

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday July 14, 2016

Hugh Freeze

Ole Miss coach

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Okay, folks. We are back to it. Our next football coach is Hugh Freeze.

COACH FREEZE: Thank you. I appreciate Greg, his leadership. He's been a great resource for us coaches, very accessible, just like Commissioner Slive was, so it's been wonderful working with him thus far. I appreciate the media and the exposure you give our great sport, and we're excited about the upcoming season, really excited about the three young men that I brought here today in Chad Kelly, Evan Engram and D.J. Jones. I think that they are everything you want a student-athlete to be right now. They've either made the turn with poor decisions that they've made, in Chad's case, to get to that point or maintain that status all of the way through and that's really things that -- they're lasting that coaches can be very, very proud of.

We've got an exciting season ahead of us, and Lord knows the we've got to prepare for the month of September with the difficulty that we face there. Before I get into football, I would love to address our NCAA case right now, and as I've said, with the limited amount that I can discuss, I remain very confident in who we are and our core values and how we do things. We fully have cooperated with the NCAA throughout the entire process, which has been a long process. We discovered most of the facts that led to self-reports and that's how a good compliance office works. You know, with them already being on our campus, we had to report many things that are a part of the Notice of Allegations that maybe typically just get reported and handled with self-imposed penalties. We believe our response to the Notice of Allegations stands on its own. As a head coach, I understand that I'm held accountable for the things that happened within our building and even outside the walls of our building. Our compliance team is working extremely hard to seek a resolution to this case and into the -- and also into the events from NFL draft night and we look forward to the conclusion of this entire process. No one looks forward to that more than I do.

On our team, as we head into the season, I think if you were to start to build a football team to compete in the Southeastern Conference, you would start with quarterbacks first and defensive line next. I think that we have those two spots. I love Chad Kelly's work



ethic. He is a gym rat and studies more film than probably the coaches do. He's going lead our football team very, very well. Our defensive line led by D.J. Jones and Marquis Haynes and Fadol Brown and Issac Gross being back, which is a great story and Breeland Speaks. We wish we had a little more depth there, but we believe we're really, really talented there.

Excited about our chemistry. We just don't have a lot of turnover in our place. Our staffs are happy. I did a little exercise this past year where I brought everyone in the entire building in to ask them to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 their happiness working here, and the question to that would be, what would make it a 10, and I was real pleased with the results. There's some things I need to change to make things a little better. In particular they said my game day management with the coaches, I can be a bit sarcastic, so that's one of my goals to work.

We've had the highest GPA in school history this past year. Seventeen players graduated off last year's senior class. Seven post grads will play this fall. There's some neat things going on with community service around the Freeze Foundation with the village in Haiti and the orphanage in Africa that we've adopted, and our kids have taken a great part in with our players and we're moving into the Delta in Mississippi.

We've addressed a lot of issues that are current to our players and will have an impact on us, whether it be taking our kids to the National Civil Rights Museum last week or continue to talk to them about the pitfalls of domestic violence, and all of the things that are going on with drugs, alcohol, and the atmosphere of agents and things that are around our sport. We continue to hit those things head on to educate them.

As Greg said, we've been to two New Year's, six games back-to-back. I think only five schools can claim that. Winning the Sugar Bowl was a huge highlight for me. It was on my bucket list. I actually have one written. It was number seven on the bucket list. Winning the game was exciting and great and all of that, but really sharing time with my father and Archie Manning on the sideline prior to that game will be forever etched in my memory.

Our support has been phenomenal. Four consecutive sell-out season tickets. It happened faster this year than ever before in school history in our administration with Chancellor Vitter and Josh Bjork, the leadership they provide and continuing to improve facilities. We have a brand-new practice area. The stadium has been transformed. I think the visiting teams are going to love what they see when they come, and our players are definitely excited about that.

The records that we've shattered since we've been at Ole Miss are pretty remarkable. A lot of that is due to the offensive stuff that we've had. Our defense led the nation one year also in scoring and last year offensively we led the SEC in most every category. So, there's a lot of great returners there. We lost a lot of great players. Most people want to talk about Laremy, and Robert, and Laquon, but, man, the Cody Cores of the world and the Trae Elstons of the world, and the Mike Hiltons and the Fahn Coopers, and the Channing Wards, all of these kids that play so many snaps for us that are now on NFL rosters, we definitely will miss them. But we've recruited extremely well and really excited about some of the young kids that we have that we get the chance to develop as we get toward the season.

