

November 4, 2010



An Interview With

COACH TOM BRANDS

COACH BRANDS: I can give an opening statement, and any time you want to ask questions, I guess you just interrupt, or my opening statement might be short, too. Number one is complete turnover pretty much, and we're okay with that. We understand that in college athletics there's only a short window, and that's the great thing about college athletics.

There's a lot of excitement that is going into this season because of that turnover, and when you're talking about excitement, it's not always about having a high-powered team coming back. Actually the fans are almost contrary to that. They want to see the new guys on the mat, so to speak.

I can throw a bunch of names out there, (Derek) St. John, (Grant) Gambrell, (Dylan) Carew, (Luke and Ethen) Lofthouses, (Tony) Ramos, (Bobby) Telford, (Mike) Evans, (Josh) Dziewa; heavyweights Blake Rasing and Jordan Johnson. I can throw all those names out there, and that's more than nine names because we've got nine weights to fill besides (Matt) McDonough, but it shows our depth and it shows the excitement of having new guys in. It also shows a problem where if you want to be an expert and make predictions, there's a lot of unknowns there and there's a lot of unproven aspects of this team.

But as a coach, when you're leading the program, you are disciplined enough to coach with the fact in mind that there may be pitfalls and weaknesses, and we're going to address them now and in the past, meaning weeks ago up through now into the early season to stay ahead of the curve.

We like our guys. They know how to wrestle. I'm not making a prediction, but the

unknown is the toughness factor when it's time to get tough. And that's a big part of wrestling, especially in this program where you make your living being tough. So that would be my opening statement.

Q. What are some things you like about Tony Ramos?

COACH BRANDS: I like his competitiveness. He's stingy. He's getting better. He's a wrestler. And what I mean by that is he's a student of the sport. He's a gym rat or a mat rat, and he's been one his whole life.

What we'd like is a little more offense out of him, but some guys, you know, they're going to take some hard communication to get through to them maybe. That's not to say that he can't score points; he can. He can hit holds. He's got to make it more of an initiator maybe and more of a repeater, and he's doing that. He's getting better.

He struggled early maybe, that first semester, and had a real good second semester academically, and he's on track now in all areas of his life. He had a growing curve that he had to go through and he learned the lesson quickly. He didn't like the lesson that he had to learn, and since a year ago he's been top-notch in everything.

Q. With so many young guys on this team, how much can they take away from what (Matt) McDonough did last year?

COACH BRANDS: That goes without saying because you're talking about McDonough and we want nine guys to be like McDonough and that's not the case. It's not a cookie-cutter program that way where we're going to make our living. We're going to make our living with individuals maybe doing the same type of damage that McDonough did, but also going about it like McDonough did, too.

There's a lot of correlation there, but there's also a lot of individuality where it's going to

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look different. McDonough lost one match, and that was in the Big Ten Finals, and that's pretty remarkable when you look back on it. But as the process went forward, it wasn't remarkable.

I'm kind of contradicting myself, but the bottom line with McDonough is that he did what he did. We have nine new weights that we've got to replace, and we've got to be tough in tough situations. There may be stumbles along the way that are earlier or there may be stumbles along the way that maybe from the fan perspective should never happen. But the idea is to stay ahead of it where if it does happen, the communication is there in advance to where you turn it around quickly.

And I see a lot of puzzled faces. I've said this twice now. I just said it there and I've also said that you coach with discipline in mind, and the mindset as a coach, to coach to the weaknesses earlier so the weaknesses aren't as pronounced or emphasized or come out as glaring. And I see puzzled looks there. But that's basically what it comes down to.

Q. Do you feel disrespected by the preseason rankings?

COACH BRANDS: No, a lot of it is math. I mean, add it up. They've got a lot of our young guys ranked 15th, 16th, 17th. You don't score any points from 15th, 16th, 17th, so they're not going to throw a ranking up there. Our guys' job and our job is to make sure they're in point-scoring capacity and point-scoring capacity at the highest level. That means they're wrestling for championships. And that's what it's always been about here. That's how I was coached and that's what it's about. It's about that standard that you're wrestling for championships at your weight class and everything else will take care of itself.

Q. You talked about the nine spots you're trying to fill. Could you maybe give a snapshot of a couple guys that have emerged in those areas?

