

University of Iowa Wrestling Media Conference

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Tom Brands

Wrestling Team

COACH BRANDS: Thanks for coming. I'll give a quick statement here to kick this thing off.

The first thing I want to say is the thing that's exciting about college athletics is when there's unknowns, when you lose a lot to graduation. That's the great thing about college athletics. There's not really a franchise player that's going to be there for a decade. We're excited about that.

There's a lot of exciting things for fans to be paying attention to or looking toward to, but there's also a lot of unknowns. We have a unique recruiting class this year where we have two or three guys that could maybe step in the lineup, and we have a transfer who, you look at a couple different weight classes he could go and how you would shift some things around, there's some unknowns there that are exciting.

And with unknowns, you also have some uncertainty. That means that this year, we're not going to know what we have until later on, and we're not in a hurry to get everything pieced together. But I know one thing. We've got a lot of guys in that room that are bringing a lot of life and a lot of energy every day.

With that, I'll open it up to you for questions.

Q. Is this a rebuilding year or reloading year?

COACH BRANDS: This is both. When you look at losing five All-Americans, five starters, Meyer was an All-American, we lost five starters. When you look at the core of that, you know what, we're going to have to rebuild.

But it's also a reload where we have some very capable guys that come to work every day the right way. Like Alex Marinelli, we've been talking about him for a long time. You know what, we're excited about him and I know our fans are, as well. When you talk about patience and stuff like that, that's like maybe coach-speak for: You know what, he doesn't really know what he has.

But you're going to have to be patient because it's November. It's November, and we have some things that are going on that you won't see our best team right away.



Q. Can you talk about the depth at 141 and what you've seen out of Turk so far?

COACH BRANDS: 141, there is depth there. Turk and Carter Happel wrestled in the wrestle-off. Both those guys bring a lot of energy into that room. They both want the same thing. It's going to make our team better.

You look at Max Murin, the true freshman, I don't think he's conceding anything to anybody. There's a lot of excitement there.

Vince Turk has waited a long time to get in the lineup. He's had some frustrating injuries he's dealt with very well. Last year he made the decision after the Luther Open to what amounted to a season-ending surgery. And now he's on pace and page to be the guy, and he did his job early and let's just keep doing your job.

And that's what it's about: Keep doing your job if you're the guy, and then you're not going to be satisfied if you're not the guy. Very competitive weight class.

Q. Is this the first time you've ever had to deal with unknowns like this, and has it changed you at all as a coach?

COACH BRANDS: This is the first time that I've approached a season like this where you're talking about having unknowns.

This is the first time where I've approached a season like this where the exciting things are the unknowns. I really look at it that way, and the reason why is because as a coach, you like seeing how these guys come to work every day. I like coming to work every day because of the way these guys come to work every day.

And I'll say it again: There's a lot of life and energy in that room, and when you have that, good things are happening. And even on days where, you know what, an individual might be having an off-day, they look at it the right way. They are getting through the barriers: The barriers of life, the barriers of being a student athlete, and those barriers are because they are getting through them.

And the way they are getting through them with energy

is those barriers actually become your friend because it teaches you that little blips are just little blips. Don't get caught up in that drama. Let's go forward. We're keeping moving forward.

Q. Has this changed you at all?

COACH BRANDS: I don't know if it's changed me or not. I think you evaluate the program and you go forward with what you had, and right away, when we walked off the mat in St. Louis we were pointing toward Cleveland. You know, you look back last year, we had a lot of talk about Alex Marinelli, is he going to come out a redshirt or not. Well, now he's out a redshirt. That's exciting. That's exciting for the fans. That's exciting for you because you've asked that question. And we're excited.

But the thing is, we see him every day, so we know what he's capable of. We're looking forward to that. But now you get to see what we know as coaches, and that's what I mean by, it's a blast going in there every day to see how these guys go to work.

Q. How important is a healthy Sam Stoll for this season?

COACH BRANDS: That's a good question and if you want to know how important that is, why don't you just take a stroll with old Sam Stoll.

It's important. He's an anchor, literally and figuratively, and you know what, when you see his wrestle-off score was 2-0, his face doesn't reflect what he's thinking, but he's fired up and he's moving forward.

