

July 24, 2008



An Interview With:

COACH RICH RODRIGUEZ

COACH RODRIGUEZ: Thank you. We're excited to be here for my first Big Ten media conference, and I hope to get a chance to meet some of y'all for the first time and maybe get a chance to answer some questions that maybe you've had. There has been a little bit of drama going on for the last seven months, so I'm looking forward to maybe clearing up some of that.

More than anything, I'm excited to talk about this year's team and the transition and how that's been going and how excited I am and our staff is to be in the Big Ten Conference. Obviously I've been in the profession for a few years and looking from another conference in have a great respect for not only the players and the coaches but also the league itself.

And I'll tell you, as that guy coming from the outside in, the Big Ten Conference has as much respect overall as a league as any conference in the country. I'm obviously excited to be here.

I know I missed some of my colleagues, the Joe Tiller roast, and I'm going to have some fun with him. Only thing, I can't wait to see Joe, because I've been looking all summer on my new snake oil concoction that I want to give Joe. I can't wait to see him tonight. We've been friends for a long time. I have such respect for the coaches in our league. Outstanding coach and a lot of fun to be around.

Regarding our team, really proud of our guys, our staff and players have been there all summer working extremely hard, getting in shape for the upcoming season. I think the transition from a football standpoint has gone probably as well as I could have expected. A lot of times there's things, guys that maybe don't make it through the transition, but generally it's probably been as positive and seamless a transition as I

could have expected, and I think for two reasons; one, because we have a lot of young, hungry players that are getting a chance for the first time to get significant playing time because of who has graduated, because I think lastly because of the nice mix on our staff.

I'm tremendously pleased with the way staff came together. I was able to bring a handful of guys that were with me at West Virginia, a lot of guys that were on the staff, either support staff, coaching staff, re-hired -- I don't call them retained but re-hired, and also a few guys that I think are some of the best in the business. Transition and seamlessness with the coaching staff has helped.

The players' attitude has been tremendous as far as working hard and buying into it, and also I think from the standpoint of all the questions about a so-called outside guy come in, I've not heard that at all from my fans. Maybe they've said it behind closed doors, whatever, but the places I've been to and talked to Michigan fans, they've been terrific, and I'm really excited about that.

We're going to be very young on offense. I'm not a pessimist or an optimist, I'm more of a realist, and I prefer to tell it like it is. We've lost some of the best players that probably have ever played at the University of Michigan on offense. We're talking about the first pick in the draft, a second-round pick at quarterback and was a four-year starter and one of the all-time leading rushers in Mike Hart and two wide receivers. We lost a lot of talent offensively up front. We have one starter returning but that's it, and again, some of these young guys, when you're young, you haven't played a lot, you're hungry. A hungry player to me is a guy who is pretty exciting to watch.

Defensively we have a few more guys coming back, a little more veterans and we're probably going to be deeper on defense than on offense I like what Coach Shafer and our defensive staff are doing. I think our players are excited on that side of the ball. I think we lost a few key players but I don't think there's a lot of high expectations for our team beyond what the normal



visit our archives at asapsports.com

Coach Rodriguez - 7.24.08

expectations are always like or to be in Michigan but I think the players are embracing the challenges that they have and I'm looking forward to our camp opening up.

Everybody wants to have the questions, Coach, what are you going to be like, and the honest answer is I really don't know. I'm not just telling you, giving you coach-speak because I have not been at two-day camp with our guys yet. I've not been in the middle of a game and when you're struggling or down in the third quarter or fourth quarter things aren't going well. I'll have a better feel for it through camp, first few weeks of camp. I'll have a better idea how to respond, but I really don't know and any coach is going to tell you he doesn't really know until a guy is playing the game.

We have so many guys being first-year starters in key positions. I think they're going to be okay, but until we get them in there, get the nerves out and get some experience, there'll be some nervous moments. I do think that our guys are buying into what we do. I know they are and I think we'll be fun to watch these guys.

Q. As you alluded to, there's been seven months. How have you kind of coped with that, and was there one comment made by a coach or just general criticism that really ruffled you?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: Oh, probably if I paid a whole lot of attention to a lot of stuff that was written, it would have probably been a little bit tougher, but after a while it was just stand in line and throw some darts my way. There's so many things out there that happens and it's really nobody's fault; it's just the day and age that we are in today, the rumor mill and how they spread so many things out there that weren't even true, so many things I wasn't aware about. Maybe I'm being ignorant, but the only one that really worried me was a question about our family values and how we approached the young men on our team. That was the one that really upset me most because that's the one we take the most pride in.

