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An interview with:

COACH DAN MULLEN

KEVIN TRAINOR: We're joined now by the head coach of the Mississippi State Bulldogs Dan Mullen.

COACH MULLEN: Thank you. Excited to be up here again this year. I know this day kicks off college football season kind of for us. A reminder that here we are, the excitement of what SEC football is all about is pretty special.

I'm excited about getting into this season with our team. We finished last year with three straight wins, which is the first time that's happened in a long time at Mississippi State. Gave us a lot of momentum going into this off-season.

Our guys are anxious to get back out on the field, anxious to get back out there and play, how positive we finished last year.

I think this is one of these years we've built a foundation of our program. By going to four straight bowl games, by winning four out of five Egg Bowls within the state, we've built a solid foundation for our future.

Upon that foundation, we're trying to build a championship program. I don't think you can build that program without that foundation existing. We've been able to do that over the last couple years.

I look at this team, we have a lot of guys coming back this year. We have 30 guys that started games last year returning this year. 15 returning, so if guess if you started a game, you can be a starter, 15 on offense, 15 on defense. Due to all the injuries we suffered throughout last season, which I've never been on a team that had more injuries than we had last year, our guys overcame that adversity, found a way to win games.

The great thing about it is it's given all those guys experience coming into this season to

have all those guys come back that have played in a lot of big games is pretty special.

We're starting the season off against Southern Miss. Game hasn't been played since 1990. On the national stage, might not be a big game, but I know certainly in the state of Mississippi it is. We're opening up our new stadium -- not new, sorry, expanded stadium. We'll have the largest stadium in the state of Mississippi. You can see our facilities have really come a long way with what we've been able to do.

Our sell-out streak, our fans have done an unbelievable job of supporting us, pushing this steam into a team that hopefully will contend for an SEC championship this season.

KEVIN TRAINOR: We'll take questions.

Q. You talked about the expectations, the buzz around the program seems to be at an all-time high. How do you meet those expectations?

COACH MULLEN: I think for us when you look at expectations on the season, I think how last season ended, with a lot of young guys coming back on our team, our team immediately put a lot of expectations on themselves. Right from day one of the workouts, the winter conditioning, of what they wanted to accomplish this year, what they felt they could accomplish.

So we've talked to them about it, embrace all those expectations. Our expectations are to find a way to get to Atlanta. That's what we can control and compete for that SEC championship this year.

When you embrace that expectation early on as a program, when you embrace that for this year's team, all those guys, that's what they're working for from day one. I don't think they shy away from it. I think they embrace everything that's going on.

Now what we have to do is follow through with it and live up to what we want. Playing in the SEC West, the most competitive conference in all of college football, look at the depth and quality of the teams that are on our side of the league just

alone to get to that championship game, is unbelievable.

So for us to do that, we're going to have to have a pretty special year. But I think we have some special guys that can make that happen.

Q. Last year Prescott scored 25 touchdowns, didn't play a complete season. What do you think his ceiling is in your offense and what improvements have you seen in him this off-season?

COACH MULLEN: He went into last year as the backup, due to injuries he became the starter, then he got hurt, had to miss part of the season. But put up some pretty big numbers.

Dak is a guy that because of his skill set, he can beat you with his arm, with his legs, he can run between the tackles and he can run in the open field. He has a lot going for him. But most importantly he has that will to win.

I mean, he is a tremendous worker. He shows up every day, wants to out-work everybody, whether it's in the weight room, conditioning, watching film, out at practice. He wants to be the first one out on the field, the last one to leave. He has that unbelievable work ethic.

That hasn't slowed down. Had a good season last year, had success. He's a guy that looks and is critical on himself of what he does well, what he does poorly, and he's constantly working to improve his skill set.

I know he has that will. He is big, strong, can lift, out-work you. He's a guy that understands the importance of the skill of the quarterback position and he's constantly working on his skill at that position.

I think he's a much better passer this year coming into this year than he was last year, working on the skill of throwing the ball and being comfortable in the pocket.

Q. You built this program back to bowl-eligibility. What is your impression now on this mandate of basically scheduling up and having to have one Power 5 team? Does that change your approach?

COACH MULLEN: No. One of the things, it's just a different approach we've taken to scheduling. If you look, we've tried to play a lot of regional games. Good or bad on that for us, the one reason we do that, a lot of these kids, these are young kids, their families, their parents, come to every single football game.

Unfortunately if we're playing a bunch of games on the West Coast, their parents aren't going to be able to make that trip out there. That sometimes makes that harder. What we've done now is gone away more from our complete regional schedule where the families can watch the game, watch their sons play on weekends, we're going to schedule who is out there. We'll go play teams that are out there.

