

**July 14, 2014**



An interview with:

## **COACH GUS MALZAHN**

KEVIN TRAINOR: We're pleased to welcome the head coach of the Auburn Tigers, Coach Gus Malzahn.

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, it's great to be back at SEC Media Days. I want to start out by giving a quick recap of last season. One of the most enjoyable, rewarding seasons that I have been able to be a part of in my whole career.

Our motto or theme last year was "Together," and that's how we did it. Players, coaches, administrators, we did it together. Our goal was real simple, to improve each practice. I feel for the most part we did that. It was also to improve each game. We definitely did that. We played our best football at the end of the year when we needed to.

Some great memories that we'll remember forever. Winning the SEC Championship, going from worst to first was definitely special. Then at the end of the year coming up 13 seconds short of winning the national championship. That was definitely a tough pill to swallow. I will tell you this, our players and coaches are extremely motivated going into this next season.

The upcoming season. We lost some key players, some guys that will be hard to replace. Dee Ford, Chris Davis, Tre Mason, Greg Robinson just to name a few.

We have a lot of experience back on both side of the football, specifically big-game experience, which I think is very valuable.

Another positive is we have our entire staff back for the second year, which I think is huge. Same offense, same defense, same terminology for our players. They're used to it. I think that's very big.

Our coaches are great coaches, but they're even better people. They're great examples for our players, which is the most important thing for me.

We had a very productive spring practice. Our offense, we focused on being more balanced. I really feel like we accomplished that.

Defensively we focused on really just the techniques and fundamentals of our base defense to get more consistent. I really feel like we accomplished that also.

Overall I really like where this team is going into the fall season.

Quick update on our quarterback Nick Marshall's status. It is a privilege and a reward to represent Auburn here at the SEC Media Days. Last Friday Nick lost that privilege. We have high expectations for our players, but specifically our quarterback, being the face of our program.

Up until last Friday, Nick has been a model student, teammate, and citizen. Nick made a mistake and he'll have to deal with the consequences. I'm not ready to say what those consequences are at this time, but he will deal with it. I know he's regretful and he feels very bad about it.

Also I'd like to update the status of Carl Lawson, our defensive end. I'd like to confirm that Carl had successful ACL surgery the first part of May. He injured his knee the last week of spring practice. Dr. Andrews looked at it, wanted to wait a couple weeks till the swelling went down to be sure. He confirmed he needed surgery. It was successful.

Carl is working extremely hard and he's determined to come back towards the end of this year.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Thank you, coach. We'll take questions.

**Q. Obviously you're not ready to say what the consequences are going to be, but a suspension for the Arkansas game, is that possible?**

COACH MALZAHN: I'm not to that point

yet.

**Q. When do you think you'd be at that point?**

COACH MALZAHN: We'll see.

**Q. This is your first quarterback you've had for a second year as a collegiate coach. What does that mean to you? Put that into perspective as to where Nick is.**

COACH MALZAHN: I think it means a lot. The great thing is we got Jeremy Johnson which could start for a lot of teams around the country, probably a majority of them. He has two games experience last year. He was a freshman SEC offensive Player of the Week both games he played. We feel good about that.

**Q. A lot of teams are moving to the no-huddle, the spread, things like that. What is it about that offense that makes it such a great equalizer?**

COACH MALZAHN: Of course, obviously that's what we do. We've been running this offense system since 1996 and had success.

I think if you look around the country, a lot of college teams are playing fast. Really if you look at the high school teams, the majority of the high school teams around the country are spreading it out, playing fast.

You can look at the NFL, with Chip Kelly, the success he's had. I just think that's where the game's going.

**Q. How do you feel about opening the season with a conference game, specifically against Arkansas?**

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah, I tell you what, that's definitely a challenge, anytime you open up your season against a conference team.

We do have a lot of our guys back. We're playing at home. But we really expect Arkansas to be much improved. We know we're going to have to play well.

**Q. Could you just talk about how the difference in a summer with what the expectations are for you this year compared to last year.**

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah, I think it's completely different. You know, last year we weren't on anybody's radar. We snuck up on a lot of people.