COACH BRANDS: There's a lot. Traci wrote a deal after talking to me. You can check that out in the press guide. I mentioned a lot of names. I probably left out some names where people are going to say, 'Why did you leave him out?' I'm not leaving anybody out intentionally. The bottom line is this will be decided on the mat shortly and then it'll be decided in competition. The guys that emerge and the guys that are tough in tough situations will be the guys that get the nod.

You know, I can go through and name a lot of names. I don't bring notes here, and I don't want to leave anybody out from non-intended disrespect, which happens. The bottom line is that these guys have a job to do and we've got to have them do it at a high level. That means every one of those weight classes is filled by a guy that is about the championship. You look at 133 right off the bat there, you look at (Tony) Ramos and Nate Moore and then you've got Tyler Clark in there who's looking good. You talk about emerging, I mean, there's a guy that's motivated more than he was a year ago, and there's reasons for that. A year ago he was ineligible. He wasn't released when he transferred. Now he has more reason.

But in my mind he should have got it a year ago. It doesn't matter if you're eligible or not, whether or not you got released. You should still train with that same sense.

And that's where we have a group of freshmen that have to have that same sense of urgency, so that's why I mentioned those freshmen, as well. We could see action from them or we couldn't. But regardless, they're going to be on the mat in some capacity, whether it's unattached or not.

Q. You have some pretty good depth at heavyweight. Is that pretty competitive?

COACH BRANDS: (Bobby) Telford, a freshman, it's all good. You know, (Blake) Rasing and (Jordan) Johnson, Rasing is probably the front runner, and maybe Jordan Johnson doesn't like me saying that, but that's what I see. We'll let the two of them decide it and then they'll decide it throughout the year as they compete. We like what we see there. We like what we have. Rasing, he's doing a good job. But again, he's had some competition because of (Dan) Erekson's injury a year ago. We know what he's about.

And has he made progress? Does it matter if he's made progress in the room? I don't think so, as much as you guys might want an answer. And when I say "you guys," I'm talking to the fans, because the answer is when it's getting tough time, you've got to get tough. When it's the seven-minute match and the fans are in the stands and the referee calls a call against you, then that's the defining moment and that's when we'll know how good our heavyweight is, when that happens and when he responds.

Q. Do you have the leadership in the room this year to replace (Brent) Metcalf and (Jay) Borschel?

COACH BRANDS: Yeah, (Matt) McDonough was leading Metcalf and Metcalf even said that at the end of last year, tremendous leadership. Basically that's an anomaly. That's something that you don't get every day where you have young people like that, whether it's vocal or not. And the other thing is what is leadership, it's not one person but it's a whole host of people that are doing the right thing. And there's a lot of examples.

It used to be when I came here that you had to look pretty hard to find an example. Now you don't have to look very hard to find examples in the room. And McDonough is a big part of that because of his results, but we have some young guys that are about doing the right thing, as well. And we have some guys that are doing it the right way in all areas of their life, their academics are strong or stronger and getting better. There's always room for improvement, but we're getting strong academically. You've got to be proud of those things, lifestyle, et cetera. And with 40 guys, remember, there's a learning curve.

I'll tell you what, it's part of -- where you're good in one thing it makes you better in another, and we're doing that, we're exhibiting that.

(Tony) Ramos is a guy I talked about earlier. You know, he was ineligible at the end of his first semester and he gets it together and now he's in great shape. Had a strong second semester and now he's in great shape. He learned a lesson. His ears were open, his mind was open. That's leadership.

Q. Why did you guys decide to not go to the National Duals this year?

COACH BRANDS: Did you see the press release and the interviews? I talked to (Andy) Hamilton, I talked to (K.J.) Pilcher, I talked to Scott Casber. I'm not busting your chops. It's all over the internet and it's very accessible in this day and age. The only thing I'll say is we looked at it long and hard and not because the NWCA was twisting our arm. Maybe that was part of it. But we looked at it long and hard because it is important, but at the same time it's important to do what's best. We went back and forth, and what is best, and we went with a decision, we waited on it, flip-flopped, waited on it, which way do you feel better, and in the end it was a no-brainer 100 percent. It wasn't

even like, man, I hope we're making the right decision. This is the right decision.

Q. Why is it the right decision?

COACH BRANDS: I can regurgitate 20 minutes of interview with Scott Casber and an article that I had with Andy Hamilton and (K.J.) Pilcher and anyone else that would have called me. I would just go back and look at that. We have a young team. We have a young team where I just talked about it. You have to coach with the discipline to not do what is popular, but to do what is right by the individuals.

