

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Wisconsin Badgers

Coach Luke Fickell

Press Conference



LUKE FICKELL: Good afternoon. Obviously I would like to start by making sure that I say I'm incredibly appreciative of this opportunity to be able to stand before you today representing the University of Wisconsin, our football program, and this Big Ten.

Obviously the way I grew up, being a Big Ten guy, it's humbling to be able to stand before you and represent that. And also understand the responsibility that in which I have representing the University of Wisconsin, the traditions, and all the things in front of me. That's something that is motivating to me on an everyday basis, and I know that for our program as well, it's upholding those traditions is something that's incredibly motivating to all of us.

Start by saying a little thank you to Commissioner Tony Petitti, his staff, A.J. and the crew, obviously for all that they do, their leadership, their patience, but in particular their commitment to not only just college football and the Big Ten, keeping us obviously up front, in the forefront of this race but also in the entire Big Ten of understanding these landscapes and making sure they continue to move us forward. They've done an unbelievable job keeping us abreast to all the things that are continuing to change on a weekly and daily basis.

To the media, not just for being here, but for what it is you do for college football, really the stories, the people. I think it's easy to recognize the game, but the people that are within, you do an unbelievable job of highlighting them and getting the stories out, and I think that's what makes college football the most exciting sport out there.

To our AD, I don't know if he's out here, Chris McIntosh, his partnership and his leadership is really important to me and our program as we continue to move forward. I think his leadership, really leading that whole department and the 23 varsity sports in this trying and unique time.

I don't think this is something that a lot of these ADs signed up for and recognized what they are going to be involved with, and recognize what they continue to do, not just with college football, but all things college athletics in particular

within their universities. Those guys, they do an unbelievable job, and Chris does an unbelievable job for us.

Not last but not least, I would be remiss if I didn't say thank you to my wife, Amy. We celebrated 25 years this past few weeks ago, and the rock of our family and all that I have an opportunity to do is because of her. I've been in this business for 25 years now, and she's been with me from being a GA to first job at the University of Akron to picking up and moving the family and six kids halfway across the country. Obviously with all of us coaches, it takes some special people behind the scenes to give us an opportunity to do what it is that we do.

University of Wisconsin is and will continue to be a traditional football program in every way possible. I know this is a transactional world that we all know about, and we continue to enter, especially since July 1 with this new revenue sharing, but it's really critical and important to me in all that we do and the way that we continue to grow and the things that we've got to be able to do, and even in the changes that we focus upon, the traditional things that has made the University of Wisconsin, the football program great, and we've got to continue to build on those things.

It starts with high school recruiting. I think we recruited 21 kids last year, will still continue to be our philosophy in our traditional mindset. But it comes down to trust and respect from within our program, whether it starts in recruiting and all that we do. It's about relationships. That's not going to change even though we're entering into this transactional world.

It's really about development, the development of 18- to 22-year-olds in all that we do. I think that's where some of this, in this new era in what we're working and continue to work for in the last three, four years and moving forward, for me and for us, I know that it's really important for us to make sure that we continue to focus upon the traditional things that has made Wisconsin great and will continue to make Wisconsin great.

That kind of leads me into three of those guys who represent us that are here today. We actually have a



leadership group of about 14 guys. To be honest with you, that's where the strength of our program lies. What's going to continue to move us forward, I don't know that it's just in the three guys that are here, but it's in this group of 14 guys that really the strength of our program and where our leadership is.

Three guys are here today to represent us, and they've done a phenomenal job. On the defensive side of the ball, we've got graduate Rico Hallman, cornerback from Miami, Florida, from University School in Miami. Rico will be a three-year starter. He's done a phenomenal job. Going into this year, he's as prepared or more prepared than he has been in the last three, and two years ago he was a Third Team All-American with seven interceptions. Rico was a big part of the revamping and some of the things we've done differently defensively for us in this program.

The next one is Jake Renfro. Jake is, again, a graduate. He'll be a returning starter at center. He's a Chicago, Illinois, Providence Catholic kid, and he will anchor that offensive line along with Riley Mahlman, Joe Brunner, who are two other guys that are returning starters, two-year starter and a three-year starter. They kind of anchor that offensive line.

