

SEC Football Media Days

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Coach Jim McElwain

Florida



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by the head coach of the Florida Gators, Coach Jim McElwain. We'll ask coach to make an opening comment and then we'll take questions.

COACH McELWAIN: Thank you. First and foremost, I just want to say what an honor it is to be back in the SEC and how humbling it is to be the head ball coach with the University of Florida. It's something you dream of as you go through this profession, and I can't tell you how honored and excited I am to have this opportunity. Our guys have done one heck of a job in the transition. They've really embraced the new guys coming in. A lot of the things that we tried to implement, they were open arms, and I think did a really good job with it. Of course, we'll find out come this fall when we get back to camp on the 5th and start practicing on the 6th. Really excited to see how they've affected all the young guys we've had coming in this summer and see how far along we are. It will be a lot of fun, and our guys have been working their tails off. I'm proud of what they've done in the weight room with the new strength staff. Those guys give nothing but glowing remarks about especially how our older guys are helping out and setting examples. That's something we like to see. So with that, look forward to answering some questions.

Q. Just curious, how quickly do you think you can get things turned around or get this program back to that elite National Championship caliber level? Do you have a sense for what the rebuilding process is going to take yet?

COACH McELWAIN: I think part of the experience of being in this conference is realizing it doesn't happen just overnight. It's something that we know. And yet every time we go to work every day, every time we wake up, our responsibility is to try to go out there and win. There's never been a game that we haven't been in that we don't think we're going to go out and be successful, and that's really what it's all about. We've got a ways to go, and yet there are some good things in place. Coach Muschamp and his staff did some really good things, obviously setting the table, and we need to just pick up from that and move forward.

Q. Coach, during the Steve Spurrier era, it was more the air ball, passing the ball, throwing it around the feel. Of course, Urban Meyer's era, it

was more of a balanced offense and defense with Tim Tebow kind of being the glue in there. What dynamic do you tend to bring to this Florida team?

COACH McELWAIN: I think background-wise, just historically, growing up out West and kind of being in the Big Sky Conference, as long as we were, we threw it around the park quite a bit, and that's something we believe in. Yet at the end of the day, you learn as you kind of go through that you've got to be able to run the ball and stop the run to be successful. So that being said, fitting the parts in that we have and finding out how exactly we're going to go about it is something that we look forward to building as we get there in August.

Q. You talked about having time to build something at Florida. The last five coaches in this league that were fired were fired in four years or fewer. How do you turn it that quick, especially in the offense, which is in the state of Florida they expect you to have a great offense with the high school talent. How do you flip that that quick?

COACH McELWAIN: I think one of the things, it's kind of great to have the expectations. That's something that we look forward to and we embrace. We obviously, from a recruiting footprint, we're in an area that I think we can probably attract some explosive playmakers along the way, and yet it all starts up front on both sides of the ball. So us rebuilding that offensive line to allow us an opportunity to be successful is something that we really need to do.

Q. Coach, can you talk about that offensive line and how -- I mean, is it going to force you to do some things with bells and whistles rather than maybe conventionally, the way you've done it in the past?

COACH McELWAIN: I think, when you look at the bells and whistles, we're a multiple shift, multiple motion, try to create as much confusion, some unbalance, create an edge here and there to give us an opportunity. And we'll continue to do that. Kind of how they grow is kind of how we're going to grow, and yet as we kind of move in, we've got to probably kind of reflect back to maybe a little bit of our NFL roots, get that core seven or eight guys that can maybe swap some spots as we develop those younger guys coming in. And I know this, we'll have some people to choose from. I'm excited about that group. I think we're 15, 16 deep right now. From what the words are, they've been working their tail off

and are excited for the opportunity. I think one of the things is you talk about taking a mental rep, and I always think about when I walked in the basketball gym with the basketball, I didn't just stare at the hoop. I actually shot it. These guys are going to have an opportunity to go take reps. How you learn to play is sometimes by making mistakes, but you've got to get that opportunity to take those reps, and they're going to have a lot of chances.

Q. I just want to see, how far back does your relationship go with Doug Nussmeier? What was the process of bringing him in, and just with the connection that both of you guys have running the offense at Alabama, how much will some of the elements in terms of what you guys are installing at Florida be similar to maybe what you two guys ran at Alabama?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, Nuss goes back -- I coached against him when he was a player at the University of Idaho and I was at Eastern Washington and watched him obviously shred a lot of defenses along the way by spreading it out and throwing it around the ballpark. Both of us come from kind of that background, and we were together at Michigan State and had an opportunity to work side by side there, which was outstanding. So there's a lot of carryover from just being able to talk the game and the language. I think his experiences, obviously, in the NFL and what he did winning the National Championship, part of that at the University of Alabama, is something that brings some SEC recognition to that side of the ball, and I think that's really important.

