

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Derek Mason

Vanderbilt coach

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good afternoon again. Vanderbilt's head football coach, Derek Mason.

COACH MASON: Excited to be here. Excited to be back on this stage. Very pleased to represent Vanderbilt University, Commodore football, this group, this team, the expectation. This is a great place for us to be.

When I look at the squad and where we're at, this is about being a more experienced squad in 2016. We talk about 42 returning upperclassmen, juniors and seniors, who have gone through the maturation process, the fire, so to speak, in terms of what it takes to try to compete in this conference, this big dog conference called the SEC.

As I look at our football team, we have 15 returning starters. Okay? And we have a lot of guys who have played significant or earned significant time, played in the SEC, and we're extremely excited to see this group take the field.

The greater part of that experience, when you've had guys that have gone through the fire, is leadership and what that looks like. As my leadership has grown, their leadership has grown. The idea of who we stand for, what we need to do in the midst of playing in this conference, moving towards being not just competitive, but winning games, is the ultimate goal for this team, and that's where we planned on being in 2016.

The team chemistry is the biggest part of what this team has been able to work to achieve during this offseason. James Dobson, my strength and conditioning coach, is tremendous. Him and his staff have spent the last six months really carrying my message: Who are you? We are tough. We can't beat ourselves. That's the intelligent piece that we'll never back away from and that we must stay in, what it takes to make good decisions consistently and play great football in this conference.

To James, I want to give him a great shoutout. What I've seen in these early morning workouts is exactly what we need to be. A lot of sweat, a lot of tears, okay, a lot of grit and grime. That's important for this team, because it creates identity and culture, and that's



exactly where we are.

This team's got a team-first mentality, has established a team-first mantra. We don't care about who is standing on the hill. We don't care about who takes the accolades. It's about this team collectively and what we need to do in order to move the needle and get up the hill.

With that, we will have a couple of marquee guys people may recognize and talk about, but it's about the collective growth of this group and what they've committed to in order to move this team from where we are to where we need to be.

And I believe the winds of change are coming. This group is moving, and we're excited about what looks to happen on West End. Critical factors for improvement are really about the changes from 15 to 16. What does that look like? We talk about Andy Ludwig, being in his second year. A somewhat depleted offense in 2015, being somewhat shorthanded. Andy never moved from what he saw was the right thing to do. He sort of tailored his offense around our strengths, tried to play around the quarterback.

Towards the end of the season, when you saw the young occasion for -- or the youthful occasion for a young quarterback by the name of Kyle Shurmur to step on the field and play meaningful football the last few games, that's important. I named Kyle Shurmur the starter. That's where we are. He showed great character and leadership in the offseason. He has been pushed by guys behind them.

Sean Stankavage, he's the guy to lead this football team. But what Andy has done is really look at the combination of talent, the guys around the group, and made sure that collectively, guys that you don't know about now, you'll know about in December. Okay? We're going to see the ability to run the football, get the football down the field and be an explosive offense while being able to play our style of football. Again, that's tough, that's relentless, that's intelligent.

Bringing Jeff Genyk from our staff from Northwestern to be our special teams coordinator to running back coach to me was key. The culture of special teams that's been enhanced in that room is terrific. Special

teams wins games. Everybody talks about changing games, it wins games. The hidden field position, what it takes to get guys to understand that that role is as critical to any role, that's an art. And Jeff Genyk, coming from where he's coming from, developing guys at Cal such as DeSean Jackson, how they played in special teams when he was at Wisconsin, it's been apparent that Jeff is the right guy.

And so in moving that message, he's been able to follow exactly what I need, what my expectations are for a special teams coach. He's made that running back very competitive.

And last is defensively what we've been able to do. I think people sort of looked at me a year ago and thought that I was kind of crazy for going back and calling defense, but that's my wheelhouse. I'm a head coach who understands exactly what his strengths are. We moved that way. These guys understand the expectation in the room of making sure that they play well; that they understand how to play with each other; that we communicate; that we understand situational football; and that we try to entrench ourselves in what it takes when you stand up and stand out. That's what we are, and that's what we're looking for, and that's what we planned on being in 2016.

