

December 28, 2013



An interview with:

COACH GRAHAM

THE MODERATOR: We will start with Coach Todd Graham. Coach?

COACH GRAHAM: Thank you. On behalf of Arizona State University, I want to thank the Holiday Bowl. What an incredible week we have had so far. The red coats are absolutely off the chart when it comes to hospitality. I can tell you just for the weather, the city is incredible. It's been a great experience for our guys. It's a really special group. We have a large senior class and a really special group of young men that have enjoyed the time together here at Sea World on the first day and the experience that our guys have had has been awesome.

It's been first class, one of the best bowls that I've been to, tremendously organized, and the city of San Diego is obviously a tremendous place and we have had tremendous weather so I want to thank you. Appreciate you guys selecting our team to come here.

We have had a great week of practice. I think we have a tremendous game for you guys. Two very explosive football teams, Coach Kliff Kingsbury and the Texas Tech red Raiders have extremely active talent, some fireworks. Great players on that field, some of the best that will go to the next level and play as well as two I think good football teams.

We're excited. I'm excited to get an opportunity to lead these guys one more time. These seniors have been very special to me. We've got probably the best "team" that I've ever coached, as far as how unselfish these guys are and how close they are. Extremely close. We had a leadership luncheon with our top 15 guys the other day and it was special. We want to thank the Holiday Bowl, the red coats, the hospitality, it's been a tremendous experience for us.

THE MODERATOR: We will open it up for questions.

Q. What's the status on your running back, on Grice?

COACH GRAHAM: Marion probably won't play. We thought it would be a three or four-week process and it's been a little slow goin' there. We hoped he would be able to make it back and play but it's doubtful.

He's not practiced and just don't want to -- probably not something we want to put him in that situation. He has a great future in the NFL and we're in good shape there with D.J. Foster and the group that we have.

Q. Can you talk about the match-up between you as a defensive mind and Cliff as an offensive coach?

COACH GRAHAM: We're going to be in trouble if that's where it's at. I hope my players can help me out on that deal! I think the coach would tell you the same thing. When I look at the film I'm a defensive-minded guy and looking at their offensive personnel, I think they have probably the best tight end in the country. Watching his body of work is phenomenal. You cannot get a better physical specimen that can block, catch the ball, that is utilized the way they utilize him is tremendous. He's had three different guys throwing him the football and I think that's one of the things you look at, the talent. The outside, their outside receivers, No. 18 is phenomenal. I love watching the guy compete for the football.

You look at the speed and the athleticism they have at the skilled position is impressive and then the thing you can't see that Coach and I are similar in our philosophies, we're a fast-tempo team. We want to go fast and they do a tremendous job. You watch the film you see other teams not lined up a lot of the time and how fast they go and you look at the amount of plays that they play. They're physical, they're talented from an offensive standpoint, and I can assure you over the years of doing this, I used to think I was going to call the plays that would win the game and I've lost more games that way.

I'm going to get out of the way and let our guys play and it's going to be a heck of a match-up. They have tremendous players and I think Coach would probably agree we've got tremendous players on our side of the ball as well.

It's going to be a great match-up as well as their defense against our offense. It's going to be a fun game. I think people coming to this game, it will be one that you will enjoy watching, exciting, explosive. They're a team that you're going to have to contain and I don't know if you're going to totally shut them down but you've got to have a plan. They've got some special players that you got to have specific plans for.

Q. Coach, you were able to successfully shutdown the offense against Washington State. Does that carry any weight coming into this game?

COACH GRAHAM: I think Coach is very different. It's like everybody talks about spread offense. That's a very general term it's like talking about a 4-3 defense, there are a million variations on that. No disrespect to Washington State, the personnel is a lot different. You look at the tight end, the outside receivers, the running backs do a great job running the football. They have a first-rounder up front in my opinion, No. 62, their tackle. They're a very good football team.

They're as good as any team we have played offensively I think in that their deal is when you look at the film they've lost games to teams that are playing in the BCS bowls and some of the best teams in the country. I think four of their five losses they had were against top-25 teams at the time. That's the big difference I would tell you. There are some similarities, obviously, but I think it's very different, and I think just like, you know, we have -- if you take what Coach Malzahn at Auburn is running, we have same philosophies, but our offense are the same, too, and it's different and we're facing good personnel.

Q. What does it do to Taylor Kelly's role up with Grice gone.

COACH GRAHAM: I think it boosts D.J. Foster's role up and he does so much for us as a player at the receiver position and we're going to utilize him in that role but he will be the primary tailback and it's going to mean more snaps for him. Taylor's job is to disperse the football to Nelson, and Lewis, their roles will increase so we can utilize D.J. and what he does.

It was something -- I'm not going to lie to you I was extremely disappointed that weapon couldn't get him back but we have to do what's best for the young man and be careful and cautious.

Q. If you can get to 11 wins what would that be about the direction of the program?

COACH GRAHAM: I think 130 years of playing football at Arizona State, this would be the sixth time that we ever won 11 games so it would be monumental for us. For me personally coming in and just being in my second year and how these guys have bought in and how we've come has been remarkable to me. The players deserve the credit for that, because it has not been easy.

You've been around and seen that, that there is nothing easy about it. It's been straining, training, and these guys have bought in at present for those seniors it's important for us to get that 11th win. It was gut-wrenching to get to the championship game and not win it. But this is something -- there is only one thing that can be acceptable for -- that's what I told our staff is to go get this thing and it's going to be a challenge, there is no question about it. We're facing a very good football team and college football is all about match-ups. Teams match-up differently with each other and this is going to be two really good football teams goin' at it and that 11th win is very, very important to us and to our program.

Q. Coach, can you talk about Will Sutton and what makes him so good and, two, I believe you have 21 interceptions this year, if I remember correctly. What are the factors that you attribute that to the most?

COACH GRAHAM: Well, our whole philosophy defensively is it's impossible -- I've worked around some of the great offensive minds in this business, and one thing sitting in that room and guys like Coach that run the kind of offense that's being ran nowadays, it's a nightmare! One of the reasons I run the defense is heck, it's the hardest job there is! I know in our league and you look in the Big 12, it's a challenge. I can't defend that stuff. You have to somehow disrupt that and create negative plays and take-aways. Every time you get a take-away you're going to play five less plays that game. It's all about snaps, that's why we believe in the no huddle and the up-tempo plays. We have averaged 82, 83 snaps per game, this is

since '07 and we have played 66 snaps on defense. If we play in this game and we're running 90 plays that's a challenge for you to be able to handle that.

So we're big into negative yardage plays, disrupting, impacting the quarterback and forcing errors and that's what you got to have happen. You got to force take-away and those type of things. What's helped us in getting take-aways is guys like Will up front, a tremendous player.

I don't think I've had a football team that -- everybody has a football team where they have a team that's really improved and the guys that are average become good and guys not so good become average and the bottom-up deal. I see that a lot.

This team with guys like Will Sutton, our best football player on our team, and we've got some really good ones, but I've never seen guys that are your best players mature as much as what he has.

My absolute favorite player in 28 years on game day. The other six days of the week have been -- we have gone at it quite a bit, but the way he matured his senior year. He's going to be a great -- he's going to have a great career ahead of him, because he was recognized by his teammates as a leader. I would tell you when I first came, I don't know that that was on the map. So he bought in. He is explosive and talented. Never once this year did he ever get frustrated, say anything about his numbers and his numbers suffered because people slide the front to him and do things like that which helped us because we were able to impact the quarterback by creating -- knowing that people were going to do that.

So he's a tremendous player, tremendous young man, has developed his character, his leadership. He was selected by our staff and team as a captain unanimously, which is a big honor. I can't say enough positive things about him, not just a great player but a great person a great leader.

Q. Coach, you have done a good job of avoiding penalties. When you're going against an offense like this is there an increased emphasis on avoiding penalties in this game in particular?

COACH GRAHAM: That's something that we work on, really tried to establish back in the spring and educating the players on the rules. The more snaps you have, the more opportunities they've got to score the more opportunities you've

got for penalties and all those things so not any more than any other week. That's something we believe strongly in is being a disciplined football team and not getting stupid penalties. That's our deal. One of the things that I think is important in this business, I started off 28 years ago coaching 7th grade football, born and raised, Texas high school football coach, I believe in sportsmanship and I think safety is important, we work hard on that and respecting your opponent. Respecting this game that's been so good to all of us. That's something we want to make sure we don't get unsportsmanlike conduct penalties. We have not got -- knock on wood, no targeting penalties, we try to work on those things that kill you. We had one roughing the quarterback penalty all year and we work on those things and emphasize and educate is what we try to do.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach Graham.

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