

SEC Football Media Days

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Coach Kevin Sumlin

Texas A&M



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by the head coach of Texas A&M, Kevin Sumlin.

COACH SUMLIN: Good morning, everybody. Just like every other coach here in the next couple days, we're excited to be here, excited for this upcoming season. Now that Coach Spurrier has got you all warmed up, I'm kind of the second part of the show today. I'm going to probably not be as funny. I made a promise to my wife that I will not be combative today. I'm going to smile and have a good time. We're looking forward to this season. I think there's been a lot of change in our program. I think the expectation levels are high. I think that's a good thing. Three years ago, if the majority of people, if you had said you would have won 28 games over the last three years in the SEC, a lot of people would have not said that was possible or said there's no way that'll happen. I think we've established ourselves as a team that has high expectations internally, and those expectations have also branched out. So we're looking forward to this season. The way we finished up at the end of the year, struggled right through the middle of the season, really came back at the end of the year, go on the road and win at Auburn. Lost a couple tight games at the end of the year, but finished on a high note with another Bowl victory. You look out there with the number of freshmen that were playing in that game, two freshmen free safeties, all three linebackers, Myles Garrett, a true freshman, to win that game in the fashion that we did gave those young guys some confidence and a springboard going into this season. So look at Kyle Allen coming off of MVP of the Bowl game performance, had nothing but confidence into the off-season. Otaru Alaka was the defensive player of the game as a true freshman. So those two young guys went into the off-season with a lot of confidence, and I think that has continued. Obviously, we made some coaching changes. We lost David Beaty. I think that's our fourth or fifth assistant coach to move on to become a head coach, which is something that we're very, very proud of in our program. Bring in Dave Christensen as our run game coordinator, change up our running game a little bit. And it's more gap scheme type things, things we need to practice against and show our defense to get better. And, of course, John Chavis, who brings a wealth of experience for us defensively. I think there's been a lot of buy in right now from our young players. I like our improvement during the 15 practices of spring.

Obviously, the new rules have given us an opportunity to meet with our players in the summer, which has given us a chance to really kind of develop and advance where we are schematically across the board. So we're looking forward to getting this thing cranked up. We start off August 9th with our first meeting, open up with Arizona State, the national TV team, and NRG in Houston, we'll probably be a top 20 football team. We'll know where we are right off the bat, just as we have in the past, but certainly we have to continue to get better. I've been accused over the last couple of years of using this time to filibuster. So I'm going to stop right here now and take any questions you might have.

Q. Where do you feel like you guys are going to be better next season? Where will you improve? What areas do you feel like need improvement the most?

COACH SUMLIN: We're always looking at everything, and the way I've always done things is whatever we're doing well, we need to continue to expand that to try to stay ahead of the curve. And what's not working well, we've got to get better. Obviously, we made some changes starting on defense with John Chavis coming in and up front in our offensive line with a new run game coordinator in Dave Christensen. So for us, one of our biggest goals in the off-season was to become a tougher team physically and mentally. In order to do that, you've got to practice a certain way. The presentation of the offense to the defense has to be one that has a physical aspect to it. I think we brought that into play with our run game and to prepare our defense to be able to stop those types of things instead of just seeing it during the week. So basically, in a nutshell, that was really the goal in the off-season, really throughout the spring, to become a more physical team and being able to run the ball in a big time league when we want to, not just when -- and when we need to. And then to be able to hold up defensively and stop that type of attack. In order to do that, we had to make some changes to get that done, and that's schematically but also how we practice and the way we do things. I've been very, very pleased with the development on both sides of the ball. Like I said, during the short 15-day window of practices, but we're going to continue down that road during training camp.

Q. You mentioned Coach Beaty. He has quite the

challenge in front of him. What qualities does Dave bring to the job?

COACH SUMLIN: David was a tremendous high school coach. He'd been around a long time in the state of Texas. A lot of guys have made that transition to the college level as position coaches and head coaches. Chad Morris is another guy right now. David is a great recruiter, a great teacher, and a great communicator, and obviously he's got a lot of ties in the Metroplex, which is going to help Kansas in recruiting. But much like a lot of the guys we've had, I think we've had four or five guys that have become head coaches, we're very, very proud of that. A third of them are in the Big 12 now, between Kliff Kingsbury and Dana and now David Beaty. So they all bring things to the table. I think David's strong suit is he's been at Kansas before. He understands, I think, what the weaknesses are there, where he needs to go, kind of like me coming back to Texas A&M after being an assistant coach. I think you have a better feel for where you need to be and what's lacking and the transition sometimes can be easier and quicker because you've been there before and you understand the deficiencies of the program.

Q. Coach, you guys played LSU the last three seasons. They held you to under 20 points in all three games, all losses. Did you kind of take the mindset, if we can't beat LSU and John Chavis, I'll go hire him away?

COACH SUMLIN: I didn't kind of. That's exactly what I did. There's really nothing more to the answer than that. That's true. We've studied the defense. We get it. We struggled. It's a great fit for us and a great fit for him. He was ready for a new challenge. We were in the market, obviously, and here's a guy who's got a tremendous track record in the SEC and recently in the SEC West. So his knowledge of opponents, his knowledge of the league helps me as a head coach, but it also helps our team and brings confidence right away to a defense that really needed it. His style, we've studied it so much over the course of the last three years in the off-season to try to get better. Like I told him, I know this thing like the back of my hand. I just need to know what you call it because I can tell you what it is. I've been looking at it in the off-season trying to figure out a way to score more points than we've scored. But transition for he and his family have been great. The buy in, as I said, for our players have been exceptional. Like I said, I'm as excited as any year that I've ever coached because I've got a lot of really, really good young talent that really went through a year unlike any other year I've been a part of. We look up after week two or three last year, some people are saying we've got a Heisman Trophy winner, and we're first or second in the country. Six weeks later, we can't win a game. We end up the year, we go to Auburn and win and win the Bowl game. So our guys left the season

feeling a heck of a lot better about themselves than they did during the middle of the year. But when you have that many young guys that are playing, I think what we learned as coaches and hopefully as players is what it takes to go through the grind of this league. Our first year here, we had a group of seniors who are physically and mentally tough. Last year I think guys like Armani Watts, who started off the year great playing free safety for us, had a great game against South Carolina, week six, seven, eight, nine, he just was worn down. So mentally it's different. The maturity level of this team in another year -- as they say, the best thing about freshmen is they become sophomores, and for us, that's a good thing because there is no one-and-done in college football. For us, they've got to be there at least three years. With the coaching changes, with what we have in the guys who played last year, like I said, I'm as excited as any year I've coached for camp to get started.

Q. Kevin, because of the way John left LSU, the abrupt departure and the litigation, how much more spice do you think this rivalry has now because of the way he was hired and the way he just left?

COACH SUMLIN: I don't know. When I walk in the stadium, they don't seem pretty happy about me walking in there in the first place. I don't know if it can get any more spicier than it is now. It's been a game that ten years ago was still a really, really big football game with Texas A&M and LSU. So there's always subplots. There's story lines. You know, you got guys we're recruiting, the same guys. I get a big hug from Jamal Adams right before the game, and then he goes out and just tries to knock our guys out. So we've got guys on both sides of the field. We're recruiting Louisiana. They're recruiting Texas. We've got all kinds of story lines involved, but certainly people want to make it what it is. Everybody's always going to look for some reason to ratchet it up a bit, you know. Just like when Nick left LSU and went to Alabama, you never know. People are going to do what they're going to do. All I know is both places have done a fabulous job with stadium renovation. There's going to be 100,000-some people whether they play at home or there. Really good players on the field, and it's good for college football.

Q. Kevin, what's been your impressions so far of Dave Christensen and what he's added to your staff?

COACH SUMLIN: I think Dave has a lot of experience. He's a guy that, again, it's kind of the -- you've watched him from afar. He had a great career as a coordinator at Missouri, has been a head coach, which, again, that's another part that helps me, another guy that's actually been in that chair that you can talk to about things. You watch what their teams did last year at

Utah, the way they were able to run the ball on a lot of really, really quality teams, including USC. Schematically, I think he brings attitude and experience to the table. It gets back to what I said. We've had to change our practice style. I think we came into the SEC with an attitude that, hey, we want to win right now, and the best way to do that is by scoring points and then building off of that with recruiting and generating excitement and doing those things. We've done that. Now let's take the next step and from a recruiting standpoint, develop a depth standpoint that we need. I've said it before. The SEC is not only a line of scrimmage league. It's a line of scrimmage and depth league. Our ability to recruit, retain, and develop defensive front players and offensive linemen has really, really increased over the last couple of years, and hopefully we're going to see that pay dividends here over the next couple.

Q. In terms of leadership on this team, what you saw in the spring heading into the summer, where do you think this team stacks up leadership-wise on the team?

