

San Diego State University Football Media Conference

Wednesday, January 8, 2020

Rocky Long

Brady Hoke

John David Wicker

Press Conference

JOHN DAVID WICKER: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us today as we celebrate the career of Rocky Long, the three-time Mountain West Conference Coach of the Year and the winningest coach in the Mountain West Conference history. Rocky became the 18th head coach at San Diego State in January of 2011 and promptly led the Aztecs to a bowl game that first season.

He would do that in each of his nine seasons that he was head coach, while amassing 81 wins and consistently coaching a defense that ranked near the top of the country in total defense. Rocky's teams produced great moments and great players throughout his nine years as head coach. Three conference championships, beating Stanford in 2017 in the Blackout game, 4-1 record versus the Pac 12 over the past four years, a consensus All-American and first-round draft pick in Rashaad Penny, along with 18 total draft picks since 2011.

DJ Pumphrey, the all-time leading rusher in NCAA history, the only team in NCAA history to have two consecutive 2000-yard rushers, that were different players, multiple Mountain West Conference Players of the Year, including sweeping those awards in the 2015 and 2016 seasons. This past year's team finished with ten wins, the fourth time in the past five seasons that we've done that, and was arguably the best defensive unit Rocky has had in his career at SDSU, finishing sixth in the country in total defense.

I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity to start my first year at SDSU the same year Rocky became head coach. I have watched as he has developed a culture within football that now permeates the entire athletic department, a culture of toughness, grit, and hard work. A mentality that given the opportunity we can and we will defeat any opponent, whether a blue blood or someone down the street.

That willingness for hard work has carried over into the classroom, where Rocky's teams have consistently performed well and young men have graduated to



careers into the NFL as engineers, teachers, police officers, and so many other success stories.

Rocky always embraced being a part of the as second athletic department. It wasn't uncommon to see football coaches at other team sporting events on campus, and he kept up with what all of our teams were doing competitively.

He was available to all of our coaches to provide advise, or to just bounce ideas of. As a first-time AD it was great to have Rocky as my football coach. He has been someone I have been able to lean on at times as I learned the ropes. I enjoyed our discussions, many of which resolved around Aztec football and Aztec athletics but also whatever might be happening in the world today.

While all of the accolades that I have discussed are amazing, his best coaching job is how Rocky met his wife Debby. While coaching the Pi Beta Phi sorority team in the spring of 1971 at the University of New Mexico. He guided the sorority to consecutive undefeated championships, and Rocky's defense was not scored upon in any game. Debby knew she had a winner. Rocky and Debby have two daughters, Roxanne and Hannah, who were both student athletes and followed their dad in careers in coaching.

I'm excited that Rocky might get to spend a little more time with his family in Durango, watching Hannah coach Queens College Volleyball or attending Debby's cutting horse competitions, which she is at a cutting horse competition right now. I hear she is looking for a good stable boy, Rocky. Rocky Long.

(Applause.)

ROCKY LONG: That's plenty, that's plenty. Thank you very much. Obviously I've decided to retire from coaching at this point, and I want to thank everybody at this university and in this community that have allowed us to be successful. Everybody knows that nobody does it alone and the people in the athletic department as well as the university do everything to support our athletes in order for our athletes to be successful. The culture at this school and in this athletic department is something special.

Being able to be part of that for the last 11 years, for all those things that that seems like a long time. I've been a head coach for 20 years. It's time. It's time. I love coaching, but I don't necessarily love all the things that head coaches do.

So it's time for me to leave and with the excitement here on campus with the new campus being developed here soon and the new stadium being developed here soon with great leadership from a young exciting president and great leadership from our young, exciting AD, it's time for -- I hate to say this -- a new face, even though it's not a pretty face, a new face. (Laughter.)

A new voice does not mean the message is going to be different, it's just going to be presented in a different way. So hopefully that will be excitement around the program so that the support is there for building this new stadium and building the new campus. I think it's a really, really exciting time. As you grow older, you know when it's time. For me it's time.

