

July 15, 2016



An Interview With:

COACH TODD GRAHAM

COACH GRAHAM: Good morning. It's an honor and a privilege for me to be here today representing Arizona State University, going into my fifth season, and also representing the 2016 Arizona State Sun Devil football program, from which I'm really proud.

I'm really proud of our football team, the work that they've put in. It's nice to be going into year five and have the values instilled in our program that we think is going to bring championship to Arizona State.

Really proud to have two young men with me here today that epitomize the values of our program -- character, smart, disciplined, and tough -- Tashon Smallwood and Tim White. Today is Tim White's 22nd birthday, so what a way to spend your birthday, right?

Really excited to have these guys here. Looking forward to this season. Really proud of our program and what our guys are doing not only on the field but off the field. And we've had four great years, have laid a great foundation, and we're looking forward to 2016 and getting out there and getting after it. Go Devils.

Q. Over the summer, did you look outside your window at the stadium and wonder if they were going to get finished?

COACH GRAHAM: I would have liked to, but I couldn't look out my window. They have a clear plastic deal over it for the construction, so I can't see out of it, but I would go up to the fifth floor and I would go up to the fourth floor and sit out there on the deck and watch it.

It's just -- it's amazing to really reflect back on just how quick that's happened and just how

blessed I've been to have great supporters and people that have really been just so gracious in their giving to make it happen.

To know that we're within -- next year we're going to have a brand-new stadium and a brand-new state-of-the-art, high-tech football complex is pretty special. Not many people can say they've invested that kind of resources in a program, and I'm proud of that, that we've also done it with great support from our donors and supporters.

I tell people it's something that I know I'm only going to have one opportunity to probably ever do what we've been able to do. And to be going into year five and have all that happening, it's a transformational time, and it's pretty special.

Q. Is it already having an impact in recruiting?

COACH GRAHAM: I think so. Like I said, we've laid a great foundation, and we've -- the things that we talked about doing, winning on the field, winning off the field, winning in the classroom, you know, we're coming off our four best years academically. We have had one of the top-three four-year periods in the history of the program. For a first-year staff, we're at the top as far as how many wins we've had, and we've established a strong foundation. That along with when kids, players see that kind of commitment, you know, it speaks volumes about our commitment to be a top-tier program.

Q. When you took over, your team was one of the worst teams in the conference. What is your secret to turning around this program?

COACH GRAHAM: Well, one, I think -- and we had some challenges last year, but I think David Coleman and the officiating in our conference are very professional and do a great

job. I'm one that really believes that they do a really good job at what they do.

But really my secret is just teaching, educating. I think, one, to win, every time you get a penalty you're losing yards, so I'd like to eliminate that, and we educate our players on how to play the game.

I also think that it's my obligation first and foremost to take care of my players as well as the opponent players. So teaching them how to play the game the right way within the rules is part of safety. And so we go to great extent to teach the game, and so all my coaches are teachers, and they also understand that we want to win, we want to win the right way. We're not going to cut one corner. Teaching the rules is about respecting the game, it's about player safety, and it's about winning.

I just really believe that -- and I'm really proud of that. I'm proud that it shows that -- I think it showed -- it's a great statement -- you look in the last three years, there's only Navy and Air Force have fewer penalties than we have in the country, and coming from where we were, that's a pretty big accomplishment.

So it's kind of a three-part deal that I just think it's part of our style of being a disciplined football team is the key to winning, and we believe that if you're disciplined, that's how -- if you're a program that's disciplined and built on the values of character, smart, discipline that produces toughness, then you're going to have a chance to consistently win.

Q. How would you size up your quarterback race going into the fall camp?

COACH GRAHAM: We're excited. I'll tell you, it reminds me, obviously, of our first year, where at this time my first year, if I would have told you who I thought the quarterback was, I would have told you I thought it was going to be Mike Bercovici, and it wound up being Taylor Kelly. So we have three guys that are coming back from the spring that have had great springs and developed as well as Dillon Sterling-Cole that's coming in. So we've got four guys that we're extremely excited about.

We recruited all of them. All of them can extend plays and are athletic and are more of the mold of being able to extend plays like Taylor was, so we're excited about that attribute.

Now, none of them has thrown a pass or done anything in a game. What gives me great confidence is the two guys that mentored them

were Scholar Athletes of the Year in the Pac-12, so they've been able to watch and learn from I think two really quality young men.

The key for us is just not doing too much with four new starters on the offensive line, keeping it simple. But we're going to be talented. We feel like we're going to be talented and have more depth on the offensive line.

