

July 28, 2014



An Interview With:

MINNESOTA COACH JERRY KILL

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Coach Jerry Kill.

COACH KILL: This is a great opportunity, and we appreciate the opportunity. We're fortunate to have three young men here who have done outstanding job for us -- Mitch Leidner, Cedric Thompson, and David Cobb -- of representing the University of Minnesota. We're excited as all coaches are about the upcoming season.

We've been very fortunate. When we came back from our bowl game and we had a team meeting, I shared with our kids: Right now you should be starving. We made some great strides last year. We did some good things. We've done some things that hadn't been done for a while. I think we kind of set the tone where in our third year where we've been before we start the turnaround process, and now we have to take it another step.

With that being said, you know, I watched our kids in the offseason when we did come back, we said: Mitch Leidner, you're our quarterback. And I told all our players he's the guy in charge.

Cedric Thompson emerged on the defensive side of the ball, and I can't say enough of what they've done in the offseason. Our session in the spring and through the offseason I thought went very well. We knew there's some things that we needed to work on, and we spent a lot of time on them. Certainly from the offensive side throwing the football, getting better in the red zone offensively and defensively, and, you know, working a lot on situations that we didn't do very well. And also teams that beat us. You have to find a way to beat those teams, and we tried to concentrate on some of their strengths.

So the summer went well. Our kids have gotten stronger. I believe we've gotten faster. And we've kind of done that each year.

And so they're excited about what's going on. I think the biggest example that I can tell you, we had a lot of players stay in May, which has been unusual in our program, stayed and worked.

And then the thing that I really have been impressed with is Mitch and Cedric here in the summertime. Where I've been before usually that third year your kids can kind of run your football team, and that's what's happened at the University of Minnesota.

Our kids, this summer, have worked just like everybody has in the Big Ten, but for us, the step they took forward they could actually go out and run a practice, and Mitch has basically done that through the summer process.

And the neat thing about that is they've handled the discipline, and when kids weren't on time and so forth, and they've kind of done it on their own and they've taken great ownership. And from a head coach's standpoint, when you get your kids to buy in and do those kind of things, it's exciting to see.

And our team last year set the tone of where we need to go and where we need to be. However, that's in the past. Now we're in the future. New team, new situation, with some veterans coming back.

I feel like on the defensive side of the ball, I think we can be better. And I think we'll be better on the offensive side of the ball. So that's what you're always striving for, but at the same time you've got to go out and prove that. We have a very tough schedule, but competition makes you better and we're looking forward to it.

So with that being said, certainly take any questions at this time.

Q. You talk about taking the next step with this program after getting eight wins. In your mind, what is that next step? Is it to win a bowl game? Win the West? What is realistic in year four?

COACH KILL: I think there's no question we want to continue to improve on what we did last year. And we won eight games, and I think



visit our archives at asapsports.com

Minnesota Coach Jerry Kill

anytime you go into the Big Ten and if you don't have a mission to win the Big Ten, then why play?

And I think our kids, they're like anybody else. It's a new season and that's our mission statement, and the same way last year, but we have to build on what we did a year ago and continue to make progress.

And that's part of having a team that is hungry to play, and as I said starving right now. And I think in the offseason -- we don't have a lot of mottos. Some places, you go all over, they have a whole bunch of mottos. But my whole life, and anybody I've ever coached, is work hard. That's the key to success, work hard.

And where I was at when I was at Northern Illinois, we talked about it and we're talking about it now, is that we have to do it the hard way. But that's the way that our coaching staff, that's the culture that we've created, our whole coaching careers, and we know we've gotta do it the hard way and we look forward to it.

That's kind of, so to speak, our team image right now.

Q. When Cedric Thompson first got to campus, you guys knew he had a unique story from Bombay Beach and everything. But when was the first sense you got that this was a potential leader of your team?

COACH KILL: I think Cedric came in as a freshman and you could tell he was going to be a very, very good player. And to be a leader you have to be a good football player. And as his maturity grew in our program and each year, I think that he has improved in that area, a great communicator.

But I think where I've seen it the most, he came up and after the season and said: Hey, Coach, I want to be that guy. I want to have that pressure. It's my time to lead.

And to be honest with you, I thought he'd be a good leader but I had no idea that he was going to do the job, what he's done, since he stepped up. And when you're a leader, you have to be different. As Tony Dungy said: You've got to be uncommon. And you're not always one of the players' best friends. You gotta do what's best for the program and the team.

And both him and Mitch have been extended coaches. And I think when you get that and you have strong leadership -- and Cedric is -- his upbringing and how he survived things and what he stands for, he understands every element of life. And when you have a kid that understands

that, and our players know that, he's got great respect. He can be hard on a player. I've seen him in the workouts; he'll get after somebody, and they respond to it.

I think when you can get kids to respond to the leadership, then you've got a chance to be pretty good.

Q. What did you guys change last year to get your team to play with such physicality?

COACH KILL: I think we played more physical. I think that we always say you gotta be able to run the ball and gotta stop the run.