I want you all to know that the very best thing about this program is our young men in the program. You don't win all those games unless you got quality kids. I don't mean athletes. You have to have athletes to win, obviously you have to have athletes to win. So they have to be good enough athletes to win but more important than that they're good people. I said "kids," some of them are kids and some of them are men. The men that leave our program are special people and are going to be very successful in life and make everybody at San Diego State very proud of them. They're the best part of our program.

There's a bunch of them coming back that are the same kind of people, plus they're pretty good. They can play. So the possibilities of continuing our success is really, really good.

So it's time. I have to say something about Brady. Once they get it away from me they're not going to let me talk again. That's what happens when head coaches resign or retire, they don't let you talk anymore.

When Brady was nice enough to bring me here, that was probably the luckiest day of my life, as far as coaching goes, because I was looking for a job; he gave me one. It worked out well. Obviously it worked out well for him, and it worked out well for me, too. When Brady decided to come back, I told everybody he was the best defensive line coach I've ever been around, and that part is true. If you saw the improvement of our defensive line, it was amazing, but what else he is a good guy, and he is a great head football coach.

There is nobody that could do it better. So thanks for

being here and thanks for the memories. I will always be an Aztec at heart.

(Applause.)

JOHN DAVID WICKER: Well, now an exciting part for me is to introduce the 17th and now the 19th head coach in Aztec football history, or maybe he's always going to be the 17th. Brady Hoke. Brady is no stranger to the Mesa as he is part of the fabric that established the success that we have achieved in the last ten years. Brady is a two-time National Coach of the Year and has over 35 years of coaching experience. In his previous stint as head coach at San Diego State, his teams went 13-12 after inheriting a 2-10 squad and ended an 11-year bowl drought in 2010 by leading the Aztecs to a Poinsettia Bowl victory over Navy.

As I began the search for our next coach, I knew continuity and the core values and culture of our program were a priority. The foundation built by Rocky and his staff the last nine years, the major factors for our success, the opportunity to get to know Brady over the last year and for him to have a season coaching in the program were key factors leading me to the decision today. Brady believes in the same values that I do. We are here for the total student-athlete experience. Winning on the field, winning in the classroom and ensuring that when young men leave our program, they do so with a degree and the opportunity to be successful in life.

Continuity is why this football program and overall department had such a successful decade, and I'm excited to formally introduce the new leader of Aztec football as we move into a new decade, Brady Hoke.

(Applause.)

BRADY HOKE: Thank you. Number one, I want to thank Coach Long. It was fun for me this year. It was fun ten years ago when Rocky was calling the defense. I want to thank him for giving me the opportunity to come back, and it was probably one of the funnest years I've had in coaching. I appreciate that. Our friendship goes back to Oregon State, goes back a long way, and that will continue. I'm still trying to recruit him, and I don't know if I can do that, but, hell, I'm going to try.

It's great to be back. I got a lot of people that I want to thank. Number one, JD and Bobby for their due diligence and everything, President de la Torre for her commitment and her faith, and obviously my wife Laura and daughter Kelly who are both in North Carolina, because this kind of happened fast. So it was one of those deals. More so, and Coach Long hit on it, the former players, the guys that have defined this program

and the guys that are in the program now.

This is a great community. Obviously the hallmarks of San Diego State football is toughness and the effort that we're going to play where, that we're going to go to class with and how we're going to treat each other within our building and on campus, and I think that is important and that's something that Coach Long has done a great job with when you look at the accountability, the commitment, the respect and trust that we all have within this football program.

We always want to strive for our best potential. Whatever that is. Whatever is laid out there, our best potential of what we're going to try to do. We're going to have pride in the ownership of San Diego State football. We talk about the past, the present, and the future warriors who will play in this program or are going to play in this program. That will always be key for us in how we move forward.

It's a great opportunity. I can't tell you -- you never get to do something twice that you really want to do in life. I was very fortunate, Coach Long bringing me back and being back here at San Diego State. I can assure you, we are going to keep going in the direction that we are going, and we always want to be better every day, and that's what we're going to try and do. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

THE MODERATOR: At this time we will open it up for questions from the media.

Q. Rocky, what was the timeline when you decided to do this? The reports out of Syracuse or Washington State or USC, is there much validity about them talking to you about bringing your stuff there?

ROCKY LONG: I went to JD before the bowl game and told him I was thinking about retiring, asked him if I could get through the bowl game and Christmas vacation before I made a decision. After Christmas vacation, I met with JD and told him that I think I wanted to retire, and he said are you sure and I said yeah, it's time, it's the right time. It's the best time for everybody involved, for this program, me, everybody else.

So I happened to mention that to a couple of my friends in the coaching business that I was retiring, and all of the sudden I got some phone calls. I'm smart enough to listen, so I listened, and a couple of those places I went and visited with. Simple as that.

Q. Coach, is there any thought that you might end

up at one of those places now that you have had that open ear and talked to them?

ROCKY LONG: As of this moment I'm retired, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to listen to anything they have to say. I mentioned it before, I'm tired of being the head coach but I love coaching. The most fun I ever had coaching is when I was coaching the DBs and the secondary and coaching the defense for Brady Hoke, because Brady was the head coach and all he made me do was coach and recruit; that's all I had to do. That's the most fun I've ever had in coaching. If somebody gives me that opportunity again, I might take it.

Q. Brady?

BRADY HOKE: Yeah.

Q. You talked about your coaching search, JD, how long did that take? Did it start and end with Brady Hoke or was there a longer process going on behind the scenes?

JOHN DAVID WICKER: As Rocky mentioned, we had a conversation back in December, a long conversation as he talked about his thoughts of maybe wanting to retire but wanting to get through the bowl game and all that.

We talked about all the different things that we could do from an athletic department standpoint to help him want to stay, whatever that might be. He came back from break and I think it was a week ago Monday, he told me he was ready to retire. Since that time, we have worked, one, a lot of conversations with Rocky about how we want to see the continuity in this program and how important it is to continue what we've already built. I had no desire in any way shape or form to blow up what we have.

So we talked about that. We talked about the "who."

We spent probably -- I think I got on the road Thursday, back Sunday, had conversations with multiple folks and at the end of the day, Brady Hoke, having been, you know, one of the architects of what we have today, and he Rocky did this for the first two years and kind of got some things established. Rocky took it to new heights, and having Brady back in the program for a year, he got to see a lot of what we had done, and we spent two hours on the phone and six hours sitting across the table from each other, myself along with Bobby Smitheran as well, who is the sport liaison for our football program, and at the end of the day felt like Brady Hoke is the person who will be able to continue what we're doing and build on this program and take us to further heights.

Q. Rocky, was there anything they could have said

or anything is he specific they could have promised or done to convince you to stay there a year or two?

ROCKY LONG: No. At my age it's nice to be flattered, they tried really hard to change my mind but also after you become a veteran, you know when it's time to go. I love this place, and I love the players at this place, but it's time for someone else to add the excitement to what's going on with the campus and with the stadium. It's time for a new voice, and I'm perfectly fine with that.

They tried. They tried, but I'm kind of hard -- for you media guys, you know this, I'm kind of hard-headed. When I have something that I think is right, you can't change my mind.

Q. We have never felt that way at all, Rocky, not at all. I think you're probably in better shape than 99% of the people gathered in this room, so you saying you're retired, is it just a hiatus, stepping away and recharging the batteries and maybe May or June you get the itch to continue coaching? Right now how does it feel, within the next couple of months, to you?

ROCKY LONG: A couple of months is too long. I'm thinking about tomorrow. I don't want to hurt anybody else's feelings, I didn't wear a coat and tie. There are advantages to being retired, I'll promise you that.

BRADY HOKE: I think no coat and tie is a good idea.

ROCKY LONG: I'll probably help somebody coach, even if it's up the street at the high school next to my house. I mean, I'm not going to stay away from the football field, and there are high school coaches that would love to have an old man coach their freshman team, and I love coaching so much that doesn't bother me a bit. I just want to be out there with the boys.