As I complete this, I want to say this. This football team knows how to compete. Okay? It's not about competing anymore, it's about winning. We had the great fortune to win one more game. For some in here, that's not monumental enough. That's okay. For us, okay, we saw how we let some games slide. We missed some opportunities, okay, and that has not gone unnoticed by this football team.

So, for me, in this group, you know, from Commodore Nation, we gladly understand that this football team reflects the city of Nashville, one of the great cities that's growing fast. We're a football team that's very representative of what this conference is. It's tough. Okay? It's the toughest in the country. But more than anything else, we know what we represent, and that's Vanderbilt.

So we're going to compete in the classroom, on the football field, in the community. That's not going stop. The ball is good, and we plan on making it better. The whole idea of being tough and intelligent, that's who we are, that's what we do, that's what we stand on.

With that being said, I'll turn it over to questions.

Q. Derek, you mentioned the change last year of you taking over the defense. That obviously worked out well. What did that do for your own self-assurance and your confidence in making a

big decision like that and it paying off?

COACH MASON: First of all, what's up, Adam? Good to see you. You know, for me, personally, I look at the opportunity to call defensive plays as a privilege. Okay? Humble in that aspect, and really try to get our coaching staff to truly understand it's not just about calling plays, it's the function of, you know, what we put those guys through and how we stress to those guys to get those guys to understand how to play big in the moment. That's an art. It's not a skill that you develop in one day. It takes time.

And, you know, for me, I'm more comfortable in who I am. In year three, I fully understand that I got a group of men around me. They know how to teach. They understand exactly how to get to these kids. These young men -- we spend a lot of time with these young men talking about the value of playing smart football, understanding situational football.

But all of that has got to be backed up by great works. So the stress comes every day. We've challenged these guys. I've enjoyed my role in this. It's good to be back calling the defense. It's good to be back in the room talking about philosophy and understanding that my coaches don't like to sit in there and hear me talk about fundamental rotation. Because I've possibly done it every day we stepped on the field. That's to go to the part on what we do is consistency.

To answer question, good to be back. I think the group has benefitted. I'm going to continue to stay in that role as long as I need to until I find somebody suitable to take it over.

Q. Coach Mason, Ralph Webb, he's one of the top premier running backs in the SEC. But in your eyes, how has his improvement been over the offseason and last season? Why should he be mentioned as one of the top running backs, not only in the SEC but the nation?

COACH MASON: That's part of that team-first attitude. Ralph won't toot his own horn. As coaches, we'll talk about Ralph and what he can do. But I think the greater part of about what Ralph has shown was what he was able to do over two seasons. It's been about the work. He cares less about what people are saying about him than about the work he's getting done and the men around him who need to step up and really help him, you know, energize his group.

So, when I look at Ralph, he's the first one in, last one out. He fully understands what it is to take true -- or full advantage of the opportunity that is Vanderbilt. You know, he's doing well in the classroom. He fights extremely hard on the football field. He's taken the hints, the subtle hints that aren't so subtle like pick your

feet up, like get stronger, like increase your vision and your ability to be a more complete back. You know, he doesn't shy away from those things. You know, he lets us hold him accountable for every bit of the work that he's doing.

So, I think what you see is a guy that's got a full -- full growth mindset in terms of what he wants to be. You saw him move from year one to year two without having a sophomore slump. You know, obviously, he didn't have the same personnel around him, but still did well.

But he's a team-first guy. So, I fully expect Ralph Webb to be a multidimensional back. As we step into this year, he needs to be better on third down, catching the ball in backfield, better in pass pro, if he wants to play every down. That's something we've openly talked about. And he's taking that challenge.

Q. You mentioned you have to know what your strengths are. In self-evaluating, what are some things that you needed to get better at, or maybe you think you've already gotten better at as a head coach?

COACH MASON: I think you start by where you got to go. Versatility of a scheme. A year ago I thought -- I thought towards the end of the season we were too vanilla. Okay. I believe in doing fundamental things in terms of scheme, in terms of getting your guys and putting your guys in position to make plays. But I thought we got to the point we were a little too predictable. That was more on me and not willing to change later on in the year.

But as this group has grown, as I've learned to trust them and they've learned how to trust me in terms of what I'm looking at and what I'm calling, this group is poised to see a lot of different changes. I changed personnel. We changed scheme suddenly, to move guys in position where hopefully it benefits this team, it benefits our ability to be a little more flexible versus some of the RPO offenses in this conference.

So with that, it's just daily growth and understanding who your team is, you know, what you need to do, what they need to do, and just growing together with the expectation of trying to be successful.

Q. Coach, you mentioned, beautifully stated, this team is about winning, because we know we can compete, but you being one of the few coaches in the Southeastern Conference African-American, is there an added pressure on you, or more so of a pressure on you to generate wins and knowing that you want to win in a big-time conference?

COACH MASON: You know what? I don't wear that

cape. I really don't. I think my ethnicity, okay, has nothing to do with my position. I think I'm intelligent enough to be a head coach, and I've proven over time that I can, you know, do the job.

And I think what needs to happen for me in this position is that I focus my strengths and my skill set on what it takes to continue to lead this program. There's a reason why Vanderbilt hired me. They felt I was the best coach. They didn't feel I was African-American. They didn't feel I was anything other than the best fit for Vanderbilt. That's what I coach under.

The pressure to be a head coach in this conference is what it is. It's the best conference in college football. So, for me I look at how we can improve this football team. I look at the full scope of the athlete and where I'm taking this program and what we have to do to meet our expectations.

But what it looks like for me in terms of pressure, that's just part of the job. You know, the everyday grind of being an SEC coach, what coach doesn't have pressure. So, with that being the case, I humbly accept the challenge and look forward to the opportunity.

Q. You all have Auburn on the schedule this year for the first time in a few years and you travel to Auburn for the first time in quite a while. What are the challenges of preparing for an opponent that you don't necessarily see every year for your staff and your players?

COACH MASON: That's football. It's a good question. It's really football. I haven't seen Georgia Tech, but we have to prepare for a triple-option football team. That's part of what we have to do. That's part of your summer scout, the idea of introducing schemes, you know, to your guys, things that you may see, tempo and pace of play. Those are things as coaches that we're responsible for.

You put those things in front of your players, you fully understand that they're going to have some things they forget, but they're also going to have some recall. So, it's about us putting out in front of those guys exactly what they may see and hopefully when we get back to that juncture in time, they've got a pretty good idea of what we're facing.

Q. Coach, because of the institution you represent, needless to say, you need to see some additional things off the field in order to get kids into your program. Because of that, from a recruiting perspective, do you need to see some different things on the field as well, since you have to bring in some kids probably not looked at as some of the traditional powers?

COACH MASON: Restate that again, please. Can you restate it again?

Q. Because of the institution you represent and academics involved in Vanderbilt, you have to see more things off the field from a young man to get him in your program.

COACH MASON: Correct.

Q. Do you need to see things on the field as well because maybe he's not the top-tier caliber, a recruit you might get some other schools?

COACH MASON: That's a statement that I don't necessarily agree with. I know you posed it as a question, but here's what I know. When I look at guys that have come through Vanderbilt, I look at Zac Stacy, Jordan Matthews, Zach Cunningham. Those guys weren't guys who were highly recruited, but they're good football players. So, you have to find what fits in your arena.

