

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

## USC Trojans Coach Lincoln Riley Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Year number two for the head coach at USC, Lincoln Riley. Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback back. Let's start with the state of the program. Year two for you. You bring in a lot of guys, get your quarterback back. How are you feeling coming into year two?

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, year two certainly feels much different than year one in a lot of ways. It's been great I think for all of us to get really settled in and acclimated to USC, to Los Angeles. Being in that market, being in that area is tremendous, but it really changes everything you do in a football program. I think we've really been able to acclimate and do maybe a much smoother, more efficient job this time around.

Yeah, obviously real excited for the year. We feel like we learned a lot in year one about what we are. We took some tremendous steps, but also had some very obvious holes to fill, improvements to be made. We feel like we've aggressively addressed a lot of those areas.

You saw the difference certainly, even in spring ball, in just the competitive depth within our program. We knew that was going to be a little bit of a journey, right? This day and age, it's been talked about a lot, you can build rosters faster than you could before, but you still can't do everything in one year. It can't happen. You can make dramatic changes, but not everything.

We were proud of what we did in year one, but certainly very focused on what we felt like year two could be. So it was fun to see again the competitive depth, especially in some key areas, the defensive front seven chief among those. I think watching this team unfold throughout spring into summer, a lot to be excited about.

Listen, we got a great opportunity in front of us. I think everybody within our program, every player, senses that and wants to do a great job of taking advantage of this. These windows are short. You only get so many shots at

this.

I think for us, does it motivate us any more if it wasn't our last year in the Pac-12? No. Is there also a sense of this is your last chance to play some of these teams, to go into some of these venues? Absolutely, you feel that. We want to make sure we put our best foot forward.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Your presence, we saw what took place in the first year. A guy like Caleb Williams, such a catalyst, how does he change the complexion of an offense in a program and take it to the next level?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Well, he's obviously been a key factor in this from a lot of different ways. I think the situation last year, he obviously did a great job, was important for our program, but also I think for his learning and his growth, it was a great situation for him to be in, as well. He was challenged to not only play a full season but to lead and to really help jump-start a program, an offense, jump-start a culture. He did a tremendous job.

Yeah, certainly obviously the quarterback position is singularly the most important position in football. This league, as well-documented, we have a great quarterback and we're going to play a lot of great quarterbacks this season, which is one of the obvious strengths of this league. There is no one that I would rather go to war with than that guy.

His toughness, ability to lead, despite any of the good things that have happened for him or his teams, his ability to continue to want to climb, the hunger to do that is very apparent on a day-to-day basis.

Great quarterbacks at the end of the day get defined by their teams success, their championships. I know he's very hungry to go close out this year with both.

**Q. Bear, Dorian, Mason have come to USC. What makes them as people fit in with the USC program and what you got going on with the Trojans?**

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LINCOLN RILEY: Similar to year one, when we brought in so many different people, we really stuck to our guns and really believed in you want to lay out the opportunities at a place like SC. You want to lay out the situation, how does it feel.

We wanted guys that were dying to be a part of this program and sensed the opportunity that was there. If we hadn't had that feeling about anybody, we've separated and we've moved the other direction.

I think coaching or playing at USC is one of the great responsibilities in our sport. This is the program that is so important to the sport, to the success of football on the West Coast in general, and has such a great history. I think we should all see it like that, right?

We're not owed the opportunity to do what we do at a place like USC. It's an honor to do it at that place. It's a great responsibility. We want a team full of players and a staff room full of people that see it that way.

The guys you mentioned are like that. Add in the obvious. I think the obvious potential impact on our defense, attacking the areas that we need to with proven players that have done it at a high level, was very, very important.

All those guys were just a great fit. They made sense from day one. They've been great within our locker room and our team up to this point.

**Q. Utah was the only team that managed to bite you guys in Pac-12 play last year. They did it twice. Is there some sort of respect to be had in the way which they built their roster, contrast to how this one is built?**

LINCOLN RILEY: I have the utmost respect for them. But you're talking about two different schools, two different situations, two different eras, two different sets of rules.

I think we'd be wasting our time honestly comparing. They have done a tremendous job over a long period of time building that roster. It's taken on the personality of Coach. They know what they want to be. They're really good at it. I have a ton of respect for them.

