

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

USC Trojans

Coach Lincoln Riley

Press Conference



LINCOLN RILEY: It's good to be back in Las Vegas, a city that was very good to the Trojans last season. Good to see everybody. I first wanted to say last year at this event in Indianapolis I spoke on -- myself and many others spoke on Mike Leach's candidacy for the Hall of Fame. At that point, I know a lot of us expressed that we felt like that there are some people that their impact on college football goes beyond maybe any prerequisites for an honor like the Hall of Fame. I know a lot of you covered that. I know a lot of you wrote stories and reported on that. Obviously that was very, very successful. For that, I first want to say thank you.

I also would like to kind of stay in that lane and really advocate for the candidacy of Pete Carroll into the College Football Hall of Fame. I know he is one year short on the requirement, but hard to imagine a guy that's had an impact like Coach Carroll had on college football, and it's a little difficult for me and I think a lot of my colleagues to imagine a Hall of Fame that exists without him and his impact.

I don't come to you as the head coach at USC just solely for that reason, but just as a fan of college football and somebody that watched Coach Carroll's teams and watched the way that he interacted with his players, the way that he impacted our sport. Just something I believe is the right thing to do and would be great for our game and great for our Hall of Fame.

With that, it's great to be back here at the beginning of the season, a season that we're very, very much anticipating. Year two in the Big Ten and so much within the walls right now of USC football.

I give a lot of credit to our administration; to Jen Cohen, our athletic director; and all the support around our football program because it's very apparent that USC is extremely serious about making this football program and returning it back to being one of the greats in college football. You can see that investment level really all the way across our program.

The excitement that comes with that, the anticipation, the opportunity is real, and I think we all feel it. There's so many signs of that right now. A lot has been made of our recruiting class here coming up in the '26 class, which we're extremely proud of and excited about.

This staff that we've been able to put together, adding some key figures on the field like Coach Rob Ryan, certainly the off-the-field changes that we've made with Chad Bowden and the recruiting staff, our personnel staff has made a great impact on our program already. We're a handful of months from moving into what I know will be one of the preeminent football facilities in college football, and it's going to be a major thing for our program.

I think with our current team seeing how our roster has evolved on all sides, especially defensively after the huge improvements that we made a year ago, the depth, the championship-caliber depth that started to be established across the board is something that we all have worked hard for. It's been a long journey to work towards that point, but it's pretty exciting to watch unfold right now.

Very excited for year two in a great conference and all the great matchups and all that's getting ready to unfold, and certainly looking forward to taking this USC football team into the Big Ten here in year two to compete.

With that, we'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Lincoln, you've obviously had tremendous success with the transfer portal and bringing in players, but how do you feel like your core high school recruits have developed and are ready to take that next step to bring USC back to prominence?

LINCOLN RILEY: Good question. I think for us it's the answer is more it's gone in phases. For us year one when we walked in the door, we felt like we needed to use the transfer portal in a big way to kind of, quote/unquote, shock the system, to get the roster where it was competitive and try to create some belief and excitement and momentum early.



We landed on a bunch of the right guys in the transfer portal year one. The team came together, caught fire, honestly probably played a little bit over our head, but I think the belief and momentum was established.

We went heavy again in the portal in year two, I think trying to capitalize on that, which was probably the toughest decision, the one we went back and forth on the most, and one that if you asked me maybe my biggest regret up to this point, that's probably it.

Because I think we all knew deep down, long-term that when you are at USC, the core I think values and I think the core beliefs in terms of how you build a program is always going to start from your high school recruiting specifically in Los Angeles and in Southern California and branching out all over the country. Then your ability to develop that and then supplementing it at times with the portal.

That's where we want to be long-term. It's where we've always wanted to be long-term, and I think that's why you're seeing us recruiting the way that we have in the last year and a half. It's really gone to another level, and we're really excited about it.

With that, building a staff like we have, we have Super Bowl champions. We have guys that have accomplished just about everything that you can in the game already that are a part of our staff. I mean, some of the best coaches in ball, we're fortunate to have those guys with us. When you combine that talent with the ability that we have to develop, you start to see why there's so much excitement within the walls right now.

Q. Do you have an update on DJ Wingfield's eligibility, and when are you hoping to get a resolution on that?

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, no specific updates right now. A process that is ongoing right now. Wish I could comment on it a little bit more, but it's one of those that we have to let it play out. He's been a full participant up to any limits that have been established, and looking forward to that process hopefully wrapping up here pretty quick.

Q. The 2026 class has an enormous amount of hype around it. Why would you tell people not to sleep on the 2025 class for the USC Trojans?

LINCOLN RILEY: I think we're getting ready to get our opportunity to prove that right now. Yeah, I mean, I think there has been so much excitement about the '26 class that in some ways maybe publicly it's overshadowed some of those guys. I think once you see these guys get on the

field, once you watch them play this season and beyond, I don't think that will exist as much.

We're very proud of that class. Fortunately for us several of those guys were able to come in midterm, be a part of spring practice, and certainly there are a handful -- more than a handful -- a large number of players in that '25 class that have an opportunity to impact us in a very positive way quickly. So looking forward to unveiling those guys this fall.

