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An Interview With:

WEST VIRGINIA COACH DANA HOLGORSSEN

COACH HOLGORSSEN: I will get some of this coach speak out of the way, but I'm obviously excited about the upcoming year. If any of the coaches come up here and say they're not excited and optimistic, they're pulling your leg.

In particular, going into our fourth year, I feel pretty confident, pretty comfortable with our team. We've got 40 juniors and seniors in the two deep. We've got 22 guys that have started Big 12 football games. We've got over 50 guys that have played in Big 12 football games. So a lot of the guys that are on our team right now are guys that have been there and done that, understand what the Big 12 is all about, understand the style of ball, understand the personnel. It's just we're in a totally different position than we have been in the past.

So looking forward to what's ahead.

Q. You mentioned the amount of experience that you have with guys that have played in Big 12 games. How does that translate specifically to your defense? Would you say this might be the best you've had since you've been here?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: Without a doubt, it should be the best that I've had potentially since I started coaching 20-some years ago. I've just got guys that have a bunch of experience.

When we came into this league three years ago, everybody remembers Geno Smith and Tavon Austin and Stedman Bailey, but I doubt you could name another person, especially anybody on defense. Just guys that have been in three and four years, even going into their fifth year, guys have been there and they've played a bunch.

We've got a lot of guys that are starters and backups. I'm not going to sit here and apologize for where we're at defensively. From a coaching staff perspective, we're in a different

place as well. Tony Gibson has done a great job. He brought a scheme that he believes in and I believe in, knows how to coach it.

We've got all our position coaches back, added Bruce Tall for our D-line, who's coached in this defense as well. So continuity on the defensive staff along with a lot of experience with players and some pretty good talent as well.

It's been a long road to get to this point defensively, and we obviously feel good about it.

Q. Can you talk about the progress you've seen from Skyler Howard over the last -- especially since the springtime and just really what do you expect from the quarterback position?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: I think the number one thing that we got to talk about when it comes to the quarterback position is he's taking care of the football. He did play in 2 1/2 games last year and didn't throw a pick, had one fumble he learned a lesson from. We're going to use our quarterbacks in the run game a little bit more. We did last year for 2 1/2 games, which is going to put a little burden on him when it comes to ball security.

Everybody talks to the quarterback position about taking care of the ball when he's throwing it, but you've got to take care of the ball in the pocket, and you've got to take care of the ball when you tuck it and head downfield as well.

Whoever that guy is for us is going to be the guy that can take care of the ball more than anything. We were 120th in turnover margin last year. We felt like we could have -- we know we would have put ourselves in position to win the conference if we'd have done a better job of taking care of the ball and getting turnovers on defense as well. That's been something that's been stressed, and it's going to be something that we're going to continue to stress going into camp.

Q. Along the offensive line, obviously, you lost Spain and Mark to graduation. What

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kind of battles do you anticipate at camp, especially at the guard position with Pankey and the transfer, Kyle Bosch from Michigan?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: I feel really good about where we're at at guard. Those two guys last year, Spain and Glowinski, were pretty good for us, and they're both in the NFL now. I feel like we're replacing them with guys that are equally as good or potentially could even be better.

Adam Pankey started all of last year for us at tackle. He's going to have the ability to be able to go out at tackle if we need him to. Kyle Bosch coming in, gaining immediate eligibility is important. He's a big, physical guy that started at Michigan as a true freshman.

I've only coached one guy that has started as a true freshman in my 16 years of being at this level. So Tony Matteo and Grant Lingafelter are guys that were our backups last year. So we've got a lot of bodies there.

I think the bigger question is getting consistent play at tackle. Marquis Lucas is going to be the same guy, even better than he was last year. We need to find another tackle, and that's going to be the biggest question mark going into camp.

Q. Not specific to your guys right now, but you've coached a lot of quarterbacks and spread offenses, air raid offenses. Are there some consistent characteristics that you've seen out of the most successful of those guys?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: Yeah, I think it goes back to what I said a minute ago, just taking care of the football is the biggest thing. Big 12's been blessed with just tremendous quarterback play throughout -- going back all the way into 2000, back when I was -- I coached with Coach Kingsbury, who's running around here somewhere, haven't seen him yet.

So much good quarterback play in the Big 12. We're used to good quarterback play. The main thing, when it comes to winning a championship, is guys that take care of the football. That's the bottom line.

Everybody's going to have talented guys that can either run with it or be accurate and throw with it, so many good skill guys that they're going to make you look right as well. But good skill guys that take care of the football is the number one quality we look for.

Q. Will you have other -- you mentioned the quarterback being more mobile

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maybe. Will you have other changes in your offense, and will you continue to use more kind of a multiple choice approach at running back?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: Yeah, I can't be too specific. There's people watching. Different personnel groupings is important. Us personally, we go back -- this league is so similar with what we do offensively. There's so much carryover from guys that I've coached or guys that I've coached with or whatever it is to the point to where we've got to do different things to change to keep people off balance.

