

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

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Hollywood, California, USA

California Golden Bears

Justin Wilcox

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We will have Coach Wilcox, he will make an opening statement, then we'll open it up for questions.

JUSTIN WILCOX: It's great to be back with you. I can honestly say I've never been more excited for a media day than I am today. It signals the start of a much-anticipated season. For us and our players and our fans and you all and everybody else in the conference, it's an exciting time of year.

Really looking forward to starting next week with our team. We've got a very, very competitive roster. We have a lot of experience coming back with nine super seniors, a number of young players we have high expectations for.

We're going to start next Thursday. Really, really looking forward to getting back on the field and working with these guys.

We have a couple of them joining us today, Kuony Deng and Chase Garbers, who you'll get to know. Like I said before, this is an exciting time of year. Being here in person at Media Days is special for all of us.

With that we'll open it up for questions and Go Bears.

Q. What has your communication been to the players about the name, image, and likeness ruling? How do you expect to help the players take advantage of this?

JUSTIN WILCOX: We have put together a program, it's called GOLDEN, which is centered around NIL for all of our student-athletes. It's a resource and provides guidance for them in terms of education and contracts, negotiations, tax implications. We have a number of players who have entered into agreements within NIL.

I think it's going to be months, maybe even years, before it really sorts itself out. I think it's long overdue. We are in full support of it. With our location, being in the Bay Area,



there's going to be a number of opportunities for players on our team.

I know they're excited about it. We are fully supportive. Our administration has done a great job of providing some resources and guidance when it comes to NIL.

Q. You have a lot of returning veterans this season. In your experience as a coach, how has that impacted your program? What are you expecting from the veteran contributions this year?

JUSTIN WILCOX: We have extremely high expectations for them and the rest of the guys. Having nine super seniors, there's a lot of guys who play a lot of reps for us. As I mentioned before, it's the most competitive roster we've had at the individual position groups and offensively and defensively. That competition will bring out the best in each and every one of those guys.

But the veterans specifically, they understand what it takes. They've been in the fire. They've played a lot of reps. What we're looking for is consistency in our performance. That starts with how we approach the off-season, our summer workouts, what we do in fall camp, and continue throughout the season to continue to improve.

I think we got some really good players coming back on both sides of the ball. We have extremely high expectations for them and ourselves.

Q. With Tim DeRuyter gone, Kuony Deng moving outside, do you anticipate or not any change (indiscernible)?

JUSTIN WILCOX: No, not at all. It's really a win-win with Kuony moving to outside linebacker, with him and Cam Goode, and a couple other guys we have, we feel like we've got some really good players there. We're eager for some of these inside linebackers to get an opportunity. We think we have some good players in there.

It won't change what we're doing specifically. Each and every year the schematics change based on the strengths of your team. Those things are tweaked. But there will be



no significant changes, any coaching changes, no.

Q. What is your ideal ending to this year?

JUSTIN WILCOX: What's our ideal ending?

Q. Yes.

JUSTIN WILCOX: To win every game. That's why you line up and play. That's the ideal ending.

Q. With the new roster (indiscernible), how does having been him back? What have you seen (indiscernible) in 2020 and 2021?

JUSTIN WILCOX: It is great having Luke back. Luke Beckett back. He is on the roster. There is still some work with the NCAA. It's in their hands at this time. We're expecting positive news regarding that.

Luke has a unique story. I don't know that there's ever been a guy who's essentially went through seven years, played for a team, left the team, come back to the team. It would be a good story for somebody to write.

But Luke has played a lot of football for us, is a good football player. He was excited to come back and join his teammates. Has a veteran presence in that room.

We feel like there's some really talented younger players in that room, they just haven't played much. We're going to need some of those guys to step up and provide us with some reps, with Brett being out.

Again, I think the competitiveness, like I said, at that position and the others, is as good as we've had.

Q. (No microphone.)

JUSTIN WILCOX: You got the names. Stanley, Ricky. Let's see, Akili. I might be missing guys. There's a number of those guys. Ethan Saunders is another guy. Aaron Maldonado is coming back. Just a handful of guys that can play for us. We got some freshmen that just joined us this summer who are pretty impressive physically. Time will tell. That's why we're going to line up and practice.

