

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday July 12, 2016

Kevin Sumlin

Texas A&M



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good afternoon. Our next coach today is Kevin Sumlin.

COACH SUMLIN: Good afternoon. Thank you, Commissioner, for the introduction, and thank you, guys, for the large round of applause, so...

(Laughter.)

COACH SUMLIN: No, seriously, we're excited to be here, like any other coach. We'll get through that part of it. You guys have been here since 9:00 this morning. I'll move along pretty quickly myself.

I think what is important for you guys to recognize, you know, the three young men that we brought along with us today are great representatives of Texas A&M and Texas A&M football. Myles Garrett has been in our program. I think what's interesting, you got guys in different levels of the program, which may answer some questions. Myles Garrett, obviously everybody in here knows, one of the best players in the country, in his third year looking to be the guy that he was last year and more. He's had an exceptional career so far, and we look to continue down that road.

Ricky Seals-Jones, in his fourth year, has been in our program almost since the beginning. A guy that we recruited early. An exceptional talent, but a guy that's looking to continue to improve as he moved from quarterback earlier, doing everything in high school, to receiver. Suffered a knee injury his freshman year after scoring his first touchdown, but has been a part of some highs and some lows while he's at Texas A&M.

And, finally, Trevor Knight, who has been with us for six months but has really come into our program and shown a real maturity level that we thought that he would have as a graduate transfer, as a guy who has won big games, has been involved in high-level competition, and obviously has been through some lows, losing his job at Baker Mayfield. And, quite honestly, it was a situation where Texas A&M filled a void for Trevor Knight as a guy who wanted to play, as a graduate transfer, a guy who wanted to play at a high level, be around a program that he thought fit his skill set with some coaches he thought fit his skill set and some teammates that he wanted to play with, got him a

little bit closer to home since he's from San Antonio.

And then filled a void for us as a quarterback who was not just a transfer quarterback but a guy who had real game experience and had some success. So, for us, it was a great match and I think has led to really a drama-free offseason.

I think people try to lump a lot of things into everything, a lot of things that happened happened during the year last year. December 31st of last year, we had to make some tough decisions, I did, in the direction of the program. Some of those were not easy, but those decisions were made.

We brought in three new coaches. Offensively, Noah Mazzone arrives as offensive coordinator. A guy I known for a number of years, a guy I worked with over in my career, have stayed in touch with, meet with, did a lot of different things with, gives us an opportunity philosophically to be on the same page and a guy with a lot of experience.

Along with Jimmy Turner who is in the second stint at Texas A&M. He's a guy that is a great recruiter, great developer of offensive talent, mainly responsible for recruiting a lot of the first-round talent we've had at Texas A&M that's come out of our O-line.

And the addition of David Turner on the defensive line has given us without a doubt the most experienced staff that we've had since I've been there and one that also recognizes from their background what the SEC is all about since they've coached in it, been in it and understand it.

So, for us, offensively, we came through spring football. We got great talent at the wide receiver position. Everybody knows that. For the first time we had five running backs in the spring. Anybody saw our spring game saw we played a bunch of different guys. We'll continue down that road with what we want to do. Offensive line-wise, although it looks like it appears like we don't have a lot of experience when it comes to starts in offensive line, we do have a lot of game experience, because our two guards rotated last year. All three guys in there are guys who played for us. And our left tackle is back. So really we'll have a brand-new center and a right tackle, Koda Martin, played a little bit

of tight end for us last year.

These are guys that have been on the field for us, guys that can do the job. The only guy he really hadn't played was our center. Erik McCoy had a fabulous spring. And he's trying to block some of the guys we have on our defensive front. I'm anxious to see him grow.

Defensively, second year with Chief, I think we made some strides last year. Obviously, statistically, we were better as a defense. We've got to get better. And our front is going to be pretty good. We've got two of the best defensive ends in the country in Myles Garrett and Daeshon Hall, inside with Daylon Mack and Kingsley Keke and Zaycoven Henderson, some real 300-pound guys in there that will be a real rotation and a two deep of guys that can play with anybody in this league. Chief said it before, I said it. He feels like and I feel like we have as good a safety tandem as there is in the country along with Donovan Wilson. We had him as a nickel. He's a great playmaker.

The key for us is our second level, how linebackers come along. Shaan Washington continues to improve. We got guys in there that can get the job done who are bigger and stronger. We can be a top-level defense if our linebackers continue to improve. So, just from an overall standpoint, philosophically, going in the spring, I don't think it's any secret for us to be the team that we want to be, the team that we need to be, the team that we can be.

We got to run the ball better. Even though we had a 1200-yard rusher. We got to be able to run it a bit more when we need to run it. Whether that means we have to have a 200-yard rusher to do it. I don't think that's the case. I know we have enough talent to maybe rotate some guys and get to substantial numbers there, and we got to get better at stopping the run. And that was a point of emphasis during spring. Fortunately as a head coach that's pretty easy to practice because those two units can beat the hell out of each other during spring ball, which is what we do.

So, I like where we are. I like the chemistry of this football team. I like where the locker room is. I like where their mind is. And I think the three guys that we brought are pretty reflective of that, as you get a chance to know them and as you get a chance to talk to them.

All right? Questions? I told you I would move around pretty quick. It's the last one of the day. I get it, guys.

Q. Two questions for you. One on Trevor Knight. Given the quarterback turnover you guys had, how critical was it to get a guy with experience to come

in and lead that offense? And then in what ways can Myles Garrett get better than he has been those first two years?

COACH SUMLIN: To your first question, I think any time you have a situation -- and we had some options. I think what's important is that timing is everything, and as badly as the timing was for the guys who left, I would say this: That you don't get a new quarterback and an offensive coordinator in seven, eight days if you don't have a plan.

So, obviously, there was some communication at that point, and we knew what we wanted to do. The rest is what happened since he's been there. I think it's been his ability since he came into the first team meeting and sitting there in the front row with his beard, and all of the 17-, 18-year-old guys are going: Who is that old man? Didn't I see him on TV playing for Oklahoma? And his ability to be humble and still be able to share his experiences and talk to our guys, it's been fabulous.

And somebody asked me a question earlier, you know, what was -- what went into the decision of naming him the starter after this -- after spring football? It was pretty simple, he earned it. And by earning that, he's continuing to earn the other part of it, which is the locker room and leadership part every day.

So, like I said, I'm really happy there. Myles Garrett, here's a guy who's phenomenally strong, extremely flexible, powerful, understands, has a better understanding of the game now than he's had beforehand.

And I'll say this also. The best thing that happened to Myles Garrett is Daeshon Hall. If you go back to the opener against Arizona State last year and everybody is talking about Myles Garrett, the fact that Daeshon Hall had four sacks against Arizona State changed the protection a little bit and got Myles back on track to having the type of season he has.

For us, those two guys can be dominant players. And for us to be the team we need to be, they've shown that in flashes, particularly on third down. For them to get better, they need to become complete players, and that gets back to what I'm talking about about defending the run.

So, if there's something that we got to be able to get better at, as I said before, it's stopping the run. And if he needs to improve somewhere, that's probably where that is. Because he's probably one of the best pass rushers in the country.

Q. Myles is kind of a renaissance man, writes poetry and reads books instead of going on Twitter. I just wonder if you've had some

interesting conversations with him.

COACH SUMLIN: Interesting to say the least. He is -- he beats to a different drum. I looked down on the plane today, he had some flip-flops on and a Marvel comic book hat. So that's what we needed to see out of our toughest guy on defense. He's just a different guy. He's a great young man.

I caught a little bit of the commissioner's talk yesterday, a little bit yesterday, and I think it speaks volumes that our commissioner's praising him as the kind of person he is. Everybody knows what kind of a player he is.

But there's not a whole lot of guys left out there of what I term the low-maintenance, great players. And here's a guy that just kind of does his -- beats to his own drum. All he wants is maybe his headphones and to know what time practice is, when to go to class, when meetings are and when game time is and where's the food. Other than that, I wish I had 80 guys like that instead of just a couple.

Q. Kevin, when you look at Trevor Knight, you got a guy that has a little bit of a gunslinger mentality early in his career in Oklahoma. How do you handle a guy that maybe you need to help value the football and limit turnovers his last year at Texas A&M?

COACH SUMLIN: I can tell you, the greatest -- I'm not going to be a philosopher for you, though. But the greatest teacher is experience and I think what has helped Trevor is some of that gunslinger has won games and some of that gunslinger cost him his job and has put him in the situation that he's in.