And it's absolutely essential that he is healthy and he's done a lot of things in his life to give him every edge to make sure he stays healthy. He's a different guy. He's got a little bit more athleticism because he's lighter. He's got a little bit more scramble-ability because he's lighter, and when you have those things and there's a little bit more pizzazz and a little bit of giddy-yup in your step, it's positive for him.

And that doesn't mean that he doesn't have work to do because he knows it. When he walked off the mat from that wrestle-off, it wasn't right into the pressure of what are the fans going to think or anything else. His mind was on the right thing.

And if you really paid attention to that wrestle-off, you saw a guy changing levels and attacking. And that mat's small down there and that room's crowded. And when you've got a small mat and you see close to getting a couple of different take downs on the edge on a small mat, I tell you what, there's some things that could have really blown that match open.

And then let's look it from the other side. You've got

Aaron Costello who's come a long ways. He's come a long ways because of one reason, and that's because of how he comes to work every day.

Q. What else did you learn in the wrestle-off?

COACH BRANDS: I learned that we have a lot of work to do and I've learned that our guys know we have a lot of work to do and we're excited to do it.

It's the first step in maybe a long process, and you haven't asked maybe the questions that you want to ask because of maybe my opening statement about Spencer Lee and Jacob Warner. But we're going to take our time with this process.

And what you saw, the wrestle-offs and who emerged from there, our team could look way different. It could look way different going into March, or maybe even going into December 1.

Q. You used the word "patience" earlier for yourself. Do you have to ask fans to be patient?

COACH BRANDS: I don't think so. I think it's one of things where our fans have expectations, and they are the same as what our expectations are, and that's a great thing.

I mean, we have a lot great ingredients with the administration, the fans, the coaches that we have coming to work here. Then we're having some great conversations with some donor fans about a facility.

We evaluated our program two years ago. We've addressed recruiting. Ryan Morningstar has done a great job there, and now that facility, along with the Hawkeye Wrestling Club, is the final piece. So a lot of good things going on.

Are the fans going to be restless? Yeah, if you're not performing. And we haven't performed before, and I don't think any coach that's ever coached here has ever been satisfied. I think Gable maybe started that "never satisfied" play on words, or whatever you want to call it, and we're never satisfied.

Q. Can you touch on more details about the facility?

COACH BRANDS: We are studying a location right now that's adjacent to the arena. And when I say "adjacent," it is part of the arena. That was important to me, and we're going from there. And we're in great conversations, like I said, with some people about it, and it's important.

It's important because our facility downstairs is 34 years old. It's not top ten in the country anymore. It's adequate. We get by; and it's more than that, because you know what, we have what we need because as

coaches we know what we need, and we're going to make sure of it and our administration makes sure that we have the resources.

Right now they have committed to getting to the next step, and that is a new facility.

Q. The way college wrestling is, with what Penn State is doing, Ohio State, all these other top-ranked schools, do you actually have to keep up with the Joneses, so to speak?

COACH BRANDS: I don't look at it like keeping up with the Joneses. I look at it like what's essential and how we have evaluated and what we need going forward. And we need it.

And you could say, Brandon Sorensen, he doesn't need it. A lunch pail guy; he doesn't need a new facility. All he needs is a mat and a little bit of heat with a roof over his head and he'll be just fine.

The bottom line is, that's not how the guys that we're trying to get in here, that's not how they think, and we need to show the future that is about winning National World Olympic Championships. The best kids in the country, the best athletes, wrestlers in the country, we need to show them that we are committed to them and their well-being through this process.

You know, it doesn't matter how Brands trained and his methods. It's 34 years old, and 34 years old is 34 years old. It's time.

Q. You talk about being satisfied for the fans. What will it take to satisfy you as the head coach? What does this team have to do?

COACH BRANDS: Well, first of all, satisfaction to me is an ongoing process. And that process right now, when you walk in that room because of the life and the energy that you see in there, I mean, it's taking care of itself.

But now you have to perform, also. And then you know what, if you don't perform, whether it's individual or team-wise, you go back to work and you keep working on it; on it, and at it.

And when you have individuals that come to work that way, then you're going to cover a lot of ground and you're going to make up a lot of what you're talking about there, being never satisfied.

