

# **Coach Bill O'Brien Teleconference**

## **September 11, 2012**

**Q. Bill, you mentioned the problems with the offense in the red zone after the Virginia game. How do you improve in that area?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Well, number one, it comes down to coaching. There were things that we did in that Virginia game that we can do better, like limiting the length of the play call and simplifying things for Matt to get us into the proper play. And then as far as the players go, just when they get out there, once we do simplify things, just executing it better.

You know, we've always -- wherever I've been we've always prided ourselves on being a good red zone team, so we're going to spend a lot of time on that this week and hopefully we'll see improvement.

**Q. This is a question about Donovan Smith, your left tackle. How is he doing physically after two games? It seems like he hasn't been able to finish games, whether it's cramps or something else, and how important is it to get a full four quarters out of him?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Well, it's very important. He's an excellent young player. He's a left tackle that's athletic and big and tough, and you know he's had some bumps and bruises over the last couple of games. He's day to day right now. You know, hopefully he can play, and we'll know better as the week goes on, but we want our best players out there for four quarters, and that's important.

**Q. How has Sam Ficken handled these last few days, especially when a kid can get a lot of negative things thrown at him on social media?**

COACH O'BRIEN: One of the things that is important to realize is that it's a team sport. So if you're watching the coaches' copy like we do, the coaches on Sunday, you can see where the protection wasn't great, the snap wasn't always great, the hold wasn't always great, and so it's not always the kicker.

And you know, Sam obviously he's gotta do better in his technique, and he's really working on it. I mean he must have kicked 300 kicks yesterday in practice, so he's really working on it, and he takes a lot of pride in it. He's a great kid. He's a Dean's List student. And he'll be back.

But again, it's 11 guys operating efficiently that helped that whole situation, so we've gotta do a better job as a team on that.

**Q. Bill, what does your running back situation look like this week with Bill Belton and Derek being at least partially injured?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Right. Those guys are day-to-day, so not sure if they're going to be able to play. So it'll be Dukes... You'll see Zwinak in there, two big guys, and you may even see Michael Zordich do some things there. So that's who we're going to go with right now -- you know, we've got a lot of depth there. We've got six guys there that all can play and run the football and protect and catch the ball in the backfield. So that's not a position that's lacking for depth, and I thought that on Saturday Derek Day ran very, very tough. Curtis Dukes went in there and ran tough. Zwinak did some good things. So that's a pretty solid position, and we just gotta keep grinding away with those guys.

**Q. You mentioned about Paul Jones's move at least partially to tight end. How has Paul taken that move, and is there any thought that he might not be happy with it and could leave? I mean where are you guys at at this point with how he feels about it?**

COACH O'BRIEN: No. Paul and I have a very good relationship, very honest relationship. We've had a lot of discussions about his role on the team. He's a 260-pound guy that is athletic and loves to play football.

You know, we feel like right now the best thing for us to do with him is to try him at this "F" position. Now, the "F" position is not really a true tight end. It's somebody that can play out wide as a wide receiver. It's somebody that can play in a wing position in the formation. It's somebody that's a move guy, somebody that can line up in the backfield. And Paul came out yesterday and played that position.

He's also still a quarterback. So we're asking him to do a lot of different things. He's got a package of plays at quarterback, so if we needed him, he can do that, too. So we're just trying to get our best players on the field and he's certainly a guy that we've got to play and that's on me to get him into the game.

**Q. I just was wondering about what your thoughts were on the return game through two games. And does that get any more emphasis when you practice special teams than any other aspect of special teams?**

COACH O'BRIEN: We spend a lot of time on the return game. Start with the punt return game. You know, we asked Jesse Della Valle to do something that he's really never done. And so in warm-ups we felt like he was the guy that was catching it the best and sometimes in college football that's what happens. You find out in warm-ups. You know, after you've practiced a hundred reps of it during the week, you just see, hey, this guy's pretty good on game day so we put him back there in a tough position and he made one really nice play where he had to go back and play center field and catch it and he was really an ankle away from having a big return. A lot of that is communication, too, with the off returner and "me" calls and "you" calls and all those things.

Then in the kickoff return game we had a bunch of touchbacks on Saturday. We still will stay right now with Adrian Amos and Alex Kenney back there. Again, we think those two guys give us some speed and athleticism back there. We gotta do a better job of blocking, we gotta do a better job of the other nine guys knowing what their assignment is and making sure they're blocking the proper guy.

