



## Western Michigan Defensive Interviews



Friday, December 30, 2016  
Omni Dallas Hotel, Dallas, Texas

### QUESTIONS FOR DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR ED PINKHAM

*Q. I'm hoping Keion [Adams] gets a shot (at the NFL).*

**DC ED PINKHAM:** He thinks quickness. This will be a big game for him. The bigger the arena, the more legitimate you have success rushing the passer.

I think of what's the name of the guy who came from Syracuse who played for the Colts? But his deal was he was -- [Dwight] Freeney. Burst kind of guy. That's what he is. He's not a first and second down run stopper. He's a pass-rush guy.

*Q. Quickness off the edge?*

**DC ED PINKHAM:** Quickness and he goes against two of the best offensive tackles in Division I in practice every day. And he more than holds his own against both of those guys, and those guys are pretty good.

*Q. I'm glad you brought that up because people talk about Wisconsin's offense. Obviously that's been their trademark, these big, huge pile driving trucks.*

**DC ED PINKHAM:** They're big.

*Q. But Western's offensive line is pretty darned good. And I know we go 1s against 2s because I'm at practice a lot. But still, he's seen pretty good ones.*

**DC ED PINKHAM:** We go one against ones in two-minute drill. And Jimmy [Williams] and [Brian] Callahan will get together in pass rush when we're doing seven on sevens. So they get a chance to go against those guys. There's some quickness with those guys, too. Our offensive line, you're right. In terms of Division I, offensive line -- we have a Division I offensive line.

*Q. We've seen a lot more blitzing this year, bringing in corners and safeties. And I've seen Justin [Tranquill] coming from all kinds of angles. Can we expect some of that kind of stuff on Monday or you going to keep us guessing?*

**DC ED PINKHAM:** Each week you've got to look at what it is that they're doing. There are blitzes at some times based on exactly the way they're blocking it or based on what plays they're running. And then there are times when you say, "I don't like the matchup. In this particular blitz, this guy has to cover that guy." And so you say I'm not really keen on that matchup. So you say we're going to can that one for a while.

So it's going to rely on the ebb and flow of the game. We've had 15 practices or whatever it's

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been to prepare. So we've had a chance to look at a lot of different pressures. And I've settled upon those that we feel we're comfortable with. How much we use them again, the ebb and flow of the game will determine that to a large extent.

*Q. What does it say about this group, especially these upperclassmen? Some were at 1-11, some were recruited into 1-11. They bought into the vision and got to the point we're at right now.*

**DC ED PINKHAM:** You know, to you a young guy and obviously P.J. [Fleck] starting four years ago, younger then, he had a plan in his head. And at times, it's in his head and not in all of ours. And there were guys who were playing that maybe didn't share the same vision, players.

And I think he made the difficult decisions at times to say, "Hey, we have to part ways." And as a result, I think the word amongst the players was passed down that, "Hey, this is the way it's going to be. So either we all adopt it and buy into the culture or, you know, we should go."

And through that first year, we kind of culled the kids that maybe didn't believe as much in what we were doing to the point now where you know, guys like Keion [Adams]. Keion was from an inner city school in North Carolina. And to say that he would have been a guy who bought into the culture from day one, I would not have said that knowing him. And I love the guy.

But I think in time, he's, like, an example of a guy that has said, You know, what? Yeah, I believe you. In order to be successful this is what we have to do. And so he and the guys who maybe didn't feel the same way parted ways.

And I would say that's probably what has happened to the point now where if you come to our practices, you'll see these guys running it. PJ has an expression that bad teams don't have any leaders. Good teams have coaches that lead. And elite teams have players that lead.

And he has put in a system where we have developed this type of mentality amongst the older kids. As a coach, it's refreshing because it makes my job much easier. I don't have to spend my time as a disciplinarian. I can spend my time as a teacher.

### QUESTIONS FOR DL KEION ADAMS

*Q. Who sticks out to you on this team as someone that you look to for inspiration?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** If I had to say, it would probably be Justin Tranquill. He always has that energy. He never has a down day. No matter what, he's always smiling and that just shows that no matter what, if you can just maintain a positive perspective on life, nothing can ever get you down. Just keep that up. I'd say Justin Tranquill brings that other side of the energy as well.

