

WATCH: Video, Transcript From Northwestern's Pat Fitzgerald Previewing B1G Championship Game Vs. Ohio State



INDIANAPOLIS — Just over 24 hours away from the Big Ten Championship Game on Saturday at Lucas Oil Stadium, an 8:17 p.m. kickoff on FOX, head coaches from both sides arrived Friday as they got their respective teams ready for Northwestern vs. Ohio State.

Before the No. 6 Buckeyes (11-1, 8-1) battle the No. 21 Wildcats (8-4, 8-1), Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald previewed the program's first clash for the conference title and embraced the tall task of facing Ohio State under head coach Urban Meyer. Below is video and transcript from Fitzgerald's portion.

Pat Fitzgerald

Q. Any surprises here so far? Is there anything you need to accomplish today in your prep?

PAT FITZGERALD: I think we got here about 20 minutes ago, so no real surprises at this point. Just honored to be here, excited to represent the Big Ten West. Our guys have earned it. Our prep, yeah, we've treated this week pretty much like a typical road game, so we have our Friday routine just a little bit different aspect for us. We'll come over here to Lucas Oil for a brief walk-through in a few minutes, then back to our typical Friday afternoon routines. We'll have some meetings, a meal. Father Feeney will say mass, a non-denominational chapel. Relaxing for a little while, the guys will eat again, quick little brief meeting, shut it down, go into our pregame routine tomorrow morning.

Q. Dwayne Haskins, how deserving is he of winning the Chicago Tribune's Silver Football award?

PAT FITZGERALD: Is that a loaded question (laughter)? I would have voted for him, like I said on Monday, if I had a Heisman Trophy ballot. I would have voted for him to win the Heisman. Not surprised he's the Offensive Player of the Year in the conference. What jumps out is poise, accuracy. Unbelievable understanding of what Coach Day and Coach Wilson are asking him to do with the offense. The touchdown-to-turnover ratio is maybe unheard of in this league's history. He's a complete player. Then you watch the way he articulates himself, the type of leader he is. You hear a young man who says, I may be at 60 to 70% of what I believe I can be at. That's scary. I'm glad we're in the West (laughter).

Q. Could you explain to people who aren't that familiar with Northwestern what a big deal this is for you guys to be here.

PAT FITZGERALD: It's an absolute honor to be here and represent the Big Ten West. I've been building this program now for 13 years, even beyond that. This is my 19th year on staff. Just a lot of thoughts, a lot of emotions. When we pulled into Indianapolis, thinking of Coach Barnett giving me the opportunity to come here as a student-athlete, my teammates, the guys that have been here before me playing that didn't really have the support we have right now, or we had when I played. Then obviously Coach Walker and his family, the guys that played for coach, the guys I had a privilege to be an assistant coach with. Now to have all the guys that I had the privilege to coach that have reached out here over the last three weeks. This was the next hurdle for our program to get over, to become competitive and successfully competitive. I think we've been that way for a number of years, but now to win the Big Ten West, get over that hurdle, was the next goal. Tomorrow night represents obviously the next goal in that process, and that's win the Big Ten championship. Our guys have earned it. To be undefeated in the west, to overcome a lot of early season adversity. They're playing their best football of the year right now. Excited for the challenge and opportunity tomorrow night.

Q. I assume a team this veteran is what was the key to getting over the early season adversity. Can you describe the special qualities of this senior class.

PAT FITZGERALD: The most successful senior class that we've ever had. You look at the quarterbacks, Clayton Thorson, making his 52nd start tomorrow night. That's unheard of. Never been done before in Big Ten history. His durability, his toughness. I think a guy that maybe outside of our program is a little under-appreciated. That's okay because in the world we live in today, it's about stats. If you're not putting up gaudy stats, you must be average. That's the furthest from the truth when it comes to Clayton. He's our leader. He's the guy that serves the drink, so to speak, coming off the season with injury. To get himself back in the opener is nothing less than miraculous. Nate Hall, other players in that same category. The senior class has been outstanding. To walk off Ryan field last Saturday evening with the Land of Lincoln trophy, with the Big Ten West trophy, it was a special and surreal moment for us. Just really proud of those guys and excited to have not only tomorrow night's opportunity, but whatever post-season opportunity we have.

Q. How much have you talked to the team about your own experiences as a player, being on a major stage back then, because they haven't been on a stage quite like this?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, they haven't been, per se. Maybe the Rose Bowl. They've been in some big bowl games, right? You think about our veterans, especially our seniors now, we've found a way to get on the podium in two big games, last year in Nashville, then two years ago in New York City. Those were great experiences against two really good opponents in two great atmospheres. We've played in some big games this year. We already played two top 10 teams, this will be our third. We've been in some big games. Obviously we've been on the short end of the ones this year. I think our guys have learned a lot from it. Like I said, I try to keep this as normal of a week as I possibly could. I think the guys have really stuck to the plan well. Hopefully we'll take that preparation into tomorrow night.

Q. I know you're obviously focused on this game. I think you might be able to do this. Where you guys are right now with the facilities, the way you're recruiting, we know Purdue, Wisconsin, state of the program for Northwestern, what do you feel about your ability to continue to compete at or near the top of the West in the future?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, absolutely. I have 100% confidence that this is going to become a consistent theme of our program. I look at us as a program that's been built on bedrock, not on sand. We've been doing things the right way for a long time. We've got amazing leadership from President Schapiro, our trustees, Jim Phillips, our great director of athletics. We're very thankful and grateful for that. We haven't compromised anything. To be in a championship game with the number one GSR in the country, I think shows not only we're doing the right things on the field, but continuing to do the right things off the field, recruiting the right guys that fit our program, surround them with amazing academic support. The culture in our locker room is built on sustainability, consistency, not on clichés, one-hit wonders. Listen, you have to earn it to get here. It's going to take more than talk, it's going to take action. We've been really close prior to this year, but we weren't able to get over the hump because we needed other people's help based on the way we played, the way we coached. I think we alleviated that early in the year. Our guys went out and earned it. To sweep the Big Ten West the way they did, win some games the way they had to win them, with an amazing senior class. But then you look at our roster of starters, a lot of young guys that are playing, playing significant roles right now. I think the future is really, really bright.

Q. Urban Meyer is in his seventh year. How much has he changed the Big Ten? How much has he raised the bar for other programs in the conference?

PAT FITZGERALD: I think when Coach Meyer came in, he brought in a national championship pedigree. Building a program not only at one place, but multiple universities that made it to the top, made it to a championship level. I think when he came in, he talked a lot about recruiting, he talked a lot about fan experience, about atmospheres in the buildings, about being willing to compete nationally. I think, again, like anyone, talk is talk. He backed it up with action. He assembled a great staff. Now you look at his record, it speaks for itself. You look at the coaches that have been through Ohio State, worked for him at previous stops. To see the success they're having at head coaches is really impressive. I've had the utmost respect for him for a long time. We've known each other for a long time. I tip my hat to him. He just does a wonderful job.

Q. I think it's 18 guys on your roster from the state of Ohio. How important has it been recruiting that state? Any memories or specific stories come to mind about recruiting battles with Urban?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, I think recruiting in the state of Ohio, once we leave Chicagoland, which is our backbone, we're going to start and end our recruiting in Chicagoland. We have to win the academic student-athlete in the state of Ohio. It's critically important to the success of our program. This goes back to Ara Parseghian. I got to be pretty close with coach, it's well documented. One of the first lunches we had in southwest Florida was about the importance of Northwestern being able to recruit the academic fit out of Ohio. 18 guys right now. This might be about the average. It's usually a little bit higher, a little bit of an anomaly. I would say recruiting battles against Coach Meyer, I am absolutely 0-fer, yeah. He can talk about the ones that he's kicked my rear-end on, I guess (smiling). We haven't beaten the Buckeyes on a recruit yet. That's how it goes.

Q. This week, have your players shown any extra excitement, nerves, different emotional feelings given the stakes of this game?

PAT FITZGERALD: I hope they're excited. When I met with the leadership council on Monday, we talked about the weekly plan, how we were going to go about our business, some really thought-provoking

things like what uniform we're going to wear, the itinerary, things of that nature (laughter). We talked about the attitude we wanted to approach the week with. They were the ones that were very clear that although the obvious outcome could be significant, the preparation has to be consistent. How we go about our business, what we do, how we do things needs to be high and tight and ready to go earn a championship. I thought they were great every day. I'm not surprised. You wind back, we were talking about 10 wins last year. I'm not sure we would have had the ability to prepare the way we did like we did this year with the new Ryan Fieldhouse and Wilson Field. The lighting, the size of the facility, the noise that we're able to get in there, without a doubt was huge for our preparation this week.