Any player that's ever played for us in 15 years as head coach will tell you it's just the opposite, not only on our team but also amongst our staff, and anybody that has touched our program, that's the one that upset me the most. Nobody has a closer family-tied union than our football program. That one upset me the most probably.

There's a lot of stuff, obviously the drama with the West Virginia situation, but I tended to



visit our archives at asapsports.com

compartmentalize things and tried to stay focused on the future the whole time. Unfortunately my wife and my family, at times it was a little frustrating and disappointing in how that played out, but the folks at the University of Michigan have been terrific. The fans have been terrific. The players, none of them asked about it and doesn't seem like it's been an issue at all in my current job, and that's the way I want it.

Q. Coach, looking back at the outcome to the lawsuit with West Virginia, do you have any regrets there?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: Well, I appreciate it's a fair question and I'll address it now so we won't have to address it the next 13, 14 years. But you know, there's a lot of things I would like to talk about but I want to move on. I think that's one of the biggest reasons that everything is in the past. And am I disappointed in certain things, sure I am. I was disappointed in that maybe not all of the things that I thought were truthful had an opportunity to come out, maybe setting the record straight to certain situations, didn't have an opportunity to come out. And that was probably the most disappointing to me in the end.

But I have great memories there, I'm in a great place and I'm trying to stay focused on the future. Hopefully now that everything is in the past we can talk about the future, and I don't want or players or anybody else when we have games to be asked about it, and that's what I want to deal with.

It was difficult because there were situations that maybe I wanted to get cleared up, but I think in the best interest certainly of moving on for us at the University of Michigan, it's time to get it settled and move on.

Q. It's been said that the matter was embarrassing for the University of Michigan. What do you say about that, and is it embarrassing for you?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: I don't think so. To what regard, I don't know how it would be. To me University of Michigan has every right from the first day forward, and I don't feel that I was on the defensive a whole lot unnecessarily at times, but again, that's in the past, and again, I don't think there's anybody that should be embarrassed on any end.

It became so public, that's the problem. It

Coach Rodriguez - 7.24.08

became so public. I was afraid to open up a paper anywhere and see what's next and what do I have to refute and all that, so there were some tough lessons learned, but I really unfortunately -- because I always tell the coaches, you give your life and soul to the place your working at, and I thought we did that. And it didn't -- quite certainly didn't end the way we wanted it to.

But again, there's a lot of great people there, a lot of great young men on that football team, a lot of great fans in the state of West Virginia, and I know they're going to have great success in the future.

Q. Coach, talk about how you completely changed your program. Can you just talk about that a little bit, why it was necessary and what changes you've seen so far?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: There has been a little talk about that so I want to make this clear, too. Anytime I had the players over, a bunch of players over to the house last night eating hamburgers and hot dogs and we talked about that little bit. Any time there's a transition or change everybody wants to compare it, fans, the media and other coaches and teams and all that, want to compare the differences. And sometimes it's a little unfair, but that's natural human nature. There's no one perfect way or right way to do things. Our guys in the past have trained very hard, did a great job, just the way our guys train now is a little bit different. We had to get some different equipment. Mike Byers I think is one of the best in the country, but of course I'm biased because I've been working with him for six or seven years. He knows how to train the guys, he's got all the modern methods and we got new equipment, and I think our guys have seen the results of it.

I think it helps when some of the pro players that played at Michigan that didn't even know Mike now train with him and they're definitely some of his biggest advocates. But our players have seen the difference in their bodies and have bought into it. And if you're a young, hungry player, you're going to do whatever it takes to get yourself ready from what Mike has told me and what I've seen from their physical make up they've bought into our training methods, and Mike and his staff have done a great job. He's spent more time with them than I have in three months in the spring and three months in the summer. It's been him and his staff just talking to the players. They like



visit our archives at asapsports.com

the results so far and I think it will translate onto the field as well.

Q. Coach Rodriguez, there's some perception either rightly or wrongly that you put a lot of your recruiting eggs in the basket of Terrelle Pryor. How much of a jolt, because he seemed a perfect fit for the offense that you ran at West Virginia. How much of a jolt was it when he decided not to go to Michigan and also with the transfer of Ryan Millet, how unsettled is your quarterback position?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: I only talk about the players that play for Michigan. That is my standard response on that. Obviously I was pleased when our recruiting class came out. When you lose Chad Henne you obviously lose a great player and quarterback, and you have to address that in recruiting.

