

## **(final) - Meet Kenny Dillingham.mp3**

[00:00:00] **Logan Stanely** Just a year ago, the Arizona State University football team was looking at a bleak road ahead. The Sun Devils, under the direction of then coach Herm Edwards, had fallen behind in a crucial area for their future. High school recruiting. Smaller schools like northern Illinois in western Kentucky were finishing ahead of ASU in the recruiting rankings. Now, there are a number of reasons for this, most notably the NCAA investigation that ASU is currently under for alleged recruiting violations that occurred during the COVID 19 pandemic.

[00:00:36] **ABC 15** All right. Spring football kicked off today as the Sun Devils returned to the field. But hovering over the program, of course, that ongoing NCAA investigation, ABC 15 Zach Crenshaw asking head coach Herm Edwards about the scandal at his first media availability in months. Here on the gridiron at Sun Devil Stadium. There's going to be a new QB under center, but there's also going to be five new assistant coaches right here on the sidelines. The reason why that ongoing NCAA investigation.

[00:01:04] **Logan Stanely** The Sun Devils got off to a sluggish start to the 2022 fall season after a bad loss to eastern Michigan in mid-September. The university fired Edwards. It made Sean Iguana the interim coach at the same time. School officials began searching for a new person to lead the program. Well, Michael Crowe, the president of ASU, and Ray Anderson, the vice president athletics didn't have to look far. The coach they wanted was right in their own backyard. A former ASU assistant and Phoenix native was waiting for this exact opportunity. Enter Kenny Dillingham, the 33 year old offensive coordinator from the University of Oregon, who was hired to be the face of ASU football. Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by the Arizona Republic about Metro, Phoenix and beyond. I'm intern producer Logan Stanley. Today we're talking with one of the youngest coaches in college football as he hopes to usher in a new era of success in the Valley. After a recent practice, I joined the Republic's ASU reporter Michelle Gardner at Mountain America Stadium in Tempe. She had an exclusive one on one interview with the new coach from his office. Even though Kenney has only been at the head of the football program since last November, it feels like a lot longer for the young head coach.

[00:02:35] **Kenny Dillingham** I feel like I've been here for five years. There's so many things to do and all the tasks that have to get accomplished. It feels like there's no way. It's only been eight months. Then part of it's like, man, like the seasons are already here and it's game time, so it goes fast. But I would say that for me it's more slow.

[00:02:54] **Logan Stanely** Because of that. Kenny hasn't had much time to think about the position he is in, but make no mistake, he's living out his dream. In fact, he's envisioned this precise moment for quite some time. Six years ago, while fans were booking tickets on the Herm train. Kenny sent out a prediction. He texted Chris Karpman publisher Sun Devil Source dot com that he be the next coach of the Sun Devils following Herm Edwards. Well, I didn't have a crystal ball or even a lottery ticket. He could have cashed his look in the future was right from that text until now. He was keeping tabs on ASU from afar.

[00:03:35] **Kenny Dillingham** That's my goal. And just having a plan and a vision for how the profession works as a whole. So it was more OC seeing the OC defensive minded head coach OC. That means eventually he'll be gone. Where will they want to hire offense? That's how the profession works. So there opens up an opportunity, right? That if I do a good job these next 5 to 6 years and I progress and then okay, at least I'll be a thought because it's what they're going to try to attract. And then the game was going

younger. So okay, you know, the next hire would probably be younger. Right. And offensive. Okay, well, that's another box. So if I just continue to work and do my job right, there's a chance I get the opportunity. And if I get the opportunity, I feel like I'll get it.

[00:04:21] **Logan Stanely** But at this point, he had never been the head coach of a football program. So who exactly is Kenny Dillingham and why did a school as large as ASU trust him to lead the Devils down the field? He was raised in Scottsdale. Eight generations of his family attended ASU, and Kenny grew up cheering on the Sun Devils, braving the heat to tailgate in the parking lot during the football season.

[00:04:56] **Kenny Dillingham** I'm home. But first thing I want to say is I want to thank Dr. Crow, Ray Anderson, Gene Boyd, Marcus Williams. I mean, this is literally home. So I say that because this place is special. The state is special. The people in this room are special. I got guys for my wedding right there. Sorry. Pretty emotional, right? It's just who I am. Right. I got guys I used to go to their their mentoring dinners on Thursday night. Blonds in the back. I didn't know he was going to be here. When you talk about a person in a family that's rooted here. That's me. And so I'm emotional. But this is special. This place can be special. And it is special, Right? And this is my dream job for you.

[00:05:57] **Logan Stanely** Kenny's emotional speech. At his introductory press conference, Vice President Athletics Ray Anderson took to the podium to explain how ASU landed on Kenny.