Q. Coach, how has the cost of attendance offered by your school affected your recruiting and your program?

COACH McELWAIN: I think, as long as everybody's running by the same rules, that's your -- it's federal guidelines, right? So there's not one thing or another. Obviously, we'd like to have a balanced sheet across the board, but at the same time, there's a reason those are in place. I think it's great for the student-athlete. I think it really gives them an opportunity. I'm happy to see it happen, and I'm glad to see that we've come to it that way. We'll see. If you lose a guy over \$1,000 here or there for his cost of attendance, maybe that's part of it. There's nothing you can do. Those are the rules. Growing up, you got a set of rules, and you just played by them. I never really put that much thought to that part of it other than I'm excited that they're getting something.

Q. Coach, you mentioned about being the ball coach at Florida. Do you have any kind of relationship with Steve Spurrier? Was he any kind of influence on you coming up as an offensive

minded coach?

COACH McELWAIN: I always enjoyed watching his teams play obviously. It's one of those things back when he was coaching there, the things he was doing, advancing the football through the air, and it was a lot of fun to watch. Had an opportunity to meet him, speak with him a couple separate times, and just what a great guy and really a knowledgeable guy as far as it comes to the offensive side of the ball. But more than that, here's a guy that -- I drive by work every day and pass his statue. That's pretty cool. There's a Heisman Trophy winner right there. I look forward to someday being really able to sit down and pick his brain because he's one of the true guys offensively that knows how to get it done.

Q. Have you been able to kind of diagnose how Florida hasn't been able to replicate that sort of offensive production from the Spurrier and from the Urban Meyer eras the past four or five years? Just kind of what's gone into that.

COACH McELWAIN: Well, I don't really look into that because we were kind of had our own set of problems working where we were, and yet at the same time, I don't really look at it as much as what was wrong. It's just what we have to come in and try to do to be successful and help us win football games. That's really what it's all about. Those guys were really good coaches that have been through Florida, and sometimes maybe it just doesn't work. I get it. It happens a lot in this profession, but at the same time, it wasn't for guys that haven't had success where they've been and for whatever reason, the pieces didn't fit.

Q. You're going to be relying on a lot of freshmen this year, first year players. Is that unusual in this situation you're in? Did you do that at CSU? How's that kind of dynamic work? It's got to be tough to do.

COACH McELWAIN: Those guys -- the one thing is they all signed up to come and play, and some think they're ready maybe before they are. In our case, they're going to have an opportunity, and we're going to rely on them. They're going to have to take a lot of valuable reps, especially on the offensive side of the ball. For those guys, that learning curve has got to happen in a hurry. There's a lot that goes into it, and yet we can't dump it all on them at once. That's got to be -- our understanding is we've got to have a little patience with a couple of those position groups as we move forward without hindering the play of the people around them. That's really kind of the delicate part. I'll be really interested to see how they blend once we get down there August 6th.

Q. Coach, you've got a couple players on the team who are sons of former Pro Bowl type guys in

Kelvin Taylor and Bryan Cox. What did you see from those two in the spring, and what are your expectations of those two in the fall?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, Kelvin, he ended up taking a ton of reps because, there again, the lack of numbers at the position, and has done an outstanding job, especially in the pass protection part of it, which is something that we're going to need out of him moving forward. Bryan is coming off an injury, and yet has done a great job from the rehab standpoint. We're excited to get him back out come the start of fall camp.

Q. Coach, last year the Florida Gators finished fifth in total defense in the SEC, and you return seven starters this year. How do you ensure there's not a dropoff on the defensive side of the ball, ensuring that the offense gets all the kinks out and is one of the top tier offenses in the SEC this year?

COACH McELWAIN: Outstanding job on defense, no doubt about it, and a lot of those guys returning that have experience. We're going to have to lean on them as we introduce some of these younger guys, and yet it's up to the offense to kind of take some of the heat off of them as well. It goes hand in hand. We've got to be good in special teams. We've got to be able to flip field position and force teams to go long field when needed and try to sustain some drives to keep them off the field. That's one of the things that, going through, we really have kind of set as a staff that we need to focus on. There's some good competitive players over there, and obviously, losing the production as we did at what turned out to be the third pick in the Draft, that guy was pretty special. Yet we're going to need some guys to step up around him, with him not being there, to take part of that burden off up front as well.

