

SEC Football Media Days

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Gus Malzahn

Auburn



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by Auburn head coach Gus Malzahn.

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, it's great to be back at SEC Media Day. Very excited about our team this year. I had a very good spring, had a very good summer. Our theme this year is "count on me." What that is is just our players to be able to count on each other on and off the field. They've done a very good job of that so far. Also, our coaches to be able to count on our players, players to be able to count on our coaches. I brought three of our leaders with me today. Our quarterback, Jeremy Johnson, a guy that's been a backup for two years, handled himself extremely well. Now he's in the starting role. We feel very good about where he's at and really a leader of our team. Our senior linebacker Kris Frost, a two-year starter. Had the opportunity to leave early, decided to stay here and get his degree. I think that's big. One of our leading tacklers the last two years also. Senior cornerback Jonathan Jones, who's our defensive MVP last year. Had a lot of impact plays. He's an outstanding young man on and off the field. Offensively, we only returned four offensive starters. We've got some big shoes to fill. We lost most of our rushing yards. We lost over half of our receiving yards. And the positives is we do have some experience coming back even though a lot of them didn't start. We have some young guys that are extremely talented also with that group. Another positive is we have our entire offensive staff back for the third year in a row, and I think that's very important. Because of that, I really believe we have a chance to improve each game. Even though we're inexperienced, we'll have a chance to improve each game. We're hoping to repeat the same performance offensively as we did in 2013. Defensively in the off-season, we hired Will Muschamp, in my opinion, the best defensive mind in all of football, not just college football. Our defensive players have taken on his personality, which I really like. Our front seven should be the strength of our team. We have some quality experience back, and with the addition of Carl Lawson, a healthy Carl Lawson, we think that could be a definite strength for us. Our secondary will be thin. We do have some of our main guys back, but we're going to have to ask some young guys to step up as far as that goes. And just like our offense, our defense has a chance to improve each game as far as that goes. Overall, I really like this team. I'm very excited about

our staff. I would put this staff against any in college football, not just being great coaches, but great examples for our players, which is the most important thing for me. Bottom line is our future is very bright at Auburn, and I'm excited to be the head coach for the Auburn Tigers. At this time, I'd like to open it up to any questions. Personally, I'd like to give Bob Holt an opportunity to be the first. I think he's earned that over the years.

KEVIN TRAINOR: So we'll start over here with Bob.

Q. I appreciate that, Gus. I'm not going to turn that down. Jeremy, you mentioned he's the new starter, but he's got starting experience. I think he's the quarterback in college you've coached the longest. What kind of impact do you think that's going to have?

COACH MALZAHN: I'm very excited about Jeremy. Even in high school -- I started recruiting him in ninth grade, and he ran a very similar offense. The fact this will be his third year in our system, even though he's the backup, he got a lot of reps with the ones in practice. He has two starts, of course last year starting out against an SEC opponent in the first half at home. I feel very good about where he's at. His coaches and his teammates have a lot of confidence in him, and he's earned that. I really appreciate the way that he responded to not being the starter the last couple of years, when he could have started for the majority of the teams, and the way he's really responded is really something special.

Q. Coach, in the past couple of seasons, your offense has been based on running the football, gaining momentum, and then going more so with the pass. With Jeremy Johnson, do you see more of a pass oriented offense this season?

COACH MALZAHN: We're going to have the same offensive philosophy and the foundation every year, but we are going to build the offense around the quarterback's strengths. Nick Marshall was one of the better zone read quarterbacks in recent history. Jeremy has the ability. He can flat out throw it. He can make every throw that you ask him to do, but he's a better runner than people think. We didn't ask him to run the past couple of years, but he's a big, athletic guy. He probably runs a 4.6. So he will allow us to call all of our offense.

Q. I was wondering, you mentioned Will Muschamp being the best defensive mind in football. What are the biggest areas he's had an impact in since he's gotten on campus these few short months?

COACH MALZAHN: His approach, his energy, his enthusiasm for the game. He just has that presence around him that he gives all the coaches confidence. He gives his players confidence. And he's got the it factor. So we're very blessed to combine his defense with an offense that we've been running. We think the future's very bright.

Q. Can you just talk about having a former head coach, a guy who's just removed from being a head coach on your staff and what Will can maybe bring for you in that regard.

COACH MALZAHN: You're exactly right. The fact that he's been a head coach in this league, which is very unique, and he can be a sounding board for me. I've already used him at times to get his advice on some things and really helps me being a young head coach in this league. He's a true professional. That's what really excites me. And he's a lot of fun to work with.

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

COACH MALZAHN: I really don't think it's impacted it too much. We just state the facts for recruits coming in. But I am glad we have it.

Q. I mean, this is an overly simplistic question, but how much does having Carl back help your defense overall, and especially your pass rush?

COACH MALZAHN: There's no doubt. I think, if you really look at the big picture last year, we got off to a good start, and about halfway through the season we started hitting some bumps. I believe a lot of it has to do, we had trouble putting pressure on the quarterback. To have a chance to be a good defense, you've got to be able to pressure the quarterback with just rushing four. And not having Carl, that really hurt us last year. We had to do some things to take some chances. So the fact that we have him back and he's 100 percent is a real blessing for us.