We played Oklahoma State last year in Houston in one of the kickoff games. I don't think it was we were against doing that, it was just trying to find regional opponents where they fit and made scheduling sense.

Now with the mandate, I know we still have to find some teams in the short-term to go play, and we're continuing to work to do that, to find some people that will jump on our schedule here in the next couple years.

Q. I want to know with having those 30-plus seniors come back this year, I mean, starters, how much does that mean to you to teach the freshmen what it means to play and win in the SEC?

COACH MULLEN: I think it is huge. Like I said, we try to build the foundation of a program and what's accepted within that program. A lot of the young players, now they're always going to look up to these older guys. The fact that you have a veteran team, they can look. We have young quarterbacks that are going to go look at Dak Prescott and say, That's how you prepare as a quarterback. Look at how he leads on the field, off the field. Look at his preparation in games.

Offensive linemen, Dillon Day, Blaine Clausell, started a lot of games for us on the O-line, a lot of young players on the O-line, this is how you have to prepare.

Same on the defensive side, Benardrick McKinney, watch his leadership, watch how he steps up and makes plays when he needs to make plays, vocal leadership when he gets up and talks.

The young guys are being taught to do that but they also get to see how it's done by some of these older players. I think that's a huge advantage for us. Hopefully for the future a lot of these young talented players we have on our team get to see the right way to do things in the future.

Q. You talked about McKinney there. Can you touch on how important he is for your

defense.

COACH MULLEN: I mean, he's huge, not just as a talent for us, a tremendous talent. I think he's on every watch-list around. Great physical specimen. He's a great play-maker for us in the middle. He makes plays that we need to have made on the defensive side of the ball.

He's a great leader for us, which is even more important. He is a vocal, emotional leader of the defense. How he gets out in front, how he encourages guys, the passion which he plays the game.

On top of that, an unbelievable trait of him is his unselfishness. He is a guy that wants to do whatever it takes for the team to win. He's not afraid. We roll players through, Richie Brown played a lot at linebacker for us as backup, how they help each other. That part of it, that unselfishness, willing to be a leader, willing to help everybody else out on the team, put our team in the best position to win, is extremely important.

Benardrick is a guy that embraces that, understands that. I think he plays with an unbelievable chip on his shoulder. I think he was a 2-star recruit out of high school, wasn't really recruited at all. We saw him, thought, Hey, this guy has got a tremendous ability, has tremendous growth potential. I think he plays with a little bit of that chip on his shoulder that, Hey, I was a pretty good player and nobody even wanted to give me an opportunity, and I want to prove everybody wrong.

Q. Even with a guy coming back who has some experience, Gus Malzahn was talking about the first few games you get a feel for where your quarterback is. Quarterbacks change from year to year. Is that similar for you as far as a play-caller, see what he's doing well early in the season?

COACH MULLEN: Absolutely. It is interesting. Each team is a unique team. No matter how many starters you have back from last year's team, this team is an independent team. As most teams, in leadership, goes through the quarterback position.

Dak is going to be a different player this year than he was last year. One of the things is finding out where his comfort level is this year compared to last year, what he's doing well. Throws he's making, is he throwing a deep ball really well better than last year? We might take a couple more shots down the field.

I think you really have to get comfortable with the team. Even though you have so many guys back, you look at your roster, you see how they're molding, how the players are playing together, what they're doing well together is important.

That team is going to evolve from the first game to the last game, and you have to make sure it's on a positive evolution throughout the season. A lot of that echoes through the quarterback position. You can't tell until the season starts, under fire on game day with the lights on, you don't know how everyone's going to respond together and where their comfort level's at till the season gets going.

They have to be willing to make those changes during the course of the season.

Q. De'Runnya Wilson emerged as a force for you guys in the red zone. Talk about him and the talent you have with the receiving core.

COACH MULLEN: De'Runnya was Mr. Alabama Basketball in high school. He was obviously a kid that played outside a lot when he was growing up. He has tremendous ball skills, naturally catching the ball, great leaping ability. At 6'5" on top of that, body control, he does make a tough matchup.

Only played two years of high school football, so here is a guy now that is really starting to understand the game. He played on the basketball team for us at Mississippi State for us last year, but now I think he knows what to expect from college football.

True freshman last year, not being a long time football player, kind of really just started to get his feet wet. Now he's out there understanding the game, understanding coverages, understanding how to get open and do different things.

I think the sky's the limit for him as a player because he has so much natural ability that when he really focuses on becoming a great football player and doing what he needs to do, the sky's going to be the limit.

