

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

## California Golden Bears Coach Justin Wilcox

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Justin Wilcox, head coach of the Cal Bears. Seventh season in Berkeley. How are you feeling coming into year seven?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Certainly has gone by fast. I didn't even realize it till somebody mentioned it this morning, that it was the second longest tenure.

Yeah, this time of year, the excitement's building. A lot has changed in seven years. Once you approach the season, you get to the week before camp, that excitement is the same.

Getting back in the building with the players, that first day back, is always one of my favorite days of the year, so I'm looking forward to that.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Jaydn Ott was a particularly exciting young player. What do you have to do in the off-season to protect a player like that from some of the hawking teams in the transfer portal, a couple of which are instate?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: So everybody uses this term where you got to re-recruit your own team. I don't really think of it that way. We want to do the best job in how we treat the players, how we coach them, how we support them, so you're not making some last-ditch effort to try to 're-recruit' them.

I don't want to speak for Jaydn, but he understands he's going to get treated well, coached well, we're going to support him. There's opportunities to take advantage of NIL, like everyone else in college football. I understand there would be a lot of suitors for a player like Jaydn. We are really glad he's with us. He did a great job as a freshman, and I think he's poised for even a better second year in the program.

**Q. You're bringing in a very big transfer portal class**

**this year. Can you talk about what led to that decision to lean more heavily there, maybe the pros and cons of relying on those transfers?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, we were very active in the transfer portal, as a number of teams were. We're always evaluating each guy in the transfer portal: A, in terms of their talent, can they help us win; B, are they going to fit in once you get to do the physical evaluation, the football player, get to know them in a really short amount of time, do some background on them, see if they're going to fit in with how we operate, our team; then obviously the academic requirements that they would have at Cal.

We found a lot of guys we felt could help us win, who would fit in with our program. Ultimately a lot of those guys had other opportunities, but they chose to join us, and we're glad they did. We had a number of them join us in winter, then another seven or eight join us in summer.

Glad to have 'em. Those guys will play a big role for us this season.

**Q. You have three new coaches on offense. What do you see the difference with that group and how smoothly did the offense adjust this spring?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: I thought they did a fantastic job in spring. I think one of the challenges that we kind of acknowledge and take on as coaches is how do you efficiently, most efficiently, prepare your team. In this environment where you're going to have some new faces in winter and in summer, systematically how do you implement offense, defense, special teams.

I thought Coach Spav and the offensive staff did a fantastic job of getting those guys up to speed really quickly. Then it's about reps. You still got to practice. Spring ball obviously we got 15 practices worth. Summertime we get some time with them in the meeting room, spend more time with the newcomers.

I think it was really a pleasure to see how quickly the guys were able to adapt, learn the offense. It doesn't mean it's basic. There's a lot to it. I think it's friendly to those

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transfers and freshmen, I think that's key in this environment.

**Q. Last year you talked about how COVID wrecked the roster. Guys left early. Can you describe the character of the senior class, the guys that have stayed throughout that adversity?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah. We've had a number of fifth- and sixth-year seniors, two of whom are here today. We have two guys, I'm going to be honest with you, they're older than about 15 people that work in our building. They're very mature. They're six-year guys. They're both really good players. They're great leaders. They're going to have an opportunity to continue to play after college.

I think they see value in another year of playing college football, playing with this team, getting their degree or graduate degree from Cal.

Again, I don't want to speak for them, but those guys I know, they're great for our team culture, and they set the example for some of these younger guys who have come into your program looking for some guidance from a player. These guys do a really, really good job of that.

**Q. Update on Brett Johnson, what you felt from his presence among some of these new faces in the transfer portal?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, so the defensive line in general, Brett being at the forefront of that, we didn't go heavy into the portal with our defensive line. Our portal at defensive line was the guys coming back from injury.

Brett is a really good football player, really good. He's missed two seasons back to back with injuries, which is tough. A lot of folks would be no judgment on them, but a lot of people, a lot of guys probably wouldn't come back from that. Brett is just a rare, rare breed when it comes to physical, mental, emotional toughness.

I don't suspect he's going to be any different. I think he's poised for a big year. We're glad he's back. Feeling that presence, not only the players feel it, they know he's a good player, but just literally feeling his presence when he lines up under center is noticeable because the center has a hard time doing anything against him. We're glad to have him back. I know the guys on the team are happy having him playing in front of them, especially at the nose and three-technique position.

**Q. Sam Jackson, what have you seen from him?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Sam joined us in the winter. Sam is a

dynamic athlete. He is a very, very athletic guy. Sometimes when you say the quarterback is athletic, they think all they can do is run. That's not the case. Sam can throw the ball, he can spin it. He doesn't have a ton of experience, okay? He's still a young player.

Our goal, my goal, is for him and all the quarterbacks, there's some other guys in that room that we think have ability to be Pac-12 players as well, but to create these game-like situations. A lot of 11-on-11 football in spring, a ton of it. We put the ball down and played a lot. We're going to continue to do that in fall camp.

We need to continue to see him and the other quarterbacks continue to grow throughout the season. We don't want to hit game one and look in the mirror and say that's who we are. We have to keep getting better every week. I think Sam is a guy that can do that.

**Q. When I played, we competed against Joe Kapp. We lost him this year. Anything special that you guys will be doing in your program to honor his legacy at Cal?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, Joe had such a story and he's a beloved figure. There will be some moments throughout the season that he'll be recognized. Obviously somebody that is near and dear to the program, to the alumni at Cal.

Right as we walk out of the locker room, we have a sign up there quoting Joe. We're sad to have lost him, but certainly he will be remembered forever for the Cal faithful, yeah.

**Q. Unfortunately you also lost your father this past off-season. How has your football family that you grew up with, Hall of Famer father, how has it helped you go through that grief?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, that's a tough one. I was fortunate to have a role model in the house with me as I grew up. It had nothing to do with him being a football player.

Anybody who's lost a role model, a parent, I can understand the pain and the sadness. There's also just so much gratitude at the same time. When you realize that you're going to miss somebody every day for the rest of your life, it kind of changes your life.

Again, I have so much gratitude. We've had players who have lost their parents and loved ones. I know people out here have, as well. My heart goes out to them. Again, I have so much gratitude because I was able to get 46 years' worth, so I'm thankful for that.

**Q. Nick Aliotti, I asked him what you were like as a**

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player --

JUSTIN WILCOX: Did he say not very good (laughter)?

**Q. He said you were very smart, great personality. When he decided to move you from safety to corner, what was your reaction? Were you up for it?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: I was wondering if the coaches were doing drugs (laughter).

No, I love him. I mean, he coached me and our defensive coordinator, Peter Sirmon. Big reason why I got into coaching, guys like Nick Aliotti, Bob Gregory, who is now across the bay at Stanford.

The people that impact your life, of course they're teaching you to play a game, but really they're teaching you how to be, how to compete, how to try to do things right. That's what it's all about. That's why we coach.

I was fortunate, like I said before, I had a great role model at home on how to be a humble, hard-working man. Then I had great role models in coaching.

Again, all this stuff that we get to do, we're coaching football for a living. It's hard and it's challenging, we get judged on winning and losing. That's what we sign up for. At the end of the day, it's relationships with the players on the team and the coaches. That is what it's really all about.

**Q. You have been in the SEC, the Big Ten, in the Pac-10 and Pac-12. What can you speak upon the difference with the style of play in the Pac-12 that makes it unique, different or more challenging as a coach?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Quarterback play, first and foremost. Even in the last 30 years. But when you look at especially this year, the level of quarterback play and the offensive football, I mean, there's really, really good coaches.

I think we talked about this, the parity. When people say 'parity', they think that means that's a lower level of competition. This is high-level parity we're talking about, teams that are coached very well.

In my experience, being in some other conferences, they're great conference, they all have strengths, but the offense, the quarterback play, the coaching is as good as I've ever been around.

**Q. You mentioned the relationships, talked about Peter Sirmon, your defensive coordinator. Did you ever imagine in a million years when you were there**

**for the birth of his son you'd be bringing him to Media Day as his head coach?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Not really in the plan. That was not the plan at the end of the day. I've known young Jackson, who is getting old now. Known him as long as you can know a person, I guess. Man, he's just done such a great job.

Somebody asked me earlier, he's a player on the team, and I'm a coach on the team, so that's no different than any other player and coach relationship. But having known him a long time, it is pretty unique, pretty special.

Peter is coaching the defense and Jackson. Peter is a demanding guy, demanding of all the players on the defense. I would say, if anything, Jackson probably gets it a little worse than others. But he's a heck of a young guy and he's doing a great job for us and we're glad to have him.

**Q. This back end, a couple transfers that were impact players at their previous stops. You have some returning vets. Is this group back to what you set the standard at what you took the job?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, I think adding Nohl and Patrick, there's a few other guys in there as well, I think competition at the DB position is as steep as it's been. I think that will drive the performance upward.

We have some returning players that played a lot for us. Adding these new guys is going to make it certainly more competitive.

We feel strong about that unit. We also know we're going to play some really good offenses. In order to play good defense, you have to limit the explosive plays, get some one-on-one wins. We're going to ask those guys to do that. I think they can.

**Q. The other player you brought out with you is Matthew Cindric.**

JUSTIN WILCOX: Matthew has been with us a long time. I mean, he's just such a smart, hard-working, all the intangibles that you're looking for, the leadership qualities. Very, very mature guy. Very mature.

On top of it, he's a really good player. He's a really good football player. He's got a ton of experience. So being the glue to that unit up front, also a leader of the offense and the team, really couldn't ask for more. When he and Jackson both decided to come back for their sixth years, two of the biggest recruits we could have gotten.

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Just really thankful. I love the guy. He is everything that's good about college football. Excited for him and his sixth year.

**Q. When you got the word he was going to have a summer camp called Golden Buddies, your reaction?**

JUSTIN WILCOX: I mean, that's just the type of guy that he is. He does this not so they put it on social media or not that we recommended he do it. Matt did this because that's what he believes in. He is, again, a leader. He serves the community, incredibly intelligent guy. That's all him. That's who he is and what he's about. Just couldn't be more proud of him and the other guys that took part.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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