

# SEC Football Media Days

Monday, July 13, 2015

## Coach Derek Mason

Vanderbilt



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by the Vanderbilt head coach, Coach Derek Mason. We'll ask Coach to make an opening comment and then we'll take your questions.

COACH MASON: I tell you, it's good to be back. I'm a year older, a year wiser, and I've grown up a little bit. But more than anything else, I'm happy to be with you today. Look forward to working with you this season. Here's what I do know. In looking at the people in attendance to the Commodore Nation, I know last year was a little bit of a disruptive road that we were on. This football team has done a tremendous job of moving forward. What that looks like for us is this. I know it's disappointing, the season we had a year ago, but that's a comma. It's a comma, okay, and not a period. This football team has definitely done the things that we need to do in order to get ourselves back on track and be exactly what we want to be. Our program's made great strides in the last eight months since that Tennessee finale. This football team is equipped and has worked towards the challenge of being a better team. When I look at that, I understand some things about us. We needed to make some changes. So those changes, whether they were staff or structure or team concept, had more to do with us not being right but us getting it right. With the help of David Williams and Chancellor Zeppos, we were able to set about the path of making sure Vanderbilt football can move towards progress, and that's exactly what we're doing. I want to let you know too that we've done a great job on our campus on the West End of moving towards reinventing ourselves, moving towards progress, and what that looks like is trying to ensure a future for our student-athletes of having success both on and off the field. It's important. It's what we strive for. And it's not one-dimensional. You've got to be about the things that matter. In looking at our identity, this football team is a much different football team than it was a year ago. The biggest component where I felt like we fell short, in watching our games, being competitive and what that looked like. We weren't a very competitive football team in 2014, and that's on me. I take full responsibility for that. But in knowing that this football team will compete, we sort of set about what we call the IT -- TI factor on the West End, and that's making sure that we're relentless, we're tough, and we're intelligent. I'll say more about that and move on. When I talk about relentless, I mean a

team that plays four quarters, 60 minutes, every play. Got to have that. That's got to be our calling card. When I talk about tough, we talk about a mindset. James Dobson, our strength and conditioning coach, has changed our physique. We look like an SEC football team, but that's got to manifest itself in our mindset and how we play. And then last, we talk about intelligence. And people make the assumption, because we sit on the West End, that it's just about being smart, but it's not. That's a state of mind. That's what we have to do in this game to be better players. So when you look at turnovers, when you look at penalties, when you look at this football team's inability to be effective in third down efficiency on both sides of the ball and on the red zone, that's football IQ. So we've worked hard to improve our football intelligence, and we believe that we're definitely on the right path. That's really how I see us, and that's really how we've been able to identify ourselves moving forward. In looking at my staff, I thought during the off-season I was able to make four tremendous acquisitions in staff. The first of which is Andy Ludwig. Andy is one of the brightest and really one of the most unique offensive coordinators in the country. If you look at his track record and where he's been, he's been successful wherever he's been, and he's been able to put his teams and his players in position to be successful. That identity piece was sorely missed for us a year ago, and now I think that's been addressed. James Dobson, our strength and conditioning coach, hails from the University of Nebraska, where he spent the last seven seasons before coming to Vanderbilt. In that, they went to seven consecutive Bowl games, and I believe James has been able to bring about a different swag, energy, understanding of not only what we need to look like but how we need to play. That's important. That breeds confidence. He's challenged these guys every day to be better than the day before, and that challenge has extended from the classroom to the football field to how these guys see themselves. So we're definitely moving along in that direction. My last two hires, Cortez Hankton, our receivers coach, played in the league, is going to be a tremendous college coach. He's done a great job in his short career at the collegiate level, but energy, his ability to teach and his ability to get guys to play at a higher level and with some passion is definitely where we've pushed this thing. The last hire is Mark Mattioli. Mark was my assistant at Stanford University. Mark and I know each

other well. We speak the same language. He's been able to make my transition to going back to the defensive side easier in terms of our ability to communicate. So I'm excited about Mark. Really, when I look at our culture right now, our culture has changed. We're a much different football team, like I said, than we were a year ago. We've been able to have success in the classroom, unparalleled success. This year, our student-athletes achieved the highest GPA in Vanderbilt history, our football players. Here's what I believe. I believe, if you can minimize the stress, you can maximize performance, especially at a school like Vanderbilt. So we've set about best practices, and we're doing just that. Our student-athletes -- 40 of our student-athletes have participated in internships this summer. And you say why is that important? Well, when you look at trying to develop the total package, the total student-athlete, the ability to have 40 student-athletes participate in something that extends beyond football and gives them life after football or a chance at a future success beyond football is important. So I'm proud of those guys. Then the last part of what we've been able to do is two of our student-athletes studied abroad, Ralph Webb and another student-athlete, Chris Martin, were able to go to Australia. You see nowadays very few athletes that are able to travel across the country or travel outside the country, especially as a football player, but both those guys were able to go to Australia, spend about 14 days in a study abroad program, and they've been excited. They did a terrific job, and they were terrific ambassadors to Vanderbilt University in terms of what they were able to bring from the States over to Australia. So I'm proud of those young men and what they've been able to do. In conclusion, our football program is well on its way to doing what we need to do. I'm excited to coach this football team. I'm going to open this thing up to questions. Thank you.

