

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Thursday, July 24, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Dave Doeren

CJ Bailey

Caden Fordham

Justin Joly

Press Conference



DAVE DOEREN: Overall, very excited to be back at NC State, going into year 13. With this group of guys, to be a part of a program that's done a lot of great things and a very humble and hungry group of guys that are ready to earn where we stand in college football this year.

Rewinding back to when I first got here, there was a lot of goals I had for myself and for NC State, and to now fast forward and be one of -- I guess the sixth most tenured coach in college football, to be the winningest coach in school history, to be in 10 bowl games in the last 12 years, to build a sustainable model of success. We've had back to back highest GPAs in school history. There's so many positive things happening on our campus through leadership of Boo Corrigan and Kevin Howell, our new chancellor. And to be with a group of guys that, like me, have a big edge to them. It's been probably the most coachable team I've had in a long time, coming off a year where we felt like we left a lot of meat on the bone. They've been very focused, a lot of fun to work with, a lot of tough days, but days that they know they've needed to push this needle where it needs to go. An addition of several players who I'm sure we'll talk about, but also some changes on the staff, and to be able to promote former players from within, I guess that's when you know you're getting older as a coach, when you get a -- recruit a young man like Isaiah Moore, Gavin Locklear, coach them, take them to graduation, see them work their butts off to try to continue as players, and then to get into the coaching ranks. And Gavin, now a full-time coach. Actually, Justin's coach in the tight end room. Isaiah Moore working with our linebackers. And these two guys have brought a lot of energy, and their blood is in the bricks, as I like to say, in this program.

Then elevating Elisha Shaw from his role last year to assistant D-line coach and what he brings. And then Kurt Roper is a guy that -- storied offensive coordinator, not only in the ACC at Duke and the success that they had, but in his time in the SEC as an offensive coordinator. Been on my staff for a while now, and Kurt is a guy that brings a lot of energy. He knows how to create cohesion.

I feel like this offense has a lot of talent. They were very young last year, so there's experienced guys that knew what to get better at, and it's not just having good players that matters, it's having good players that play together, and I know Kurt is going to do that. Obviously his relationship and the continuity he brings with our quarterback, I'm sure he'll speak to, but there's a lot of trust there, and that's a big thing in this sport.

Defensively an area that I felt like we struggled last year was getting consistent pressure on the quarterback, and we had a lot of 3rd downs that I think are winnable 3rd downs where we didn't get off the field, and as a former defensive coordinator, pressure on the quarterback is a great fix.

The one thing about DJ Eliot's defenses over the years, everywhere he's been, he's improved their numbers in tackles for loss and sacks. He's learned a lot in this profession as a coordinator in the SEC, ACC and Pac-12, but also in his time with the Philadelphia Eagles.

The one unique thing about both these coordinators is they're similar to me, similar to our players; we've got something to prove. I think for those of you that know me know that that's something I like. I like being in a room with guys that feel like they're being under the radar, feel like maybe there's some things we've got to prove about our team, ourselves as coaches, as players.

So it's a really unique staff. We have gotten younger as a staff, and I think that energy is definitely contagious on the field for these guys at practice.

We have really two different things when you look at our team. Our offense returns a lot of the players that played last year, with the exception of a few transfers on the



offensive line. If you look at our skill players, Wesley Grimes, Noah Rogers, Keenan Jackson, Terrell Anderson, guys that played a lot last year at receiver are back at tight end with Justin, coming back and obviously improving. But adding an experienced player, Cody Hardy, who you guys haven't watched yet. He's really going to be a dominant player in the run game for us. Our tailback, Hollywood Smothers, really had some big plays for us last year, and then the emergence in the off-season of one of our young backs in Duke Scott. We have a lot of guys back on offense along with our quarterbacks.

The first time I've had a returning starter at quarterback in three years, so your off-season as a head coach is tremendously different when you have an off-season with a starting quarterback. A year ago he's trying to learn what it's like to be a college student. He's trying to learn an offense. He's trying to learn the names of his coaches, names of his teammates. This year he's leading those guys. He's taking them out on the field and working on routes. There's a different thing for him. It's a completely different place that he's in at 200 plus pounds compared to the 170-ish that he was when he got here.

Some key pieces defensively; we lost a lot of starters. There's a lot of guys that played that are back, but a lot of starters. So this fall camp will be a very competitive fall camp. I think DJ and the defensive staff did a really good job of adding some quality pieces to the front. Cian Slone, seven-and-a-half sacks last year, really good pass rushers. Sebastian Harsh was a really good player at Wyoming. Adding those two guys to the edges of our defensive line. Tra Thomas comes in, a guy that can play multiple positions. And Brian Nelson, a guy that got a lot of accolades as a true freshman at North Texas, tested really well for us last week at corner. A safety that's played every position in the back end in JJ Johnson is just a really consistent and good communicator. Kenny Soares, a linebacker that played a lot of positions for Northwestern.

