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An interview with:

MICHIGAN HEAD COACH RICH RODRIGUEZ

RICH RODRIGUEZ: We're very excited, excited to be here again to see everybody. I really appreciate everybody's coverage of not only the Big Ten, but certainly Michigan. I can't tell you how thrilled I am with the way things are going in our program, the way our young men are working, the way the staff is coming together.

Obviously we have a lot of work to do. And the last year, we don't want to talk about it obviously for as bad a season as we had. But at the same time I think we've learned some things from it. I think we've grown from it. I think our team is closer, and I think we know what we need to do.

What do we have to do so we can get this program to a championship level and have the type of seasons that Michigan has been accustomed to? I think we're on that track. I don't want to make any predictions, and I don't think our players do either, but I do expect us to be a lot better. I think our players will expect us to be a lot better, and I think we're on our way.

And depending on if we can stay healthy, get a few key areas shored up and have some production for some young guys at a high level, I think we'll be all right.

Q. Coming from West Virginia, what was the biggest thing that you learned going from that conference to the Big Ten?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: That's been a question that's been asked quite a bit, comparing leagues. Obviously I think the Big Ten, besides the obvious having more teams, I think the strength of the league from top to bottom may be a little stronger than the Big East.

But I don't want to disparage the Big East either. That league is very, very competitive. It changed over time. When I was first in the league in Miami and Virginia Tech and Boston College were in it, it was probably stronger from top to bottom. But even the last few years we were in it, I thought the Big East was very competitive, very competitive with the Big Ten.

Having been in the Big Ten a year, I would probably still say that. I think there's probably the quality and depth in our league now, and the Big Ten is a little bit stronger at certain positions. I think it's more established from a traditional standpoint. I think we learned more from the standpoint about us, about what we have on our team. Everybody says, what have you learned in the past year regarding the league or whatever? I think more than anything, as coaches we learned what we have, the strengths and weaknesses of our players, what we have in our program and what we've got to do to have success.

Q. One of the biggest changes for Michigan this year is going to be on defense. Talk to us a little bit about the difference between Scott Shafer's approach and now with Greg Robinson?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, a little bit scheme-wise. I think probably too much is made out of schemes I think on both sides of the ball, whether you run a spread or a west coast or a 3-4 or 4-3 on defense. Greg has a little bit more -- a little different things scheme-wise than what Scott did defensively. Some of it will be difference. There's some different coverage packages, some different blitz packages that everybody have. So there will be some subtle differences.

But like everybody else, defensively nowadays you have to have a variety of packages because you may play a traditional I-formation team one week and a spread team the next week. So if you don't have some variation in your schemes and some adaptability you're going to be in trouble. I think the biggest thing Greg has done just in the six or seven months he's been on

campus is he's really done a great job of developing that chemistry amongst the defensive players that we needed.

We have some young guys. We lost some outstanding defensive players. But I really like our defense -- not just Greg, but our other defensive coaches, as well. They bring a lot to the table, and I think they're really communicating well now.

Q. On the offensive side of the ball, what specific ways do you expect to see improvement? And is there anything about your system that improves dramatically year one to year two?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I hope in every way (laughing.) We need to. There were some moments last year that we executed well, but they were way few and far between. I think it was very frustrating for everybody. But at the same time, we didn't panic. And I think some of the pain that we went through, some of the trials and tribulations we went through last year will serve us well this year.

Everybody, you focus on the quarterback and lack of experience there, but we had a lack of experience everywhere on offense. Now all those guys, particularly up front on the offensive line, have played before. The big thing experience brings you, particularly if you're in the same system, now this year when they go through a ballgame and the bullets are flying and there's adjustments to be made, they've been there and done that.

That's tough to do when you don't have any experience of doing that. When you've done it and you're an experienced player you don't panic as much and you're able to react better, particularly if you're running the same system. And now our guys have been the same system.

I think it's typically not just in a spread offense but any offense. The more you're familiar with it, the more you know the answers to your problems.

Q. With the spread offense being more involved in the Big Ten, do you see defenses in the Big Ten starting to catch up with the spread offense and doing a better job against the spread?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, there's been a lot of talk about whether people are going to catch up to a spread offense, and I think it's -- I think that's a lot of -- I understand the chatter about that, but most spread offenses aren't just one formation

and one type of scheme. I mean, you run the gamut of different plays.

Fifteen, 20 years ago when I was first running the spread, sure, it was two or three formations and you never were under center and you had a very limited run game. Now it's changed. Everybody runs a little bit of everything. One spread is not like another spread.

For instance, if you look at some of the schools in the Big 12, they're more of a passing spread. Some other teams have done different things in the run game. I don't know if catching up is the right term, but I think defense now, people have seen it and are more familiar with it. I think that's the biggest difference now as opposed to 10, 15 years ago since there are so many more teams running the spread, defenses are becoming more familiar with it.

But they're still just 11 on 11. I think more than anything else, again, talking about schemes, I think more important is execution. No matter what system you run, whether you execute your offense or defense the best is the team that's going to win the game. I don't worry too much about that so-called defenses catching up to it. I worry about execution. If we execute better than them and got better players than them, we'll win. If not, we'll lose.

Q. Coach Zook at Illinois is going to play deeper into the traditional end of the Big Ten season, and Bielema has a game where they play Hawaii later. Does it make sense for this league to try to change their success in the bowl season to start playing later into November and maybe into early December rather than waiting a month, a month and a half or longer for those bowl games?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I know that's been up as a theory. Unfortunately we weren't in a bowl last year, so I couldn't tell you relative or not. And I usually don't worry about anybody else's program. Having been in five, six or whatever number it was bowls at West Virginia, we ended in December, the first weekend in December, and I felt that that was less of a time as far as the gap between practicing and playing a game. I thought that was more beneficial.

I do agree with the coaches that having six weeks as opposed to four weeks before you play another game does make a difference, because there is a difference of execution and rhythm and

just playing the game.

For instance, I think most coaches will tell you at the end of spring ball you're playing and practicing a little bit better than you were the first of spring ball. There's a space of four weeks or a month of practice. I think it'll help. Again, we'll have to see. But I think all their perception, negative perceptions of the Big Ten regarding bowl performances, all it takes is one or two big wins in a bowl game and all that will go away.

And that's going to happen, and it's going to happen when we're better than all the other teams we play.

Q. I saw that one of the players that you invited was your punter Zoltan Mesko. What makes him a good punter, and what type of leadership characteristics does he possess for your team on and off the field?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Zoltan, not only is he a very talented punter, but we ask our punters to do some unconventional things, as well. We roll punt, and Zoltan had never done that before we go there. He did a great job with that. Then also traditional punt, which he is outstanding. He's also a very good athlete. I think he ran for a couple first downs. He's great in the community. He's an outstanding student. He's already in grad school and he's also one of our team leaders, not only with the specialists, but with the other guys on the team because he's a tremendous worker.

When our guys go through workouts and things like that, he's right there in the middle of it. He keeps wanting me to add more packages to our punt team to show off his athleticism, and we're yet to do that. But he's a very, very talented young man and an outstanding individual, and we think he's, if not the best, certainly one of the best in the country.

Q. What did you learn from seeing Tate play in the spring that you didn't know from recruiting him or watching him on film?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Most of the time, it was kind of funny, because we talked about our guys -- we had seven freshmen enrolled early, and then we evaluate them after the spring, as well. Basically what we saw from them in the spring is what we saw on film, and that's usually pretty relevant. As coaches you're probably going to get what we saw on film.

What we saw out of Tate in the spring was a guy that was very, very competitive, had the ability to make some plays, and had a feel for it.

He's still young, and sometimes we forget those guys that are 18 years old and in spring practice, most of his buddies are back in high school getting ready for prom. He's in there performing in front of 50,000 in the spring game.

We've got to sometimes remind ourselves that that maturity level is not where he's going to be in two or three years from now. We're excited about what we saw. He's still got to compete. By no means is anybody locked in as a starting quarterback. You've got Denard Robinson, Nick Sheridan is going to fight for the job. But Tate did a lot of things this spring I think to improve himself. He had a great summer. Talking to him he feels strong. We're excited about him.

