

July 22, 2008



An Interview With:

KANSAS STATE COACH RON PRINCE

PETER IRWIN: We're now joined by Kansas State, Coach Ron Prince. If you would introduce the players you've brought with you and then for an opening comment or two.

COACH PRINCE: I was going to try to say something clever about the players that I brought, but Peter told me I might not be that funny. But Chris Carney, one of our defensive captains, is here and as well as Ian Campbell, another defensive captain, along with Josh Freeman.

We're pretty excited about the hard work that's gone into getting the team to this place in 2008. Clearly we've played 45 players, we've started 45 players in each of the last two seasons. We've had a single game in which we've played almost 70 players in a single game.

We've red shirted very few players. We've put ourselves in a position to become one of the most experienced teams in the league for the 2008 season. That was one of our goals from the very beginning, partly because of the challenge that we're going to face within the north knowing that the teams in the north are very, very experienced, among the most experienced in the league.

But knowing that the way that the South schedule is going to rotate around to us, the teams that we've played in the last two years have been a couple of the more young teams like ourselves, now we're going to play some of the more veteran teams, Texas Tech and Oklahoma and Texas A&M have a tremendous number of veteran players.

We can see that. All those programs have done a terrific job recruiting. We knew coming into year three that we'd have quite a test going down to the South to play that part of the schedule, and it's pretty clear that the teams in the North that have coaches who have been in their program six, seven, eight years, would have their programs very well established as well.

So we feel like we've put a lot of work into it. We feel like we'll have at the most maybe one or two sophomores in the two-deep. Other than that, we'll really look at having a bulk of seniors and juniors. And a huge number of those players have played, community college players add to the mix, those guys have all won at a pretty high level of football.

And we're excited about coming into the '08 season and we're just trying to take advantage of all the hard work that's gone into it. And that's kind of our outlook for the season.

PETER IRWIN: Questions.

Q. Where in your opinion is Josh in his development and what do you think -- what step has he got to take this year?

COACH PRINCE: The question's about Josh. I think a couple of things have to be kept in mind. This is one of the very few quarterbacks in the country that's never red shirted. This is one of the few quarterbacks in the country that came in from high school right into our program, was expected to play and win. In his very first start, he had a very important win on the last drive, a two-minute drive.

And I think from there it's just been a matter of trying to put the kind of talent around him at some of the skill positions, but really we didn't feel that he was going to realize any of this talent either until he had an offensive line that could protect him and have a complementary running game or at least a running game that could dictate the terms.

And we put that offensive line together in such a way last year where they have done a pretty nice job, gave up among the fewest sacks in the league and had 1,000-yard rushing on the fewest carries in school history.

If we build on that, we only lose one player out of our offensive line two deep, and we've added two significant players to the mix.

If all those things stay constant, I think now it's a matter of all the small things: progression, reads, footwork, all that kind of stuff. Warren Ruggiero, our quarterback coach, did a terrific job through the spring. The future is in front of him. The sky's the limit. I would not trade our quarterback for any

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quarterback in the country. There's a lot of really good ones. I think there's at least eight in our conference that are very confirmed on a national level as far as their ability and have the resume to back it up. But I think our quarterback's right up there with the very best ones nationally.

And, like I said, I wouldn't trade with anybody.

Q. Your special teams have been phenomenal, and how does the experience of the players that you're talking about 70 guys playing in football games, how does that trickle down to the area of the team as well?

COACH PRINCE: We would like to think we have good returners. I think that Deon Murphy is one of the leaders coming back. But I think you have terrific kicking game because of the people who block and who tackle, who cover the kicks. And that's where we'd like to be able to in my opinion make a real big step this year.

In '06 and '07 we led the nation in a couple of categories. But really our kick-off coverage really cost us maybe a couple of games last year from the standpoint that we gave up a really critical special teams touchdown which had not really happened to us.

When it happens on kick-off coverage, it really negates any momentum you might have gained by scoring on the previous play, and that really hurt us. Hurt us in the Oklahoma State game in particular, the start of the Missouri game, and also in the Nebraska game. And I think the coverage units are the place where we're hoping to find the biggest growth opportunity for our team and Jeff Rodgers, who we brought in from the 49ers, their as good as anybody in the NFL in special teams, he was the assistant special teams coach there. We brought him in. We're really hoping that will pay dividends for us.

But at Kansas State, we feel that non-offensive touchdowns and the play and the kicking game has to be an integral part if not the key ingredient to having a successful program and we want to continue to build on that. And our players know that. They know no matter what your resume is from the place the first place you'll have an impact on this roster is in the coverage or blocking units and special teams in some way and we place a tremendous emphasis on it.

Q. Is your recruiting philosophy this year impacted at all with the desire to get older with the number of junior college kids you brought in?

COACH PRINCE: It did. One of the things that we did when Josh Freeman's recruiting class

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which I'll call Chris Carney was a part of that as well, those players have progressed nicely. And many of them have not red shirted. They're all going into their third year. The recruiting philosophy was to really do what Kansas State is best at and what they've always done which is to really have a unique mix of high school players and community college players.

