

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Gus Malzahn

Auburn

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Please welcome to the podium Coach Gus Malzahn.

COACH MALZAHN: Okay. It's great to be back. I think this is the second year in a row I've had the lead-off spot, which I like. You know, I brought three of our team leaders with me today: Carl Lawson, our defensive end, a guy that has battled injuries the last couple of years. He is in the best shape and the best spot he's been since he's been here. And that's a good thing.

Defensive tackle Montravius Adams, a three-year starter. Both of these guys had chances to leave early. They've decided to come back, which I think is very important to get their degree and be team leaders. Wide receiver Marcus Davis, one of our more versatile players that we have, also returns kicks.

The thing about these three, they have experience. All three of these guys had an active role in us winning the SEC Championship in 2013. I think that's very important.

Our theme this year is "earn it." Our players came up with that. Earn your teammates' respect, your coaches' respect. Earn it every day on and off the field and our guys have done that in the offseason.

Real excited about our players. They've had a very good offseason, very good spring. Our team unity is very strong, and our leadership is very strong. They are really stepping up and being accountable to each other and not just the coaches. That's very critical can teams.

Very excited about our staff, offensive staff. All of them have played for me in this offense or coached for me in the extended period of time. Our defense, Kevin Steele has done a great job with our staff. Gelled. Doing a great job gelling our staff together. Our philosophies are exactly the same. I think that's very important.

Offensively, one thing we have focused on in the spring and will in fall camp, getting back to playing with pace. That's the edge of ours in the past, and that's got to be the same this coming year. Also executing at a high level. We always pride ourselves in executing at a high



level. Last year we didn't do that. Those were the two focuses from my standpoint to get this thing turned around so we can play quality offense like we expect.

And, thirdly, we got to find our starting quarterback. The positive is we have three guys that we feel like can execute our offense. The challenge we have is defining and figuring out who that guy is that gives us the best chance to win games.

The good thing is we do have experience in this before. Three years ago we had a wide-open job. That's when Nick Marshall won the job and we ended up having a pretty good year with that.

Defensively, we do have a lot of experience back, which I think is very important, we played well in the second half of the season. There's a lot of carryover, as far as our defense last year and defense this year, which I think is important. And I think we got a chance to have one of the best, if not the best, defenses we've had at my time at Auburn, which I think is very important.

Special teams, I feel very good about our special teams with our depth coming back. Specifically our kicker, Daniel Carlson, I think he's one of the best kickers in all of college football. He's not just a weapon, field goals and extra points, but he's a weapon on kick-offs which is very critical, as far as that goes.

And overall I really like where our team's at, I like where our staff's at. We have one of the toughest schedules in all of college football again this year. We got to win close games, and that's what you have to do in this league. And you got to earn it. And we're going to take the one-game-at-a-time approach, similar to what we did in 2013. Questions?

Q. Coach, going into fall camp, how is the offensive line shaping up? What kind of changes are we going to see there, and is there any edge on who might be the starting right tackle?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. You know, we're at the same point when we left spring, as far as the first five out there. Here's the good thing. All five guys have experience. Now we switched up some positions, but there's nothing like experience specifically in our

league. You know, we're going to need some young guys to step up from a depth standpoint, but the first five that we put out there, you know, they're pretty much battle-tested and we know what we're getting.

Q. Gus, is it easier to fit a quarterback to your system or adjust your system to fit the quarterback, and which part of the equation does John Franklin III fit in on that?

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, John is the guy to be impressed with. He's really won his teammates' respect which is always important for a new guy coming in. It's very important to him. He's a hard worker.

The two older guys both are in a lot better spot than they were this time last year. Once we identify who our starter is, it gives us a best chance of winning. You will see us tweak our offense to build around their strengths. We're always going to have the same philosophy and core beliefs with our offense, but once we make that call on who that guy is, we will tweak and try to build around their strengths and try not to ask them to do things that are maybe not their strengths.

Q. Just curious, what do you think you misjudged about your team last year? And then when something like that happens to you as a coach, how do you sort of compensate for that the next year in terms of maybe managing expectations or that kind of thing?

COACH MALZAHN: I think each year after year, you always -- you know, you take a look back and you evaluate things, what can you do better from a head coach's standpoint, what can you do better from an administrative standpoint.

So it was good for me to set back and look and evaluate everything. You know, when I look at last year, really the thing that stands out to me is we lost close games. In this league, you're going to have a lot of close games. The two previous years, we were one of the best in the country at winning close games. And we had opportunities. And usually it comes down in this league to two or three plays in these close games, and you got to find a way to make them and you got to have your guys prepared and you got to be able to execute.

And from an offensive standpoint, really was the first time since I've been coaching college that we didn't execute at, what I say, a high level consistently. And that goes back on me. I do feel good about where we're at. I do feel good about some of the valuations and some of the changes we made going into this year.

Q. Coach, at the running back position last year, Peyton Barber, a 1000-yard back. Talk to me about Kerryon Johnson, a diverse player. What do you see from him in the weight room and film room that has you excited about him?

COACH MALZAHN: Kerryon Johnson has got a chance to be one of the most versatile guys in the league. His best days are to come. He did a good job for us last year, a true freshman. You're talking about a guy who threw the ball out of backfield. Some wildcat stuff. He was banged up most of the year. Had shoulder surgery in the spring. He has probably put on close to 15, 20 pounds, which that's a good thing.

Just from a play calling standpoint, from an offensive standpoint, he gives us a lot of flexibility because he does a lot of things well. He's going to have a good role for us this year.

Q. I was reading some stories in the spring about how maybe you felt like you didn't get to strictly focus on being a football coach enough last season and maybe were too much a CEO. I was wondering if you could expound on those thoughts.

COACH MALZAHN: At the end of the day, I'm a football coach. That's my strength, being on the field and coaching an offense. You know, it kind of goes back to the question before, after you get down with the season and you're not as successful as you'd like, you evaluate things.

One thing that really hit me pretty hard is that I got to be more active with the daily X's and O's and coaching that goes with that. And that's what I look at as my strength. And so that's what I meant by that, and I'm looking forward to getting back in the middle of things and enjoying the actual coaching on the field.

Q. Coach, do you have a policy on the players in your program or the players you're trying to recruit in your program about domestic violence issues and how you handle them, or do you think there should be a conference-wide or NCAA-wide policy on this issue?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. We do our homework. Matter of fact, we do our homework thoroughly on everybody we recruit. I've said before as far as domestic violence is something that we don't touch. But we do our homework on everyone we bring in the program. There's a lot of information out there these days, which makes it -- makes it better. But, you know, that's just our approach.

Q. Coach, could you talk about opening with five straight home games, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

COACH MALZAHN: That's -- I hope it's a good thing. You know, I really, really excited that we're playing at home. You know, our players and our coaches and I know our fans are excited. We got a real schedule starting out. I would probably put our schedule up against anybody in college football, especially early.

The fact that we are playing at home will do nothing but help us. We got in, in my opinion, the best crowd in college football. It's really something to be able to play and coach in front of them. We have a pretty tough opener, obviously with Clemson, one of the better teams in all of college football, with maybe the best player in all of college football.

So, we got our work cut out for us, but we are definitely happy we're playing the first five games at home, to answer your question.

Q. My question for you is this: Going into the fall after the spring, if you would just talk about Chandler Cox's role?

COACH MALZAHN: Did you say Chandler Cox?

Q. Yes.

COACH MALZAHN: Chandler Cox is one of our leaders. He brings great energy. He played significantly as a true freshman last year. He's a tough guy. He's gotten a little bigger. He's probably put on 10 to 15 pounds from last year.

If you think back of the Jake Prossers and those guys that when we've been really good on offense, we had that guy. He really reminds me a lot of that. He is a very physical player, he's been very durable, too.

Q. Gus, you had, you know, 13 seconds away from a national championship in your first season, and then within a couple years of that, obviously, you mentioned going through a season last year where the offense didn't execute the way your offenses traditionally do. In addition to just doing the evaluation you talked about, was last season humbling for you as a coach? You really hadn't experienced anything quite like that, as a college head coach?

COACH MALZAHN: I think so. We had high expectations and we do every year. We weren't able to reach our goals. And that was very frustrating and it was very humbling to go through an experience like that. And I think you got to evaluate everything, like we talked about. You got to figure out a way to improve.

I will tell you that I'm extremely motivated this year, as well our staff and our team is. But, like I said, it really comes down to, in our league, winning close games, and the difference in last year and the years before,

we've been one of the best in the country in winning close games. And last year, we didn't get it done.

And that's really from a coach's standpoint. Close game I really believe is a coach's standpoint. Our kids really played their guts out, and I expect us to play much better in those close games this year.

Q. Dak Prescott led Mississippi State in so many offensive categories last couple of years. In your experience, how does an offense move on and rebuild after losing such a valuable piece that did so much?

COACH MALZAHN: He was one of the better players in our conference, in my opinion, in the last couple years and what he meant to his team. He got better and better each year. He was like a running back, the way we utilized him. Every time we play him, he threw the ball extremely well. I think he's an extremely good player, and it doesn't hurt my feelings that he has moved on.

Q. Please talk about how hard it's been to game plan with Carl and then to lose him both years, and then just how eager you are to try to have him for a whole year?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. I think that's a great question. Any time you have an impact player, whether it's offense or defense, you know, you really build around that impact player's strengths. And he's a game-changer. When you have a guy like that, it changes everything.

And it really makes people better than maybe they are, or it hides some of your deficiencies. He's got that ability. And, you know, so he's had the ups and downs with his injury. And I think from a coach's standpoint you learn. You either got to prepare with or prepare without him, without an impact player. You know, he's got that ability. I really expect him to stay healthy.

Like I said earlier, he's at his best. He's at his fastest and quickest and strongest he's ever been. He's very competent. He's a wonderful young man. And I really expect him to stay healthy.

Q. Gus, you kind of traded coaches with LSU this season with Craig going over to LSU and Steele. How does that fuel the rivalry, one, and, two, what do you expect Kevin Steele to bring to your defense?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. First of all, Coach Craig decided to move on. He did a good job for us. We wish him nothing but the best. Kodi Burns is a former player that played for me in this offense. We won the national championship. We feel very good about him coming up in that.

And your second part of your question was what I expect out of Coach Steele? Is that it? Yeah, he's a true professional. When Coach Muschamp went to take another head coaching job, I really wanted somebody that was familiar with our conference. I wanted somebody that was a true professional, somebody that had the same philosophy that I have, and it really -- all of the boxes fit.

So, we're blessed to have a guy like him. Our defenses responded extremely well. Our players were flying around during the spring. They were having fun, like I said, with our defensive staff. You can just sense it when you go on the defensive staff room. They are all on the same page. It's a great feeling. And he's really looking forward to working with our defensive players and the rest of our defensive staff is, too.

Q. Coach, a couple of coaches around the league have called for some reform in the way that underclassmen transition to the NFL, whether it be having an underclassman combine or even let underclassmen who go undrafted come back to school. Do you have any thoughts of that reform-wise, or do you like the system the way it is?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. I think I'm open to anything. Especially the guys that go undrafted. I think that is something to definitely look into. I know Bret from Arkansas, we talked about that, and I thought that was probably a good idea at least to discuss, you know, as far as that goes. Everything else, you know, I'm pretty happy with the way things are right now.

Q. Just how hard is it going to be to replace a guy like Muschamp and T-Rob and all of the guys who went with Muschamp over to South Carolina?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. They are all good coaches. No doubt about that. But I feel great about our staff right now. Travis Williams. Wesley McGriff coached in the NFL for 30 years with the Saints, did a great job. Travis is a guy that was an All-Conference player in our league at this position, just loves Auburn. Rodney Garner I believe is the best D-line coach in all of college football. As I said, I already talked about Kevin Steele.

I feel great about this defensive staff. Really, my goal is to keep this group together, and I'm definitely committed to doing that.

Q. Specifically, recruiting out of Madison Academy, you have two tailbacks out of Madison Academy. If you could, just talk about recruiting in the north Alabama area and how vital Madison Academy has been to the program?

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, the two running backs

are outstanding young men, outstanding players that will definitely help us win football games. And if you look, you know, four years ago, we made a commitment to recruit the state of Alabama, and we've done a very good job up in the Huntsville area. There's a lot of great players into that area. And we made a commitment to doing that. You know, Cameron Toney, Rudy Ford, you know, the list goes on. We're going to continue to recruit that area. A lot of very good football players and a lot of very good high school coaches.

Q. Coach, you had so much success real quickly in 2013. Now that we're remove from that, do you have a greater appreciation just how great a run that was and how many things need to go that way to taste that success again?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. That was really very special to be a part of that team and everything that went with that. We play in the toughest league in college football. And probably said it three, four times, but you got to win a close one.

There's going to be a lot of close games in this conference. And I think that's what really separates this conference or one of the things that separates this conference from others. You got to bring your lunch every week.

To answer your question, yeah, any time you have a very good season and you have -- you win the SEC Championship, that's extremely hard to do. You got to play well, you got to have timely plays. You got to get a couple breaks, and it's a grind.

And when you win the championship in this league, it's a big deal. And it motivates you to try to do that every year, and that's the great challenge in our league. There's a lot of great teams, a lot of great coaches, and you got to win close ones.

Q. You open with Clemson. How much, if at all, do you consider the caliber of the opponent when it comes to disciplined players who get in trouble, whether they get suspended for an opener or not?

