

Big Ten Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 23, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Northwestern Wildcats

Coach David Braun

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach Braun, we'll begin with your opening statement.

DAVID BRAUN: Good afternoon. Excited to be back at Big Ten Media Days. Honored to be league Northwestern football into the future. Really proud of what our team was able to accomplish in the 2023 season.

I say that to also say very excited and thrilled for what's ahead of this program and attacking some of the challenges that exist within navigating a new time in college football and finding ways to keep the Cats at our best as we continue to move forward.

Our team has had an incredible offseason, a great spring ball, capped off by a six-week training cycle this summer. Really excited to report to camp here in the next week and a half and get going on 2024.

In a rapidly-evolving landscape of college football, there are challenges for sure, but with those challenges also comes opportunity.

You know, as we attack these opportunities, the things that us as a program are going to prioritize are making sure that we continue to support our student-athletes and further support our student-athletes moving forward, develop our young men holistically, support our young men and absolutely prioritize making sure that our young men earn a Northwestern degree, leveraging our best qualities at Northwestern and new landscape to compete and win Big Ten Championships, all the while doubling down on two things: making sure that we stay true to Northwestern values and continue to build off of and embody what this program has stood for for decades.

I do want to take this opportunity to introduce the three young men that are with us here today. These three young men were absolutely critical in the success that we experienced in 2023. These young men embody character, courage, leadership, competitive spirit, and a level of gratitude for being at a place like Northwestern.

Cam Porter, returning starting running back, returning captain for us. Has had an incredible offseason. So excited for Cam to operate within a new offense under the leadership of Zach Lujan. Chris Foster is the running backs coach and does an exceptional job.

Cam is part of leading a room that has some of the best depth on our team right now and embodies everything that our program is about. So excited for him to have an incredible senior year.

Our offense will go as our running game goes. The opportunities that we create in the passing game will be directly reflected on what we're able to establish on the ground, and Cam is certainly going to be the leader of that running back room that all pieces of that room will play a critical role in the way that we establish that.

The second young man that's with us today, Xander Mueller, starting linebacker for us. Xander, when I arrived on campus, interesting story about Xander, I had an opportunity to recruit Xander in my time at North Dakota State for a short time before the Cats offered Xander. Someone that I have admired from afar for a long, long time.

When I arrived in January of 2023, was excited to see Xander developing in the program, but the growth that we've seen out of Xander over the course of the last year and a half and what he was able to accomplish on the field last season I would say is nothing short of a break-out season for him.

I would argue he is unquestioned one of the best linebackers in the Big Ten and in the country, and so excited for him to continue to lead that room, continue to develop, and continue to lead our defense.

Lastly, A.J. Henning. A.J., it is a good down for the Cats when A.J. Henning has the ball in his hands, whether that be on a special teams down or offensive down. The versatility that A.J. embodies, the way that A.J. brings a certain electric component, explosiveness to our offense and our special teams game, some of the things that he was able to demonstrate throughout the season last year in



our bowl game against Utah, again, we are at our best when A.J. Henning has the ball in his hands.

So proud of what he has done as a member of our team only for two seasons, but excited for all that is ahead for him, what's ahead for these three young men and for what is ahead of our program in 2024.

With that, I'll turn it over to questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Coach, this event last year, you had been the interim for about two weeks. You were the first to publicly address questions about the hazing schedule. Your daughter was about to be born. Now being back this year, how different has this summer and this pending season been for you both personally and professionally?

DAVID BRAUN: Yeah, it's been really unique. A year of firsts, Matt. Going through a first cycle as a head coach, you know, a lot to learn. I have a great staff around me. I'm excited about where our team is at.

Personally it's been incredible. Our family has gotten settled in. We love the area. Our boys love school. They're staying busy with baseball and camps. Very grateful to be here at Northwestern and having had the opportunity to settle in.

