

An Interview With:

COACH TYRONE WILLINGHAM

Q. Talking about the schedule, Notre Dame is having a change of philosophy scheduling and planning to go to a seven-game home schedule in 2009. Do you think there's a need to level the playing field as far as changing philosophy?

COACH WILLINGHAM: If you're saying adding another home game is something detrimental, I would think that's a great advantage to have an additional home game.

Now, what does that mean? What you're trying to imply what the thought process is, is that means weakening your schedule?

Q. A little bit, because you have three teams coming in who are not getting return dates. I thought you would have Tennessee or Nebraska, Penn State without getting return dates?

COACH WILLINGHAM: It's how you do that, that would be the key. If you do it in such a manner so that return visits are delayed down the road, it's a great positive for everyone and it doesn't have to be a weakening of the schedule.

Q. How about seven home games, does that give you a big advantage?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I'm trying to convince people to get nine.

Q. Talk about the difference this year between Brady Quinn this year and last year.

COACH WILLINGHAM: The biggest difference is the word **experience**. Once you've done it, you seem to have a larger base of knowledge, a larger base of confidence, and that's where Brady is. Most teams when you look at them, which make their best runs at being a championship-caliber team, (those teams) do have an experienced quarterback.

Q. Does having the experience -- you keep saying last year that coming out of high school -- inaudible?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Always in every job, the trials that you have to go through in order to have those around you have confidence in what

you're about, what you can do. And I think Brady was no different as a first-year player for us, you have to do something to earn the respect of the players around you, and I think he's done that both on the field with his play last year and with his off-field presence.

Q. Could you talk about John Sullivan and what he brings to the offensive line?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I'm hopeful that at some point there will be some very favorable comparisons to John Sullivan and Jeff Faine, so hopefully this we can research that point by the time John is a senior; that he will look very much like Jeff in terms of aggressive play that he brings to the game.

Q. Speaking with some of the players yesterday, asking them what kind of things specifically they needed to do to turn the season around from last year and you had different answers: Focus, concentration, getting a quicker start in games, a variety of different answers. What one or two things would you point to as being the key to turning the season around from what happened last year?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I would say the word **confidence** is probably the biggest thing. If we go out on the field and we have that, the popular term that people like to apply is that you have that swagger.

But if you play with confidence and resolve, I think we have a chance to be an excellent football team.

Q. How do you get that confidence and swagger?

COACH WILLINGHAM: We get it with experience. We get it with improved physical skills that come through the winter conditioning, training. All of those things add to make you a better football player the next season.

Q. Some of the players were also talking about the number 38 because of the 38-0 loss to Michigan, and I heard Justin Tuck say that they do sets of 38 whatever with Mickey (Mariotti – strength and conditioning coach), are you familiar with that?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I'm very familiar with that.

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Q. What's your involvement in that activity?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I'm aware of it.

Q. You're aware of? You let Mickey handle that?

COACH WILLINGHAM: It depends.

Q. Okay. The punting job, have you made a decision regarding that?

COACH WILLINGHAM: We are still analyzing all of our information and that means we are still looking at both candidates day-to-day. But I would probably believe that right now our punter in this ballgame would probably be D.J. Fitzpatrick.

Q. On running back, Ryan Grant said yesterday that he was 95 percent and ready to go. He has not had a lot of contact this fall, if any. Is that a concern of yours as you go into this first game?

COACH WILLINGHAM: No, it is not that we've had a lack of contact. **Ryan** has played a lot of football at Notre Dame and he will adjust pretty quickly.

My biggest concern is if there is any, I guess, remaining issues with the injury that he had that might show themselves again. If not, it would be better advised to delay his progress than to accelerate.

Q. In terms of finding that second or third running back that you wanted to put into the rotation, what are the criteria that you've used in order to make that decision? Is it just holding on it the football, is it explosiveness; how would you characterize how you've made that decision?

COACH WILLINGHAM: We would view -- and I hate to say that this, but all of the above.

I think you have to look at the guy and his all-around skills that he brings to the table. We expect our halfback to be a receiver, we expect him to be a blocker, we expect him to be a ball carrier. When he carries the ball, we expect him to hold on to it. All of those things go to assess the overall performance of the individual that will probably give us that next selection.

Q. Could you talk about the challenges you'll face with *BYU's* passing game?

COACH WILLINGHAM: The first thing is, we approach *BYU* and we can't neglect their running game. We cannot allow them to have what I call a two-way go, when they have got their

running game and their passing game going full speed.

We know and recognize that over the years that their preference has been to throw the football. But at the same time, if we let them have a run game, then they become that kind of double-edged sword; that you can't stop it no matter what you're doing. So have got to first make sure we pay attention to their running game.

