An interview with:

**COACH GARY PINKEL**

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin with Coach Pinkel.

COACH PINKEL: Good afternoon. Certainly an honor to be here. Actually, I've been here a couple times. Done a couple alumni events here. Sean Weatherspoon, known as Spoon here and also Columbia, Missouri, helped set that up for us.

We're honored to be here. Our team will get here, do a walk-through at 4:00. Working real hard to play our best football game. Going to play a great football team in Auburn.

Real excited about getting out and competing tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. You had something like four quarterbacks in 13 years, a lot of consistency at that position. What is it about your system that you get that consistency, then a freshman steps in and plays as well as he does?

COACH PINKEL: I don't know. I just feel real fortunate. When I was at the University of Washington with Don James, I wasn't a great coach, but I coached four quarterbacks there. At Toledo our quarterbacks made all-conference. Here our last three quarterbacks are playing in the NFL.

I don't know. I think it's a little bit lucky, to be honest with you. We certainly have a philosophy in how we recruit players. We don't like to over-recruit quarterbacks. Some will recruit one or two so things will work out.

You are very, very right. We're very fortunate. In the Georgia game, fourth quarter with a two-point lead, James is playing as good as anybody in the country. For us to have a Maty Mauk go in on that stage and play the way he did, to play the way we did the next four games, we're very, very fortunate to play at that level.

Q. When James went down, it was in Athens against Georgia. A lot of people in the media really thought that was the end of your chances for the SEC Championship game. Can you talk about what your team was able to do in rallying around Maty Mauk?

COACH PINKEL: It was a good point. Except for that position, we've stayed remarkably healthy this year compared to the last couple years. It allowed us to become a much better football team. We're a lot better football team in the first part of October and November than we were in the previous weeks. Being healthy is a component, you have to be healthy to have a chance to get better.

To answer your question, we have an offensive line intact. You have a receiving corps, running back, all these guys that are pretty good players. I think they tried to up their game a little bit and help Maty Mauk out the best they can by making great catches, giving him time to throw the football.

Because of the health of our team, the offensive team, it allowed him to play and certainly gave him the best chance to be successful.

Q. How did practice go this week? Did it feel any different being a championship week?
or every other week?

COACH PINKEL: Well, I wanted it to feel like every other week. If I objectively look at it, I think it was. I meet with the seniors every Monday at 4:30. The rallying cry is, Do what we do, this is what we do.

We all know as the weeks go on, as you're getting closer to have an opportunity to get here, you eventually do, things mount. There's more stuff out there. Certainly you want your team to be able to focus through all that to play their best football game.

We can talk about the stadium, we can talk about the SEC all we want to talk about it. Bottom line is we have to be able to go out and play our best game. Hopefully we've learned how to do that. Thus far we've done a pretty good job of that as a football team.

Q. Dealing with the injuries this year, some of the players talked about that last year, that your team did not do as well dealing with them. Do you feel that was a huge learning lesson, to know when you are faced with a situation like Franklin's this year, they know how to deal with it now?

COACH PINKEL: Yeah. We certainly took the right approach as a team. Last year was just a very significant year as far as the number of injuries in the same spots.

I think our team certainly are mindful of rallying around that we don't have excuses for anything. If we would have won one more game, we would have gone to a bowl game. Bottom line is we didn't get it done.

What you learn is you stay focused on what you're doing. I think everybody is stepping it up. Instead of saying, Gosh, we don't have this player, it's, What can I do to help this football team as a better player? I think we've taken that approach.

Q. What kind of reception have you received this last week being the new kid on the block?

COACH PINKEL: In my world, hasn't really changed a whole lot. We're excited about being here. It's a great league. When we came here a couple years ago, a few months before the season started, our first year in the SEC, we were proud to be a member of it. It's a great league. Gauntlet schedule, game after game of high-level games and personnel. Feel very fortunate and blessed that we're here.

Q. This sounds a little strange playing in an SEC Championship, possible national title at stake. Did you have to guard against any sort of letdown this week after the big win last week? Hard to keep getting up week after week?

COACH PINKEL: That's the challenge. The challenge is that game we win, we win the SEC East, if we lose, we're out. Obviously it was a big game.

The challenge of any coach, the leadership of the team, the coaching staff, everybody, is can you stay focused to do what you do day to day to play your best. I would like to think we're doing all the right things. We've done it all year long.

When we lost to South Carolina, we had that 17-point lead, lost it in double overtime, we wanted to be undefeated in November. We call it 'the grind,' do all the things first week, second week, third. We got through November.

Hopefully we can focus on the right thing: that's your preparation to play your best. I know that's redundant, probably sounds boring, but it's the facts.

Q. You have a national audience watching this press conference today. Now that you've had a week to think about it, in your opinion do you feel like the winner of the SEC Championship game should be awarded a spot in the national championship game?

COACH PINKEL: I'm going to focus on the game tomorrow. That's where my focus should be, my team's focus should be. That's where it's going to be.