Q. When you've been in the situation of having a first-year starter like so many teams are, how long does it take, how many weeks or games, till you feel comfortable throwing the whole offense at a guy?

COACH MULLEN: Well, I mean, a lot is

what the individual player can handle. My concern is not really what you throw at him, it's the situations that they're in. As a coach, how often have you been able to put a guy in a situation so that they're prepared for that moment?

I think even a lot of first-year starters, what I've always tried to do, sometimes people question, Why did you put the number two quarterback in in the middle of the second quarter early in the season? I did that to get those guys that rep so they've been in game situations for when they become the guy, whether it is because of injury during the season or later on in their career, that they're ready to take those reins.

It's the comfort of them in situations that you need more than maybe the playbook. These guys work. You know, I mean, they know the playbook front and back. It is how are they going to manage that playbook within game situations is the most important aspect, how fast they can be prepared to do that.

Q. The last two years, the records were similar, but the seasons sequenced much differently. Two years ago the team seemed to deflate after the losses. After the A&M and Alabama games, that seemed to fire the team up. What were you doing different? Was it Dak? What were the differences you saw in the last two years?

COACH MULLEN: No, you know what, like you said, every team responds differently. It is a very long season. I think a couple years ago we finished 8-5, finished on a down note. That kind of led into last season. We didn't start last season on a high note. We had some ups and downs, but had to win the last two games to get bowl-eligible. Then the bowl game obviously is going to lead this season into a better note.

I think last year we played A&M in kind of a high-scoring game, I think it was 51-41 was the final. The next week we end up in the fourth quarter, had a true freshman quarterback playing Alabama, not the best situation to get your first action as a college football player. But Damian Williams gets thrown in trying to win the game in a close, low-scoring game against Alabama in the fourth quarter.

I think after that game, we look back, we played Auburn earlier in the year, didn't know what type of team they were going to be at that point in the game, ended up losing to Auburn at the end of the game. The team was able to look back and say, We can score points against teams in this

league, we can play great defense against teams in this league when we need to. We've played tight games against some of the best teams in the country. We're pretty good.

And we need to finish the season in the right way. We found a way. I think in the end we started to find a way to win those games at the end of the year.

I think after the last two games, going into that bowl game, that team had so much confidence going into the bowl game because they realized, We can play great offense, defense, we've learned how to go in, and we finished the bowl game the right way.

I think that's why there's so much excitement within our program right now to get this season started because I think our guys believe in themselves and believe that they can make special things happen.

Q. I was told you're a big fan of the World Cup. Do you think you're the only SEC coach watching? What are your thoughts on Liverpool?

COACH MULLEN: Liverpool traded Suarez to Barcelona. A lot of offensive power gone from Liverpool.

I enjoy watching the World Cup. My mom is a British citizen. She grew up in North Wales. Grew up watching that stuff, watching the soccer.

Believe it or not, as a football coach, some of our downtime is in the spring. I'm a big sportsfans. My wife sometimes questions what I'm doing, but I don't mind waking up early Sunday morning and watching the premiersip if you have a little bit of the break. Get a workout in, watch that 6 a.m. kick.

But the World Cup is so exciting. You see the passion the fans have, the whole country is on top of it. Unbelievable.

I do think SEC football could be compared to European soccer. The passion our fans have is equal. I'm sure I'll have a lot of European nations very upset, teams throughout the world upset. That is one of the things that makes this league so much fun, is the passion that our fan bases have for football is similar to watching the passion these European soccer teams and followings have, which is a pretty neat deal.

Q. In your run game, what, percentage-wise, are Dak's run calls designed

runs versus run-pass options?

COACH MULLEN: A lot of them, they are pretty limited. There's the option component, whether handed off or keep it. Run-pass component is part of it for him in there.

You know, I would say probably 5% to 10% are designed quarterback runs. So it is pretty minimal in how much you put the ball in his hands and let him run and call a run play for him.

You know, the defense actually dictates a lot more of who is going to run the ball more than we do, except for, I mean, a very small percentage of calls we have within our offense.

Q. One of the big storylines coming out of the spring meetings was an early signing date for recruiting, the Monday after Thanksgiving. How realistic do you think that is for football recruiting to have an early signing period, especially after what the last week of the regular season?

COACH MULLEN: I think the early signing is coming. There's going to be an early signing point here in the near future.

One of the things our league did, you get around our coaches when they're in our league, everybody is looking and discussing what's the best for the players, what's the best for the coaches in every aspect of it.

I think if you look at the key points of why you pick that day, you play a game on that Saturday, you pick that first Monday after the Thanksgiving weekend, that makes Sunday a quiet period, makes Monday dead. After your last game, you have the opportunity to get your recruiting schedule organized.

What we proposed was not changing the calendars by guys not being able to take official visits. You don't have to rush to get guys visiting on campus. It's for guys that have been on campus 10 times, have been committed to you for a long period of time, they can sign. Get some of the silly parts that go on in recruiting out of the way so they can focus on their academics, not constantly being pulled out of class.

By doing it later in the school year from that, it gives the players an opportunity to see, Hey, is the coach going to be here or not? Where is the program at so I can get through basically a whole regular season, see where the program's at.

Also doesn't disrupt a lot of their seasons where guys are signing before their senior year and maybe have a different outlook or a different way that they're playing, which high school

coaches have said sometimes the guys are playing not to get hurt. They want to play their high school year and finish out their year the right way.

As you look at all the different points, not just have an early signing, throw it out there, let's look at what an early signing is going to do, what the purpose of it is, what's the best way to make that happen. I think as a league in our proposal, that's what we were able to do.

Q. We'd like to get your opinion on the new format for the national championship and how much you think it will impact the Southeastern Conference.

COACH MULLEN: It's really interesting with the new playoff system because nobody really knows how it's going to affect us. I don't know how the selection process is going to be made. I don't know that anybody does until they get in the room and start selecting teams.

You also look at the format. You have four weeks before you play a playoff game after your last game, then one week before you play a championship game. I'm sure there's a lot of preparation and issues that you have to deal with in getting ready for those two deals.

As far as scheduling, how much is scheduling going to be involved, I'm not sure. The key is you always want to look back on a season and say, Hey, college football got it right. The national champion was actually the best team in the country.

I think over the last several years, that's happened. The team that was the best team in the country has won the national championship for the most part.

As the new playoff goes, you hope that continues. I think it will be a huge learning curve for all of us this year, coaches, players, fans, media, everybody, to see how this is going to play out because nobody knows exactly. We know what the calendar dates are going to be, but how it actually plays out is going to be pretty unique.

Q. With the new summer rules for workouts, how were you able to use that time?

COACH MULLEN: We made some slight variations, not a whole lot. I always look sometimes, I was wondering, you know, what our players are taking out of a July 2nd half-hour position meeting because they're looking at you saying, Coach, I want to get home, see my family

for the 4th, taking a little bit of a breather here and there.

For us one of the things we did with that, we utilized some of the meeting time right when our players got back on campus, then we'll utilize some of the meeting time near the end.

The part that I think was best for the coaches, as our guys are working out, you can be out there while they're working out. I think when coaches are around when they're working out, it does increase the intensity level when our guys are on the field. We can see the performances they're having out there on the field. Are they training, developing the right way, doing the things we need them to do, get to where they need to get to physically.

Q. If you look back over the last several years, SEC West teams have been ranked at or near the top of the national pre-season polls. They've been there at the end of the season, too. Do you see this year a little bit different? There may be a little bit open path to the West division championship?

COACH MULLEN: I think there is. I think there's seven coaches in the SEC West that expect to find a way to get to Atlanta and win our side of the league. I really do.

That's not coach talk. I mean, there's seven coaches in the SEC West that are sitting there, they look and they expect to go to Atlanta.

I think that is a pretty unique deal, that that happens. I think that does show the depth, that it is a wide-open path. I think it has been. Obviously last year with Auburn winning, it was a wide-open path last year because I don't think a lot of people expected them to get there.

I think that just shows within each program the confidence the kids can have that anybody on our side of the league can find a way to win and get themselves in that SEC championship game.

Q. The SEC has always prided itself on defense. Last year, whether it's because of experienced quarterbacks or the up-tempo attacks in the league, the opposite seemed to be true. Do you think that's a one-year anomaly or do you think this is becoming an offensive-oriented conference?

COACH MULLEN: I don't know in the end you'll say it's an offensive-oriented conference. I think there's great defense to be played. I think teams just kind of adapt to what's going on and to the different talent level in the league each year.

You'll see some high-scoring games and you'll see some low-scoring games within the league. I think it's the team that consistently plays the best. That team that is going to play very good defense and have the ability to go score points on offense, be able to do both, be the complete team is the team that is going to go win that championship.

You have to be solid on both sides of the ball to win in this league 'cause there's going to be times when you're going to call on your offense, call on your defense. If they both can't step up, you're not going to find a way to win in the end.

You know, I think with all the up-tempo offenses, there's more plays being run. With more plays, there's more yards. With more yards, there's more points. That's just a mathematical fact and statistic that's going to keep being out there.

I still think there's great defense played in the SEC even though statistically there is more offense going on. I think there's a lot more plays run, too.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

COACH MULLEN: Thank you. Y'all have a great week.

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