

July 17, 2014



An interview with:

COACH HUGH FREEZE

KEVIN TRAINOR: We're joined by the head coach of the Ole Miss Rebels, Hugh Freeze.

COACH FREEZE: Good to see you guys again in year three. Appreciate that.

It's an honor always to represent our great university in any of the platforms that I get a chance to do that. Today is no exception.

We have some of the greatest fans in all the world. Our faculty, our students, our administration has been phenomenal. Chancellor Jones, AD Bjork have been so supportive in our two years, heading into year three, with everything that they're driving for us. I'm very thankful and grateful.

I would also like to say publicly I know our team has adopted a young man by the name of Chance Tetric, he's fighting for his life. I want them to know our team is thinking of him even today.

One good thing about Media Days is Coach Spurrier isn't talking about Ole Miss as much, wanting to play us every year. Maybe that's a good thing.

I tell people all the time of the support that I've received from the coaches in this league. It's been phenomenal. He and Les Miles have been tremendous to me in helping me through my first couple years.

Year three of our journey, we're about being all in, relentless effort. I don't read a ton of books, but I read a couple every summer and try to get us a theme that we'll introduce into our fall camp. This year's will be about us being all in with relentless effort. Based upon the fact that I don't know anyone doing any job can have perfect execution all the time, but you can be perfect in your effort.

Our spring practice certainly was reflective to me of that attitude. I couldn't have asked for a better 15 days than we had. Very physical, very

competitive. Looking forward to how that carries over into fall camp.

I'm excited to get the reports from our strength staff from what's going on there, the additional depth we have incurred through recruiting and developing some of the kids that are on our campus. I'm very excited to see those guys.

We talk a lot about buy-in percentage. In our three years there, two, going on the third, I think the buy-in percentage from our kids, staff, everyone in our building is at an all-time high. It's not totally there. I don't know that you ever get totally there. But we do feel like the percentage is at a point now where it should help us meet our expectations.

I think leadership will be the key. We haven't developed leadership within our locker room to the point that I am totally happy with. We're better than we were. I think Bo Wallace has matured quite nicely. I love the frame of mind he is in right now leading us. We need C.J. Johnson and Cody Prewitt to come on as great leader defensively. We have great guys on the offensive side, Laremy Tunsil, Laquon Treadwell, that are leading really well.

D.T. Shackelford is our Chucky Mullins Award winner. He'll wear the jersey No. 38 in honor of Chucky Mullins. He's in his sixth year at Ole Miss and we're excited about the leadership that he brings to our team. When he was receiving his award, one of the former winners said that when he received the No. 38 jersey, it was one of the greatest athletic awards of his life. He wondered if Chucky would say they got the right guy. I know we got the right guy in D.T. Shackelford. One of the qualities he has is he finishes. That's another theme we have.

Our staff is all returning. I think that's always a good sign. The continuity, the like-mindedness in relaying who you are in core values and the message that you want to relate to your people. I think that's very important.

Academically I couldn't be more proud of the progress that we've made in the APR. We've

had two consecutive years of 965 or above. We were struggling some when I arrived there in that regard and couldn't be more pleased with what's going on with that.

Offensively we've got to get better in red zone scoring. We were not good at that last year. It certainly was one of the factors in us not finishing the season as strong as we started the season. We've looked at that very closely and hopefully are making adjustments. We've been very good in red zone scoring every year I've been a coach until last year.

Defensively we have to get more takeaways and continue to improve on third-down percentage. We've been good in red zone score defense. We've got to improve on third down and turnovers.

Special teams will be wide open. We've lost most everybody there. We can talk about specific names later.

But, you know, we know that the summertime is over and we've had fun with our families. I've enjoyed golfing and fishing, just talking with my daughters, hearing Ragan's list of how she lists the SEC coaches, Jordan and Madison, enjoyed being around them.

This kind of signifies us getting into what we want to do, what we feel like we're made to do. The expectations have been risen around our program, which we embrace. Can't wait to get started with our kids in a couple of weeks.

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

Q. You've improved one game each year since you've been here. What are your realistic expectations for 2014 and how do you feel the fans' expectations should be?

COACH FREEZE: To be very candid, I think the journey that we've been on, I think it's faster than I thought possible. When I first arrived there, I really thought we would be going to hopefully a bowl game in year three. We were able to do that in year one and two, and win both of them.