So, when you're dealing with a mature guy, a guy that understands and starts to understand his strengths and weaknesses maybe at the age of 23 that you didn't understand at 18 and you look in the mirror and say, hey, look, I got beat out and let's not just think about, you know, was the guy better than me, what could I have done better, and he understands that.

So, you know, the growth during your career can happen quicker if you understand where your shortcomings are, and there was no greater teacher than losing this opportunity at Oklahoma.

And, you know, it doesn't take much to remind a guy of that, you know, when it's gotten him in the situation that he's in. And so because of that, he's a mature enough guy that he understand that, and he's always looking to get better. And the communication piece becomes important, the reminder of that. You don't have to remind him as much because of what he's gone through.

Q. Have you reached out at all to Johnny Manziel? Has he reached out to you? If so, what have you told him and do you ever think back is there anything that I or the school could have done to --

COACH SUMLIN: I can say this, I exchanged text messages with Johnny Manziel over the last two weeks. That's the extent of it. Look. Here's the bottom line. He's an Aggie and he's always going to be an Aggie. At Texas A&M, we take care of each other. So, you know, that has gone on. I have exchanged text messages with him, and really that's the extent of it.

Q. Was there anything he could have done --

COACH SUMLIN: I'm sure there's a lot of things that could have been done in a lot of different situations. Some of the things that -- I think everything gets lumped into one piece with him. So, you know, that's just part of it.

Q. Coach, I think a lot of armchair quarterbacks look at Oklahoma and see a spread-style offense. They look at your team to see a spread-style offense. But when you bring in a kid like Trevor Knight, how much of a learning curve it really was from one system to the other, and how did he progress in your program?

COACH SUMLIN: I think it's really -- it's amazing to me, and guys have gotten a lot better about it, just using the term "spread." There's a million spreads. There's a million spreads in this league. You look at the amount of one back football Alabama played last year with Lane. It's an incredibly different football team than they were three years ago. And across the board, whether it's Ole Miss, Mississippi State, whatever you're doing.

Because of Oklahoma's style, and the fact that I may have worked there for five years in my career, I might know a little bit more about what's going on there, and that may give us some insight, or given me some insight, into Trevor as a person, as a player, and some of his strengths and limitations, which I think may have helped his growth in the situation.

And also the fact that I think Noah Mazzone has a record of dealing with quarterbacks in a way that can present their strengths and not trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. So, there's a combination of good things happening around him. And besides our receiving corps but also the environment that he's in right now that I think has given him the opportunity to grow. Because, you know, he's a talented guy. And fortunately he's an experienced guy.

And some of those things, you know, you got to pull him back a little bit more than push him, and you kind of like that as a quarterback. That's what practice is

about. But, you know, we'll see where it is. He's done a great job through the spring. He's done a great job kind of leaving the seven on sevens and the player-led sessions this summer. And then because of his experiences, I think the conversation piece, the coaching piece, the film study piece, that just comes natural to him.

Q. Hey, Coach. I wanted to ask you about the opener, UCLA game, and you mentioned Coach Mazzone a moment ago. I got to ask you, this is the most fascinating game of the opening week because of where he came from. I should ask Coach Mora the same thing at the Pac-12 later this week. It creates interesting cat-and-mouse dynamics. Do you approach this game differently because of his connection with UCLA, or do you coach it the same? What goes into getting this team ready for the opener?

COACH SUMLIN: It's funny. When you've done it as long as I have, you have coaches coming from one place, going to another place. A lot of times it's not the first game. The hard parts are the phone conversations, you know, in the offseason as a courtesy, just to let them know, hey, we're trying to hire your guy. So, that's all part of it.

And when you're professional like Jim is, you know, that becomes part of it. We've talked many times about a lot of different things, and I have a lot of respect for Jim and how he does things.

You know, we got to -- we got to A&M, he got to UCLA, but at the same time and we knew this game was coming up years later.

But to answer your question, you know, yeah, we'll have some feedback on UCLA. But I think people -- as soon as you say that, you know, he did work at UCLA for Jim, so Jim knows a little bit about Noah Mazzone, too. That's give and take in that deal.

But obviously for us, as an opener, it's a great game for our fans and a great game for this league. I was just talking to somebody in one of the rooms about, you know, the first week in the SEC, the first week ball games are great for our fans. And I think it says a lot about this league and where we are as a conference that, you know, we're all stepping outside of our own competition, particularly in the SEC West, which is relatively a tough situation week in and week out and playing the type of games that we're playing from coast to coast.