This year we know we're going to be circled. We talked about that with our players. But at the same time I feel like that's good pressure. We've got our program back to where it should be, where people, you know, have us circled.

But, hey, we got to play better and we have to play better early.

**Q. Can you take me back to the process with Tray Matthews? Did you have any trouble taking a player that was dismissed from other program?**

COACH MALZAHN: We do our homework on everybody that we take in our program. We got a chance to recruit Tray before he went to the other school.

Then we have a coach on our staff that knew his family, knew him well. We feel like he'll be successful in our program.

**Q. I was wondering how Peyton Barber has progressed from his spring game injury and how some of the other younger runningbacks are going to fit into the rotation?**

COACH MALZAHN: Peyton Barber, he's back working out 100%. He's got a lot of talent, like we've talked about before.

Roc Thomas, Kamryn Pettway are two of the young guys coming in. We'll give them a chance, see what they can do.

**Q. You had Greg Robinson this past season. Did a great job blocking for Tre Mason. Who is the next guy to step up and fulfill that role?**

COACH MALZAHN: Patrick Miller and Shon Coleman are two guys that Coach Grimes has worked hard at at that left tackle position. We feel we have some depth up front.

Greg is one of those guys that is extremely hard to replace. He was the number two overall pick in the draft. He provided great movement at the point of attack no matter who we were playing. That movement helped get our play started a lot of times.

That's big shoes to fill. But the good thing is we've got some guys that have experience. We have a little depth up front, which should help.

**Q. How much do you interact with Bret Bielema and how would you describe your relationship?**

COACH MALZAHN: I think it's real professional. I've got a lot of respect for Brett as a coach. When we're in meetings, we communicate. Like I said, I got a lot of respect for him. I know he's going to get that program where he wants it to be.

**Q. When you look back how the season unfolded, can you talk about what that win at A&M meant?**

COACH MALZAHN: That was a huge win for our program at that time. There was still a lot of question marks that we had from a coaching staff about our team. At the time Texas A&M was in the top 10. We were going on the road. Obviously Johnny Manziel was playing extremely well.

I think it was the way we won the game. Our offense drove the field, scored. We left a minute on the clock for Johnny Manziel. We sacked him at the end of the game. That was really the first time all year that I really let my mind go there that, Hey, we got a chance to play with anyone if we can beat them on the road.

I think our players felt the same way. When we left the field, that was kind of that new day to finish the second half of the season off right.

**Q. I think you were the coach midway through your Shiloh tenure. How daunting a task is that for any program, Auburn or whoever, to win two in a row?**

COACH MALZAHN: I was pretty young when I was at Shiloh Christian. That's been a while. I think that says it all. That's how hard it is to repeat in our league. There's so many great teams. That is a goal of ours.

But we do understand how hard it will be. Last year when we did win the SEC, I believe there were six games decided by less than a touchdown. There were numerous games that went down to the very last play that we were successful with.

It's a huge challenge. We understand that. So we're definitely aware.

**Q. I wanted to get your thought, a lot of people have said in order for your team to match last year's success, Nick Marshall will have to improve in his passing ability and accuracy. Where is that on your list of priorities?**

COACH MALZAHN: Well, like I said, that was really probably the number one priority in the spring, to be more balanced. We led the country in rushing last year. When you do that, defenses

have to take some chances. We've got to do a better job this year of making them pay when they do take chances.

Coach Lashlee and the offensive staff worked extremely hard in the spring. We feel like we have some receivers that can stretch the field and make some plays. We worked extremely hard to get more balanced. Hopefully that will carry over to the fall.

But I feel pretty good about that aspect of it going into fall camp.

**Q. Reese Dismukes, I guess he's going into his fourth straight year as a starter. What makes him such a good center and what does he bring to the table for you?**

COACH MALZAHN: In our offense, our center is just as important a lot of times as our quarterback with what we ask him to do, with the communication. You know, when you play fast, they have to ID things extremely quick, make decisions on the run.

He's a four-year starter, which is rare in our league. Did an outstanding job from a leadership standpoint.

A lot of times your center is an offensive leader. But I truly believe Reese is a team leader. He's a tough guy, comes to practice every day. He demands that his teammates practice at the level that the coaches expect. He's an extension of the coaches.

We're very fortunate to have him. He had a lot to do with our success last year.

**Q. With the start of the four-team playoff this season, do you feel that the SEC champion will be in that playoff? Do you feel that most years there may be two SEC teams in the playoff?**

COACH MALZAHN: Well, you know, I think this first year we're going to learn a lot about the new system. I think it's safe to say the SEC champion will be in the final four. If you look at the last few years, numerous times there would be two teams from the SEC in the final four.

I think the first year especially there will be a lot of learning about the new process and how everything is handled.

**Q. What are you hoping that Nick learns from this and how do you feel like he'll move forward from that?**

COACH MALZAHN: I'm hoping he learns a lesson. I know he's very remorseful, and that's the start. Like I said, we have high expectations for our players, specifically our quarterback.

**Q. What is your feeling on the use of marijuana by student-athletes? It's not just Auburn where this issue has risen. Is it something you see a lot? Is it something you proactively try to address?**

COACH MALZAHN: Well, we have school rules. Of course, I have team rules. We abide by them.

**Q. How important are the off-season visits to the state for you?**

COACH MALZAHN: My parents and Kristi's parents are from Fort Smith. We try to go back during the holiday times. Getting the chance to go back to Hughes, the very first place I coached. It was very special to see those former players, get updates on those guys. See a lot of friends and family.

Then Kevin Johnson, one of my best friends that passed a way a few years back with skin cancer, the memorial golf tournament, special to go back to see his boys, a lot of friends, talk about old times.

Kevin Johnson was one of those guys that really helped me get to where I'm at today. He was a right-hand man for me when I coached at Shiloh Christian and Springdale High School and really deserves a lot of the credit for what we did and really where I'm at.

**Q. There's a lot of first-year starting quarterbacks coming into the league. Your experience managing a first-year guy and lessons you've learned.**

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, I had a lot of experience with a first-year guy. Looking back at last year, I know from Ellis Johnson's standpoint, there were so many great quarterbacks in our league. It seemed like every week there was another great quarterback. So there will be a lot of new ones in our league.

But we do know they're extremely talented. But with that, you know, sometimes there's some growing pains, especially early in the season as you're learning your quarterback. You can go through practice and you can go through scrimmages, but there's nothing like the real game.

In the past it's usually taken me three or four games to really get a good feel for how he

reacts to success, adversity, pressure, really all the different situations that come across in a game.

I think back when we had Cam, went through spring. You find a lot about them, they win the job. It really took a good four games where I really knew fully what his strengths were, which he had a lot of them, really try to build around those.

**Q. You talked about having all the staff back, but you brought in Bobby Bentley.**

COACH MALZAHN: Bobby Bentley is a guy we've been friends for a long time, old high school coaches, played 7-on-7 against each other at Hoover High School. Even when I was at Tulsa, he'd come visit.

We're excited to have Bobby. Bobby is an outstanding coach. He'll be very successful. He'll be a big-time college coach. You look at Chip Lindsey last year, now he's a coordinator at this level. Very happy.

I believe we have four off-the-field guys, excuse me, five, to go on to take full-time college positions. I think it's important, being a former high school coach, to give high school coaches an opportunity in college football.

Like I said, there's a lot of high school coaches out there that could be doing the exact same thing I am doing, even better, if they were just given the opportunity.

**Q. With so many players declaring early for the NFL, seems like more and more every year, do you have to strike a balance between how much you promote to recruits that you can get them ready to play in the NFL as opposed to playing for Auburn?**

COACH MALZAHN: I think each individual player has different goals, different dreams. We feel very good about our staff preparing our guys for the next level. Obviously they'll represent Auburn first. But just like we had Tre Mason, Greg Robinson come out early, I'm very happy for those guys. That was kind of both their goals when we first recruited them.

