

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 27 2017

Willie Taggart Oregon Ducks



WILLIE TAGGART: Good morning. First, I'd like to thank Commissioner Scott, and I am so excited to be in this conference, to be back in the Pac-12. Really excited about the season ahead of us. Fired up about our football team. Today I have here with us Justin Herbert and Troy Dye in the back: Two young guys on our football team, two young stars in the making, and excited to have them here with me. Been really excited being at the University of Oregon and the support we're getting from our administration and our fans and how everyone in our building is working to change the culture at the University of Oregon. That's been fun to see. It's been great to see the buy in by our players and see how those guys are working really hard. It's great to ride around Eugene and see how excited everyone is about football season and things that's going on. It's great to see our guys' bodies change in the weight room and the things they're doing from that standpoint and seeing their confidence come.

Probably most important and gratifying thing for me is just seeing our team come together and watching our guys hang out with each other and starting to hold themselves accountable for the things they do.

Now we're in the real season. The honeymoon is almost over. So really excited about training camp starting on Monday, and our football team and seeing how our guys improve.

Q. Coach, what has been the biggest challenge as you try to get this program back on track?

WILLIE TAGGART: The biggest challenge? I wouldn't necessarily call it a challenge. It's just I think now having the third time of doing this, it's just trying to change the culture. I think, if there's anything, it would be that. Anytime you come into a new program, changing the culture is probably the biggest thing and the hardest thing to do because they have been doing it a certain way for a while. So it's hard changing behaviors.

But that's the most important thing that we're doing is trying to change the culture, change the behavior to the way that we want it to be, not necessarily how it was before. But just the way that we want things to be there.

But it's been fun. Our guys have bought into what we've been asking them to do, and I've been really appreciative and really happy with how they've been responding to everything.

Q. What made the decision to get rid of Darren? Obviously, that's a tough decision. Can you walk us through how you handled that?

WILLIE TAGGART: Well, I think it's always tough because you always want to help young people. You know, you don't ever want to throw them out or kick them to the curb. You want to help them reach their dreams, goals and aspirations, but in the same sense we have rules. And the rules, you have to abide by the rules, and when you break the rules, there are consequences.

Unfortunately, the consequences for Darren were for us both to move on. I wish him nothing but the best. He's a great football player, and I hope things get right for him.

Q. Is there any more importance when you're early in your tenure somewhere of setting the tone and your disciplinary position?

WILLIE TAGGART: I don't look at it like that, because I think from day one our guys understood the expectation. For six months they've been doing everything I asked them to do, the entire football team. I think the whole time they knew everything I said that we were going to do, I meant it.

Again, it's unfortunate that this situation happened, and it looked like, okay, Coach is setting the tone, and I think the tone was set from day one. It's just Coach doing what we said we were going to do. We're going to hold everyone accountable to be at their best and do things the way that we know and the way that we want them to do.

Q. (Inaudible) Justin seems like he's done a pretty good job?

WILLIE TAGGART: Oh, he's been awesome. It seemed like Justin went to bed one night and woke up and said, okay, it's time to go. He's just changed, you know, whether it's in the weight room or competing with other guys. He's changed his body. He's gained about 15 pounds since last year, and Justin's walking outside with his shirt off now. And if you all know Justin, that

wasn't him before. But he's laughing. He's hanging out with his guys. I get a text from him almost every other day. It's been great. I'm excited for the young man.

Again, I think he's a star in the making.

Q. (Indiscernible) what specifically did you see that needed changing and that you're trying to instill?

WILLIE TAGGART: Well, I wasn't necessarily looking at changing what it was before. I wanted it to be the way that I want it. The way that I want a football program to be, and how I want our culture to be. So that's what we were doing is just -- I think when you're changing cultures, you're changing behaviors, and you want to get it to the way you know how you want it to be.

It wasn't necessarily broke or anything. I don't know what it was like before. It was just important that we get it the way that we want it, and knowing that that was going to take some time. We're still in the process of changing that. But it's been great, getting our guys coming together and working the way that we want them to work.