Then in terms of their passing game, we do have some inexperience in our secondary and what we've got to do is count on our front seven to really be a force for us to help out our secondary get its feet on the ground. So if we can count on the Justins (Tuck), the Victors (Abiamiri), the Kyles (Budinscak), the Gregs (Pauly) to really apply some pressure to that quarterback and make it really uncomfortable for him, and they can do things that he's not willing or desiring to do, then we help our secondary out.

Q. Have you figured out starters on the corners?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I think right now we're leaning toward Preston Jackson and Dwight Ellick.

Q. Strong safety?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Strong safety, we're still looking.

Q. You mention confidence and swagger, talking to the players yesterday, they gave a fairly clear indication that they already have that confidence, I don't know about swagger, but they don't have a point to prove to themselves Saturday night. They already know that they can do it. Could you talk about how you maybe coached that confidence up over the last nine months, because certainly their most recent memory of playing a game was a negative one?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Be careful there. Be careful about who remembers what. Because yes, we do know and have some thoughts about Syracuse, but at the same time there are some other very good things that did occur during that final stretch of the season.

I would like to think that our football team is a group of very positive young men. I've always told them that it's amazing what can be accomplished when you're positive.

So they could focus on all of the good things they did and not be concerned about the negative things.

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Q. So is that a mentality that you have coached through for the last nine months?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I would hope that it's one I live by and that our players can see that. I've never seen very much, very many good things accomplished by a lot of negative thoughts. So I'd prefer to think positive and hopefully our guys have inherited that thought process.

Q. Turning to Ryan Harris for a little bit, can you talk about his athleticism? Talking to Justin Tuck yesterday, he said he's considered more of a big tight end than an offensive lineman, which is a pretty high compliment?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I think it is. We felt last year when we were able to insert him into the lineup, it allowed us to move some people and make us a better football team but also got an excellent player on the field in terms of his athleticism, his footwork, his quickness and his tenacity.

What we are hopeful for is that *Ryan* can really step even above his last year, obviously, and really be a force at the left tackle spot for us.

Q. Could you talk about his drive a little bit to really excel, there was that show on MTV --

COACH WILLINGHAM: I have yet to see that show.

Q. The professional training he puts himself through in the off-season. I think it's fairly unique for a college athlete to a certain degree; could you talk about his conditioning and his drive to put himself in optimum shape?

COACH WILLINGHAM: When you think of that incident you're describing with MTV, if I'm correct that almost goes back to high school. And to me when you say high school, that separates him from a lot of guys that would have the mind set to even position themselves in that manner, and then to follow through with it.

When you see that and you place it in that category of him as in a high school setting, now you see that you've got hopefully an exceptional young man and has a drive that's a little bit different from a lot of guys.

Q. Is that something that could be indicative of the program that he came from?

COACH WILLINGHAM: They have a wonderful program there. If you are familiar, they have created a lot or had a lot of great players come through that program.

Q. Moving from the right to the left side, what has been your evaluation of that through fall camp and how is he progressing?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I thought it was a natural for him and he's adapted very well. As always, as you try to bring tackles along, if you had your preference, you'd probably start him right and then move him left if you thought he had the ability.

Q. And lastly, Carl Gioia, the kickoff specialist, what has he done to prove himself in that regard and when was that decision made?

COACH WILLINGHAM: You have to forgive me, because he's kicked well, that's as simple as information as I can give you on that one.

Q. When it comes to consistency in that regard, where did he prove himself in that way through fall camp?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Fall camp? I mean, even last year, Carl showed himself over the competition to be very consistent, maybe not as long range as some others but he showed himself to be very consistent.

Q. Can you evaluate your backup quarterback situation?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I'm very comfortable with having *Pat Dillingham* be our backup quarterback.

Q. How are the two freshmen progressing during camp?

COACH WILLINGHAM: One has progressed very well and the other has been injured. So it's slowed his progress down, the injured guy being (Darrin) Bragg.

Q. You talked about the 38 thing, or you commented on the 38 thing.

COACH WILLINGHAM: I don't think I had very much comment. Does that have something to do with BYU?

Q. Well, that's what I was going to ask you, is that a problem, does that take away from the focus of *BYU*?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I don't think it does.

Q. How do you as a coach get them really locked down on *BYU*, what you have a big rivalry game hanging in the distance the

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next week?

COACH WILLINGHAM: The fact that the success that **BYU** has had over the years, it was mentioned this morning that they have done an outstanding job in what they call their payback games, I think it is, if the stats are correct. So I think all of those things lead us to be focused on **BYU** and not anyone else. We understand that to have a great season, you have to win your first ballgame.

Q. Corey Mays, can you talk about his progress?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Absolutely. Corey has been a real delight in our program. He's evolved from just being a physical player to being one that now is gaining a great deal of understanding and expertise of the overall defensive scheme. That is the area that we've put the most focus on him or stressed to him that we need him to cover and have greater knowledge of that. He's willingly done that and put himself in position, where now if you looked at our linebacking corps, we would have a rotation of four and not just three starters.