We had some very nice wins last year. Going to Texas and winning, beating No. 6 LSU in the beginning of the year. Didn't finish the season like we wanted, obviously. But with the recruiting that our coaches have done and with those two successful seasons, there's no question that the expectations are raised.

I think most fans that are close to our program realize that we're still maybe a year or two

away of looking like a total SEC team in the depth chart.

But I said on day one that my expectations were to make Ole Miss very relevant in the SEC West. And I think this year we should be that. That's my expectation, is that we should be competitive in every single game.

Obviously I can't control the health of players, injuries, turnovers, how your quarterback plays. All of those factors will kind of determining the ending result of win/losses. There's no question in my mind we're a better football team today than we were in year one and year two and we should be very competitive.

Q. Over the last couple years you had a good backup quarterback in Barry Brunetti who is gone now. How do you plan on utilizing other guys? How is a guy who redshirted last year, Jordan Wilkins, coming along for your team?

COACH FREEZE: Jordan had a phenomenal spring. Love the way he looks. He's a big, physical kid that has good speed. I think that the runningback position is one that we are ready. We don't have to wait another year to be depth what we should be. I think we have good depth there. So I'm pleased with his progress.

Backup quarterback, I think we have the same type of kid as Brunetti in DaVante Kincade. I'm pleased with he and Ryan Buchanan. They both bring a little different skill set to us. The good thing is they both have used their redshirt year, so I'm not afraid to throw them in for a series here or a series there to see exactly what they do.

Then you got the wildcards of the Jeremy Ligginses and the Anthony Alford's of the world that could possibly add to that position for something also.

I kind of like where we are at the quarterback position right now.

Q. You referenced Steve Spurrier's comments a couple years ago. Is that something that has driven you? Has he ever said anything to you about he was just joking around? With an experienced quarterback, does that open the window a little wider for Ole Miss in the West?

COACH FREEZE: Why blame Steve for saying that. I've said that all along, too. At that point who wouldn't have wanted to play Ole Miss.

He and I, we talk frequently now. I don't know that we've ever had just a direct conversation about that. But I didn't take it personally.

I'm thrilled that I can call him one of my colleagues and friends in the coaching business.

I do think standing here today you would rather be in my shoes with a Bo Wallace coming back than without. Having said that, there's a lot of people talking about the lack of returning quarterbacks and those things.

But standing here last year no one talked about Nick Marshall either. Two years ago, before Manziel's first year, nobody really talked about him.

There's no doubt you feel like it might make it a bit wide open, but there will be somebody that emerges from one of the programs in our conference that has a breakout year at that position, I'm quite sure of it.

Q. How does Ragan rank the SEC coaches?

COACH FREEZE: My daughter Ragan, she keeps a ranking of the SEC coaches. If you're at any of our games and viewing her an hour before game time, she's at midfield trying to find the other head coach. That's how into this football season she is.

I don't know that I will give you the whole ranking. But number one in her book is Coach Miles. In Baton Rouge he spent 10 minutes with her talking. Then last year when they came to our place, she was out there without me talking to him.

To her, that's her, that's her favorite.

Q. How old is Ragan?

COACH FREEZE: She's 15 now.

Q. How do you embrace social media at Ole Miss? You seem to tweet a lot of fishing pictures.

COACH FREEZE: I caught big ones this week. I got to where I feel a bit guilty about posting the big fish I catch because I think people think I'm being braggadocios of some sort and I'm spoiled with the lake I get to fish in.

I try to use social media really to get the brand of who I am and the core values of our program out. I think it's important that any student-athlete or anyone that chooses to use it knows that when you hit send, tweet, retweet, you're building a brand for yourself.

There's parts of it I do not like, but I do think that it is in the platform God's given me. I think that's an avenue I can use to hopefully impact

others by getting the brand of who we really want to be out.

Q. You open the season in two NFL stadiums. You open in Atlanta as well. How important do you feel like those games are for elevating that Ole Miss brand in terms of recruiting?

COACH FREEZE: I think opening up in the Chick-Fil-A game in Atlanta where we recruit extremely hard, playing in the Georgia Dome where every SEC team wants to end their season, I think it's very important.

We get to open college football. All eyes will be on you on that Thursday night against a very good Boise program.

So we're excited and hopefully embrace that opportunity and the magnitude it will have on expanding our brand nationally. You certainly know that could help. Hopefully we get a chance to embrace that opportunity and make the most of it.

Q. You had a CNN program with your team for a while, and athlete compensation was a big part of that. How do you feel about your players taking stances on those issues? It could certainly bring attention to your program that may or may not be unwelcomed?

COACH FREEZE: I've been clear on my stance on it. Hopefully my kids will follow.

Number one thing I tell our kids and remind them every single week is to not forget the blessing. They are blessed individuals to be at an SEC program, to receive compensation to play athletics, and for your education, that many, many people would trade places with you. So don't forget that, don't lose sight of that. You're blessed. Hopefully our kids understand that.

At the same time we as SEC coaches and as a conference have certainly been in favor of getting full cost of attendance for our kids.

I hope that's the message that our kids get, that they portray when they have the opportunity to speak about it.

Q. Last year you had Alabama and Auburn on the road. How big of a deal is it this year to get them at home?

COACH FREEZE: It's always big to have home games. Certainly you're going to have four SEC at home and four away. But looking at it this

year with what everybody expects to happen, which doesn't always occur, but everyone expects those to be the top two teams in the SEC West.

Having them at home certainly is advantageous and could be big. Playing in front of our home crowd hopefully in a game that we're very competitive in and get into the fourth quarter, and our Rebel Nation will be very important having them at home for that.

Q. You closed out last year beating Georgia Tech in the Music City Bowl. How big would it be to go up there and play Vanderbilt after Derek Mason already talked earlier how it's going to be a big celebration being in Nashville with the Vandy fans?

COACH FREEZE: I'm not sure of the comments. But we love Nashville. There's a lot of Rebels in Nashville. Nashville has been good to us. We won there twice last year, had the experience of playing at LP Field. I know that will be advantageous. I know we can get more Rebels in that stadium.

We're excited the game's there and look forward going back to Nashville.

Q. When you look back at last season, all those freshmen you really had to count on a lot, did some of those guys get fatigued late in the season? If so, what have you done this off-season knowing you're going to have to count on them so much this coming season?

COACH FREEZE: I think fatigue took place if not physically, definitely mentally. I had a learning curve on that, too, last year that I've had to look at some of the things we do.

We depended on so many of those young kids. The way we opened up the season with so many road games in a row. Every road game was at 7, 8 at night, we're getting back at 3, 4 a.m. Somewhere in there, for the freshmen, it's a whole new world for them. I do believe it took somewhat of a toll on them, whereas an upperclassmen has been through it, handled it a little bit better. I don't know.

We certainly need to look at some of those things and it's on my radar to always be aware of young kids that are having to play an enormous amount of snaps in games. If that occurs again where we're on the road that much or have long weeks for some reason, I will be much more aware of it.

Q. Can you give us an injury update on Collins Moore and how that affects the passing game?

COACH FREEZE: We had an unfortunate injury this week with Collins Moore, who was voted our most improved player this spring at the receiving position. That is one position we think we have good players there, but we're not as deep as I would like to be. So losing him for four to six weeks certainly doesn't help us.

We think that's all it will be, is a four-week to six-week recovery. We lost Chief Brown as well and that hurts. We're just hopeful we don't lose any more.

Q. Back in the spring meetings, you and Steve Spurrier and Gus Malzahn played golf together one day. Since you and Gus are no-huddle guys, can you talk about the pace of play? I understand Spurrier won a bet with you.

COACH FREEZE: We played in under three hours. We teed off at 6:50, I do remember that. There's not many practice swings in that group. As a matter of fact, I don't remember any. So it was a quick round of golf. We got to play with Gus several times this summer. We understand that.

My hair is quite shorter than normal today. Spurrier takes credit for that. If he won our match, come to Media Day, you had to buzz cut your hair, so that's why my hair is so short today (laughter).

Really there is some truth to that and there's another story behind it, too, but we'll give Spurrier the credit for that.

Q. Last year you brought in a talented freshmen group and they played very well. What are you looking to get out of those guys who are now sophomores?

COACH FREEZE: I certainly hope that another year in the off-season program with Paul Jackson and being a college student-athlete, that the grind of what we ask them to go through is more common to them so that they are better equipped and better prepared to go through the grind of the season that we're going to ask them to go through.