**Q. Coach, do you look at Arkansas as somewhat of a table to look forward to? I know you all finished 0-8 last year, but as fast as they've come back into relevancy in the SEC, do you use them as not a motivator, but they've set the table to how you come back to an 0-8 winless season in the SEC to stepping forward to contend for a title?**

COACH MASON: Absolutely. Each year stands on its own merit. That's a good question. I believe one year doesn't make a football team. What you do is you realize who you are, and you retool yourself, and you get yourself ready to go play. We were a young football team a year ago. We started 33 freshmen, or played 33 freshmen at some point in time, and I believe that this football team has had a chance to mature. In that maturity, what you find is experience and the ability to step forward and get ready for a new season or move towards a new season, and that's what we've done

here on West End. Thank you.

**Q. 17.2 points per game last year. How do you expect to improve on that this time around?**

COACH MASON: In looking at our football team, I know Andy Ludwig has done a tremendous job in being able to assess our talents. You have to cater or build an offense around what you do best. So spring for him was about assessing our talent, our ability level, and what we do and how to help our quarterbacks manage the game. So I think, when you put yourself in a position where you can hold on to the football and you can be better at not turning it over, better on third down, better in the red zone, you find yourself scoring points. So that's been the push. Again, football intellect and making good decisions. So that's where we've moved. I think Andy has done a great job of really building the identity of this football team offensively.

**Q. Good afternoon, Coach. How has the specific cost of attendance offered by your school impacted your recruiting and your program?**

COACH MASON: Cost of attendance really hasn't impacted Vanderbilt. I believe our brand and who we are caters to a specific student-athlete, and our standards are as such that we're going to continue to look at student-athletes who fit our profile. But when you talk about the money in terms of cost of attendance, I think that's about making sure that the student-athlete can afford to go back and forth, can afford to have a meal or two. So the cost of attendance really hasn't impacted us. I think the quality of education at Vanderbilt really stands for itself, and when we look at best practices and opportunities to play in the SEC, it's an opportunity second to none. So the academic opportunity, the athletic opportunity, student-athletes are still looking for the best value that money can buy, and Vanderbilt by far, I believe, provides that.

**Q. Coach Mason, it's imperative, of course, to have a competitive team. It starts with the mindset.**

**What's the mindset of this year's Vanderbilt team coming in, especially from spring practice, spring ball to right now? What's the mindset of Anchor Down? What's the mindset of the Commodores?**

COACH MASON: The mindset of Anchor Down is about making sure we don't beat ourselves. When you talk about a mindset, a mindset has to be something that moves you forward. But when you're a football team that lacks confidence and couldn't find itself trying to get out of its own way, the confidence factor was few and far between. I think what we've been able to do is bridge that gap. These guys, with the help of James Dobson, we've been able to reshape the culture. The culture is about winning the day. We don't go past where we are today. Our student-athletes are back on

the West End right now working. We have three student-athletes that are here. That's great. But our mindset is about the work, and there's no shortcut for work. Between the work, between the experience, between the opportunity, you look to push your team forward, give yourself a chance for your best practices, and then hopefully on that, what you build is a foundation of solid -- a solid mindset, a solid foundation of work that leads to hopefully great opportunity to be successful.

**Q. Coach, last year you guys played Temple on a Thursday night in your home stadium. You guys were prohibitive favorites, lost 37-7. This year you have Western Kentucky on a Thursday night. It's your home stadium again. Do you, your coaching staff, and your players see this as a similar opportunity as last year? Let's go set the tone this year and get it right? Because the following week you're going to have Georgia. It seems like the game has a similar setup as last year's. Unfortunately, for you guys last year it didn't work out. Is this an opportunity to revamp on what you guys couldn't do last year?**

COACH MASON: Well, 2014's got nothing to do with 2015, first of all. I think this football team is a different football team than we had a year ago. What you build on is the understanding of last year it was more about ideal self. Now it's more about real self. We understand who we are and what we aren't. We don't move past anybody. When it's time to play Western Kentucky, we'll be ready to play. This football team is primed to take one game at a time. Western Kentucky is a good football team, and we want to make sure that we play well on opening day. It will be a Thursday night. So it's exciting to get back on the field on a Thursday night and open up in our stadium. But who that opponent is, it matters. This game matters to us. It matters in terms of making a statement and showing our fan base as well as college football that we've moved forward.

