

An Interview With:

COACH RON ZOOK

COACH ZOOK: Thank you. Obviously this is a great time of the year. We're all excited to be here. Everybody's undefeated; everybody is kind of predicting the future. And so it's a time of year that everybody is excited to get going with football. First of all, let me just say that I'm very, very proud of our football team and what we were able to accomplish this past year, but I think the thing that as a football coach you have to go on, it's over.

The thing we've talked about football team since we've gotten back from California is that we're not there yet. We still have a long, long way to go. We have to continue to remember why, or how, I should say, how we were able to get to make the progress that we were able to do. So we're excited about it. I think I'm real proud of the way our guys have worked. In the recruiting phase our guys have done a good job there, spring football. The fourth phase was summer ball which our guys just had their run test today, and I'm sure everything went well there, so now we're just getting ready for the fifth phase is going to camp.

But I can't say enough about, once again, the way our guys have worked and they understand that kind of the mood out there was it just an one-and-done year for Illinois. So it's going to be a great challenge for us, and as I said, I'm very, very proud the way they've worked to try to get back to where we were.

JULIE DUNN: Thank you, Coach. At this time we'll go ahead and open it up for questions.

Q. Are you going to line up with the running backs these first couple of days, and how are you going to sort through playing time? Is it more of a committee like you've talked about in the past? How are you going to start that, and what's your timetable?

COACH ZOOK: Number one, (Daniel) Dufrene will be the guy who takes the first rip, although our first few days we split the two teams and don't get into depth charts and that kind of thing. The most important thing, we've talked about this as offensive stuff, Coach Mitchell and the

coaches know it's going to be important. As I said earlier, it will be running back by committee.

I think right now, at least in the beginning until we see and it's going to be important that we get the bats in there that we know what they do. Jason Ford is the one freshman that has not been there, so Mikel LeShoure Shore was there in the spring, Troy Pollard is coming back off a knee injury, but it's 100 percent, and we have a pretty good feel what those guys can do. So it's going to be important once again as a staff we put those guys in position where they can be successful.

Q. Coach, you have a very successful record using the spread. You've seen that pop up a number of places around the Michigan is known for it, Auburn hired an offensive coordinator. Why is the spread becoming so important in college football?

COACH ZOOK: I don't have the answer to that. When I first became a head coach, one thing most of my experience was on the defensive side of the football, and the one thing I wanted to do is I wanted to run an offense that I hated to see the most as a defensive football coach. Any time they spread out you've got to be able to obviously in any -- whether it be high school, college or the National Football League, you have to be able to stop the run, and the more field that you have to cover sometimes the harder that it is, and I think once again it gives people an opportunity that maybe we're -- personnel-wise you may not be quite as good as others it maybe levels the field a little bit, and plus I think it's a front offense. It's an offense that you know with the new rule, I'm excited about that. Now you're going to be able to go as fast as you can and once again it will cause the defense some problems.

Q. Just talk a little bit about Juice's progression last year and again what you're looking for from him this year, changing things around at all or just keeping the progression going as you saw last year?

COACH ZOOK: Well, really I think sometimes -- and quarterback position is a position obviously you have to have. Usually the teams that have the better quarterback are going to have the better chance to win. If you go back and look at Juice's freshman year, I believe his completion percentage was 39 percent, which was obviously not very good. And of course the big thing at this

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time a year ago is he throwing the ball better. This past year he was, I believe, right at 57 percent. And obviously that needs to get better; you want that up around 70 percent.

And he's given us -- one of our main goals this spring was we knew we had to improve our passing game, and I think more importantly, Juice has worked extremely hard. Mike Locksley has done a great job with him, making sure that he knows where to go with the football, and there the confidence factor. We say this many times, players are going to be better players as juniors and seniors than they are as freshman and sophomores. I think when you see him around here today; he's just much more relaxed, he's much more confident. He's really excited. He is doing the things that we've kind of talked to him about since he's been at the University of Illinois that he has to do on his own, grabbing the receivers and taking them in the indoors and throwing and throwing. And it's fun to watch his progress.

And of course Eddie McGee has done a great job, as well. I think the fact that you have two guys that are very, very quality athletes and quality people are guys that can win for you.

Q. Just wondering, the way last the Bowl season turned out, sort of the higher profile BCS games that the Big Ten was involved in obviously didn't go their way. Do you think the conference is taking kind of a hit because of that nationally in terms of perception? And what besides winning can you do to kind of combat that?

COACH ZOOK: I'm sure nationally that we have a little bit, and I think that's why it's so important that -- I heard Coach Tressel say this, it's important that we go win. There's not a whole lot we can say until we go win. I've been fortunate to coach in two BCS conferences here in the last six years, and there's no doubt in my mind that the Big Ten conference is a great, great conference. Now until we go do that then there's not a whole lot we can say; I think we're going to have to go out and do it. But I think it is important that we take care of business that way.

Q. Coach, could you talk a little bit about Joe Tiller's impact in the Big Ten, this being his last year?

COACH ZOOK: Coach Tiller, I've gotten to know him on the Nike trips. He's got a great sense of humor as you all know. He's a great football coach, he's been around and won an awful lot of games, and the things he's done with the

Purdue program speaks for itself. I know I grew up in Ohio in the Big Ten country and two different schools and coach Tiller's has come in and taken Purdue and put Purdue in the upper echelon in the Big Ten, not once in a while but consistently done a great job. He's a great football coach and a great person for the Big Ten conference, and to be honest with you, I'm glad we don't play them this year.

Q. You mentioned the perception, the one-and-done thing. Is that something you guys reinforce as coaches or do the players know that at this point?

COACH ZOOK: There are two things we said when we got back from California. Number one, I said, when you guys watch the tape you're really going to be disappointed because we didn't play the way we were capable of playing. And not to take anything away from Southern Cal; they're a great football program and they've done a great job. But that was the number one thing.

And the number two thing is that's what people are saying. I think, once again, until you do it consistently, and this is why you've heard me say this many, many times, is until we can take a freshman class and go through all four years and win consistently, then I think you can say that you've turned the corner.

And so once again, it's going to be a great challenge for our guys. I really like the way the senior class -- in fact, Brit Miller, you'll be able to talk to him, one of things he said is we're not going to be the class that people say let it go backwards. When you get that challenge, which is to be going to be very important that we have, and that helps your leadership and everything else, and that's one of the things we said in the spring, that we really wanted to make sure that the leadership of this football team continued to grow as well.

Q. Coach, you've obviously got Missouri in your season opener. Are you happy having such a tough first game or would you rather start with someone easier?

COACH ZOOK: Well, they're not going to change it; I might as well be happy about it. Missouri is a great program, a great team. We felt like they were a great team last year going into it and really felt like it the year before everybody else realized how good they are. Anytime you have a quarterback of Jason's caliber coming back, they're going to be a team to be reckoned with.

But the thing I've told our team, the schedule gives us an opportunity, if we can go in

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and take care of business in our schedule and play the kind of football that we're capable of playing I think it's going to give us an opportunity to get back to where we were. I think that's maybe the positive side of the schedule. I think when you're looking at that first game, knowing that you're going to play a top-five team it's going to give us an opportunity to make sure we do the things we have to do in camp.

Q. Coach, who's made the biggest progression as a player in the off-season program in between the spring and now?

COACH ZOOK: It's hard to say, whether there's one person that's really made an overall -- they've all progressed they really have and our goals in the spring were obviously improve the passing game, make sure that our leadership continued and we continued the hard work and do some things differently on the defense. I really believe strength of our football team is going to be the defensive side this year. We have eight senior starters and six of them are the defensive side, and probably the strength of our team is our defensive front. Those guys, I like how they've come together and really you can see the closeness, very close-knit group of guys, and they're excited to prove that they're as good a defensive line as there is in the Big Ten.

Q. Coach, whether or not we might have thought it last year, Missouri was a lot bigger of a game than maybe originally anticipated. Now that you know they are the team that they are, Jason is coming back, what's different about going in this game this year than it was last year?

COACH ZOOK: The number one thing is a year ago at this time, and that was one of the biggest concerns that we had, what we said is we have to teach our guys how to win. One of the hardest things that there is in coaching is teaching guys because the year before we kind of got in a situation where our guys kind of thought they could win but we couldn't get over the hump. This year the biggest difference is our guys are going to go in and play an awfully good football team, and they're going to feel like they got an opportunity to compete and have a chance to win if they do the things necessary that you have to do to win football games.

Q. You were asked earlier about the spread offense. Taking a look at it from both the offensive side and the defensive side, is there one thing that you have to have to run the spread right? Is there one thing that you have to do defensively to try to stop that?

COACH ZOOK: Well, I don't know if there's one thing that you have to do. I think the one thing that you have on defense in particular is you can't get too complicated. A lot of times it's going to change what you see, what you do in your game plan.

The one thing that the spread has allowed us to do is do the things that give our players the best chance to win. I think that's what coaching is, is putting players in a position where they can be successful. When we were at Florida we didn't run a lot of option. That wasn't Chris Leak's biggest thing. Here we run more option because we are better at it. It gives us an opportunity to do the things that your football players can do the best.

JULIE DUNN: Thank you, coach.

COACH ZOOK: Thank you.

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