

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

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Cal Bears

Coach Justin Wilcox

Devin Brown

Aidan Keanaaina

Cade Uluave

Press Conference



Q. Coach, you've had a record number of turnovers this last year, I think 50 new people between grad turnovers, portal turnovers and freshmen. What have been some of the most complicated things navigating that, and what have been some of the most pleasant surprises you've seen through spring and summer workouts?

JUSTIN WILCOX: The most complicated thing I think is just the time and the numbers. From year to year, that number is going to change. This year was higher than maybe we would have thought. We have an unbelievable team of people around us. It's obviously the coaches, but we have an incredible staff, personnel staff, and now added a GM, Coach Ron Rivera, and we've got a lot of support to go identify players who physically we feel like can help us, who are going to fit in at Cal and have the character traits that we're looking for.

I think the pleasant surprise has been just once those guys have been identified and getting them into school and getting them connected together, it's been really, really fun to watch. We've got a lot of really good guys on the team, and they're talented players. But the way that they've come together starting in January and then absorbing some guys even this June onto the team and working together, it's really shown up on the field and in the locker room with how connected those guys are. That's been a pleasant surprise.

Q. To go deeper into the general manager side of things, just how the college football world has evolved that now we have these general managers, and specifically what it's like to work with Ron Rivera.

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, I think the term maybe is a little more fluid than it is in pro football, in my opinion. I haven't been in pro football, but for the most part, in pro football, the GM role is pretty standard. It's roster management, working with the coach, a cap person, identifying players, contracts, those type of things. There's a significant amount of that that's happening in college.

But the difference is there's recruiting versus drafting. That's a big difference. Kind of the fluid nature of college football versus the contract lengths in the NFL, that's different. There's constituent groups, there's working with the campus, there's working with donors to raise money.

The second part of your question, Coach Rivera has been unbelievable. He's got so many different experiences in pro football which have helped, just organizational structure, roster management, talking about players, situational football. Kind of from a 10,000-foot view. But his job, it's dynamic now. He's talking to donors. He's an advocate. He's talking to folks on campus, directly to the chancellor. So I think in college, we hear that term GM, but I think it really depends on which school and how they define that role because there probably are schools where it is just cap and players, and then there's schools like us where it's a bigger role. It's really just the tip of the spear of football in general, and there's a lot that goes into that.

I think that's where it's a little bit different than maybe the NFL.

Q. Last year we saw a quarterback competition between Fernando Mendoza and Chandler Rogers. Obviously those two are gone now. Will we see a similar type of competition play out between Devin and Jaron?

JUSTIN WILCOX: First of all, we feel really good about our quarterback room, Devin, Jaron, EJ. We've got some talented quarterbacks. Not a ton of experience. That just is what it is. Devin came to us in January. Devin has been in college football, he's been trained very well. He's a really smart guy, is very mature. He's done some great stuff for us. Jaron came in mid-year out of high school, a very natural football player. It's going to be competitive in



that room, and it's going to be competitive throughout the roster, to be honest with you.

But the good thing is we feel like this team at each position is probably as competitive or more competitive than any team we've had in our tenure there, so that's a good thing. The goal is to bring in as many good players as we possibly can who fit us, who fit Cal, and let the competition sort the depth chart out.

Q. We've seen a wave of schools transitioning into the GM world. With newly added Ron Rivera, what insight are you hoping he brings to this program as well as your coaching strategies on the field?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, like I said, we get to talk about anything and everything that has to do with Cal football. When Coach got there -- there's an element of him watching kind of what we do and how this college football thing is working and the similarities to pro football, and then the significant differences to pro football and talking through those and how his experiences and what he's been through, how we can take and learn from those and apply them, whether it's 3rd down defense or organizational structure and coaching and roster management and all these different things.

It's been awesome. It really has. The thing that makes it so unique is he's a Cal Bear through and through, and he will tell you that. He will carry that flag. He obviously carries a lot of weight with our donor group and our campus and just who he is as a person, his experience, what he's accomplished in his life. It's just been awesome. For me personally, for our coaching staff, for our players, for our donor base, for our university. It's just been an incredible addition and advocate for Cal football.

Q. You've been coaching, you've been in the system for quite a few years. Are these changes with the way college sports is structured, college football is structured, is it harder for someone who has been in as long as you have to make that transition as opposed to a coach who has basically just grown up --

JUSTIN WILCOX: Do I look that old?

Q. You don't look that old, but you've been doing this a few years.

JUSTIN WILCOX: You weren't supposed to answer that.

That's a great question. It's changed a lot. But it's really changed in the last four or five years. From 2001 to 2019, the names and faces change, but essentially the rules of the game and how it was done were pretty similar.

Then it's changed a lot. The things that the players are subject to and kind of the changes in college football with the transfer portal, the conference realignment, NIL and players making money now, that is significant. Any one of those things in a 10-year window would be a big deal, and when they all three kind of happened at the same time, boy, that's a lot of change.

So it's our job as coaches just to help navigate that for our respective programs. So that has been different, and it's been a challenge and it's been fun, and there's been some times where it's not as fun, but you're just trying to find a way to do what's best for the program because that's ultimately our job.

When you start taking into account the coaching history and what were you accustomed to, at the end of it, these guys need mentoring and they need coaching, and I know there's this kind of feeling sometimes, whether it's from fans or our donor bases or schools or even coaches where it's like, now they get paid, it's like the NFL. But it's not. They're 17, 18 to 22, 23-year-old guys. They still need to be coached. They still need to be mentored.

Is it a bit more complicated? Yes, it is. But I will tell you what hasn't changed is when you go to meetings, that hasn't changed. The rules of the game, the dimensions are the same, it's still 11-on-11. The rules are the same. The fundamentals of the game haven't changed, what's important, how to block, how to tackle, pad level, all these things that we've talked about, how to back pedal, let's cover three. That hasn't changed. So when you go to the meeting room and the walkthrough and the football field, it's the same.

If you have an issue as a coach or administrator or a staff member with this new environment, then you've got to decide whether it's for you or not. It's our job to coach the guys and mentor them and help them become better. If you as a coach don't like it -- like, we're all working on our own free will. We don't have to coach. We don't have to be a part of these programs. We get to do this, and we'd better adapt.

Yeah, I can understand there's some frustration at times thinking, how is this going to go? But you either figure it out and find a way to embrace the change and continue to coach them and mentor them because that's what they need, or you need to do something else.

Q. This team was competitive all last year. However, 2-5 in one-score games. How do you fix that, especially being in a unique situation of losing your statistical leader in virtually every category? How do



you fix that into this year with so many new faces?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, you didn't need to remind me, but I know the stat, yeah. There's difficult, frustrating losses. We had plenty of opportunities to win those games.

I wish it was as simple as, well, we need to do this one drill or address this one position or fix this one problem. It's not that simple.

It's everything. It's coaching and schematics. What are we going to do better? It's off-season programming. What are we going to do better? It's food. It's our class schedule so we have the best situation to teach and practice our players. It's admissions and recruitment and talent acquisition and talent retention. It's support from every level of our institution. It's sports med. I could name 50 things that can help us, okay?

Thankfully Coach Rivera and our chancellor have been very, very supportive in things that we can do to make the program better, because ultimately it's one play in the game, it's one more defensive stop, it's another score in the red zone on offense, a touchdown and maybe a field goal that we connect on.

But any one of those 50 things, we've all got to be pulling the same direction so when those moments come up, that we're able to capitalize on them and win those games.

The other thing you can do to solve for that is not be in so many close games and score more points and get them off the field more often. So you either create bigger margins or when those margins are small you've got to be better in those critical moments.

You had a second part to your question. Oh, the statistical leaders.

Yeah, last year we had - I can't recall all the statistics - but we were a pretty darned good defense. We had a few bad quarters, but overall we had a pretty darned good defense. Now we lost some really good players off that defense. However, we got some dang good players back and we feel like there's some young guys, and some new guys, I should say, not just young guys but new guys, who are going to be really good defensive players.

Offensively we weren't as good statistically. We didn't score as much as we needed to. I'm a firm believer you've got to try to get to four offensive touchdowns a game. Now, is that always going to happen? Maybe not, but that's the goal, score four offensive touchdowns a game. We were a little short on that.

We know that we lost some players, but we also feel like we have added some players and we can be as or more productive offensively. And then in the special teams game, it's field position and executing field goals.

So all that right there can be the difference in those one-score games, which if you win those, then we're up here probably having a totally different conversation.

Q. Devin, I just want to know what role Kyion Grayes played in getting you over to Cal? I know you've had a long relationship with him.

DEVIN BROWN: Yeah, long relationship with Kyion. Known him since being an Arizona High School athlete to being at Ohio State together. He was calling me pretty much every day trying to get me to come be a bear, and it worked.

Q. Devin, what are some of the biggest differences that you've seen coming from Ohio State to Cal, totally different system, totally different culture, different part of the country? What are some of the biggest differences?

DEVIN BROWN: Yeah, it's totally different football and it's totally different life, Big Ten football compared to ACC football is night and day different in terms of the people and the staff and life outside of football with the fans and stuff like that.

But weather has been a different change for me, as well.

But I love West Coast football. I love being a part of Cal. I'm just super excited to actually get to do it.

Q. Devin, the decision to come to Cal, what is it about the school itself, the program, Coach Wilcox, what spoke to you that made more sense than any other place you could have gone?