[00:06:08] **Ray Anderson** Kenny and a bunch of very qualified candidates who were interviewed and spoken to directly, indirectly. And we came to, very frankly, a unanimous and exciting decision that we had our man and Kenny dealing it. So what did the process what was the profile? The first thing we did is said, let's figure out what the new head coach in this new era looks like. And it started with one thing, very simple. This new head coach had to be in tune with and relatable to the new era. Student athlete. Energetic, flexible, adaptable, collaborative, innovative. Great partner, great personality, great listener, great experiences, winning and learning from others. Strong, passionate about display, someone who knows marketing and promotion, someone who knows business. And as young as he is at age 32, the multitude of accomplishments and experiences and successes that Kenny Dillingham brought to the table was undeniable. And so this is a place where you needed someone who loves this community, loves this university, loves this state. And I believe that when you get a chance to bring them home, you bring them home.

[00:07:43] **Logan Stanely** Kenny attended Chaparral High, where he played linebacker on the football team until his senior year. But a devastating knee injury put an end to any college football dreams.

[00:07:53] **Kenny Dillingham** It was an ACL playing football. So then I tried to play without it in fall camp and then it just was not good. I remember Conrad Hamilton, who's the head coach, does the mountain now. He was our defense coordinator and he was like, Who is this guy running around with this big old knee brace limping all the time? He needs to hang it up.

[00:08:13] **Logan Stanely** Charlie Riggle, who will play a big role later in their story, was the head football coach at Chaparral at the time. He helped lead the Chaparral Firebirds to three state championships during his tenure. While one path closed for Kenny with the injury, a new one opened up. During his final year in high school, Kenny began to dip his

toes in the world of coaching. He helped out with the junior varsity team as a 17 year old senior. By the time he was 21 years old, Kenny was named the offensive coordinator at Chaparral. A rare feat for someone so young. While coaching at Chaparral, Kenny attended ASU and spent a year as a graduate assistant on the football team under offensive coordinator Mike Norvell. From 2014 to 2015. It was then he decided it was time to leave the valley. If he wanted to get back and achieve his goal. Kenny headed east where he is the quarterbacks coach at the University of Memphis.

[00:09:17] **Kenny Dillingham** So going to Memphis was allowing me for living here, was allowing me to get with the quarterback. Then I became a coordinator because I worked with the quarterback. Going to Auburn was obviously getting the opportunity to be in the SCC as a coordinator. That's a that's a no brainer. That move going back to Norvell was people driven and as I have so much respect for normal and he said, Hey, come with me. I want to build something here. So that was not really professional. That was personal. I wanted to go help him in his journey to do what he wanted to do. I said, You know what? This isn't really a professional move. This is just for him. And this is a personal deal for somebody I respect and who help me. And then going to Oregon for me was the opportunity to get out of my shadow. That was a decision I had to make to say, Well, everybody says, Oh, this is Mike, this is Mike, this is Mike. I needed the opportunity to show that I can do this without that, that even though I'm young and I've had these opportunities for offensive money, head coaches like I want to go run it by myself and show that there's a reason I've gotten these opportunities. It wasn't by accident and that's why I went to Oregon, was to be by myself on the offensive side of the ball and show that. So I think every job, most of them were the opportunity. Other than going to Florida State was definitely personal to help Coach Norvell and his vision just to be successful and bring that place back.

[00:10:56] **Logan Stanely** Now 33 years old. And back at ASU, Kenny is the youngest head coach in any Power five conference. The elite conferences that send the most teams into the Division one football playoffs, the perception of being a young coach in the way some people may view it are something that Kenny looks to take on head first.

[00:11:15] **Kenny Dillingham** Yeah, but I've heard that my entire life. And I was 22 as The O.C. Ash at 26 as the O.C. of Memphis, 27 as the O.C. of Auburn. I've heard the young thing my whole life. It doesn't matter to me, because all that matters to me is the people I coach and the people I work around. And people respect knowledge. They feel like I can help them. They're going to respect it. Right. And the people that aren't around to seek the knowledge, then they're just going to go to their natural state of He's young, right? So for me, it was always, well, if I want to be respected, I better learn. I'm going to be able to teach it better than everybody else. I better be able to stay cutting edge, like I can't get complacent because I am young. And if I get complacent and I'm young right, then the narrative's going to be right. So it was always a challenge to me to break the narrative through knowledge.

[00:12:04] **Logan Stanely** As well as always, usually being the youngest person in the room. Kenny also wears another chip on his shoulder. He never played college football.