And we got better at it. And I think from a physical standpoint, I think our recruiting continues to be better, but Eric Klein is the critical piece in our strength staff. Eric's been with me 21 years. He's always following the great programs. We always look at the top five programs in the country and find out what they're doing.

But we've had a good philosophy through our coaching career and kind of stuck to it. And we take kids that we bring in and we know that they have length and speed and we build them in the weight room.

He's done a great job of that everywhere we've been, and he continues to do that, because we're a much stronger, faster team than I believe we were a year ago. And we look better.

But you still gotta go play. But a lot of it has to do with the strength staff and what they've done, plus our coaching staff's done a good job of recruiting to what we need and what we do.

Sometimes we get caught up in the recruiting process and so forth, who is recruiting who, but we've tried to do what's best for us and recruit to the system that we run.

Q. You obviously have a pretty solid running game, but how critical is it for you in order to take that next step to get more production through the year?

COACH KILL: We've got some depth at running back and we have done a good job of that. But we've worked hard in offseason. We brought some people in to -- you are never too proud to get better. And I think all the coaches here in the Big Ten, we're always visiting with other programs, whether it's NFL teams or great college teams, and I think as a coaching staff we gotta do a better job. And I don't think there's any question that we've improved ourselves in that area.

The other thing is I think through the past we've always made decision on a quarterback, and probably didn't do that enough a year ago. And we said: Hey, Mitch is going to be our quarterback. And where we're at, Chris Streveler is going to be a guy that's a backup and ready to go. And we established that. And I think when you know you're going to be the guy, it's a little bit different.

So we've spent a lot of time -- Mitch has spent a lot of time with the receivers. And we know we've gotta do a good job we start seeing eight, nine people in the box and you've got to be able to throw the ball downfield and make some catches. But we also have improved our receiving corps. And sometimes the receiver can make a quarterback look good.

So I think we've helped ourselves through recruiting. I think our older guys have gotten better. And we put a lot of emphasis in it in the spring.

And usually what you emphasize is what you get. And I think we emphasized it much more.

Q. You guys have lost 10 straight now against Wisconsin, meaning 10 straight games, without Paul Bunyan's axe. How important is that obviously to get back on that winning track, not just obviously from a record standpoint, but from a recruiting standpoint and just for school pride, especially with it being the border battle?

COACH KILL: Absolutely. And, you know, I think what our job is as coaches and most programs that we've taken over, there's a lot of things that hadn't been done for a while, and you take steps at doing that.

I think we understand for us to be successful and win the Big Ten and take our strides farther along in our program, you know, you have to beat the border schools. So there's certainly focus on that. But we focus on everybody.

But we're well aware of that situation. And as you take steps, those are games you gotta win. And they're both -- Wisconsin, Iowa are very well coached and got good players. But we have to step our game up, and I think our kids are excited about that.

And I think we know what we need to do. We just gotta go out and do it. But, you know, there's a lot of things that we haven't done in a while, and we've done a lot of those things a year ago. But we have to continue to make strides to take care of that, because when you do, you're

going to be successful because of the programs that are our border schools.

When you get that done, you've got a chance to compete for the Big Ten title.

Q. How do you think David Cobb handled the success he had last year, especially like at the end in the way he took what happened in the bowl game and kind of pushed him through the offseason?

COACH KILL: Well, I think competition makes everybody better. And David is an awful good football player and had a great season for us and has worked very hard in the offseason.

But when you have some of the kids that he's got in that backfield, you have no time to rest. Early in the year, David wasn't playing for us. We had two other guys that got injuries. But the thing about it, David was prepared for his opportunity and took it and ran with it and had just had a great year.

And his hard work and preparation for this coming year, I know he'll do well. And he's excited about that. And we are deep in the backfield and we've got to find a way to utilize our backs, but in the past, where we've been, you know, we've been able to get three backs on the field and do a lot of different things.

But his work ethic has been very good. And he's got a lot of high goals like every player that's here in the Big Ten. He wants to reach those goals. He's put in the work and effort and really all our kids have. We have had an outstanding spring and summer, the best we've had at the University of Minnesota, and also maybe one of the better ones we've been anywhere.

So David's a part of that, and he knows he wants to continue to get better. And I look forward to watching him play this year.

Q. Can you just talk about maybe some discussions you've had with the team about some of the changes that are going to go on in college football moving forward and if you've addressed that at all with your players?

COACH KILL: We've talked a little bit about it, but I think the concentration's been on our season and going forward with the season. But we certainly talked some about it with all the changes that have happened and some of the ones that are going forward. And I think it's a great opportunity

for our kids. The game's about the kids. I always say it's not about the coaches, it's not about all that, it's about the players and the kids.

I think anytime we can improve to help our players from an academic and athletic situation, we need to do that. And I think all the changes are here to help the players, and the game's about the players.

I always get a kick out of people that are teaching and so forth, they go: Boy, these darned kids, what are we going to do with them? Guess what? That's why we've all got jobs. So we need to make sure we take care of them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports