

Coach Bill O'Brien Teleconference

September 4, 2012

Q. Can you give us an update on the injuries to Bill Belton and Stephon Morris and do you expect them to play Saturday?

BILL O'BRIEN: Those guys are day-to-day. They're both ankle issues, and they're not serious, so you know, we'll have to wait and see. Usually I'll try to -- if they don't practice by Thursday or Friday then probably they'll be out of the game, but right now I would say it's day-to-day. It's probable, but again, won't really know until Thursday.

Q. I'd like to ask you about Matt Lehman, the tight end from Pennsylvania. Can you comment a little on his development, and I was wondering if you thought he had a chance to play maybe a prominent role on the offense this year.

BILL O'BRIEN: I think with regards to Matt, there's a lot of guys like Matt, that on offense, especially, that played on Saturday that really haven't played a lot of football for Penn State in the past. Matt was a guy that when we came here in the wintertime and then into spring practice... big, tall, long tight end that we thought could run. We thought he had some toughness, caught the ball pretty well, really hadn't played a whole lot, and he's a guy that has really improved and is going to continue to improve.

That's the thing: These guys that haven't played a whole lot, you think about on offense on Saturday, you've got Miles Dieffenbach, that was his first game; Donovan Smith, that was his first game; Kyle Carter; Allen Robinson caught nine passes, that's triple the amount he caught last year, I think; Shawney Kersey caught five balls, that was more than he caught all year last year. So, you've got a bunch of guys on offense that played that hadn't really played a whole lot in the past. So you'll see with a guy like Matt Lehman, and those other guys, marked improvement hopefully as the season goes along.

Q. Sort of building off that, how much progress have you seen from Kyle Carter since the spring? How tough is it for a 19 year old to learn all the nuances of that tight end role?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, it's not easy, and he's a very instinctive player. Well, let me back up a little bit and tell you what a great kid he is. He's a guy that really cares about being good both on and off the field. He does a great job in the classroom, comes from a great family. He'll get better and better.

Like you said, he's 19 years old, so he's really only experienced six months of Fitzzy's (Craig Fitzgerald) program, and then he goes out there on Saturday and has a productive game for us and really can't wait to practice on Monday because he knows how much better he can get.

There's a lot of examples like that all over the football team.

Q. What's your role in calling the defense on Saturday, and how would you assess how that process went against Ohio?

BILL O'BRIEN: I think my role is I'm the head football coach, so Ted Roof is the defensive coordinator, he makes the defensive calls, but I'm right there in the headset. I have the ability to change over from offense to defense and special teams, so I have a three-way headset, so I'm on the line with Ted. Obviously, as the head coach I can overrule things and things like that, but again, at the end of the day, Ted calls the defense, and I have a lot of confidence in Ted and the operation of how the defense was called, getting the defense in and the press box operation, all those things that go into the game I thought went smoothly for our first time out.

Q. How is the progress going for Akeel Lynch? How close was he to getting in Saturday's game? Do you expect him to play possibly this coming Saturday?

BILL O'BRIEN: Akeel Lynch is a guy that came in here as a freshman and really did some good things. He's smart, he's instinctive, and he's definitely in the depth (at running back). And so the decision you have to make there, just like with any freshman if you're going to play them, that's a true freshman, if you're going to play those guys, then you'd better actually play them. So we're going to see how practice goes this week with Akeel, and we'll make a decision on that later in the week.

But he's definitely a guy that we think has a good future here at Penn State.

Q. You'll be playing your first road game this Saturday. Given all that's happened in the off-season, what are your concerns about the crowd being a little more hostile than normal, and what will you tell your players before going there?

BILL O'BRIEN: Well, that's a good question. I'll tell you, though, I've coached in games in Met Life Stadium in New York, I've coached in games in the Oakland Raiders' stadium, so I've been in some hostile crowds. I think at the end of the day we've got to be able to deal with the crowd noise, because having gone to Charlottesville many times at Georgia Tech and Maryland and Duke, it's a very loud home crowd, it's a great home advantage for Virginia, and we've got to do a great job this week of practicing with the crowd noise because that's the biggest thing, not what they're yelling, but how loud they are.