Whether it's Clemson or whether it's UCLA, whatever that is, and anybody in between, this league's not ducking anybody, and I think that says a lot about the

scheduling that's going on.

Q. Quick question about Jim Turner. I wanted to see what changes you've seen from your linemen in the short period of time since he's returned.

COACH SUMLIN: I think schematically, there's some different things. I think fundamentally there's some different things. Without being too technical, those are the biggest changes. I think technique-wise, there's -- there have been some radical changes from a year ago, and schematically some subtle changes.

So for our guys, there's a comfort level. There's a comfort level for me. And, you know, just like I said, I think without being real, real specific about it, and not being completely technical and boring everybody, I think there's things that maybe not to the naked eye you would -- you would pick up, but, you know, for maybe a more advanced person, any time you come to practice, you'll be able to see those things.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your linebacking corps as a whole and getting back Otaru Alaka. How big is that for him, and what kind of progress did they make in the spring?

COACH SUMLIN: It was a tough year for Otaru. He had a tough week. I met with his dad right there in two-a-days. He had a dislocated elbow. He was going to come back and heal. And his father had a stroke, but he survived. Mentally and physically where he was after all the things he put in and the way he finished his freshman season, you know, we're looking for big things out of O.T.

But during that time, it was just so difficult for him. We actually put him on a plane and sent him home just to be with his family during fall camp. Football was not as important to me as for him to be with his family, to get his mental frame back and his physical frame back.

And he's done that. You look where he is right now. He's bigger and stronger. He's in the 240-some level. He's obviously a talented guy that can run and do a lot of things, with Shaan Washington who gives us the ability, a guy who came in as a safety but is 240 now.

You got guys like that that can run a little bit and have length and athleticism that can cover up a lot of mistakes and give you the opportunity against some spread teams to really play with two linebackers and Donovan Wilson as a nickel instead of trying to match personnel all the time and be able to keep four D linemen on the field.

O.T. being back physically and mentally where he is right now would be a big deal for us because it was a real blow for us during two-a-days.

Q. Coach, you touched on your receiving corps and kind of singling out Ricky Seals-Jones, but one of the more consistent guys happens to be Josh Reynolds. What has he done to really help welcome in Trevor Knight and welcome him on the field and film room? How has Josh Reynolds brought Trevor Knight in?

COACH SUMLIN: Josh is a guy a little bit like Ricky. Josh -- you have two different paths: One guy that was highly recruited in Ricky Seals-Jones who's had success, and a guy like Josh Reynolds who really nobody recruited.

It was really kind of interesting as things were going and -- you know, I'll never forget. You get a knock on the door at the bowl game. You know, we've just lost. There's a lot of things going on. There's a lot of people doubting what's going to happen. You got a knock on the door. They said, Josh Reynolds wants to see you. And I said, What can happen now? And he's got tears in his eyes. He was disappointed in how he played in the bowl game. Kind of disappointed in the way things were. He said, Coach, I want you to know something. Don't worry about having that meeting next week. I'm coming back next year.

So from then on, it was kind of a little different spark in Josh Reynolds. Here's a guy who had 13 touchdowns his first year in this league and is just an exceptional player -- long, athletic, makes plays down the field. I think the combination of him and Christian Kirk give us a real punch.

And, you know, with Ricky being a bigger guy that can handle the middle of the field, we got some weapons. And to be able to use those, we're going to have to use them because I catch a little bit of that UCLA film, they've got some really good guys on the perimeter, too. They're throwing the ball, too, and a damn good quarterback in Josh Rosen.

Our guys are going have to -- as I said before, quarterback position is one thing, but it's the ten other guys that got to help him, and certainly, we've got guys on the perimeter that can get that done.

Q. It's been a pivotal game the last four years. Does the game being Week 3 change the pivotal nature of that game for you? And second part, do you have insight into why the road team has been the victor the last four years?

COACH SUMLIN: No and no. You got an answer for that, let me know. Why we go to our place and win, why they come to our place and win, I have no idea. Just because it's Game 3, guess what? The way it is in the SEC West, we're going to play him sometime.

So, I've been through a lot of different schedules in the last four, five years. We've opened at South Carolina. I've opened with Florida. I've opened, you know -- Arizona State last year was nonleague, but we played a lot of early conference opponents.