[00:12:12] **Kenny Dillingham** Most people in college only get into college. If you played college, have a connection in college usually don't get into college. If there's not, you can play it or you don't have a relative that does it. So people told me, you're not going to coach college. You're probably going to like, it's going to be really hard. You're not going to make it. Look, I just when I was great with that, I was part about it. And then just

opportunities presented themselves. And I, I kind of took that as a challenge to some people because there are people that I was close to that were telling me that. And I kind of took that as a challenge and tried to, you know, not make it in spite of them, but more. It just motivated me to be like, I can do that.

[00:12:55] **Logan Stanely** Kenny has surrounded himself with a staff of experienced in diverse coaches, keeping his ties to the valley. Kenny hired his former high school football coach, Riggle, as the assistant head coach and special teams coordinator at ASU. When it came time to build out the rest of the staff for his debut season at the helm of the Sun Devils. Football wasn't his only qualification.

[00:13:18] **Kenny Dillingham** I would say the most. One thing was a good person. I was going to hire people that I wanted to be around, right? Not people I didn't want to be around. And then you have to balance. You have to be a good football coach like everybody wants to get wrapped up in recruiting and recruiting is important, but at the end of the day, if a coach so good football coaches that are good people and that's when you then balance areas where people are from for recruiting. So after they check those two boxes, you're a good person, you're a good coach. Okay, we need some people that can recruit. Southern California.

[00:13:53] **Logan Stanely** Here is where he found Coach SAGA TUI TELE.

[00:13:56] **Kenny Dillingham** You need some people who can recruit the bay.

[00:13:59] **Logan Stanely** Insert coach Vince Amey from the bay.

[00:14:02] **Kenny Dillingham** You need some people who can recruit the Pacific North West....and Texas

[00:14:05] **Logan Stanely** Well, Beau Baldwin spent time at Eastern Washington University, where he won a national championship as a head coach. And Dillingham knew two people from Texas to add to his staff.

[00:14:16] **Kenny Dillingham** We need guys. I want I make a point that we're going to recruit people in the state. So we put people from here in the state or here in the state. You want to recruit Hawaii? Well, we have two guys that are recruited there. One guy who is from there. One recruit, Utah. Three of the guys on staff have recruited Utah in the past. So you have to be really strategic with not going all in in certain area.

[00:14:37] **Logan Stanely** With so much money involved in college football, there's a lot at stake. And in the cutthroat nature of the sport, that means your rivals will use anything against you. The NCAA is currently investigating the football team for allegedly breaking protocols set during the pandemic. No decision has been made, but it's impossible to ignore the cloud hovering with the investigation still lingering around. Young coach, potential sanctions, the heat in Arizona, all things potential opponents could use as ammo in the battle for recruits. Kenny knows this.

[00:15:17] **Kenny Dillingham** It's \$1,000,000,000 industry. They're going to use everything that they can possibly think of to throw. Right. And that's definitely something that things that I've heard, I've heard in my entire career, though it's not just here. Like that's the thing. It's not these narratives aren't just all of a sudden coming up. They're here. And my deal is, okay, well, just come watch us practice. Don't listen to the words

Somebody tells you, Come watch our kids operate. Come look at our kids GPA. That was the highest spring GPA in the last 14 years here. Is that reflective of what they're trying to describe this young coaches? No, that's actually contradicting what they're trying to perceive a young coach would be, Is not that right? So come look at what we're actually doing and building and how we practice in our organization and then let them tell you that. And you then you take where you know your own opinion of what that means.

[00:16:35] **Logan Stanely** College football has changed in many ways over the years with the infusion of money from media rights deals. The impact has been seen far and wide, most notably in conference realignment with ASU set to lead the PAC 12 next year for the Big 12. But that's a whole other story. Another one of the biggest changes to college football has been name, image and likeness. And I I with an initial college athletes are now allowed to make money off their own likeness. This has added another element to the battle for high school recruits. ASU has struggled in the NRL sector and Kenny is aiming to change that. He knows how important it is to succeed in the new landscape of college football. I was covering an introductory press conference as head coach when longtime ASU booster Knapp Lawrence stood up in front of the room and announced he was donating 1 million to the Sun Angel Collective in our group designed to help athletes at the school. That donation has been crucial to the Sun Devils.

[00:17:49] **Kenny Dillingham** Well, first of all, we wouldn't have a football team without Knapp Lawrence and you can put that on every single streaming media you want. Now, Lawrence built our football team because what he did when the first day I got hired. Right. So to see him out here, that was the start of the program as anybody on the field. I called him the other day and said, Come out on the field. Do whatever you want. Without you, we don't have a team. Point blank. Simple, because that's the new Danish college football.

[00:18:14] **Logan Stanely** Activate the Valley has been Kenney's rallying cry for gathering support. What does that exactly mean? I'll let the man himself explain.

[00:18:24] **Kenny Dillingham** Yeah. I think people understanding that a lot of the narratives are in all the numbers aren't what people think they are, and that every bit helps. Like, I think everybody gets a little bit blinded by these gigantic numbers that they feel like, what's the point? Or they don't agree with it? So what's the point? Well, nobody agrees with, you know, everything that you're forced to do, but tough to do it. Right. So it's a necessary piece of that. And I think there's enough people in the city that if everybody did a little bit, just a little bit, if everybody just got involved in some way, however, you could get it. Like I said, even if that's going to two games, it doesn't matter. However, you can support the program. You support the program. I think that's going to equate to winning because if you just show up to tailgate and we have recruits and you don't even go to the game because you can't afford to go to the game, that's fine. You tailgate and people see you there and recruits see, oh my gosh, there's tailgating here. Okay, you go to the game and it's sold out. All people care. I think that's the trend. And then you combine that with, you know, some initial opportunities through the city and through businesses, what that's supposed to be. I think that's how you can get the place where it needs to go. So literally activate the valley. That's why it's been the platform since I got here was that's how you win here. Now, if you don't, you won't win.

[00:19:49] **Logan Stanely** We've gotten to know that Kenny on the field. But what about the Kenny off the field? He's married to his high school girlfriend, Bree, who is highly competitive herself. It's probably one of the reasons why they work out so well together.

[00:20:04] **Kenny Dillingham** I mean, I remember vividly I was at Auburn and I came home at like 8:30 or 9:00 on a Monday and all I'm in the office till like 10:30 or 11. She's like, Why are you home so early? I'm like, I'm done. Like, this team doesn't do much on defense. There's not much to watch. She goes, Are you complacent? Are you getting complacent with this team? Like you like. That's her mindset is like she wants to win. Like she is all in football. So she has just as much competitive fire and want to win in her than I do. And especially for this place.

[00:20:43] **Logan Stanely** When Kenny's not coaching football, he's either playing cards or chess games on his phone. He can also do magic, which he picked up in high school. He'll sometimes dabble in golf where he goes against conventional wisdom and only uses one club for all 18 holes. If there's a time for it, but there's not too much time for hobbies for him as he tries to turn around the team he grew up rooting for. That requires him to be on the throttle, so to speak. It's like that until he goes to bed.

[00:21:15] **Kenny Dillingham** I just fall asleep instantly. I am full speed at full speed. At full speed at full speed. Head out. There's not like a transition a very slow transition. There is anything to wind down. It's playing spades on my phone. Like in bed. Just playing spades and just. Honestly, playing spades. I would say that would be the only thing. Your chest. But I want to spade sketch.

[00:21:39] **Logan Stanely** So there's a lot of work to be done for Kenny. It's been nearly ten years since the Sun Devils had double digit wins in the season. It's been four years since their last bowl win and they have failed to even qualify for a bowl game in the past two seasons. Since the inception of the four Team College Football Playoff in 2015. ASU has not made it. But starting in 2024, the field expands to 12 teams with the enthusiasm and youthful spirit that Dylan Hamm brings. It's the first time in a while as you've had someone like that leading the program. There's an energy building in Tempe, and Dillingham is the catalyst.

[00:22:19] **Logan Stanely** Thank you so much for listening to this week's episode of Valley 101. This episode was produced by me with interview support by Michelle Gardner, editorial help by Kaely Monahan, Amanda Luberto, and Kathy Tulamello. Today's scoring came from Universal Production Music. Additional audio came from Abc15, ASU Athletics and Sun Devil Source.com. You can stay up to date on Valley 101 and All Other Arizona Republic Podcast on Twitter and Instagram at A-Z-C Podcast. If you enjoyed the episode, subscribe wherever you get your podcast from and please share with a friend next week.

[00:23:14] **Rafael Carranza** When people think about watering holes, a lot of times they tend to think of northern Arizona with good reason because there's a lot of great places up north. But particularly if you're here in the Valley, there's a lot of great options down in southern Arizona as well that are as equally accessible. They look very different, but they're just as beautiful.

[00:23:31] **Logan Stanely** We're hitting the road to discover more places to beat the heat, this time outside the valley of the Sun. Valley 101 is a Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. I'm intern producer Logan Stanely and this is the final podcast of my internship with the Arizona Republic. From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much to everybody who listened. As we traveled from Gila Bend and Buckeye to Chase Field and Harkins Theaters. This was a transformative summer for myself as I've learned an entirely new skill. Special shoutout to my two editors, Kaley and Amanda, who have had a profound

impact on me. And not to worry, the Valley 101 team is still working hard to answer your questions about the Valley. We'll see you next week.