Well, we're going to keep working toward that ultimate satisfaction. You know, what is that? That's 10 national champions -- just because you're ranked seventh or 10th or whatever you are, or Marinelli's case, he's ranked 11th or 16th; that doesn't mean that's

all I could do. And if I wrestle and I get upset or whatever, that doesn't mean that's all I can do.

After that, there's a lot you can do. And so never satisfied is: No matter what, I can always do better. I could always do better. I can always do one more. I can always get that major decision. I can always get that technical fall. I can always get that pin. I can always help the team with bonus points because of the way I train and live.

Q. You talk about the unknowns. How have knowns like Sorensen and Kemerer embraced their role?

COACH BRANDS: Very well. You know, you talk about leadership, and they are doing a good job. They are hand-picked by themselves.

They are the leaders because of their credentials, and they bring the same kind of life into that room that everybody else does. They might have a little bit of a different method, but they bring that same life.

And when you look at the things that are going on in that room with the dialogue that we're having, to your point, about the facility and the dialogue about the unknowns and how we're moving forward there; and then you talk about Thomas Gilman, who won a Silver Medal in the world championships. That's energy in our room, and then Sam Brooks is on the U-23 world team. That's a big deal. That's a UWW. That's the Olympics governing body in the sport of wrestling. That's a new age group.

That's a big deal, Sam Brooks. And he's going to Poland November 20th to wrestle on November 26th in a World Championship event. It's going to be very competitive. And he's getting ready. You're going to see him preparing down there, downstairs.

Q. Has the edition of Mark Perry given you extra time or is it really making you more busy?

COACH BRANDS: Mark Perry, neither. Mark Perry is a partner in what we're doing. His role is to, like for instance, we were in Colorado Springs this past weekend. His role is to be with those athletes as they are training. He'll be going to Tehran, Iran with Titan Mercury Wrestling Club in December. He'll be going to Poland with Brooks. So now Brooks has a coach that's going to go along with him in-season, where when it was in-season, it was tough to go.

I know my brother went to Krasnoyarsk, over the last seven or eight years since he's been there, but now Mark Perry, he will go to those winter tour dates. It's an addition, it's a partnership and it's what we needed. It's one of the completing pieces to what I'm talking about. It's process still. It's not complete. It's part of that

financial piece; it's facility, Hawkeye Wrestling Club, facility, Hawkeye Wrestling Club.

Q. Kemerer won 33 matches as a freshman. Where have you seen him improve or progress since we saw him last in St. Louis?

COACH BRANDS: We've seen him mature. We've seen him lead his class, which when you look at Cash Wilcke, when you look at Joey Gunther, when you look at Vince Turk; the way that they are coming to work every day is better. Their maturity is showing, and they know that they have to pick it up and get on par with Kemerer, and he's raising the bar even more. His change is maturity and his change is maybe knowing when he's coming to work, it may be about more of a leadership role.

Wrestling is a funny sport, though. You've got to take care of No. 1, as well.

Q. Spencer Lee is a true freshman, and this whole team is so young, why not just redshirt him?

COACH BRANDS: Because Spencer Lee is a unique individual. He's a competitor from the word go. And you do what's best by the individual, and we'll certainly do that.

And in Spencer Lee's case, it might be best thing for him to compete and not sit him, not put him on the shelf. And not that he would get dusty, you know, using a metaphor there. But it might not be the best thing for him. But we're going to be very careful with what we do.

I'm going to tell you something. He's fun to watch. He's entertaining. He brings a lot of scoring energy, a lot of boom, boom, boom, and that's very refreshing for our fans when they know that; when they can get excited about something that they maybe haven't seen a lot of because he wasn't in the wrestle-off and a lot of his workouts are controlled right now.

But use your imagination there and look at how I talk about our individuals, and I'm usually very, very conservative and reserved, and I just described Spencer Lee as boom, boom, boom. I tell you what, when he goes in there, he's smiling. He's having fun. He'll tell you, in his words, it's an awesome experience; "this is awesome," and he's growing every day.

