

July 14, 2014



An interview with:

COACH DEREK MASON

KEVIN TRAINOR: We're glad to be joined by head coach of the Vanderbilt Commodores, Derek Mason.

COACH MASON: I'd like to say thank you. It's great to be here. First year head coach, Vanderbilt University. It's exciting.

I'm a fresh new face, only new head coach on the block. Great thing is I'm undefeated, so I'm feeling real good about where we're at (smiling).

As I look at my path, it's been a fun one. The opportunity to be out at Stanford with David Shaw, it was outstanding. But now with this opportunity, it's a great one.

Our team is a team of probably no-name young men who have a chance to do something great. It's talented across the board.

I think our opportunity to compete for an SEC East title is now. We want to make sure that we work extremely hard day in and day out to be men of character, men of integrity. We're going to play extremely hard.

Our quarterback position is something that we'll talk about as we go down this road because I know there's going to be some questions about it.

When I look at our offensive philosophy, the hiring of Karl Dorrell as our offensive coordinator helped solidify who we are and our identify as a West Coast offense.

Coach Bankins, our special teams coordinator is going to do a fantastic job of doing what he's done, which is keep us in the top 25 on special teams.

David Kotulski, our defensive coordinator, will be bringing the same 3-4 scheme to Vanderbilt University. This scheme allows us to be multiple. From a philosophy standpoint, we want to make sure, we met with our student-athletes, that we know and understand how to play great football, how not to beat ourselves, get teams into deep

water, play well into the fourth quarter and really have an opportunity for success.

With that being said, thank you.

KEVIN TRAINOR: We'll go ahead and take questions.

Q. Do you get the feeling that Caleb Azubike is getting ready to blossom into a full blown star?

COACH MASON: Caleb Azubike is getting ready to be a well-known name. I think this scheme allows him the opportunity to put his hands on the ground as well as stand up. We can move him around. We can utilize his full-skill set.

He's intense. He understands how to play the game. His physical attributes are really off the chart. Now what he's really working towards is full comprehension of what we do and how we're going to move him around in order, in the matchups we need, especially when we have to rush the passer.

Q. Stanford had four straight ten-win seasons. What did it take to have that level of success at a high academic school like Stanford? How does that translate to Vanderbilt? What unique challenges await you at Vanderbilt that might be a little bit different from what you had to overcome at Stanford?

COACH MASON: I'll start with the second part of it.

When you look at the challenges, I think at Stanford, Jim had already recruited a certain type of young man that fit that scheme, that system a little bit, both offensively and defensively.

For us at Vanderbilt, we're actually changing over in the scheme right now both offensively and defensively. That brings about a need for immediate buy-in. For us the buy-in has been really, really good.

Our guys understand what we do. We're about 70% there in terms of what it looks like. This summer was used to try to get us the rest of the way. We'll do it again when we come back to fall camp.

In terms of looking at who we are overall, the similarities between the two schools are evident: good academic institutions that play really good football.

Vanderbilt has its own brand. It sits in the SEC which is the best conference in college football. For us, when we talk about who we are, what we look like, the idea of using the brand, the brand of academics and athletics, as well as recruiting a certain type of young man, and that young man is called a Vanderbilt man.

When you talk about integrity, character, I know some people laugh because it sounds cliché. We've won a lot of games over the last couple years with two and three star players, weren't as talented initially as some of the guys they played against. What it came down to was our ability to put those guys in position to make plays and those guys' ability to execute, understanding situational football that separated those guys from everybody else.

At Vanderbilt you have a similar brand, his understanding of what we're doing. Now when you infuse that with the idea of our system, what we stand for, how we want to play the game, it's a physical style of football. Not much different than what's been played in the SEC for a long time.

For me, I'm truly excited about knowing exactly who we are. That's what we have to do, we have to stick to who we are, know what we are, stick to that brand and recruit that type of young man.

Recruiting went well last year. We're well on our way right now, so we feel good about where we're at.

Q. Within the quarterback battle, putting athletic abilities aside, how valuable is Patton Robinette's game experience from last year, especially considering some of the environments he went into and got victories?

COACH MASON: Anytime you have a young man who has played in games, it's something that you can't replicate.

For us, I think Robinette has the leg up. But what I wanted was a quarterback competition. We need to make sure that if we're going to be successful, we have to solidify the quarterback position overall.

For us, with the addition of Rivers, with Wade Freebeck, you look at our freshmen, Grady is now healthy, we'll have six guys competing at the quarterback position.

You ask, How do you get six quarterbacks ready? You don't. You create competitive situations where those guys rise out front and you start to look at where we're at.

Robinette is tremendous. I love the way he competes. I love his swagger in terms of how he talks to our guys, how he leads.

But for us to be successful, we need a guy who can do it game in, game out, okay, with very little hitches, very few flaws.

Q. You talked about the similarities between Vanderbilt and Stanford. Your Stanford defense prided themselves on slowing down up-tempo teams like Oregon. How far away are you from having the ability to do what you did at Stanford? Does that measure up to Texas A&M, which Vanderbilt struggled against last year?

COACH MASON: For us, the spring was just the first phase. That's the foundation phase. The deeper you dig, the higher you go. We talked to our young men about understanding what we do, asking questions. They're smart, so they can make adjustments.

We went through that trial-and-error phase of what we can do, really how to tweak it in order for us to be successful.

The biggest addition to our program will be our incoming freshmen. We don't believe in redshirting at Vanderbilt. What we'll do is we'll take out of that class of 22, we'll probably have 17 guys that will step on the field and play at some point in time this year.

What you do is work to solidify your depth. You ask yourself, Well, how can you do that in the SEC? When you look at the limited number of guys that you have on scholarship, when you look at building depth, playing special teams, especially with up-tempo offenses, you have to find a way to take the pressure off your top guys because your top guys in terms of having to play 98 snaps, that's tough for a team to play 98 snaps, I don't care who you are.

We've had to address that issue, having our freshmen on campus now shows we can look forward to those guys stepping on the field because we actually have a good idea of what we actually recruited.

Then if you go back and look at my history, what I've done, I've never hesitated to play freshmen. The only way you get better at playing

football is to play the game. Look at them, how it goes across the board. I tell you this, when you invest in freshmen, you get them on the field, you have less problems off the field.

Q. You mentioned the time to win for Vandy in the SEC is now. When you decided to take the job, how did you look at the East and how do you look at it now as you've gotten into the job a little bit?

COACH MASON: You know, it's deep, to say the least. Great coaches, talented teams. You know, your perception on the outside, you only know where you're at. So really that's all you have to go off of.

Being in the midst of the SEC now, this is football country. Every program, every coach has a chance to be successful.

What we have to do and what I've tried to do is really verse my staff on what the SEC looks like. I mean, I'm seeing it when I go out and I touch head coaches' meetings, I attend media events, you really get a chance to feel the pomp and circumstance of what the SEC is.

For me, that's huge. For our staff, that's huge. That's probably the biggest thing that I've been able to try to grasp is the brevity of what this place is, and it's outstanding.

Q. Back to the quarterbacks for a minute. You mentioned six guys in this competition. Do you have a timetable laid out for fall camp when you might pare that down a little bit, name a starter.

COACH MASON: Yeah, first game. When I look at naming a quarterback, I'm not going to be pressed into naming a quarterback. I think what we'll do is we'll go through the process. We have plenty of evaluation time to make the right decision.

I do want to name a starter. For what we're doing and how we want to do it, a two-quarterback system is not the way I want to go. I believe there should be a starter and there should be a guy behind him to watch and learn and understand the situation. Where the situation arises where he needs to play, he'll be ready.

I feel confident in that.

Q. Stanford did a lot of things well, and one thing that they did well was they were able to come East and get guys like David Yankey and bring them back and turn them into stars. Do you want to go all over the United States

and bring players to Vanderbilt instead of just staying in the South?

COACH MASON: Vanderbilt is a national brand. The Southeast, as well as the Midwest, produces a lot of talent. With our brand, with our academic requirements, is going national. In going national, we were able to solidify a pretty good recruiting class. I say 'pretty good' because they'll be measured by how they play, but a pretty good recruiting class in two weeks. If I was going regional, I would have struggled.

You have to understand who you are, where you're at. I think I understand the branding, where we are. In terms of getting the best student-athlete who understands what we do scheme-wise is where we're headed.

Q. Most coaches that have come here at new Vanderbilt coaches, they were taking over an 0-11. You're inheriting a team that went to bowls. Is this a job that would have interested you before the recent success?

COACH MASON: I'll start with the latter.

I think every job is hard, whether you follow a guy or you're the first person to do it. Every job is hard.

I learned in the NFL. I coach with the NFL mentality. I coach with the one-year mentality. I have to be the best I can for one year and look at next year when it comes.

For me, looking at this program, now, you're right, it's different. It's different. James established this program. I would have took this job had they been coming off an O-11 stint. Doesn't matter to me. It's the opportunity, especially coming from a place like Stanford where you actually saw it being done.

I had the opportunity to see it firsthand in terms of the progress of strength and conditioning, what it looks like in terms of the young men that you recruit, how to work within those parameters.

Being smart shouldn't be an excuse, you know. I mean, the idea of coming here now, James did the legwork, there's no question, and Bobby Johnson did the legwork before him when you talk about the recruits playing at Vanderbilt the last three years.

When I look at where we're at, what's going on, Vanderbilt is a great opportunity, a great job. But my expectation is to push the envelope a little bit. We have to move past the idea of playing for nine wins. Nine wins, it's really exceptional. At

the end of the day why have nine when you can have ten. Why settle for ten when you can have 11?

That's the way I think. That's the way I wake up. That's the way I want my team to be. Dream big, you can accomplish big things. Dream small, you fall short.

Q. Vanderbilt has beaten Tennessee the past two seasons since 1925, 1926. How much does that mean to the program? Is that a rivalry you look to embrace?

COACH MASON: The rivalry is huge. It's in-state teams who know and understand where those borders start and begin. For the people of Nashville and/or Vanderbilt graduates, Vanderbilt supporters, it's been a great time in recent football history for those fans.

We don't look to move backwards. We always look to go forward. So we hope, we hope to continue and play as well as we can play in this rivalry.

Butch Jones and I faced each other several years ago when I was at Ohio and he was at Central. We know each other well. We're friends. We both have a common ally in the state of Tennessee. But we know we have two teams that are going to go toe-to-toe.

With that being the case, it's a great rivalry, a great time to be in the state of Tennessee. We look forward to it.

We'll play that game when it comes. Right now we have 11 more before I can touch that one.

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH MASON: I mean, for me, I know in watching the game, studying the rivalry a little bit, it doesn't matter who's doing what, that game's going to be a game.

He's an excellent coach with an excellent team. Taking the game to LP is a way for us to open up our arms to the city of Nashville, actually put it in a venue that allows the city of Nashville to come out in droves.

Ole Miss is going to be well-represented, but so will we. I've had a chance to talk to our fan base on many occasions. That game is going to be a great game. We want to make it a day to the 'Dores. We'll start it in the morning and end it that night. It's going to be a fun venue.

I think that was the idea behind it. We know what the game has actually given us over the last three seasons. You take a look at it, the

opportunity to move it downtown, making it an all-day affair, is what should be done.

It gives us a chance to show the city of Nashville how much we appreciate their support for us and what we do.

Q. I want to talk about recruiting, NFL experience, Stanford, Vanderbilt. You like to play freshmen. What is your 2015 class looking like? As a father, I was sitting at a table, you came in recruiting, how is your 2015 class going?

COACH MASON: You know, recruiting right now is going extremely well. I mean, everybody checks the Internet. Everybody looks to see where you're at. I think Vanderbilt is probably as strong recruiting now as it's ever been.

I think the reason why is young men are willing now, along with their parents, to look at the idea of having it all. Why shortchange yourself. The idea of getting a world-class education and playing in the best conference in the country and winning, I tell you what, you'd be hard-pressed to find a parent who wouldn't buy that.

So really I don't think it's what we're selling, it's what we're offering. I think a lot of coaches sell. I don't have to sell. I just present what we have to offer.

From there, when you look at the academics, what the football is in the SEC, how competitive we are, it gives us an opportunity to have a level playing field.

Our playing field is level now. So what we have to do is just continue to be who we are, do the things we need to do in order to be successful. Understand that football is what they do, not necessarily who they are, work on educating the whole man, not part of him.

Q. Your defensive scheme, you had a lot of success in the PAC-12 slowing down some pretty up-tempo offenses, Oregon, Arizona State. Have you had a chance to study the offensive styles in this conference?

COACH MASON: That's what I do. I mean, my iPad, nowadays with technology, between my iPad and my phone, you can find me on most days just tinkering.