Q. Brady, when are you with putting your staff together? Is it in place?

BRADY HOKE: We will meet tomorrow and talk about where we're at, what direction we want to go. I was taught a long time ago that a leader has to choose their team, so to some degree obviously I want to look at that. I think the guys here and the guys I was privileged to work with are good men. I'm excited about those meetings tomorrow.

Q. This program as taken off with both of you gentlemen. Is there a sense of frustration not being in a Power Five conference? Did that have anything to do with you deciding to retire? You won double digits several seasons. Coach Hoke, you go to a Big Ten school. Does that frustrate you at all that you all can't get -- you've gone to the mountain, but you not haven't gotten to the mountain top.

ROCKY LONG: It's always frustrating if you don't win every game. Brady and I have been friends a long time, we have similar philosophies. We're out there to win every game. We have to control over what league we're in, and half of them won't schedule us. Any of them that will schedule us, they're in for a fight. The more of them that schedule us, the more fight they're going to get. JD said our record against the Pac 12, half of them won't play us anymore.

Is that frustrating? Yeah. If they're scared, that's frustrating, okay? But we're in the league we're in, and we have no say-so over that, so we try to win every single game, whoever is on the schedule.

BRADY HOKE: Obviously same philosophy. We don't care who we're playing. They know they're going to get a doggone dog fight with who we are and who we represent. Just like Rocky said, people don't want to play San Diego State. They don't want to. But if they do, then we're going to play with our toughness and our effort like no one does out there on the football field.

Q. Brady, talk about having this thing come full circle.

BRADY HOKE: It's unbelievable. Feel really fortunate to be able to come back. Believe me, we love San Diego, San Diego State, Laura, my wife, loves it here, and she loves the Aztecs. If it wasn't for the friendship and the professionalism that I've had with Coach Long, with Rocky over the years, maybe we wouldn't have come back, but with him and Debby, number one his leadership and also just as a friend. He's someone you know you're going to fight for.

Q. Coach Long, was there an epiphany that you had where the moment came that it's time to step aside?

ROCKY LONG: Maybe you ought to tell me what that means! (Laughter.) No, there wasn't one thing that happened or one moment that happened that made me decide. For the last two years that's been a thought in my mind, but everybody in this room knows what we're all about. Brady and I are about the same thing; you know what we're all about. 7-6 isn't good enough. So you never quit when it's not good enough. Double digit wins, four and five years, that's pretty good. (Laughter.)

Seems like the right time now.

BRADY HOKE: And I appreciate, he made this a lot harder. (Laughter.)

Q. Coach Hoke, how have you grown and changed since the last time you had this job? What's going to be different this time around that you maybe

have matured as a coach and your philosophy?

BRADY HOKE: I think philosophically that hasn't changed much, as far as how we want to represent our name, who we are, how we want a team that's going to play with great toughness and great effort, and mentally tough guys who are going to add to our program and our athletic department and our university that are first-class guys, and guys that have great integrity and great character.

I think you always grow, if not then you have -- you won't get to where you want to go. I think that's been part of it. I think different experiences shape you in different ways, so down to the core there is a lot that's who I am. I think that's important in how we do things. But other than that, I think there's little thing you take from recruiting to, you know, the style of offense has changed and all that and we will talk about that at another time.

Those things are all part of it.

Q. Do you feel like this is a second chance for your career?

BRADY HOKE: I don't know about that. I'm proud of my career, believe me. A second chance of coming back to a place that we really loved for 18 months and the type of kids that we have on this football team, that's where the second chance comes from.

Q. Brady, on the topic of second chances and getting back here again, I know some Aztec fans want you to be asked this question and I know coaches hate hypotheticals, but if your dream job comes along two years from now, will you take it?

BRADY HOKE: No. No. This is where we want to be, believe me. I made a commitment to JD, to the President, and to my wife (Laughter.) We're here! Not that she holds more than JD, but -- (Laughter.)

JOHN DAVID WICKER: She does. We all know that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone.