

July 27, 2009



An interview with:

ILLINOIS HEAD COACH RON ZOOK

RON ZOOK: Obviously excited to be here, as I'm sure that all the coaches are going to say the same thing. I'm excited to see what we've learned. I think the last couple years we've kind of been up and down, and I think it's kind of the process of the program and where we are.

I think two years ago coming off the Rose Bowl year and the expectations, and I had made the comment, and I believe it today, that we were going to be a better football team the next year. But we didn't reach those expectations. I think that's part of the program. It's part of the process. Part of kind of what it takes. You have to teach them how to win, and then you have to teach them how to sustain that.

So I'm excited to see whether we've learned that or not. I believe we have. We've had a great, great off-season. We've had three new coaches. Mike Schultz is coming in as our offensive coordinator, and I know there's going to be a lot of questions, how is the offense going to change? One of the great things about having the opportunity to hire Mike was that he was going to come in and run our stuff and run our offense.

There's no question you'll see his personality in the play calling and so forth, and I think every year on offense you're going to make your tweaks to the system and so forth. We're no different in that manner. But I think the fact of him coming in here -- and you've got a guy -- you've got a bunch of guys that have played in the system for four years. You've got a quarterback that's played in it for four years. So the least you can change to allow them to continue their growth, I think, is the best you can do.

And then Joe Gilbert as the offensive line coach coming in just has done a great job. To be

able to have guys come in, Keith Gilmore is our defensive line coach. To have two line coaches and an offensive coordinator come in and to have the transition go as smooth as it did is first of all a tribute to the coaches. Just no egos. Guys wanted to come in and are excited to be part of our program and part of it.

I think it's a tribute to our players, as well. Just the kind of people that they are. They received them with open arms, and just the transition was unbelievably smooth. I think having the guys that I've brought, this is the first year that I've been able to -- we've had to make some decisions on who to bring. We brought three guys. Of course Isaiah "Juice" Williams and Arrelious, Regis, he goes by Regis if you don't know that. He goes more by Regis than Arrelious, and Doug Pilcher, three guys that have exemplified great leadership, obviously played an awful lot of football in the Big Ten conference. But there's many more guys we could have brought.

Jeff Cumberland, the wide receiver, Jon Asamoah, offensive lineman, Eric Block offensive lineman, Michael Hoomanawanui. I told Michael when we recruited him that when he started doing something that I'd remember -- I'd make sure I learned how to pronounce his last name. But just had a great, great off-season.

Eddie McGee, a backup quarterback, has shown unbelievable leadership. As many of you know, that position sometimes can be tough being the backup quarterback. But he's one of those guys that whatever it takes, whatever he can do, and wants to be in there.

We had to make a decision, and I think that kind of shows that we've made some progress in terms of leadership and so forth. So I'm excited to get started. I'm excited to see whether we've learned things you need to learn to have our program where we feel like it can be and maintain that excellence. With that being said, I'll open it up to questions.

Q. Can you talk about the running back derby and perhaps what role Dufrene might



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have, and if any of the candidates might take on a role like Rashard did a few years ago?

RON ZOOK: Well, that seems to be obviously a question that a lot of people want to know. I don't know that you have to have a running back that comes in and takes over and is the guy. Daniel Dufrene has had a great off-season. He's had a great spring. He's still showing signs that he could be the guy.

I think if you remember with Rashard, I think it was the fifth game before Rashard really took over and kind of solidified that position. We've got guys -- I think one of the great things about having a stable full of running backs is all four of the guys that we have coming back -- Troy Pollard is a guy that's 100 percent healthy now. All four of them are guys that we feel like we can win with. I just don't know that you can have too many good running backs.

If one of those guys take over and become the guy, then that's fine. But I think the thing now is you've got four guys that we feel like can all play and can all win for us. Once again, I think the running game is something that fell off a little bit. We led the Big Ten for two years and then fell off this past year. But it goes to show you, you have to be able to run the football in this league, and for that matter any league, to be a successful program.

I feel very good about our running program now, our running game and where we're at and the progress we made in the spring. And whoever gives us -- we feel like gives us the best opportunity to win will be the guy that goes out there first.