So we've added some pieces that have been on the field playing at their other schools, and then we added some guys that were younger that bring a lot to the table. Jaren Sensabaugh, defensive back, whose father had a great career at the school down the road and played in the NFL for a long time. AJ Richardson has been a delight, great leadership, was a captain as a true freshman at his former school, so has proven leadership.

Then DJ, he's, like me, been through a lot. Through his different stops and learning, it's been fun because I've known him over 20 years, but never worked with him. Just sitting down and talking football. He's a great translator of the changes that we're making.

He's coached in this exact system at another school, and so he knows the verbiage of it, but he also knows how to translate the verbiage of it into other things that we're doing.

We return all of our specialists, so it's nice to have returning experience and proven guys as punter, snapper, kicker, and look forward to seeing what Jonathan Paylor and Hollywood Smothers and some of these guys can do as our returners this season.

This league, conference of quarterbacks, puts a lot of teams in bowl games year in and year out, tons of players in the draft, I think, is also similar to our program, undervalued and under looked at times, but year after year has a team fighting to be in the National Championship. So proud to be a competitive member of the ACC and look forward to chasing our dreams and goals, no different than every year.

We have the same aspirations that we've had, and that's to win every game that we play and to put ourselves in a position to be in the conversation at the end of the year.

We look forward to the opportunity starting Monday with these guys to show that we're ready to do that.

Q. To go off of what you were speaking on here and what you've done, 13 years -- year 13 at NC State. We don't see that. It's atypical for coaches to be around that long. What you can say about why NC State, and why build this program for the length of time you have? And to go off of your comments on the ACC, if you feel like this is a multibid College Football Playoff caliber conference?

DAVE DOEREN: Yeah, NC State was the right fit for me. My second year at NIU we had won a second straight conference championship. Our team was headed to the Orange Bowl. There was a lot of teams that were calling and asking if I would be interested. At that time I told Sara, if we leave, I want to leave for the right fit. I don't want to just chase a name or a school. I want to find something that fits our family. We had three sons that I didn't really want to move them again if I didn't have to, and I know that's unrealistic maybe in college football, but I never think about going somewhere and it not working. I think about what I'm going to do when I get there and how I'm going to do it and the people I need along my side to do it with me.

I found that at North Carolina State. I found a blue collar school where the fan base supports the student-athletes, a place where I could live and be myself, a place where I could raise my sons and a place that had the geography that I like because I love to be outdoors. I love to fish and



golf, and to be able to do that in four seasons was a blessing.

So we were fortunate, like recruiting. We tell recruits, hey, find the right fit, and I did.

I had a lot of goals when I got here, and I've accomplished a lot of them, but there's still, as I said at the beginning, meat on the bone. 10 plus wins, winning the ACC, being in the playoffs. These are all things that I think and know that we can do with the right players, right staff, and sometimes you've got to have a few breaks, staying healthy and things like that.

As far as the league, there's no doubt that this league has shown that, and if you go back just in my tenure, with Florida State winning National Championships, Clemson winning National Championships, we've shown that we belong. Just to be candid, I'm not against multiple automatic qualifiers. I think that, to me, I think that limits leagues. You may have six teams that are in the top 20 in your league; why would you only want three of them or four of them? To me, it ought to be the top whatever that number is in the playoffs, come up with an algorithm that takes human elements out of it, that rewards people for strength of schedule, quality wins, conference wins, all the things that you look at that mean something when it comes to successful seasons.

Being a coach that actually was in the FCS that was a part of playoffs, you knew that the top whatever were in. We didn't have a conference championship game. You had to be in the top 12 or top 16. So I've been a part of it where it wasn't messy. The only team that's mad is the one that gets left out that's the lowest ranked. I think people can live with the best 15 or 16 teams being in there.

I think we're complicating things too much right now with what league deserves this or deserves that. To that point, college football just needs to do its best for college football, not what's best for the Big Ten, SEC or ACC, we need to do what's best for the sport.

Q. You talked about the fact that you saw some differences in terms of the offense back in the spring. What did you see as far as tangible differences having a guy like CJ Bailey back, having Hollywood Smothers, having a Justin Joly?

DAVE DOEREN: When you have returning players, they can build on previous experiences, and you can as a coach. I can point out to those three players the areas that they did well and the areas they need to focus on to be better, and you can see their focus on those areas and help them get to those points where they're improving.

That's one of the things we pride ourselves on is being a developmental program, helping guys become better than they were. So when you have a returning player you're allowed that opportunity.

I think that's one of the things that gets lost in the sauce of transferring. When guys leave, sometimes their development goes down. They may be going to a worse strength program and not know that. They may be going to a position coach that's not a developmental coach, he only coaches the guys that are going to play on game day. It's the opposite; we want to develop every player in our locker room. We don't care if you're a walk-on, if you're a starter, if you're a backup. Our job is to help them get better. That's how we do things at NC State. So those guys were diligent about being better. And it's not just as players; being better as people, being better as leaders, being better in your weak areas. So it's nice to be able to do that.

In regard to changes in the offense, when you watch offensive football on tape, taking play calling out of it and taking names of plays out of it, a lot of plays are the same. Same formation, same plays when you watch all teams. Everybody in some way is running inside zone, outside zone, counter. You have the same route trees. It's how you package it. So within the game you can make adjustments and call plays the way you need to based on how you're being defended.

That's the one thing I like about the things Kurt has changed. Our offense is similar in some ways and in some ways it's very different, in that he can manipulate things quickly with the verbiage that he's changed.

Q. CJ, you were kind of thrown to the wolves when Grayson McCall got hurt. Can you talk about some of the most important lessons you've learned becoming QB1 and the leader of this program?

CJ BAILEY: I learned a lot, especially from Grayson McCall. He was a great leader for me, great mentor for me even when he was done. I learned how to every day be the same person, try to be more vocal than what I was before. So at the end of last year, that's what I was working towards, was just being a more vocal leader. You'll see some of those flashes in the spring ball that we just had, I was very -- still is a very vocal leader. But overall, the type of leader I am, I'm an energetic guy, and that's what I bring to the table.

Q. To end last year, you guys played East Carolina, you also play them to start this year. What's that going to be like in terms of getting back at the Pirates?

CJ BAILEY: Yeah, it's always exciting to get on that field



for that first time, and that game 1 is going to be really fun, and the way we prepare for it is going to even be funner. I can't wait to step out for the first time with my guys and see what we're really made of.

Q. CJ, Coach Doeren talked about what it meant to bring a quarterback back, and now this is the first time that's happened in quite some time. Can you explain what the difference is in kind of knowing I'm in the front seat, I'm in the driver's seat, this is my team as the quarterback 1 here as opposed to being in the mentored and nurtured into playing this year?

CJ BAILEY: Yeah, it's a big difference. Like, last year, I just was sitting back and letting Grayson do his thing, and there was a lot of things I wanted to do last year, but I didn't want to step on Grayson's toes. Like, just be more of a leader than what Grayson was. I just observed, and coming into this year it's very different. In spring it was very different. I used my voice more, as I said before. I was way more than what I was last year, and I think what happened -- not any knock to Grayson, but I think I got the chance to experience being a starter of the team.

Q. Working with offensive coordinator and quarterbacks Coach Kurt Roper, how has he helped you evolve your game up to this point?

CJ BAILEY: Coach Roper, for one, he's a great guy, phenomenal guy, but he helped me every day. Every day I come into that room with him, in that meeting room, I gain some type of knowledge and some type of understanding of the game better. It's great that he's our offensive coordinator because he understands me and I understand him. He's my quarterback coach still at the end of the day.

Q. CJ, a lot of new guys coming to the O-line group this year, whether it's Teague Andersen or Jalen Grant, the transfer portal, Spike Sowell's coming in as a highly touted freshman. How much have you been able to get to know those guys on and off the field, and how much are you looking forward to working with those guys this season?

CJ BAILEY: Yeah, we've got a great group of guys up front and I spend a lot of time with them. We've had a couple dinners so far. I have fun with them, joke around with them a lot. But some of those guys are returners and we already had that connection. It's just guys, like you just said, like Teague and JG, I'm getting to know them more and I feel like I did a good job. I feel like I just know them a lot and they know me.

Q. CJ, what's it mean to represent Miami on this stage as a rising sophomore?

CJ BAILEY: It's great. I feel good to represent the city of Miami. That's where I'm from, and taking what I got to North Carolina, showing them what I got and putting on for the city, the 305. It's just been good. It's been great. I feel like I'm doing a great job.

Q. Caden, NC State has prided themselves on their defense for quite some time under Tony Gibson. Last year it seemed like things took a little bit of a step back in terms of performance, and I know that your injury was part of that. Looking forward to this year, looking forward to new coordinator, new system, all those things, do you think all of that newness is kind of the shot in the arm that this unit needed to get back to what the expectation is set at for NC State defenses?

CADEN FORDHAM: Yeah, anytime we go out on the field as an NC State defense, we expect to dominate. We expect to play physical and tough, and I believe this off-season was big for us. Getting a lot of the new guys in here, showing them the ways of how we do things here is huge for us.

But as far as me coming back, Sean, some of the guys that have been there for a while, we got to see guys like Drake, Payton, Zay, how they did things, and last year, you're right, it wasn't up to the standard. But this year is a new year and we're going to come out and prove that we're back. We're going to uphold that standard and play ball on defense.