Q. I guess a better way to phrase that question, what would you want your team to be known for? What do you want that culture to be?

WILLIE TAGGART: Well, I want those guys to play for each other, first and foremost. Our guys got to understand that the way that they play is like a gift to their teammates. Those guys got to love each other, and they can't love each other if they don't know each other. They can't look out for each other if they don't know each other. So it was really important that we get everyone, not just our players, but coaches and all, to be around each other and express -- talk to each other and get to know each other a lot better than what we did, because we didn't know anyone, and they didn't know us. We didn't know them. Hell, we had coaches that didn't know each other, so we all had to come together.

That's important that we as coaches come together first. We've got to set a good example in order for our young people to follow us. That's so important. If you look at any good football team out there, and you can see it when they play, they really play for each other. That's really important that we get our guys to play that way.

Q. You established a pretty strong presence in Southern California with recruiting. What has your approach been to get these kids to notice you guys and come visit and give you guys a shot?

WILLIE TAGGART: I think the O and the Nike swoosh helps going in there. Then the tradition. Oregon has

won a lot of football games. I think I saw a stat where the last 20 years probably the winningest team in the Pac-12.

The players in Southern Cal and the players around the country, they all know about the University of Oregon. It's just for us is getting them up there and get around our coaches and players and sell our vision and what we want it to be, seeing if that's something they want to be a part of. But I know in the past Southern Cal has been great for the University of Oregon.

Q. You talked a little about your defense. How much impact can these new coaches really make in your bottom line performance?

WILLIE TAGGART: I think they can make a huge impact on the defensive side of the ball, just getting our guys to be fundamentally and technically sound and playing with great effort. I think, again, like I mentioned earlier, they've got to play together and play for one another. I think that's huge in anything that we do.

But I think we'll make big improvements. Again, our guys, we play a lot of young guys, you know. They took their lumps. Probably, again, they're playing in another defense, so that part they're going to learn. But I think going back to the 3-4 is going to help a lot of these guys because a lot of them were recruited to play in a 3-4 system, so hopefully that helps. Hopefully with Coach Leavitt and our defensive staff, they'll do the things we know they're capable of doing and get our guys to play at a high level.

Q. When you bring in a new staff like that and they're instilling a new defense, sometimes it takes a while for the personnel to catch up. Is it hard to adapt to the personnel you have?

WILLIE TAGGART: I think it's always tough when it comes to just learning something new. Every year has been something new for these guys for like the last two or three years. So having a defense that can be there for a while is going to be important for us.

But I think it all goes back to teaching and being simple enough so these guys can understand and play at a high level and fast, where they're not running out and thinking too much. I think playing on that side of the ball, our guys got to react and not think, and that's going to be important when it comes to teaching our guys and implementing our system.

Q. Coach, what are your thoughts on Darren staying in the conference with Utah and you playing against him?

WILLIE TAGGART: I wish Darren nothing but the best, wherever he plays. Except against us.

Q. Are there some younger guys coming in that you think will make an impact?

WILLIE TAGGART: Hopefully all of them. They're all going to have an opportunity to. When we recruited every single one of those young men, we told them we're going to give them the opportunity to come in here and take somebody's job. And it's on our current guys to keep their job. Starting Monday, or those guys started this summer, but starting Monday on the football field, they'll get an opportunity to go out and compete and try to work their way into a starting position playing for our football team. Hopefully in a couple weeks we start to see a little more out of guys. Probably then I can probably answer that question a little better. But they're going to have an opportunity to compete, and we've got some really talented young guys coming in. I'm sure a lot of them will play for us because of depth.

Q. You guys got in a pretty lengthy process for Braxton. What was it about him that attracted you to him?

WILLIE TAGGART: Braxton was always intrigued with Oregon. That was one of his schools. Just like a lot of those kids, they all say Oregon has been their dream school. So when a kid says that and you watch the film and see he's a good football player, you love that as a coach.