DEVIN BROWN: Yeah, there's a lot. The history of the quarterback position at Cal is long with Aaron Rodgers and Jared Goff. The list goes on and on. Then being able to build a relationship with Coach Wilcox and Coach Harsin and Coach Rolo and all these coaches in such a short amount of time while I was still in season, it was a tough time in my life, but the relationships that I built from just a phone call, I knew it would only continue to grow in person, and I just knew I had trust in them. I knew I believed in what they were preaching and believed what we could do at Cal would be something really special, so I jumped on board.

Q. In terms of the QB room, Coach Wilcox alluded to

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

it, you all are extremely young in terms of playing experience, especially in meaningful playing time. What have Coach Wilcox and Coach Harsin done to flatten that curve out and make things easier for you and the rest of the guys in that quarterback competition?

DEVIN BROWN: Yeah, every guy is different, obviously. All the guys in the room are their first year there or maybe two years in college football. I've been in college football for three years now. This will be my fourth season. So the biggest thing for me was language, but they've been great on figuring out what things are different for me. And there really wasn't a whole lot of change other than the language, but then it came into the role of me helping the other guys and giving my ideas to help further build this offense. There's so many different guys in that staff room with Coach Cefalo, with Coach Griffin, with Coach Anae and Coach Rolo and Harsin that the offense is always evolving and changing with so many different ideas being pushed into it.

Me being able to come from another system and add my values and add my thoughts, it's been really interesting.

Q. Over the summer, what was your main focus and what was your mentality? And then carrying that over as you head towards fall camp, what's your mentality and what are you hoping to showcase ahead of the regular season?

DEVIN BROWN: The biggest thing this whole off season has been just building the trust of this team in me. Coming in early on, I had to figure out all my relationships with everybody, just figuring out who these guys were, letting guys know who I am, what I like to do outside of football. The biggest thing was building relationships on and off the field. The O-line had to be able to trust that they could be my friend off the field. They're not going to want to block for somebody that they don't like, right? So that was a big thing for me, whether it was inviting guys over to watch fights at the house or come over for dinner or just setting up going to play pickleball or something like that. That was really important for me.

Then building into the season, this team has been through a lot. There was a lot of games they should have won last year. So there's still a sour taste in a lot of these guys' mouth, and they want to go out there and show the world that this team is a really good football team and can do a lot of special things. And all the new guys that have come in are on that same mission. Everybody that's come in here wants to change the outlook on this program because we know we have something really special. So it's going to be really interesting to see how tough and how competitive

this team really is.

Q. I was wondering if you're going to wear the number 33 again because I read you did that after Sammy Baugh. Is Coach going to let you play safety and punt, as well?

DEVIN BROWN: I doubt that. I'm sure he doesn't want me to do anything too physical. Maybe get mad at me for trying to run somebody over instead of getting out of bounds. But I wanted to wear 33. We have another teammate that has it and he won't give it up. He's being a little stingy, but I wanted it, so we'll see what happens.

Q. Sticking on the numbers, I know you were 92 in high school, 92 at Notre Dame. Why 47 at Cal?

AIDAN KEANAAINA: Yeah, I think just entering the portal and coming here to Cal, I really want to change it up. Why I went with 92 as my number is the year my dad graduated college, and my mom. It's something that was important to me. But I want a new opportunity and I want to just be a little different.

So I just remember talking through it with multiple people and just the number 47 stood out to me, and I think it fit perfectly. So I rolled with it, and it's been perfect.

Q. Aidan, you have co-defensive coordinators in Coach Terrence and Coach Vic that were elevated. Just what you can say to their leadership and how you've seen them work together to develop a plan that you think will be successful in 2025?

AIDAN KEANAAINA: I love our coaching staff. I'm very grateful for Coach Wilcox for hiring within house. Keeping the guys around that I've been comfortable with has been amazing for all of us. They built this defensive culture from when I came in to where it is now. I think both of them bring amazing aspects to what our defense is going to be in this upcoming year.

I think you have Coach So'oto with that front seven, I think he brings aggression and he brings pressure and he brings necessary things we need in that front seven. But then you have Coach TB who has the back end. He's helping us with those coverages. That's where he specializes. They both specialize in these different areas, and having both of them work together, because our entire defensive staff does an amazing job of collaborating. They go into their meeting rooms before every game and rank disappears. They all work together to create the best defensive strategy and plan for every team we play.

Having both of them there, I think, is going to be an



amazing advantage for us.

Q. You talked about the aggression and the kind of pressure that is brought out of the front seven. After losing guys like Xavier Carlton and Danny Buchanan, you're losing 14 sacks there. If we're looking for this defensive front to emulate that kind of pressure that you all brought last year, how do you plan on doing that, and who are some names to break out that we may not have on our radars right now?

AIDAN KEANAAINA: I think our staff has done an amazing job of filling those gaps that we needed. Those guys are moving on to bigger things, professional lives, professional sports, and I'm so happy for them and seeing their career continue.