I really like the talent we have at quarterback. So the key for us is getting back to play Sun Devil football and not turning the football over and minimizing the negative plays.

So I've got a lot of confidence. I'm looking forward to it, and being real honest with you that our players know coming out of spring exactly -- they're there every day, so they kind of know how the battle is kind of playing out. But we've got a lot left in that evaluation, and I'm looking forward to fall camp getting started and getting after it, seeing where they're at.

Q. Do you have a timetable for picking a starter?

COACH GRAHAM: Yeah, we'll do it the first week. We'll do it probably Friday before the first game. Why would I do it any time before that? Our players will know, just being honest with you, not trying to -- but I'm being truthful. You know, who I thought the quarterback was going to be my first year wound up being -- the third-team guy wound up being the guy because of what he had done over the summer and how he came in what kind of camp.

The first couple of weeks of camp it'll start to clear up fast within our house, within our players, and they'll know that.

Our players will clearly know who that player is going to be long before we make that announcement.

Q. Players have talked about toning down championship talk. What do you make of that?

COACH GRAHAM: I didn't make anything of it. From the time you walked in the door, if you walk down the hallway, our goals are written on the wall. Number one, we want to produce men of character that know how to live a championship life, and I think it's something that I'm proud of the progress we've made there.

Number two, want to graduate 100 percent of our players. I think we've made progress there,

the four best years academically.

And then obviously we want to be Pac-12 champions, and then it says Rose Bowl champions, and then it says national champions. Why would you have any other goal?

Obviously we learned some lessons last year. The good news is we had put ourselves in position of having high expectations because we'd had back-to-back 10-win seasons, and we lost a lot of close games is the reality of it, and we've got to win those close football games.

We worry about the things we can control, and our motto is rise up. We get knocked on our can, you rise up and go at it.

Q. The goals may not have changed, but have you changed the way you approach Media Day and the way you enter a season?

COACH GRAHAM: I don't know, I'll let you guys make that decision. I can tell you that I'm going to be genuinely who I am. The reason why is because I'm not a person that looks towards the media as a negative. It's an opportunity for me to communicate with my fans and communicate with Sun Devil Nation and communicate with the future Sun Devils.

Part of my philosophy is that my players watch this and they hear me, and I believe in them. I never try to say anything that -- I try to tell people what I really think, and I never try to -- I think sometimes people get tired of the same ol' answers, and I just try to be genuinely who I am, and that's something that I'm proud of what we've done in the four years that I've been there, and I'm proud of the foundation we've laid. We learned a lot from last year, and what I learned is we've got to win the close football games.

We'll proceed with class and character, and that's how I've tried to represent our program.

Q. What kind of jump do you expect from JoJo Wicker?

COACH GRAHAM: I'm excited for JoJo. You know, came in, started as a true freshman. Really, I'll tell you, Tashon has been big in being a mentor and a leader to him, just a great young man that has unbelievable talent. And so he's a guy that we're looking to have a big year and needs to really -- I tell him every day, he's a Freshman All-American and had a great freshman year, but I'd like for him to jump to having three senior years back to back to back. He's a guy that I think is a guy we'll look to and a guy that has to be one-on-one.

That's the big key for us is probably since 2013 we haven't had that type of impact, and I do think that we have the guys that can do it.

JoJo is definitely the guy that we look to as a playmaker up front for us.

Q. What do you see as Jay Jay Wilson's role this season?

COACH GRAHAM: One of the things that we've really worked hard to develop is our tight ends. I feel great about our tight end position as a whole. Cody Cole coming back has been really solid, and we feel like we've developed five guys at that position that we think we've really improved dramatically at that position. It'll be one of those things, it'll be on going evaluation, see how fall camp goes, and go from there.

Q. Out of your freshmen, who has a chance to play this first season?

COACH GRAHAM: You know, there's a lot of guys that are going to be given a look. The ones that come in that probably have prepared -- we've been very impressed, obviously, with the guys and their work ethic and how they've reported and how they've come in. You know, that'll be kind of a wait-and-see deal.

But I'm excited about that bunch and really excited about how they -- now just about -- I think just about everybody in the program we've recruited, so adding a great deal of -- great young men of character, and I like the speed that we're bringing in. So looking forward to hopefully being a faster football team, and I think some of those guys can help us.

Q. What do you make of the media picking you guys fifth?

COACH GRAHAM: I don't make anything of it. I think that pretty much how the pick is going to go is kind of how last year finished. You know, I don't worry too much about where they pick us. It's more important where we finish.