You get nervous as a coach when you talk about possibly playing true freshmen anywhere, particularly at quarterback. But I have all the confidence in the world that our coaches and Tate will put the work in to get ready.

Q. Real quick, based on the Big Ten perception nationally, how much of that is tied into Michigan's recent swoon, a former big two that had a little bit of a tough time?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: That may have something to do with it, sure, because the perception nationwide you expect Michigan to be playing in a January bowl game or potentially in a BCS game and in the top ranks. That may have something to do with it. I think more of it has come from recent bowls. I think it's -- again, as coaches we talk about it a little bit, but that's all going to change.

Once we win a big bowl game, whether it's a championship or not -- I had a little bit of experience with it back when the Big East had some changes and Virginia Tech and Boston College left and everybody said the Big East is going to go down, they should have an automatic bid in the BCS, and this and that. We heard that stuff quite a bit.

All of a sudden we beat Georgia in a Sugar Bowl and all that changed, and Louisville wins the BCS Bowl the following year and all the sudden that perception changed. Maybe now it's coming back.

I think our league is posed to have a big, I guess, bowl performance situation very, very soon if you look at who's coming back in our league and the teams. I have great respect for the league. People say, have you learned anything new? No.

Coming in I knew a lot of the coaches, had great respect for what they're doing, have a lot of respect for the players and recruited against them.

As a league, once we get a few big wins, whether it's regular season, nonconference, or BCS Bowl or bowl games, that perception will change.

Q. Terrelle Pryor, preseason offensive Player of the Year; you recruited him. Do you see the potential there? What do you see coming out of him in the next couple years?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I think he's a great player. I'd prefer to talk about my own guys. Terrelle, we recruited him and played against him last year. He's a tremendous athlete. I think a quarterback in any system is going to be a focal point, particularly of your offense, and he's the guy that's certainly the focal point of theirs.

He can beat you in a lot of different ways.

Q. Could you please address the recent turnovers and dismissal and how your team is dealing with it?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: I think my team is fine. We only worry about the guys that play for us. I think you lose a little -- I think you probably lose a few more players in a transition year, probably within the first year and a half, two years than normal, and that was the case in the last places I've coached, and talking some other coaches have been through it.

But you don't really worry about them, even though you wish everybody was doing all the right things and you could move forward. But inevitably when you come, sometimes not everybody fits, either fits the University profile or fits your program and what you want to do, and so you move forward with the ones you have.

But I've never worried about the guys that don't play for us. I just worry about the ones that do. I'm really excited. We look at our guys, 90-some percent of them have hung in there the last 17, 18 months and in talking to our strength coach, the way they've worked in the summer, and I know the way they've worked in spring practice, I've got a great group of young men. They like the guys that they're with.

Our players I think have come closer together in the last, oh, five or six months than I could even have hoped for, and I'm pretty excited about getting ready to work with them here in a couple of weeks.

Q. Last year was your first experience with the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry. How did that compare to your expectations, and did your perspective change on that game?

RICH RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I wish we would have played better. I wish we were better so the game would have been better. But the intensity was what you thought it was. I think it's the greatest rivalry in sports. Coming in on the bus, people were pretty colorful. We saw a few old ladies hold up some hand signals (laughter) while we were driving in, but I had seen that before, too. That was kind of fun.

But I didn't enjoy the atmosphere because we weren't playing well. I think if we would have played better and been more competitive, which is certainly our plan and our intention, it'll be a whole lot better. But the rivalry is second to none.

I've said this several times, maybe to you all as well: we're in kind of a unique situation. We're not only in that rivalry, but we also have a great rivalry with Michigan State and another one with Notre Dame. Probably all the coaches in our league will tell you they have rivalries with everybody else in the Big Ten Conference.

It's kind of unique, and I think that's what's so great with college football, the passion that we have in college football from the rivalry standpoint and all that is second to none.

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