**Q. Now that you've looked at the film a little bit, coaches always talk about making that big leap from week one to week two. Do you feel like there are areas in which you made that leap and the team did improve generally, and you know, in what areas do you feel like you improved?**

COACH O'BRIEN: I think we've improved a lot. I believe the first drive of the game was a 17-play, 75-yard drive that was fairly well executed and we can play even better than we did on that drive. We've gotta do a better job in the red zone.

I believe on defense we made a lot of improvement from week one to week two. We really swarmed the ball on the running game. We got a lot of pressure on the quarterback. (On the) Three-step drop, he wasn't even able to really step forward and get something on the throw.

We've gotta do a better job in some of our split safety coverages in making sure we take care of the middle field and making sure nine-and-16 they don't get the first down and I think if we can improve on that, we'll play well defensive. Even better.

I think special teams wise it's obvious. I believe our kickoff team did an excellent job. There are guys on that that really went down there and really did an excellent job of covering kicks. I think our kickoff return team I've already talked about. Our punt return team I've spoken about, and I think our punt team did some nice things. We gotta get a little bit better punting. We faked one and Glenn Carson did a nice job on. So there's always room for improvement there. We can't take four turnovers from

our defense and come away with only three points. That's ridiculous and we all know that and it starts with coaching and we just gotta do a better job there.

**Q. Can you talk about the kind of kid P.J. Byers is? What is he like in practice, what type of leader is he and do you get the sense this is a more special type of week for him?**

COACH O'BRIEN: It's probably a very special week for him and also Brent Smith, who's a guy that's come onto our team this year and has done two tours of duty in Iraq. P.J. Byers is a very special kid. He's a guy that's in the Navy and he wants to be a diver, a Navy specialist diver, when he gets out of Penn State. So you're talking about a guy that's a very unique guy. Brent Smith's another guy, very unique guy. This is a big week for them. We've got a guy on staff, Stevie Williams, who played football at Harvard, plays in the pros for a little bit and his mom was in the Air Force for I think 26, 27 years, so you're talking about a very special week for a lot of guys in our program and we have so much respect for the military and what it means to our country and so much respect for the Naval Academy and the work those guys put in, and we're looking forward to playing the game on Saturday.

**Q. How close is Paul Jones to being game ready as far as playing tight end, and you said with the packages you have for him at quarterback, could he still see time there as well?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Yes, he could. He has a package of play at quarterback and he will play this week as an "F" tight end.

**Q. Giving that these are college kids and Sam Ficken is 19 years old, there have really been a lot of vicious comments toward him on Twitter. Do you guys have to talk to the kids about staying away from that and how do you feel about people really making some pretty vicious attacks on these kids at points?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Well, obviously I think it's absolutely ridiculous. Not just because it's a 19-year-old college kid. It's just because -- I mean it's anonymous in some ways, and in other ways it's not. But at the end of the day, you know, these guys are really playing hard, giving great effort for us. To go on whatever, spacebook or tweeter, or whatever and put stuff on there is just absolutely ridiculous to me and very cowardly, to be honest with you. But that's just my opinion.

If people really knew these kids and understood the effort that they put forth and how hard they play and how hard they train and how much it means to them, you know, I don't know. I just -- I don't know what type of people do that. But -- I don't know any people that do that personally.

**Q. You talked about working on the PAT and field goal units. Is that just a matter of repetition or do you work on technical things? How do you approach that?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Yeah. It's repetition with the units. We do it every single day. We get at least five to eight reps every day in practice. We go right to it right after stretch. You've been there. You've seen us go right to it right after stretch and technically with the kicker I think really what's important for all kickers and starting with Sam is to think about his what we call the plant foot. And wherever the plant foot is pointed is where that ball is going to go. So we've done a lot of work starting yesterday and continuing on today and tomorrow and the rest of the week of just working technically with him on his plant foot and understanding that hey, it can't be pointed in a different direction every single kick. It's gotta be the same direction as it relates to where we're trying to kick the football. So it's 11 guys doing a better job of protecting and Sam getting better at his overall technique.

**Q. Explain the process you went through to make Ficken your No. 1 kicker and what separates him from (Matt) Marcincin and (Kevin) DiSanto.**

COACH O'BRIEN: Well, we kicked those guys -- Sam was our No. 2 kicker before (Anthony) Fera transferred and we just felt like he didn't quite have the leg that Fera had, but he was No. 2 and he had a stronger leg than Marcincin and DiSanto. So we stuck with Sam because we think he gives us a little more range as far as kicks go and kickoffs.