Q. Speaking of three starters, do you expect Brandon (Hoyte) to be able to play for you?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Undecided right now as to what his status will be for the weekend.

Q. Last thing, you personally, do you feel like as a coach you need to show progress this year?

COACH WILLINGHAM: You have to break that down for me.

Q. First, to have either a winning record or a better record than last year in terms of, you know, the bigger picture here. Or do you think about those things at all?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I think about winning every ballgame I coach in.

Q. And so the rest of it, you don't think about those kind of things?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I think about winning every game I coach.

Q. In 2002, you took your team to Air Force to play, that's over a mile high in altitude, but that was well into the season. Did you do anything in camp to approximate or at least try to get ready for the altitude that you will face?

COACH WILLINGHAM: No, we haven't. Because our belief is that, one, there's not anything you really can do to acclimate yourself, unless you're there for a week or so, a week or two weeks, for training and preparation for that.

And also, the fact that the altitude, if I'm correct, is about -- not quite, but 2,000 feet lower than it was at Colorado Springs, so to us, that's an advantage.

Q. Talking to a lot of the other players, they have mentioned Ryan Grant to them looks a lot faster than they have seen in the past. And asking him about it, he thinks that running track in the off-season really helped him. Can you evaluate what he gained from running track, whether it's mental, physical and how that's helped him?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I would believe that the experience of running track is a plus. Because there's only one way to get faster and that is to run fast, and every time you do that, you have a chance to be a faster player and a more explosive player.

But at the same time, you see track performance, you cannot apply that speed to the game of football. The difference is, you have to have a mind that is track-fast at the game of football. And I think that's where **Ryan's** greatest improvement is that the confidence and knowledge and experience that he has as a player allows him now to take that speed that he has and run fast, and we as football coaches know there are players that run 4.3, but when they play the game of football, they run 4.7. The key thing is to be able to run your fastest at the game, and I think **Ryan** does that.

Q. Would you talk specifically about a couple of kids about the offensive line, but talking to Derek Curry, lining up across this year, he said they are a tougher group and they are more in sync. What would you attribute that to, is the maturity of (Ryan) Harris and the emergence of (John) Sullivan, or what accounts for the fact that the defense is saying they are that much better?

COACH WILLINGHAM: First of all I'm delighted to hear our defense say that. And second of all, the true test comes Saturday. That's when we know we have matured and the experience is really visible.

But I would believe that, first of all, the ability to work together and start to become a team adds to that critical word of confidence; that you

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can trust the guy next to you. The experience of knowing what you're supposed to do and how to do it adds a great deal to your ability to be tough. Because I tell our guys, if you don't know what to do, you don't hit anybody. So therefore, when you know what to do, you can be more aggressive, you can play the game the way it's designed to be played.

Those are the things in my opinion that are making this hopefully a much better group, a much more cohesive group and much more physical in the way they play the game.

Q. How would you describe the transition Mark (LeVoir) has made to the right tackle spot and how has that affected the overall offensive line?

COACH WILLINGHAM: First of all having Mark be able to make that move has allowed us to get better players on the field and position him so that he is now a very worldly football player in terms of the entire offensive line. Now he understands the experience at guard, he understands how that relates to Dan Stevenson, who will be playing next to him. So, you have a better player based on having two positions under his belt, as compared to having just one.

Q. How is recruiting different from coming off a winning season or losing different if there is a difference?

COACH WILLINGHAM: There's always a difference when you're coming off a winning season, you appear more attractive to the young men out here. The values are still very much the same - they have not changed. But just that one fact, you look a little different to young men.

Q. Are you finding guys asking this year about the record?

COACH WILLINGHAM: No. At least I'm not. Our guys understand that we've got a program that's on the verge of something very big. That's why we've had the early success we've had and I think we're doing very well with some of the marquee, as you might call them, players around the country.

Q. Ronald Tally, what did you like about him?

COACH WILLINGHAM: One of the first prerequisites for me is a young man has to be tough, and what I saw in him coming out of Detroit was a young man that was tough and yet still met all of the requirements.

Q. Seems like a kid that may be one of those guys that develops into a leader, do you see that?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Yes. And it is still very early, so you don't want to put more on the table than what's there, but I would like Ronald Tally to emerge one day as one of those guys. Already he's starting to be one of the favorites of this football team.

Q. Inaudible question on BYU at home...

COACH WILLINGHAM: It's already been stated. **BYU** is a far better team at home than they were on the road, especially that we saw last year. I don't think there's any question in our minds that this is a very dangerous and very explosive team when they are playing football the way they can play it.

What we have to do is go in that stadium, be off to a quick start, get control of the game and then play our football.

Q. You talked about confidence in your quarterback and your team, can you point to a time last season where you felt maybe they got down a little bit and that impacted your season?