Q. Now that you've had a chance to look at the film and kind of digest it, was there any -- how do you react to Saturday? Was there anything about it that surprised you that maybe was better than you thought? Is there stuff to build on there?

BILL O'BRIEN: There was nothing that really surprised me. There's a lot of stuff to build on. Usually in close football games, they come down to eight or nine plays on both sides of the ball, especially in college football where you play -- in the pros it's about five or six plays because you don't have as many plays, but in college football I'd say about eight or nine plays.

We turned it over; they didn't turn it over. They converted on third down in the second half on offense, we didn't convert on our offense on third down in the second half. We had chances to break passes up, make interceptions. We had chances to hit guys that were wide open or catch the ball being wide open, and we did not make those plays and Ohio did.

Again, there's no excuses to be made there, but we have in many areas of our football team a young football team. In other areas a little bit more veteran team. So the veterans need to play better, and the younger guys are going to get better.

Again, I don't really want to look back too much, but Coach Solich has done an excellent job at Ohio. It's his eighth year there, it's his best team, and they came in and did a really good job, especially in the second half. We've got a lot to build on, a lot of good stuff to build on.

Q. Another one of the young players that you guys used a lot on Saturday was Nyeem Wartman. I'm wondering what you've seen in him that's impressed you so far.

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, that punt block that he had was just a tremendous effort. He really was all-out on that play, and that was really good to see. He's a guy that takes tremendous pride in his playing, and during training camp he would come and talk to me about how he knew he could play better and he's going to really practice hard to be better. He's a very, very good young player that's only going to get better with experience, and he's another guy that has a really bright future at Penn State.

Q. Wondering if there are any plans or at least consideration into playing Paul Jones some at Virginia, or right now would you just like to stick with one guy because everyone is getting used to a new offense?

BILL O'BRIEN: Right now we're going to stick with one guy. Paul has made a lot of improvement, but right now we're going to stick with one guy.

Q. You have a lot of walk-ons and former walk-ons in key roles. How important is that to kind of send a message to other prospective walk-ons that you may be leaning on them in the future?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, that's a good point. That's something that we know is going to be important in the next few years is that walk-on program, and Matt Lehman, who I was just asked about, is a great example of that...Derek Day. Those guys are great examples of guys that -- Derek Day, who played a prominent role, also, and Matt Lehman. So those are great examples of guys that were walk-ons, and we call them run-ons now. We've changed the name. We don't call them walk-ons anymore, we call them "run-ons," and they're guys that have improved so much in their time here at Penn State, and especially in the state of Pennsylvania, high school players in the state of Pennsylvania can really look at that and say, "here's a place that I've grown up loving, and I've always wanted to play at, and here's my opportunity to go play at and potentially earn a scholarship in my time there." I think there's no doubt that hopefully that resonates with kids in Pennsylvania especially.

Q. Why do you call them run-ons?

BILL O'BRIEN: These guys don't walk, they run on the field, they sprint on the field, they bust their butt on the field. These guys are not walk-ons; they are run-ons. I know that goes against everybody's term for non-scholarship players for the last 100 years of college football, but that's just our term for them.

Q. A couple of your guys this morning talked about not being able to stay in their emotions going into the second half last week. Looking back, do you think that was a factor, and how do you build on that going forward?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, again, that's their opinion, and obviously I have a lot of respect for our players and their opinions. At the end of the day, we've got to go out there and execute better; coach better. We've got to put our players in better positions, and then our players need to go out there and make plays, and we have playmakers that we know are here in this program that are going to play better. Again, I think it's football, it was an emotional day, but it came down to turnovers, third down conversions, and that's what it usually comes down to in close games.

Hopefully we'll improve on that this week.

Q. With Saturday having been your first game as head coach, was there anything that caught you off guard about that experience or anything specific that you learned from the first game experience as a head coach?