Getting the quarterback involved in the run game, I've mentioned that. Different personnel groupings is important. Different tempos is important. I think defenses have caught up to if you just stay in one personnel grouping and think you're going to just go as fast as you possibly can, I think defenses have caught up to that, and they can suffocate that.

So being able to change is important, and then being able to vary things is important as well.

Q. Wide receiver took a big hit for you guys in Mario Alford and Kevin White going into the NFL draft. What do you expect to do at that position this season?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: Just got to coach them up. No one knew who knows guys were a year ago. We weren't really talking about those guys a year ago. We're going to coach up the guys we've got.

We're in a much better place than we were two years ago when we lost 99 percent of our receiving production. Right now, even with those guys gone, we've got at least 50 percent of our receiving production coming back. Jordan Thompson is a good little player, keeps getting better. Daikiel Shorts is a very solid guy that has a chance to be one of those replacements on the outside. Shelton Gibson is probably the fastest player I've ever coached.

Then we brought in three guys who I think all three are a different caliber player than we've recruited for the last several years. All those guys are young, but we coached them a little bit in June, but it's hard to really assess it when you don't really have the football. I like those guys' mentality and the way their bodies are.

We've just got to get out and practice. If you look back at the history going all the way back to the 2000s and Texas Tech, we've had a fairly

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successful rate of developing receivers. So I don't see this year being any different.

Q. You mentioned running backs, personnel groupings. I know a couple of years ago Charles Sims, you're real proud of how he caught the football. Obviously, he was a big deal going to the NFL. Of your running backs -- and we know their names -- but does one stand up as far as a better receiver right now?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: There's a reason Wendell Smallwood was here today. He sat there and learned from Charles Sims during his true freshman year, wasn't needed as much as we needed Charles two years ago this past year, but he was arguably our best back in terms of being able to carry the ball and line up as a receiver and catch the ball.

He's potentially the most versatile guy I've ever been around. We're planning on doing some of the same things with William Crest, that running back-type body that can carry the ball and can also transition into the slot and be able to do things successfully downfield. Is going to be interesting to watch.

Q. Dana, obviously concussion is a big issue everywhere, and you guys had it front and center with Clint last year. The decision in the conference to limit the hitting days seems like it could be a real positive move staying ahead of that issue. How have you seen it? Is that going to change any practice, number of days you guys hit?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: It's a model that I've been following for the past four years. It's not going to restrict our practice time whatsoever. We haven't had a two-a-day at West Virginia in four years, haven't had -- really actually haven't had back-to-back full contact days in quite some time.

The way the model is right now is something that I've supported and something that we've done at West Virginia since I got there.

It's obviously an issue. And Clint was a great player for us and just unfortunately kind of took too many hits there towards the end. But that's just part of the game, and that's why he's coaching right now too.

It's something that coaches are incredibly hands off on. It's 100 percent in the doctors' hands, and whatever they decide, we've got to support. That's just the way it's going to be.

Q. Just given the amount of experience you've got coming back at the running back position, you answered a few questions ago about some new receivers and some guys who are going to be getting a lot of playing time this season, do you expect that the running load will kind of carry this offense, maybe for the first time in your career?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: Hope not. Geez, I still like to throw the ball a good bit, you know. I know one thing: If you can't do either one, you're not going to be worth a darn, I can assure you of that.

We worked hard -- and Ron Cook coming in has been instrumental in this. But we've worked hard on getting our run game to where people got to respect it. Last year we were still top seven or eight in passing in the country, but we ran the ball over 50 percent of the time.

That's just kind of what our philosophy is, and that's the way it's going to be. The more success we have running the ball, the more we're going to do it. But if people are putting too many people up there to block, we're not going to do it.

So you've just got to figure out what the tendencies are for what they do defensively, what their plan's going to be, and you need to be able to adjust accordingly. If you can't run the ball and throw the ball, then you're not going to be successful offensively.

Q. Every coach so far has said that they don't mind the limit in contact drills. Is that a sign of the change, maybe more spread offenses being run, or why is that? It seems like maybe older coaches would say, hey, I need to hit a little bit more. Why is that?

COACH HOLGORSSEN: I think it goes back to what she just talked about with the concussion stuff. You've got to protect the kids as much as you possibly can, but you can't lose sight of the fact that it's a physical game.

Everybody wants to say, well, we're going to go to the spread offense and be soft. You go to the spread offense and you're soft, you're going to get your butt kicked. So you got to maintain a physical nature. It's a physical game.

They can curb it from practice time a little bit, but if you curb it out there on the game field, you're not going to be successful. I just think you've got to be able to find that balance, and you've got to be able to do as much contact and as

much teaching these guys the proper techniques and the proper mentality, which is being tough. If you don't do that, you're not going to win.

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