This conference is just talented across the board, from what quarterback play looks like, to skill play on both sides of the ball, to what front guys look like.

To me, seeing the advent of spreads, what Chip did out in the PAC-12. Most people don't realize the PAC-12 moved maybe to a different venue. I used to look at the PAC-12, it was all West Coast football. You look up, between Arizona, Washington State, Oregon, everybody went the other way.

You had very few teams that were West Coast anymore. You had 10 teams that were all spread. All we saw was spread football.

For me, just the idea of trying to find ways to slow it down, trying to find ways to get an edge or a level playing field is what we were looking for.

In the SEC, it's moved, it's changed. I shouldn't say it's changed, the package has changed. When you look at a team like Auburn, how they run the football, it's no different than Alabama, they just do it a different way.

Really when it's all said and done, the packaging has changed, but the idea is still the same. Control the clock. Spurrier is doing the same thing. When you look, Coach Spurrier, Coach Miles, all the rest of these coaches, they truly understand what the game comes down to: possessions and points.

For me, I'm in a very intelligent conference with great, great coaches. So for me, I just have to stay in my lane, understand who we are, understand what we're trying to defend. Our coaches will do a great job in terms of game planning.

Q. You talked about freshmen earlier. At one point you had nine commitments with less than 30 days left in the recruiting season. What was that experience like? Would you support some sort of legislation in the future that would prevent a situation like yours?

COACH MASON: In terms of legislation to prevent, no. You're sort of dealt the hand you're dealt.

I truly believe pressure provides opportunity. That was an opportunity for us, to see exactly where we were going to go.

It started at nine. After that first recruiting weekend, we had three with eight days of recruiting left.

We went across the country. We had ties across the country. We were able to solidify a really strong recruiting class.

So in my mind, it really helped me to understand what we were doing was right: identifying guys that fit what we do. I don't care about the 2- or 3-star. Tell you what, you go back

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and you look at a guy like Jordan Matthews, 2-star player. Richard Sherman, was he even a star?

I don't care about the stars. I care about what they put on tape. Does the tape look like what I needed it to look like? Does the play look like what I needed it to look like? Does he know how to play the game? If I can measure those things, then I think I've got a football player. Last time I checked, games were won between the lines.

For me, I feel like I want to be a good coach, but you definitely have to get guys that fit what you do. If you can do that, you can find some success.

Q. Coming from the PAC-12 with respectable, dominating head coaches to the SEC with some of the best head coaches in the nation, do you feel any pressure to cement your name year one as, Hey, I not only belong here, but I can dominate here as well?

COACH MASON: I think the idea of submitting your name has to do with personality, who you are. I'm a blue-collar guy. I've learned from some blue-collar guys.

When you approach the game with the idea that you're not better than the game and all you need to do is work hard, find your way, try to carve out your niche, that's what you have to get to. That's what I'm trying to get to.

I think for me I don't need to be bold, make bold, brash statements about who we are. I truly believe who we are. With all those great coaches, the one thing I'm sure they would probably like for me to do is say, I'm a little less, and I'm not a little less. I understand where I'm at. I understand what we need to do.

So my job is to compete. My team has to be competitive. I need to be competitive from a recruiting standpoint, from a coaching standpoint, from selling of our program, our city. Those things are what I've been charged with to do.

I really embrace that from the standpoint of here is the opportunity, let's go. So good question. But in the end I am me, I can only be me. What you see is what you get.

Q. You talked about wanting to have a quarterback and settle on that guy. Football has changed to where you have certain guys in certain situations, third-and-short, those sort of things. If you have a guy on the bench that you

can use in that spot, is that a possibility? Are you looking to take one guy and stick with him no matter what?

COACH MASON: Football is a game of advantages. If a guy creates an advantage for you in a certain down-and-distance situation, you have to take advantage of the situation.

I'm saying with the quarterback position, you know, itself, taking a guy in and out of a game to me takes away the ebb and flow of what we're trying to do offensively.

I always want to make sure we can stay in the ebb and flow of the game. Football is not a mistake-free game. Mistakes happen. I think what you do is you try to find the guy that, you know, has some tangibles, those tangibles being leadership, understanding the offense, truly understanding how to make plays when plays are there to be made.

If anybody gives you a chance to be successful, I'll put him in. But I'm a one-quarterback guy. So we'll see how it goes.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

COACH MASON: Thank you.

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