And those players that came in with us in that initial class from community colleges are now gone and really we wanted it to not go backwards. We really wanted to be able to replace those players with other players who have confirmed in how to play the game of football, how to get up and go to class on your own, how to do all those things, many of those things are unknown with the high school kids, but that's unique to Kansas State, a very interesting mix. And we really felt like coming into the year three we were going to face some of the more veteran teams in the country.

And we wanted to make sure when the big fish eat the little fish, 22-, 23-year-olds are pushing around the 18- and 19-year-olds, we've been through all that. We want to move through that stage and into a place where we can be a veteran team. And a big part of that is winning games in the fourth quarter and in November, to have mature players who can win late in the game, late in the season and have enough of them that's what mature football programs can do, and we want to be a part of that.

Q. How concerned are you with the situation at running back right now, with Daniel Thomas not qualifying and with Leon as well?

COACH PRINCE: I think we've made significant moves to answer the running back position clearly. Clearly Leon Patton was our starter in the year. That situation will go unresolved for a period of time. Losing James Johnson, obviously you can have a very doubtful approach to that. We didn't have that approach at all. We did recruit three and signed three high school running backs: Kwamaine Brown, Logan Dold, Jarell Childs. We think all three will have a significant contribution. But we also brought in Justin Woods and Dee Bell the year before.

So I think the surprise of our recruiting class is Keithen Valentine, a kid that walked on from junior college in Mississippi. He really stole the show in the spring. That's a very positive thing for us, to have that veteran presence like you just mentioned. A player like Daniel Thomas will join us in January or -- can't be with us now. It's disappointing.

But the truth is that we feel like we've done

enough in the last couple of years in this class to try to answer them.

Q. How legitimate is the chance that Keithen will be the number one in that depth chart?

COACH PRINCE: I think we'll go into training camp and legitimize whether -- you didn't have a microphone, so your question was -- how legitimate a chance does Keithen have? I think it's very legitimate. Ricky Rahne, our running back coach, has an open mind. He improved in the spring and so did Justin Woods. I was impressed with Justin. We know Dee Bell and Justin are 100-meter champs and all that stuff, so we don't feel like we're really going to concede much speed. It's just going to be experience. And that's really where Keithen would help us out there, because he played in the games and played against good competition.

Q. Can you talk about how you feel about your wide receivers losing an impact player like Jordy Nelson and how that affects your philosophy heading into the 2008 season?

COACH PRINCE: We had the same question a year ago with Yamon Figurs going off into the draft, and I would say Jordy did a pretty good job in responding to that. But I think that's the news that a lot of people may know. But I think that Deon Murphy's contribution may go unnoticed. If you look at Deon Murphy's contribution as a junior, it well exceeds anything that Jordy did as a junior. Credit Dave Brock, our wide receiver coach, for that. I think that's one of the places where we feel like we've really made some strides. Dave's going to be our offensive coordinator this year. We think we've added four significant players to the wide receiver position through our recruiting efforts. We're very excited about those guys.

And we have a number of players returning. Ernie Pierce returns from a year ago. A lot of these players get an opportunity to catch and be a part of an offense that is in its third year, that has a mature quarterback, that has a offensive line, that we can assure the ball's going to get off. As the question was earlier, if you have a running game that can support that, then you're obviously going to need some of the coverages that you might think are to your favor.

So we're very excited about the wide receiver position. We think it's something all the perimeter play, we think Kansas State should be an advantage for the kind of skilled athletes you can get there. And we really feel that the hard work has to go into both fronts and we think we've answered that.

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We're real excited about Brandon Banks, Attrail Snipes, Adrian Hilburn who was with us in the spring, and Aubrey Quarles. Three of those four guys just arrived. But we think that they'll have a tremendous impact and we're really excited about the season, particularly at wide out.

Q. In all the ways that Josh matured last season, one thing that sticks out is 12 touchdowns and no interceptions inside the red zone. Can you comment on his maturity in that respect and how he's been able to do that?

COACH PRINCE: I think it's really a credit to our operation, the kid, the linemen, everything else. One of the criticisms I had of our offense in the off season is I didn't feel we ran the ball as effectively in the red zone as we could have. We had the most red zone appearances in the league but we also kicked the most field goals. I think we actually attempted and completed 23 of them. That's far too many. Particularly on the road games that we had. That really made it challenging.

So all those circumstances set and that's the stage, he still goes out and outperforms a lot of other players and the kind of care that he took with the ball to make sure that we did get points I think speaks to a level of maturity and maybe that's kind of a hidden yardage type of quotient and maybe doesn't stand out in some of the other things.

But I think he's ready to improve in the two-minute as well. I think if that happens, with the way he's handled the ball and red zone and the ways he's been able to score and really make strides in the two-minute game, then I think we'll see the total package that we think he is and we feel like he's prepared to do that.

PETER IRWIN: Thank you, Coach.

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