

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 26 2017

Rich Rodriguez Arizona Wildcats



RICH RODRIGUEZ: Thank you for coming out and supporting our conference and our team. I've got two big guys with me, offensive lineman Jacob Alsadek and defensive lineman Luca Bruno. Brought those guys because I know we'd eat well. And they'll be great representatives of our program. I'm sure you'll enjoy talking to them, if you get that opportunity.

We've got a lot of work to do. In a few days we start practice. Close to 50 new players on the roster. We had a lot of work to do to get better, and I think some of it has been done. A lot of it will be done certainly in a few weeks getting ready for our opener. With that, I'm ready to go for questions.

Q. What kind of process do you go through during the tough times to evaluate and get better?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I think I mentioned in earlier interviews, is a terrible year, I don't think you should bury your head in the sand and kind of pretend it wasn't there. It was there. You've got to evaluate yourself, your staff, your program, and everything that you're doing so you don't go through it again.

We've done that. I've had years before, but last year there were a lot of reasons why. I think you've got to address every reason why and make sure it doesn't happen again.

I think our staff has done a good job of that. Our players have done a phenomenal job of that so far. And there are 50 guys on the roster that are kind of part of that. It's kind of a reboot. It sounds kind of strange to be in your -- what is my sixth year, but that's kind of what it was and is, and it's going to be a lot of fun in August sorting it out.

Q. What is one finding of what you can fix?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Well, we certainly can look at injuries, but it happens for a couple of reasons, so quickly, that it kind of devastated us at the time, we didn't think we could afford to. But that's why we have seven. Why do you have seven on the roster? Well, I've got to have three that can play, and my odds are better with seven than with four. I want to make sure we have enough quarterbacks so we can win this, and I want to make sure we have enough running backs so we can win this. And defensively last year was the first

year in the new system.

This year there's no excuse for that. This is the second year in the system, and I think the staff feels more comfortable with the players we've got.

But there are going to be a bunch of those fifth guys that wind up playing this year, whether it's because we need depth or just because we're better than what we were. That's going to be a fun part of August.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about how comfortable you are with the quarterback situation currently?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, coming from the standpoint Brandon Dawkins is a talented guy that's still getting better. I think Brandon is learning how to be a quarterback from learning leadership and all of that. But he's a good football player. Really good football player. But the best way to expedite his process is to have competition. When it comes to Khalil who had no business playing last year as a 17-year-old freshman that we had playing because that's all we had, whether it's a couple guys we signed or from a guy that's a former pro baseball player that's bringing some maturity to the room, that dynamic in that quarterback room changed, and it's changed for the better.

Q. What's going to be the biggest surprise this year for Arizona fans? In a good way (laughing).

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Start hopefully winning better and playing better. I think the difference is I think they'll see a little more athleticism defensively. We need to get more athletic defensively on all levels. Then just better football. I think as a coach, you sit back and say, well, we had injuries, and we had this happen. But it is what it is. We better have a chip on our shoulder it doesn't happen again. I would have thought that the attitude was poor, but it needed to be a little bit more competitive. Losing needed to hurt a little bit more.

Just judging on the way the guys have worked out in the last six or seven months, and judging by what's going to happen the next three or four weeks, the attitude will be right where we want it.

Q. How tough is the Pac-12?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: The Pac-12 is really good. I think it's better than it's ever been. I've been in the league now five, six years. I don't think -- I think the

commitment to football has never been higher throughout the league than it is right now, whether it's TV revenue or what have you, but the league is in a great spot. For us to have success at Arizona, we've got to be willing to spend some money and great job as coaches at recruiting, doing a great job as players.

And one of the things we've talked about, in order to win at Arizona, everybody associated with the program has got to love football. You can't just like it to be good, you've got to love it and need it. It starts within the program, with the players and the staff. Obviously, the staff, we all love it, but I think we've got more players now that truly love football and love and embrace the things that you've got to be good at. That includes all the stuff you've got to do in the off-season.

Q. Is that harder to do because of the success of the basketball program?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: No, I think it's easier. People talk about, well, you're at a basketball school, well, at least we're known for something. But the truth is we're pretty damn good in softball too, we're pretty good in baseball and Olympic sports, basketball has been phenomenal. Look, you can get it done.

Now it took a little bit, a little while, I guess, to build a basketball culture. Then when Sean got there, he raised it to another level, Sean Miller. So I think that's a great example of what we can do in football.

Basketball is really, really important to a whole lot of people in Arizona. Football needs to be the same and the same way in how we approach it from administrative standpoint, from a coaching standpoint, certainly, and from a player standpoint. Good news is we have an example across campus in a lot of sports that we can point to to help us lead that way.

Q. Have any enrollees caught your eye?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, there are several. When I start name dropping, I forget guys, so I hesitate to do that. But one guy that enrolled early, Tony Fields at linebacker, we thought that is a position we needed a lot of help at. He graduated early in high school. He was one of the most athletic backers the first day on campus. He's done a great job over the last six or seven months. So he's going to play as a true freshman.

But there is a group of linebackers in this freshman class, there are six or seven of them that are all going to get reps starting next week. A lot of them will wind up playing for us.

Q. Are you trying to get guys that love football, and how do you do that?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Well, you try to identify that. I

think every coach wants that, but -- and every player you ask, they'll tell you they love football, but what are they doing when they're not playing the games? Are they training year-round? I hope, if they're not training, they're playing other sports, which is a good thing.

But in football, in order to have success, to get good at the game, you've got to do a lot of things that are unpleasant as far as lifting weights, running when it's hot and you're tired, doing all the hard, physical stuff in football. It's not fun. It's not lifetime stuff that you do.

So identify that in recruiting. Okay, you can have this guy to pick from and this guy to pick from. Which of the two really loves football? Which are playing just because they like the attention and which ones are playing because they truly love the game?

All coaches look for that, but we're probably trying to do a better job of trying to identify that in recruiting with our questions and how we approach and who we're trying to bring over here.

Q. Can you tell us more about -- I believe he's a 26-year-old quarterback?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, Donavan is an interesting guy. Donavan Tate, we recruited him. I remembered him from -- I'm dating myself here -- about eight or nine years ago when I was at Michigan. He was the third pick in the draft. Took the signing bonus and went and played baseball. Found out through a friend he's not playing baseball anymore. He's got four years of college eligibility, baseball has paid his way.

So does he really want to do this? After talking to the guy, he paid for his own visit to come visit campus, and he's worked his tail off. He's bringing -- I don't know what kind of player he's going to be right now. But I know this: The maturity in that quarterback room has changed already. Here's a 26-, 27-year-old grown man, married with three kids, and then you have my son who is 19 going on 39 in the room, too, so the maturity level in that quarterback room has changed already. And that's going to help us.

We didn't throw a pass. We didn't have a third down, I don't think. Well, we have to be able to run the football well, and we've always put ourselves in doing that, and there were times, whether it was because of the depth at tailback or injuries, last year where we didn't run the football when we had to, and that cost us some games. Our quarterbacks all had the ability to run.

I think, again, we're healthier now at tailback, so we've got a couple guys we feel good about there. But we've got to have -- we've got to get better at throwing the ball. That's one thing we've challenged Brandon and the quarterbacks and the receiving crew, that we've got

to be able to get better at throwing the football. That's when we have to throw it, when they don't expect it. I think we'll be better at it.

Q. This is outside the scope a little bit, but are you surprised to see a Riley or Justin Wilcox, top coordinators, get jobs? What are the challenges for guys that haven't been head coaches at smaller schools?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I think when you're ready, you're ready, whether you're a coordinator or head coach at a smaller school. I think when you're ready to be a head coach, you're ready to be a head coach. Lincoln, I don't know him that well, but everybody says he's extremely bright and worked his tail off. Bob's a close friend of mine. It came to a surprise to all of us. But there are a lot of people in Oklahoma running that program, and they know when a guy's ready to coach and be a head coach.

I think I started early when I was a head coach at 24 at Salem College. I wasn't ready. I was just faking it. That's probably why I was the youngest at 24, the youngest fired at 25. That's when they dropped football.

But when I got the next coaching opportunity at 26, and then when I was a head coach at West Virginia at whatever I was, 32 or 33, I was more prepared.

I think sometimes when you get a head coach, you think some people think that's the end. I've been doing this -- I'd like to think I've learned a lot more each year I've coached. I'm a smarter coach and tried to be better now than I was two, three, four, 10, 20 years ago. I think that the challenge for a head coach is when you get there, this is not the end all and be all. You've got to keep learning and growing, and that's what I've tried to do.

Q. What have you learned since you've been at Arizona?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Good question. I've learned a lot of stuff. Certainly what we have is not an easy job, but you can have success. Couple years ago we were close when we won the South and played in the championship. But it's going to be tougher to stay in it if we don't get all the right things in place. Not just from coaching and recruiting and a player standpoint, but everything else.

I think you have to have the entire university involved in having a successful program. And the university has been. We've gotten better (indiscernible) wise. There's some things we need to get that we're going to get. I think everybody's pulling in the same direction. I've got to lead the way, and I feel like we have a good

plan to do that.

Q. What are your thoughts on Utah adding Darren Carrington?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I just read that this morning. He's a good player. He'll help him. We recruited Darren out of high school. But all these rules and legislations getting passed, and there is not one coach that has a vote in it, it's absurd to me. There are student-athletes on there, which is fine, but no coach? So I'm a little frustrated with that. The no two-a-day thing, most coaches had gotten away from that anyway. I think we only had three last year, so that's not a big deal.

But some of the other stuff, the official visits in the springtime I think is a bad idea. The early signs is better than what it was, but I don't think there should be any signing day. I think we make the process way more complicated than it needs to be. I think you treat it just like a talented musician or artist or something -- two sides come to an agreement, and they sign, whether they're 14 years old, four years old or 20 years old. And if the head coach is not the head coach in the kid's senior year, then he can get out of it as a student-athlete. Why we start talking about all these dates and times -- we make this way more complicated than it needs to be.

That's just my opinion on it. If you want to know what I think of signing day, I don't think there should be any.

Q. Looking at the roster, it shows there is slated to be a high number of contributors from the east and west valley of Phoenix. Can you talk a little about the effort that went into getting a recruiting foothold there and getting some of the walk-ons who will go on to be contributors?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, the first place we start is Arizona. There's good football in the state. It's just spread out. Most of the population is in the valley, so we go in there. Whether it's a scholarship guy or walk-on, I take great pride in we think we have the best walk-on program in the country, and it's helped us over the years.

So we made a conscious effort to make sure the guys we're bringing in, whether a walk-on or scholarship guys, are guys that can contribute. It starts in the state of Arizona. Southern California. We're expanding now a little bit, too. We hired new coaches that know Texas a little bit, know Florida a little bit. So we've just got to get them on campus. I think the only way now to really get your roster to where you want to do is unofficial visits and be able to bring guys on campus, not unofficial visits in the spring, but unofficial visits, and I think our staff did a good job.

This is the most number of new players I've ever had in 30 years of coaching. It's exciting, but also a little nervousness, too, involved in that. And a lot of them are from the state of Arizona.

Q. Speaking on the state of Arizona, do you feel both Arizona programs have kind of mirrored each other's trajectories after competing for the south?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: What's that?

Q. Do you feel both ASU and U of A have mirrored each other?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I don't look in the mirror and look at ASU. I promise you that. I could care less what they're doing.

Q. Oregon has been aggressive in social media for recruiting and offers. Any feelings on what they're doing?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Who?

Q. Oregon Ducks.

RICH RODRIGUEZ: No, I don't care what Oregon does, I just care about what Arizona does. But social media, I think we've got to do -- I think we do a pretty good job in social media and really individually in recruiting. My Twitter game sucks, according to my daughter. But I've got to get better at that. But social media is not going away, so you have to use it to your advantage, and I think most programs do. What did you say about the other question?

Q. Just the number of new players.

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I think it's close to 50. I'm not going to -- I may have to put names on their helmets. I like to think I know them all. But this is a very exciting August because a lot of them, you hope that you're not playing too many true freshmen, but the reality of that 50, there's probably 20 of them that will play this year. So it's going to be neat and fun to watch.

Q. What happened in Colorado this off-season, (indiscernible) domestic violence. It raises the conversation about what coaches are supposed to do and how to thwart those kinds of things. Do you have policies in place and know what to do if a similar situation came up?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I think whether it's anybody on your staff or your players, there is kind of a set policy that every university has, and you want to follow that. The biggest is once you become aware of something, you can't just -- as you've seen where everything else is going wrong, you can't just sit there and say: Okay, thanks for telling me. If you're in a position of responsibility as a head coach or athletic director, when you find some kind of information out,

you've got to pass it on to the people that need to know and make sure you follow through there.

Q. Do you plan on having any fall camp practices open to the public, maybe an appreciation day this year?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Maybe every one of them. You all want to come to all of them? I appreciate the attention. No, we've got a couple of practices that are open. I think maybe we'll have an open scrimmage as well. You've got to have something. But most of the stuff closed. Not so much to hide anything, but to make sure our guys keep their focus. But we'll have a couple open practices for the public.

Q. The player who transferred, how do you say his name, Sione Taufahema?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, well, I'm hoping Sione he had a little injury issue, he gained a little bit of weight, so he's got to drop some weight and get in shape before he can contribute. But if he gets in shape in the next month, he can help us.

Q. You guys had a bye a couple years ago. Is that a big deal, not a big deal?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: If you're deep, you stay healthy, it's not a big deal. If you're not, it is. I think it's tougher.