Physically I look at them right now and couldn't be more pleased. It's hard to judge the mental state of exactly where they are until we get into the camp mode and get to spend more time

with them like that.

But there's no question that those guys, when we look back on this season, those guys will have a huge role in defining how successful we are.

Q. All in all being in year three, is this program where you expected it to be when you originally took this job?

COACH FREEZE: Being perfectly candid, I think we're ahead. This will be the first season that we're at the full allotment of 85 scholarships that have been recruited. My first year, we were around 68. Last year I awarded six scholarships to walk-ons to fill out the 85.

But this will be our first season where we have 85 guys who we recruited to be on scholarship. So I didn't think, with knowing the SEC, being around it my whole life, following it, coaching circles, I wasn't sure we could accomplish what we had in year one and year two.

So I think it's expedited some than what I anticipated.

Q. I understand you not wanting to share Ragan's complete list. Where do you fall on it?

COACH FREEZE: She doesn't put me on the list. I would be her number one, I hope. That's my girl.

She lives and dies with this football now. It's probably not as healthy as it needs to be. Hopefully as she ages a little more, she kind of gets out of that. But, man, her little heart beats a hundred miles an hour when you win, she's crushed when you lose.

Our families, the families of our coaches probably have it harder than we do. All three of my girls and my wife are so supportive. I'm thrilled that I'm still thrilled I'm somebody she wants to be around.

My fear is as they get older, my girls don't want to be around their dad. That hasn't happened yet and I hope it never changes.

Q. With all the talk about the quarterbacks in the league, the down year, Bo Wallace returns as a leading passer, what does he have to do to take the reins as the guy in the SEC?

COACH FREEZE: I think to continue what he's done. He's just been overshadowed by some really good players. Continue to cut down on his

turnovers, make sure he's making smart plays most of the time.

The guy has a chance to, you know, own every passing record in Ole Miss history before he leaves there. Like I've said in many interviews, there's no way we win two bowl games without him the past two seasons.

I think he's matured quite nicely in the way he leads our team, the way he goes about our business. He feels finally healthy and confident. I really think he's at a point where he certainly has every avenue right now to step in and be one of the guys in this conference.

Q. You said you thought you were ahead of schedule on rebuilding. When you look at what Auburn has done so quickly, what is it you attribute to the ability for these teams to come in and rebuild faster than ever? Have you talked about a guy like Bret Bielema similar to what you inherited when you got to Ole Miss?

COACH FREEZE: Bret and I have talked, but I don't know if that's a subject that's come up. Every coach has their own way of going about doing what they're going to do.

I do think one common factor in all of it, and again this is no reflection on staffs that were before these staffs that you're mentioning, but I think one common thread you would see in all of those that have had quick turnarounds and successful seasons is accountability to the little things. I just don't believe it's possible for teams in this league to have any kind of sustained success if you're not accountable to those little things.

For some reasons sometimes attention to those wanes a bit. It affects the team adversely. I'm sure there's a lot of other things, the systems, communication and all that. But I would venture to guess that all would say accountability is one of those core things that you have to have.

Q. You commented earlier on the freshmen that came in last year and had a big season, one of those names being Laquon Treadwell. Comment on the progression you've seen from him between the end of last season and now and what you expect of him this year.

COACH FREEZE: Couldn't be more pleased with his leadership right now and the way he's developed himself. He's gained another 12

pounds. He's a physical specimen. He's a blocking machine. His hands are good. He really takes serious his role of being a leader on the offensive side of the football.

I think year two he knows that we've moved him outside now. He knows quite a bit of attention would be geared toward him. I think it's important that Vince Sanders and Quincy Adebeyejo and those other receivers have a good year with helping being more balanced in their design of coverages. But really excited to see what Laquon is going to do this year.

Q. The pass-rush last year was kind of a weak spot. How do you see that improving this year?

COACH FREEZE: Getting C.J. Johnson back helps us. When we lost him, it certainly changed us some. Marquis Haynes I'm really excited about also. Fadol Brown. Of course, the other guys that you know we have.

But you've got to have some speed guys that can give you some great rush in this league. We now have C.J. and Marquis and Fadol. We're going to see what Breeland and G. Mack can do in fall camp.

I know looking on paper, I feel a lot better about it going into this year than last year.

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

COACH FREEZE: Thank you.

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