Q. Back at Media Days, both you and Auburn were picked in the bottom half of your divisions. What similarities to see between the two teams?

COACH PINKEL: I don't know. I think they're two different programs. We're a program that had gone to eight straight bowls until last year. We were wounded bad. We didn't make it to a bowl game to compete.

Gus comes in there and does a remarkable job. People don't realize how difficult that is to corral a team, to be able to get them to play as one, play as a unit with coaching changes, as he's still building his program.

They're different in some ways. Obviously,
certainly lack of respect going into the season. How you get respect back is you earn it.

Q. After a week of film study, what specifically have you seen in Auburn that makes their running game so effective?

COACH PINKEL: Their tailbacks are great players. Their offensive line is good. But I think the offense is at a whole different level when you have Nick Marshall in there. He's a play-maker. We had a guy named Brad Smith that broke records in the Big 12 quite a few years ago, plays in the NFL now. He's athletic like Brad is. Being from Columbia, you understand that.

It's an offense that presents so many problems because there's versions of the wishbone, option football. You have to have somebody that can control the middle, perimeter, quarterback. You have to have somebody in place.

It's a great challenge, without a doubt. Then you got a great quarterback that's running the whole thing. The running backs, they're impact players. It will be a challenge for us.

To contain the offense the best you can, that's what you're working to do. You want to eliminate big plays, reduce big plays. It's a challenge.

Q. You alluded to sort of the welcome to the SEC thing you had here two Junes ago. I know there were a lot of people from other SEC schools at that thing looking at A&M and Missouri with great curiosity as to what they were going to bring to a pretty loaded league already. In your mind, did you feel you were capable of something like this so soon?

COACH PINKEL: Yeah, I mean, we set high goals and high standards. We knew we were coming into a great league. You're a competitor, you love being in the league. This is what you want to do.

It's like being in the NFL: every week you have a high-level game you're going to play. Very little drop-off.

Where we came from, some good teams in that league. We were pretty competitive in that league, too.

Knew it was going to be a great challenge for us. We're glad to be here.

Q. Your offensive schemes are somewhat similar. Is that advantageous or a disadvantage for you in preparation for the week?

COACH PINKEL: I don't know. I think there's some similarities, and some things are different. I think each team does their own things, has their own players. It's about personnel, making plays.

We've certainly seen each other's offenses, defenses in various ways throughout the season. But bottom line it's still about this personnel, what their tendencies are, what they do. We hopefully are prepared well.

Q. How similar is this team to the 2007 team in any way? Obviously playing A&M, you got Manziel, ran against their option. How similar is Auburn's offense to that?

COACH PINKEL: The '07 team, we were 11-1, lost the championship game to Oklahoma. I think there are some similarities in that way. We were building our program. That was a hugely important season for us.

This is a lot different just because last year we didn't go to a bowl game. To flip it around and play at a high level was unique.

This is an option offense. This is a great running football team, top-10 running football team. This presents a lot of problems. Rather you play these guys in a bowl game where you have three weeks to prepare for them.

Look at what they've done, look at how they've played, their whole football team, all year long. They've played at a very high level. They're competitive, got good athletes, got play-makers. So it's a challenge.

Q. Not sure if you played here at the Dome before. Can you talk about bringing your team to Atlanta and playing in an atmosphere like this, 70,000 fans?

COACH PINKEL: Yeah, one of the things we talk about, our football team has talked about, this has come from our captains, seniors, kind of the theme we started at the beginning: Doesn't matter who we play, where we play, it's about how we play. We've been talking about that every single week since August.

Doesn't matter who we play, we're going to play some great teams throughout the season, play some teams that might not be as good as others, play in a lot of different venues. All that aside, it's about how the University of Missouri is
going to play.
I think we've taken that approach. Our players are so excited about being here, there's no question about it, to represent the East in the SEC. We're honored to do that.

Just like Auburn, both sides got two really good football teams. It's going to be a battle, but just a great environment.

Typical to the SEC since I've been here, this is what the SEC does. In my observation, they do absolutely everything first class. I've noticed that since I've been in the league for two years.

Q. Adapting your personnel. You used to have big slot tight ends. Now you have big wide receivers, smaller slot guys. You take easier splits in the line. Talk about your adapting to personnel.

COACH PINKEL: We always adapt to personnel, how your quarterback is playing, impact running backs, receivers, tight ends. Chase Coffman was an All-American tight end at Mizzou. We tweaked our offense a little bit last year, got a new coordinator. The offensive staff and Josh. We used to run empty backfield 70% of the time, versions of it. We probably do that, I don't know, under 10% now. We incorporate our tight end a little bit more than we used to in the past. We're still a spread offense. We just tweaked it a little bit. A lot of the plays are the same as a year ago.

It has allowed us to do some different things in our offensive scheme than what we've done in the past. I think for the most part it's worked out pretty good.