BILL O'BRIEN: Nothing really caught me off guard. Like you said, it was my first game as a head football coach, and you're going to -- just with anything, the more experience you get, hopefully you get better and better, but nothing really caught me off guard. I tried to be as prepared as I could for the football game, whether it was time management or the opponent that we were playing. So nothing caught me off guard.

I was thrilled with the crowd, 100,000 people, and it was a pretty neat moment to run out in front of this crowd and lead the football team on the field. That was pretty neat.

Q. 48 passes and 22 runs on Saturday. Is that kind of what you anticipated it would be against Ohio? Is it what you wanted it to be?

BILL O'BRIEN: I think I've got to do a better job there. I think we need to be more balanced. We can run the football. We've got a tough offensive line that... I think probably one of the units that played the best on Saturday was our offensive line, if not the unit that did play the best. We've got to be more balanced, and that starts with me.

Hindsight being 20/20, I'd like to say we would not throw it 50 and run it 20, we'd like to be more balanced.

Q. How do you think your front seven played on defense, and what are some of the challenges they're going to face against Virginia, especially considering Virginia's size of tackles?

BILL O'BRIEN: Right. I thought the front seven did certain things very, very well. For instance, I think it's going to be hard to run up inside on us. Ohio had a couple runs late in the game, but for the most part, we controlled it tackle to tackle. I think when you're playing an athletic quarterback that's a quick passer, we've got certain things we can work on with our pass rush and things like that. When we have a chance to bat balls down or make a play, we've got to make those plays.

I thought overall the effort was excellent. I thought the linebackers played hard. I thought they tackled pretty well for the most part. I just think that at the end of the day, it came down to third down, and we've got to stop them on third down, and then offensively we can help our defense by possessing the ball a little bit more and getting them off the field.

We had, I think, 76 plays (70) on offense, and Ohio had 93 plays (88) on offense. So we've got to do a better job of keeping our defense off the field.

Q. You have expressed a little concern about your punting game. You only averaged 35.8 yards. Are you worried about that?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, it's not good enough. I mean, everybody knows that. We've got a great kid there in Alex Butterworth. He's a great kid. He works extremely hard at it, but we've got to get better. We've got to get better there. We're going to work extremely hard every single day to get better at that because that's a field position deal.

And again, we went for it, I think, three times on Saturday, and I think we were 2 for 3, and that's okay on fourth down. But we've just got to continue to work on the punting, and we've got other guys that can punt, too, so it'll be a competition every single week just like it has been all during training camp. I think everybody knows that part of our team has to improve.

Q. NFL season starts tomorrow. I'm wondering how closely if at all you'll be following it, and will there be any nostalgia at all?

BILL O'BRIEN: I've got enough problems of my own, so I don't know how closely I'll be following the NFL season, but I definitely wish the New England Patriots luck. Great group of guys, got obviously a great head football coach in Bill Belichick, and I'm sure they'll really excited for the start of the season. They're playing a tough opponent, the Tennessee Titans, led by a former Penn State All-American in Mike Munchak, so that's going to be a tough game for them, but wish them all the best.

Q. You had mentioned the Run-ons, and I think I read an article that you're calling your scout team the "Dirty Show." Is that all part of the philosophy of keeping these guys engaged through very difficult circumstances?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, to a certain degree, no doubt about it. But when we practice, we divide it up in different ways, so we have certain periods that are ones on ones, twos on twos, then we have

other periods that are walk-through type periods, then we have periods where we need a look, like we need the Virginia look this week, so we have the Dirty Show come in and do some of that.

We change things up, and we don't just go "look" teams the whole practice, so part of it is making sure that guys stay engaged. We've got a lot of guys that are on those look teams, that Dirty Show team that are in the game plan on special teams or offense or defense, so they're kind of doing double duty. But it's definitely part of the philosophy that we have here at Penn State of keeping everybody involved.

Q. Are you looking forward to getting this team on the road and just kind of getting away from everything and just kind of having that chance to just dial in on this game, and can you offer a little bit on Virginia, what you see from them?