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*Q. A couple guys were telling me that Coach [PJ] Fleck gave you an object lesson involving Princess Diana this week. Can you give me the nutshell of what Coach Fleck was trying to tell you guys?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** Basically just don't be scared to be different. The way we've done things is different than any other Group of 5 or any other MAC team or any other Western Michigan team in program history. So just don't be scared to be different. Be yourself and always no matter what, never let the world change you. Just show that you're here to stay. That's really the main thing.

*Q. What's been your favorite sort of non-football lesson that Coach [PJ] Fleck has brought up? He brings in stuff every week. What sticks out to you as something that you kind of thought, "I'd never hear this from any other coach"?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** To just always maintain a positive perspective in response to life. No matter what life throws at you or circumstances, always keep your joy. As long as you keep your joy and a positive mindset, nothing can keep you down. You don't look at something as I failed or woe is me. Just look at it as a challenge. That's probably the main thing. Just maintain a positive perspective and response.

*Q. Any specific lessons that he's brought in in terms of the object or material that kind of caught you off guard or you found really interesting?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** Row the Boat itself because when we first got in, it was like, "What does 'Row the Boat' have to do with a Bronco?" It's not just about football or not just about the program. It's about life. It's about never giving up and a never-giving-up mantra. Always the energy. The boat is sacrifice, and the oar is the compass and direction you set for yourself.

That's what stuck with me. It's guided me through my life and made me the person that I am today and allowed me to get to where I am. Just row the boat.

*Q. Do seniors get an oar when they leave the program?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** I asked Coach [PJ Fleck] about that, literally before we have our banquet. Hope we do. Hopefully it's not illegal. That would be the main thing they worry about. I've been trying to get an oar to hang on my wall. That's the main thing but hopefully so. We have to see.

*Q. Got to get the seniors together and make that a team tradition?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** That should be a tradition. But just everything Coach [PJ] Fleck has

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given us, I'm thankful for everything he's given us, just this opportunity and allowing me to be here. If he does give me an oar, if not, I can buy one. They're not that much. It will be fine.

*Q. When you think about where you guys have come from 1-11 to this point, still undefeated, I mean, as a group of seniors that are leaving and have been part of that, what does that do for you guys?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** I mean, it doesn't only affect us, it affects the community, it affects the university, and then it affects our family.

To go from 1-11 to 13-0 shows perseverance. Coach [PJ] Fleck has taught us to not just look at the end result. Just trust the process. If we look at the end result, we're going to miss on the opportunities and everything that comes with it and miss out on the hard work we have to put in.

We have bumps and bruises and scars in that 1-11 season. It molded us into who we are now. When we've seen adversity this season and stuff that didn't go our way, we're prepared for it because the 1-11 season built the foundation to set us up and propel us into this 13-0 season.

*Q. How important is it to finish undefeated?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** It's important. But win, lose, or draw, I'm excited for what we did for the community and the city of Kalamazoo. 13-0.

Not saying we're the best team in MAC history, but there's an argument there. All I wanted for Christmas was a MAC championship, and we definitely brought one of the three in the past since the program has been here.

So it's definitely a big thing, and we're focused on it because we don't want to be 13-1. But at the end of the day, I feel like we've done enough.

*Q. Would you rather be the underdog in a game or a favorite?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** It doesn't matter to me. We try not to focus too much on the media. And we let you guys do your job. So underdog, favorite, no matter what, we've been both in every scenario this year. So as long as we go out there and take care of our business and focus on us, it really doesn't matter.

*Q. Are there Fleck-isms that will live with you for life?*

**DL KEION ADAMS:** There are a few. "Plus three" is probably the main one. "Never finish at the stopping point". "Always go above and beyond." That's one of the main ones.

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### QUESTIONS FOR LB ASANTAY BROWN

*Q. What's your favorite piece of Bronconese?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** Mine would be the "Row the Boat" mantra. You keep an oar in the water, always rowing during the hardest times. You're going to face adversity in your life. You don't go through life and it's easy because it never is. So when he brought that in there, you just continue to row the boat and use that mantra. We really believe that.

*Q. You guys have gotten to this point and the MAC championship. How important is it for you to finish this off now that you've gotten here, to finish undefeated?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** It's really important, but we're not focused on the result. We're process driven. It's important, but we can't get uptight about it. At the end of the day, it's a game and it's something that we love to do. If we focus too much on it, we lose what we have in sight, we don't want to do that. We go one game at a time. We don't look at it, "Yeah, we are undefeated." We see that, but we don't look at it as we're top dogs. We still have to earn everything. Nothing will be given.