Us coming into USC year one, a different school, again a different total situation, we attacked it a different way. I think your job as a coach is to take the situation you have, take the rules that are in the game, and then go build the best rosters and the best programs that you possibly can by any means necessary within the framework of those rules. That's our job.

They've done a great job of it. I think we've done a great

job of it, too. We had two tremendous games with them last year. Obviously would expect they'll be a strong team and looking forward to having them visit L.A. this fall.

**Q. You've coached teams that have made the College Football Playoff before. What similarities do you see with this year's USC team compared to the teams you had success with in the past?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Well, I think you got a team, I know at least looking through spring ball, that was very competitive back and forth with one another. I've been a part of teams where you practice against each other, and the offense just kind of dominates the defense on a day-in/day-out basis, or the defense dominates the offense.

We may be pretty good on that side of the ball, but to win championships, those big games, you have to have both. You're going to have to win games with elite defensive performances. You're going to have to win games with elite offensive performances. Play off one another, but cover up for one another. Every week, every matchup, every situation is very, very different.

So I like what I've seen out of our team. I think the other part is you have to have a team that believes you can do it, that knows you can do it.

I think we believed we could last year. Even throughout the beginning of the year, when we first got to L.A., I think there was a sense of convincing these guys within the program that, like, we could win, we could be successful, that it shouldn't be a shock or a surprise.

I think as the year went on, there was still a part of our roster that was a little surprised that it was going well and we were winning that many games. I don't think that will be the case this year.

We've taken steps to be able to really be great at the end of the season. The thing we've said within our walls, the day the Pac-12 championship game ended through now, it's really not about the end for us, it's the longer it goes the better we get.

We've really taken that mentality. That's how you take that next step to go from putting yourselves in the situations we did last year to being able to capitalize on those. That's the obvious step we have to take as a program.

**Q. You added three guys from Arizona in the transfer portal. What do those guys bring to your team? How do you reflect on Dorian's performance against you last year?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Hopefully he'll do the same thing to everybody else that he did to us last year. Dorian was tremendous, really was tremendous the whole season. A lot of great tape. A lot of production. When he entered the transfer portal, it was a pretty obvious person for us to have some interest in.

Was really impressed by both Kyon and Christian in our game. Watching different common opponents throughout the year. Both of those guys, with losing Mekhi Blackmon in the secondary, as we've said, wanting to really overhaul the defensive front seven, made a lot of sense.

They got game experience in this league. They're guys that are all three physically in a great place. They've done a great job developing through their careers, I think have continued to develop as they've been on our campus.

Listen, at the end of the day, once they went into the portal and we were able to have conversations, the key characteristic with all three, and this is similar to the answer to the previous question, once they got in the portal, knew they were leaving, those guys all really, really wanted to be at USC.

This was not like a deal where you feel like you're going out of your way to convince these guys. I think they sensed the opportunity that was there. They wanted to be a part of it. There was not a lot of back and forth, which always I think is a very healthy sign.

**Q. You completely transformed the program in one year. What motivates you as a leader in helping you be so successful in crafting a new culture?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Well, we transformed it. It's never one person. I appreciate you saying that.

Yeah, I mean, listen, coming to USC, the decision for all of us, whether myself, the assistant coaches, the staff members that came, the players that stayed, the new players that came in, I think we all had to recognize it for the opportunity that it was.

Some people can look at a program like that and say, Well, it's been down a few years, only won this many games the year before. Some people see negative things and some people see opportunity. We saw, all of us saw, opportunity. I think there was a common belief that the combination of the people we have, the program and setup at SC, could do something really, really special.

There's no story in life or sports any better than a comeback and a rise. To get a chance to be a part of that, embrace that, it reinvigorates you. It's exciting.

Like I said, not only do we get a chance to do it, but we get a chance to do it at one of the most important programs in our sport. I think we've all recognized that for what it is. We all appreciate it. I think it motivates every single one of us to continue the climb.

**Q. In this prolific era of offense, a lot of defensive teams with NFL players, they seem to surrender points as well. How would you define from your perspective an acceptable level of defense that can help you get to the College Football Playoff and win a national championship?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, listen, it's a great question. That question's going to continue to evolve because football continues to evolve. You're going to have periods in the game where defenses are dominant and scoring, yards, all that go down. You're going to have times where they climb. I think it's always going to evolve.

I think for any side of the ball, being able to rise to a championship level in key situations, I think having a consistency within your performance, then being able on a week-to-week basis to have a strong impact on winning football is what it's about.

I was sitting in the hotel room last night, they're replaying the semifinal game with Georgia and Ohio State. You have the national champion giving up, whatever it was, 41 points in the semifinal game. You're going to have some of those ebbs and flows, right? Are you going to hold every single team to 10 points this day and age? Maybe not right now. Are you impacting winning, are you making that consistent impact on a week-to-week basis? I think that's what tells the story.

I think the key factor in what we are all certainly seeing, not that this is any big surprise, you have to have groups that are capable of rising on any given week and making those plays to win the game.

You never know exactly how that's going to play out, right? Games change so many different ways, there's so many different factors: weather, matchups, injuries, officiating, you name it. The best team I think have groups on all sides of the ball that are able to persevere and really show up in the big moments.

**Q. Last year when you came in, there was a lot to fix within the program. After the season, you talked about how you had 600 pages on your iPad of notes. What is that number reduced down to in year two?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Say that again.



**Q. You mentioned you had 600 pages on your iPad of stuff that had to be fixed. Going into year two, how many pages has that been reduced down to?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Probably 598, something like that (laughter). No, I'm joking.

It's different, right? The challenge is still there; it's just the challenges change, right? The mark moves a little bit. You're not having to decide right now, like, who goes in what office. You're not having to decide some of those things that maybe are only year-one things.

Also, the program is at a little bit different point now. You're at a different point of the climb. It's still a climb, right? There's still challenges. They're just new and different challenges.

So it's been fun. I mean, I think I would really point to the continuity of our staff. I think being able to have so many of those guys back and together. Even though some of us have coached together or coached together at previous spots, having that whole group together, being able to carry so many of those people forward at the same school with a lot of the same players, gives you some real advantages.

Listen, that part has been tremendous. Also returning a lot of the leaders within the team that have an idea of what the expectations are, what the standard is, being able to carry that over to anybody new that comes into the program.

I'm not going to say it's easier. It's just different right now. We're not focused on the beginning stages of the climb, we're focused on getting to the mountaintop. That's the challenge within our walls.

**Q. What is your take on NIL? Do you believe Congressional input is needed in order to solve this issue?**

LINCOLN RILEY: I know it's been discussed at all the different media days in the last few weeks.

Listen, NIL, probably like any new thing, especially something this seismic, has its advantages and its real positives. Certainly players being able to be treated like the rest of the world, not having restrictions on being able to earn or capitalize off of their hard work, I think we all agree, is a positive thing.

Is there still regret, maybe even disappointment, I think fair to say disappointment, over how it was just kind of thrown together and implemented? Yes. How do you fix that? Is

it Congressional involvement? Is it NCAA reform? I don't know that I have that answer. I don't know that I do. I don't know that anybody does at this point.

We're learning more about it as it goes, right? In the beginning of NIL, it was a lot more just propaganda, a lot more that came out about NIL was false than was true. I think now we're seeing the market, if you will, starting to settle. I think we're all getting an idea of what it really is and what it really is not.

I think as we all understand that more, I think the path forward to maybe regulating it and making it a little bit more organized, I think that will become more apparent as we learn more.

You got to figure out what it really is before you know what the solution is. It's going to take some time and I think people are going to have to be patient.

**Q. I probably speak for some of my colleagues in here. Is there, from a historical perspective, some sense of melancholy, like you guys are leaving this great conference, going to a new frontier in the Big Ten? Do you feel a sense of loss as you enter into your final season here in the Pac-12?**

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah. Sure we do. I haven't been in this conference very long. When I made the decision to come coach at USC, it was to come coach here. In a short time, been able to make and create great relationships within this conference, whether it's the other coaches, the other schools, the administrators here, getting to play at the different venues. So, yeah, sure there is.

I think that's part of it.

Is there excitement to go into the Big Ten? Absolutely there is, right? This is not a battle between good and evil, right? It's not that there's one right answer. Pac-12 is a tremendous conference. I think it's set up for a tremendous year. Obviously we're excited to be a part of it this year. Hopefully our last year goes really, really well.

Then, yeah, I'd be lying to you if I said we weren't excited about the future, what that brings. Yeah, yeah, melancholy, the way you described it is a little bit yes, but I think it's more motivation to make it count. That's certainly our mindset right now.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you.

LINCOLN RILEY: Thank you.

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