Q. Caden, going back to last year, that injury, first of all, how much of an eye opener was that for you and kind of change your perspective on the game of football, and where are you at from a health standpoint heading into fall camp now?

CADEN FORDHAM: Yeah, anytime you're taken away from the sport you love so much, it's difficult. Thankfully I've got my brothers. They were with me the whole way. Coach Doeren helped me a ton. My dad, he was in my corner the whole time. My faith in the Lord helped me get through it all.

It was an eye-opening experience. I learned how to lead from a different perspective. I was on the sideline. I wasn't really out there with the guys doing it the whole time.

It was a big step in my leadership, learning how to talk to guys and show them things one-on-one instead of being out there in front of the team.

It was such a blessing. Anytime you get to play this sport, you can never take it for granted. Then as far as it goes



right now, I actually just went home, got cleared, so we're ready to go, and I'm excited for fall camp.

Q. Caden, you just spoke about your faith there. Just having faith in the chaos of adversity and how faith guided you through that storm that you had with the season-ending injury?

CADEN FORDHAM: Yeah, that's the rock. Faith is so much -- means so much more to me than any game. So having that strong faith really helped me get through those dark times.

Also, like I said, being with the guys, anytime I was with them, it made it so much better. It felt like I was out there the whole time. Definitely having a relationship with Christ, it was huge during those times.

Q. Speak about the Pack culture and what it means to be a part of the Wolfpack and the whole city of Raleigh is behind you guys?

JUSTIN JOLY: I would say that's really the reason I committed here. When I got here, I didn't know where I should go out of the portal coming out of UConn. But the people here, the people I look at to my left, that's my family right there, and everyone who wears red and represents the Wolfpack, it's not just one person, it's a pack. It's the Pack for a reason. I would say that was definitely a big moment for me and my culture.

Q. You're now 18 months in; what have you learned being a Wolfpack that may stay with you for the next 30 years?

JUSTIN JOLY: That you can rely on your people. I can count on -- if I ever need anything, I know I can call up Coach Doeren, CJ, Biscuit. I can call up any one of them to tell them if I ever need anything.

Q. You were listed as one of the Top 5 tight ends on College Football '26 and yet it seems like nationally you don't get the respect and the accolades of some of the other guys mentioned in that same breath and vein do, and Coach Doeren talks about how NC State players have an edge and they have that chip on their shoulder. Is that something that adds that chip to your shoulder?

JUSTIN JOLY: Honestly, it doesn't really faze me because at the end of the day I know who I am as a player and I think my teammates know what I'm capable of. Preseason they can have the top five tight ends. That doesn't worry me. At the end of the season is when I really want to shine.

Q. Justin, this is a very versatile tight end group with yourself, Coach mentioned Cody Hardy as a guy that's going to move some bodies, Dante Daniels is back, another very large man, a lot of excitement around a freshman like Gus Ritchey. How much are you all embracing that versatility and being able to do a lot of different things on offense in different ways in your group?

JUSTIN JOLY: I think versatility is one of the best things you can have on offense because it's very unpredictable. You never know, like, if I'm in if it's a run play or if Cody is in if it's a run play or pass play. Having that and having all different statures when it comes to tight end also, I think, helps the offense out a lot because we don't know what's going to happen, we've just got to take a guess.

Q. Recently you posted a 007 chain. Go into your personality and how you define your personality, and if we can see that in the chain which you said, "Coming to a field near you?"

JUSTIN JOLY: Yeah, man, 007, James Bond, you know, I'm rocking rock No. 7 this year. I rocked No. 7 my senior year of high school. I've got a little personality in me, if y'all couldn't tell. Yeah, coming to a field near you.

Q. Talk about your relationship with CJ Bailey and how you've gotten to work with him and build a rapport.

JUSTIN JOLY: I remember when CJ first took the helm over, you know, became QB1, I was, like, hey, fam, if you need someone to rely on and you need a reliability factor, you can come to me, like, for anything. That relationship has grown. He's relied on me for things that -- sometimes there's some routes I shouldn't have ran, but he's going to give me the ball in an open moment.

And CJ, I love you for it; don't stop ever.

Me and him, we were rooming together here at the hotel, and we were just bickering, having fun, going back and forth because that's what brothers do, and I really think that's what me and CJ's relationship are.

Q. There's been a lot of noise going on with the basketball program and in Chapel Hill, obviously, with Belichick. How has that helped you and the rest of the offensive skill position group which has retained a lot of players? How have you been able to bond and fly under the radar? How has that helped you guys?

JUSTIN JOLY: Honestly, we just block out the noise. No



offense to any of y'all, but we're not really worried about what anyone else says; we're worried about what in-house says. At the end of the day, we're the one who plays football, so I love all of y'all and I appreciate y'all for coming out, but it really don't matter.

Q. Are you sure you don't want to be a wide receiver?

JUSTIN JOLY: I promise, man. I love being a tight end.

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