And it's not like we have the luxury of having (Brent) Metcalf, (Dan) Erekson, (Daniel) Dennis, (Chad) Beatty, and to lean on those guys where we're trying to figure out last year. 157, we tried to figure out that weight class with three guys. We're trying to figure out nine weight classes. So refresh your memory with those articles. Not saying that disrespectfully.

Q. Could you talk about Luke Lofthouse? He had some experience last year. How is he looking?

COACH BRANDS: You know, interestingly enough, Luke Lofthouse among Blake Rasing, Nate Moore, guys that were filling in for some injured wrestlers have experience. So it's not like it's total turnover where there's not guys that are proven in some degree. I mean, Blake Rasing wrestled in the Midlands and he was a point scorer. He wrestled in the National Duals last year, so he had to scrap.

Luke Lofthouse filling in for (Chad) Beatty, he has experience. And again, it's about how much he's improved from that point. And he can't be stagnant there. That can't be his wrestling, how he wrestled. Even though he's made improvement over the years, he's going to have to take a big step there. Very disciplined, very good lifestyle, epitome of what makes you good and one things makes you better in another. His lifestyle, he's married, he's got it together, he's a good student, he's got it together with his Mormon faith. He's to the letter of the law, he's a tough competitor and he's a mean guy on the mat.

But there's going to have to be accelerated curve to get the results that I know he wants, and I know that last year if he's stagnant or a step ahead of where he was last year, then we're going to still have the same issues, and I don't see that happening. But I also don't make predictions. We

will see. He's one of the guys, as are all of them, as we will see where he's at when it comes to that toughness time, that barometer where you go into a situation where you've got to get tough.

Q. Do you think his age is an advantage for him?

COACH BRANDS: I don't look at any advantage. I think his mind is an advantage, his approach is an advantage. There's young guys that are mature and there's old guys that are immature. He's mature, but I don't know if it's so much of his age as it is his approach. Going on a mission for two years, it helped him with a lot of worldly perspective. But even he'll tell you that it's taken a long time to get back into shape. Two years off is nothing to sneeze at.

Q. December 9th you travel to Cedar Falls, where you're going to see a familiar face. Talk about what that's going to be like.

COACH BRANDS: Well, we have wrestle-offs next weekend. The weekend after that we have the Iowa City Duals, the weekend after that we have Cornell, we're up at Cornell and we wrestle at Tennessee-Chattanooga and then we wrestle Iowa State and Michigan State and UNI in a three-match whirlwind match in about five or six days.

So it's down the road. (Doug) Schwab is doing a good job, everything I hear. We'll be ready when it's December 9th, I believe.

Q. There is the potential for native lowans to fill most of the starting spots. I know that's the backbone of the program and there's always several, but to have that many, we know how great wrestling is in the state but what does it say about it to have that many guys be part of this program at the top level?

COACH BRANDS: Good for Iowa, and it's maybe by coincidence or not, but not really because we recruit the best guys in the country and they happen to be from Iowa. That's a coincidence. But we have also a recruiting class this year where we're basically split down the middle. We've got Colorado and Philadelphia and Pennsylvania and Delaware and Iowa, Iowa, Iowa. So whoever emerges, it just happens that those Iowa boys are getting tough.

You can mention (Derek) St. John, (Grant) Gambrell, (Matt) McDonough proved himself, Nate Moore, Tyler Clark is now from Iowa. You can consider him an Iowan, north Iowa by way of

Illinois. Blake Rasing, Iowa. 174, you know, depends on who it is; 165, but it looks like (Jake) Kerr, (Aaron) Janssen, Iowa. 157, Iowa. Mike Kelly, I didn't mention him. He was a recruit this year.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about Derek St. John and kind of the progress he made during his redshirt season and where he's at now?

COACH BRANDS: Yeah, again, you're not making predictions, but the kid can wrestle. Emotionally how is he going to handle it, and he'd better be tougher than he was a year ago, which he is. But challenge him every day.

Q. How are you seeing that toughness?

COACH BRANDS: I like it. I like my team. I like this team. I like our team. I wouldn't trade them for the world. But we don't make predictions, either. We like what we have. We like what we see. I've spoke all over the state. I've talked about it like this: We have a group that's making progress, but the unknown is the individuals that don't have experience, how are they going to react when they get into the situation.

And see, I'm not a propaganda guy. I'm not going to sit here and rah-rah. Are our guys ready to compete? You bet they are. Are they fired up? You bet they are. But I don't know.

And I've said this in the past, too: I mean, are they going to poop their pants or are they going to get tough? That's a good question. So ask (Derek) St. John specifically. You ask him. You're the interviewer. You say, are you going to poop your pants or are you going to get tough? And he will tell you, and I know what his answer is going to be, and I see progress in the room, but again -- the thing is you can talk to these guys, they've got thick skin. I can talk to them like that. I love it. They're great to coach.

We've got staff that you look at (Kurt) Backes in addition and Mike Zadick who's wanted this position for a long time. There's things that are different that have upgraded this program. When you replace a guy like Doug Schwab, it's very hard to do. You don't replace the man, but you bring in things that are fresh perspective and new, and it's all good.

And so replacing Schwab, it wasn't easy, but we did it and we did it with the best guys we could. They bring perspective that has been well

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4

received.

Now, that's propaganda, so I'll stop right there. I'm not going to gush on my staff. But I'll tell you, a guy like Zadick who's wanted this job, he's proven himself. And this guy right here had questions on him. This guy had questions on him as a coach, and he's answering them. He's answering them.

Q. Concussions in your sport, how prevalent are they, and as a competitor what was your experience with them?

COACH BRANDS: How prevalent? I would say a lot less prevalent than you would think that two guys head-to-head would be, literally head to head. But they happen, and the sensitivity from our point of view is that the thing about a head injury is that it's unknown, and you just don't know. You err on the side of caution big time, and that's not just the rhetoric coming down the pipe, but that's been my experience.

Jay Borschel dealt with them, and it was a trial-and-error thing with him. Finally the coach stepped in and put him on a six- or eight-week plan and said, this is what you're going to do. We're not going to do trial and error anymore. And the best thing to do for head injury based on my experience is to err on the side of caution big time and not just even when they're cleared but make sure that you're testing them by getting their heart rate up in a hard way on an Airdyne, throwing heavy weights, et cetera, and seeing if there's any after effects when that blood pressure is way up.

We have a guy dealing with it right now, and it's not just being 100 percent but being 100 percent that you're 100 percent. That's how I would describe it. And there is sensitivity. We've signed forms and had more dialogue this year recently. But it is a big deal.

Q. Did you ever deal with it, with a concussion?

COACH BRANDS: Yes. I mean, I've been there. But you know what, you're looking at a different guy maybe. Plus it was an age ago. It doesn't matter with me; it's about what's today. A very sensitive issue.

Q. Is (Matt) McDonough as smooth and calm in practice as he is on the mat during matches?

COACH BRANDS: Hell no. No, he's not. I'll tell you what, he's a work in progress and he knows it, and so that's why he works hard. He's

smooth, and is it automatic, no, and he knows it. As a matter of fact, we have to pull him off the mat, and he's holding on like that, because he is always working to get better, always. It's a very good example.

An interesting thing about McDonough is that you see a good leader and a good example, and sometimes it's not always well received because of maybe some petty jealousies and stuff like that. And I think that was going on a little bit, especially when this high-powered class graduated, and maybe there was some of that in this group, but we've since ironed that out and they've ironed it out amongst themselves. But there's been some things that he's had to deal with because he is kind of a lone wolf on a mission, but the guy does it right. You use that guy as an example, these guys are human, they get tired of that. So there may be some pettiness there. We're beyond it, but I'm saying it has happened.

I'm not going to sit here and tell you that everything is rosy with him, but the example is there. The idea is to get our guys that maybe aren't about that example to embrace the fact that here's a good example. We're not asking you to emulate him or be a robot like him but we're asking you to step up and at least work at it like he works at it. He knows he's not automatic, he's not a smooth operator. He works very hard, and what you see on the mat is a product of a lot of dealing with and pushing through frustration, which frustration is a negative word if you use it negatively. But frustration, there's a description, so it's not just smooth like you asked. Good question, though. He works his tail off. Doesn't take no for an answer type thing.

We've got a lot of guys that are on the same plane like that, but we'll see how they handle it in the heat of the battle. You saw some adversity right out of the gate with McDonough last year in Ames, Iowa, on the enemy mat. I think he gets the first takedown in that and then the guy takes him down, and both guys are about the right thing and they're both competitors, and he prevailed. Why? Because he's got guts.

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