We do have high expectations for that group.

Q. (No microphone.)

JUSTIN WILCOX: No updates. He's doing as well as he possibly could be. Significant injury that he suffered. First of all, we're just glad that he's okay. It was a serious accident. Obviously the football side of it, he's a very, very

good player, very good player. We'll miss that, not having a guy like that.

Gives opportunity to some of these other guys we just mentioned. Brett is back on campus. We will get him back going as soon as humanly possible. He's attacked the rehabilitation like we would have expected Brett to. Look forward to him getting back on the field as soon as possible.

Q. (No microphone.)

JUSTIN WILCOX: Doing well. Kai can throw the ball. He has a great demeanor. Kai joined us this summer. We've known him a long time. Got a ton to learn, like any freshman, especially at that position. He's going to learn a lot, drink from the firehose a little bit.

But he's a talented guy. Again, as I mentioned, he has a great personality and demeanor, which you like to see out of that quarterback position. He can throw the ball. When it comes out of his hand, it's got some pace and he's accurate. Really, really looking forward to getting him some reps starting next week.

Q. The two players from Liberty (indiscernible)?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Braxten Croteau is a really steady player for us. Braxten works extremely hard, a very, very physical guy. He's played a lot, he's made some big plays for us last year. He's in as good a shape as he's ever been in.

I would expect him to have a very, very good season.

Ryan Puskas has kind of been in and out of the lineup nursing some injury things. He still has a lot of work to do.

Q. The impact of Charlie Ragle (indiscernible).

JUSTIN WILCOX: He was a really successful high school coach in Arizona, as you probably know. Has a lot of relationships. He's connects really well with the players in terms of recruiting and identifying the guys that fit us.

Charlie has been a really valuable person for our program in that way.

Q. (No microphone.)

JUSTIN WILCOX: To not go on a visit, commit and sign to a school is pretty unique. It's never happened before, I don't think. We had a number of guys we did virtual recruiting tours with, virtual visits who weren't even on our campus until they checked in last month. I hope that would

never have to happen again.

We feel really good about those guys. The feedback here in the last month with next year's class has been very, very positive.

Q. Mike Saffell retired, team captain, important part of your squad. What are your thoughts on that? What opportunities does it open up for others?

JUSTIN WILCOX: I feel for Mike. It was something he really didn't have much control over. It was a decision he had to make. We support him fully. We love Mike. He is an unbelievable person. He's a great football player. We're going to miss him as a player.

He's still part of our team and will continue to be. Mike is going to be involved in some way moving forward. But right now we're just supporting him through kind of a difficult time. He's been playing football probably as long as he remembers. It's tough to have to give that up when it's not within your control like that.

The other guys, there's some O-linemen. Matt Cindric played center. Brian Driscoll really came on last season and had a very good spring. A very smart, tough guy. We expect him to be in the mix there.

Then there's some other guys who I think, Ben Coleman is a guy that potentially could play interior there. We'll see. There's just a handful of guys that will be working at that position in the next month. We cross-train a number of our offensive linemen for this very reason. We're eager to watch those guys continue to grow as players throughout this fall.

Q. I know during your recruiting one of the things you tell incoming players is that football will often retire them before they want to retire from football.

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah.

Q. How does the situation with Saffell play into that? What has the program maybe done for him to prepare him for the next step in his life?

JUSTIN WILCOX: It does. Football, for the most part, retires the player. The player doesn't always retire from football. The game chooses. That happened with Mike probably earlier than he anticipated.

But I think what Mike has done in his time at Cal on the field, been exceptional, but off the field in terms of his education, how he approaches school, how he approaches networking, meeting people, the opportunities.

I spoke with a couple of our alumni this past week. The phone calls that Mike Saffell is going to get to come meet with them, talk with them, they're significant. I think it speaks to the power of the institution, but also the way that Mike has taken advantage of his time at Cal, so...