But I think our coaching staff, Coach Wilcox and our two defensive coordinators, have done a great job of filling those roles with some guys. I think Ram is going to be amazing. He was amazing for us last year. We brought in some new guys for -- X is going to be difficult to replace, but I think we have some new guys in there that are going to step up and fill that role. I think the D-line being one of the more experienced groups is really going to help this defense overall with bringing the pressure on every day.

Q. A moment ago you used the word "culture." As someone with deep Polynesian roots, how does your cultural identity influence the approach you take to football, competition, life?

AIDAN KEANAAINA: Yeah, I think most Polynesians can agree with me that family is one of the main values that we have. I try to bring that in all aspects, in my room and in Cal.

I think the Cal locker room's culture has been amazing. Coming in here last year, they brought me in immediately. They did an amazing job making me feel comfortable with the team, and I have some amazing relationships with guys that are no longer a part of the team and guys that are still on the team now that I played with last year, and that are going to continue.

I think Cal's locker room culture is one of the best I've ever seen.

Q. Cade, you started off real strong in your first two years. Now you've got a GM in here who's a legendary Cal middle linebacker. Have you had some heart to heart talks with him about what it takes to be just the best in the business at the position you play?

CADE ULUAVE: Definitely, definitely. I think having

Coach Rivera here has been a great addition to our team. Like you said, he's a legendary figure in Cal football, so being able to have him has been tremendous. I know we got his jersey hung up in the inside linebacker room. Having him be around for practice to interact with us has been great. During practice, we kind of noticed that Coach Rivera comes to the linebackers most of the time, and so it's good to talk to him, and he'll give us pointers of how to be a successful player, especially at linebacker. So being able to have him here and help us out has been absolutely tremendous, and I'm super grateful for the opportunity.

Q. From minimal playing time to Pac-12 Defensive Freshman of the Year in 2023 to leader and full-time starter last season, what's the adjustment to that new leadership position looked like for you, and how are you handling that?

CADE ULUAVE: The adjustment has been great. I think, like you said, it's gone really fast. Naturally, I feel like me being a leader has been something I've had to learn and it's been an awesome experience.

Coming from being Pac-12 Freshman of the Year and working my way up has definitely put me in a role to be a leader, especially coming back to Cal, as many people left and we got new faces coming in, that's just how college football is nowadays, it's put me in this position where I need to be a leader and I'm willing to do so. I feel like it's helped me as a person, as a player, and it's just a cool opportunity.

Q. Last year you said that mastering the mental side of the game, like recognizing formations, was your next step as a player. How much focus have you made in that area and what's your focus on this year?

CADE ULUAVE: Yeah, like you were saying, being a student of the game has been something that I've worked on a lot and I feel like I've gotten a lot better at. Obviously football is a game that people are learning constantly. So you've got people in the NFL that are still learning the game and still -- new things come up.

So just being a student of the game and being able to stay on top of everything has been crucial for me and how I play. I just plan on continuing to do so.

In terms of this next year comes along, for me to become a better player, I think, again, just being a student of the game and getting bigger, stronger, faster is always a key, and just being a good leader.

I think when you have good players around you, you play better. For me to help other players be the best they can



be will help me. Just being a team player and doing as much as I can for the team and just set an example. Once you set an example, people are going to follow.

Q. Cade, what does it mean to represent Cal at ACC Media Days in this new chapter of the program?

CADE ULUAVE: I think it's great. I think to be able to represent Cal, being on the West Coast, coming out here to ACC territory is huge. I think that just brings more attention to the ACC on the whole of being coast to coast.

To be able to represent this university is huge, being the No. 1 public university in the world and being part of the ACC is tremendous. And to represent football is awesome, as well, and then we've also got a whole ton of other sports that compete in the ACC, as well. It just means a lot to be able to come out here and support and have the support from the ACC, and we're grateful to be here.

The plane flight might be a little long, but we're still here to play and give it our all.

Q. The additions that have come into the linebacker corps, just what you can speak to in that sense when you know that some guys have left in the transfer portal, but you also have talent coming in and what that looks like in the linebacker room?

CADE ULUAVE: Yeah, I think our linebacker room is very talented. I think we have a lot of good players that are super athletic, have a nose for the ball and just love football. I think that's the main thing. I know we've got a bunch of guys coming in. We've got Buom Jock, we've got Harrison Taggart. I think another young guy coming up, Luke Ferrelli. I think all these guys are ballers and they're all willing to do whatever it takes to play the linebacker position. But overall as a group, I think we're super tight. The linebackers, we do everything together. We hang out all the time.

The competition is very competitive, you could say. I think the whole group is super competitive, and we're just ready to go out and ball. I think Cal has had a history of good linebackers, and we're ready to continue that tradition going forward, and we're ready to be a staple on defense and just keep on balling out and doing our thing and just playing with confidence.

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