Me as a head coach, I'm extremely proud and happy for not only those two individuals, but their families. I think each individual player has his own goals and dreams. Both those guys did an outstanding job for us, really had a whole lot to do with our success last year.

**Q. You mentioned how it takes three to**

**four games to get comfortable with a quarterback. How much more comfortable do you feel with Nick with that, but also is there a certain point where you have to take three to four games to figure out what the strengths are with this team considering a new runningback, new left tackle?**

COACH MALZAHN: Like I said, I think it does, three to four games, at least for me it has in the past, to identify the strengths of our quarterback. It did last year.

I think as you're building your strengths around him, you find out a lot about your team. Last year was a completely different deal because we were learning every single play in every single game until probably halfway through the year. This year we have a lot of guys back that we already have very good information about how they're going to react in certain situations, really, from a coach's standpoint, what we're going to get.

Obviously we'll have some young guys that are very talented that will be able to help us, if not at a position, then at some special teams.

It will take us a little bit. I think everybody in the country, for the most part, can say that.

**Q. Can you talk about what Roc Thomas brings to the table, specifically your sense at this point as to how he might fit in this year?**

COACH MALZAHN: First of all when we recruited Roc Thomas, he was our number one runningback on our board. We were tickled to death to have him. Got a chance to watch him in person. Last year was one of the most impressive performances I've seen since I've been recruiting.

With that being said, he's going to have an opportunity to help this year. We've had some success in the past with true freshman, runningbacks, being successful in our offense.

But we'll see. We'll see how fall camp goes. But he's off to a good start right now.

**Q. With today's take on quarterback coaches, quarterback experts, you being a phenomenal quarterback coach yourself, what is your philosophy when it comes to your players wanting to do the extra? What do you think about everybody else taking their off time to spend with quarterback coaches?**

COACH MALZAHN: Sure. I'm an old high school coach. Our offense is fairly specific. I always felt like it was very important, when I had the quarterback, that I had him thinking exactly

how I wanted him to think without a lot of outside distractions. That's my opinions specifically.

There's some great individual quarterback coaches out there. For our offense, for what we do, we feel very good about Rhett Lashlee. I've been dealing with quarterbacks for a long time, had success. But that's our philosophy. We feel like after their eligibility is exhausted, if they feel like they need some extra work, we're all for that. But that's just our philosophy.

**Q. With the recent and untimely death of Phillip Lutzenkirchen, any talk early, especially with his former teammates, about maybe dedicating a game or a season to him? Also knowing him how you did, as close as you were, do you think there might be somewhere in the future a possible player recognition award for either the contributions during the spring or during the season?**

COACH MALZAHN: Well, myself and our athletic director, Jay Jacobs, the Lutzenkirchen family, are working through that. There will be definitely something to honor Phillip. Phillip, that was an extremely tough thing. He was a great person. He was the very first player I ever recruited as an Auburn coach. Got a great family.

He's very unique. His teammates loved him. He was a true Auburn man. He was a great player, too. One of the better players to ever put on an Auburn uniform. Just had that ability to play his best in the biggest games.

He had the 'it' factor. So that was definitely a tough blow to the Auburn family. But he'll definitely be remembered and we'll do some things to honor him for a long time to come.

**Q. You faced Nick Saban's defense a few times now. Is the key having that outstanding performance from a quarterback to beat that defense?**

COACH MALZAHN: Well, I think the big thing that stands out, they do a great job. You usually have to earn what you get. They make you earn it. They got very good players at each position.

**Q. How did you first learn of Phillip's passing and what do you remember about your emotions when you were hit with that news?**

COACH MALZAHN: I think anytime you hear something like that, you're in shock. I was on

vacation, about six hours away, got woke up in the middle of the night with the news. Obviously extremely tough situation. Just feel for the family. The impact he made, he was just an phenomenal person, like I said before. It was extremely tough.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Coach Malzahn, thank you for your time.

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