COACH MALZAHN: You know, we have the same expectations regardless of the opener. It just so happens we're playing one of the best teams in college football, a team that almost won it all last year. They got a lot of guys coming back. So, you know, we played. We've had some success with first games in the past. We're going to have to continue to do that to have a chance. Very good team.

But, to answer your question, we have high expectations with our players no matter who we're playing the first game or not.

Q. Can you talk about the new group of receivers? And you've obviously shown some confidence in Marcus Davis by bringing him to Hoover. Are there some guys we have not seen that you expect to tape up?

COACH MALZAHN: Marcus Davis. Tony Stevens, Jason Smith. Stanton Truitt is a guy that's banged up. Then we have a bunch of freshman. Those freshman will play this year and they'll have to grow up in a hurry.

But I will tell you this. This will be a position of strength for us in the future. We've got some outstanding, talented talent at that position. A young talent. And meshed in with those guys that have experience, you know, with Marcus and Tony and those guys.

You know, Coach Burns is excited about the group, and, like I said, you're talking about a guy that played in this offense. I think he caught the first touchdown in the national championship game in 2010. He's young enough to relate to the players. So I'm excited to watch that group grow. You're going to have to grow up in a hurry.

Q. Coach, wanted to ask you about your special relationship with Herb Hand. He's come in, and you guys had a really good run together at Tulsa. What has he brought to your offensive line? I know he shifted Austin Golson from center to left tackle. What kind of progress did your O-line make in the spring? I know that's going to be a key to your offense.

COACH MALZAHN: I have a lot of the confidence in Herb. We go way back. Our personalities really complement each other. He's a very, very intelligent person. You'll see us. It will be a little different. There will be tweaks, and a lot of it will have his name on it.

I've got a lot of confidence in him. He's a great teacher. His offensive linemen have really taken hold of his philosophy. They really bonded. I'm looking forward -- he happens to be one of my really good friends, to I'm excited to work with Herb Hand again.

Q. I'm wondering in light of the way the series has gone the last several years, are you glad to see Mark Richt go, leave and go somewhere else? And following up on that, obviously Kirby Smart is a guy that you know really well just from competing, and what kind of effect do you think that will have, what kind of relationship you two guys have?

COACH MALZAHN: First of all, Mark Richt is one of the better coaches in all of college football, I think. And he's one of the true professionals in all of college football. I think he's a great example for young guys getting into that profession of what -- how you're supposed to act, how you're supposed to, you know, go

about your business. So, I'll say that first. And it was an honor for me to coach against Coach Richt.

Kirby Smart, like you said, we have a lot of history. I have a lot of respect for him as a football coach. We've had some pretty good battles. We know each other pretty well. And that's always been a pretty good rivalry and continues to be a good rivalry.

Q. Ole Miss's defensive line lost Robert Nkemdiche. Where does that group rank within the SEC West and just kind of game planning for losing a guy that used to double, triple team, all that?

COACH MALZAHN: They were very good on the defensive front. It wasn't just him. They've been very good on defense the last couple years. They've recruited well. So I think you've got to approach it that they're going to have one of the better defensive fronts that you go against. They've done a great job on offense, too. I think we go there again this year, and that's been a good rivalry.

Q. Last year we were here, Jeremy Johnson, everyone was talking about a possible Heisman Trophy candidate. He certainly didn't have the season he wanted to have or you guys wanted him to have but pledges his allegiance to Auburn. Talk about Jeremy and what impact he's still able to have within the Auburn organization without maybe playing as much on the field this year?

COACH MALZAHN: Sure. Jeremy went through a storm last year and the way he's responded in the spring, in the summer, he's responded very well. He's operating with a chip on his shoulder. He wants to help our team in any way he can. He's fighting for the starting quarterback job.

Like I said at the very first, we got three guys, and I've got a very open mind going into this thing. So, we'll see what happens. But he's a team guy, and he's still a very talented young man also.

Q. You talked about people coming back to Clemson, but your secondary, bringing back Nick Ruffin, Tray Matthews, Jonathan Ford, but Carlton Davis is probably the most talented out of the bunch. What do you want to see from him also character-wise and bringing his play onto the field from a character standpoint?

COACH MALZAHN: I think he's got very good character. He's a very good football player. He's a young guy. What he did last year in our league, you're talking about going against some much the best wide receivers, week in and week out.

And for a true freshman, we put him on an island quite

a bit. He had a very good spring. He does have the ability to lock down a top receiver and let you focus in the other side of the field. There's not a whole lot of guys I think can say that. He's a freshman. He's got a great attitude. He's very competent. You know, we're expecting big things out of Carlton this year.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach, thank you for your time.

COACH MALZAHN: Thank you all.