COACH SUMLIN: That's an interesting question because last year we lacked leadership, particularly defensively, and a lot of that is not an excuse, but when you're a young player, you got a hard enough time trying to figure out what you're doing instead of while you're trying to lead somebody else. Like I said, I look up in the Bowl game, and you've got two freshmen safeties which you're trying to get leadership out of. They're worried about the ball going over their head. You've got three linebackers who are freshmen, they're worried about stopping the run. I've got Myles Garrett, who's a heck of a player, but he's got his own issues. So I think that, as a young player grows, he goes from the what-to-do to how-to-do-it stage, and that's where leadership comes in. I see guys getting outside themselves during spring football, during the summer, and then going into fall camp and saying, all right, I've been through this before. I have a bigger responsibility to this team than just worrying about me, and that comes with age and maturity. So who those guys are, we've got three of them here, Julien Obioha started every game as a freshmen against Florida as a defensive end. He's moving inside. Mike Matthews has played just about every game. He's been there since I've been there. We did not redshirt him. We did redshirt Germain Ifedi, but he started every year since his redshirt freshman year. These guys have been through it, they understand it. They are in that year two, where, okay, it's more to it than just me worrying about himself, I need to be able to lead. And I like the signs of what I've seen in the off-season.

Q. Can you just talk about in this conference, we have seven new defensive coordinators, if you

count Derek Mason taking over the defense. Is that a challenge, even though they're somewhat familiar, to deal with all these new faces?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, we just kind of passed them around, didn't we? A lot of them just got new shirts on and new hats. So whatever they're going to do. Will's been around. He was involved in the defense at Florida, you know that. Kevin Steele's been around. John moving over with us. Manny -- shoot, I've known Manny forever. This is his second stint at Mississippi State. We used to play when I was at Houston. So a lot of these guys have kind of just moved around a little bit. Geoff Collins moving away. But the big thing is that I think the movement has been one that's going to energize certain programs like ours. All I can do is tell you that John coming to us really has helped our intensity level as a defense and our confidence level as a defense. Are we going to be the '82 Bears? I don't know. But I know that our confidence level is better. Where we are, we're playing faster, we're playing harder, and we're being more physical, and that's what we needed.

Q. Kevin, how did the offensive line specifically respond to the different physical approach this spring? And beyond that, how do you think Germain Ifedi, for lack of a better word, compares to the offensive tackles that you all have been having as first round picks in the last three years?

COACH SUMLIN: Germain's a different player. You guys see him walk around here. He's every bit of 335. I think he thinks he's a model too. He's got his glasses on and a big ole smile. He's a bigger guy. You look back at Ced, Luke Joeckel, Jake, were closer to 300, 305, more athletic guys. This guy is a big powerful, powerful man. Over the course of time, we've been able to develop a rapport with our players and sit down and talk to them, here's where you are status-wise. You can play your way into this. That happened with Jake Matthews, who played himself into the top ten, it's time for him to go. He made somewhere between \$9 million and \$14 million coming back. Germain is a bona fide longtime player in the NFL, a for sure guard, really working at tackle, probably more at right tackle than left tackle at the next level. Can he play left tackle? Yeah, he can because he's big and strong and he's athletic. He's a different player than maybe the other three first rounders. I think he had a late, from what I gathered in our research, a late second round grade last year, for sure third, but a late second round, and he's decided to come back and try to move up. My experience, if he moves up into the first round, that means he's played very, very well for us, and it's a win-win for everybody.

Q. You talked about, obviously, the freshmen. You played a lot of them last year. Are they ready to take that step to get you guys where you want to

be this year after that year of really taking some hard lumps?

COACH SUMLIN: I think so. I'm a little bit like Coach Spurrier. Everybody can't win. We won eight games. So it wasn't a complete flop. We need to get better. I think our guys going through the season that we went through, should have been able to learn from that. From a preparation standpoint, from a how you deal with week to week, how to take care of your body, what the mental stressors are, and one of the few teams that played eight straight games without a bye last year with young players. So all those things we can learn from. As I said, in year two, what you hope and what you try to do is relate those experiences to your young people, have them learn from them and grow from it, and it's okay to make a mistake, but let's not make the same mistake again. Let's learn from that, maybe not know what to do, but let's not do that, and move on. So we've placed a big emphasis on how we practice, how we approach practice, what we're doing in the off-season to really try to be more consistent. The good teams I've been on don't ride roller coasters. Young teams have really kind of done that in the past, play up here, some games down here. Really great teams are consistent, and that consistency level comes with maturity. Hopefully, we've helped try to develop that in the off-season, but certainly we're going to have to have some guys step up in sophomores and juniors and be the leaders that we need them to be. Because we've got pretty good guys as seniors that are represented here and three guys we brought.

Q. How much of a distraction has the Chavis LSU lawsuit been? And is it true that you called him just before kickoff of LSU's Bowl game?

COACH SUMLIN: That's not true, and it hasn't been a distraction to me at all.

Q. You played two games at neutral sites this season, opening up against Arizona State at NRG Stadium and then Arkansas in Dallas Cowboys Stadium. How do you feel about the neutral sites, particularly one against a conference foe in Arkansas, or do you prefer a home-and-home type setup against division foes?

COACH SUMLIN: If I had my way, we'd play all 12 games at home, but they're not going to let that happen. For us in a recruiting standpoint, it's been very, very helpful. Not just the location, but when our stadium's done this year, we play the 12th, we play Ball State. It will be the finest football facility, college football stadium in the country. 102,500, smart stadium, they've got all the bells and whistles in there with Internet, all that wi-fi, all the stuff that fans need, you guys need. They said you can make 100,000 phone calls at one time. So a lot of people are really coming by and seeing what this is, the suites, it's going

to be as nice as it is. And our recruiting over the course of the last year, we're able to tell guys that, number one, you're going to play in the finest football facility in the country as a home stadium. This year we're going to play, open at NRG, which is just a fabulous facility in Houston that's hosted the Super Bowl, and we play in Arlington every year. So you're going to play in the best stadiums there are. Not only in the state of Texas, but probably in the country. And then we go on the road, it's passion and great fans across the SEC. So I think I know that, as we recruit and we talk about big-time venues and putting guys on a stage that it really, really shows who they are and how they play and gives them the exposure that they want these types of games and these types of venues. I see the better players in the country wanting to be a part of that.

Q. As we get closer to this first game against Arizona State, A&M and Arizona State are both teams that are clearly on the rise. What has been your biggest concentration and the team's biggest concentration as you get closer and closer to that specific game?

COACH SUMLIN: We really worry more about us than anything else. I think you heard me talk about what we try to do, what our goals were in the off-season as a football team. If we can continue down the path that we started off in the spring, everything else takes care of itself. Schematically, we want to play different teams. We'll start worrying about Arizona State maybe two weeks before that. We worry more about us and the makeup of our own team, developing depth, developing attitude, what that attitude's going to be physically and mentally, and then we'll start worrying about the people that we play. Quite frankly, that's the way I've approached it all the time. You can get all over the place dealing with opponents this time of year, but if you spend that time and energy on yourself, trying to make sure that you're doing the things that are necessary to be consistent during the year, which is something that we weren't, that's where we spend our time and energy in the off-season.

Q. Coach, you brought two offensive linemen here today. How important was it for you to give them the spotlight?

COACH SUMLIN: We've always brought guys here. I think just because we brought two of them, we've had a guy here every year since I've been there, and fortunately, all of them are really rich right now. They're first round picks, and we want to continue that. As long as we're bringing them here, hopefully, they continue to play well. I think it gets back to what I said earlier. You've got three -- you've got two O-linemen and a D-lineman, which we probably could have brought Myles Garrett too. We've run out of deals, and these guys have been here a long time in our program. The great

thing about college football that's different than college basketball, there's no one and done. I've got them for at least three years. I told Myles he'll get to go. Last year part of the negotiation for Germain Ifedi was that, if he came back for this year, that he wanted to come to SEC Media Days. I said, we can make that happen. That's the kind of negotiation we've got with these big guys, and we're having a great time.

Q. You guys are back at Ole Miss this year. I wonder if you could tell me what stood out for you about your first two trips to Oxford, and what do you make of the fact that in three meetings the home team has yet to win between Ole Miss and A&M?

COACH SUMLIN: I haven't really thought about that. It's always been a heck of a game. I've got a lot of respect for Hugh. We've known each other for a long time. There have been some great ball games, including the first one over there. I don't know. It's kind of a different series, different -- we've been kind of a different team. We've had better success on the road than we've had at home as a team. Might be because maybe our stadium is under construction. Maybe now that it's going to be finished this year, maybe we can settle down and play better at home too. No, it's been a great series. It's been a good game. They're talented. They're going to have a good football team, and, again, Ole Miss is in Dallas recruiting. There's players on that team that we recruit on both sides of the field. So it makes it interesting. We've got guys that played in the same high school that are playing against each other in that game. So we look forward to it. You never look forward to leaving and going on the road in the SEC, but I think, for whatever reason, our team kind of enjoys that. I look forward to it being another heck of a game.