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An Interview With:

NEBRASKA COACH BILL CALLAHAN

PETER IRWIN: Coach, welcome.

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: Thank you, Peter. It's great to be here. Great kicking this off and starting the season. We did bring three players here with us today. You'll get a chance to meet them. You will find them to be just terrific young men.

Adam Carriker, our defensive end, who is projected to do very well this season. A lot of the preseason polls rated as one of the top defensive ends in the country. We brought down our starting cornerback, Zackary Bowman, who had a very exciting year, had a year where we emerged as a junior college transfer and played well. And of course we brought down our quarterback, Zac Taylor.

I hope you get a chance to meet the three young men. Great players, but they're great people and great kids and they're excited to be here today.

PETER IRWIN: Any other opening comments?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: No, we're just excited to get going. I think we're all anxious and eager to get into the flow of things again. But we start next week, our kids come in for reporting day, next Wednesday and we kick it off with our normal training camp schedule. But we're very anxious and excited to get the Big 12 season going.

PETER IRWIN: Great. Thank you, Coach. We'll take the coach's questions from the floor, if you'll put your hand up. Start in the front middle.

Q. Can you talk about how last season's end produced confidence coming in this season coming over Colorado and Michigan?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: I think you hit the nail on the head. It was confidence. It carries over into the off-season and now it's a matter of

how we use that motivation as we head into the last quarter of our off-season, that being training camp. So you can draw a lot of momentum from that. You can certainly draw confidence from that experience, but the important thing now is you go into training camp and you prepare your team to play. How that transcends into, you know, preparedness and improvement, that's where it lies.

But I think we gained a lot of great experience through those two victories at the end. Three, as a matter of fact. And we always, it's kind of funny. We talk to our team about starting fast and finishing strong. That's one of our signs we have up on our locker room. But last year somewhere in the middle we forgot to win consistently. So we're going to build on that aspect as well.

But it certainly was a great finish to last season culminating in the Bowl victory against Michigan and certainly gave our players a lot of momentum and confidence to build upon.

Q. Coach, in the spring, you put a pretty big emphasis on running the football. Is that something that carries, that you'll do again in fall camp?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: We will, Steve. You know, we were not efficient enough in our running game from a production standpoint. Although, we did run it a number of times in terms of trying to balance the number of plays called between pass and run. We needed to do a better job with the efficiency of the running attack. A lot of that has to do with the consistency and the stability of the offensive line, which is an area we focused on strongly this past spring. We got a number of young players that are starting to emerge, starting to come onto the scene.

We returned a center, an academic All-American called Kurt Mann who is the anchor in the front. Smart guy. He's got extraordinary reachability in terms of reaching or snatching the nose, or one gap player. He's complemented with two, three young guards, a fellow by the name of Mike Huff, a red-shirt sophomore, Andy

Christensen, a red-shirt sophomore, and a veteran player Greg Austin.

We've got good experience. We're bigger, square, much thicker inside than what we've been in the last two years, and of course outside we feel we've got more continuity in the terms of our tackle play. We had a lot of young tackles last year in Lineman Bertha, who played a little at the end of the season who will play on the left side and a young freshman by the name of Matt Slauson who has the ability to play inside or outside. A young man named Chris Patrick, a tenacious player who came off to play for us, played the right tackle and left tackle position.

And that line is beginning to gel and beginning to emerge. And the off-season is so important in the weight room, on the field, in the running program. When those guys are together they're a tight-knit group. They know each other a lot better in terms of the communication abilities and calls. So we anticipate that we'll be much improved as we head into the season.

Q. Coach, overall, when you took over Nebraska, are you where you wanted to be or you figured where you would be going into the third season?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: Well, I noticed that we're -- you know, we're projected to win the North and that's always our goal is to win the North Division, and it's awfully competitive in this juncture within our own -- within our own division. As you look at the -- as you look at the opponents and what they return and their strengths and weaknesses.

But we're on schedule, in my opinion. And we're getting better. We're more improved. We're more consistent. We're starting to make plays that we didn't make in our first couple of years or our first year, particularly, but we're getting better. And how much that's going to carry over in the fall, we'll have to see. But we're a confident group right now, and that's important as you head into training camp, because this is the time where your team really comes together is during this next phase. And so it's critical for us that all those dynamics and factors begin to emerge at a much higher level.

Q. Coach, you've got Kansas City, Baylor coming up, of course Texas Tech is here today. Baylor and Kansas State dabbled with their offensive. Kansas beat you on a pro

style offense and Baylor looks like it will be passing more. Can you talk about that shift or maybe that trend going on to the Big 12 right now where teams are putting it in the air more than maybe before?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: I think the Big 12 overall is a more wide-open conference than a lot of conferences around the country. That was noted in our first year. And I know when Coach Kevin Cosgrove, our defensive coordinator, started defending the teams in styles, in schematics around the conference, it was drastically different than where it was in the Big 10. That was different. We adjusted. We acclimated well going into our second year.

But I see the Big 12 as a very potent conference from an offensive perspective, a lot of good coaches, good talent, and I think that's the dimension that people are headed to, to recruit athletes that can make plays spread the field and take advantage of the matchups and that's an oversimplification, but that's the trend and that's what we see. There's not many teams that you can look, that you can look around and they're going to line up in the I formation and try to come downhill at you. There's just not that many teams doing it.

So for ourselves in particular, we have to practice the two back-style attack against our defense so we keep them boned up on that aspect of football.

But the answer to the question, is it changing? Yes, I think it's changing. I think the style of offense is changing. I think in looking at the two teams that have won the National Championships in the last two years, you have to score points to win. What Texas did, putting 41 points on SC, and what SC did two years ago against Oklahoma, it's pretty prolific, in my mind, playing in a National Championship caliber game and scoring the amount of points that have been produced really sends a message, I think, to everybody and throughout this conference. I think it's something that it's noted in my mind and you gotta score to win in this conference, obviously.

Q. Bill, could you talk a little bit about the development of Zac Taylor made and what steps you want to see him take, what you want out of him as a quarterback?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: First off, Randy, he's an exceptional young man with a

real -- with a real knowledge of the game. He's a very -- his depth is probably one of the best that I've been around in terms of comprehension and understanding and knowing the nuances of everything you want as a coach. He's a coach on the field for us. And he's got that leadership ability. And he has that personality and character that you want leading your football team. He did as good a job as any first-year quarterback in this system that I've ever been around at any level, college or pro. And he's making steps, we took a number of steps in the spring with him. We increased as a package standpoint and we'll do that again as we get into the training camp again here next week.

But he can absorb so much offense, so much detail, and not only absorb and execute it, but he can transcend it to other players. So he can transmit it to a wide receiver. He can explain to a receiver what he's doing, how he's doing it and how to do it better.

So when you have that type of communication and dialog going on within the realm of your offense and your team, you know it kind of bodes well for him and kind of speaks to the competence of the progression that he's made.

Q. Can you talk about how much the landscape the North has changed new coaches at Colorado and Kansas State and Missouri loses Brad Smith this year?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: It's kind of unique. I was looking at our schedule. We've been studying it since it's come out. And for us we're essentially playing seven new teams. We brought in four teams in the nonconference schedule that we've never played before. And we have no history with. Then, of course, you know we pick up the cross overs within the conference play.

And then also within our own division, you know, we've had two changes at the head coaching position at K State and Colorado, so we're facing four new coordinators, four new schematics. So this is really a little topsy-turvy for us to get a grip and get our arms around exactly what people are going to do.

So the challenge is for our team this year are going to be very unique. And you know every year is different. We always -- I always preach that to our players and the understanding that the challenges, the matchups, the schemes, the coordinators, it's always different. And it's going to

be extremely different, especially for our first four games.

Q. Bill, Zac also took a lot of punishment last year, can you talk about how that needs to change?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: Zac Taylor did a tremendous job of managing the offense and unloading the ball when he had to. There were times where he gets hit and I think any quarterback is going to get hit in any offense that's throwing the football.

But I would tell you he's got tremendous courage. And he maintains that, you know, by taking that extra step, you know, taking that extra second of hanging into the pocket and trying to get the ball out of his hand. He's got great confidence in his receiving court. Good confidence in his protection. Can he get better? Absolutely. One of the steps in his progression is not taking sacks. And when you look at sacks the overall consensus is your line is not doing well when you take a sack. But sacks are the extension of everybody that plays on offense. It has to do with the timing of the quarterbacks, the timing of the receivers to get open, and that's critical. If they're not on time, then they're going to disrupt the rhythm of the attack.

It's on the line, of course. It's on the backs taking the correct pickups and having good pickups and also getting into a check-down position. So when you look at sacks and the totality of it, it's just not your offensive line. It's all -- it's an all-encompassing integrated dynamic you've got to deal with as a coach.

Now, our numbers aren't good. We don't want to take sacks, we don't want to take negative plays. We've done some things from a schematic aspect to help us kind of shore up. That's where you look as a coach, are you going to open it up and use 5-man and 6-man protections or are you going to get conservative and start to use 7- and 8-man protections. So those are the types of issues that is a coaching staff that we go through and then the balance of that is really crucial to eliminate that type of a situation or that type of a result.

Q. The loss of (inaudible) five capable backs in the staff, were you looking for a we-back, are you looking for a man to emerge as being the best man?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: We'll play the

best back. Whether it's by committee, whether it's two, three, four, five, however it shakes out, that's our goal.

Q. You mentioned that it was the fourth quarter of the off-season when you go to training camp. Can you tell me what four quarters are, how you break that down?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: Well, we look at the off-season in four quarters, first one being the off-season program where we're essentially running and conditioning and lifting weights. The second phase of that is our spring practice. The third quarter of our off-season is summer conditioning, and the fourth quarter is training camp. And we want to make improvements and make gains and strides in those four areas of our preparation.

And that's really the all -- that's essentially our philosophy of how we're taking the team and how we're preparing it to get ready for the season.

Q. Coach, Coach talked about Zac Taylor, what does Harrison Beck have to do in training camp and lock down that number two spot?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: Just continue to compete and to produce the way he's capable of. We didn't get a good look or an opportunity to really evaluate him in the spring because of his injury. And because there was not enough, I don't think there's enough practices anyhow to get a determination on a back-up quarterback. But it will be interesting to see. He's made steady progress throughout the summer from what I understand. I don't get that opportunity to watch him during the summer because they're being prepared by the strength coach. We don't get a chance to watch our players, but our players have been involved on 7-on-7s and 11-on-11's throughout. And the word I've hear he's progressed very well. His arm is back in shape again.

So, you know, how you handle executing under pressure in training camp and pressure drills and whether it's third down drills, whether it's a blitz drill, whether it's a red zone drill, that will all be determined. I think that will shake itself out as we progress.

Q. Bill, is this the year maybe that the North Division starts narrowing the gap with the South?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: I really don't know. That's a good question. I really don't know. All I can tell you is that the teams, you know, from the historical standpoint in the last ten years, some have done well. Some have not done well. I think it's cyclical, personally. Whether or not, you know, there's a direct advantage there, I don't know. I couldn't tell you one way or the other.

But I know this division is a very competitive division. I know the conference is ultra competitive in every respect. You have some great coaches. You've got some great teams and players that compete in the Big 12. I'm proud to be a part of it. And it's a challenge. And every week you've got to be ready to take on everyone's A game. You're taking on the best.

And you cannot have a slip. You can't allow yourself to not have a focus or not be prepared to take on someone's best, their best plays, best players, best schemes. It's just that type of conference now because I think it's an exceptional conference with great coaches and players.

Q. Coach, the expectations of Nebraska are always high but now as you got your program establishing in the third year and you're favored to win the thing, have they stepped up even, do you sense that they stepped up even a greater level than in the past?

COACH BILL CALLAHAN: Our goal is always to win a National Championship as well. And as you look at the history of the Big 12 Conference in the last 12 years, I think there's only three teams that really hit the trifecta. And that's winning the division. Winning the conference and then winning the National Championship game.

So when you study that, teams like Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas, only three teams you know to really capitalize on that opportunity. So we always sell it to our players from the aspect of capturing the Division first and then winning the Big 12 Championship, putting yourself in the position to be in the title game.

And that's the essence of this conference competition, and that's what we embrace, and that's what we look forward to and that's the expectation of our program.

PETER IRWIN: Okay, Coach. Thank you very much.

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