Q. What has Nate Hall meant to your program? How has evolved since he came from Ohio?

PAT FITZGERALD: Here is your recruiting story. I remember watching Nate play basketball, dunked the ball. I looked at our linebacker coach, Randy Bates at the time, I think he'll be able to play for us. His coach couldn't dunk the ball, he'll be okay. It's a family affair when you talk about the Halls. The privilege to coach his older brother James, great player, went on to play in the National Football League. When I went into the home for the first time, his parents were very clear they wanted to make sure I came back for Nate. I said I got to back up my words with actions first, then hopefully we'll earn your family's trust, be able to come back and get Nate. Talented player, plays multiple positions for us, great player early in the kicking game, now has great position flexibility. Randy Bates went on to become the DC at Pittsburgh. Coach Narduzzi playing in the ACC championship here tomorrow night also. When I brought in Timmy McGarigle to coach the linebackers, Nate knew more of the defense than Tim did. There were some times in spring ball, even during training camp, when Nate was like, Coach, this is actually how we do it, making adjustments on the board. Nate has overcome a ton, very similar to Clayton, has been a huge leader for us on the defensive side of the ball. Just so thankful to that family for their trust, looking forward to a couple more games with him. He's going to play in the NFL for a long time.

Q. Isaiah Bowser in a nutshell, how tough of a move was that to go with a freshman running back? What did you see in him that told you he was ready for it?

PAT FITZGERALD: I started obviously out of necessity from injuries. We thought, again, another great Ohio player, Jeremy Larkin, would be our back, coming out of an amazing season last year. Him and Jordan Thompson, two great players from LaSalle, Jordan is an unsung hero on our team. To talk about the running back position specifically, we could have never anticipated what happened with Lark. There were probably two or three weeks where we had to figure out who was going to take over the lead. We really opened it up to competition, not that we told the guys, Hey, this is spring ball, training camp, may the best player win. But we basically did that as a coaching staff. To the whole room's credit, all the guys competed, tried to fill in the role to the best of their ability. To Isaiah's credit, he took it over. I think the Rutgers start really gave him a lot of confidence. I think he's moved forward each week getting stronger and stronger. Again, another Ohio young man from Sidney that I think has a bright future ahead of him. As far as the freshman concern, this is not my first time playing a freshman back. This kid named Justin Jackson a couple years ago did it for us. Now he's obviously having a great NFL career, all-time leading rusher in Northwestern history, the top handful in the Big Ten. Not the first time we've gone through it as a staff, but very proud of the way Isaiah has stepped up. Louis Aveni and the rest have done a great job.

Q. I wanted to ask you about clinching a few weeks ago. You made it very clear the last two games were very important. You went out, won those games. How did the circumstances in

those games help you prepare for tomorrow?

PAT FITZGERALD: We talked about championship preparation for three weeks, the week leading into Minnesota, Illinois, and obviously this week, to take a look at how you go about your film study, your preparation, your hydration, your nutrition, your rest, your daily routine, let's put it to a championship level. Not that it hasn't been, but let's raise it up a little bit. After we got through going to Minneapolis, it was the same thing for the Illini, obviously this week. That was the challenge. For me, I hope that we're able to clinch a couple weeks early for the rest of my career, but that was a different challenge in managing the health of the squad, still preparing them mentally, physically and emotionally. Winning the game, which is the most important thing, the guys when we met, leadership council and captains, was about going undefeated in the Big Ten West. We wanted to change the narrative of this team. We didn't want the narrative to be losses early in the season. Those are over with, those are in the rearview mirror, that's why the rearview mirror is so small and the windshield is so big. Let's look forward and change the narrative of what this team is all about, the legacy of this team. The credit goes to our players. They were very focused and determined to do that. Very thankful for them.