So, we don't have to -- we don't have to obviously work too hard to get prepared to get motivated for week one, opening up Monday night football in Orlando, Florida against the team the caliber of Florida State. Our kids are locked in for that and focused for that and preparing for that. I did get a kick out of our AD telling me it's a neutral site game and I'd use that in quotes, "neutral site" and I explain to him, any time you go on a road to a neutral site game, and you have to use silent cadence, it shouldn't be considered a neutral site. So, we'll have a great opposition there in a lot of ways, and it will be an atmosphere that we have to handle. Good thing I think we have some people in key positions of leadership that will help us do that.

So, I'll take your questions as we wrap up the last day of Media Days.

Q. The creation of run-pass conflicts for defenses, how does that go into your game-planning? Maybe how has that evolved making it difficult for defenses?

COACH FREEZE: Yeah. I think that that step alone is the -- has changed the way offenses -- you look at the numbers that offenses are doing now. It's pretty incredible the numbers that are being put up week in, week out. We averaged over 500 yards last year in the Southeastern Conference Western Division, which was pretty remarkable, and most every, most every, I wouldn't say every, but most every run we call has the -- we call them RPOs, run-pass options. They have

those on there, and if your quarterback and receivers really understand that, it really is designed so you take on that given play what the defense is allowing you to have or what should be -- you obviously have to win a one-on-one and you have to win your block on the point of attack and you have to do all those things, but it should have a chance to be a successful play, and it's made it very difficult on defenses to defend that. And we get ridiculed sometimes because the stats say we don't rush the ball a whole lot, but we'll get through a game and we'll have 20 runs called that ended up being passes, and that's not factored into that, but it's who we are and it's kind of what works for us, but it's -- the best called games I've had are games where I could come out of them, and I really only called about four drop-back protections.

But calls, if you're able to throw the football effectively off of the run action, it is advantageous for your offensive lineman, because pass setting against these defensive linemen that we face in this league, it's hard to make a living at that.

Q. Coach, from a production standpoint Chad Kelly had the kind of year last year that probably would have driven a lot of quarterbacks out to turn pro, but he comes back. What are some of the things that scouts want to see from him this fall that would enhance his draft status?

COACH FREEZE: I've been asked all morning about what he needs to do to improve, and I have to be -- his last seven games last year were pretty good, and I don't know that I can look at a lot of things and say, man, you're doing this really poorly, or -- he did everything for those last seven games pretty solidly.

I would say that the transition from our game to the NFL for him is going to be more mental than physical. I think the NFL now, if you look at it, I think they're intrigued by some of the things that we're doing. I know they are. I've spent time with some of their staff that want to hear, hey, tell us about how you're simplifying the verbiage, and tell us about the RPOs and those things. So I think he needs to -- he obviously would be drafted to the right environment for him. I don't know that he is -- he suffers from ADD, and he has -- you know, it's easy for him in our system because of the way we use our verbiage for him. I think translating that into typical NFL system could be a challenge for him, not one he couldn't overcome, but I think fit is everything for him, as we talk about his next step. The first three games of the year he didn't take care of the ball extremely well, and then those last seven he was really remarkable with doing that, and they probably wouldn't like the fact that he would take some hits, because he is -- he uses his legs well when the protections break down. That works for us. We got

to be smart with that with him, but I just think the mental side of it, the good things. He comes from good stock and Jim Kelly's given him a good idea of what that looks like, and he's got some -- he's got some people in his circle that can really help that translation hopefully -- transition, hopefully.

Q. Coach, you've got a lot of positives on this team coming back, but what were your concerns coming out of spring a couple areas?

COACH FREEZE: Well, we'll start with offensive line. That seems like that's always a concern, because I think that's the toughest position to recruit, I really do. It's difficult. It's -- because, not because there's not some good players, but it does take time to develop those, but because of the defensive lines that we face, they're just really, really talented.

I am confident, though. I mean, people forget, you know, Laremy set seven games last year, so that allowed us to get a lot of young kids, like Sean Rawlings, and Javon Patterson, and Rod Taylor, and Jordon Sims and we get the return of Robert Conyers, who -- what a great story. I mean, The kid's got his degree in hand, has had three surgeries, but wants to finish his career playing and can't wait for him to get back and hopefully experience a successful senior season. But you know, in that game, I know it sticks in my mind. Because I remember vividly looking out there and we had Sean Rawlings at right tackle. We had Fahn Cooper that left, so Fahn is gone. The others were just young pups that were out there playing. So that was good experience for them. I think we had the ability, and I think we recruited well.

I think this offensive line group, Alex Givens we redshirted last year, I think has a chance to be really good. Greg Little is a very talented offensive lineman. Haven't seen how he translates into all of the looks he's going to see yet. Jack Raborn, Bryce Mathews, and all of the kids that we signed this year. Michael Howard, who redshirted last year in this game. He needs to gain some more weight, but I don't know how that's going, how we're going to fair there, but I have confidence if Matt Luke and that we'll get ourselves prepared there.

Linebackers has been the biggest concern on defense. We missed out on recruiting on a couple there, and we've got to nail next year's recruiting class for linebackers because of the need there. Fortunately, we were able to get Bing-Dukes out of junior college who had some experience in the SEC and get Rommel on a graduate transfer out of Oregon State. We believe with those two, along with young Willie Hibbler, have to handle the linebacker and feel very strong about Gates and Caldwell and Temario Strong playing the stingers.

But we're going to have some young kids in the secondary, but those are the ones. I feel very good about our receiving corps, good about our running backs, so offensive line and linebackers are probably the two biggest concerns.

Q. Hugh, you've been a guy that's been very optimistic, get up in the morning and can't wait to work. Can you describe -- I guess since NFL draft night, what has it been like for you? You've been under investigation, but that night it became particularly public and blew up. Can you talk about what it's been like for you and how you approach each day in the program?

COACH FREEZE: You know, if you're really going to be a person of faith that I say I am -- that doesn't mean I'm perfect; it means that's why I need it -- man, you really hold on to like James I: You consider it all joy when you encounter these trials and tribulations.

I remember when that happened. If you are a coach and you have the rocky times and trials and tribulations and it causes you to lose all of the joy that comes with working with the relationships that you have within your building and on your team, man, you're going be like a roller coaster.

My first words when that happened: Hey, this is draft day, not draft career, Laremy, you get to decide how it finishes. That ultimately is when it matters.

And you go back into our building, it's really easier than people think for me, because if you look at the issues that we're dealing with, the percentage of our team and the percentage of our staff that is involved in those issues is so small that if you focus -- and I know in today's time, someone -- one of the media guys told me this morning: If it bleeds it leads.

But if you look at -- what about all of these other guys that have nothing to do with that. And that is what motivates me every day, to consider it joy in the journey that I get to do with these kids and, man, coming through adversity, you know, I really believe that all things work together for good.

And I believe that. I don't like it. It's like making a cake. I don't like taking a raw egg or baking soda. Those don't taste good. But when the final product is done, it tastes really, really good. And it doesn't taste good right now, but when you go to work and you see the effort that's been putting in by kids like Issac Gross who are coming back from a neck surgery to finish his career and the Chad Kellys and these young kids that amid all of the circus that was out there, still shows we want to play for this staff, at this university.

How can you not be motivated to go to work every day to help prepare them for life, for academic life, and, obviously, to compete at a high level? So it's really not as hard as it may seem.

Q. Looking around the league, there's obviously a lot of experienced quarterbacks. Do you feel like you have a pretty significant edge because you have one of those quarterbacks, and how big of a concern should that be that quarterback play may be a little bit down this year?

COACH FREEZE: I think we have that conversation every year, and rightfully so, and I do feel like it's an advantage for us. However, every year, it seems to be another staff that has recruited a kid that we don't know about or hadn't talked about or is unproven and all of a sudden the guy's a really good player.

So it will probably be some of that. But there's no question I'd rather be in our position going into the season than otherwise. I like our backups, too, in Shea Patterson and Jason Pellerin. I think those two guys are really good also. There will be somebody that comes out. But quarterback play in this league, if you don't have good quarterback play, it's very, very difficult to win games.