So, you know, the preparation for those games are going to happen. I don't know that, you know -- this is the first time that it's been this early, you're right. But I don't know that it changed something. All that means, we're playing another tough team late in the year like we've done the last four years. It just won't be Auburn this time. We're playing early.

Q. Coach, earlier in this offseason you had a situation where an assistant coach was tweeting out and caused kind of this big thing of decommits from your program. What type of policies and how much have you put to not only your assistant coaches but your players about social media and the impact it can have to prevent something like this happening again?

COACH SUMLIN: I think I addressed that about three months ago, right, with what we did with Coach Moorehead. That's been addressed. And so, you know, there's no reason to really rehash that.

I will say that what we do, we got a great educational program for our players and for our coaches. And, you know, since that time, as you want to bring it up, we didn't have a bunch of decommits, we had a couple. But since that time we've had a hell of a lot more commits than decommits.

Q. As a coach, what have you observed in the relationship between young men and local police?

COACH SUMLIN: You know, I think we're in a unique situation in College Station. We went through a time early when I got there where we had some issues as a program. I think that's been well documented.

I think what we did was reach out and start a relationship not only with campus police, but with city police and being able to have those guys come in and talk to our team about here's what we're looking for, here are the issues that we address or that we see. And then, as I said before, education and communication are big. And if I don't know you, I've got a different attitude than when I do.

And, you know, it's a lot different than it was maybe my first year in College Station with our team. I think, you know, our educational piece is twofold. We spend a lot of time educating our guys, bringing in speakers that have nothing to do with football but everything to do with life and what's that look like on the docket of guys

that have been successful in situations, who have come through situations and made the right choices, and then guys who have not been successful, have gotten the worst part, maybe some prison time, maybe some things, and lost families, maybe hit rock bottom. But their stories become important to our players.

And, you know, I had a coach tell me a long time ago, Joe Tiller, who I played for, coached with, coached for, it's not necessarily what you learn to do that's important, it's what you learn not to do. So, if you can eliminate some of the mistakes that people have made down the road in your life, you have got a heck of a chance to be more successful. And that's kind of the way we approach it. Does that make sense?

Q. Kevin, you talked about having Otaru Alaka back and improvement of Shaan Washington. Where does Richard Moore fit in now?

COACH SUMLIN: He fits in. He's a guy that's probably a little smaller than those guys. He's going have to be a guy that's very instinctive. You don't make 180-some tackles your senior year and not be a good linebacker. He's 210. Everybody saw him play. The first time he played was in the Alabama game, he was tackling people all over the place.

Richard, because of his size and the way he's done things, has had a hard time staying healthy. A healthy Richard Moore helps us. More to your point, he doesn't have the size that those guys have to be every down players. What's got to happen, we have to see where he is in relationship to Donovan Wilson being on the field, too. Because Donovan is now 200-some pounds, 205. We'll see where that fits in.

They're all moveable pieces in there at linebacker. Just because it says Sam, Mike and Will doesn't mean we're going to line up like that and take guys out of the game and make them play there. We're going to get our best guys on the field. If he's one of them, he's going to be on there.

Q. If I can ask one more thing.

COACH SUMLIN: Only because you're the local guy. We'll give you that.

Q. If you'd speak about the growth that you've seen in the defensive tackle position and how you might feel about that position now as opposed to some of the other years when you've been in the SEC.

COACH SUMLIN: When we had 260-pound guys in there?

Q. Something like that.

COACH SUMLIN: And just hanging on for their lives? Yeah. Like I said, I started off with our front is going to

be good. We have a rotation, a two-deep, that's going to be, talent-wise, as good as anybody in this league. Our two ends are national, national award-caliber guys. Daylon Mack, we got his weight down -- he's down to 313 instead of 340. So he can play more than two plays in a row. That's going to be important. He doesn't mind me saying that, because he knew it. So that should make him better. Kingsley Keke gave us great depth last year. There's a 6'5", 6'6" guy, 315, 320 pounds. Zaycoven Henderson played a lot of football.

You want to be able to rotate guys on the inside and keep them fresh. And I think, you know, that's going to be key. Everybody has to stay healthy. But we got more than enough bodies in there right now. They're the right size SEC bodies and the right twitch and the right strength that can hold up. So, I'm looking forward to seeing these guys play.

Q. All right. Thank you, Coach, for your time.

COACH SUMLIN: Appreciate it. Thanks, guys.