

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 27 2017

## Todd Graham Arizona State Sun Devils



TODD GRAHAM: It's a great honor and a privilege for me today to be here and representing Arizona State University and our football program. I'm very excited to introduce to you two of our team captains. I brought two captains with me today. They really represent our team in a tremendous way. Kalen Ballage, our running back, and JoJo Wicker, our defensive end. Really proud of those guys.

Our football team, obviously, has gone to work, and we spent -- we've made a great investment, and our players, the spring and the summer that they've had has been, they've worked as hard as any group I've ever had. So we're excited about this season. We're also excited these guys are getting an opportunity to train. I think the best training and teaching facility in the country. Very grateful to our supporters that made that possible. And it's something that I think is going to be a big game changer for our program.

So we're looking forward to 2017. We've got practice today at 4:30, so we're already rolling. We've already gotten through two practices, and looking forward to this season. We always have one goal, and that's to be champions. So I'm looking forward to it. Really excited about JoJo and Kalen being here and representing the Sun Devils.

### **Q. Coach, you have seven starters returning on both sides of the ball, what is going to be the big key to success this season?**

TODD GRAHAM: Our big thing is really we've gone back and assessed. Our whole deal is getting back to what we do. That's playing hard-core, disciplined football. I like our team because it's a veteran team. We have a lot of experience on both sides of the football. So the whole key for us is getting back to playing disciplined, hard-core football.

I like the fact that I feel good. Probably the most important thing I do is hire the coaches that work with our players and personnel. I like the edge that our team has. The first day of practice, I went out there and had to go like: Wait a minute, we don't have pads on, easy. They've got a little edge on them. I think they're a veteran bunch, and I like the maturity of our team.

### **Q. This is your sixth year at ASU. How do you think you've evolved as a coach?**

TODD GRAHAM: That's a great question. I would tell you that's probably the reason why you get knocked on your can is we didn't evolve in, I think, the recent years, and that's something we spent a lot of time looking at. You go back and the key to winning a championship is to plan championship defense and being able to run the football and obviously score points. We've been pretty good scoring points. We were second in the league in the last five years and almost 37 points a game.

So we're going to score points. We've got to get back to taking care of the football. We've got to eliminate the negative plays. That's the biggest two things on offense. On defense, obviously, with the big plays, that's why I brought Coach Bennett in. But when we were in '13 when we went to the championship, we really had a unique system, then people start studying what you're doing, and you have to constantly evolve.

So that's something, I think, is critical to being successful. We've spent a lot of time, I think, in that process, evolving and adapting. Because what happens is each year the players change. Boy, it's hard to change something you've been successful with. So tough to evolve, and you have to adapt.

I think that's where we had some injuries, so in the scheme that we were doing, we went from ones to threes, but that doesn't mean that we had bad personnel. We needed to change what we were doing. So that's something that we've really spent a lot of time on adapting. And I think that's probably one of the most critical things in a highly competitive league with a lot of parity. You've got to adapt and evolve.

But we know the formula. There is a very definitive formula for winning, and it's very simple. It's owning the football. It's dominating the line of scrimmage, the run game, and score more than the other team.

### **Q. How did you feel about navigating the logistics of this week with having to start practice and come here and all that?**

TODD GRAHAM: I mean, we had, you know, obviously we were able to practice yesterday. Had to leave a little bit early. Then flying over here for, I don't know,

whatever reason, it took 20 minutes longer than usual. It's been a little frantic.

But don't worry about things I can't control. So not a big deal.

**Q. You have some intensity on the field. Bennett seems to have an edge about him?**

TODD GRAHAM: Phil does?

**Q. Yeah. Michael Slater also does a little bit of that. Do you think that's something that's going to help the players?**

TODD GRAHAM: You know, I think that our motto this year is "Sun Devil Tough." You know, when I came here today, I can't keep thinking about Coach Kush. Every single Sun Devil you talk to, it's about being tough. Tough people come out of tough times.

One of the things we went back and evaluated and assessed was how hard we had played when we were competing for championships. So that's something that our guys are teachers. We're going to treat our guys with great respect. But tough people come out of tough times, and this is a tough, physical sport. We've got to get back to running the ball and playing with speed and physicality and to finish every play with a passion.

So that's what you see. I think you see guys like Rob Sale and Slater and Bennett and Rob Likens, every guy we've got on our staff are guys that are very passionate about what they're doing. They're all great teachers as well.

**Q. How much did you guys miss Christian Sam last year?**

TODD GRAHAM: The most under-asked question that -- he was huge because I think anybody that watches us practice knows how good a football player he is. But just where we were from a depth standpoint, we had some young guys that weren't really ready. You know, if we -- even though we had a veteran in there, if he would have been healthy, I think, for the most part, it would have been D.J. and Christian.

So that hurt us tremendously. Guys are very talented. Got a lot of experience. We've got to stay healthy, and part of that has been our training.

That's one of the things I'm excited about our new facility is from a nutritional standpoint we've gone from I think the bottom to the top in how we can take care of our players as far as how we feed them, how we can maintain and be on a cutting edge from a nutritional standpoint, from an athletic training standpoint, an injury prevention standpoint as far as our strength

room.

Anybody that's been in there you can see is going to have a huge impact. It doesn't have an impact while you're showing pictures of it. It has an impact once you get it.

The great thing we did wasn't trying to put a lot of elaborate things, it's integrating -- technology-wise, it's on the cutting edge. It's very innovative from a teaching standpoint. And then from a training standpoint, it's on the cutting edge. You look at the underwater treadmill and the zero gravity treadmill, those things that we have now, we just didn't have before, that's something to help us tremendously, keep our guys healthy, train them and teach them.

**Q. These things you've been discussing today -- toughness, running the ball, playing hard -- did the Territorial Cup results drive that home for you, or were you thinking along those lines leading into the end of the season?**

TODD GRAHAM: No, we assess the entire season, entire year in what we were doing. You know, we just -- my whole deal, it's easy to assess other people. It's all self-evaluation. And every year is a new year. I don't spend any time. We do that in January.

When we get into January, we put that behind us and we go to the next deal. Basically got knocked on our can. You can sit around and make every excuse for it. Nobody cares you had injuries. Nobody cares about any of that.

I tell you what you can do something about is the next rep, the next day, the next practice, the next game. So that's been our approach. But this is not something that -- anybody that's been around our program knows that's who we are. But we obviously got knocked on our can from that, and you've got to get back up and get those things reestablished.

I have a lot of confidence we're going to do that because I've been very, very pleased with our coaching and the training that we put in. Then the edge that these guys have, I'm looking forward to watching this team. Anytime you have that kind of investment from your players, not just on the times that are required, but everything these guys have invested, I've not had a team that's invested more than this team has from a work standpoint and from a toughness standpoint as far as the rigor of what they've done. Usually when you have that kind of investment, you get pretty good returns.

**Q. Coach, a lot of people have been talking for years about Arizona State, they've been the**

**sleeping giants, and that's probably one of the reasons you took the job. What is it going to take to change that?**

TODD GRAHAM: We've done it. We've been to the championship in '13. We've had success, and success sometimes is hard. The key you're talking about is sustaining it. The whole deal is being able to be consistent.

I think one of the things that's going to impact us moving forward is having a state-of-the-art training and teaching facility, because we've got a definitive plan in how to be a consistent winner in the Pac-12.

We talk about our four values -- character, smart, discipline, tough, and in that order because each one produces the next one. Now you can put those things in place, and we've worked hard to do those things with what we've had.

But the key is now we're going to have an opportunity, I think, to improve our ability to recruit, improve our ability to develop and teach, and improve our ability to train our players.

So I think that's going to be big. Man, the big thing is just getting it down the field, man. You can play in a lot of close football games, you've got to win them, and that's why you have to have the discipline that it takes.

We think our plan is unique to who we are and what we're about. So it's not -- there's no magical solution, man. It just takes a lot of work. You've got to stay -- it's so competitive, and the difference between winning and lose something so small, you've got to stay on the edge, on the cutting edge on a lot of things. So I really just feel like I know from a focus standpoint, eliminating the distractions, I know just for me it's different.

**Q. How do you expect Jay Jay Wilson to contribute this year?**

TODD GRAHAM: Jay Jay is one of the most talented guys we have. He's grown from a maturity standpoint, and he's a guy that I think has benefited from the culture of the program and a guy that's really talented. He's stronger, faster, and I think more mentally mature. So he's a guy that I think will play a big role in what we're doing. Been really, really proud of his development.

**Q. What is the status of Brady White?**

TODD GRAHAM: Brady's a guy that it was a very, very traumatic injury, a Lisfranc injury. So it's basically a 12-month recovery, so I think it happened at the end of October, first of November. So has not been released medically, and I don't look for that to happen at least for a while.

So hopefully we'll get him back this year, but right now I think that's just a day-to-day deal. I've been really proud of him. He will make it back. He's done a tremendous job. Worked hard. Shown unbelievable courage. He's a special young man. He was a guy that was a 4.0 in the classroom. I see him every day and try to encourage him. I say: Hey, man, ain't a lot of undefeated quarterbacks. He's 1-0. So we're anxious to get him back sooner than later. But want to be smart about his recovery, because it's very, very important that he's full speed before he gets going.

It's been hard for him to see the other two guys competing and not being able to do that because you're injured. But no doubt in my mind he'll be competing when he gets back because he has all the intangibles to be a great quarterback.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about the two quarterbacks?**

TODD GRAHAM: Guys have elevated each other. I've enjoyed watching the competition probably as much as I've ever enjoyed any competition. What's been neat is to watch them elevate each other, and it's a fierce competition. And it's created that atmosphere on our whole team. So it's been a cool deal.

**Q. The new rule change obviously impacted you guys since you're starting practice already. What do you think of it overall?**

TODD GRAHAM: Well, I'd just rather -- you'd probably listened to me talk about hard-core toughness and discipline and all that stuff, you probably know how I feel about that. On the same hand, whatever the rules are, I respect the rules and we'll go by the rules. Also, I do think that they made them for the right reason, because of the well-being of our student-athletes.

In saying that, we're reporting a week and a half early, so you're taking a week and a half. Usually they're home with their families, so that's different. Obviously took a week and a half out of our preparation. So could there have been a better solution? I don't know. Probably. Especially planning. But that's kind of helped things come down. But don't really worry about things I can't control.

But one thing I do believe, I love this game. This game is such an important game, but it's also a physical game. It's a contact sport, and you need to be able to teach it to play it safely. So that's one of the things that's important. We've taken the head completely out of tackling. And to teach that rugby-style tackling, it takes time to do that. I even watch from the NFL to college, just tackling and all the fundamentals. It's really -- you can tell the impact. And you just need to have time to teach those things.

I think we can do it. I think it's a good thing that they're looking at the well-being of our players. I'm always for that. That's first and foremost with our guys. But a lot of the practices we put in place, we didn't have a full-blown two-a-day. The afternoon was more of a passing-type deal. So, you know, we'll see how it works. But you've got recruiting going to the end of June next year on official visits, and if you report the last week of July, that's a pretty short window for players and for coaches to have breaks. So I hope they'll look at that too.

**Q. Some of your players said they did more conditioning work outside this year than opposed to last year. Is that part of the strategy, or was that on them?**

TODD GRAHAM: You know, a lot of it just anytime we have a heat warning or whatever, we're going inside. So probably had a lot to do with the weather pattern. And was things harder by design? Yeah, I think they were. I think they took that upon themselves as well.

So we wanted to return to our blue-collar mentality, just like what we do on offense and defense. We want to get the core values of what we believe. We want to get reestablished. And that all starts with investment and work ethic. Anytime -- you know how it is. If it gets really hot, we're going to be smart and go inside. But we'll spend -- I think that was some by design, and some we had mild temperatures.

**Q. You talk about the investment happening even before the facility was built. Now that the facility is built, do you see that kicking up a few more notches?**

TODD GRAHAM: I don't think you benefit by showing kids a picture. Two, you've got to understand, our building was built for teaching and development and training, and I think it's the best facility. I've looked all over the country, and there's not one that I believe that is better than our facility for teaching and training and innovation as far as the technology piece of it.

Now that we have that, you'll start seeing the benefits. I think it's going to be a dramatic benefit. You can watch how it will impact recruiting just by watching our existing players walk into the building. It just speaks volumes about the commitment that you have to be successful. The fact that our donors and the support, it shows great support, that we have a great support and a championship-caliber support. So, I think moving forward it will pay its dividends.

**Q. Ideally would you like to red-shirt Dillon Sterling-Cole, given that he played last year?**

TODD GRAHAM: Yeah, if he's not playing, then that's something that I think we'd be smart to do.

**Q. How much did not being able to run the ball affect you?**

TODD GRAHAM: We looked backward in January, and there's a lot more than that. Some of the most miserable things I've experienced I experienced last year. So I've moved on from that. But on the same hand, I'm 100 percent accountable for everything. So we've moved forward, and I think we're assured a different place than we were last year.

**Q. Last year you toyed with the idea of playing Chase Lucas. Do you feel like he's ready this year to play?**

TODD GRAHAM: You know, I think Coach feels like he's developing. I think he's a guy that's really matured, he's got to continue to improve. Yeah, he's a guy that's got to continue to play.

**Q. The speed you have on offense in particular, is that different?**

TODD GRAHAM: I think from a personnel standpoint, we're top to bottom skill-wise -- you look at our receivers and our running back corps is as good as we've been speed-wise, talent-wise, quarterback position, receiver position, running back position. I like the veterans up front. We've got a lot of guys with a lot of experience up front. There is a lot of competition. So we eliminate the negatives, take care of the football, and we do do some good things there.

**Q. Kalen is one of the most unique talents coming back in the conference this year with that size and speed. How can you best utilize him?**

TODD GRAHAM: We've spent a lot of time researching that. One of the things we talked to Kalen about is getting a guy that can play 80 plays a game. Him and Demario will play together a lot. I think you've got to put your best personnel on the field. Both those guys have great hands.

One of the things with Kalen, he's really a dynamic receiver. He can really do some things out of the backfield. Really even as a slot receiver. So Demario as well as Nick Ralston. We think Nick has positioned himself that we've got three guys that are solid. Then you have Eno Benjamin coming in. Trelon Smith has looked very good. And we think Justin Brimhall. Justin's a guy that's kind of just -- you can sleep on the guy that's got a lot of ability.

We're very deep and diverse in our talents at running back. We spent a lot of time and utilizing the talent that we have at those two positions. So we'll play a lot I think with two backs on the field.

**Q. Has JoJo -- he was a second team All-**

**Conference player last year, you brought him here, is he poised to continue to blossom?**

TODD GRAHAM: I think so. I think you can see that by the respect of his players electing him captain. I think that's a big deal. Being a leader, that's why I tell him, it's not about giving a speech, it's about your actions. So he's really maturing and just one of the finest kids I've ever coached. He's not reached his potential. He's got a lot more room to grow, and I think he's doing that.

**Q. What makes him one of the finest in America?**

TODD GRAHAM: He's so explosive. He's powerful. He's a very instinctive player, and he's a guy who can play every snap. He's a guy that very seldom do you have to rotate somebody else in there on him.

So he's a guy that's extremely durable. Probably one of the hardest practicers I've ever been around. So he's pretty talented. He's just really gifted with his explosive power. He's a guy that really can move down inside and I think could be even more disruptive. So he's a really versatile player.

**Q. Anytime your offense stalled, you could send Zane out there and go ahead and mark it down. I know you have a talented kicker that you brought in, but there is an adjustment going from the best kicker in the country to a freshmen.**

TODD GRAHAM: Let me tell you, in two days -- all I'll tell you is: Wow, he's pretty good. I don't think he's missed a field goal. He kicks them high and very deep, and I think he's going to be a great weapon for us.

We just had a really good kicker. All right? And being able to kick the ball out of the end zone on kickoffs is huge. And then scoring points. I don't want to put too much on Brandon, but he's been impressive. He's a very, very talented young man. What's interesting is he kind of has the kind of -- it's like "this is no big deal" kind of mentality. I kind of like that. Zane was like that. Like he's like -- it wasn't too big for him.

So just from a raw talent standpoint, that's what having players like that do, is that you can attract guys like Brandon. So I really think that obviously the poise and the maturity of a senior like Zane is hard to replace. But I was pleased. I was very pleased in the first couple days. So we'll see how that goes. But I think we've got an extremely talented young man.