



## **Arizona State Head Coach Kenny Dillingham Weekly Press Conference**

**Monday, August 25, 2025**

### **Previewing Northern Arizona and Week One:**

#### **On Quarterback Sam Leavitt's Evolution:**

"Being able to control the game on earlier downs, that's not just big play action shots, naked boots, screens, it's all early down passing. I think that's an area where if he improves that, the sky is the limit."

#### **On Sam Leavitt's Trajectory:**

"We talked about (QB) Bo Nix's trajectory and the difference in his completion percentage from his transition from Auburn to Oregon and the amount of sacks he took. (QB) Sam (Leavitt) wants to be perfect all the time, he wants to be the best. So we were talking about (Bo) Nix taking only five sacks in his first year at Oregon and the other things he did. But I told Sam that he's not you, we don't run the same stuff, play your game. I think his game will naturally elevate this year because of the work he's put in, but I don't want him to think about those things. I just want him to go play his game because he's a phenomenal football player. That type of prep is kind of like the hay in the barn prep. It's time to see all the work he's put in and what that shows, and I have a lot of confidence in him."

#### **On this Season's Home Field Advantage:**

"I hope it's like last year and that there's a true advantage over our guys running out of the tunnel and they see 14,000 students that they're staring at as they run out on the field after the fireworks and then they see that the crowd's packed. I think that's the environment that we're going to see based on ticket sales and the renewals. I believe the environment on Saturdays is going to be unbelievable."

#### **On Wide Receiver Jordyn Tyson becoming a Star:**

"To say that you see him as elite as he's become, you envision that. The work that he's put in, he's earned the accolades that he's getting. You saw the tape of his freshman year at Colorado and he's absolutely dominating as a true freshman at times. You can see the acceleration and the ball skills, I believe he returned to punt for a touchdown versus Arizona State in his freshman year, so you could see all the skill sets for him to be elite, so I did anticipate him being an elite player. He's putting in the work to double down on his talent and that's the part that excites me the most is his maturity level and his commitment to be great now."

#### **On Coach Hines Ward and Jordyn Tyson's Relationship:**

"Their relationship is critical, when you have a guy who's been there and done what you want to accomplish, are a lot of the things that (WR) Jordyn (Tyson) wants to accomplish. For Hines to be able to constantly give him feedback and constantly coach him. Hines is a guy who lives and practices where he preaches. He doesn't say, 'be a hard worker and then the last coach in the building,' Hines is one of the first coaches in the building and is one of the most prepared people

here. When you think of Hines Ward and the preparation he took to football, he takes that same thing to coaching, and that correlates to the players, and they feed off that.”

### **On the Team’s Injury Updates:**

“Offensively, (TE) AJ Ia got dinged up the other day. Other than that, it’s the same guys that have been injured from the beginning of camp and the guys that haven’t gone through camp. “Man Man” got hurt the last day, he should be back pretty quickly. We haven’t had many injuries during camp. (DE) My’Keil Gardner was the only one who got injured in camp, he unfortunately tore his achilles tendon. We’re actually doing rehab for another injury. I told him that everything happens for a reason and maybe this was a way for his body to heal and get ready for next season. We’ve had two other guys go through a similar injury and they both are starting for us. That was the challenge for him was that everything happens for a reason. He’s going to go to work and build relationships with his teammates for the time being.”

### **On how he wants the team to be different from last season:**

“We should be able to be a little better with disguises on defense, we should be around the ball more on defense, knowing the strengths and weaknesses, the coverages, and match patterns a little bit better. Our defense should be able to create more sacks because we have a better unit pass rush, not just a solo pass rush. We should equate to a few more takeaways. I expect more explosive plays from the takeaway department. Offensively, I’d say we have to be a better early down passing team. That doesn’t mean we’re going to go out there and sling it 90 times. It means a couple more times a game, we have got to be able to control early downs and passing. I hope there’s consistency in running the ball like we did last year, I have a lot of confidence that that’s going to be there. I hope we’re more explosive offensively. If there’s one thing you can say about our offense last year is that we weren’t overly explosive. We have to have other ways to create those plays.”

### **On Special Teams and the progression of the kicking game:**

“I would say as far as his growth, to be honest, not much. This kid is dialed since the moment he got here, he has been dialed in to be the very best. Nothing really rattles him. He is his own hardest critic, and he’s very, very consistent. You know what you’re going to get. I’ve got the utmost confidence in him. I actually joke around to the team with how much confidence I have with him kicking field goals. And another guy who’s done a great job is (PK) (Carson) Kieffer. Kieffer is a guy who went in there and made kicks late in the season, in the championship game, and even the Peach Bowl. One of them was blocked – that wasn’t on him – but he’s made kicks and he’s out to the 50-yard range now, which is a testament to his strength and how much he’s put in work to become stronger. He can make them from 50 (yards) a little bit further sometimes. So I think that position as a whole has gotten drastically better.”

### **On Sam’s (Leavitt’s) maturity as a quarterback and leader:**

“I think Sam understands that you need a team around you to be a good quarterback. You have to have the pieces around you and the pieces around you are what make you look better. So I think he understands that. I think he also understands it’s a privilege to be in the situation he’s in, and he’s earned all of it. He’s worked his butt off to go from where he was 12 months ago to where he is today, and he wants to give back because that’s the nature of who he is. He isn’t about all the extras. Sam’s about ball. So when you talk about giving back to people, when you talk about all of that stuff, that’s just what he wants to do because he’s a good person and he really doesn’t care about all the money as much as he does the ball. He’s obsessed with

football, and I think that's really what defines Sam. His X factor is how much he loves the game and is obsessed with being great."

**On how the depth of the roster pushes the team to be better:**

"I think our competitive depth on this team is high. If you look at our depth chart, you could argue, 'this dude would start at most places' and I think you can do that for a lot of different positions. I think it's a testament to people wanting to be here, a testament to the players wanting to be here, but it's a positive and it pushes each other because you know there's a guy behind you that can play and will play. I think that's going to be a difference this year, as I think we're going to rotate some guys to make sure we get all those guys in the field and keep guys fresher. Because I do think our competitive depth is very high."

**On what personal expectations the positional leaders have for themselves**

"I won't get into the conversations that I have with those guys on a personal level. I think that's something that if they want to share they can, but I just know what their goals and their dreams are. They're far beyond what can be written about, and I think that's what makes them great and it's what gives me unbelievable confidence in them. I think that's the same case for a lot of our guys. A lot of our guys have goals and aspirations that are beyond what people think about them. It's one thing to have goals and aspirations that are laughable; it's another to work for those goals. I think a lot of our team has those goals and they're working towards them. They're not just hoping that they'll happen and a lot of people hope goals happen. Others force to make them happen, and I think we've got a lot of guys on our team who are doing everything they can to make them happen."

**On (RB) Kyson Brown's development and readiness to take over RB1:**

"Kyson's just put in the work. He's one of our strongest guys on our football team. Everybody knows him as a super-fast guy from high school, right? Now he's over 205 pounds. One of his biggest things when he got here was that he was a fast guy. Fast guys are naturally a little bit stiffer, however, he's put an extreme amount of work to create flexibility to be able to make smoother cuts, and there's a drastic difference. As a true freshman to now, they're almost two different players. The reason for that is the work he's put in to become more flexible and more fluid, and he's no longer just a fast guy. He's a fast guy that's 200 pounds, that's fluid, and can catch the ball. It gives me confidence in him that if the ball's in his hands, I know that he's going to give everything he's got because that's all he's done for 3 years."

**On how The Valley Continues to Show Up:**

"Our ticket sales, unbelievable. I think it's like 7,700 or 7,800 new season tickets, I think we are supposed to hopefully have 14,000 students out there, almost a 98% renewal right now. The excitement in the Valley is real, the excitement is showing up, especially from the ticket sales and all that stuff. It's what I hoped it can become, but it's not where it needs to be at. We're always growing, we're always trying to become better and bigger and set a higher standard, so I think that's the key is you're never satisfied. Somebody says you're always hiking, you're never at the peak. Same thing is you're always hiking, you're always climbing- the moment you get there is the moment you go down the other side. If you want to get somewhere you got to keep hiking."

**On (RB) Raleek Brown Working to Become Starting Running Back:**

"It just depends on the game plan, we haven't solidified that yet. (RB) Raleek (Brown) has had an unbelievable camp, Raleek is another guy who has gained 20 pounds this year and you can see it. He looks good, he plays good and those guys are really close so I think it just depends on what the early calls are. They are both really good players and I'm excited to see them both play in a live setting, when people have to tackle them. I mean we have done that a little bit but we get to play football again, so that's the fun part if you play running back. Raleek has gotten so much better at ball security, he's really worked on that. We've really challenged him and he's improved, so I'm really excited to see him have to do that in a live game. See his ball security when bullets fly because that's what matters at that position, not how many yards you run, not how explosive you are, but can we trust you to take care of the football."

**On how the offense will be tested by NAU's complex defensive scheme:**

"I mean (NAU head coach Brian Wright) being an offensive guy, he knows what gives offenses problems and they do a lot of things to give offenses problems. I think that's just a testament to him having a say on multiple sides of the ball and him being able to allow his defensive coordinator to play Blitz Cover 0 on second-and-10. Most head coaches play the game a little bit more scared. You don't want to play Blitz Cover 0 on second-and-10 because you're scared of what can happen. They had one of the most successful seasons in the last 10 to 15 years. They were a top 25 team. They were a playoff team because they don't play scared, and I think it's testament to their head coach. Both sides of the ball create a lot of pre-snap confusion. They do a really good job making you communicate. Their goal is to slow opponents down by forcing them to communicate constantly — double backs on offense, reverses, FIB (formation into boundary) formations back to regular, unbalanced. Defensively, they're in Bear, they're in odd stack, odd broken stack, four-down. It's like how many times can they make you communicate? I think that's a philosophy that they use in all three phases and it was very successful for them last year. Going into week one, those are the teams you don't want to face because it's communication and you're in week one. You want to face the team that's like four-down quarters and you know where they're going to be, not the team that forces you to over-communicate. So, kudos to them, they've done an unbelievable job there."

**On Sam Leavitt's approach to work and drowning out the noise from the media:**

"Sam's the ultimate competitor. His dreams are huge. When I take the media head on, when I see things go out and comments in the media, I want to approach it with my team. I don't want our team to read things and not talk about them. I want to attack them. So, 99% of the time we focus on today and being the best version of us today. Every once in a while there's things that pop up that I just want to put to bed for our players. All these funky stats that they hear, 'Yeah, here it is. Now, who cares? You know how to solve it. Go to work today and repeat, repeat, repeat.' In our team meeting today, the message was 'How hard is it to attack 12 Mondays?' And it's difficult. Great teams cannot attack today with everything they got, and then wake up and do it again, consistently for four months. It's so difficult, and that's what separates teams. Some teams are wired to do it. And nothing else matters other than being your best. I think that the constant challenge here is, is this our best Monday that we've ever had in program history? Can we say we were more focused today? And if we can do that, we can have a good Tuesday, right? Then, who knows where it's going to end up. It's all about today."

**On the feeling heading into this season versus years past:**

“The exact same. Literally the exact same except I know that there's gonna be a lot more fun environment out there when we take the field. But it's the exact same. As coaches, you live in a constant state of paranoia. You live in a constant state of ‘Am I doing enough?’ And I think, like most people, you want to be your very best. It doesn't matter where you are, you're constantly trying to be better and if you're not, then what's the goal? There's not a peak to this thing. There is no peak. You just do your very best every day. So, how do I feel? I feel the exact same that I felt when we were 3-9, unfortunately. I wish there was a reprieve. I wish I could be like, ‘Oh, I feel great. This is awesome.’ No, not at all. I feel the exact same except I hope that we have people cheering when we're on defense and it's third down, which we will.”

**On NAU QB Ty Pennington and the rest of the Lumberjacks personnel:**

“He's been in their system. He came over with them and he did a phenomenal job last year. He's a dual threat, he's intelligent. He knows where to go with the football. You can clearly see that. He checks them into good plays. So, anytime you have a returning starter off of a team that was a top 25 team, and anytime you're going into year two with the amount of returning starters they have and the style that they play, that's a tough opponent to play early because of what they do schematically, the amount of returning starters, and anytime you get your quarterback back. I know specifically on offense they have eight returners back, which is a lot for a second-year head coach.”

**On continuity within the coaching staff:**

“Less wasted time. You're not having to go through things like, ‘Hey, remember pregame — you guys stand here, we stand here, then in four minutes we rotate. Then you go through the routes, we're going to throw these routes at 7.’ And you multiply that by every period in practice, every meeting we have. Now there's an expectation of what's needed. When you're more efficient like that, you can focus your time on the players, not on planning how you're going to act when you're around them. You can actually focus on the game plan, watch more film, create better cut-ups — and not be dog tired as well. You can always do as much as you want, but there's a point of diminishing returns. Because we have continuity, it gives us more time to prepare for our players, to watch tape and to be better coaches for them. We're not doing all the operational stuff. We're not getting to know each other as much, which is better. We can just go coach football because we know the expectations and we know each other.”

**On Continuing To Be Aggressive Throughout the Year:**

“It definitely changes some situations, we are still going to be aggressive on fourth down. I wholeheartedly believe in that, being aggressive. I think it's a mindset for your football team that you're not going to play scared. While some people rule it as a negative to the defense, I rule it as a positive to our football team that we're going to play this game aggressive as if we're going to be successful, not as we're scared to fail. We are going to try to be smart with it, of course, but does that mean we are going to be scared of it, absolutely not. Are we going to be able to kick a 52-yard field goal on a 4th and 6th and feel good about it? Yeah, very good. You may see some of those go down, but everybody knows it from our stats if we get to a 4th and 1, buckle up- the odds are we are going for that thing. We get to a 4th and 2 and it's a high percentage, people have watched our film, it's not a secret. We have a philosophy in terms of how we want to be aggressive and that's going to stay consistent.”

**On How The Offensive Line Creates a Movement:**

“They've grown together, they communicate well, they're all friends. They're massive, they're big people, you stand behind them and you can see the size- which is positive. They're creating a

movement and we have a pretty good D-line, at times in practice they are creating movement. In practice our defense is not going back, so it's back and forth, back and forth. The key for me is, you can see the times that it clicks and the combos are together and you're like woah. That is a powerful double team. Those are the things that excite me when you get into game week is how many times we can create the wow moments of man, that was a powerful double team. At the end of the day, it's all about moving people. Just got to move the people, if you move the people, you move the ball. If you move the ball, you score the points, it's pretty simple."