If he could just be more consistent. If you watch his kick-off, the one he boomed into the endzone, I told him yesterday in the team meeting, if we could get that from you every time, boy, that's beautiful. And then the field goal that he made was a fairly pressure kick there, put us up 16 to 10. If he could do that more consistently, he's the best of what we've got there and that's no discredit to the other guys. He's just a little bit better.

**Q. Can you talk about the challenge of playing Navy and their style of play?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Navy is so good at what they do. They're attacking your discipline, and they're attacking your toughness. Now, we've got a tough defense. In my opinion we have a tough football team. We have a tough defense, but what we've got to do defensively is we've got to play responsibility football. And these guys, what was good about the Virginia game is you saw guys playing responsibility football against Virginia. They've got to do that and up that another notch against the Naval Academy.

It's very difficult to practice it because you're talking about cut blocks and triple option and triple option play action. What we do is we get our "dirty show" offense team out there a little earlier and they run through the plays they're going to run with our defense. So hopefully it's executed when they come out for practice and they can see a picture of what they're doing. It's a difficult team to play against. I didn't schedule Navy. Just kidding. (laughs)

**Q. You mentioned about the red zone. Did you regret specifically not taking more shots into the end zone via the pass when you were down there as you went back over the film?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Yeah, in some ways, I did. I felt like I always want to try to run the ball in the red area. I think the one run I called where I called basically a lead play, wasn't a great call. I wish I could have that call back. Trying to run the ball a little bit in the red area. Most of the other calls I felt were good calls, but we've gotta do a better job executing.

And then you're right, from the 20 to the 15 you've got a chance to take a shot in the end zone. Maybe we do that a little more, but there's some calls I would take back and some things I want to try to improve on this week, no question about it.

**Q. How would you rate the morale of the team at this point? All the things they've been through... they've had a couple of tough losses. Where do you see the collective morale?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Again, I see the morale as really at a good level. The morale is really set by your seniors. The coaches, we have a lot to do with it, but at the end of the day it's the (Michael) Mautis, the (Michael) Zordiches, (Gerald) Hodges', the Jordan Hills, the (Garry) Gilliams, the (Matt) Stankiewitches....It's these guys that come to practice on Monday ready to go and put the work in.

Football is the ultimate team sport and it's also a brutal sport. It teaches you a lot about getting knocked down and being able to get back up and go back to work on a Monday, after not being successful on a Saturday. These kids are tough kids. They've been through a lot, and they're really, really looking forward to practicing today and playing the game on Saturday.

**Q. Could you please talk about what Military Appreciation Day means to you and what it means to the team to have an active member on the team and someone who's done a couple of tours with them?**

COACH O'BRIEN: It means a lot to us. We've had some guest speakers in preseason camp that -- a couple Navy SEALs came in and spoke to the team. Means a lot to me. Means a whole lot to me. Just my experience with guys that I've met -- we had a guy at New England Patriots, Eric Kettani, who was a member of the Navy and he was a fullback for us in New England for a while. So I've met a lot of guys through the years, have so much respect for what they do, especially on a day like today, the anniversary of 9/11. So it just means a lot to us.

And P.J. Byers and Brent Smith, those two guys are really important role guys on our football team. We're glad to have them and I think our guys look up to them for what they stand for and what they do. You're talking about a guy Brent Smith that's done two tours in Iraq. That's a little different than going out and practicing every day football. That's putting your life on the line, so we owe a lot to those guys and we owe a lot to the military.

**Q. Did you give any thought to opening up the kicking position?**

COACH O'BRIEN: To be honest with you, it's open every week. We chart it. It's open every single week. We chart the kicks, we chart the accuracy, we chart the percentages of kicks made. We chart the operation time. It's really open every week.

The long snapping duties are open every week, and we try to make it a competition and let the best guy win. So it's not like it's just been, Sam Ficken's been our kicker no matter what. We open it up every week and he's won the job every week. So, that's what we've been doing from day one.

**Q. Also, how is Matt McGloin doing? Do you expect to limit him in practice this week because of the elbow?**

COACH O'BRIEN: He looks all right to me. He's a tough kid. He looks all right to me. He didn't throw yesterday. He took yesterday off from throwing. He handed off and things like that. But he'll be ready to go. He's a very tough kid. If anybody actually saw that play on tape, I mean he got smashed in the elbow. So to think that he came back and played in that game, you know, to me played another solid football game, I'm sure just like anybody else, there's some plays that he wishes he could have back, but overall he's played solid for us in these last two games. So he will be ready to go this week.

