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An interview with:

NORTHWESTERN HEAD COACH PAT FITZGERALD

THE MODERATOR: The first coach up is Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald. He enters his fourth year at the helm of the Wildcat program, and was recently inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

A former linebacker and a two-time All-American at NU, Fitzgerald led his squad to a nine win campaign in 2008 and a berth at the Valero Alamo Bowl. Northwestern returns 15 starters from last season, including five on offense and eight on defense. We'll start with an opening statement and then take questions.

PAT FITZGERALD: Good morning, and thank you, everyone, for attending. I know it's tough times right now in the media industry, and I hope the situation improves, obviously, for all of us.

College football is what it is today because of the great student-athletes and the great support that we receive from the media. As the economy turns up, I hope that we see this room grow and grow. And a big hearty thank you for all of us as coaches to everyone in the media.

I want to make sure I make my vote crystal clear. I did vote for Tim Tebow, so I want to make sure there's no questions about that, and that will be a recurring theme.

I'm ready for football. It's been a long summer. It's been well documented my golf game is out in the woods. And with three boys under five years old, Stacy is ready for me to go back to football, and I couldn't be more excited.

To rewind, 2008 was a big step forward for our football program. To have nine wins for the first time in school history I believe speaks for itself, and the growth that we had as a program was an obvious big step forward. The exposure

that we were able to receive last year for our football program and for our young men was probably at an all-time high.

To have the exposure we had on the Big Ten Network and have our games seen worldwide and nationally, it really helped us in recruiting and we're really seeing the fruits of that labor now this year in our recruiting class. I'm obviously not allowed to talk about that, but it's really helped us from a standpoint of getting Northwestern football out to the masses, and especially the recruits throughout the country.

We have a lot coming back as we look forward to 2009: 14 returning lettermen and 13 returning starters. On offense we lose our quarterback, our running back, and three of the most prolific wide receivers in our program history. But we've only got a quarterback coming back who on the Unitas watch list who set a single-game rushing record in Big Ten history with 217 yards in Mike Kafka. And we've got as good a competition as we've ever had in our skill positions, and that's a credit to our coaches and it's a credit to our players in the recruiting efforts that we had.

Even though this group is probably only going to be a sophomore in age, this may be the most experienced offensive line we've had in a couple of years, so I'm encouraged by that.

Defensively we do return eight starters, including our entire secondary, which last year really afforded us to take a big step forward on defense with the leadership of Mike Hankwitz we improved tremendously in a number of different areas statistically. And I'm excited to have 100 percent healthy Corey Wootton back, an All-American candidate up front on the defensive line.

This off-season based on last year, has been one of solid improvement and ownership taken by our players. They came out -- we've come out of the off-season, I believe, as improved a football team as there is in the country. We're extremely disappointed in the loss that we had in our Valero Alamo Bowl to Missouri. That set the tone, I think, for a very focused and driven off



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season by a football team that has been solidly led by a leadership council of ten men in a cross-section from freshmen up to four seniors.

We've now evolved as a program where our players are holding each other accountable as they hold themselves accountable, and the expectation is nothing but winning. To me, that's exciting as we look forward.

Academically 2008 was the best year that we've ever had. We had 158 players, and our three quarters receive above a 3.0 GPA. And for the first time in the spring quarter, we have a team GPA above a 3.0. You couple that with our academic reputation, it just proves that you can recruit world-class student-athletes, win nine football games, win five games in the Big Ten, and still be about the right things academically, plus 600 hours of community outreach to give back to the Northwestern, the Evanston, and Chicago community area. I couldn't be more proud of our players.

Last, the University has shown a tremendous commitment to myself and to our football program. I'm very humbled and thankful to the support of Jim Phillips, our athletic director, our outgoing president, Henry Bienen, and our chairman of the board of trustees Patrick Ryan.

I couldn't be more excited. It's amazing. Thirteen days from now we report to camp, and 40 days from today is the opener. With that, I'll open it up to questions.

Q. Coach, did you splurge on anything after signing the big contract?

PAT FITZGERALD: That's a great question. I bought a couple wiffle balls from Target for my boys. We had knocked too many into a couple yards over, so that was about the biggest splurge. I guess we have a surplus of wiffle balls now in Evanston.

Q. Your program has taken a step forward each year you've been the head coach. What do you consider to be the next step from here, and how do you get there?