I think we're going to be all right. Steve Threet I think has a lot of talent. Nick Sheridan did a great job. Justin Feagin, good guys for the system in this year's class. Any time you don't get recruits that you want, any coach will tell you it's disappointing. It's not the impact that you're losing the game, it's disappointing time invested in a young man.

I'm very excited about the recruiting class we've got. I think that our system has to be flexible enough that we can suit it or fit it around the abilities of our current quarterbacks, which is what we've been doing in spring practice and again in August, and I think we'll be fine. I'm excited to see what Steve and Nick and those guys can do and will we have to be creative at times as coaches? This year and next year, sure, well, but even if we have a current quarterback coming back, we'd have to do that. The biggest difference I said several times when you're playing inexperienced players it's two-fold; you have to teach them some of the fundamentals and you have to teach them the system. That's kind of what we're in right now. It's not giving an excuse or anything like that; that's the way it is. When you have an experienced player, our experienced players have been coached. They've been coached very well by Coach Carr and his staff so now we're just teaching them a new system. It's the inexperienced guys that we're teaching two-fold, and they have to buy into it and they have to be quick learners and so far, again, it's just 15 days in the spring they've showed that.

Coach Rodriguez - 7.24.08

Q. Coming from outside the conference, what do you think about the bad rap the Big Ten sometimes gets when it comes to speed and athleticism?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: It's funny, talking about the reputation, the conference, ability-wise I was talking to some of the players about that. Again I've seen some of the Big Ten teams on film. We've not played with a lot of them in the past, but when you exchange film you get a chance to watch them against common opponents, I think the perception is just that, perception. There's obviously some great speed in some other leagues, but there's some great speed in our league as well. There's some very -- just look at who's getting drafted and who's playing in the NFL. There's a lot of players in the Big Ten playing in the NFL. I don't know what the numbers are, but we stack up pretty high in that regard. That's just a perception for years and years and years that we were more of a pound-it-out, smash mouth big tough football team. We still have that, but the perception that all of a sudden Michigan is coming in with a new spread offense, well shoot, seven or eight teams in our league have been running the spread or a version of the spread all the time or several years now.

So it's nothing new that we're bringing into our league, and Michigan even at times used the spread, so there are athletes and past athletes everywhere throughout the Big Ten Conference and some of them come from Midwest high schools and some of them come from down south. I think our league is just that perception, and sometimes perceptions become reality in people's minds, but it's not.

Q. Coach, you have experience in the rivalry games, Pittsburgh and these kind of things, and you know how to approach a rivalry game. If you could talk about what you can do going into Michigan, accentuating the rivalry with Ohio State turning the results around back in Michigan's favor after what's happened the last several years.

COACH RODRIGUEZ: Obviously you don't coach or live in Michigan without understanding the rivalry games, and we're a little unique from the standpoint that Big Ten rivalries to our fans obviously are Ohio State, Michigan State and Notre Dame. You hear about them all the time. I still have on my desk from the first day I got

the job a "Beat Ohio State" button, so not like I needed to be reminded about that.

But I do think it's fun. I'm not a coach that has a countdown to a particular game other than the game that's next, but there's nothing wrong with that. I think some folks think it's a great motivator.

I've been focused on what's the next day and what's the day after that so I try not to get too far ahead, especially now I think everybody understands we have so much work to do and change in the systems, and the transition, if you look too far ahead, you'll stumble your way early getting the right stuff. It's a process we're in.

I want to enjoy the process and our players understand the process. Do I understand the rivalry? You have to be deaf not to hear about it every day, and our players hear about it every day. I think it's funny. It's obvious we've got some work to do, Ohio State has had tremendous success in the last several years, and Jim has done and the staff has done a great job and they're a top five. They've been in the top five for several years now, but those are easy games as coaches when you're getting ready to play that week that's an easy game to it use for a team motivator because they hear about it all the time. I hear fans say well, Coach, if you just win one game, it's the Ohio State game, we'll be happy.

I don't believe that; I'm not going to be happy. I'll be happy with that one but not the other ones, so we talk about it, but nothing in particular significant for just one team all the time. Our guys hear about it.

Q. What's Kevin Grady's status having to deal with a situation like it is and how did you learn about it?

COACH RODRIGUEZ: Actually Kevin's father called me and told me about it and then he was home over the weekend when it happened and so he's been suspended from the team, he's no longer working out with the guys. He's working out on his own, still attending classes, and it's kind of a week-by-week basis on him getting back. He has to do certain things in the program to get back on the team, and then once he does that, there will be some playing time, penalties as well, and then he's on a strict kind of a watch from there. He has to earn his way back to the team and we'll take it from there.

Fast Scripts by ASAP Sports