**Q. Coach, big turnaround this (past) week on creating turnovers. Can you talk about the importance of that, moving forward throughout the season?**

COACH O'BRIEN: It's huge. We've got to do a much better job on offense of turning those things into points, and that starts with me. Got to do a better job of calling plays there to get us in position to score touchdowns. But the defense really worked on that all week last week, takeaways. They've been working on it since spring practice. They work it every day. Coach (John) Butler does interception drills. Coach (Larry) Johnson does interception drills. Coach (Ted) Roof oversees all the strip drills we do. Those are big things, and they're coached and emphasized in practice, and that's why you saw those guys do a good job of that on Saturday.

**Q. What were your thoughts about how Matt McGloin managed the team in the final two minutes (of the game) and what has he shown you leadership wise?**

COACH O'BRIEN: We've worked a bunch of two-minute drives in practice. In the practices we've had, we've probably worked close to 30 or 40 minute/two-minute drives. We've done it with and without crowd noise. Field goal situations, touchdown situations and for the most part he's executed pretty well.

And so when you practice it like that, usually when you go into a game you got a chance to execute it because you've practiced it a lot. And so he did a good job of finding the open guys and

stepping up in the pocket and understanding the urgency of the drive and there's a couple of things that we corrected with him yesterday that he'll get better at in that (next) drive.

And overall he's gotten much better as a leader. He's gotten much better. I would tell you that in many ways he's grown up in the eight months since I've had him. He's done a really good job of huddle command and being encouraging to his teammates and playing tough, playing through some injuries and I'm proud to be his coach.

**Q. You guys have had to call some early timeouts in the first couple of games. Has it been sideline issues or has it been trying to change the play on the field?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Again, you've got to look at me when it comes to that. The first game we had a personnel grouping in there, and we didn't signal it well enough from the sidelines, so we almost got caught with 12 in the huddle. So I took the timeout instead of...then in the Ohio we had another one where we signaled in the play and it wasn't the right play. So we had to take a timeout there instead of taking a delay of game.

And in the Virginia game there were a couple of times where I felt like the penalty was being explained to me and the play clock was starting, but maybe I was wrong on that; probably. I'm usually wrong. So had to take a timeout there.

So we've just got to get better at those. That's not like us. We're much better coached than that and we've got to do a better job making sure that doesn't happen anymore. But, that's on me.

**Q. Coach, Navy's schedule has a pretty tough schedule year in and year out. This year is no exception with Notre Dame and now Penn State. Do you think the tough schedule allows them to play up to the level of some of their more superior opponents?**

COACH O'BRIEN: I think the Naval Academy is the type of place that really doesn't care who they're going to play. That's the mentality of the Naval Academy coaches and players. They're going to play as many good opponents as they can, and obviously they have a very unique and tough scheme on offense. They have a unique scheme on defense, and they've got a bunch of kids that play extremely hard.

You're going to have to fight tooth and nail to win the football game, and Ken's (Niumatalolo) done a great job of coaching that team, and they've been good for a long time, for a long time. I've had experience playing Navy at Georgia Tech where we had decent success against them. I think we lost once, but we beat them a couple times. Then at Duke, we lost to them. So these are tough teams, and we've got to be ready to go on Saturday.

**Q. In the second half your opponents have made 18 of 21 third down conversions. Is there something different there? Are you playing more conservatively? Why is there that disparity so far?**

COACH O'BRIEN: I would say in the Ohio game, Ohio made the plays and we didn't make the plays. I'd say in the Virginia game that Virginia came up with some big good plays. We had two guys on McGee on that one and he went up one-handed and grabbed it. I think it was on 19 or 16. They made the play. I don't think it had anything to do with the scheme. I think it's just us going up and making the play. I think we will. I think we've got some guys back there that will understand what happens in those plays and improve the next time it happens and make the play.

**Q. Bill, you guys have been scored on to open the third quarter in both games. Is there -- when you watch the tape -- is there adjustments that Ohio and Virginia have made or is that just them executing a little better than they did in the first half?**

COACH O'BRIEN: I think it came down to third down in both of those drives. I think we had a couple mediums. They executed their third down play better than we executed our third down defense. We make adjustments at half time just like all other times. We make adjustments in the first quarter. And you know, I think our defensive staff does an excellent job and I believe our kids play well.

Again, it's a team sport. We lost the game together, obviously as a team, but again, if your defense creates four turnovers, forces four turnovers and you only get three points out of those turnovers, you've got to make sure that you're doing a better job on offense. I think our defense played really, really well, and just again, we've got to keep working on third down.

**Q. How would you assess your fourth down play calling so far?**

COACH O'BRIEN: You know, when you go for it on fourth down, you can't just all of a sudden go for it. So your third down call is more of a second down call because you're trying to get half the distance to the first down, so it's a manageable fourth down.

I don't think many coaches have said that in a long time. You're also looking at the field position. So once we get really close to the 50, I'm pretty much not going to punt it. I'm just going to tell you that. Like we're going to go for it, unless it's fourth and forever -- probably punt it. But if it's a manageable fourth down, we're going to go for it and we have some third down/second down calls on fourth downs depending on the distances that we're prepared for. We prepare the kids for it. The kids know we're going to go for it. So I think it's been okay. I think we're five-for-seven on fourth down this year. We could probably be seven-for-seven. So the plays have been okay.

**Q. Bill, Navy's had two weeks to prepare for you. When a team has a bye and they have that much time to prepare, how much more difficult does that make your job?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Of course it's difficult. They played Notre Dame and had a week off. They could watch our Ohio game and get some rest and get some guys healed up and ready to go.

And then they had this week and watched us play Virginia. So they have two weeks on us. We have to have a sense of urgency on our team making sure we understand that and make sure we have a real good practice week and are ready to go.

Can't do anything about it. That's the schedule. That's the way it goes. So we've just got to make sure we have a good practice this week and we're ready to go.

**Q. Is there something holding Garry Gilliam back? Seems like we haven't seen a lot of him the first two weeks.**

COACH O'BRIEN: No. He's involved in some personnel groupings that maybe we haven't called as much as the other ones, but there's nothing holding him back.

**Q. You mentioned Sam Ficken will be your kicker. Have you explored your options in that unit as far as long snapper and holder goes?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Again, the kicking job is open every week and Sam's won the job every week. The long snapping job is usually open every week, and it's between (Emery) Etter and Mike Fuhrman. The holding job, (Ryan) Keiser for the most part has really done a good job of holding. He really has. Even on that last kick that was a bad snap and he scooped it up and got it down which is really all you can ask of your holder in that situation. So he's pretty much our holder, Keiser, but we're definitely trying to open up the competition every week at kicker and snapper.

**Q. Couple games into the season, where do you find given all the hats you wear you're spending the most or most demanding part of your job?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Once training camp started, there were some things during training camp that I had to do that I had committed to doing. But once training camp started, it's been, you know, pretty much 18 hours -- 16 hours a day of football and making sure that I'm doing the best job I can as the head football coach with offense, defense and special teams.

So a lot of my time at night and early in the morning is spent on offense, game planning and things like that. And then during the day I try to definitely every single day get with the defense, make sure that obviously I'm overseeing that. Special teams I'm in every single special teams meeting, staffing and player meeting. Very heavily involved in that. So it's really been all about football.

Probably at the end of the year when I look at all the things that I did in the last nine months or so, probably may be a few things that I won't do next year, but other than that, it's been mostly football since training camp started.

**Q. Coach, you were talking about the running backs earlier. You didn't mention Akeel Lynch. Is he an option at all for Saturday?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Akeel is in the mix. Ideally I would really like to redshirt Akeel. I think he's got a great future for us here at Penn State. He's a very, very good player. We've got some veteran running backs that have played and are playing pretty good. I think right now protecting, involved in the passing game.

So right now I'd like to redshirt Akeel, but at the end of the day if he's got to play, he knows he'll be ready to play.

**Q. Bill, you mentioned before, Sam Ficken tried something like 300 kicks yesterday. Just how much hard work has he been putting in ever since he stepped off that plane Saturday?**

COACH O'BRIEN: Yeah, that was probably an exaggeration. But no, he kicked a lot of balls yesterday. He's a very bright guy. He's a very calm guy. He's got great perspective. He's a great kid.

You know, it's college football. I mean if you really look at the game, should it really have come down to that kick? We had four turnovers. We got the ball inside the 15-yard line, I think, three times inside the 20-yard line once and came away with a field goal.

Look, we should have scored touchdowns. It's a team sport. It's a team sport. We talk to our team about that every day, every week, every minute, about playing as a team. So Sam's a big part of our team, and I'm glad we have him. And he's going to try to get better, and we're all going to try to get better.