

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Dan Mullen

Mississippi State coach

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Coach Dan Mullen.

COACH MULLEN: All right. Very exciting to be back here for my eighth season. It only seems like yesterday I was up here for year one, and to be back here for year eight is pretty exciting, pretty special.

The success we've had over the last couple of years at Mississippi State and building the program has been fantastic. And I'm thankful that everybody has bought in. We have an unbelievable university administration that bought into a plan eight years ago, a student body, a fan base that bought in to us building a program and building a program that's consistent winner.

We're coming off consecutive nine-win seasons, which never happened before. We had three nine-win seasons in the last six years. So when you look at that, of changing the expectations -- I now I said eight years ago I got up here and said we want to change the expectations of Mississippi State football -- I think we've been able to do that. Our players have bought in, and we've been able to do that, and going to six straight bowl games and building a culture of winning.

I'm excited about this year's team. Guys have been working hard. The attitude of our team, the expectations of the guys within our program, they expect to win football games and they expect to do it by work ethic that they have, every single day. And showing up and trying to outwork everybody.

Going to be an interesting year for us. Going to have an interesting quarterback battle. As I said, coming out of spring, there's no secret to it. I'm not trying to hold back or play it close to the vest with our quarterback. We had four guys competing for the job in spring ball. All of them were still in contention for the job. No one really separated themselves to pull away from one of the other four at that position.

I'm hoping over the summer that someone does do that. I -- I will be a happy guy to name a starting quarterback and find somebody that has separated themselves from the other three, throughout the summer, whether it's all of the extra work they put in over the summer, if it happens in the first week of training camp, great. If it has to happen game week,



fantastic.

You know, I hope it does happen. Or it might take into the course of the season. We don't know. But excited about those three guys. They have -- they're going to bring a new look to our offense. We'll be a little different on offense this year. We're going to do that because we're playing with a different quarterback. And got a lot of good players coming back on the offensive side of the ball. All our running backs are back. We have some starters coming back on the offensive line. We have to depend on the running game a little bit more this year than we did last year.

Defensively, our defensive philosophy is not going to change, but our personality is with Peter Sirmon coming in as our D coordinator. A lot of new defensive coaches on our staff. That's always going to change, a little bit of that personality, a little bit of the play call. But our philosophy will not change.

You see that defense. We have 11 guys running the ball, a very attacking style of defense that we have played since I've been the head coach and will always play while I'm the head coach at Mississippi State.

Got some good guys with us here today. I don't know if you got to meet Richie Brown, great young man working on MBA, graduated already. A.J. Jefferson, who's had a tremendous career as a young guy with great work ethic. Fred Ross, All-SEC receiver back to lead us as a playmaker this year. Hopefully you get time to enjoy them.

Great to be back here and great to see everybody here in the room again getting ready to kick off another exciting season. And some of the best time of the year is Saturdays down south in the fall, there's nothing like it. So, questions?

KEVIN TRAINER: Thank you, Coach. If you have a question please raise your hand.

Q. Dan, can you talk a little bit about Fred Ross and how important it is for him to help whoever the quarterback is after the year he had last year?

COACH MULLEN: Well, I think it's huge. Because when you look at it, you love to have everybody be veterans. But if you have some veteran wide receivers

and a young quarterback, they have to take some of the onus and responsibility of trying to make life easier for that quarterback. And also building up confidence. You know, I think they're -- we're going to have some throws, hopefully, I hope not many, but our young quarterback will make mistakes, make some bad throws. The receivers are the ones that got to go over to the quarterback instead of -- a lot of times it's the other way around, the quarterback going to the receiver and saying, Keep your head up. We're going to go, make the drop and come right back you to. The receiver says, Don't worry about that. Keep coming to me, keep coming to me, I'm going make plays for you.

And having a guy like Fred that understands the offense, can play multiple wide receiver positions, he can play any of the wide receiver positions, he's been around, a great playmaker, I think it will help take a lot of pressure off the quarterbacks, not just his playmaking but his personality. And we're going to need him to do that for these guys to get comfortable and get more experience in games.

Q. Dan, I know that there's a sign in the locker room that says respect women. What did you tell the team to welcome Jeffery Simmons in with a one-game suspension? How do you convey that to fans, players and families that that's conveying that sign and living up to that sign?

COACH MULLEN: Everything we do in our program and all of the players on our team are part of a family. Every guy on our team we treat as part of a family. You know, as we look at different things of core values within the program, of how to better yourself in life, it gets down to a decision-making process.

And one of the things that we want to do as a coach is help young men learn to make good decisions. And we're always working and coaching our young men of how to make a good decision. Every time you make a decision in life, there's going to be a consequence and you have to think how it's going to affect you, how it affects your teammates, how it affects your family, how it affects our football program.

All of these young guys that come in and come through our program, we constantly want to help them learn to make good decisions in their life. And, hopefully, I certainly hope that as guys leave, they are much better decision-makers in life than when they come in. And all of our players not just one part but every aspect of their lives, that's critical.

Q. Since Gus Malzahn took over as Auburn's coach in 2013, Mississippi State has held him to the lowest average number of points per game among all Auburn's annual opponents. What do you think

you've been able to do to be so successful against his particular offense which is kind of unique and difficult to prepare for?

COACH MULLEN: Yeah, well, you know what? I think Gus is a great offensive innovator. You know, I remember spending time with him as a high school coach when I was at Florida as the offensive coordinator of Florida. And I think one of the things is, if you look, our offenses are different but they contain similarities within the offense. And I think they've done a good job against us with their defense over the last couple years.

And I think, when you look at some of the similarities between our style of play, there's some comfort on the teams, that some of the things they do, our defense sees in practice, because we do them, and some of the things that they're able to do, their defense is comfortable playing against us because they see some crossovers within the different schemes. And I think there becomes a little comfort level for the guys out on the field that they've seen those things before.

Q. I was curious about your thoughts on quarterback play in the league. Obviously you had a great one in Dak, but there doesn't seem to be as much experience coming back in the league this year. How do you think that will affect the season?

COACH MULLEN: Obviously anyone that was a real veteran quarterback has a little bit of an advantage during the season in that experience, just because those guys have been on that stage before. They've been in the moment. It's one less thing you have to worry about as a coach.

And the experience that quarterbacks have, I think having a veteran quarterback is going to allow you to take some more shots, or take some more chances. Because you're counting on that guy with experience and that veteran quarterback to overcome coaching. And, you know, to look and say we're going to take a shot to throw the ball down the field, and the veteran quarterback is going to look and say it's not here, I'm going to check it down, I know Coach will call that play again later and hopefully I'll get the look I want for that shot.

Younger quarterbacks, sometimes you call that shot and they're thinking Coach is calling a play for me to go make it happen, and they're going to throw that ball up and that's where mistakes happen. But, you know, hopefully at the end of the year we're one of the teams that we can say we thought quarterback play might not be great but it was a lot better than everybody thought it was.

Q. Dan, when you first got this, you struggled to

find a quarterback to fit what you do. Since you got Dak, has it been easier to recruit players that fit your system and more what you like to do?

COACH MULLEN: Yes. I think the most important thing for me is, in looking at quarterbacks, finding a winner, finding a guy that just has that "it" about him winning. That's one of the hardest things to find when you're out there recruiting is that guy that has that "it" personality, and Dak certainly had it.

I think the other thing you have to do as a coach is you have to be flexible to build around the strengths of your quarterback. And I think now, if you look at our quarterback makeup in our quarterback meeting room, there are guys that have a lot of different -- there they are all different. They all bring a little different skill set to the table, but they all can throw and they all can run.

I think when you have that dual threat, it makes the defense have to account for all 11 players on offense on every single snap. And so we've been able to get more of those guys into the program that keep defenses on edge.