BILL O'BRIEN: Sure. There's an element to that, just being able to get on a plane and go play at Virginia. But again, it's a very, very difficult place to play, so we've got to have a really good week of practice, with crowd noise and all those different things we're going to have to handle, but there's an element of looking forward to playing our next game and being on the road.

Virginia, Coach London has done an excellent job of putting together his style of team. They're a big team, they're a physical team. There's certain units on the team that are veteran guys that play extremely hard. It's going to be a big challenge for us.

He's a guy that I've known for a while. I don't know him well, but I know him enough to have a ton of respect for him and what he's done in his career; National Championship at Richmond and the type of team he's put together at UVa. They've got big, strong athletes that are a physical football team.

Q. Does what happened Saturday affect much or at all how you guys will practice this week, because it kind of looked like you guys got tired in the second half. Maybe that's not right, but could you address that, some of the injuries and stuff?

BILL O'BRIEN: When I watched the tape, I don't agree with that, and I respect your opinion, but when I watched the tape, I saw great effort. I saw plays that just -- we didn't make, whether it was maybe a run where we missed a cut or a pass that we didn't throw accurately enough or a route that we could have run better or a tackle that we missed. We had great coverage on a tight end, couldn't break the pass up, they jumped up and made a play on a pass, we didn't come up through the hands and make the play on it.

So, I think it was more they made some plays and we didn't. I think our team is in pretty good condition, and I think it's more just making sure that we go out there and show the guys that, that it's a very fine line between winning and losing. It's the team that doesn't turn it over, it's the team that makes plays in critical situations that usually wins the game.

Q. And also your return game, last week you said it would be a week to week. Are you asking a lot or too much of Gerald Hodges for him to be back there with the number of plays that he has to play?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, probably. Probably right. We put him back there, and the reason why, he did an excellent job in practice. He's an excellent athlete, and he caught every one of them in practice. But it's a lot on his plate, and his main role is obviously as our outside linebacker. He might or might not be back there this week, but there was a lot on his plate, and I'll tell you, I accept responsibility for that. But we'll move forward and we'll find some guys that can return some punts.

Q. With you going into a hostile environment, is this a game you rely even more on your senior leaders?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, no question. You've got a group of guys there that have been in some hostile environments and know how to react, so yeah, we've got a really tough senior class, a mentally tough senior class, so we'll be leaning on them all year, no matter if it's home or away.

Q. You accepted a lot of the responsibility after the game. You said you had to do a better job coaching. Did they (senior leaders) accept any responsibility afterwards or kind of step up as leaders, talk to the younger guys?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, no question, they feel bad about the game, but we've got to move forward to the next game, and they know that. They're frustrated because they watched the tape, and everybody sees on tape that there were plays that could have been made that weren't made, and there were coaching mistakes that we could have done a lot better job with, and so we're all a little bit frustrated. Couldn't wait to get back to practice yesterday. The guys came back ready to go, and that was a good sign, and we're looking forward to today's practice, and these seniors are really looking forward to trying to get back on track.

Q. You talked a lot during this press conference about the team needing to get better on 3rd down conversions; 1 of 12 (defensively) in the second half against Ohio. What specifically does the defense do in practice in order to improve in that statistic?

BILL O'BRIEN: We practice that just about every single day. They have to have a better awareness of the sticks, meaning understanding what the down and distance is, how much they need for a first down. They've got to understand when we call a pressure, where they're supposed to rush and what that might trigger in the passing game when we do pressure, meaning what the hot is, what the sight adjust is, things like that. It's just overall awareness, and our guys are going to get better at that, and it's a new system, it's a new year. Everything is new.

So again, I would expect us to definitely improve on third down as the year goes on, on both sides of the ball.

Q. Is your depth or lack of depth in the secondary kind of why you guys haven't gone with the nickel yet, or is it the fact you've got good linebackers that can cover. And also with Stephon Morris kind of questionable is there anybody you're thinking about moving over to the secondary for depth from other positions?

BILL O'BRIEN: I'll answer the last one first. We're not going to move anybody as of right now to the secondary. Our 4-3 defense is an athletic defense. It's hard to substitute there if you think you've got some guys there that can cover in space, that's what you're going to go with because they give you the best chance to get people covered. I don't know if it's more -- I don't think it's from a lack of depth that we don't go nickel. I think it's more that we feel pretty good about the two outside backers that we have in (Michael) Mauti and (Gerald) Hodges as far as their cover capabilities.

Q. If Bill Belton is not able to go Saturday, what would be the plan at running back?

BILL O'BRIEN: We'd probably go with Derek Day, and then the other guys that will be ready to go are Akeel Lynch like we talked about, (Zach) Zwinak, Curtis Dukes; those guys will be ready to go, Mike Zordich will be involved there, too.

We've got good depth at running back. Billy, obviously the ankle injury, you never like to lose a player like Billy. We think he's a really good player. But if he can't go, we've got plenty of guys there that can go.

Q. On Saturday a lot of guys were talking about how before the fourth quarter started Mike Mauti got a lot of the guys together and kind of gave them a good talk and everything.

How much does it help the team to have a guy like that who kind of without asking just goes and will talk to the team and everything?

BILL O'BRIEN: Well, he's a tremendous leader. He's an articulate guy. He's been around for a while here. He really has a passion for playing football, and he loves Penn State. He comes from a Penn State family. He's just got great leadership qualities, and so a lot of times it can't always be the coach trying to rev you up, and when you have players like Mike that take control of that, that's a good thing.

I think that's what he was trying to do on Saturday.

Q. You saw a lot of Virginia teams from your days in the ACC as an assistant coach. What do you remember about some of those teams, and how does this Virginia team compare to some of them?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, the Virginia teams that we played in the mid-'90s, early 2000s were very similar; big, tall defensive linemen, offensive linemen, big DBs. I saw Coach (Anthony) Poindexter on their sideline when I was watching tape of them. He was an excellent strong safety for them that was a very, very good player; big guy. They've got similar players.

I think they've got a great home field environment, atmosphere. It's a loud place. Our guys have got to be ready for that. But I definitely see some similar qualities of the teams that we played. We had great rivalries with them at Georgia Tech and at Maryland. We had great rivalries with them. We'd win one year, they'd win the next year. I can remember 51-48 games, 13-10 games, all kinds of types of games. It's a very, very good program, and Mike London has done a great job with the program.

Q. What are your thoughts about the different styles Virginia has with their running backs, and how do you feel your defensive line matches up with their offensive line?

BILL O'BRIEN: I think that you've got -- every good offense has that capability to have a scat type back and then a bigger powerful back, and that's -- those are some of the things that they have. I think, again, Coach (Bill) Lazor does a great job with that offense of motioning and shifting and trying to keep people off balance with a lot of different looks; call it window dressing, but he does a really good job with that. And I think our defensive line will be up to the challenge. They're a good defensive line, and they can't wait to play. We've got to have a good week of practice, but it'll be a big challenge for them because it's a big front, and they've got some really good players on offense.

Q. Can you elaborate on Derek Day's role on this team, how he worked his way up the depth chart despite not having a ton of game experience?

BILL O'BRIEN: Yeah, that's another guy that didn't have a lot of experience coming into this year, and we noticed right away he was an excellent special teams player. He was on all four core special teams, so we knew he was going to be that. In fact, he was the special teams captain for us on Saturday; he was one of our three captains. As we watched him run the football in the spring, you could tell he had good vision, good cutting ability, he's a tough kid, caught the ball pretty well out of the backfield. He just is a guy that's shown a lot of improvement over the last six, seven months, and we have a lot of confidence in him.

Q. You mentioned Akeel (Lynch) might contribute this Saturday. The other freshmen who haven't seen the field yet, is it safe to assume that they're redshirting for this year?

BILL O'BRIEN: No, I wouldn't say that. I think maybe halfway through the season or so, if they still haven't played, it would be safe to assume they would redshirt unless we absolutely had to play them because of injuries or things like that. But no, I'd give it some more time on that.