**Q. How much time has been spent preparing?**

COACH MASON: Every day, to be honest. There's not a day that goes by. I was looking at my iPad last night. That's what we do. That's part of what we do as coaches. We try to make sure that we can assess who they are and make sure that we can find ways to minimize their strengths. Doughty is one of the best quarterbacks in the country, and he's got a run game to go along with that receiving corps and those tight ends. So for us it's definitely about the preparation. Here's the thing. The biggest thing we have to worry about is us. As coaches, we put together schemes. As players, we have to worry about being fast, being physical, and playing the type of football we want to play. Again, it's about your brand. The brand you take on the football

field is who you are. We need to let our brand show. I'm looking forward to doing that on opening day versus Western Kentucky.

**Q. Coach, how important is Ralph Webb going to be this year as a sophomore for you guys' offense?**

COACH MASON: Everybody's important. Football is a team game. Here's what I know. There's special players all across the country, and I believe Ralph Webb is a special player for our team. But we all have things to improve on. Ralph's told me in confidence that at the end of the day, he wants to be a three-dimensional back. He wants to be a guy that can run between the tackles, he can set up in pass pro and really be a factor out of the backfield. Well, in order to do that, that takes work, and right now this football team is about doing work. So I believe Ralph is going to be better than he was a year ago, but for us, it's not about the shortcuts. As a first year head coach, last year I made the assumption of thinking this football team was a little better coming out of spring than we really were. I'm not making that assumption. We're just going to be about the work. Ralph will show us how good he's going to be when we have a chance to line up and play between the white lines.

**Q. Coach, last year you were a first year coach entering into your first season as an SEC coach. And now that you've gone through the schedule and gone through the division last season, how do you feel about the SEC and the competitive nature? Has your feelings changed on the outlook of this conference at all since last year?**

COACH MASON: I love the SEC. This is the best conference in college football. So for me, it's exciting. The challenges were many. I think you have to learn how to manage where you're at, really who you are, and what your identity is. We struggled to find identity. We had some missing pieces. What we've tried to do in the last eight months is try to right the wrong. Our fan base should be excited about where we're going because this group is talented. They are. We're young. We return 22 starters. I know some publications say 18, but it's really 22. So when you look at our football team, this football team is young, but talented, growing by the day. And when you get a young team, it's about confidence. So as long as we continue to be about the work and continue to put confidence in the bank, we can make some withdrawals come the 2015 season.

**Q. I had a question about Caleb Azubike. It seems like he's one of the more underappreciated athletes in the league. How do you view his potential as a pass rusher and his ability to reach that potential in his last year?**

COACH MASON: I moved Caleb to outside linebacker

a year ago. Really, in the three-four structure, he's not an outside backer. What he is is a five technique. But I do know this, now understanding, again, a year in, who he is and what we are defensively, it allows me to get him in one-on-one matchups. I can move Caleb from three to five technique, and right now Caleb's weighing about 275. So I'm excited about what he is and where he is. This guy is going to have a tremendous year as an end. I think with his speed, his size, and his athleticism, being able to put his hand back down and being able to change our structure, our front structure, to be able to gain some one-on-one matchups for him is going to be huge. Look for a productive year from Caleb Azubike.

**Q. Coach, could you please talk about C.J. Duncan and Josh Crawford and kind of what you're expecting from them this year.**

COACH MASON: Some Alabama products. Let me tell you, these guys have done a good job. C.J. stepped on the field a year ago and had some splash games but was inconsistent week in and week out. That could be said of our football team. C.J. has been probably one of the hardest workers during the off-season as being able to take his game to another level, and I believe with the help of Coach Cortez Hankton, he's going to be able to do that. He's older. He's smarter. He understands what the SEC is now, having played behind Jordan Matthews and seeing what Jordan did in this conference. He feels compelled to be better, especially as an Alabama product. Josh Crawford is young, and now with two recruiting classes behind us, we're able to look at possibly slowing down how we play young guys and being able to let him mature in the SEC because, when those guys can mature, once they're ready to play, they take off, and they wind up being productive. So I'm looking forward to seeing what those two young men do, but they're talented. So the future is bright.

