

July 14, 2016



An Interview With:

RICH RODRIGUEZ

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Hopefully offensively we can take another step, stay healthy, and have some success. With that, we'll get this knocked out.

Q. What is the QB situation?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Okay, our quarterback situation, we have in my opinion two returning starters. One that's more established in Anu Solomon, really good player, particularly when he's healthy. Last year he had some injuries. But he's got a challenge with Brandon Dawkins who played a little bit at the end of the year, it has gotten better.

So I think we're in a good situation where we have two guys competing for the starting job. We've got a young guy Khalil Tate who's got an outstanding future, we think, and we're recruiting well at that position. But Solomon, Dawkins will go into camp splitting first-team reps, and we'll see who wins the job. I hope both of them prove that we can win with them and we'll play both of them throughout the year.

I'm not typical where I think you've got to name a starter. We treat the quarterback position pretty much like the rest of them. Just compete and play the best guy at the time.

Q. How do you try to figure out what BYU's schemes will look like in the opener?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Trying to figure out what BYU is going to do has been the biggest challenge just because we don't -- even though we know who they hired and can check their background, you don't know for sure in the first game. So we're going back and studying what they did in the past, we're studying some high school film. I'm not worrying about that right now, but midway through August we'll start getting into that.

Q. Solomon has been fairly steady his first two years of starting. In year three, what do you want to see from him to nail down his job?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: The next step for Anu is simply be more consistent. Certainly health is an issue with that, but there are so many more things that we can do in our offense if the quarterback can handle it mentally, and he can handle a lot mentally, and we're going to put more on him.

Now, we're still going to call the plays just because I've always said we watch more film as coaches than the players do. They might be watching Sponge Bob Square Pants or something, I don't know, on Saturday mornings. But Anu is a really -- is a more competitive guy than sometimes he lets on. He's calm and you look at him, it doesn't look like he gets that excited, but he does. So it's important to him, but we're going to push him and have pushed him since the spring to take his game to another level, and I think he'll do that.

Q. Which Pac-12 team's offense is the biggest headache to game plan for and why?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Okay, that's a fair question, but I'm not going to ever name somebody else. I like to think we're the most difficult to prepare for, but of their games, it looks like maybe that's not the case. I don't know. They're all pretty difficult.

What's unique about our league and particularly about our schedule is that it's different from week to week scheme-wise. You'll go from a Stanford system to -- we don't play them, Oregon, to Utah, and everything in between. The biggest challenge is the talent in our league is better now. I don't think there's anybody, any coach, I may be the first coach speaking that won't tell you that the Pac-12 is more talented now than it's ever been in its history, and that's what makes it more difficult to defend.

Q. Having gone through spring ball with the new defensive staff, do you have an idea yet what your defense will look like?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yeah, I know what we're going to do on defense. In fact, when I hired a coordinator, which was a little bit unique, I wasn't looking so much for a scheme, because I

think schemes are overrated, as much as I was looking for a personality and attitude. And I kind of set the parameters, this is what I want him to do. But I'm not going to coach it or teach it, I'm going to let my defensive staff to do that. But I hired Marcel Yates who scheme-wise was really good, but more than anything I liked his personality, I liked the personality of the defense, and I know what we're going to do, I'm just not -- why tell anybody until we have to. I mean, it's not like it's a big secret, but for the first couple teams, they'll have to figure that out.

Q. What's the most encouraging thing you saw from your defense this spring?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: The most encouraging thing I saw from our defense was, again, just the renewed enthusiasm, and there's a lot of young guys out there. It sounds like coach speak, but hell, I don't really know how good we're going to be, I just know we weren't really good last year, and we need to get better.

The first person has got to take responsibility, that's me. As the head coach, I'm responsible for all phases of the team, and so I looked at myself and say, geez, I've got to do a better job of making sure we're getting better defensively. There's going to be some growing pains, but the future of our defense is going to be really good.

Q. Can you talk about the players you brought today and what you expect to see from them on the field this season?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, really proud. Nate Phillips has been a four-year starter, been one of the most consistent wide receivers I've ever coached in 30 years. He practices hard. He's smart, intelligent. He's tough. He blocks well. He'll have a big year for us.

We've got himself, Samajie Grant and Trey Griffey, are three seniors that are starters for us for a long time, so we're pretty excited there. And then Sonny is not quite my age but close. He's newly married, got a little baby, mature, a great leader, and a really good football player. When he came back from his mission, he was there with Coach Stoops and then he left and I really didn't know him, and when he came back, he came back ready to play and has worked his tail off. He's one of the best leaders in our locker room for sure.

Q. Was Tate there during the spring?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, Khalil Tate enrolled early. He was 17 years old, so he's a young guy. But everything is -- now he's still trying

to figure it out, but he's a talented guy, and he's eager to learn. He's got a really neat skill set.

Q. Should I assume he'll redshirt?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: No, I wouldn't assume anything. He's definitely behind the other guys, which you'd expect, but depends how quickly he learns.

Q. And during the spring did he show you how he plays? He makes up plays as they go?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I don't like to make up plays as you go, but I don't mind extending plays, and for him, he's such a talented runner. He's not fast, but he's big and he's strong and he's elusive. I think we'll probably -- whoever the best quarterback is will play, and whatever they do the best, whether it's throw, run, a little bit of both, that's what we'll call when they're in there.

But basically in the spring we just wanted Khalil to learn the base offense, and he got a little bit of that. I don't know how much he's progressed since then because we don't have as much contact with him in the summer, but in August camp he's going to get reps. It's not like we're going to say, Khalil, go to the scout team, redshirt. He's going to get reps, but he'll get reps after Brandon and Anu does.

Q. What do you look at as his strength?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: With Khalil? He can throw it about 80 yards and he can run well, but we've got to make sure he's running in the right direction and throwing to our guys. When he does that, he's going to be okay.

Q. Have you talked about his wanting to improvise a lot?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: We talked a little bit about it, but when you watch the guys from high school, a lot of times it's the same system, sometimes it's a different system. We just see more than anything is he a good guy, is he eager to learn, and what kind of work ethic does he have, does he love football, not like it. I've always said our biggest challenge is to find talented guys that love football, not like it, and he's a guy that loves football, and talking to his coach they said he loves football. If you have that, then you've got a chance.

Q. What are you hoping to get out of some of the local recruits like DaVonte' Neal is here?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, DaVonte' has been moved back and forth. I think he's set on defense. We're going to keep him there. I don't think he was 100 percent healthy, either. He had a wrist injury throughout the fall. But I think he'll have

a big year. It's key for us to have DaVonte' Neal have a big year at corner, and all of our defensive guys.

So I'm excited about him. He's a local guy, and he's matured. He's an older guy that has a young child. I've been really proud of the way he's worked.

Q. When you renovated your football complex and stadium, did you see immediate advantages or improvement in recruiting?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: We did. At Arizona, I think they were going to build that complex whether I came or not. It's just my timing was pretty good. My second year, we got to move in the new facility, and the only thing we need now is an indoor. I was a little naïve. It never rains, why did we need an indoor. But you spend a couple summers in Arizona, you realize what an indoor could do for you. So I think that's next. I'm not sure when, but hopefully soon we'll get an indoor built, and then you've got everything you need.

Q. Would you say that Dawkins is a better all-around athlete than Anu?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I don't know, that's a fair question. I think that's an assumption because he probably runs better, but Anu is a better runner than he lets on. I tell him, you're faster than you think. If they ran a 40 time, I think they'd be pretty close to each other, but Brandon is a long strider so he can separate a little bit. But athletically they're both pretty similar. They're pretty close.

Q. How about in arm strength?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Close, yeah. I think Anu has a tighter release. I don't know how far they throw it.

It's like Khalil Tate can throw it 80 yards, but I don't have a single play on our offense that requires an 80-yard throw. I'm not too much worried about that. I'm more worried about accuracy and timing.