Q. Dan, as a coach, what do you observe in the relationship between young men and local police?

COACH MULLEN: I think, one, it's important that all of these guys come -- all of the players, one great thing in the football locker room is a mix of everybody. I mean, you have guys from every background, you know, every race. It's just a mix. But it's a giant family in there.

One of the things we try to do is make sure we educate our guys very early on. We have law enforcement days. There's always police officers at -- law enforcement police officers at a practice for guys to get to know them, become comfortable with them and understand the sacrifices that our law enforcement makes on a daily basis.

And they might not have been exposed to that before. And I think, you know, one of the things that will shock a lot of the young players is, you know, here's a guy that's local law enforcement, came out in full uniform, and he's got his two kids with him and he wants a picture with me. And I think it gets to see them and respect them in a new light, and when they kind of understand and have that respect for what those -- and sacrifices those people and their family makes on a daily basis, our law enforcement, I think it helps build a relationship between them and change a mindset between maybe what they thought before and what their current thoughts are on law enforcement.

Q. Coach, I know Richie Brown has dealt with Hurricane Katrina, which is a hard tragedy. How do you teach players to cover come adversity in the

locker room, even off the field?

COACH MULLEN: I think one of the things we always challenge guys to is you're going to face tons of different adversity, adversity of dealing with success. Adversity of dealing with failure, but you never give up in what you're doing in life. Effort is something that you can control.

And I always tell our guys to look and take a challenging road in life. If you come to a fork in a road, and one road goes flat and straight for as far as you can see, the other road goes up this steep cliff mountain and you can't see around the corner, I know what I'm getting if I go down this road, but I can't be afraid to take on the challenge, whatever adversities are up this mountain for me to go and take on.

When you start to have that mindset and you start having to learn to deal with adversities and tragedies in your life, you start to say I'm not going to let any adversity or any situation define who I am. I'm going have the opportunity to go. I'm going to get up and I'm going to go take that challenge. I'm going to run up that mountain. Even though I don't know what road it will lead me to, I'll take on that challenge and whatever life will throw at me.

Q. Dan, the number 36 holds a lot of meaning to you personally in the program. Why have Jeffery Simmons wear it this year and why have it be out of retirement now?

COACH MULLEN: Yeah. That's not finalized yet. I think they posted the numbers with some discussions we're going to have. That's something we're going to continue to look at. It was an idea that was brought up of -- one of the things -- I think with retire numbers sometimes, especially ones that have meaningful things to programs. I learned this as a young coach at Syracuse University where it's a very special honor to wear the number 44. And, you know, I think it -- the best way you can honor numbers is by having people wear them, but understand and respect what it takes to wear that number and what you're representing in wearing that number.

And so that's something we had discussed and we're looking forward to. Even though I know when the roster came out yesterday, I think every freshman blew me up: Why am I in this jersey number? And I said, That's not finalized yet, we just kind of assigned it off what locker you're going to be in right now and what number that coincides with.

Q. Coach, when the program handed out its discipline for Jeffery Simmons, did you leave that meeting assuming this was going to be satisfactory for everybody outside of the program,

or did you anticipate some of the public backlash that you did get?

COACH MULLEN: I wasn't involved as much. It was a university decision, but I was just thrilled that we're having Jeffery as part of our family coming in. As I said, I take a lot of pride as a coach on developing young men to be champions, not just on the field, off the field, and every part of their life to be successful in whatever it is they do, and that's not an easy process.

I think everyone loves -- coaches, we get judged a lot on a 60-minute game on Saturday, but our real job goes well beyond that. It goes -- we have four to five years to make a positive impact on young people's lives. And hopefully they leave better men in our program than when they came and they can go out and have successful lives and be a successful part of -- successful in their futures and make positive impacts in their communities.

Q. Real quick. Two years ago you were here and you were coming off the Liberty Bowl win over Rice, which was a big win, and you were very upbeat, you felt that carried over into the spring and into the summer, and I was wondering, similar sort of bowl than last year, great game against NC State, kind of erased the bad taste of the Egg Bowl, did you see that carrying over into spring and motivating into the fall?

COACH MULLEN: I do. I love the attitude of our team right now. There's guys that have a -- they are a confident group of guys that have put in an awful lot of work. And I think any time -- any time you can win that last game in the bowl game and it leaves a great taste in your mouth, it almost leaves -- one of the things I will say is the great thing about bowl games -- and I saw the other day. I think the SEC Network was replaying different games and they are playing different bowl games that are up there, and I was looking at the joy and the face of the seniors, most of them, the last football game they're going to play, this unbelievable joy of getting to win a bowl game. That's one of the reasons I love the bowl system.

But also I look at the younger players and the motivation, that final taste of success, and now it's nine months before they get to have the opportunity to go feel that again is a tremendous motivator for them. And I think our teams had a fantastic attitude all spring long, spring and summer and hopefully leading into the fall.

Q. Scheduling question for you. If I'm reading this right, there's a stretch where you have four road games out of five games, includes UMass and BYU. How do the nonconference road games come about?

COACH MULLEN: I think one of them is scheduling and scheduling gets harder, almost trickier and trickier every single year, trying to find opponents to go play and to do things. I think one of the things we want to look at is, look at opponents. You look at UMass. That game will be held in Foxborough. And the opportunity and experience for our guys to go play at an NFL stadium is really kind of a fantastic deal.

BYU, a program that's been very, very strong over the last several years, for a nonconference game, and I know they're always looking for nonconference games, it's not always easy to schedule nonconference games, and everybody analyzes it a lot, looks at it very, very in depth of what are they doing, but a lot of these games are scheduled out in advance and you're trying to match and play teams that are going to fit your schedule, and then all of a sudden, you know, you got to combine the conference games and we end up with a tough road stretch right there in the middle of the season, middle part of the season.

You know, that's just something that happens, but you couldn't plan about it when we schedule -- you couldn't plan for that when we scheduled the nonconference games a couple years ago.

Q. This is a two-part question. First of all, what has impressed you most about Peter Sirmon?

COACH MULLEN: You know what? Peter is an extremely intelligent young football coach. And, you know, coming in, he and I met and you could see he had a great passion for the game and as a guy that was not afraid to think outside of the box. And that really fits who we are as a program. He and I hit it off with great personality. But a guy that not only played the game, has a passion to coach and teach the game, and is a real up-and-coming star in the coaching profession.

Q. And then can you talk about your shoes?

COACH MULLEN: My shoes? Yeah, I got the Yeezy Boosts on today, the new 750s. My man knows all about them. You all in the front row are laughing right here. Right? They're pretty swagged up right now. I didn't get Kanye to sign them, unfortunately.

You got to have fun and wear good shoes and have a good time while you're doing things. I have my Jimmy Buffett socks underneath to balance off the Kanye shoes.

Q. What do you think is the impact of having three defensive coordinators in three years on your players and how much a part of this process in hiring Peter was hoping to find somebody who would stick around for a couple of years and build

some continuity?

COACH MULLEN: Well, I think the one thing, if you look within our program, our defensive philosophy hasn't changed no matter who the coordinator is. One of the trickier parts of it -- that's why Peter is a great fit, because of somebody that's not afraid to be flexible and thinking outside the box. They have to fit in to the philosophy of defense we're going to play at Mississippi State. And, you know, Peter certainly does that.

Now, he is going to bring a different personality and a little different flair for our players. The feedback from the players I've gotten has all been extremely positive, of his energy, what we're doing defensively, how we're going about teaching it.

This was a year, you know, for us, we've played some really good defense. Guys have had some fabulous opportunities to go move on. And I liked that for our coaches. Honest, it means we're doing a good job. We have guys going on and having other opportunities in the coaching profession. So, there's -- but there is a new taste and new flavor in the defensive room this year, and I think our players are really enjoying that.

Q. With Dak obviously being such a leader on your program, now that he is gone, do you have a definite leader going into the fall already?

COACH MULLEN: Well, I think Dak was such a strong leader that there is a little bit of that missing. You know, one of the things that, good and bad, he was almost such a strong leader that other guys didn't have to step up and even younger guys to step up in the leadership roles. So, there's a lot of new things going on.

