

July 24, 2008



An Interview With:

COACH PAT FITZGERALD

COACH FITZGERALD: It's great to be here. It's an honor and privilege to be a member of the Big Ten Conference and looking forward to a fun and exciting couple days.

We're very excited about the 2008 season. Obviously last year we took some very positive things from the season but not very satisfied with the overall outcome, the attitude and the expectations that obviously changed dramatically since 1995, and in 13 short years and we are very excited based not only on the wealth on of experience we have coming back in our starters but also on the competition we've been able to recruit in the last couple years. We've had a great off-season.

As I look back after signing day in February, leadership in our program, primarily within our players, within the locker room, has been outstanding. We have a new leadership council, 10 young men, and 10 players roughly on their teams and reorganized and managed and led a team within our team and very, very competitive off-season. They'll wrap up here next Friday and also with some changes obviously with offensive and defensive coordinators. And bringing a wealth of experience on offense is Mick McCall as the former high school football coach and obviously great coordinator and Mike Hankwitz that has more coaching experience than I've had since I've been on the face of the Earth. We've made some positive steps during the springtime with two new coordinators, a lot of communication, a lot of development that has to happen in the coaching staff but building trust with our players and taking a positive step forward in spring.

These young men have done a great job this summer and also have to take steps in Camp Kenosha. With that I'll open up for questions.

Q. Coach, I guess with the new offensive coordinator how about that change how you do things will you talk about that a little bit?

COACH FITZGERALD: If you go back the history of Northwestern's spread offense, you can probably look back and see Kevin Wilson, you'll then see Mike Dunbar, Garrick McGee and now it'll be Mick McCall's offense. I think if you look across the board in the Big Ten I believe we now have eight offenses that base out of the spread, and each one of those offenses are a little bit different. So really it'll take on the personality of Mick, and that's what it's been like in my eight years at Northwestern, going through Kevin, Mike, Garrick, and now Mick.

But we're going to do everything we can to put our players in the best position to make the best plays, and the way we look at it offensively, it's about our players, formation and then plays. And if we can put our guys in the best opportunity to be successful, we will. Obviously we did a great job of executing at BG and then also controlling tempo. With the new play clock being at 40 seconds; it will be more important than ever in college football.

Q. Coach, as you mentioned, eight of the 11 teams now run some form of the spread, and you see it coming up in other places in the country, as well. Why do you think the spread is becoming so popular in college football?

COACH FITZGERALD: There's so much flexibility in the system. The question earlier asked to Ron [Zook], I think it's critical at the quarterback position. When you go down a level to the high school level, typically the high school coaches play their best football player at quarterback. So the flexibility in the spread offense, if you have a solid quarterback that will make good decisions, can run a little bit, the ability to throw the quick game, it opens up your ability to do a lot of different concepts offensively. And then get really a lot of speed on the field.

Are you in a three-wide set because you

have a great tight end? Are you in a three-wide set because you've got two strong running backs? Are you in a four-wide set because your four wide receivers are strong? It really allows you the flexibility as a coaching staff to find out who your best 11 players are.

So I love it. I think it put defense on their heels, it makes them have to be assignment sound and I think the availability to go four vertical and also be able to run a triple option play out of the same formation is very difficult on defense.

Q. Of the newcomers, who right now appear to have the quickest impact?

COACH FITZGERALD: Well, the ones I know the most about are our red-shirt freshman, and based on what we experienced in spring practice, starting up front two of our offensive linemen I thought did a nice job, obviously Al Netter at left tackle and then Ben Burkett before he had a little bit of an injury to limit him in spring practice up front.

Out at the wide receiver position, I was extremely impressed with the off-season that Charles Brown had. He was a little banged up for spring practice, but I liked what I saw from Charles on offense. I thought Vince Browne had a very solid spring at defensive end along with Ben Johnson at linebacker.

And then on the corner with Sherrick McManis being a little banged up, we got a good look at Michael Bolden and Jordan Mabin, two young men that I think will play a lot for us maybe not corner right away but definitely in depth on special teams and then David Arnold and Brian Peters at safety. So I'm optimistic about that group of young guys from what I learned this spring.

Q. Can you talk about what kind of impact Sutton could have if he's healthy for the full season, and what kind of confidence does he bring to the team just with his demeanor?

COACH FITZGERALD: Tyrell (Sutton) has got a tremendous attitude. He's ultra-competitive. He's a young man that came in here and was Big Ten Player of the Year as a true freshman. I believe that he's poised and healthy right now to have that same kind of season this year as a senior and put maybe a great bookend on the front and a great bookend on the back of a tremendously successful season. If he stays healthy he's in line to maybe potentially be the all-time leader in all-purpose yards, he's a tremendous receiver out of the backfield, he's a

physical blocker and if he truly stays healthy and we're able to get our running game back on track like we hope we will, he's got a chance to be the all-time leading rusher in Northwestern history. So he's critical, but he's also pushed, and we've got great competition there, and we saw it last year with Omar Conteh, so that's a good one-two punch in our backfield.

Q. At what point on the learning curve are you right now a month before the season, and do you expect to have all the bugs worked out first game against Syracuse?

COACH FITZGERALD: I was really proud of the way that our players, our young men, were able to spend the extra time it takes to build the relationship with new coaches. The players had the same lockers, same jerseys, same place to eat, same training table, same practice, expectations.

You have three new coaches if you include Marty Long, our defensive line coach, that have sell a home, buy a home and all the adjustments. I really thought we did a nice job in the off-season coming together. And spring practice I thought we were able to get in the basic fundamentals and concepts of what we want to accomplish on both sides of the ball.