Q. Gus, last year the Auburn Tigers finished a little over 68.2 yards penalty-wise last year. What can you and the coaching staff do to try to cut down some of those mistakes and get the yardage back on the big plays that you all did get last year?

COACH MALZAHN: I'm glad you brought that up. There's no doubt, that starts with the head coach. I've always prided myself on the discipline part of the game, and we faltered. As a matter of fact, we faltered the second half of the season with some undisciplined

penalties. So that's something we addressed in the spring, something we'll definitely address and do a better job of coaching in fall camp.

Q. Coach, in 2011 Nick Saban posted the sign "never again" all throughout the Alabama complex after that loss that you helped defeat the Tide in 2010. After last year's Iron Bowl, are you doing something kind of similar to that to strike revenge for this year down in Jordan-Hare?

COACH MALZAHN: No. We're really just focused on playing better defense. We played extremely well on offense, didn't play very well on defense, gave up a lot of points, specifically in the second half. But we're playing at home this year, and I like our chances.

Q. Coach, losing Cameron Artis-Payne, Corey Grant and Artis-Payne has done a lot over the last couple of years. Outside of Roc Thomas, who else could step in and play big in the backfield for you guys?

COACH MALZAHN: Of course, Roc has done an outstanding job. The other two guys that we have, Peyton Barber and our junior college transfer that came in, we think all three will have a chance to be very successful in our offense. The fact that we've not named a starter, if you look at 2013, it took us about four weeks to name Tre as our starter. We always like to have that one workhorse guy, but we have a habit of utilizing multiple tailbacks. Hopefully, we'll figure out who that workhorse guy is earlier rather than later, but I like the fact we've got three guys coming in, or three guys that are there that can do the job that we have confidence in.

Q. Coach, you talked about the secondary. How much of it last year was just lack of discipline on plays and how much is Will changing that with him being there?

COACH MALZAHN: I think, like I said earlier, I think it starts with pass rush. We didn't have a pass rush. We had to take some chances. We put some DBs on some islands, but the bottom line is we just -- we got to get better. Will came in, and like I said earlier, he's the best in the business. He's got a good plan for our guys, and I really feel like you'll see us improve each game. Once our guys get in games and start understanding his expectations, getting more familiar with the defense -- and he's got an excellent defensive staff around him too. So I feel very good about our defense moving forward in the future.

Q. A lot of hype this year. How will your returning veterans help those young guys you mentioned live up to the hype and not fall victim to it?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah, I think that's a big key. The fortunate thing is we do have some experienced guys

that have won an SEC Championship, knows what it takes, feels like, almost won the whole thing, and then last year went through the other end of it, not reaching your goal. So we've got some guys that have experience. We have some young guys that are extremely talented. So we are going to be relying on those old guys to bring those young guys along. So that's going to be a big key to our season, especially getting off to a good start. With the inexperience we have, and if you look at our schedule, especially starting out the season, we're going to have to play well, and we're probably going to have to win some close games to have that chance of winning the championship in our league.

Q. You lost a four-year starter at center in Reese Dismukes. And Austin Golson, transfer from Ole Miss, steps in at center. How confident are you that that position will be secure this year?

COACH MALZAHN: Austin Golson is an extremely intelligent player, he's very athletic. Xavier Dampeer is also battling out that position. We've got two guys we feel very confident in. We ask a lot of our center. We play fast. He's got to make calls. He's got to ID fronts and everything that goes with it. Both those young men had very good springs. The fact that we have two guys we feel good about, that's a very good feeling going into the season.

Q. Gus, you're opening the season against Louisville and Bobby Petrino. How well do you know Bobby? What do you think of him? Have you ever kind of picked his brain on offense or gotten some from watching his teams play?

COACH MALZAHN: I really don't know him well. I talked to him a handful of times. I respect him as a coach. He's a very good offensive coach with what he does and his approach. You look at his track record, we've got our hands full that first game. I know that they're a top 25 team. He's had them for a year, and he's been successful at that place before. So we're playing them in the Dome in Atlanta. We're going to have to play extremely well to have a chance to win that game.

Q. SEC West teams have won the conference title six seasons in a row. How do you think the West has maybe been able to gain a little separation from teams in the East?

COACH MALZAHN: In my opinion, the West is the toughest conference in football. I don't even think it's close. You look at Mississippi schools, you look at adding a very athletic Texas A&M to the West, I mean, it's a man's league. There's no off weeks. Everybody asks about the SEC and all that, and the thing that really stands out to me is the grind. If you're not in it, you don't understand it. So the grind every week, week

in and week out, and then you win the West, and then you've got to play the champion of the East, and then you get into the four-team playoff. So it's just a matter of surviving the grind, and the team that does that being able to have enough fuel and enough energy and everything that goes with it to finish the deal.

Q. Gus, you get LSU there early in the season. Auburn hasn't won in Baton Rouge since 1999, but it's a day game. Do you think that helps you? How big is that game for the rest of the season?

COACH MALZAHN: What is that, week three? It's down the list a little bit. But you look at their track record, they're extremely tough to play at their place, especially at night. So it may be a little bit of an advantage that we're playing during the day. They've kind of had our number, and even up into last year -- of course, we won that. So hopefully, that will give us a little momentum, a little confidence. Tough place to play, but we'll be looking forward to it.

Q. Coach, two years ago, you went into Kyle Field and knocked off A&M. Last year they went into Jordan-Hare and returned the favor. Both kind of young teams. Do you see any similarities between your program and the Aggies and where they are at this point?

COACH MALZAHN: I'm not too up to date on everything they're doing, just the fact that we play. That was a huge win for us two years ago, probably was really the turning point for us as a program that, after we won that game, sacked Johnny Manziel on the last play of the game, it gave us confidence that we could play with anybody. This past year, it was a real tough pill to swallow the way we lost that game. We fumbled on the 1 yard line going in, which was very uncharacteristic, and then we had an exchange from the quarterback-center exchange, communication was very uncharacteristic. But they're a very talented team. You've got to play well to beat them.

Q. Gus, has there ever come a point in your career where, because of how fast you play and how good you are offensively, that you felt you maybe had to give something up defensively and just sort of how you run the defense? And does Will represent a change in philosophy at all in how you want to play defense?

COACH MALZAHN: I think the bottom line is winning games, and I think you, as successful coaches, no matter whether you're playing fast or slow, you've got to determine what's best for your team. I think we've been very successful doing that. You look now at pace. Just about everybody in our league has some type of tempo, even the teams that used to gripe about it are actually doing it now. So it's something that you've got to get used to it. And Will and Rhett, I get with both of

them, and we talk about what their needs are going into the season, what do we need? We're going to do that. So I feel very good about that.

Q. Gus, could you just talk about, I think there's seven new defensive coordinators in this league, eight if you count Derek Mason taking over. Is that a challenge for you as an offensive coach? Also, do you think it's an indication that offenses have kind of taken over this league a little bit?

COACH MALZAHN: Well, there is quite a few new defensive coordinators, but a lot of them we faced before, and we've seen and are somewhat familiar with them. I think there are some of the best minds in all of college football in our league, and you've got to prepare for that. You can't just prepare for that that week you play them. You've got to prepare in the off-season, already be thinking ahead because each defensive coordinator is going to be a little bit different. They're going to have their personnel, and you've got to project how they're going to use that particular personnel that they have.

Q. Gus, I know a couple years ago, they had that thing at Hughes where they're going to name the stadium after you. Now they're not going to be able to do that because they're consolidating. What's your thoughts on that?

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, I was very honored and blessed to have a field named after me. That's a really surreal thing. I think they're consolidating with West Memphis. I told the head coach at West Memphis the other day he shouldn't lose a game with those players. But I am honored to have that.

Q. Could you talk about year three, the overall talent on your roster and depth compared to last year and the year before.

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah, this is the third year, and I think that's very important when you start recruiting the type of person that you want to fit your offense and defense, special teams and all that. I believe this is the second year in a row that we've had everybody qualify. So that tells you a lot about the character of the type of players that we're bringing in, and I'm extremely proud of that group. I really feel like the future, the foundation from a player's standpoint is really set up good for us from a coach's standpoint. So very excited about that.

Q. Gus, your stance on the new transfer rule regarding players with serious misconduct has been clear as zero tolerance. Nick Saban made reference to two of your former quarterbacks and taking issue with that rule, though it wouldn't have applied to them. Did you take issue with his remarks at all?

COACH MALZAHN: No, I didn't, but I really feel like this

is all stemming from the domestic violence attention that's coming up, and I really believe that that's the main thing. I believe most coaches wouldn't have a problem with that.

Q. Gus, a lot was made of the satellite camps and whatnot earlier this year, specifically Jim Harbaugh coming down to Alabama. I didn't know, is he a guy that you have any relationship with at all? As far as are you running like a camp with him or anything before? Just anything like that?

COACH MALZAHN: No, I don't. I think that whole thing kind of got blown out of proportion, to be honest with you. The chances of a team up north coming into our state and a player that us or Alabama wants are slim to none. So it was just a matter of that was the big story. Our league right now, if they're going to keep doing it, we've chosen to be a part of that. So we'll see where that goes.

Q. Coach, having the largest scoreboard or video board in college football, how excited are the guys to get on the field and practice with that? Is it going to be any much of a distraction maybe?

COACH MALZAHN: It's big. It's real big. When you get on the field and you actually see how big it is, it's really something else. I think it's going to be a great thing for our fans. The atmosphere, it will do nothing but help our atmosphere, which is already off the charts. I know our players are going to enjoy it. Me, as a coach, there will be times I'll look at the scoreboard either on a replay or during a certain play, especially if the ball's in the middle. It will take me a little getting used to, but I'm really looking forward to having it. And we are going to practice some in fall camp with that thing on so it won't be a shock to us that first game at home.