

# SEC Football Media Days

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## Coach Hugh Freeze

Ole Miss



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by Ole Miss head coach Hugh Freeze.

COACH FREEZE: Good to see you guys again. I can't believe it's year four. Really it seems like yesterday that I was standing here before you guys, but appreciate all you do for college football. It's an honor to represent our great university, and I truly am living a dream getting to coach at this level and represent Rebel Nation and our great university and our administration. I work for some of the greatest guys, and the vision that they've had for our program and supportive spirit that they have is second to none. Just fortunate to do that. I'd like to say thank you to all -- I know I was just talking to Coach Miles out in the hallway there. We're really fortunate to have great wives and children that allow us to do what we do. They're getting ready to be without their husbands for a long stretch for the most part, and the things we miss out on in regards to that, we have great wives that really make us look good. So I want to say thank you to them. Congrats to Commissioner Slive on his outstanding run. The things he's done for our conference are amazing, and looking forward to Commissioner Sankey taking over. So impressed with the man that he is and the vision he has for us. I'm blessed with a great staff, and we've been fortunate to stay together. We lost one coach. Tom Allen has moved on to take the defensive coordinator's job at South Florida with a good friend of mine in Willie Taggart, which we're very happy that Tom gets to advance his career. We had Cory Batoon sitting right there, who's been with me since Arkansas State, that we moved right into his spot. Our continuity has been great. Our strength staff stayed the same. Just excited to work with great men every day that have no ego, that care about the program more than they do any individual accomplishments. Our theme this spring was chasing greatness, and I think it's -- I think our young men that we coach these days, they're not sure what that means or what that looks like. What does it look like in how you treat a female and how you go about in a relationship and the things that we all can do better? What does it look like as a student? What does it look like as an athlete? What does it look like in society? When you have 120 young men on your team in a college setting, there are mistakes that are made. We get the fortunate responsibility of helping them navigate those mistakes. But as a leader, I have to look

at myself first and what does chasing greatness look like to me. The first thing that I think jumps out is I get to set the core values of our program. We believe strongly in who we are, that our core values are faith and attitude and mental toughness and integrity and love. Hopefully, we model that daily with our young men. I really hope to empty myself daily into being the best, using the platform that I've been given, that God's given me to impact the lives of others, and certainly that includes our young men. I hope they can see our staff doing things that they want to model when they get through with football. We have to handle adversity in difficult situations and be willing to take a stand, which will be our motto this year. In taking a stand, you have to have core values to do that. We want to own every moment and then recharge the next day and do it the same. As an offense, our chasing greatness, hopefully, it is a model of efficient offensive football. We've looked very hard at the deficiencies we had last year, excited of the return of so many talented kids, hopefully can stay healthy and get quarterbacks that can take care of the football and manage us. With the kids that are returning offensively, there's no reason that we should not be a competitive football team. We need to be more efficient in the red zone and the run game, eliminate so many negative runs. As a defense, basically, what I've charged our defensive staff to do -- Dave did a great job with his staff last year -- is to just repeat. Repeat what you've done and try to find a way to get a little better at some areas, but we were very good at defense last year. And hopefully with the front we had returning and the replacements we had for a few key losses, we will repeat that. Special teams, we're in good hands. Everyone is returning with the exception of the long snapper. We've got to find who's going to be that guy, but Gary Wunderlich plans on handling the field goal duties. Nathan Noble, the kickoff duties. Will Gleeson, our punting duties. Chasing greatness, what does that look like for our student-athletes? What I've challenged our guys to do this spring is to set a new standard of what an Ole Miss football player is known for socially and academically, and I've been really pleased. Last fall we broke the school GPA. The spring went even higher. And in the summer, we've had 62 kids that had a 3.0 or better in the first summer term. All 17 freshmen that were in June term had an A in at least one class. I've been very convicted about something that I don't know that we are doing very well in the college game as coaches,

and that is preparing our kids for what is next. Sometimes the kids' focus is always what major do I need to be in that is the easiest for me to be eligible? And they don't look long term. We've developed a program that we call our road map to success that I'm very excited about trying to get kids to identify where they want to be in ten years. After football is over, what do you want your life to look like as a husband, as a father, and the work force what do you want to be doing? And then making sure that the road map that he's on both academically and social decisions that he's on the right track. And then my job would be to keep him coloring in between the lines. We've already had a few guys that have seen a change that needed to be made, maybe academically, where originally they're headed down this major, but what they came to the conclusion setting in my meeting with them, that they wanted to do long term, did not match up with that. So we're hopeful that we can make a difference long term with them. We're extremely excited about embracing the expectations in year four. We welcome those. We obviously play in a conference that is not going backwards, that is very difficult, and every team can beat you and can win the west, and even the crossover games are extremely difficult. We want to focus on moment by moment, day by day, preparing for the opportunities that come our way, and we believe that, if we can stay healthy and get a break here or there, we will be a factor in who decides the SEC West, and we're excited about getting it kicked off.

**Q. What's your entry in the shoe wars, number one? Number two, you've won one more game each year. How do you plan on bettering that or maintaining that or continuing that trend? It's a tough road to go.**

COACH FREEZE: Let's try to take the first one, the shoe war. I'm a pretty simple guy. I'm going to wear my Johnston Murphys from Williams Brothers store, the general store down in Philadelphia, Mississippi. You should try the baloney and bacon there for sure too. It's quite fine. As far as the success question, I think, number one, I think it's important that you have a great definition for success, and mine is probably a bit different than what you hear. I don't know that you can define if I've been successful or not in the time that I've been at Ole Miss. I'm sure it can be argued that we have, but I think the real success would be how are our guys doing 20 years from now? Were we successful then? I mean, there will come a point where people will forget about the wins. I know I get defined about that. That doesn't mean I have to define myself by that. So defining success for me is making sure our young men are productive citizens, husbands, and fathers and impacting the others after they get away from us. But when it gets back to continuing the success, there's no secret recipe that I can come up other than daily decisions, moment by moment, focusing on the little

things and continuing to recruit really good players. If you recruit good players that fit with you, that are like minded and are dedicated to the same core values and your little things are being done well, you'll compete at a high level.

**Q. Hugh, do you sense that home field advantage in the Egg Bowl has become more important in recent seasons?**

COACH FREEZE: It's been advantageous for us, of course. I don't know the three years is enough for me to weigh in on that for sure. Ask me that next year at this time. Hopefully, I'm still standing here, and I might know more. We had a great shot at winning down there two years ago and didn't take care of the ball. Credit to them, they played extremely well that game. But it's certainly advantageous. They're both difficult places to play in that rivalry.

**Q. Coach, everybody knows Ole Miss has done a lot over the years to sort of separate itself from the symbols of the old confederacy. Your thoughts on changing the state flag? And also, do you think the Ole Miss nickname is appropriate?**

COACH FREEZE: In the early -- in the late '90s, our school made a move in a direction away from the flag. So our school has kind of made up its mind of where it's at. I'm a Mississippian. No one understands the pride of the people of that state and the heritage of that state any better than I do. While I'm not a political figure, that symbol has been hijacked somewhat by groups that have meant ill will toward other people. I think it's time that we move in a different direction with the state flag. We could get into the name of the Rebels and everything, and if that's something that is troublesome to others, I'm sure that we would address that. I haven't heard that.

**Q. Hugh, as you win a little more and the pressure builds, how do you manage the off-the-field stuff like arrests or maybe people who might want to take your program down through NCAA inquiries? As you win more, everybody wants to pick away at you.**

COACH FREEZE: That's a great question. I really have struggled with some of that as we've moved forward. Man, I've come to one conclusion. You control what you can control, and you cannot worry about the rest of it. I have really very little control of what happens outside of us, setting who we are, our core values, and making sure that we are vigilant daily about being attentive to all the issues that are surrounding college football and educating our young men. As far as the issues that come up with them making poor decisions, I've started to try to embrace that and to give thanks in everything and to rejoice always because, man, that gives me an opportunity to

help them navigate life. Now, I'll be the first to tell you that I don't enjoy it, but I'm trying to rejoice even in those that, man, I've got an opportunity here to somehow make a difference in an outcome of a kid's life, whether it be disciplining him, maybe sending him on his way to maybe learn a different lesson a different way, or maybe it's restoration. Those decisions are never easy on any of us. Every case is different, and there's no book that tells you. It's like raising my three daughters. They're all three different. Man, my love doesn't change for them if a mistake is made, but I certainly want to get it corrected for further. Basically, to answer your question, make sure that you are attentive to doing things the right way and setting the right tone and worry about what you can control and hope and pray that it takes by all that are around your program.

**Q. How's Treadwell doing? Do you expect him to be as explosive as he was? When he went down last year, obviously, you lost a great player, but how much did it take out of you emotionally the way he went down?**

COACH FREEZE: All signs point to him being fully recovered. He even looks a little different. I think he lost a little weight, feels a little more explosive. I'm anxious to get pads on him and see how he responds when the ball's a little high and in traffic. That kid is extremely determined to make a full recovery, and I think he has. So we're excited. There was so much riding on that game that evening. You had the No. 3 and the No. 4 team playing, the winner of that has two games left. That puts you in a position to play in the first ever BCS playoff. For it to happen like it did, adversity is certainly a teaching tool, but that next week, I don't know -- I tried everything in the world, but I didn't sense that we could rebound from it. Credit to Arkansas, of course. They're playing extremely well, and Bret has them playing better each and every week. But it took a lot out of us, both emotionally and just big picture-wise from the scores on the scoreboard to losing the game and one of your best players.

**Q. The question of your quarterbacks and the development of Buchanan and Kincade and, of course, Chad Kelly, could you discuss the progress there. And have we really gotten a fair sampling in terms of game reps in terms of what Buchanan and Kincade can do?**

COACH FREEZE: I don't think there's a fair sampling yet for any of the three. And that's why I have not put -- I won't put myself in a box on when that decision will be made. I think all three have earned the right to compete for it. I said after spring I thought Ryan was a little ahead of the other two, but the margin was so small that it certainly could be overcome. It may be two weeks into fall camp that it's obvious, or it may be two

games into the season before it's made, but I'm not going to put myself in a box on that. I really want to evaluate, give them all a fair chance to see who's the most efficient in leading our offense. I am excited about the competition. I think all three are talented kids.

**Q. Just wanted to ask you, you're bringing Evan Engram in. Wanted to ask you about his role in the offense and the impact he has on that team.**

COACH FREEZE: His impact is far beyond the field. He's one of the guys that you look at and say, man, I wish we could model this young man as a student-athlete, both in the classroom, on the field, in his personal life. He's just an outstanding leader for us that brings it every single day and that others follow on our football team. Then on the field, he's a very difficult matchup that we think makes us more difficult to defend when he's on the field.

**Q. Can you just, generally speaking, talk about the nature of the transfer at quarterback and that's become a bigger deal around college football and how that's going to change the way coaches might look at that position?**

COACH FREEZE: I can only speak for us. I don't keep up with a lot of that, but the quarterbacks, you can only play one, and typically quarterbacks want to play. And particularly, after they've bided their time somewhere and they feel like there's a guy that's just ahead of them -- I had a personal experience with it at Arkansas State. I'm coaching a guy by the name of Ryan Aplin, who was a two-time Player of the Year there, and Bo Wallace was sitting behind him. And my honesty with him, saying you're going to be behind him as long as he's here, and he made a decision to go somewhere else to advance his cause, and it worked out for him. The same thing is the case at four-year universities. If you're setting behind a guy that's going to be a senior and he's a starter, you know you've got the option, and it's not a right or wrong answer. But if you think your chances of getting on the field are better at another university, they're probably going to look into that. Then as a coach, you've got to decide if that is the right move for the chemistry of your football team or not. That's not ever an easy call either.

**Q. Hugh, where do things currently stand with Laremy Tunsil? Within that, is it concerning that agents are trying to get involved with some of your players? Yesterday Nick kind of mentioned that draft grades can sometimes create issues in terms of mindset and team chemistry. Or is that something you have to accept when you have guys that are highly rated to be drafted?**

COACH FREEZE: I've said in meetings -- I'm kind of a rookie at some of that. But I've sat in meetings where



I've heard Coach Saban and Coach Miles and others say, guys, we've got an issue brewing with these kids and agents and things. So now I'm experiencing it, and it is very difficult to manage. You want your kids to be focused on the task at hand and the fact that you want them to understand that the only thing that can do anything for you right now is your resume that you're going to put on the field. You hope that other professions that are trying to get to them would respect that, and some do. I don't know that I have the exact answer, but it is a concern for sure that that can be a distraction for your kids. I know this. I don't know if we can do anything more in educating them about the possible dangers and everything that could go on and where your focus needs to be right now and then come January after the Bowl game, you'll have plenty of time to discuss exactly what is the right move for you at that time. So it is troublesome. As far as the Laremy situation right now, there's very little to report. We obviously will cooperate fully with, whether it's the NCAA process or the law enforcement process, we will cooperate fully with that. I'm very confident, like I said, in the way we do things and what we can control. I'm very confident in the person that Laremy Tunsil is too, and we look forward to that coming to a conclusion at whatever time is appropriate.

**Q. Since you mentioned tread we will's ankle, how about Denzel Nkemdiche? How's his ankle doing, and how's he progressing as we get closer to fall?**

COACH FREEZE: He had a full recovery and was ready for spring. He went through every day of spring practice and looked full healthy. So excited to have him back.

**Q. Coach, you had a couple running backs transfer. How do you see young guys like Jordan Wilkins and Akeem Judd kind of fill in the void that those guys left?**

COACH FREEZE: They'll have to do that. I think they're very capable of doing that. I thought Akeem had a really nice spring, as did Jordan, Jalen and even Eugene. We think we've got four quality guys there that can share the reps. But I really think Akeem and Jordan could add a different dimension to us.

**Q. You ended the season probably not the way you wanted to, blowout loss 42-3 to TCU. As a coach, how do you bounce back from that and get some positive energy going into the next season? Or do you use that loss as a motivation for your team?**

COACH FREEZE: I'm a big picture guy. So you won't find me making too much of a loss or too much of a win. I think in the big picture of things, while I look very hard at what I did to prepare our team for that game and everything from what hotel you stayed in to how you practiced, I looked at all of that, and we certainly

will learn from that. Credit goes to TCU to being a really good football team on that day, but we obviously needed to compete better. At the same time, I look at the big picture, and if in a short three years, we're playing in a New Year's Six Bowl, beat some of the top teams in the nation, won some nine games, that's really for me on the right track, and that's what I would use to focus on for me. That's just the way I'm made, and I'm a big picture guy.

**Q. Last year you all finished last in the SEC in red zone offense. What can you and the offense do to make sure that you all do get those points in those situations?**

COACH FREEZE: Score points. I mean, we've got to study that and then go study the teams that are really efficient at doing that. We've been very, very good every year I've been a head coach except for last year. So we certainly have got to go and search and make sure we've got great plans. It's very difficult to score on teams in this league down there, but we've got to improve that. That was one of our focus along with eliminating negative runs in spring practice.

**Q. How helpful is it to have someone as versatile as Mike Hilton returning to your secondary?**

COACH FREEZE: Mike is a great story. He's very valuable to us as a leader. He's our Chucky Mullins Award winner this year. He's started for us since his first year and has played a lot of different positions and has rotated from week to week. He understands that back end of our defense very well. We're going to move him to start at safety to hopefully help replace Cody Prewitt, and we believe strongly he's going to be a very solid player. But the fact that he can move around and play our husky, our nickel, corner, safety, he's invaluable to us.

**Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you about cost of attendance in terms of what advice will you give the players on how they should spend or use their money?**

COACH FREEZE: We've already brought in a management -- financial management team from a local bank that has been very thorough in explaining to them. We've broken down the exact distribution of how it's going to work at our place and trying to give them a budget to work off of to make sure that they're being responsible with that money that they're given. It's obviously a good thing for them to have that, but it also, if mismanaged, can be a bad thing. We will continue to try to educate them as to the best way to use that money.

**Q. You've said a couple times, Hugh, that the flag was hijacked. Do you really believe that it was hijacked as opposed to the original meaning of the**

**flag? Until it was misappropriated by various hate groups. And then secondly, what do you think of your role in talking about this at all? I'm curious, what's the role of a head football coach?**

COACH FREEZE: Like I said, I'm not a political figure, nor do I want to be. I'm sure our Governor and the legislation will hear from the people. But in the world to which I live in, if something that is creating ill will in any way towards someone, it's difficult for me to support that. As far as comparing what the original meaning meant, I'm going to have to go study some and make sure I'm speaking out of knowledge as opposed to -- I know the people that I grew up around, I did not see the -- them using it in ill will toward anyone, but obviously, I was raised at a much later date. I do think that it's been associated with people that have meant some harm and ill will.

**Q. Hugh, top recruits come in with a ton of hype each year. You dealt with it with Robert Nkemdiche. How do you go about handling the outside noise around a true freshman before they even play, and do you have to treat them a little differently given the unique circumstances?**

COACH FREEZE: I think you have to treat a lot of players a little differently. I think everyone's their own individual. Robert is a unique individual. One great thing, great quality about him is he's a hard worker and loves to compete. So you don't have to try to motivate him. He really never -- yes, there's a lot of noise around him that you wish wouldn't be, but it never really stopped him from working toward his goals. He's always, what can I do to be better? He needs to finish plays more. He's phenomenal athletically and wins his one-on-ones. Yeah, you have to handle him a little bit differently, but a lot of it depends on the kid also. I'm not a fan of the way recruiting has gone right now and the social media, I think, kind of creates a false sense of really what's real and what's not to some young men. Sometimes that can affect them negatively.