I couldn't even tell you, I think the highest we've ever been picked was second; is that right? Or third? It doesn't bother me. I can tell you in this league if you polled the coaches, it's pretty hard to -- any team in this league can beat any team on any given Saturday. The parity in this league, and you just look at last year, we had five games that we were winning with four minutes left in the game. So you have to win the close games. You're going

to have a close game every week in this conference.

Q. You used to work for Rich Rodriguez at West Virginia?

COACH GRAHAM: I did.

Q. You guys are obviously coaching at rival schools. What's your relationship with him like now?

COACH GRAHAM: You know, I mean, he's the head coach at Arizona, I'm the head coach at Arizona State. Obviously I'm a person that has always been grateful to the people that have hired me and given me an opportunity in the past. I've got respect for all the coaches in our league and what they do. But we're obviously fierce rivals and competitors, and that's a must-win for us every year.

But I am very grateful and appreciate the opportunity that he gave me back years ago.

Q. What excites you the most for the upcoming season?

COACH GRAHAM: The heart and the character of our team. I'm looking forward to -- I think we might have the most inexperienced line. I think that's what I read somewhere. I'm excited about the youth and the excitement around our team, and really -- I really like the mentality that our team is taking and how they've approached spring, and we're pretty motivated.

Kind of a bad taste in our mouth, and we'd been accustomed to winning those close games, and I think our guys have worked extremely hard to right those issues that we've had, including me, and it's exciting -- the new staff members that we have. There's a lot of excitement around our program with the transformation that's happening that you see outside in the stadium and our football complex. There's a lot of excitement around our program.

But our guys take a great deal of pride in what we've been able to accomplish, and we lost a lot of close games last year, and that didn't sit well with us, and we're anxious to get back on the field and work to change that.

Q. There's a lot of familiarity now with the coaches in the Pac-12 who have been around four years or so. How has that shaped your perspective on scheme and things that you are doing?

COACH GRAHAM: I'll tell you one of the interesting things that I find about this year that not a lot of people -- some people have talked about, but there's a lot of new coordinators, and there's a little bit of -- any time you have that, there's a little bit of unknown kind of how that's going to shape out.

I think that's one of the things as you -- this is one of the toughest leagues to play defense in, and obviously you see the coordinators, the offensive coordinators and a lot of those guys have gotten opportunities to go on and be head coaches around the country, which speaks volumes about our league, but that's going to be interesting to see how that plays out and just kind of where those schemes kind of move to.

One of the things I can tell you and going back and studying and really trying to assess and analyze 2015, you have to be adaptive. You really have to be adaptive, and you've got to stay healthy, and when you have injuries, then you've got to be adaptive.

What I mean is that this league is constantly evolving, and I think the key to winning this league is being able to run the ball, being able to stop the run, and win the explosives, and the first explosive you'd better do is take care of the football.

Very tough league to play defense in, and I think there's a lot of new coordinators that are going to be -- it's an interesting dynamic in our league this year.

Q. You had to face Myles Garrett at Texas A&M in the opener. What's the biggest challenge he presents?

COACH GRAHAM: Don't underestimate his abilities, I'll tell you that. We knew that he was a great pass rusher, and going into that game, our deal was to get the ball out, and we kind of deviated from that, and it wound up being something that I think really we'd like to have had an opportunity to go back and try again.

But he's a guy that can really impact the quarterback, and you've got to know where he's at, and if we had to do it over again, we'd have had a different plan.

Q. You used Tim White on defense during the spring. Will you continue to use him there?

COACH GRAHAM: Tim White is -- we got

him last summer, and we got him late in the spring. He is one of the most dynamic players with the ball in his hand. That will be his job. He will get the ball on kick returns and punt returns and screens and vertical passes and intermediate passes, and that's going to be his primary role.

Tim is a guy that is extremely versatile. And so will we look at utilizing all those skills? Yes, but we're going to make sure that we don't -- first things first, he's going to be a guy with the ball in his hand.

Q. What did you see from Brady White this summer?

COACH GRAHAM: Fierce competitor, make all the throws, tremendous leader. He's a Barrett Honors student, just smart, bright guy, and very much in the mix of this thing, a guy that had a great spring, great bowl practice, and a guy that can really extend plays and takes care of the football. Really excited about him as well as the other guys.

Q. How would you evaluate in-state recruiting and how you've recruited the state of Arizona throughout your tenure?

COACH GRAHAM: I think we've worked extremely hard to keep the best and the brightest with the best character there, and that's been one of the biggest challenges, but I think that you reap what you sew, and people know who we are and what we're about now, and people are starting to see the benefits of that.

Q. Have you ever coached a season with this much inexperience on the offensive line?

COACH GRAHAM: Yeah, I think when we were at Tulsa we did. We graduated four, I think, one year. We graduated three and then one part-time starter.

One of the things about that I will tell you, I think Coach Thompson is just the best there is at developing young talent, and I've got a great deal of confidence there, and that's going to be key for us. And what's going to be key for us, we adapt what we're doing schematically and keep it simple, help them in what we're doing, but I like -- Coach Lindsey, what's been great about it for us offensively, we haven't had to change any terminology. We haven't had to do really anything different other than really return to our traditional values of the program that we established back in '07 and '08.

So for us, it's not holding the ball and not putting too much pressure on those guys and run the football.

The good news is we've got some pretty good backs and some pretty good receivers, and I think some really athletic, smart quarterbacks. The key for us is just how we utilize all that and really designing what we're doing in camp and evolving that to make sure we're at the right spot as far as how much risk we're taking with that group.

Q. You were very unhappy with special teams early in your tenure, and now you have two pieces of watch list, kicker, punter, Tim White. How much of a difference is that?

COACH GRAHAM: Well, one, I can't undervalue the impact that Coach Slocum has had. To be able to hire a guy that we study with every year, who we consider the best at what he does, he's had a great impact. And I really think that we're just now scratching the surface on where we can be. We feel like we've had marked improvement there.

We've got to eliminate some substitution errors. We've got to -- we have, I think, Zane is very, very capable. Obviously he's shown that in the past. We've just got to be more consistent there in scoring points from a field goal standpoint, and just continue to get better with our coverage. But I think that we have improved in the return game, and I think our guys are -- their approach to special teams has changed, and I think Coach Slocum has done a great job with it.

Q. Is Cameron Smith back to his old self 100 percent?

COACH GRAHAM: Yeah, I think he will be. I mean, that's one of the things that we're excited about. I think we had seven starters lost on offense, but to get back him, a guy that can, one play, score. He's had a great spring. I think Coach Norvell has had a great impact on him, and he's a guy we're really looking to get back to form, and he really is in great shape.

We've got to make sure we minimize reps and things like that, make sure we don't get too many reps in practice sometimes with Cam. But he's a guy we're looking to be back to form and even then some. He's a guy that can flat stretch the field vertically.

Q. Does Koron Crump start camp as

the devil position?

COACH GRAHAM: You know, that's probably where we'll start him off, depending on what package we're running. If we're running our 3-4 wide receiver package, he's definitely a devil, and then our heavy package he'll play the outside backer, the field, the spur position.

Q. You must have been happy this spring.

COACH GRAHAM: Yeah, I was really pleased, really pleased with Koron. Our guys have worked hard this summer, and getting a good training session with him has really helped, and he'll be -- he's in a lot better shape than he was in the spring, but he can flat -- he's another guy we think can impact the quarterback and do some things athletically, can really run.

Q. Have you removed some elements of the playbook for the quarterbacks just in terms of their process?

COACH GRAHAM: Not really. I mean, we have -- Chip -- I've been just so excited about where we're going there, and we've got a lot of work to do, obviously. We've never gone to battle together and all that, but each quarterback's plan will be different, and so we're very specific what we do with each one of them.

But all of our quarterbacks are really bright. Dillon coming in knows the least about our system, so we obviously will keep things with his reps very, very simple as he moves along. But we've got four bright guys, and so, you know, that's something that we haven't -- we don't scale it back for -- I think the things that we'll scale back on is making sure we're not putting too much pressure on our offensive line.

Q. Going into the season would you play two quarterbacks early on?

COACH GRAHAM: Yeah, I don't know. I wouldn't rule anything out.

Q. Tim mentioned that (inaudible) really helped him get more mature was the word he used. When he first came into the program, did you really see a level of maturity from him?

COACH GRAHAM: Tim is always -- I call him an old soul. I asked him today was he turning 30. He's a guy that just -- he's always had great mental maturity from the time we met him. We really had limited film on him, and actually Coach Kraft, our track coach, is the one that deserves

credit for recruiting Tim because he brought him to us, and very grateful for that.

But when I met Tim White, there was no doubt because of just the mental maturity and the character that he has, and he's a guy that's very well-respected on our team in a very short period of time.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports



visit our archives at asapsports.com