Q. With the depth you have at wide receiver, how do you see that affecting what Benn can do on the field? And second question, what's the development of Jarred Fayson has been like?

RON ZOOK: Well, I'll answer the second question first. With Jarred Fayson as a transfer from the University of Florida, a guy that played in the National Championship game as a true freshman, Jarred is such a competitor, is just unbelievable, his work ethic. He's had a great, great summer.

The leadership, he's another guy that possibly we could have brought, but he hadn't played actually in game for us but a guy that wants to win. He knows how to win. He's going to do everything in his power to help us win.

I've been asked a lot of questions with the receiving corps that you have back how do you get them all the football? How do you get them all happy? And as you guys get to know Regis here in these next couple days, Regis is about winning. He's about whatever it takes to win.

I think there's some things that we've kind of come up with that we can do differently with him to get the ball in his hands, whether it be as a returner, whether it be as a running back, whether it be as a receiver.

And you know, I think that's one of the exciting things about our team right now and the leadership. These guys understand that it doesn't have to be just one guy. We don't have to put the team on Juice's back. Juice can just be who he is. And with the weapons that we have, we feel like we'll have enough -- everybody wants to know, are there enough balls to go around? But I don't think there's any question that because of the type of people they are and because of what they want to do, their goal is to win obviously. I think we'll be fine there.

There's no question, Regis, we need to get the ball in his hands as much as possible.

Q. The last couple years your defense, J Leman, Brit Miller, you've had these defensive anchors at linebacker. Who do you envision stepping up into that roll?

RON ZOOK: Well, if you go back and you look at J Leman and look at Brett Miller, two guys that had great, great years, but really it was their junior year before they came on and had the type of year that we were all expecting. We've moved Martez Wilson in the middle there. There's no question in my mind, and I think maybe one of the things that hurt him a little bit in the beginning was the expectations were so high and he wasn't quite ready to play to those expectations.

But he's had a great off-season, as well. He had a great spring. He's excited. I think he understands the position much, much better, and there's no reason to believe that he can't be a guy in the middle that -- because he's very, very talented. He knows how to play the game. When he knows what to do he's as good as I've been around. I think he wants to pattern himself after Brit and after J.

Q. On your roster you have 13 guys from the state of Ohio and I think six guys in

your recruiting class were from Ohio. What's your recreating approach in that state, and how important is it to recruit there for success in your program?

RON ZOOK: Well, we said when we went to the University of Illinois that we were going to start in Champaign as far as we had to go. I really believe in recruiting that you recruit friends and family. I'm fortunate enough I'm from Ohio and I have a lot of friends. I've coached in Ohio, high school coach in Ohio. We have coaches on our staff that have great contacts in the state of Ohio.

I think that's what you have to do. It's hard to go into an area where you don't know anyone. When you can go into an area, and Ohio is a state that has a lot of excellent football players, excellent coaching, excellent people -- and I think if you go back -- the other thing, we did a study of the rosters in the Big Ten, and the majority of the players in the Big Ten Conference are from a six-state area.

So this region and this vicinity, a lot of guys grow up wanting their family and friends to be able to watch them play. Obviously with the Big Ten Network now and with the proximity and so forth, it gives them a chance to stay in an area where everybody who's ever seen them play a game is going to be able to see them play.

Ohio is very, very important. Is it the most important? It's going to depend year to year on where your guys come from.

Q. You would obviously be one of the best coaches to speak to this subject. Can you compare and contrast with your experience in both the competition in the southeast conference and now in the Big Ten?

RON ZOOK: Well, the one thing when I first came to the Big Ten Conference that was a question that was asked, and if there was a difference to me in the Southeastern Conference, there may have been a few more big people that could run. I'm talking about the linemen that run extremely well, primarily defensive linemen and so forth.

But I think in this league, in my opinion, there's teams in this league that can play in any league in the country, and I know that's a big -- it's talk of the conference and it's slipped a little bit and so forth. But as the other coaches in this league, we've talked about, until we go win the bowl games and obviously win the games out of conference, there's not really a whole lot we can say.

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I know they look at the number of people drafted from one conference or another conference. In my opinion, as I said, there's teams in this league that can play in any league in this country, and it still comes down to you have to play every Saturday.

I think one of the things that we've done, and hopefully this is going to help us, but we're going to end up playing December 5th, so we're extending our season. We've got two open dates, and I think that's one of the things that can possibly help our program be able to prolong, and obviously if we're fortunate enough to get into the postseason.

Q. Following up on that, is there a little bit of a sense, like you said, you coaches have actually talked about this. Is there a little bit of a sense of maybe not inferiority, but lagging right now to the SEC?

RON ZOOK: Well, I think it's more the media. The media write about that. And obviously until we go win, until we do the things in the bowl games -- and if you go back and really look, I want to say in the last six, seven years we may be .500 against the SEC when you look at BCS games. We have to win those games.

Obviously we were in a position in the Rose Bowl two years ago where we didn't uphold our end of the bargain, as well. But there's teams, Ohio State, there's no question in my mind they can play with anybody in this country. I don't care what conference or what league they're in or where it is.

But once again, standing up here saying it is one thing, but you have to go do it. That's one thing about the game of football: you're judged solely on wins and losses. The hype is gone. They've had a couple National Championships in the last few years, and as I said, I think there's been a few more guys drafted out of that league than our league, so people try to compare that.

But I don't personally -- I think the other thing, too, if you go back and look, it kind of runs in cycles. A few years ago Miami was on top of the world. A couple years before that Florida State was on top of the world. It kind of runs in cycles like that.

Q. Ohio State is the favorite in the league this year, and the last four years they've won at least a share of the conference title. I

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guess I'm wondering what do you see as maybe the impact of that? Do you see teams maybe in the league imitating some of the things Ohio State does because they've had success with it? Or as a coach, do you find yourself thinking that maybe you have to recruit a certain player in order to in essence sort of play catch-up with Ohio State and kind of catch them in the standings?

RON ZOOK: I don't think there's any question. You can't argue with the success that Ohio State has had. Coach Tressel and that staff have done a great job recruiting. They've got great players, also. Us personally, I can only answer for us, but we're going to do the things that we feel like are going to give us the best chance to win. Obviously we're all chasing Ohio State right now.

I think everyone in this league wants to see Ohio State do well once again outside the conference. Obviously it's going to be a big game in September when they play Southern Cal. But once again, I think that runs in cycles, as well. One of the things when I was growing up in state of Ohio, it was kind of a two-team conference, and there's no question that that's changed now.

I think anybody in this league can win the conference. If we can win our conference and we can win bowl games and so forth, then I think you're going to see the conference come back to where it was in the past.

Q. Are there things that the coaches in the conference need to do in terms of changing maybe their thinking in certain ways in order to win those games that would then change the perception of the league as a whole?

RON ZOOK: Well, you know, like I said, I think everybody has their own idea. I think when I first -- I'm going into my fifth season, and when I first came to the Big Ten, no one played after Ohio State-Michigan. No one played after Thanksgiving. So that part has changed.

The thing we've tried to do is let's have some open dates. You're playing 12 games now, and it's hard for guys to go 12 straight weeks. It's hard for coaches to go 12 straight weeks. You've got injuries, you've got things that go along there. So I think they're beginning to make some changes.

As I said earlier, we're playing December the 5th, so we're going to have two open dates and we're going to play two non-conference games after our last conference game.

To me, I maybe wouldn't have scheduled the teams that we're playing, but I think it's a great opportunity for our guys to prolong the season. Once again, Northwestern is traditionally our last game, and we're still going to have a couple games after that. To me, that's one way we feel like we can help ourselves.

The other thing I thought was the open date. I thought it was important that we have some open dates and some rest to give your guys team to heal, and once again, get away from it a little bit. These guys, they've got a lot on their plate in every level, in every league.

But when you talk about athletics and you talk about the pressure that's put on them, athletic pressure and then academic appreciate usual. This is a great academic conference, as well. So these guys have a lot of pressure on them. I think it's good to give them a break and recharge their batteries a little bit. They do it in the NFL, so there must be something good about it.

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