Wish I could have had both of those guys with us here today as well. Those three guys are really the core of our offensive line, not just our offensive line, of our offense, and a lot of the leadership of the entire program. That's a great place to start.

The third guy with us today is Billy Edwards Jr. Billy is a graduate as well, obviously a quarterback from Lake Braddock High School in northern Virginia, son of a high school football coach. He comes to us from the University of Maryland. In this unique world, I think Billy came to us in January, and I can honestly tell you that, since the day he's walked in the door, it's a new era. He's walking in the door, taking the keys to a new offense in a lot of ways. Everything within our program is earned, so that's a unique situation.

I can tell you that Billy has walked in, humbled himself, embraced all things Wisconsin, has done an incredible job at earning the role as a leader in all that he's done from the way he's worked, and then as he's continued to grow, and his voice is becoming more and more of a leadership voice in everything that we do.

He's done an unbelievable job and will obviously be the leader of a group that is probably one of the bigger changes that we're experiencing now. That's the leadership group. Those three guys will represent that group of 14 guys that really for me and for us is what is key

for the growth for where we're headed and what it is that we're doing.

Last year was not the standard. It's pretty obvious to be able to say. Really we're talking about the way that we finished last year. That's not the standard. That's not the expectation by any ways. I was not brought here thinking that that's in any way what it is that we expect at the University of Wisconsin, but I'm not here to dwell upon last year either.

What last year does do is it gives us an opportunity to be able to self-reflect. It gives us an opportunity to recognize things that we need to continue to be able to change. I think that's what was most important as we attack December and January for us and our program. That's where everything started. It's pretty easy to kind of pinpoint some of the changes that we've made, whether it's offensively. There's some difference defensively, just size and some things we had to be able to address and do.

What it really came down to, and some of the changes we had to make was we had to get back to what has and will continue to make Wisconsin an unbelievable place, an incredible football power and give us a chance to play for championships. A lot of people will say what is that? Running the football? That's getting back -- no, that's a part of things, but what it really comes down to is our ability to get back to what I would say is complementary football. I don't mean complementary football in a way that everybody would define complementary football on a Saturday afternoon or a Saturday night. It's much deeper than that.

We talk about complementary football for our team and our program, it's something at the core of what it is we have to be able to do. It's something that as a team and as a program has to be something that we live on a daily basis, and we kind of define, and we will continue to define what complementary football looks like to us at Wisconsin.

It's really more than three phases, it's four phases. It's offense, defense, special teams, and a culture to the way in which we do things, and our ability to embody that as a program -- and I don't just mean that on Saturdays. I mean that in everything that we do and recognize and understand how each and every one of us feeds off of one another and the things that we have to do in order to be successful, the sacrifices we need to make for the good of the whole is more important than just to sit here and talk about what we've changed offensively or the things we've changed defensively or what your expectations are.

It comes back to a process that started in December, has gone through January, and has been a big part of some of



and a lot of the changes, whether it's faces or people within our program. So I can honestly sit here and tell you that we're really excited. Six days from now, we begin camp and we begin this 131 day journey. That's 131 days from the time we start camp until the end of the regular season to put to the test the things that we implemented from the leadership ideas to what complementary football looks like and what's going to give us the greatest opportunity to get back into a place where Wisconsin's playing for championships.

That's the exciting time for us. At this point in time, I'll open it up for some questions.

Q. You have an uncommonly challenging schedule this season. Is there anything you're doing differently to prepare for the variety of challenges you have on the schedule this season?

LUKE FICKELL: Thank you, captain obvious. Guess what you signed up for? As I said to our guys in the past, this isn't the Big Ten West anymore. I can honestly say, with that schedule has brought upon probably a lot of the changes which we have, whether it's guys that are no longer with us or guys that are with us today.

The great thing about that schedule is it's pretty easy to be able to lay it down right in front of everybody, whether they're coming back fifth year or fourth year, or guys coming into our program, a guy like Billy Edwards. They don't lay out the schedule sometime in April. Everybody knows what they signed up for, and everybody knows what they stuck around for, and the beautiful thing about that is we've been able to embrace that.

We're not going to say, hey, this is the elephant in the room. We understand what being part of the Big Ten, what being part of this conference, and in order to be at the top and be at the best, you've got to compete, and you've got to beat the best. It gives us a challenge and an incredible opportunity in front of us as well.

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