Q. Are there any freshmen you think that can come in and help you right away?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Freshmen coming in? There's a handful. I don't know their names. In fact, I mean, I know their names, but I don't know which ones it will be until August practice starts.

We kind of have a different philosophy. I don't know if it's different, but I tell the freshmen when we recruit them, we don't ever promise or guarantee they'll start, but at the same time we don't recruit anybody to be backups. If you're a freshman, don't take a backseat and say, okay, I'll play my second or third year. They'll come in and

compete right away. The hardest positions to play early are probably O-line and quarterback, but if you're ready to play physically and mentally, we'll play them as a true freshman because the last thing I want to do is save them for the next coach.

There'll be a handful that play early, and then the way recruiting is going, next year's class, there will be even more.

Q. It seems like recruiting has sort of been energized by --

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, we've gotten a boost in recruiting. I don't know commitments we've got, like 20 of them. It's still early, but recruiting is going as well or better than at any time in my four years at Arizona, so I'm really pleased with that.

Q. What are you expecting from Freddie?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Freddie will be the first guy off the bus because he looks the part. Freddie is all bulked up and he's huge.

Q. Is he 6'8"?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: He's about 6'6", 6'7", about 330 pounds, depending on what he had for breakfast. But he loves the weight room. He hasn't been healthy. He wasn't healthy in the spring, but he's healthy now, and it's really important to him. He's a hard worker, and frankly he's competing for a starting job. He's not -- just because he's the first guy off the bus doesn't mean he's the first guy in the lineup, so he's competing for a starting job. But if he's healthy, he's a pretty good football player.

Q. Coach, what was the turning point for you to make an offensive change?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Oh, gosh, that's a fair question. It wasn't one particular thing. I think, when I look back and evaluate everything like I always do after the season, it was more like, okay, are the issues we have fixable with what we've got or do I need to look internally, look at myself, and do we need to just start all over again. And in my determination it was better just to start all over again, scheme-wise, personnel-wise, recruiting-wise, and that's hard to do because I think it's easy particularly when you have guys that you respect and know they're really, really good coaches. It just wasn't working out.

So I thought, okay, I'm kind of -- a lot of times of the personality, instead of just putting a Band-Aid on it, let's just go and start all over again. That's what we did.

Q. How are the returners adjusting?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I think good. They don't have much choice. I think players are more resilient than

coaches. I think it was harder for me initially, but as soon as spring practice started, and we started practice early, and we had a few practices, I think our players responded really well. Like I said, players in my experience coaching, they're really resilient, and they'll do what you ask them to do, particularly if they believe in who they're doing it for, and I really think they respect the staff and I think they respected the other staff, too, but because maybe it's younger, maybe it's new and fresh, they've got a kind of new bounce in their step, at least I hope they do.

Q. Pac-12 has the best non-conference schedule, but in the preseason picks, they're picked to not get to the playoffs again.

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Hell, that don't matter. I mean, it's preseason, right? I didn't know. Somebody just showed me where we got picked, but I didn't even know -- if they picked the top 25 in the country or something? There are a lot of polls coming out. I think there will be some. I think the winner of our league will be in the playoff, but maybe not. They might have two losses because we beat each other up. I don't think that points to strength or lack of strength in our league. I think our league is better than it's been and it will continue to get that way.

Q. What does it do for overall play in the conference when you have so many coaches who are four, five, six years into their tenure when usually you have a lot of coaches cycling in and out?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, that's good to have tenure, right? You don't like to see where you turn coaches over every two, three years. One, it means that they feel pretty good, the school feels pretty good about the coach and the coach feels pretty good about the school. We have some tenured coaches, you have some stability there, and I think, again, from a guy that's done it a long time, I think when you have stability and maybe patience at times, it pays off for your program. But I also understand there's some times when we get paid so much money nowadays, I say we as coaches, both the head coach and assistant coaches, that there's less patience to win a championship or to have a top program, so they make changes earlier. So that's just the world we live in.

Q. Any comments on any of the new rules and any of them that you like?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: What are they? Just remind me. I haven't paid much attention. What are the new rules?

Q. Just the targeting rules.

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Targeting was okay.

Q. Some of the blocking stuff?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I think some of that's kind of mouse terds. Most of the guys are -- I think the targeting thing has helped. I think the concussion issues and the things we've talked about helps. I didn't listen to all of Commissioner Scott's speech about time demands and all of that stuff, but the life of a student-athlete has never been better.

Now, I think we had to give them the cost of attendance, I think giving them free meals, give them a cost of attendance stipend, some of these other things, I think maybe even paying for them using their jerseys, whatever, after they graduate or something, give them a little stipend for that, it's all good. But I don't think student-athletes have any reason to complain now, because if they're good enough in three years, they get to go pro and make millions. Very few professions have you do a three-year internship before you make millions. Imagine what a doctor or a lawyer goes through? The life of a student-athlete is not bad, and you won't hear our guys complain too much. If they do, I'll remind them that, hey, this is not too tough of a gig you've got.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Marcel Yates, too? He's a good recruiter.

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Well, when I interviewed him, and I interviewed a bunch of guys and talked to them, again, I was looking for more of a personality as opposed to scheme, and also all coaches have a little bit of an ego, and you want them to be comfortable in what they're doing and have confidence in what they're doing, and Marcel did.

But I also said to Marcel, you're going to run some of your stuff, but I'm going to give you some of my stuff or some of our stuff that I want you to implement, and are you willing to do that. Some guys wouldn't be willing to do that. Marcel said, yeah, we'll adapt and we'll put our own package together, and we've been doing that.

Q. Top to bottom is this the best conference you've been in, very top to very bottom?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I guess I can tell you more at the end of the year, but it's more talented

than probably any time in the Pac-12's history. Now I've been in the Big Ten and the ACC and some others, but the league is in a good spot right now.

Q. What would you have picked as the team to beat in the South?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Oh, I know, but I wouldn't tell you. Arizona. I'd pick Arizona. I have confidence in our guys.

Q. Can you talk about the code of conduct?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: You know, I guess the refs will tell you different. In my younger days, I used to yell a lot, but I guess, one, they can't hear you, and two, they don't care what you say anyway. I really don't yell that much. I get upset if I think it's a bad call, but most of the time they're right.

The only thing that bothers me is that I don't think a replay should ever be wrong because they've got the benefit of rewinding it. But sometimes they make mistakes, too.

But overall they're usually pretty good.

Q. What are you expecting from Michael Barton?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Michael Barton, a transfer from Cal. He enrolled there. We had linebacker issues last year, everybody getting hurt, and we needed healthy bodies, period, and Michael is a veteran guy. He's a good football player, great young man, and he got into graduate school, so I expect him to play right away.

Q. Do you play Pokemon Go?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I had no idea what the hell Pokemon Go was until the other day, and I think my son was telling me, he's an 18 year old. But I know there's a lot of people that are walking around like this and bumping into each other, so it's kind of dangerous.

Q. How is the defense gelling with all the guys coming in?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I think there's some leadership. Sonny is one of them, and I think there's some unknowns, certainly on defense. We're not sure who's going to be starting, and we know what our schemes are going to be, but there's also, I think, when you have such an openness defensively, there are a lot of guys that say, gee, this is my chance. I think they're taking that approach.

I want to play 20, 22 guys on defense. We have not been able to do that. It wasn't because of the staff, it was because we weren't healthy. If we

could stay healthy and play 20 or 22 guys on defense, we'll be better.

Q. Are you happy about the schedule?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Well, we have an open date this year. How about that? So the next time we will not have an open date is in 12 years, so that will be the next poor coach's problem, not mine. Toes in the water, butt in the sand is where I'll be, or somewhere like that.

FastScripts Transcript by ASAP Sports