Q. The UCLA game might have been the strangest circumstance in a strange season last year. With some distance, do you feel it was right to play that game the way it come together? Do you have some regrets?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Oh, geez. It was such a unique time. I mean, you could make an argument either way. To be honest with you, we're moving on. We are moving forward.

Last season was challenging for everybody. I could sit here and talk about all the challenges we had. I'm sure the other coaches and schools could, too. We're looking forward to next week and next season. I feel very good about our team. But really not spending a lot of time looking back on last year.

We identified plays and things we need to do better, but not spending a whole lot of time with decisions about playing games and policies and protocols, and all that. We're moving forward.

Q. For Bill and Chase, they start spring ball, it gets interrupted. Where is their understanding and comfort level compared to last season?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Much further along. Much further along as you would expect. Relationship and the teaching that goes on when you're installing a new offense with some significant changes, language, expectations, techniques, those things. We're much, much further along.

Spring football was really, really productive for us. Our summer, we had a really long post-spring workout period and a summer workout period where Brian Johnson, our strength and conditioning staff, have really taken advantage of building up our bodies.

Specific to the offense we've had a lot more time to communicate, meet, spend on football. Any time you get that, you're getting better and better every day. If you talk to Chase, he'd tell you the same thing. The comfort level has significantly improved.

Q. What have been your early impressions of the new commissioner and what sort of changes or developments would you like to see with the new regime?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Could you repeat the last part of your question?

Q. What sort of changes or developments are you hoping to see with the new conference leadership?

JUSTIN WILCOX: We had a chance to meet with the commissioner yesterday for the first time. Very, very impressive. Very smart, very calculated. Full confidence in the direction of the conference, yep.

Q. You have a couple guys that you signed in the 2021 recruiting class that didn't appear on your roster. Femi Oladejo and Jeremia Moore. Are they going to be on the roster in the future?

JUSTIN WILCOX: They're on the roster.

Q. They are?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yes. Well, there is your guy. Don't get mad at me.

They're both with us (smiling).

Q. Coach Sirmon, he took over as full-time defensive coordinator last year. You don't have Coach DeRuyter in the defensive meeting room any more. How has he kind of handled that change? Are there any fundamental changes to the defense?

JUSTIN WILCOX: There won't be any fundamental changes. As I mentioned before, every year you tweak things based on strengths and weaknesses of your team. Yeah, that's not an issue at all.

Q. (No microphone.)

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, we got some new faces. I think when you look at the roster, the outside linebacker position, when you have Kuony and Cameron Goode and Braxten Croteau, and some of these younger guys that we think can help us, that's a strength.

I think there's some good football players at the D-line. They just don't have as much experience. We have to find out who's going to play how many reps. The inside linebacker position, I think Evan Tattersall's had a very good off-season, he's in the best shape he's ever been in. Taking a step forward in his progression.

Muelu Iosefa is a very talented player who is still learning a lot. I think there's some other inside linebackers that can provide some reps.

In the back end you've got Josh Drayden who's played some good football for us for a long, along with Elijah Hicks. Those two guys have played a ton of football for us for the past four years, four-plus years for Josh I guess.

Then there's some other guys in that secondary that I think are kind of ready to make their move.

All that will sort out. But I think if you just looked on paper, the returning guys with Cameron and Kuony, that outside linebacker position would be one of the strengths.

Q. Lu Hearn, had a massive spring over there. Have you been able to see anything from him so far as far the summer workouts?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, summer workouts. He's a very quick twitch guy. He's very, very productive in a great program. That's always a good sign. Got high hopes for him. Again, like any freshman, there's just a lot to be determined. We're very excited about the recruiting class and the signees. There's just so much to do yet, yeah.

Q. There has been a shift much more to a two-down line across the sport. How do you go about that when this division might be the biggest throwback?

JUSTIN WILCOX: That's a great question. I think it's one of the strengths of our conference. You have the diversity in the schemes that you play against, both offensively and defensively. The players playing those schemes are very talented players.

Speaking from a defensive perspective, yeah, we play 3-4 base defense. We'll do that again with teams that want to go big. Then we play 4-2-5 nickel. I know you mentioned the two-down defense lineman, that probably is semantics, just how you look at the standup outside guys, whether they put their hand down or not. I wouldn't differentiate those too much.