Q. What's the timeline on when we might see him in competition?

COACH BRANDS: We'll see him soon. Don't know specifically. We'll see him at Midlands and then we will make decisions. We will make decisions going forward. Our pre-New Year's schedule, we're going to need our best team, but it's very, very possible and

probable that we will not have our best team when we go to Rutgers and when we have Illinois here on December 1. It's very possible, and not overlooking Rider and the Iowa City Duals, Buffalo and North Dakota State.

But when you look at Rutgers there, they are making a move a little bit. They are excited there and we're going to be there, and we were at the facility that they compete at a couple years ago. You know, they are excited about their program and it's going to be a hornets' nest, and they will make sure they make it that way.

So we have got to be ready. And we'll be ready, but will we have our best lineup; and that's what I'm talking about with those unknowns. I'm not sure we will and probably not.

Q. Same process going to be applied to Warner?

COACH BRANDS: Warner, a little bit different than Lee. But here's the thing. When you communicate to these young people, you're communicating now, hey, you might -- Costello, same way, Myles Wilson, same way. Max Murin, same way. You might be talking to them: Hey, you know, you might be redshirt, but you've got to pick it up every day. But you don't really have to because of the approach.

Their approach, we're seeing what we need to see. A guy gets banged in the nose, blood is pouring, nose might be broke. Might have to stop and go call mom and dad and run to the trainer and put a face mask on him. No. Shake it off.

Big glob of paper towels, pull them up, no face mask, no phone call to mom and dad. This is my decision; I'm going. Clock's ticking. Time to go. You know, that's our freshmen. That's our freshmen. That's pretty good leadership, you know, when you look at -- where did they learn that? Well, they learned that where they were, but then they see it in our room.

Gilman, he didn't waste any time. Didn't waste any time in the World Championships. First medal we've had in over 10 years.

Q. Sounds like the future is very bright here.

COACH BRANDS: I think, you know, without making predictions, I think we've got the right personnel here. We've got the right personnel.

And there's just a lot of good things that are happening, along with being able to talk about some of the things that we've addressed as a staff and had some really good conversations with our administration, and they are on board.

And so that -- you know, that makes me feel really good about the future. But is it automatic? No, no.

Q. The facilities and addressing the recruiting, did the program wait too long or what caused the realization?

COACH BRANDS: I don't think the program waited too long on the financial piece. I think the program had to address some things that come before that. Like, you know what, we need to figure out why we're getting whipped in the recruiting.

I tell you what, when we got a commitment from Spencer Lee and his dad, Larry Lee, who was close to that process, they gave us a portfolio of gold intel of how we were being recruited against by You Know Who and You Know Who and You Know Who, and there's a reason why we were getting our pants beat off. We've addressed that.

Q. What were they saying?

COACH BRANDS: You know what they were saying. You know what they were saying. And we know what they were saying. And doggone, now we know. I'm too, maybe, focused internally on: Hey, we're just going to focus on what we need to focus on, because we're going to get the right guy; we're going to go after him hard, and then if we don't get him, we'll find the next guy.

I think those days are over. I think these young guys are so super talented with scholarships, I think those days are over. You have to make sure that when you're spending money on a guy, it is the right guy and you're not selling for that guy that might be good enough because he does this, this and that; right.

You've got to get that Spencer Lee and that Jacob Warner, and then you've got to have that supporting cast with that Max Murin that's got that work ethic and that blue-collar that fits in.

But we need that Spencer Lee guy. When we got him, I'm talking, that folder, that thick, and I'm not exaggerating, and it might have been that thick, because Larry Lee might have discarded a lot of the you-know-what. He might have got it down just to the essentials. We got a partner there and we've got a partner with some parents, and Kemerer and Larry Lee and those guys, and they have got the right approach to what we are doing; and maybe that's why I'm optimistic because we filled some of it with good stuff and partnerships.

Q. Does it surprise you that you were being recruited against like that?

COACH BRANDS: It surprises me because I'm so

looking inside. I'm not worried about what's going on out there. I'm not worried about it. It's like, you don't really care; "One thing about Brands, he doesn't care what people think about him."

Well, you know what, I do care when people think about me now because they are using it against us. We don't have any funds; we're robots. Hey, we're having a blast, man. We're having a blast.