*Q. I guess you guys won't be defined by one game, no matter what happens because of what you've already done as a whole group, coming from 1-11 to now?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** No matter what. Of course. Like you said, we're not defined by one game because this culture is bigger than just one game. It's not always about the wins and losses. It's about becoming a man in the process of playing football.

*Q. Were you already in the program at 1-11?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** I was recruited.

*Q. So how does a guy get recruited into a 1-11 program and be convinced this could happen?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** Well, it's a hard process. You've got other people saying, "They're 1-11. They're not going to be any good". But what the coaches had for us was more than just football. It was life lessons and becoming a man, you know? And when you have coaches that talk about it and they're actually about it, then it's not something you just turn down. When opportunities present itself like that, that's something you take.

*Q. We see Coach [PJ] Fleck in interviews and sidelines. How would you describe him, being around him all the time? Is it anything different than what we see publicly?*

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**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** No. He's always energetic, always talking, always leading. He's always finding a way to make us better, always changing our best, no matter what.

And he always tells us sometimes we're going to have -- failing in the program, that equals growth. If you're always successful, you don't really fail. If you don't have any failing, how can you grow? Because sometimes people might get satisfied with just doing that. But if you're failing, you always find a way to better yourself.

*Q. After you guys won your first-ever bowl game, I know he showed you all the Cotton Bowl logo. And here you are sitting in front of that logo. What went through your mind when he showed you that? You guys were basically trying to enjoy winning a bowl game, and he's talking about the possible next one.*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** When he showed us that, we all came to it as a team. We're like, "Okay. If we really want to do this, that's something we got to do. We can't be half in. Has to be 100%. Everybody has to want to go there."

And when we saw that, We're like, "Why can't it be done? Why can't it be done?" Everybody plays football. Everybody suits up. One game at a time, we go. And look at us now, we're here.

*Q. Yeah. Is that the first time y'all knew that was a possibility, or had y'all even thought about that really until he brought it up?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** Well, at first, we're all -- we wanted to go to a bowl game, MAC championship. And when he brought that up, it can't be his vision of what we want to do. At the end of the day, we have to play. They do the film and everything, break it down for us as much as they can. But at the end of the day, we have to play. So it has to be something that we want to do, not just the coach. So when he brought it to us, it's like, do you guys want to do this or not? We came up as a team we wanted to do this.

*Q. Do you know much about Cotton Bowl history? Is it a game you've watched in the past?*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** I've watched it in the past, but I wouldn't say I know a lot of history about it. Just growing up, you watch a lot of bowl games. You don't necessarily know all the history about it. But I see we do have a book here that does have the history, so I'll definitely look in it.

*Q. It's kind of interesting because until Michigan State, there had only been one Big Ten team. There were not a lot of teams. It was always SEC-Big 12. So a little different to have Western Michigan against Wisconsin in the Cotton Bowl.*

**LB ASANTAY BROWN:** Yeah. It's going to be a good game, though.

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### QUESTIONS FOR DB JUSTIN TRANQUILL

*Q. How did you get recruited to this team?*

**DB JUSTIN TRANQUILL:** I was picturing myself part of this team, and it was a sense of peace. Normally, I'm like a mama's boy. I want to get other people's opinions before I make decisions. But I didn't do it. I woke up that morning. I said a quick prayer. And I didn't tell anybody. I just called Coach [PJ] Fleck and committed. I love telling it just because, looking back, I just see more and more how God's timing and everything panned out perfectly. At the time it may have seemed to me like there's no good to come from this. But, looking back, I just see more and more every day how, like, everything that happened to me played perfectly into His plan and how it's all worked out exactly how He wanted it to.