PAT FITZGERALD: First and foremost, to continue the academic success we built upon last year in the classroom. We've graduated every senior that's been on scholarship since I've been the head coach. I'm proud of the job that we were able to do as assistant coaches with Randy Walker. Those groups were the young men that we recruited when I was with Walk, and I'm proud of that.

So to continue to have our strength staff and speed staff develop our young men the way that we have will help us continue to have the competitive depth. Last year we had as many as nine starters that were starters on paper going into the season missing at least one game, and that kind of competitive depth, I think, shows the strength of our football program right now.

You see the way that Mike Kafka stepped up when C.J. went down; Nate Williams when Malcolm went down; Vincent Browne when Corey went down. A bunch of guys, Jordan Mabin. I could go on and on. I'm proud of that depth. I'm proud of the way our coaches have recruited.

So to continue to do that and to continue to coach our guys to the best of our ability and to develop them, I believe we'll continue to take the next step. That will result in victories on the field.

Q. Give us your thoughts on the induction into the College Football Hall of Fame, the whole experience in South Bend.

PAT FITZGERALD: Well, it was incredibly humbling to be about two hours away from home. My entire family was able to experience the enshrinement. The National Football Foundation, the College Football Hall of Fame, put on a tremendous weekend. Started with a great golf outing on Friday, a tremendous parade and dinner. I'm very humbled and honored to represent my teammates. Go 15-1 in the Big Ten in '95 and '96 and win back-to-back Big Ten Championships.

You can see from my illustrious NFL career that I was just so good (laughter). So with that being said, it was a lot less about me and a lot more about the great teammates that I had. I was honored to represent those great teammates, my best friends in the world, and my coaches.

It was amazing. When I took the exit to go down to the Hall of Fame, it made me go down memory lane. I visited with Adam about this on my way out there. I think I can count one or two times that I've been back in that South Bend area. And the time I remember the most is when Gary Barnett took us to the Hall of Fame the Friday before we beat the team in South Bend 17-15 to start the Run for the Roses.

It brought back a lot of memories. It was an incredible experience for Stacy and the boys and I and my parents. Incredibly humbling.

Q. You alluded to the addition of Mike

Hankwitz and what he did for the defense. Just numbers aside, I'm just curious, how did he change things and what qualities about him allowed for that to happen?

PAT FITZGERALD: Forty years of coaching experience, a ton of confidence, a belief in a system, an incredible motivator, a great teacher of defense, someone that empowers the coaches in the room.

With that wealth of experience, sometimes those coaches can be intimidating to the other coaches on a staff, and I believe what Mike does the best is he allows the other coaches to have input and helps them grow professionally and allows their input to help our defense improve. We've got a defensive staff with Marty Long on the defensive line, Randy Bates coaches our linebackers, and Jerry Brown, the dean of our coaching staff, a Northwestern graduate, in our secondary. That molded together well, and as long as I stayed out of their way I thought we were able to improve and get better.

Hank is just a consummate football coach and a tremendous man and a great teacher and a great leader.

Q. Staying on that tone, there have been a lot of years since you graduated in that group in '95, '96 graduated where Northwestern's defense just looked like they were overmatched. That doesn't look that way anymore. Did anything you say to these guys, could it be an inspiration thing? Did you recruit better players who were more prepared physically, or what happened? Your guys are always in the game now.

PAT FITZGERALD: I think it's a combination of recruiting. We've been able to put together back-to-back-to-back recruiting classes on defense at a competitive depth. The coaching that Mike Hankwitz and the leadership that he's brought along with the coaching staff that I just mentioned, and then a belief in each other. You have to buy in and have the chemistry on either side of the ball, and collectively on your football team.

I thought last year we played very unselfish defense. I thought our guys played very well together. When someone went down, the next guy stepped up and was prepared. That's what we talk a lot about in our program, is you don't control always whether or not you're the starter. You just control whether or not you're prepared. To see the next guys go down and the next gentlemen step up, I think shows you the belief that our players

have in the coaches, and the same thing with the chemistry back from the coaches to our players.

Q. When was Corey 100 percent, deemed 100 percent? What has he done since then, and how will you treat him in camp?

PAT FITZGERALD: I fully anticipate Corey will be a full-go in camp. Will he participate in every practice? Probably not. Typically what we've done with guys off of injuries, we'll limit them maybe. They won't go back-to-back days of having three practices, so you go two-a-day, one-a-day.