Q. In your preparation this week, while you're watching what Ohio State did to Michigan last weekend, first of all, what was your reaction to that? Secondly, in any way did that impact your preparation for tomorrow?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, you know, when I watched the game, we had our seniors over for our senior reception after the Illinois game, so we DVR'd the game, had it in the background. I was technically talking to all the families, but I had one other eye on the TV, watching the TV copy, watching the score, the score, the score. It was an outstanding performance. Like I said on Monday, to me it was an A plus. That's an outstanding defense, one of the top defenses in the country. To see the way they executed was flawless, it was incredibly impressive. What do you do to prepare? You do what you always do: you work on the fundamentals, on the schematics, you work on the attitude, the mindset, then you hopefully have your team well rested, well prepared, ready to go compete for 60 minutes. The good news is, we don't have to play them twice, last Saturday and this Saturday. We just got to play them this Saturday. Hopefully we'll put together our best performance here tomorrow night.

Q. Are you going to be playing up the underdog angle? You can do that most weeks with your guys.

PAT FITZGERALD: Well, I don't think I really have to. I think everyone has done a really good job of that, so I appreciate it. Danny (indiscernible) was phenomenal at that for us a couple years ago, if you recall. That was sweet. Danny is a great dude, so I appreciate him. He's one of the best. I don't think I had to do a whole lot this week, you know. Like I said in my press conference, my mom and dad think we can get it done. My sisters probably don't. I got two total get after my rear-end text messages from my sisters: yes, we do (laughter). Hey, let's go roll it out, play ball, have some fun. I think our guys will cut it loose, enjoy the moment. They've earned it.

Q. We're pretty far down the line here in the history of the Big Ten championship game. You did coach in this conference when there wasn't a Big Ten championship game. Your first time here. What do you think of this setup? Do you like having the divisions?

PAT FITZGERALD: I'm kind of an old soul, I think, some people have called me. I'm a traditionalist. I love the bowl season. I think it's unbelievable for college football. Been a part of a bunch of them now. Impact it has on every players' life, the families, our coaches, their families, our fans. There's nothing

like postseason football in college that brings a university and their alums together. I'm a big proponent of it. I believe in it. I hope it never goes away. The appetite fans have for a College Football Playoff, we've now gone to that. It's been in a positive way that we've had games that are now semifinal and a final that you have to win to go to the championship. I think it is awesome television to discuss who should be in, who shouldn't be in, should we be at four, let's go to eight, why don't we go to 16. It's awesome for our game. I just want to coach well enough for our guys to play well enough to be in those discussions. Am I a fan of the Big Ten championship? Absolutely. I think it's an absolutely terrific reward for our young men, for their dedication and sacrifice. We have 50 plus buses of students coming down from Evanston. If that doesn't talk about what's awesome for college football, you need to check your pulse. It's absolutely phenomenal. We're incredibly thankful. We're not one of those traditional 'have' programs. We don't have 70,000 students, 100,000 seat stadium, we don't have a hundred years of going to the postseason. What we have is what we have, and we're really proud of it. When I walked in this morning, a few minutes ago, saw the Big Ten folks getting ready to have their big meeting, it dawned on me a little bit. I got a bunch of text messages this week from the guys that played in the '70s and '80s. We stand upon their shoulders because they didn't have the support we have right now. We're very thankful for it. We're very thankful for them. As I think about what's great about college football right now, I think everything. If we want to debate how we should do it, great, let's make it better. Let's not forget about the what is the best aspect of college football, and that is the young men that are in the arena tomorrow night. Whatever decisions we make moving forward, it's no disrespect for fans or alums, it's what's right for the players. That's what we should do. Everything else I think for all of us as spectators, I'm a spectator, too, should be to lift those guys up.

Q. You've been shorthanded in the secondary the last few weeks. How is that group heading into this game?

PAT FITZGERALD: They're doing great. Everybody is doing awesome. The guys have been working diligently in their rehabs, getting themselves ready to play tomorrow night.