The young men have done a great job. I had our leadership council over for a barbecue on Monday. They've been very active this summer doing a lot of things together, not only with football but off the field as players. I'm proud of them for that. I believe we're right on track and if we can stay healthy take another step. We took one step, now we need to take another, start walking in camp, hopefully we'll be running by the time we begin to get ready for Syracuse.

Q. Finishing games last season was a bit of a problem for you guys. How did you go about addressing that and how do you proceed in the future fixing that problem, just executing game plan and getting the win?

COACH FITZGERALD: Well, finish is a way of life. It's not just about football; it's also in all aspects of what you do, academically, socially, and football is a major component of that and stress finish in everything that we do. Maybe we overemphasize it; maybe we weren't in good enough condition. I could go on with all the variables.

We've analyzed and scrutinized everything we possible can but at the end of the day it comes to confidence. You need to be confident when all the chips are on the table and it's the fourth quarter and comes down to a 15-minute game.

And we've done a great job over the years. Our overtime record, we've been successful in overtime games. I think it's an anomaly. We'll be back where we belong in that aspect.

Q. Just tell me what you learned maybe from last year, how your camp, and maybe some different things you might do differently this year from the stuff that you learned last year?

COACH FITZGERALD: I think as a coach you always learn it's never ending. I learn a ton from my players, just watching the resiliency, how they were able to respond from just a few short years ago when we lost a tremendous person, great coach and great man in Randy Walker, to where they were able to really focus on football to the best of their ability. And last year, like I said, I felt we took a positive step forward.

I believe I've learned a lot about myself. It's amazing, this game of football, how it really challenges you. I'm very optimistic for the season obviously with the wealth of experience we have coming back, but I'm more excited because of the competition. We've recruited well, our red shirt freshman class, our sophomore class, and the incoming class. We have the competition we need to take the next step.

Q. Early on last season you had a double whammy that was almost worst-case-possible scenario the loss at home to Duke, the injury to Tyrell. Is there any point in discussion with the team moving forward from things like that, or is that just an Etch-a-Sketch matter you flip over and hopefully you don't have it happen again?

COACH FITZGERALD: Well, everything happens for a reason, and last year we got exactly what we deserved in the game against Duke. We didn't execute very well. When we finally decided to start to play Northwestern football, we ran out of time. So we got exactly what we deserved.

With Tyrell, injuries are a fact of life and especially in this game. I was really proud of the way Omar stepped up. I felt we learned a lot from that; I did, our players did and our program did. I felt we righted the ship and responded the right

way to both of those issues that happened early in the season.

Again, we're not satisfied with six wins. I've said this a lot. Back in 1993 when I arrived back on campus at Northwestern, if we would have had six wins, we would have had a parade down Central Street, shut it down and had a purple party here in Chicago. And things are changed and I'm excited about that and it's taken 13 years but we're still not where we want to be. It takes time and consistency and I believe we're poised to hopefully take another step this year.

Q. Coach, I asked Ron Zook this; I'll ask you too. Joe Tiller's last year, you've been around the Big Ten for a while. What do you think his impact has been, particularly bringing that wide-open offense to a more traditional conference when he came in?

COACH FITZGERALD: Well, I'll go back to when I was a student-athlete in 1993. I used to have to tackle Mike Alstott. I had two neck-roll guys, guys who today probably couldn't even get recruited to play Big Ten football with the 11 teams being in an one-back spread type of mentality.

I think Joe Tiller will always be looked at in the Big Ten as an innovator on the football field. He'll be looked at, I believe, within our coaching ranks, as someone who has never changed who he is, his personality has always been the same, a tremendous sense of humor, and I'm very excited to have Coach Tiller move into retirement.

It's been a long run for him here in the Big Ten and it's been a tough one for us at Northwestern against him. Just look at our record. We have a very difficult challenge against him again this year. We're going to miss him, no question about that, but he's not looking for us to roast him here I think at the Big Ten kickoff. But he's been a complete innovator and I'm honored to call him someone I've had a chance to be a colleague with.

Q. Coach, it's Ohio State, I think Wisconsin, Illinois was the pick in the polls. Is that legit to you? How do you see this conference shaping up?

COACH FITZGERALD: I believe everyone is looking up at Ohio State to play for back-to-back national championships. That's pretty obvious to me and after that you look at last season and that's what I look at. We haven't played a game and we

have 10 bowl-eligible teams. That shows me that this conference is as strong as it's ever been, and that goes to what we're doing in the nonconference schedule to put ourselves with 10 bowl-eligible teams and ourselves and Iowa on the outside looking in the Bowl season I think shows you the strength of what we are as a Big Ten conference.

Our non-conference schedule has some of those traditional powers year in and year out, and it just seems like the Big Ten has success in our non-conference schedule.

Q. With Jim Phillips now on the scene has there been any fundamental change to anything in your program?

COACH FITZGERALD: I thought that I didn't sleep a lot, and now I look at Jim and he's a great role model for sleep deprivation. He's got great energy, he's got a tremendous passion for being at Northwestern and I think a great vision. For our program, there's been a lot of change, a lot of excitement from a standpoint.

But I think the change that you're going to see maybe outwardly, no. I think Jim came in with a great plan and has a great vision there's a lot of work going on behind the scenes to make Northwestern football a great experience for our fans and our alumni and most importantly for our players and for our coaches. Thank you very much.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports