



Wisconsin Defensive Interviews

Thursday, December 29, 2016
Omni Dallas Hotel, Dallas, Texas



QUESTIONS FOR DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR JUSTIN WILCOX

Q. Western Michigan has good running backs. What are you going to do?

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: They're very efficient in the run game. Obviously the thing that shows up in the run game is just how physical they are, the backs and the whole line. I think the whole line doesn't probably get as much attention from you guys as they deserve.

The tight end (Donnie Ernsberger) is an extremely physical blocker in the run game, and it just helps everything.

Q. T.J. Watt obviously gets a lot of attention because of his name. But what kind of impact does he have for you guys? I know the whole defensive unit is really good.

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: I could talk about a lot of guys, but T.J. in particular, the skills he has. He's a very gifted guy. He's big. He's strong. He's athletic. And you take those traits and then add in the intangible things, the toughness, the work ethic, the competitiveness, the guy loves football.

I got there in spring. And from then until now, he just keeps getting better. The more he plays, he just keeps getting better and better. The way he approaches a game is very important to him. He's extremely driven and motivated. Great teammate. Couldn't say enough good things about him.

Q. I think I read a quote from you about his approach to it is like a business-like approach, and that's not saying the other guys don't approach it well.

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: He makes decisions based on his football career, what he eats, how he sleeps, how he prepares. And there's a lot of guys on our team who do that. But T.J. is one of those guys. I mean, from how he hydrates to workouts, everything matters. And he understands how important that stuff is. And it's all about gaining an edge, and he does that.

Q. Do you use him (T.J. Watt) as he moves around, or is he kind of Swiss Army knife?

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: Well, he's an outside linebacker. We play 3-4 in base and nickel defense. And in our nickel defense, both he and Vince [Biegel] stay on the field and become essentially ends. But we'll drop them and move them around in trying to create things in pass protection. So he does some different things for us as does Vince and some other guys. But those guys, because of their approach and their mental capacity, you could do those things and they give us more flexibility because of that.

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Q. His (T.J. Watt) background as a tight end, does that have anything at all to do with it?

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: I think the more positions you play growing up, the more you understand football and the big picture. And I think it's the same when a guy comes out of high school, high school quarterback.

T.J. Edwards, quarterback, plays middle linebacker. You probably see a little less of it this day and age because everybody has become more specialized but it always helps.

Q. Going back to Corey [Davis], when you watch film with him, what do you see?

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: He's a very complete -- he's really good in a lot of different ways. He is physical. He'll catch short and intermediate routes, break a tackle, and turn it into a big game. He can take you deep. He runs in breaking routes and outbreaking routes, catches a ball with his hands. He gets in and out of breaks. He can be strong out of his break and throw a guy. He does a lot of different things. He is probably the same way. He doesn't always play the X or always play the Z or always play the slot. He moves around, and they do that to create matchups and get him the ball.

Q. You've talked about their (Western Michigan's offense) unit specifically. They do a bunch of different things, don't they? That's kind of what makes them successful. Does that make it tough for you?

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: Their offense? Yeah. They're an 11-personnel team. They're very efficient. They don't make many mistakes at all. They don't turn the ball over. They get the ball to their playmakers. They're just well-coached; and they execute very, very well. You don't win the number of games they've won without executing, and they've done that at a very high level.

Q. Can you compare them to anybody you have faced?

DC JUSTIN WILCOX: Some of the style of offense we've seen, some of the similar things. But no two teams are the same. But you see some of the same runs here and there, some of the pass concepts.

But I think it's just the -- as much as anything, it's the execution. They've been very, very efficient. Quarterback (Zach Terrell) does a really good job. They run the ball. They're physical in the run game, and they can obviously throw it. And so that's a good football team. There is a reason they won all their games.

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QUESTIONS FOR LB VINCE BIEGEL

Q. Does T.J. Watt come to you for advice on any decisions?

LB VINCE BIEGEL: T.J. Watt has not. But I know he has some other big role models in his life that I know he looks up to. And can share a great deal of knowledge and some advice that I know he's got plenty of resources for.

Q. When you look at this offense and Corey Davis, wide receiver, they've got a couple good running backs too, talk about the challenge they bring because of all that talent.

LB VINCE BIEGEL: Yeah, like you said before, everybody wants to talk about the quarterback and wide receiver combination. But I think in every good offense there's an element of run involved, and Western Michigan has had that all season. A very talented running back, a big guy. They've also had a couple guys slip in for more rushing and become a power and speed combination.

They're a very talented group, and we're looking forward to the opportunity to play with them and get out there and do what you have to do.

Q. How much do you guys relish the opportunity? There's only two undefeated teams in the FBS. One is playing in the national championship, and you guys are playing the other one. How much do you relish the opportunity to play that team?

LB VINCE BIEGEL: It's a great opportunity besides them being undefeated, Western Michigan is a talented football team. Say what you want about what conference they're in. This is a talented team, and they've got talented players on that roster. We're excited to be playing in the Cotton Bowl against them, just us going out there and kind of rewriting their Cinderella story and kind of turning it into our final stamp on our season.

They've got a very well-coached team, got talented players. But I think we also have some great weapons to counter their talents.

Q. They are not the top team, but they beat two of them.

LB VINCE BIEGEL: They beat Illinois and Northwestern, both at Illinois and at Northwestern. I think that speaks to the type of players they have. I think it speaks to the type of characters their team has.

Q. You talk about putting the stamp on your season. Clearly a Big Ten championship game. You guys have had a good season. So how do you view it as a whole when you look at it,

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despite the disappointment of losing that game?

LB VINCE BIEGEL: I haven't really had a chance to really -- we're still in the season. We're in a bowl game, and we played in the Big Ten championship a few weeks ago. We're still in the grunt. And once the bowl season is completed, I'll be able to kind of look at it as a whole and see and reflect on the season.

But what I can say is that our team has been extremely resilient. And what I mean by that is our schedule has been a challenge, the amount of injuries that our team has had, especially from the defensive side. Jack Cichy going down on the season with an injury. Chris Orr going down with an injury. Myself going down with a foot injury for a few games. I think it speaks to resilience, not just defense on this team but our team as a whole. And it's a fun group of young men.

QUESTIONS FOR LB T.J. EDWARDS

Q. When you look at this offense, a lot of people look at the quarterback and receivers. But when you look at them as a whole and look at the running backs, what's the challenge they present for you guys?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: I think a lot of people don't talk about them enough just because of how many dangerous things they can do to you if you're not focused or if you're not mentally locked in because I think they have so many great weapons. Just like you said, they can really hurt you if you're not on your game.

Q. You watch out for all of them?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: That's what I'm saying. There's not one guy you can focus on because one guy buries you deep. I think it's going to be a great challenge for our defense, and I think we're excited for it.

Q. There's only two teams in the FBS that are undefeated. You guys are playing one and Alabama. Clearly you'd rather be in the playoffs. But if not, how much do you relish the opportunity to play the team that everybody else is looking at as undefeated?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: It's a huge challenge and huge opportunity for us. They've been literally perfect throughout the whole year to where they've not lost a game. That is incredibly hard to do at this level.

I think it's a great opportunity for us, just like you said. I think you look at it, you see the record. But at the end of the day, you're playing the team and not anything they've done in the past. So it's going to be fun.

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Q. I know the disappointment of losing the Big Ten championship game. But as a whole, you had a six-game winning streak going into that. Obviously, you guys just had a tough game that day.

LB T.J. EDWARDS: Right. I think it's almost bittersweet because we did a lot to get to that game, beat a lot of really good teams. But just the couple games that we lost kind of hurts, especially the Big Ten championship. I think it's something that stings with a lot of guys. And that's why I think the excitement is so high for this next game because we just want to get back out on the field and prove ourselves again. So it's exciting.