COACH WILLINGHAM: That they got down a little bit?

Q. Lost a little confidence and it impacted your season.

COACH WILLINGHAM: I thought even at the beginning of our season it was a real learning process through the season. I don't think there was a point where we got down. It was building all year because we had a lot of changes and adjustments in very critical areas to start the season, and I thought we continued to grow as we progressed throughout the season.

Q. Do you in any way wish you had an easier opener from the standpoint of building confidence?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Do I wish I had an easier opener from the standpoint of building confidence? Who would you describe as being an easier opener?

Q. I wouldn't want to put my finger on anybody but --

COACH WILLINGHAM: Neither would I, thank you.

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Q. Perhaps a home game against a second division MAC opponent?

COACH WILLINGHAM: No, I mean, the thing that you find out in college football is that everybody has got players and that's the thing that's changed over the years. If this were 20 years ago, there might be some programs that you could probably look at and say they don't have any players.

But right now, with the way the balance is in college football, you've got to be ready to play every weekend, and if not, you'll get beat.

Q. Talking to Mike Goolsby, he said at the start of camp that the spring was a real adjustment for him, more so mentally, just getting back to playing again after having two bad shoulders. How has he looked in fall camp and how are things going with him, his comeback?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I've been very impressed with Mike, and the term we used earlier in talking about him, describing where he had to go, we just had to get the rust off. But that rust also included some growth on his part because there was very much a need for us with Courtney Watson going to have some leadership to step up, and Mike needed to fill that void for us. He's done that both as a leader and in terms of his overall knowledge of the game. That's what's so important, when you have experience, you have to get better mentally, not just physically, and I'm pleased with what he's done.

Q. The other thing is, a road opener is probably a concern for every coach, but particularly you have a long road trip and then you're playing a night game as well. Are there added concerns because of those factors?

COACH WILLINGHAM: No. This team for the most part, most of the guys have done at least a trip with us in some regard. Because we try often and in some cases to get some of the freshmen, even though they don't play, we try to get them to travel with us, so they have some knowledge of the routine and how we do things.

You are always concerned about the unknown, things that you can't control that will happen that could change your mindset, change your emotions, etc..

Q. You said you think the guys, the program is on the verge of something big, why do you feel that way?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Well, because I think our young men have prepared. They all

believe and stand for the right things in this program, and that, to me puts us on the verge of doing something big.

One of the words you heard all preseason was the word consistency, and when you have consistency of person, it's much easier to get consistency of players in uniforms.

Q. Are there more tangible things such as increased talent level and better mastery of schemes?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I'm like any other coach, I love talent, but talent can be detrimental if it's not focused and channeled the right way. What I'm interested in is a group that play well together as a team.

Q. You said you think about winning every single football game, do you ever think about the potential ramifications if you don't win every single football game?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Those usually take care of themselves.

Q. How do you prepare for a Todd Watkins, do you get tape on junior college players?

COACH WILLINGHAM: I don't think you really do and I don't know if the resources are there to really find out about that player. You're more concerned about the scheme that the player is in than just the actual player himself. So our preparation is to focus on their scheme. They have quite a few junior college players.

Q. Could you talk about (D.J.) Fitzpatrick, just awarded a scholarship and how he's earned that position, kicking and punting?

COACH WILLINGHAM: It's not just the performance on the field. He did an excellent job of stepping in for us last year and settling down. He performed admirably during that series of games.

But he's been a winner in our program off the field as well as on; and that is, in my mind, what's earned him the right to have the scholarship. He is doing all of the right things in all of the areas of our program.

Q. Have you ever played him in golf?

COACH WILLINGHAM: No, but I understand he's pretty tough. I'm trying to get him on our golf team. I think he can maybe help them. It's not bad to have another guy.

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Q. How many freshmen do you feel like are in the mix to potentially play this Saturday?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Right now, I'd probably say zero. I'd probably say there's still some growth and learning to take place. Some of them are very close to positioning themselves, but I think to start this opening ballgame, I would probably say zero.

Q. Would you comment on two of the three walk-ons that got scholarships -- Josh Schmidt, he really came out of nowhere, would you comment on what he has done?

COACH WILLINGHAM: It's amazing the similarity between that group in terms of what I would call character, personality. And D.J. (Fitzpatrick) and Josh have been the two that have had some on-field performance that you would say, boy, they have done a great job. They all have been model citizens in our program. They have done things that we've asked them that we expect of all of our players.

It's my belief that their on-field performance will be good. Josh has caught passes for us in ball games, he's made blocks in ball games and had some runs in ball games and he's continued to work, develop and be a team player, and to me that's important.

Q. Have you made a decision about your punt returners and kick returners?

COACH WILLINGHAM: Not yet. But probably our starter in the punt return will be Rhema (McKnight) starting there and our kickoff return we're still making that decision.

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