I think that's a great challenge that you have enough defense to be able to line up and play effectively against these teams that we're playing, also not overload your guys. That's the line we're always trying to walk.

Again, that's kind of some of the fun in all this, is trying to find that sweet spot for what you're good at, what you need, get it communicated to the players so they can go out there and play.

Q. Can you speak to what Tim did for you in running your defense, the seasons that he did.

JUSTIN WILCOX: I can't hear you.

Q. I realize he moved within the division, but can you speak to what Tim DeRuyter did?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Tim did a great job for us. I've known him a long time. He was great to work with. We have some excellent football coaches. Andrew Browning, who's as good as there is, in my opinion, as a defensive line coach. Pete Sirmon, who I've known for a long time, in terms of teaching, preparing and game planning, is as good as there is. Now with Keith Heyward and Tre Watson.

Keith, who I have a long history with, exceptional football coach, even better person.

I coached defense for a number of years. There's a lot of communication going on in that room. We know who we are. We know what we want to do. Our job is to get it communicated to the players and make sure we're giving this year's team, which is not last year's team or the year before, the best opportunity. Schematically, in how we teach 'em, how we prepare 'em.

I have the utmost confidence in the guys in our room doing that.

Q. With Chase only getting four games last year, talk about his development. How have you seen him grow in the past 12 to 24 months?

JUSTIN WILCOX: I think Chase is primed for a great season, I really do. He's played a ton of football. Got a lot of different experiences. His comfort level in practice, his comfort level within the schemes, just operating. He's confident. I think that just comes with age and time.

Doesn't always happen overnight. He's had some really good moments. He's learned a lot along the way. I think Chase is, like I said before, just primed for a very, very good season.

Q. What is one thing you would like to see him specifically develop this season that you haven't in the past two?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, I think for all of us, it's just the consistency in our performance. He's had some great moments and great games, like the rest of the team has. Now it's finding that consistency.

That's just part of your DNA, how you operate in the off-season, how you prepare. When you go out and play a play or a series or quarter or a game, it's finding that

consistency.

It's hard to do. A lot of people can have a great play or a great series or a great quarter, even a game, but to do that throughout the season with all the twists and turns, some of the adversity you're going to face, is difficult. That's really where we need to take the next step.

Q. You mentioned Keith coming in, back to your days with Washington, is that where a lot of the relationship came from?

JUSTIN WILCOX: I'm having a hard time hearing you. You said Keith?

I've known Keith a long time, really dating back to his playing days. Got a chance to work with him for about four years.

Keith is a very, very good football mind, super person. He's great with our players. I know they love playing for him.

It doesn't take long with a guy like that, walk in the meeting room, spend time with the players, to see that relationship develop. That's such a key component in coaching.

There's a lot of people that can draw Xs and Os, there really are. Hell, you can learn it on YouTube. You can spend time on YouTube, learn how to line up a defense. There are fewer people who can communicate that, get to know the players and build a relationship with the players so they have faith in the guy teaching them, they will buy in and spend time on it.

The power is in the learning, the power is in the players. They are going to choose whether they listen to you or not. How you treat them, how you build that relationship is so critical, and he has that.

Q. Your relationship with Chase, given a defensive head coach, do you help him in a special way that maybe an offensive-minded head coach couldn't?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Yeah, I mean, I don't know. Bill Musgrave is the offensive and quarterback coach. He coaches Chase. I'm going to support Chase in the ways that I see fit. I have a great relationship with him, a lot of other guys on our team.

Always provide my input without having too many cooks in the kitchen, so to speak. I don't think it's helpful to have seven coaches coach a player. That doesn't help them play better.

When we have a guy like Bill Musgrave, who has done it for as long as he's done it, been around it at the highest level, he's the guy that's going to be coaching Chase.

I will help Chase in other ways, but when it comes to schematics and things like that, that's Bill's job. I have the utmost confidence in him doing that. As I mentioned before, the more people you have chirping in somebody's ear, that doesn't help them play better.

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