Q. You mentioned the excitement earlier. How do you harness that positively and make sure it's not a detriment on your football team?

COACH PINKEL: That's the challenge of every coach in a championship game, bowl game. Last week against A&M, that's the challenge. That's why you have seniors you meet with. You have your captains. That's why you have leaders at every position.

You look for behavior in terms of how we're practicing, how we're focusing, how we're preparing. Our team will be here probably shortly. I think you rely on the leadership of your team, first of all, for our veteran players that are certainly mature, they're going to lead by example. Their habits are the same as seven weeks ago, everything they do. The younger players see that.

Q. When you prepared for Ellis Johnson's defense, the South Carolina tape, is that the most relevant tape to look at with the 4-2-5?

COACH PINKEL: That's what we play at Missouri, versions of that. I think everybody plays different versions. Their defensive front is really good. They're a great red zone defensive football team. That's why the scoring is so low. Don't give up a lot of big plays.

Every defense has its challenges. We'll try to get the best game plan we can. Generally in games like this how well you play up front, on both sides of the football, will have a lot to do with the success you're going to have or don't have.

Q. Dave Steckel is a pretty intense guy. Is he any different when he's prepping for a game like this against a unique offense?

COACH PINKEL: He's our defensive coordinator. He's an ex-marine. He's a marine. You have to watch what you say. I did that to my brother-in-law once and almost got hit (laughter).

He's an intense coach, smart, does a great job. Our whole staff, one thing I want to make sure with our staff, is that we're not acting different around our players. We're saying, Players, you have to stay at this. All of a sudden you see the intensity level of the coaches wound so tight. We've done a good job with our staff staying consistent with that kind of behavior.

Again, that's what kids look at. They feel all those things. I think intensity is not one of his problems. But he's a great coach and does a great job. That's part of personality. That's what makes him who he is.

Q. Both you and Auburn in the bottom of the SEC in pass defense. Is that a reflection of how many points you score?

COACH PINKEL: Their passing game, what Nick does, they do all this running, running. You're trying to cover all this stuff. All of a sudden he pulls the ball out, the ball goes downfield. Play-action passing game puts tremendous pressure on your secondary run support and the discipline you have in the back. That in itself is going to be a real challenge for us.

I think we're second in the league in rush
defense. I think we’ve had leads in a lot of games, so people probably throw the ball a little bit more statistically.

I look at the pass efficiency defense, because that gives us a little better indicator of the pass defense that we’re playing. But it can always improve, without a question.

Q. What has James' return to the offense really meant for the team emotionally? What have you seen from Auburn in regards to what Nick has done in his first year there as a leader?

COACH PINKEL: Nick has done a remarkable job. Just watch him play, they’ve gotten better and better and better. This offense, you got the right guy, without a question, running it. It presents tremendous problems, as we discussed before.

James, his running ability, his ability to throw the football, but also his ability to extend the play, to run, puts a lot of pressure on a defense. Having him back, obviously he’s the leader of the team. I have a great amount of respect for Maty Mauk.

He's the guy. They believe in him. He's very healthy. We got a great team chemistry that that's all part of.

Q. Was Duron Singleton able to make the trip?

COACH PINKEL: Yeah. He will play. He's fine. He had a hip issue. Missed the last couple games. But he had a good week of practice. I don't know how much he'll play, but he can play. That's good for us.

Q. The day before the SEC Championship game, if you could talk to your mentor, Don James, what do you think he would tell you?

COACH PINKEL: Coach James, for those that don't know, Nick Saban, myself, Jack Lambert, played for him at Kent State University. He is my mentor. Coached with him 12 years at Washington. He passed away this year. Got a chance to fly out and honor him at a memorial service.

He was all about the kicking game, win the kicking game, turnovers, be a good third-down team. All the basics you've got to play to win, that would be the emphasis with him. There's a lot of components to winning, to try in big games like this to get as many of those on your side.

Then he would say, Do what you do. Don't treat this game different than the first game. Just do what you do. That's what the kids will believe.

Q. You mentioned Sean Weatherspoon as an alum.

COACH PINKEL: And William.

Q. William, he took a long time dressing in his gold jumpsuit sort of thing. What do you think this does or what have you heard this is doing for your alums and people that can look on this game as a real source of pride for Missouri football?

COACH PINKEL: Well, it means a lot to me that we're being respected. That's important to me. When I came to Missouri, two winning seasons in I don't know how many years, 15, 18, I don't know what it was, but a lot. At the press conference I said I want the University of Missouri to be respected in the Big 12, and now the SEC. When you mention Missouri football, have respect for it.

Last year they had a lot of respect for it. This is the fourth time in seven years we've won 10 or more games. I know our Mizzou fans are going wild and crazy. The Texas A&M game, we saw it.

We got to earn what we deserve. We got to earn the respect. Our fans get it. The SEC fans are the best college football fans around the country. Mizzou fans have responded well and very appreciative of their support.

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