We'll probably only have him go two out of three practices at least to start. He was cleared a couple weeks ago to go full speed with our strength and conditioning staff. He's been running with our trainers all summer long, really since the end of spring practice. I fully anticipate him being 100 percent for the opener.

Q. People talked about next steps for the program. Having so much to replace skill position wise, how big a challenge is that for this program to be able to survive and reload and do those things year after year?

PAT FITZGERALD: I think every program has that challenge, and based on the recruiting that our coaches have done and our players have really helped us bring in the right fit, the right character young men into our program, our guys have been working diligently to improve and get better.

We're going to have new names and new faces, but we've got as much competitive depth in the skill positions as we've ever had. If you rewind back to three years ago, Peterman, Lane and Ward were, and all they did was go out in their career and have over 100 receptions each.

Sutton came on the scene as a tailback, but in the last two years he's been 12 football teams. So in the last two years we've only had Tyrell for one year. And then when C.J. went down, Mike picked up the flag and went forward. I'm encouraged by our depth. I'm really encouraged by our competition. Our guys have done a great job competing with themselves first and with each other to improve, and I'm very excited about the depth that we have.

Will it be one name? Will it be one face in all those roles? Probably not, especially early. But we'll figure that out as we get ready for Big Ten

play.

Q. How much do you anticipate that Mike Kafka is going to run the ball, and what are his chances of breaking his own record with the 217 rushing yards in a game?

PAT FITZGERALD: Well, we have 12 games and hopefully a 13th, so that's his odds. Is he going to run the ball more? Well, his strengths are that he's got tremendous athleticism, he's got a big time arm, great accuracy. He's really developed into a tremendous leader. You look at the stats last year he threw for about 69 percent of his throws, and I think about a 131 passing rating. So he throws it better than I think any of us in this room want to give him credit for.

He had a great spring. I thought he improved each week. He's done a tremendous job leading our football team. Excited about it. I think what's interesting for us, is a year ago C.J.'s strengths were maybe a little bit different than Mike's, and now Mike's strengths are very similar to Dan Persa's strength. So we've got a lot of similarity in our first two quarterbacks.

Will we open it up somewhat? Yeah, we'll put our players in the best formations and run the best plays, but it's all player-driven. And that's what's so much fun about being spread. We'll make sure we play to Mike and Dan's strengths.

Q. It's been four years in a row that either Penn State or Ohio State has won the conference. They're picked one-two again this year. Where do you think the rest of the league is compared to Penn State and Ohio State at this point?

PAT FITZGERALD: Well, I think we're all competing and trying to find ways to improve our programs. At the end of the day, you have to go out and make it happen on the field. Unfortunately, we haven't played our best football against the Buckeyes the last couple years. I was heart-broken when Mark Rudner gave me the schedule and I don't have Michigan and Ohio State.

At the end of the day, we haven't had that happen since 1926. At the end of the day, I think we're all competing to improve. We're proud of the fact that we've won three Big Ten Championships since '95. That's third-best in the league in that time period. We've consistently been improving. We're a couple games short of being .500 overall record. I think we're 82 and 78 or something like that in that time during the regular season.

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When I was being recruited back in '93 they said that never would have happen. At least that's what the other coaches said outside of Coach Barnett. Obviously we've changed the attitude and tides here in the Big Ten, and that's by recruiting the right fit and right quality young men and tremendous support from the University and our fans and alumni. I think we're just scratching the surface.

Where the rest of the league is I can't answer that question. I know we're an improving program on the rise, and I'm excited to have the opportunity to get back with the guys here in about 13 days.

Q. You mentioned that you're not playing Ohio State and Michigan this year. Would you be in favor of going to a ten-game conference schedule?

PAT FITZGERALD: I would say this: The Big Ten is already hard enough as it is. I like where things are at. I'm a traditionalist. I get asked questions about that. I get asked questions about a playoff. I like everything the way it is.

I grew up on the south side of Chicago. I dreamed of playing in Pasadena in winning the Big Ten Championship. We've got an unbelievable group of young athletes, great coaches, great leadership in Commissioner Delany. The Big Ten programs are as strong as they've ever been.

I know all of us as coaches are chomping at the bit to change the national perspective of our league. I think where things are at, it couldn't be a better time to be a Big Ten athlete and a Big Ten coach.

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