Q. Coach, last summer the program was in turmoil for a lack of a better word. You inherit the program. 1-11 the previous year. You guys win seven more games than the previous year. 8-5, get a bowl win. Who are some of the players in your locker room that allowed you to reach the success you had? Because a lot of people were counting you guys out last year, and you guys proved the world wrong.

DAVID BRAUN: Not to deflect the question. It took all 103 that chose to stay, but the young men I just mentioned, I mean, Cam Porter, returning captain.

I just had a chance to talk with some other people over there today. Cam Porter may be one of the most impressive young men I have ever been around in my entire life. He's consistent. He's competitive. He builds other people up. He is self-reflective. He has a thirst for just continuous growth.

Bryce Gallagher, who is no longer with us, pursuing his NFL dreams, but, I mean, Bryce just had a certain quality about him where he was able to step in the room, step in the locker room, command the room, and just demand the

best out of himself and others. That's just to name a couple.

There is no doubt in my mind the reason that we found success in 2023 was because the leadership on our team. It was a player-led team. The unique challenge for this 2024 collection of coaches and players is this group collectively hasn't done anything yet. Can we find the same level of leadership within our team?

I believe it exists. I've seen it, but we have to put that into practice in fall camp.

Q. You mentioned that first coaching cycle, and now as you enter that second year, this offseason, able to have a full offseason without a lot of the chaos from last year, you're able to bring in some of your own staff, some transfers. Can you kind of talk about what this offseason has looked like in terms of building a David Braun program and what that looks like rather than just inheriting what came before you?

DAVID BRAUN: Yeah. I think the first thing I'll say is it's not a David Braun program. It's our program. It's our players' program. It's our alumni's program.

Really having to be self-reflective on what we want that to look like moving forward, especially in a changing landscape. At the end of the day, it comes back to what I mentioned in my opening remarks about staying true to our values at Northwestern and staying true to our objectives at prioritizing the student-athlete experience, prioritizing what the value of a Northwestern degree means, and leveraging all those things to find ways to create competitive advantages that lead to Big Ten Championships.

I'm proud of what we did in strength and conditioning in our offseason. I'm proud of what we've done in recruiting. I'm really excited about the way that this staff and this team is starting to gel.

I think where I've been most critical on the program is the things that I oversee. There are so many things I need to continue to grow in as a head coach, and I'm excited to do that.

Q. How do you navigate not knowing what you don't know, as a first-time head coach? Secondly, what was the process like gaining the trust of the parents and players that chose to stay after everything that happened at Northwestern?

DAVID BRAUN: How you navigate it is control the controllables. I'm very thankful for the leadership of Tony

Petitti. Very thankful for the group of head coaches here in the Big Ten as we navigate this together. The only thing you can do is control the controllables and do a great job of recruiting your class of 2025, do your best with roster management, worry about your current team.

To your second question, so much of it came down to just spending as much one-on-one time with our players as I potentially could, finding connection points with our parents when possible, getting on Zoom calls.

I've been very glowing about my admiration of our players. I will go on to say that the continued factors and the strength of our team has been the support of our players' parents. That is a special group. Just come hang out with that group on a tailgate this fall, you'll find a very special group that's incredibly supportive of the program and will continue to be moving forward.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your new hire of offensive coordinator Zach Lujan. When did you become aware of him and what he was able to do, and how do you think he will transform your offense?

DAVID BRAUN: I got very familiar with Zach competing against him. Some of my largest headaches over the years were trying to defend his offenses. To be very blunt, I was a little resistant to the North Dakota State-South Dakota State rivalry that exists. A little resistant to even exploring Zach as an option. We hired Christian Smith as our D-line coach the previous cycle. One of the best D-line coaches in the country.

We came open to talking to Zach, and our first conversation I knew he was someone that we were going to have further conversations with. I've been so impressed with his ability to really identify the strengths of the personnel, the strength of your team, the strength of the individuals, the people within your program, and tailor the scheme to fit that.

That's what we need at Northwestern. What he was able to establish at South Dakota State was really, really impressive, and I was very excited to see the growth that we saw within that unit over spring ball.

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