Q. You talk about it being bittersweet. As hard as it was, it's not hard for you guys to get up and get motivated to go. I mean, you can go one of two ways after something like that happens. So you don't sense that's going to be an issue?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: There's a lot of teams in college football who don't get this opportunity to play in a bowl game, especially a huge one like the Cotton Bowl against an undefeated team. We lost the game, but you can't look back. You look back and correct what happened. Just win the big game.

Q. You can't let it beat you twice, right?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: Exactly.

Q. So when you look at Western Michigan's offense, they turned the ball over less than any team in the country. Do you approach that any differently than you would normally as far as trying to turn the ball over?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: I think you just take it as a challenge because they've done such a good job of protecting the ball. So I think it's almost a challenge to try to make those things happen because if you have turnovers, it gives your offense a better chance to do what they do.

And it's been impressive what they've done holding onto the ball, and the quarterback being smart with the ball. So it's something that we really emphasize this week because we know we have to do that to win.

Q. Have you emphasized turnovers more this year in particular? I mean you guys are getting more than you have in the past and especially 13 in the last four games.

LB T.J. EDWARDS: Yeah. I don't know if there's anything different. I know that our team is huge about -- all about the ball. I think our DBs do a great job. They're just walking into every game throwing footballs, guys who can make plays, I think that they do a great job.

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Q. What do you think Coach [Justin] Wilcox has done this year that's helped your game?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: I think he just does a good job of trusting us. And especially in the linebackers, I think there's a lot of responsibility. It's nice to know that your coach is behind you and trusts what you're doing and trusts what you're seeing. And he lets you play free, and I think that's good. We're very lucky about that.

Q. I think some people look at that Penn State game and say maybe Coach [Justin] Wilcox could have done this or that, maybe brought more pressure. What would you say to that? What are the reasons why that game doesn't really take anything away from what Coach Wilcox has done?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: A lot of people point fingers. I'm sure he'd do things differently if he had to, and we would do things differently, things we didn't execute during that game, plays that were left on the field that they made and we didn't.

That's what it comes down to. They made more plays than us. We're not pointing any fingers at any one person. It's tough but I'm sure he would gladly take the blame over us. That's just the kind of guy he is.

Q. You probably are sick of hearing this, but a lot of people are saying that this is the biggest game in program history for Western Michigan and you guys won't be as motivated as them. But do you think that you can match their urgency level, so to speak?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: We just went out a couple weeks ago and lost the Big Ten championship. That feeling of how bad that hurt, I don't think really anyone understands. So the fact that we get to go out against a good team and play another game with all the seniors and send them off right away is comparable to how much we really want to play in this game.

I'm sure they're going to come out just as hard as we would. So I think it's going to be really fun and come down to the same thing.

Q. What do you think that the inside linebacker battle is going to be this off-season? You have you three who are battling this and then Ryan [Connelly]. What's that competition going to be like for you guys?

LB T.J. EDWARDS: It's tough because we're such great friends. Everyone would like to start. That's the consensus, and it's a fun challenge. Everyone is bringing their A game every day.

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QUESTIONS FOR LB T.J. WATT

LB T.J. WATT: This year we've been having more turnovers in general. There's something to be said about the way we all gel as a team not only on the field but off the field.

We just care so much about each other that we're always putting our chips in one basket, and we're all looking forward to seeing everyone succeed. When you're an unselfish player, a lot of great things will happen. No one's trying to do too much. And that's what leads to turnovers.

Q. As disappointing as the Big Ten championship game was, do you get a sense about this team's ability to bounce back and get back to where you were before that game?

LB T.J. WATT: We say we definitely had a bitter taste in our mouth from that game. We've been priding ourselves all year in showing up in big time games. And it sucks to not get the result we wanted in that game. But we have a great opportunity ahead of us in the Cotton Bowl against an undefeated opponent. And we're not shying away from this game at all. We're ready to show people what we can do.

Q. As good as the Big Ten was as a whole this year, how much pride do you take in the fact that you did get to that point?

LB T.J. WATT: It was huge. A lot of people counted us out as soon as they saw our schedule. Our coaches did a great job of keeping it one game at a time, one practice at a time. And that's crucial. When you're playing in a conference like Big Ten, you have to respect each opponent regardless if they're undefeated. That's something we pride ourselves on.

Q. You made a point of playing an undefeated team in this bowl. One of only two left in the country. What does that mean to you guys? How much do you relish that opportunity? If you're not going to play in the playoff, you get to play against a team that doesn't have a loss?

LB T.J. WATT: We're not taking this challenge lightly at all. Part of it is because of the taste in our mouth from the Big Ten game. Part is because we're facing a really good opponent. And, like I said before, I don't care what conference you're in, who you're playing. If you're undefeated, that's one heck of an accomplishment. And we're going in there and trying to wreck their season. They would love to finish undefeated, and I'd love to make sure they don't. So it's going to be a great matchup. And there's going to be a lot of great plays. And we're going to see who gets the W at the end of the day.

Q. And they played two Big Ten teams and beat them on the road.

LB T.J. WATT: They can do it. We're not overlooking them at all. We're ready.

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Q. Everybody wants to look at the quarterback-receiver combo. And Corey Davis, we know how good a receiver he is. But they've got a couple good running backs as well. They play that pass game off the running game. Talk about the challenges overall.

LB T.J. WATT: I think going into every game our number one goal is just to stop the run early. It's easy. If you stop the run early on, you force them in long distances they're not comfortable with, it makes them pass the ball. Some people might look at this game and say you got to stop the run. You've got Corey Davis on the other side. Because everything stems from the run. You've got play action everything else. Like every other game, we've got to stop the run. You have to stop the running game and then try to control number 84 and the quarterback. It's going to a great challenge, like I said. And I can't wait to get out there.

Q. Your defensive backs, there's three that have had four interceptions. They've been up to the challenge this year. I'm sure you feel confident.

LB T.J. WATT: I feel confident our guys going against anybody in the country. We've got guys in the back end doing great things all year long. And I'm finally happy that people are starting to realize it. We've been seeing it in practice. So it's interesting to see people start to recognize their good game.

QUESTIONS FOR CB SOJOURN SHELTON

Q. Any tweaks against Penn State?

CB SOJOURN SHELTON: Only thing is we didn't win the 50/50 balls. I don't take anything away from Penn State, but it wasn't like they were scheming us up and we weren't in position to make plays. It was just dead on. It's either a ball in the air that you're going to win or you're going to lose. We didn't win some of those one-on-one battles. So it will be fun. Monday is going to be pretty fun. And I think overall, as a secondary, we're all excited for this challenge. This is a big one in a big bowl game. We've got to be able to come in and just try to play our best ball.

Q. As you mentioned, probably the best wide receiver [Corey Davis] in college football. How good is he?

CB SOJOURN SHELTON: Corey Davis is really good. I think what stands him out is, when you look at receivers in college football, they all have usually one thing they're good at. Maybe you can run really good routes but not as fast. Maybe he has really good hands but not really a good route runner. I think that's what. Corey just separates himself from all of that. He's a good route runner. He has speed. He's tall. He can catch the ball. His radius is really big as far as

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catching a football. It's going to be a really big challenge trying to figure out.

Q. What does it mean for you guys to be playing the only other team other than Alabama that's undefeated still and the challenge there?

CB SOJOURN SHELTON: The challenge. I think for us we understand it's hard to go undefeated in college football. No matter what conference you're in, who you play, that's extremely impressive.

So to be able to play one out of the two undefeated teams left in college football is big for us. We want to be able to top that, end that streak. But at the same time, I think we're just focused on winning this game. It will definitely help next year's team going into next year and just for the senior group. The amount of work that we've put in overall as a group, I think everybody on this team wants to see this class go out on top.

Q. As disappointing as the Big Ten championship game was, you don't let that beat you twice. I'm assuming that it wasn't hard to get focused back in.

CB SOJOURN SHELTON: No, it wasn't. Everybody on this team felt that pain after that game.

You know, coaches gave us a week off just to kind of recharge. And me, personally, I don't take losing well. But, at the same time, it just kind of gave me a chance to get over that, get that completely out of my mind. I didn't have to lose a game and then the next week have to find a way to get over that. So get over it and prepare for a game the following week. But it gave me some time to really get all that frustration and whatever I had out from that game. And now I'm focused on this bowl game. Just trying to get a win.

Q. You guys relish challenges, don't you?

CB SOJOURN SHELTON: We faced some really good receivers this year. LSU's receiving core is really good. Michigan, Ohio State, Nebraska, we faced good receiving cores. It's going to be fun.

QUESTIONS FOR S LEO MUSSO

Q. When you look at this team and you look at the wide receivers, what do you think when you look at Corey [Davis]?

S LEO MUSSO: Very, very talented, very talented. He can do it all. As a defensive back, you always want to go against the best player. So it's great opportunity for us, and we're excited to play him.

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Q. How much of a challenge is it for you guys to show -- you've been great defensively -- I guess pass defense all year. How much fun is it to face somebody like this in a bowl game?

S LEO MUSSO: It's awesome. You get to play one of the best teams in the nation. Any time you get to play one of the best teams, it's a great opportunity. I'm approaching it like we're the underdogs. They're the undefeated team. They've beaten everybody and nobody has beaten them. We're excited to play them and play such a great team.

Q. There are only two undefeated teams in the FBS. One is playing in the playoff, and you guys are playing the other one. Is there an opportunity to throw them off their year?

S LEO MUSSO: It's just special to play in the game, honestly. It would be cool to get the win. Not just because they're undefeated. You want to win just because you want to win. But it's a great opportunity for us to play a great team. They're one of two undefeated teams in the nation, so it's -- and especially at a venue like the Cotton Bowl. You know, it's great for Wisconsin. And we're very excited.

Q. I know the Big Ten championship game, disappointed in the outcome of that. But you were on a six-game winning stream before that. Where do you sense this team is? Getting past that and ready to pick up where you were?

S LEO MUSSO: Absolutely. Not only putting that one behind us but using it as motivation. You know, being ahead and then them coming back and beating us leaves a very, very sour taste in your mouth. So that's kind of a motivating factor for guys to come out and practice harder. You know, working on techniques maybe where we got exposed and just certain things like that. You're very excited and very motivated to play. You go back and watch the games. Personally, there's a lot of great teams. You can't take anybody in this league for granted. There's a lot of talented players, a lot of great coaches. And I think that kind of speaks for itself.

Q. Leo, from what you've seen on tape, why is Western Michigan so good at not turning the ball over?

S LEO MUSSO: Because they got great players. Honestly, their run game, their pass game, their O-line. The quarterback, obviously, does a great job of protecting the ball and just -- I think that in itself kind of speaks -- they've got playmakers all over. So they don't have to rely on just one specific aspect of the game to really focus on. Or I guess people would be able to kind of key off of them. So they're just very talented, I think, more so than anything.

Q. Do you have to approach the offense any differently when you know it's going to be difficult to take the ball away? I know you've had a lot of turnovers recently.

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S LEO MUSSO: I don't think so. I don't think any offense is trying to give you the ball anyway. It's always a challenge each and every week. So you just go out there and try to play your game. And, if the turnovers come, they come.

Q. What do you think it is about your team that's allowed you to get more turnovers this year than in the past?

S LEO MUSSO: A lot of high effort, I guess, plays. A lot of smart guys. And I think everybody working together and being on the same page. Obviously, a big credit of it goes up to the up front for our interceptions. Everybody has got interceptions this year. The big credit goes to the entire front seven because they're getting pressure on that quarterback. And just guys being in the right spot at the right time.

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