**Q. You said that you wished you'd decided to call your own defense from the beginning. How close did you come to -- did you seriously consider that when you first took the job? And what happened over the course of the first season that made you change your mind?**

COACH MASON: When you look at it as a first year head coach and you're trying to figure out exactly what your duties are, again, things went so fast from being hired to recruiting to hiring staff and finishing my staff maybe four or five days before spring ball a year ago. Things were just happening fast. So I had more on my plate and more to deal with at that point in time. But in retrospect and having some experience behind me, I had a chance to look at who we are and what we are, and I thought it was maybe taboo because you don't see too many defensive coaches doing it. But I think

what I just said is really a misnomer. If you're a defensive mind, if you're an offensive mind, you do what you know. I believe I know defensive football. So with that being the case, late in the year as we moved through the season and I looked at our production, I felt like defensively we weren't the type of football team that I foresaw coming into Vanderbilt. I pictured us being aggressive, attacking style defense that looked to stop the run and really apply pressure to quarterbacks. If you look at our Tennessee game, I thought that's exactly what we did. I think it's important that, as you go through the process where you try to figure out who you are, and I couldn't make every implementation during the season, but I think after the Mississippi State game I knew in my own mind that, at some point in time, I was going to need to make a change. After talking to coaches and interviewing guys, I felt like I didn't want to speak through anybody to talk about what the structure of our defense was going to be. It needed to be direct, and if I'm going to be responsible, then I'll be responsible. So at that point in time, I figured it was best that I go ahead and move into that role, and I've been able to structure my day and move some things around, along with my staff, to make sure that our program doesn't suffer because I'm moving into a defensive coordinator role. Actually, it's been great. So I'm excited.

**Q. Coach, how much pressure do you feel going into your second year to feel like you have to win more than three games?**

COACH MASON: It's college football. I've been coaching 22 years. So my understanding is that every year I coach on a one-year mentality. That's a mindset. That's what you do. You understand exactly what this game is and what you have to do, and it's about production. We're going to be a better football team. What that is, I can't predict wins. But I do know, in terms of being competitive, doing the right things, and creating men that will thrive here in the SEC, I can do that. So I'm not going to be about predictions. I'm just going to be about the work and let the season tell a story. So I'm excited.

**Q. Coach Mason, two questions on Ralph Webb. Obviously, he had a great freshman campaign. How much better do you think he can be? What is his ceiling in your eyes? Two, Bowden said he's become a team leader. How has he done transitioning into that role?**

COACH MASON: When we talk about Ralph Webb, that's a good question. Ralph is going to be as good as he can be. Again, his ceiling is high. I talked to our young men in the concept of being limitless. There's two types of people in this world, limited and limitless. Ralph's one of those guys, he comes in, he doesn't see problems. He fixes problems. So for him, he knows

what type of back he needs to be in this conference. He needed to be bigger, so he got bigger. He needed to be faster, so he got faster. But that's not all that he needs to do. He understands that he's got to be able to run between the tackles consistently, and that required weight. He's also got to be able to pass pro, and that requires weight and the ability to put his hands on people in pass pro. Then when you look at catching the ball out of the backfield, he's got to become a common threat. So I think Ralph is pushing himself to be as good as he can be, and his standard is pretty high. He never talks about being the best running back on our team or the best running back in the conference. He just wants to be the best period. So I think, when you have that mindset, you don't talk about the work, you do the work, and that's exactly what he's doing. Nigel Bowden. Nigel is just growing into what he can be. He's young. He's a guy who had 70-plus tackles a year ago in limited starts. What I believe in Nigel is what you see in most teams. There's a guy inside who's now making his presence known. He's going to be on the West End for a while. He's bright, tremendously articulate, and really has a high football IQ. But his motor and his ability to find the ball carrier is what we're talking about. He's physical. He's nasty. He loves to play the game. And you know what, he never wants to come off the field. So I think that's the makings of a pretty good inside backer. We'll see.

this game, and I feel like I've grown a lot.

**Q. Coach, you opened up by saying that you're older, you're wiser and that you've grown up a little bit. Can you expand on what you mean by that.**

COACH MASON: You don't have all the answers. As a coach, you really have to depend on the guys around you. I felt like, in looking at hires and what the process looks like, for me, I think one of the toughest things I had to do a year ago was -- or a little bit ago was make some staff changes, staff changes with guys that I've been around and that I've known for a long time, and that's tough. That's tough in this environment. Here's what I know. I've got a responsibility to 105 young men and 11 coaches to get it right. With the help of David Williams and Chancellor Zeppos, we were able to do something that Vanderbilt's never really done. We've pushed forward to make the best hires that we can to make sure that this program can be competitive in this conference. I think me as a head coach, I made some assumptions a year ago about this football team. I assumed that, just because we were in the SEC, that we play like an SEC team, and we didn't. Again, that starts with me. So I bring it back to me. For me, I've got to be more persistent, more consistent with my personality, and that personality really layers down to our football team. I control every facet of what we do top to bottom. With that being the case, this football team has done a great job day in and day out of not disappointing. So I don't want to disappoint them. They don't want to disappoint me. So growth is key in