Q. I wanted to get your take on UNLV transfer Jayden Maiava, who is your starting quarterback, at least as of this point. I wanted to just get your recollection as far as his maturation moving forward. And what do you see from Jayden as far as transferring from UNLV and going there to Southern Cal, how he has matured, and what you expect from him this year?

LINCOLN RILEY: Really proud of Jayden. He started four games for us last year, all four against good football teams. All four against really good defenses.

He gave us a chance to win all four. We were able to pick off three of them. Made some huge plays, made some unbelievable plays in those games. Showed a lot of resiliency, a lot of toughness.

His arm talent, the decisiveness in which he plays and how he sees things is really unique and has a chance to be really special. We've really focused in on I think two big areas this offseason. I think him continuing to find his voice as a leader, which he's really grown and I think matured and really become more comfortable with. Then I think the second for him, like a lot of young quarterbacks that we've had that ended up being pretty solid players, is making sure that your mistakes, you know, don't kill us.

As a quarterback, a lot of times it's, yes, you want to have the great plays, but how bad are your bad plays, right? If your bad plays are incompletions or throw-aways or occasionally taking a sack, like, you can still win with that.

I think his maturity as a player and understanding that I think will all but grow because once he harnesses that, you saw what this guy did against some pretty good groups. He's got a chance to be a really, really special player.

It's been fun to work with him. He's humble, a really hard worker, and has the respect of everybody in our building.

Q. I know depth and endurance was a bit of a challenge at times last year. How are you feeling about the depth of the defense, defensive line in particular, and who are some players that are standing

out to you?

LINCOLN RILEY: The depth, certainly it's going to matter. When you play a schedule like we play, it's paramount, right, that it's great because, if not, it's going to show up and get you at some point.

I think the depth, the talent level, and the size of the defensive line, I mean, there's honestly really no comparison to this time 12 months ago, I mean, to be honest. There's young talent. There's experience. There's guys now that have been in our system with Coach Lynn and Coach Nua and Coach Henderson.

We have more guys that can play multiple positions. We have more competition. I think we have better natural pass rushers, and we certainly have more size I think that I think is going to create some problems for people in the run game.

That was a big part of it. If you look at the defense and statistically we were one of the most improved defenses in the country last year and how do you take that step from being one of the most improved to flat-out being one of the best, and that was the number one target for us is, all right, we've got to really go make a big improvement here. I think we've done our part on the roster, and now we've got to develop them and go put it on the field this fall.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Kamari and just some of the steps you've seen him take to get to that next level for this 2025 season and also with him being one of the anchors of your secondary?

LINCOLN RILEY: He's another guy that we've really challenged to step up vocally just as a leader and have a presence beyond just the plays that he makes on the field because he has that capability. And it's been fun to see him become more vocal not just with our DBs, but with our defense and our team as a whole. That's something I don't know that he really wanted to do last year, but I think he sees that it's vital for our defense, our team, our program right now.

Kamari is a guy that's going to have an opportunity to play football for a long time, and it will be important for his career as it goes on to develop that so he can bring as much value to whatever team or organization that he is a part of.

Then I think as a player, he made a lot of great plays last year, but I think there's still another level he can go to in terms of his consistency, our ability to move him around in different spots, which Coach Lynn and our staff are very talented at. We're obviously thrilled that he's back, and it's

a little bit of a new position for him being such a leader and being counted upon in that way.

So far he's certainly risen up to the challenge.

Q. Talk about the importance, the significance of the USC-Notre Dame rivalry. Does it matter when that game is played during the schedule?

LINCOLN RILEY: Does it matter when it's played? I don't think so. I think that's something that we'll always look at. I think depending on what happens here from a playoff perspective and do we expand, what model do we go to, that's certainly going to have an impact. Not only in the rivalry, but what time of year potentially that you would play it.

I've been asked a bunch about it. Listen, I told somebody the other day, when Bob Stoops first called me and offered me the OC job at Oklahoma, and I had been sitting on pins and needles for four days, and I was convinced I wasn't getting it. I was at Gate 12 of Love Field, and he called me and told me that he offered me the job. I took it immediately. My very first thought, literally before calling my dad, calling my wife, anybody, was I get to coach in an OU-Texas. First thing.

When I decided the night at my house to take the USC job, my first thought was, I get to coach in USC-Notre Dame. The first thought. Because before coach, player, any of that, as a fan.

So the rivalry -- all these rivalries mean a great deal to me. They mean a great deal to anybody who cares about college football. Yes, I mean, do I want to play the game? Hell, yeah, I want to play the game. Absolutely. It's one of the reasons I came here. All right?

But, also, my allegiance and my loyalty is not to Notre Dame, and it's not to anybody else. I'm the head football coach at USC, and I'm going to back USC, and I'm going to do everything possible that I can in my power to make USC as good as it can and not going to let anything stand in between that.

I'm very hopeful we can get to a point where it makes sense. It's one of those situations right now where the two schools are in radically different situations. I think we can all agree with that with one having a conference affiliation and one not.

I think it's another -- I think there's a million reasons why that we should very seriously as a college football community, that we should adopt the automatic qualifying in terms of the College Football Playoff. This might be the

most important one, right, is that we give every reason for college football to preserve nonconference games that mean a lot to the history of the game and to the fan bases and the former players and everybody that's been associated with it.

I'm very hopeful that we can get there, and I'm very hopeful that we play this game forever.

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