I fully understand that I need to see it in my own eyes. See, I'm a young head coach, okay, who's gained more experience, but what I always believed is that my eyes don't lie to me. By using the NFL in terms of evaluation, I really hope you understand that I need to see. Sometimes you have a coach go out and he's recruiting, and he'll come back and say this kid is 6'2". Well, the young man comes on campus and he's six foot.

For me I have to see with my own eyes exactly where we are. The film lies. Anybody can put together a highlight tape. I need to see the young man work. Our evaluation process, as well as our recruiting team, has changed. We have done a really good job in the last couple of months of being able to identify guys that fit. That's why, for us, it's a process of learning who you are, identifying the characteristics that you need per position -- offense, defense, special teams. And that's exactly what we've been able to do.

So I'm not worried about the stars. I'm worried about the functionality of what these players can do in terms what they bring to the table in terms of being able to handle the mental aspect of what it is in the classroom and on the football field.

Q. What does it mean to have leaders on your team like Ralph, Zach and Oren?

COACH MASON: These guys are fully representative of what it is to be a Vanderbilt man. They fully take responsibility for everything they do. Everything they do matters. How they eat, how they sleep, you know, who they talk to, and really how they lead. That's important. They work harder and smarter than their contemporaries.

That's what it looks like in the building. That's why I got a group of juniors that are here. I think our senior leadership is great. These guys embody what it is to play SEC football and be productive. That's important. You can't talk about what they are doing in this classroom because every one of these guys are terrific students.

I believe what they've been able to do on the football field is exemplary of what it takes to compete in the SEC. To me, it all matters. These guys exemplify that, the way I want to see it, the way Vanderbilt expects it to be seen.

With that being the case, that's why they're here. Great question.

Q. Coach, you mentioned going from a contender to winning games. Mentality-wise, what is it going to take and what are the steps you've been taking to get that through your players, that mental aspect?

COACH MASON: It's about consistency. It's about discipline. It's about being big in the moment. Okay. It's about understanding how it all works together. Here's what I tell my guys: If I can't trust you on first and second down, you'll never get on the field. And it all works as a cycle. If I can't trust you to go to class, you'll never get to first, second or third down.

So, again, it's about the expectation that you set forth for these guys and what it looks like on the West end. West end looks different than the rest of the other teams in our conference. So I've had to invest in who we are, what we are, what the football looks like on Saturdays.

We got to stop beating ourselves in terms of making poor decisions, not taking care of the football. And that's -- those things are everyday aspects and concepts, okay, that me and my coaching staff have to speak to daily.

It's about making good decisions. It's about being held accountable, but it's about winning the day. We can win Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. It looks good to try to win Saturday. That's where we're at, that's where we're pushing towards. I believe this football team is making the right steps in that direction.

Q. Coach, your team lost five games last year that you had it within one possession in the fourth quarter. What have you done mentally to prepare your team in the offseason in order to sort of get ready for crunch time in 2016?

COACH MASON: That's about focus. You know, missed opportunities come when a team can focus better than you can, when they can be big in the moment and you can't. So, attention to detail. You know, we do what we call one perfect jumping jack at the end of conditioning. One perfect jumping jack may get us to be done immediately, or we may be done 15 minutes after we've had a chance to get it right. Because there's conditioning sessions in between, you know, what that looks like if we don't get it right.

So, it's about the focus, the detail in the moment. Everybody can do it when they're fresh. It's what you do when you're tired. It's what you do in the midst of a third quarter drive when you have the ball on the 15-yard line and you need to make a good decision with the football. Do you throw it to the competitor or do you throw it away and give yourself a chance to kick a field goal and make it a one-possession game?

Those are the things that we had the opportunity to learn the greater parts of. So we don't need to keep repeating the same mistakes. And we've gone a long way and really push these guys and put these guys in situations where they fully understand, again, what the expectation -- it's about expectation, but it's about accountability. We've done a great job, I believe, in moving it in that direction.

Q. I know Vanderbilt has the seven best linebacker corps. I know you tweeted why settle for second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, even seventh when first is available. Can you elaborate more about that group and that tweet in particular with Cunningham leading the pack?

COACH MASON: It goes back to John F. Kennedy when he was asked to fall for the lesser role than running for president. For me, that's been a statement that really speaks to where we are. I think, obviously, if there's an opportunity to be better, then let's be better. Let's reach, you know, for the highest thing out there. Let's reach for the sky. Let's reach for the brass ring. Let's not reach for, you know, what is sitting there at eye level.

I think we're better than that. I think we need to think better than that. I heard a quote one time: Don't downgrade your dreams to match your reality. Upgrade your faith to match your destiny. And I believe that's what we have to do. That's how we see ourselves. You know, we need to make sure, man, if there's something there to be had, okay, let's compete, let's fight, let's put ourselves in.

You come to Vanderbilt to be great, not good. So, with the midst of this linebacking corps they don't see themselves being second fiddle to anybody. They

compete that way every day. That's the mindset, the mentality. The bond is specifically strong. What you put upstairs is what manifests itself as it comes down. So that's where these guys at, that's where we'll stay, that is the expectation.

Q. Coach, earlier today, Commissioner Sankey referenced last week's shootings and some of the unrest and said he believes sports can be a uniting force. Do you believe coaches and athletes should use their platform to try to unite, and if so, how so?

COACH MASON: Absolutely. That's the greater part of, you know, what's extremely great about this country. You know, it takes teamwork to make the dream work. And our young people today are extremely bright. And that's been evidenced as these young men started to, you know, look at what they're willing to accept and how to speak up for themselves in terms of what's not acceptable.

I believe, as we get further along, in terms of where we're at, the platform for sports has always been there to be able to speak on injustices or things that aren't necessarily acceptable to us and how we see them.

So, if they can use that platform intelligently, and speak to it intelligently, that's something that I'm always looking and pushing these young men towards. It's about being able to use every part of the intellect, not just the football IQ.

I told these young men to make sure their message is consistent and clear. And we are a team. I know there's differences in terms of ethnicity, in terms of who they are, but in that locker room, we have common goals, and there's only good and bad. With that, let's make sure that we use our powers for good, not evil.

Q. Kind of a broad question. What do you think the most difficult position is in the SEC on the field?

COACH MASON: Nowadays, I believe it's linebacker, just because what's happening. The run-pass conflict. What happens, I believe those guys are constantly under stress and duress, because of what you're seeing. The slight of hand with quarterbacks, the deception of formation adjustments and how things change, bumping gaps, being able to communicate what happens with empty sets.

There's a lot of stimuli, you know, going on, and those guys have to deal with a lot of ground. I'm not saying that because I'm a defensive guy. I coached 14 years on the offensive side of the ball. I think I understand what it looks like. Defense is about reacting, anticipating and reacting. And now with these RPO teams and how teams are attacking you off the line of scrimmage, guys coming back across the formation,

there's a lot of things that draw your attention. You have to focus, anticipate, react well, and that job is made increasingly tough and increasingly hard by the tempo of the game.

Q. I'm going to follow up to that. How has that changed the way you recruited the position over the years?

COACH MASON: It's definitely changed. I believe you got what you got. You took what actually fits your system. What changed, now football is such a space game. It's changed in nine years. It's a true space game. It's about match-ups. Guys have to be longer. I'm not saying length is the only category. Because I'm not going to dismiss a good football player. We're going to take a good football player anywhere we can find it.

Length is key, in my opinion. The ability to cover down in space, the ability to close in space, to think on your feet. Football's definitely changed. So, for me, you've seen our linebacking corps evolve from where it's been. Chris Marve, who is now my linebacker coach, has done a really good job of understanding exactly who Zach Cunningham is, what we need to be. He's taking some keys from me in terms of what we're recruiting and a lot has to do with length, speed, ability to read, recognize and react and ability to play on the sideline.

MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

COACH MASON: Thank you.