Q. You said you guys wanted to change the narrative on this team. How have you done that?

PAT FITZGERALD: We've gotten to this game. You go undefeated in the Big Ten West, we're three points away from being pretty close to being unblemished in the Big Ten. We won 15 out of the last 16 in the Big Ten. The narrative nationally is about two games. One of those teams is playing in the post-season, the other time we turned it over three times for scores. Bad job by me. I get it, I understand it. I'd rather earn it anyways. I'd rather have each one of my teams that I get the privilege to coach to earn it. You can't go back and talk about history and tradition, that's why we're going to win. We are going to win because of the guys that are in the arena. As their leader, it kind of fires you up. It fires you up we're building a legacy, building a tradition, putting this program on really solid foundation, not just this year but for sustainability and consistent success. You always want to leave something better than what you took it over in. I took it over in a great place with Randy Walker. The work ethic, toughness was impeccable. We had to overcome a difficult tragedy. I knew that was going to take time. Now to build this program where it's at, we're not anywhere close to being satisfied by any stretch of the imagination. We're far from being the finished product. But this was, again, the next hurdle to get over for us to get our program where we want it to be. I was a part of it a couple years ago as a fan. There was no bigger fan of Chris Collins and our hoops team than me. It's well documented. I'm like a YouTube sensation going crazy. I hope those guys down to Bloomington tomorrow, get the dub, come up and cheer for us. It is a two-way street.

Q. A couple years ago when you played Ohio State, they didn't have Ryan Day and Kevin Wilson as offensive coordinators. How have they changed the way Ohio State's offense attacks defenses?

PAT FITZGERALD: Well, they're outstanding. Obviously I've got a great relationship with Coach Wilson. We worked together for a number of years. We've been friends for a long time. I met Ryan a few times. Know Kevin obviously better. Have a ton of respect for the job that they do. Both guys I think are at the top of the offensive coordinator charts. As you look at the guys that put a lot of pressure on you schematically, they put a lot of pressure on you from an adjustment standpoint in game, then obviously they've recruited phenomenally. They have some of the best talent if not the best talent in this conference if not in the country, at least in a competitive conversation in the country. They do an absolutely phenomenal job. They'll put a ton of pressure on our defense tomorrow. Hopefully we'll execute.

Q. While you were glancing at the screen last Saturday watching Ohio State, did you also notice the last two weeks they've given up (indiscernible). What do you see about their defense that concerns you? Do you see opportunity also?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, Coach Young and I are very good friends. He was gracious enough when he was the head coach at Rutgers to give me a day to go spend with him. He and I talked head coach corner office stuff on how you manage to run the program. Known coach for a long time. He does a phenomenal job. First time starters, as you see they're well coordinated, maybe just a couple fundamental breakdowns, maybe a couple communication breakdowns. I would say this. The rules are a little bit skewed for the offense in college football, not that I've been quoted or misquoted on that at all this year. So we won't go back there. But it is what it is, man, to coach defensive football right now. There's linemen downfield, guys are throwing slant routes. I don't quite get this being football, but that is what it is. I think they do a great job. What was impressive to me last week was the turnovers caused, their ability to stop the run. They were suffocating in their ability to stop the run. The big turnovers, I know Coach Schiano was involved in the big punt block that turned the game around.

Q. When you were a player, now as a coach, how far was Northwestern away from being at Ohio State's level? How far are you from being at Ohio State's level?

PAT FITZGERALD: I think from when Coach Barnett walked into that basketball arena, said he was going to take the purple to Pasadena, had seven thousand people laugh at him, I was a recruit that day in the building. I didn't laugh. I was like, "All right, sign me up for some of this stuff, I like this guy." My dad kind of looked over at me, This is kind of an interesting statement. We talked about it on the way home. After a number of years, now I know my dad set me up, but that's another story. We had a long way to go. Hadn't had a lot of success before I was born as far as a record. Those guys that played in the '70s and '80s that didn't have the support that we have right now, I'm very thankful for them. Like I said earlier, we stand upon their shoulders. As I look at where we're at right now, we're nowhere close to Ohio State. We're never going to be close to Ohio State. We're very different, the size of our school, the location. We just want to be the best us. We know who we are. We want to be the best Northwestern that we can be. If we do that consistently, we'll consistently be in this game. As we sit here right now under the current Big Ten structure, that is the goal. The goal is to win the Big Ten West. If you do that, you put yourself in position to be Big Ten champions. There are 14 teams that have that same goal when you kick off in January, your offseason program. We have the privilege tomorrow to compete against one of the best teams in the country, coached by one of the best coaches ever to coach this game. We

know it's going to be a huge challenge. As a coach on the other side of it, on our side, you get excited about that type of opportunity. I'm really proud of our guys and our staff, very thankful for the support of our administration.

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