But Braxton's a winner. He's a really good football player and he's a gym rat. That kid lives in the meeting room, and you've got to kick him out of there and make him go home. He's always there and trying to learn. But he's a winner.

Q. He's going to be your No. 2 quarterback, right?

WILLIE TAGGART: He's competing for it, so we'll see.

Q. What do you know about the Oregon-Washington rivalry?

WILLIE TAGGART: I know that's a big rivalry. It's tough, and I know they won last year. So we've got to get back to our winning ways.

Q. Any thoughts on the rule change that eliminates two-a-day practices?

WILLIE TAGGART: It is what it is. They changed the rules, and we've got to abide by the rules. I don't think many people were doing two-a-days anyways. So it will just give us another way of teaching and developing our guys. I know there will be a lot of walk-throughs. But whatever it is to keep our guys safe and healthy, I'm all for it.

Q. What about signing day?

WILLIE TAGGART: Early signing day, if that's going to help the game, I'm all for it. I'm one of those guys, I

didn't think anything was wrong with the other one. You've just got to go out and compete and recruit until you can get them all there. But if early signing day is going to make things better and make the game better, I'm all for that too.

At the end of the day, you've got to recruit, recruit, recruit and get guys to come into your system, the right guys.

Q. In general, what is your approach for a new guy who's committed to a school already or something along those lines?

WILLIE TAGGART: If we like him and if he's showing interest in us, then we're going to recruit him. There's nothing in the rule books that says you can't recruit a guy that's committed somewhere else. Until they sign, once they sign, you turn and go the other way. But if they're open and they're interested in you, then you're going to recruit them and see if you can get them to change.

Q. You guys start at Western Kentucky and (indiscernible). I know USC has three Western Kentucky coaches. What was going on at Western? That's not the place you'd expect people to start coming out of there?

WILLIE TAGGART: Well, Western was a IAA program, and when I played there and coached there, and Coach Harbaugh won a National Championship there. Then they decided to go Division I. Then in that process, it was kind of tough. They were on a 20-game losing streak when I took over.

So we had to stop that downward spiral and build it back up. They committed themselves to the facilities and things you need to get good players there. We recruited some good players and started winning some ballgames. You know, it became attractive place to be.

Q. Coach, you're bringing in some players from Florida, and that's obviously from the connections you had. Is that something you expect to continue or gradually move more the emphasis to the West Coast?

WILLIE TAGGART: It's always going to be -- the West Coast is going to be first and foremost. We're going to recruit the West, we're going to recruit Oregon first and foremost. We're going to recruit Oregon like it's our in-state. Then we'll go off and try to get the best football players we can get.

We feel Oregon is a national brand and we can go nationally to get guys. If we can go nationally and get a football player that's interested in the University of Oregon and it can help us, then we're going to go. Whether it's Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Ohio, no

matter where it is, that's what we're going to do.

I don't think it would be smart for us not to use those ties that we have in Florida and bringing guys out here. Because there are a lot of kids in the state of Florida that want to leave Florida and see the world and go out. So if we get those guys and they fit what we're trying to do, we're going to recruit them too. But we're going to put a big emphasis in Oregon and in California.

Q. How's Royce Freeman looking and how good is he?

WILLIE TAGGART: Royce is looking really good. Really good. His body is changing. He's lost a lot of fat and had a lot of muscle. He's already big. But looking good. He's excited. He's ready to go. I've seen a big difference in him and his attitude and the way he's doing things and the way he's working. Really excited about it, and glad that he decided to come back.

Q. You're smiling already just talking about him. How many times can he carry the ball?

WILLIE TAGGART: As many as he wants. I told him to tell me when he doesn't want any more carries. I'll just keep giving them to him.

Q. Troy Dye was just singing Jordon Scott praises. What have you seen out of him so far?

WILLIE TAGGART: He's a unique young man. For a freshman to come in and grab the attention of the entire team and athletic department, you've got to be special. He had a great attitude every day. A kid that's really appreciative of being at the University of Oregon. You see a kid that's committed to being the best that he can be.

The kid came in at 357 pounds and he's down to 333 now. He's committed to changing his diet. It's crazy because he moved pretty well at 350 pounds. Now he's getting a little slimmer, and the way that he plays and competes has been very impressive. I just have been really impressed how he's integrated into our entire football team so fast. They all love him. Every single one of the guys just love Jordon Scott. He's that guy.

Q. You know, Thomas Tyner, did he need to come to you guys to get an official release?

WILLIE TAGGART: Who is that?

Q. The running back that went to Oregon State?

WILLIE TAGGART: Oh, I don't know.

Q. Did you have to do anything from your standpoint?

WILLIE TAGGART: No.

Q. For fans who maybe want to get to know you a little better, what are three fun things you did this summer?

WILLIE TAGGART: Three fun things I did this summer, the biggest, I moved my family out here. Yes! Yes! They got here. I went kayaking for the first time, so that was pretty cool, with the staff. That was fun and funny.

We went out on the coast. I forgot the name of the place, but it was beautiful. Something you wouldn't see in Florida. Plus I wouldn't be in the river in Florida. They've got alligators. But that was fun.

The third thing was we're going to continue to get to know them.

Q. You were able to flip about four or five high-ranked recruits from Arizona to Oregon. How did those conversations go?

WILLIE TAGGART: Well, you get a call: Coach such-and-such is interested in your program. You watch the film and see that they're pretty good football players and you become interested in them as well. Talking and starting to build a relationship, you talk about your vision and how you see your program going. Seeing if that's something they want to be a part of. Then you continue to talk, continue to build those relationships, and eventually the guys say: Hey, Coach, I want to come. It's like: Yes, come on. It's pretty much that simple.

Q. What is your take of the Pac-12?

WILLIE TAGGART: The league? I think the parity in the league is very close, which makes our league really good, is that the parity is close. Each week, you can't take a week off. You've got to come ready to play every single week, and knowing that whatever team you're playing is playing good enough to beat you. You get fired up as a coach knowing that each week there is going to be a challenge like that.

So I'm excited about the challenge. That's going to be tough, but that's how you want it.

Q. How important do you think social media is when it comes to recruiting?

WILLIE TAGGART: I think it's huge. That's all the kids do nowadays. They're on the phone. They're on social media. Whether it's Instagram or Snapchat or Twitter or Facebook, that's just how the world has changed. And as the world changes, recruiting changes and everything has to change with it.

But that's one of the key areas of communicating with the kids. It's crazy because not many people talk

anymore. I mean, they message each other or text each other, and we've got to find a way to get them to talk a little more. But that's the one way you can communicate with them. But it's also another way of selling your program and selling your vision the way you want things. So it's very important in recruiting. You've got to get a little social media savvy if you want to stay up.

Q. Do you put your staff through training to make sure they're on top of that, or are they already pretty savvy?

WILLIE TAGGART: They're pretty savvy. We've got guys that are pretty sharp on it. I'm impressed with some of them. I'm like, whoa, they're a little above where I'm at. I'm a little simple guy. But as long as we're abiding by the rules. There are NCAA rules that we've got to abide by, and as long as our guys are abiding by that and doing a great job of selling our program, I'm all for it.

Q. You mentioned at the end of spring that the summer was going to be huge for you guys to be better this fall because you didn't want to regress you want them to improve. How do you think the guys have progressed as a group without your supervision?

WILLIE TAGGART: I think they've done a tremendous job. I see a big difference in each and every last one of our guys. The gains they've made in the weight room has been big. Then you see them. We took before and after pictures, and it's like night and day with those guys. That's fun to see.

Just hearing our guys, Justin coming and telling me how much better seven-on-seven is when they go out. It was tough back in the wintertime trying to do it. He's telling me now how the whole entire team is out there. That's great to hear, knowing that these guys are committed to getting better in the summertime. That's what it's going to take for us to be a good football team.