Q. How good a player is Vernon Hargreaves? And how much do you think it helps his dad is a college coach?

COACH McELWAIN: There's no doubt. I love the way this guy comes to work every day. The way he practices, the way he thrives in competition, and not only that, the way he takes care of himself in the classroom and other things that go along with being successful in life. Growing up the son of a coach, he obviously has been around it, and I think that that is huge. I'll tell you, here's the best thing, he's fun to watch practice. The guy loves it. That's what I think separates some of the guys at times is the ones that really, truly go out there and compete every day to perfect their craft. He's one of those guys. He's a lot of fun to be around, and he's great to watch on tape.

Q. Jim, you've got an incumbent starting quarterback being pushed in competition. LSU has something similar going on. How is your competition affecting the team, and how would you

describe it, and when do you expect it to end?

COACH McELWAIN: I think it's one of those things that's kind of exciting for both guys. Really what it comes down to is when we get there in August is which one of those guys affect the play of the other people around them to help them be successful. There's a lot of talented guys out there that can throw it and do all that, but for some reason don't click with the guys around them. And how they help those guys play better, that's something we're looking for. I know those guys have done a good job of getting the guys together, doing the off-season workouts. To see which one of them kind of stood up, maybe did some other things. What I mean by that, just a little extra work in the weight room, maybe a little pulling the guys aside here or there and communicating with those O-linemen that are going to be their bread and butter as far as being successful. So I think the biggest thing is who's going to move the football team up and down the field is really what it's all about.

Q. You've got a couple National Championships on your resume as an offensive coordinator. First, do you think that experience helps you coming back into the SEC? And do you think that gave you some credibility with the players when you walked into that room the first time?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, no doubt that experience is something that I can't tell you how blessed I was to have a chance to be at the University of Alabama in that capacity. Obviously, being involved in the SEC for those four years was something that I think kind of helped a little bit. Yet, as all the coaches along the way, I've been fortunate to be around some great ones, the one thing that each one of them have echoed, and Coach Saban echoed it before I left for Colorado State, at the end of the day, you've got to do it the way you do it. Take the different ways you've learned, but make sure you're yourself when you're doing it. I may have made that mistake a couple times early at Colorado State and understanding that, at the end of the day, I've been really lucky to be around some great coaches and learn some great things, but applying it, you've got to apply it with your style, I guess, and that's something we're doing now.

Q. Coach, I was looking over, you guys were top 20 in offense last year, No. 18 at Colorado State, Michigan was 115th. A lot of people criticized Doug Nussmeier last year. Devin Gardner's progress really got worse as the season went on. Their offense, they were calling plays with less than five seconds on the play clock. I know you have a longstanding relationship with Doug Nussmeier, but just kind of elaborate on why you picked him to be your offensive coordinator.

COACH McELWAIN: One of those things, statistically

it's great. Dave Baldwin did an outstanding job with our offense at Colorado State. We got a little bit better each and every year and up to where we really became productive, and he did a great job with that. Doug's experience in this conference, I think is something that is really good. I can't speak for what happened. I wasn't up there. But I just know what kind of ball coach he is. Every now and then, sometimes you go through one of those, and it isn't -- obviously, it comes back to the coach. I get it. That's the way it goes. Yet I know how excited he is to have this opportunity to get back with these guys and implement a system and move forward with it.

Q. There's been particular instances, just in the past few months, at other universities dealing with players being in bad situations and behaving in a way that's not necessarily the best of a citizen. How do you make sure that your players and the guys you recruit hold themselves accountable and stay out of those types of situations?

COACH McELWAIN: Part of it starts with your leadership in your football team. It's really interesting, each one of us in this room, we've all got freedom of choice. We can educate, and that's what we try to do. As coaches, we're teachers. We try to do as much as we can to help these young men be successful, and yet at the end of the day, it's about choices and decisions that you make, and some of those that are spur of the moment, you never know. Summertime is really usually the worst because there's a little more free time, and yet at the same time, what you hope is they understand that we do have freedom of choice but we don't have freedom of consequence. That's part of growing up and part of learning. I think it's one of those deals each one of us are going to deal with. It's the way it goes. And yet the education piece is what we're all about, and we look forward to trying to keep teaching every single day.

Q. You got eight SEC games. You play Florida State every year. I think you've got Michigan in 2017. What's your scheduling philosophy? Do you like that? Do you think Florida needs to do more of that? Or how do you approach that?

COACH McELWAIN: I really like those opening games, like we're going to get an opportunity in a while to play Michigan down in Texas, and I'm looking forward to that. I think that's good for college football. I really do. Playing Florida State, that's one of those rivalry things, and I don't think you ever get away from that. I'm a big believer in -- that's what I love about college football. I love the rivalries. I love those Saturdays. Those are certain things that I think just shouldn't go away. So for us, maybe playing some of those opening games like that, I just think it helps your team prepare in the off-season knowing that right off the bat, here we go. And

I think it's a good thing.

Q. Jim, I just want to say how much have you stayed in contact with Coach Saban during the course of the last few years since leaving Alabama? Have you guys had a chance to reconnect or talk about you being back in the SEC now and you guys having a chance to face off against each other with you at Florida and him obviously at Alabama at some point coming up soon?

COACH McELWAIN: He's been a guy that's always been there. As soon as I took the job, and a couple times a year, three, four times, in some cases five, just being able to call, have as a resource, he's there to help along the way. And obviously, taking this job, he's been a guy that has answered a lot of questions, maybe gave me some things to look for and look out for as we kind of roll through. In fact, something like this, right? But having that relationship is something I'll cherish forever, and to have a guy that you can pick up the phone and get an answer that has that much experience and credibility, man, that's something special.

Q. Facilities have been a big topic at Florida the last -- this off-season. First, is the indoor practice facility on schedule to be completed? Secondly, how do you think the new facilities will kind of tangibly help the program now and then moving into the future?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, there's a lot of things. When you go into it, I think it was long needed, and it's a beautiful facility. They're ahead of the construction date right now. It sounds like we'll at least be able to get permit to be able to go spend a couple hours in there as we go through two-a-days. So that's something that's really exciting, and it's exciting for our guys. Gutting out some of the dorms, the living arrangements is something we tackled right away, and that should be finished up for these guys to be moving in this fall, and we're excited about that and the security within those dorms, something that's really important. And then the academic center and the nutrition component, the money that we put in there. As I told the people around, don't worry about our offices. It doesn't matter. It's about what the players -- it's about helping them. We're moving in that direction. Got a long ways to go, but it's good to see that those things are happening.

Q. Jim, what was it about Geoff Collins that lured you to him that he's the right fit for your program and how has he meshed with the program so far and the players?

COACH McELWAIN: Geoff is a guy obviously, there again, experienced in the SEC at Mississippi State. He

was with us at Alabama in a player personnel role and a guy that I've known a long time. His energy, obviously, a little bit of continuity coming in with what we had done defensively. There's a lot of similarity, a lot of same language, and I think that that's really important as we go. I just love his energy every day, and the way his teams have played, that speaks for itself.

Q. Coach, obviously, college football becoming more and more of a win now, not later. So how much pressure are you feeling to turn this around right away?

COACH McELWAIN: I don't ever look at it as pressure. I look at it as opportunity. You're right. I mean, that's the way it is, but you know what, it's that way for everybody. So just to be able to go to work every day and have an opportunity to coach in this conference at a place like the University of Florida and do the best job we can, that's one thing that really it's all about. So the pressures itself, those are the things you put on yourself. I'm confident that we've put a good thing together and looking forward to executing it. That's really what it's all about.

Q. SEC West teams have won the conference title six years in a row now. You've been on the other side of that coin in the West. How do you think teams in the West have been able to gain a little bit of that separation, and what's it going to take for East teams to close the gap?

COACH McELWAIN: Sure, I don't know. There's a lot of things that go into that. Sometimes it's a roll of the dice. I think the one thing that they have done on that side is they've really invested in facilities. I think, when you look at it up and down the road as far as helping in the recruiting phase of it, I think that they're really -- there's a lot of really good things happening that way. And they got out ahead of the curve just a little bit. But at the same time, we all have the opportunity to recruit the same guys, right? So that's what we've got to be able to do, and we've got to be able to put them together and go out and play their tails off.

Q. Coach, obviously, when you're recruiting players, you do a lot of research. Do you guys run criminal background checks on players you're recruiting? And what's your philosophy about bringing in a player who has a criminal past?

COACH McELWAIN: It's not just the criminal piece, it's the whole piece. It's how they interact with people at school, how they interact with the teachers, what they do in a lot of different ways when no one's looking, so to say. We look into that quite extensively in a lot of different ways. That's become a huge piece of that because not only is it about a good player, but it's about a guy that's going to be able to come in and

enhance your program and not bring it down. That's something that we try to do. You don't catch everything. I mean, it happens. But at the same time, it's certainly one of the big things we put this tag on each one of the players we're recruiting, and part of that is the investigation of that if needed.

Q. So you guys do do it?

COACH McELWAIN: Yes.