But I think there's part of it, too, with the coaches. Our coaching staff have to step up and help fill whatever void of leadership there is, left by Dak, and hope either we're filling it, that void, and as we're filling it, we're developing people to take that place or -- I don't know. I think this year's team, looking at this offensively, that we might not have that one leader, but there is the opportunity to have more leaders. Kind of two years ago, we had a great group of strong leadership throughout the team, and I think this year's team has that opportunity to have that take place.

Q. Dan, playing off that quarterback question a little bit, you've had some great quarterbacks at Florida and Mississippi State. What are some of the things that are unique in developing quarterbacks in the SEC different than other leagues or conferences that you've been in?

COACH MULLEN: Well, I don't know if it's unique in our league. I know one thing in our league, you better get rid of that ball fast because they got good defensive

ends coming after you. You have all seen that from some guys rolling through here so far. And some coming this afternoon, they can get to the quarterback in a hurry.

I think part of quarterback development is really taking the big-picture approach to them and making sure they understand every aspect of the game, of starting early on in their career and building them up and building them up in different stages to understand not just what to do or how to do it but why we're doing it.

And when they really get involved and they understand the why you're doing what you're doing, they understand the strategy within the game plan, why we want to take shots at certain times during the game. I think that allows them to manage the game much, much better and be a more successful player.

I've been fortunate to be around guys that have, you know, great character, great work ethic at the quarterback position. And when you have those guys that really want to develop, they are going to develop it. And you can see huge changes throughout their career. And, you know, through the years, I've been very fortunate to coach some really good ones.

Q. Just a follow-up to that, would you say that quarterback is the most difficult position to play in the SEC, or would you --

COACH MULLEN: I think the quarterback positions, not just this league, but any really high level of football, just because of how much goes into it. You know, all of the extra time, all of the things they have to know. You think the time you break the huddle or you call that play, all of the different things you have to process within a very, very short period of time before the ball snapped and all of the things you have to process in about 1.2 seconds after the ball is snapped, the preparation, the processing of information and what you have to do at that position makes it, I think, the hardest position on the field.

Q. Dan, when you recruit and enroll someone on your campus who has a violent incident in their past, what level of responsibility goes to the coach if that player then causes an incident on campus that turns one of your students into a victim?

COACH MULLEN: I think one of the things you have to do, in any time a situation like that occurs, you have to have a great investigation into what happened, into getting as many details from as many people as you possibly can, to make good decisions. And you -- because you are responsible in a very high-profile position.

You want to make sure that everybody in the university

is involved. It's not a football decision. It is a university decision that we're all looking at making. And we want to go out there and to do that, we have to have as much information as possible.

And in this situation, our university did a very, very thorough investigation into everything that happened within the situation there and came up with the conclusion that, you know, we felt that Jeffery deserved the opportunity to be part of our family. And that now we move forward in helping educate and develop a young man to become successful in his life.

Q. Is he responsible?

COACH MULLEN: We're all responsible. If that happens, all of us, to be honest with you, I'm responsible for all of the actions for every one of my players. I'm responsible as a head coach. I can't be with them all of the time. All I can do is be a parent. My wife and I try to be parents to every one of the kids in our program. Not an individual. Just every single one of them. We try to be parents. And I take a great deal of responsibility of all of our players and actions that they do, good and bad.

I'm proud of our guys, of all of our different players that we've had and the successes they had. Just like you are with your own children. We'll have a lot of different players make mistakes. And when they do make mistake, to be honest with you, I know for a lot of people it's a story, it's a blur, it's a headline. For us, that's a family member that's making a mistake; that you're trying to help them get through a tough time, help educate them, help them not make mistakes in the future and help them better themselves in life.

And my wife and I take that very seriously with every single member of our team and every player that's played with us, not just now on our current roster but anybody that's ever played for us at Mississippi State.

KEVIN TRAINER: Thank you, Coach.