*Q. I've been covering the team for years and years and years. And I've talked to guys in interviews. But it's not until I talked to you individually that I'm struck by the fact that you all seem to have incredible faith. And you don't get that because there's no team mass or no team going to church. But everybody from Zach on down seems to have strong faith. And including P.J. I remember one of the first times I had lunch with him, he crossed and said his prayers before dinner. And that struck me. It's like these guys are all really into their faith. That, obviously, was part of the guiding factor for you.*

**DB JUSTIN TRANQUILL:** I think more than anything, a lot of the people look at our success this season and just think that it's maybe part of just our team in general and maybe some fluke. Whatever people think, I personally think -- and I've talked about it with multiple guys on the team -- that that aspect of our faith on this team has played a very critical component in how the season has gone. Because the cool thing is this year -- a lot of people don't know this -- this year alone was, like, the most football guys we've ever had be a part of our FCA, which is our Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It was cool to watch it pan out through the season, because more and more guys from the football team would come each week. I remember one week in particular we had 40 guys on the team come, which in past years we only had 10-15 guys. And it really turned in from moving away from that central group of 10-15 guys to really breaking out where we really challenged ourselves to break out and reach out and get other guys to come. And seeing how we reached out, got guys to come, and turn around and see how the season has gone, to me, that's God. I can't even sit here and take credit for that. That's just God working and moving on this team.

*Q. Let's get back to football a little bit. We know that Wisconsin has been running the ball because they're good at it, you know? And they don't throw. And I thought maybe it's because they don't throw the ball well. Coach Pinkham says no, it's because they don't have to. They run the ball effectively. In your position as a safety, you've got to kind of do both. You run support, but you've got to be looking for maximum backfield and tight ends. They do a lot of*

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*trickery, a lot of motion, a lot of formations. Talk about that challenge for you as a safety.*

**DB JUSTIN TRANQUILL:** I don't think that necessarily it's going to be anything too much to stress about in terms of having to over think things. Our coach has put in a really awesome game plan, which works well to our strengths for our team. Everyone has their gap to worry about, which is good because no one is going to be out of place. If you know your assignment and you know your job, everything is taken care of. So, for me, it's just going to be following my game plan, following my coaching and what they've been implementing all year.

*Q. You're confident the other 10 guys are going to be doing their job?*

**DB JUSTIN TRANQUILL:** Exactly. Do your job and know your team.

*Q. I got to know Buck Atkins (former WMU Safety). You had pretty good defensive backs, safeties that preceded you. Talk about what you learned from the guys that came before you.*

**DB JUSTIN TRANQUILL:** Buck was the one I would consider my mentor. We had a lot of awesome guys, but Buck was the one who took me under his wing and guided me as a freshman. He's one of those guys that off the field is hilarious, loves to have a good time. Funny guy, real down to earth. But, when it came to football, he was locked in. There was no messing around with him.

That was one thing that I learned. There's a time to have fun, be funny, be yourself. And then there's a time to really lock in and get focused. So that's been one thing that he implemented in a DB room that's kind of carried on and been his legacy is there's a time for fun and there's a time when it's time to lock in and get serious. So what he did for me is he taught me defense, taught me a little different pointers about safety. Because up until I got to Western, I was more of a corner. I'd never really played safety. So he kind of taught me everything I really needed to learn about being a safety.

And then, like I said, his whole idea of just being locked in in meetings and practice. Something that's carried on.

### QUESTIONS FOR DB DARIUS PHILLIPS

*Q. How's planning going?*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** It's going good. I feel like we have a great game plan. It's going to be a great game.

*Q. What is it about their side of the ball that concerns you the most? Anything jump out at*

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*you that maybe you hadn't seen when you started breaking down tape?*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** I don't feel we have any concerns, but they have the great run game, a great offensive line. Quarterback has great receivers that run great routes.

*Q. Talk about good receivers. What's it like going against Corey [Davis] in practice? How has he made you better? And how have you made him better?*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** I feel we've made each other better through the two years I've been playing corner.

He makes sure that I come out there and bring my best every day. Because if I don't, I'll get embarrassed. So I feel like our competition, the way we compete, we make each other better every day, every time we practice.

*Q. When you guys get to this point at the Cotton Bowl, I know Coach [PJ] Fleck showed you this logo right after you won a bowl game for the first time. What does it mean to have accomplished that goal and gotten to this point? I know the MAC championship is number one, but now you're here.*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** Well, our goal is -- we're here but it's not accomplished yet. We don't want to just say we came to the Cotton Bowl. We really want to win this Cotton Bowl. Our game plan is trusting each other and just playing.

*Q. You have got three pick-sixes. Is that right?*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** Yes.

*Q. Do you have another one in you?*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** Hopefully.

*Q. How much fun is that? Some guys go their whole career and look for one. Do you have three this season?*

**DB DARIUS PHILLIPS:** Me playing receiver, I really like having the ball in my hands so whenever I have the opportunity to touch the ball and make a change, I feel like I do everything I can to get to the end zone after that happens.

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### QUESTIONS FOR LB ROBERT SPILLANE

*Q. So what class are you?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** I'm a junior.

*Q. So you were being recruited during the 1-11 season?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** I was committed before that year. I was the first commitment in the 2014 class, and I believed in what Coach Fleck was saying and the culture and the process of growing into the team that we have become.

*Q. What was it about that message that really appealed to you at that time?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** Coach Fleck always told me to buy into the people of the program, not just the logo. So it's really about your relationships with your coach. I mean, I could have gone to a bigger named program, but it was all about getting to know the people and having that real family feel. The coaches love my family. And I have a big family, and they've always been accepting and open to them. And it wasn't just during the recruiting process. It's been like that since the day I first started getting recruited until now. And nothing has changed. My brother plays at Indiana. I don't want to throw anyone under the bus, but things happen. And there's divides in locker rooms. There's all this that doesn't really make sense. But they treat you well during recruiting. And, once you get there, you're there and it's not the same. But at Western it's been a true family feel since the day I was recruited until now.

*Q. Like you said, Coach had a vision. How long did it take when you got there until you realized that was the case and it wasn't going to be something different, it wasn't a bait and switch or whatever?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** Just how he treats his players every day and the energy he brings to the meetings and to his life. And he really inspires us as a team, as a whole, to be a family and to love what we're doing and to go out there and have fun. So that feel -- you know, I never really knew about this recruiting thing. I didn't want to be part of all this bait and switch and all this. So, as soon as I really felt that feel from Coach Fleck the first time I met him, my first ever college visit, I knew that this was the right place for me. And it's turned out the way I wanted it to. Excited about it.

*Q. That was your first college visit?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** First unofficial visit. I never went to another. That was it. I knew this was family, and I knew that other schools had called and wanted me to come visit. But I

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knew that my verbal commit was my bond. So that was my home, and I was excited for it.

*Q. I think a lot of people would have probably said you're crazy. The team is 1-11. Wouldn't you like to say, "Look at me now" or "look at us" now?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** You know, it's those same people that love me and support me. Even the family members were, like, "Coach Fleck is just using Western to take the next step." But they didn't understand that he's about family and he's about love and he really is about developing players in a program. And he's done that. And I've just been happy since the day I got there with my decision.

*Q. What are the things that he's done that's really helped you maybe off the field? Because it sounds to me like you guys talk a lot about kind of life lessons more so than football. You hardly even talk before Xs and Os.*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** A lot of schools have rules, dos and don'ts. Coach Fleck understands that we know the right thing to do, and he really preaches that do the right thing, be a good person out in the community, give and serve. And that's what we pride ourselves on, giving and serving back in the community back to the people that need our love and support. And we do a great job of it in Kalamazoo.

And we're able to get the experience to come out here to the Children's Medical Center. Such a great experience. Just, like, literally it gives me chills every time I talk about it. Just seeing those kids smile and, like, knowing how much pain they're going through and just being able to put a smile on their faces. And then also give back to us by giving us the chills and giving us that love. So it was really amazing.

*Q. We hear the word "culture" from you guys a lot.*

*How much is the foundation set now? Obviously, you can't plan to go 13-0 and win the MAC every year. But how well is the foundation set that 1-11 is so far behind that what's happening now is more the norm?*

**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** After that 1-11 season, it took a lot of rebuilding. So there were players leaving left and right. Coach Fleck wanted to get new young energy in there, and he did a great job of recruiting. And the recruiting speaks for itself. Like Coach Fleck says, "Bad teams nobody leads; good teams coaches lead; and elite teams players lead." So he's really given us the reins to go out there and lead the fellow teammates. Our leadership has grown year by year, steadily, steadily. We're looking forward to that going as long as the program just keeps rising.

*Q. It's for the guys that it has been done to them, they do it for the next group. You've seen that progress?*

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**LB ROBERT SPILLANE:** Of course. And Coach Fleck has a leadership council, which is four players from each grade. And he wants to teach to lead from the front, middle, and back. So it's not just the best players on the team leading; it's everyone knowing their role and picking up the guy next to him. So it's exciting because I've been on the leadership council since my freshman year. And I've grown steadily as a leader every year. He's done a great job of getting guys that normally are silent that don't like to go out there and speak to speak on behalf of the team and to go out and lead guys to be the best players they can be.

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