

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

Friday, July 21, 2023
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Washington Huskies Coach Kalen DeBoer Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We welcome Washington's head coach to Media Day. How has your day been so far?

KALEN DeBOER: Great. Non-stop, but we're all good.

THE MODERATOR: Terrific first season. I don't know what your expectations were, but 11 wins, huge win in the Alamo Bowl over Texas. As you come into year two, what are the expectations?

KALEN DeBOER: There's so much to build from from last year's season. The momentum that we carried through the end of the year, just finishing strong. It's a big deal. I think it helped with just the energy around the program, the buzz. Also, I think it played an impact and role in retention, keeping a lot of our guys from maybe moving on to the NFL. Wanting to experience a bigger and better year.

It's been an awesome off-season. The guys and all their goals that they have, it's supported by the work they're putting in and actions.

We're excited about a big season. We have a great team, a potential for a great 2023. As long as we keep the mindset right where it's at, where every day we're building, growing, evolving, not taking anything for granted, we'll be in a good spot.

Catch a couple breaks along the way, we know that, to win a championship. That's what you need. You make your own breaks. I think that comes through hard work, building great chemistry. Helps you through the tough times that we know are going to come each and every year.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. What's the most important thing you're emphasizing for the off-season?

KALEN DeBOER: The most important thing for the team?

Q. Yes.

KALEN DeBOER: Well, I think the things that have been important for us are consistency, the continuity of a staff. Every single coach returning, that's on the field. Really all our off-the-field staff returning for the most part as well, including strength staff and personnel. That continuity helps you continue to propel into the next season.

Player-wise, that continuity of having a lot of guys returning has been huge for us, as well. We don't want to fall to routine. The grind that comes along with each and every day, kind of it being the same. We don't want to fall into that trap. The guys have kept what we call a starving mindset. They've kept moving forward. They've stayed hungry. Above and beyond.

When I feel like they've maybe kind of just starting to teeter a little bit, remind them we didn't win a championship last year, didn't go to the Pac-12 championship. That kind of puts them back in the right mindset very quickly. Really that hasn't been an issue, but that's the thing we're focusing on, we haven't accomplished all our goals and aspirations we have set forth in this program.

Q. You inherited a couple of former Vegas stars. What is it about this area that makes it a hotbed for high school talent?

KALEN DeBOER: Talent in this area?

Q. Yes.

KALEN DeBOER: We were fortunate. Ede Ulofoshio and Troy Fautanu, Rome Odunze are key guys in our football program. Obviously there's a high level of football being played. We're appreciative those guys are willing to venture up to Seattle and take a look. Once we get them there, I'm sure that was the case, I didn't recruit those guys, but once they get there, they see how beautiful of a place we have, the resources that surround our program, the leadership we have from an administrative point on down. It's all aligned, all in one.

Again, the hotbed of football here is a big deal to us and



our program. We will always recruit here. We will come here often, make sure we always understand who's on every single team in the Vegas area. That's for sure.

Q. In the spring, you talked about the mentality, 1-0 mindset. Jalen McMillan was in the receiver room watching film. What have you seen from the stars that have chosen to return that make sure they are not resting on last season?

KALEN DeBOER: We just happened to walk into that room and he was doing that. That's because it happens every day. Guys like Jalen McMillan and so many of these especially upperclassmen are leading by example. They understand the work. They know where we have fallen short in years past, what it takes to get there.

I'm a believer that it's hard to skip steps. Last year happened for a reason. We need to learn from those steps that we took and the steps that we have yet to take.

The guys, examples like you mentioned of doing the extra work, it's happening on the field, it's happening off the field. It's building chemistry, it's being intentional and building strong relationships for those tough times when they come, sticking together.

But that's happening every single day. The guys have all bought into that culture that we want to have. It starts with the coaching staff, that continuity, that similar message that happens from me on down through the coaches, through the leaders of our program.

Q. I asked Michael, coming in after the pre-season voting, Washington, second behind USC, how has that humbleness, low-key attitude helped propel him into the person he is?

KALEN DeBOER: That's the way I feel our whole team is with their mindset. Thankful we have a leader like Mike who thinks that way, who knows that he's not there yet, we're always building. We're building leaders, building our program each and every day. A growth mindset is what we talk about often.

I think the number one character trait with that is humility. Mike certainly has that humility. We understand the conference, how strong it is. It's awesome. It's great for the Pac-12, for us to be a part of the conference. We know every single weekend we got our hands full. I feel like there's no team that we can't beat, but there's no team that can't beat us either.

Each and every day we got to grow, we got to get better, improve. We're as strong and our team as a unit. Mike

understands, just like everyone else, the accolades will come with our team's success.

Q. You have a pretty ridiculous set of receivers in your room. How would you describe their skill sets? What differentiates them that makes them unique?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, it's fun having the tools that you need to do the work on the field that you want to get done.

The wide receiver core, every position is important. We try to distribute the ball to all our skill players. Every guy needs to be a home run threat. That helps us have a good balance.

Those receivers in particular, there is an explosiveness to it. We want to throw the ball down the field, but we also need to have a high efficiency level, put the ball in these great athletes' hands and let them go to work.

Guys like Rome Odunze, he's put on even more weight, he's even faster. Jalen McMillan I think is running 23-plus miles an hour as you can track with a GPS, stronger than I've ever seen him. Ja'Lynn Polk, I think his speed is probably undervalued. He's faster than most people think. He's right in the same range as Jalen and Rome.

Their temperament that they have I think is the key. They are becoming a hard-nosed group, not just this group of skill guys that just run around and catch a couple balls and make big plays, make it look pretty. They go out there and do the hard work.

They're blocking for each other. They're physical at the point of attack when they need to be. I'm really proud of the way they represent our whole team. Any time you have a hard-nosed receiving core, just like you'd say an offensive line, defensive line, I think that spreads throughout the mindset of the rest of the offense.

Q. What's the biggest area of improvement that Michael has shown the most?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, I think it's definitely in the leadership. We know that he's got the reads, he's understood the offense now because it's been really the same system since 2019 when he was at Indiana, was introduced to it at that time.

Him, the reads, the progressions, the checks, it changes from week to week and the game plan, so forth. He understands it inside and out. Now it's just a matter of him leading.

I don't think there's a meeting that we have where I ask for

input, thoughts, where he doesn't speak up and say something anymore. That happens on the field. He brings his A game every day. He knows that's what we need from him. A year ago at this time he wasn't even named the starter. It's been great for us to have his leadership from day one back in January knowing who our starting quarterback is going to be September 2nd.

Q. Earlier you spoke about intentionality when building culture. What is your philosophy towards building culture?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, it starts with the coaches, just the way they communicate, the philosophy that we have as a staff. It's as simple as making this one of the greatest experiences of these guys' life. Everything that goes along with it.

Yes, winning is a big part of that, but the experience each and every day of building a brotherhood, having love for each other, being accountable, seeing the wins that come along with that, whether it's yourself, your group, your team, those are all things that are part of the experience.

These guys really have enjoyed the journey. Along with that, when you enjoy it, it's amazing what gets done when you put the work in each and every day, those long hours go fast because you love the ride you're on.

The intentionality is important. We talk about it often. When we're doing a group activity that we have, we're coming together, let's take advantage of those moments to continue. Older guys get to know the younger guys, cross-positional relationship building.

As it happens, you have an appreciation for the guys on the other side of the ball, guys that are working hard across the team. You realize, man, I respect these guys, I want to make sure I hold up my end of the bargain. That's what a lot of our culture is built around.

Q. In regards to how explosive your offense is, how have the defensive backs counteracted that? What does the DB room look like in response to your offense?

KALEN DeBOER: Each and every day both sides of the ball face some pretty good talent, get pushed. It might be our offensive tackles versus our defensive ends, or offensive line versus defensive line. The receiving core we just mentioned, the competition and the challenge that the defensive backs have each and every day, it goes both ways there, too.

I would say Elijah Jackson, he's had a great full year of

training, development, growth, building confidence. He's got the tools. Last year he just couldn't break through a few of the dings that football will bring you.

We got Asa Turner back. Mish Powell we moved from corner to the nickel, Dom Hampton from the nickel to the safety. Some of those moves I think have really fit the skill sets of our guys. I'm excited to see that come to fruition this fall.

The cross-training by position I think gives us more depth in case situations do come up where now guys have got a lot of banked reps at other positions, and we'll make sure we get the best football players on the football field when those times do arise.

Q. Relationships are foundational to the culture. Your relationship with Michael Penix goes back a few years to Indiana. Last year was the first year he was able to complete an entire season without having an injury. What is the like to him personally?

KALEN DeBOER: It's just fun seeing any player grow and go through the challenges that come along. It might be on the field but it might be life in general. There are a lot of things out of your control. Seeing guys respond, in Mike's case seeing the growth he's had in what he went through since the 2019 season when I was with him. He got hurt during that year when I was there in 2019. He had a fabulous return. That was a shortened season with COVID. Followed that up with another shortened season.

He's been through a lot. I think his response to adversity is resembled in how his response is on the football field when our team needs that big moment, that big drive. He can focus on where his feet are at, play in the present, give us the energy, lock in on the situation that's at hand.

Q. Bralen Trice, first team All-League, preseason. The guy on the opposite side this year, ZTF, people have been putting expectations on him. What have you noticed about him this off-season? Where is his head space?

KALEN DeBOER: I'm glad you asked about ZTF. A lot of attention. Bralen had an amazing year last year, no doubt about it. He's ready to replicate that. One of the best defensive ends in the country, edges in the country.

He and ZTF, they take a lot of pride in being that combination, that group that can get after people. I'm just so proud of the way ZTF has just really, I mean, locked in on another level after the injuries a few years ago. Putting on more weight, strong as ever. Understanding the areas of growth he can have in his game.

I'm excited for the big year that I know everyone is expecting or has expected. I'm excited about that year happening right now because physically he's there, mentally he's there. He's a pleasure to be around. He's grown as a person. Just can't say enough about him. Could go on and on.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, coach.

KALEN DeBOER: Thank you.

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