Q. Evan Engram and Chad Kelly both decided to come back for their senior season. What does that mean for your program?

COACH FREEZE: Totally honored that they would do that. I think we have an epidemic going on right now with early outs that is not always wise, and I'm so proud we had two that listened to wise counsel, listened to facts that were on the table.

I know some of the guys in our league -- and I'm very supportive of trying to do things that are going to help so the young men have an accurate evaluation of where they are. But for those two leaders to come back, I'm so thrilled I get to coach them both another year.

And their leadership, they are two of the greatest leaders on our football team. And think they made the wise choice in coming back, and glad there's still a lot of kids that do that and listen to counsel. So they'll be the leaders, and we wouldn't be the same without those two, so we're thrilled they're back.

Q. Coach, going back to draft night, I think you can make an argument that social media had a case and potentially costing Laremy Tunsil millions of dollars, quite literally. For a college athlete with so much to lose, what is the upside to even being on social media? Because it seems like it's just an accident waiting to happen for most of them.

COACH FREEZE: I don't know any school that puts as much into trying to educate your kids about branding on social media and dangers and pitfalls of it. I'm confident we worked as hard as we can on that. Kids still make mistakes, and he did. But the evilness in this world, the fact that someone would do that at that moment to young men, is very saddening.

And I see it all the time on social media. It's fueled with either unhappy people, or people that want to tear others down for sure. And nothing is going to be kept in their lives anymore that is private. And it is a danger that is constantly costing people.

I think you can use it for positive. I try to do that every day. I'm not a big fan of it. I kind of wish I wasn't even a part of it. But I do think you can use it for good. And I think our kids, being in the platform they have as a college athlete and the SEC, they can really use it for good, and I'm hopeful that ours will.

But there is no question that on that given night is a great example for our young men. We have a gift box at our place, and in that gift box goes things we should learn from the gifts of others. And sometimes we give our own self a gift. We go through those constantly and what should we learn from it. And hopefully we'll take that and that mistake won't happen again.

Q. A two-part question. You've mentioned that head coaches are now more accountable, I guess, for NCAA violations, and you've said previously that you're confident the NCAA won't punish you personally. What gives you that confidence? And second part, what have your conversations with Barney and John been like since April 28th, or draft night?

COACH FREEZE: I don't know that I've ever said "confident." I'm -- I obviously believe that I am responsible for things that happen in our program and some that are outside, and you have to be able to prove that you've set a tone of compliance, which I'm confident that I have done that. But ultimately that's not my say. I can't comment on anything that's ongoing with the NCAA.

Look. Everybody has -- everybody's got a narrative. You have one, I have one, our rivals have one. All of us have one in regards to us going on in the world and in our world with the NCAA. It's obvious that the allegations have come. We've got our notice. I would encourage you to read our response, and we look forward to that day.

But with everybody's narrative going on, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle and the facts are this. There will come a day where we get to stand

before the committee on infractions, which are the ones that matter, and we will be held accountable for any wrongdoing that is found, and that's the way it should be. We don't want it to be. I have zero interest, zero interest, in cutting corners to be successful, and our staff knows that very well. I have a lot of things that I'm not very good at, but that is not a temptation.

But we will be responsible and held accountable for anything that happened on that day, but until that day, we're going to stay focused on being the best football team we can and continue to be relevant and having confidence in who we are. Because I see it every day, I see the impact it has. Recruiting is still going really well because people know us for who we are.

Q. To follow up on your last comment about not wanting to cut corners, in the response that you guys submitted to the NCAA, and I believe I read that your school spent over \$1 million on a legal defense to help create that response, it essentially assigns a lot of the violations that happened in the program to carelessness, or ignorance, or just flat missed communication and that type of thing. But I'm curious, especially given that you knew the scrutiny that your program was going to be under with those high-profile players that you recruited, how do you explain not dotting every I and crossing every T with regard to their recruitment and what they did when they got on campus?

COACH FREEZE: That's a good question, and we obviously feel like we did dot a bunch of Is and crossed a lot of Ts. Could we have been better? Obviously we could. Until we get to share some of the back story on some of the allegations that maybe brought us to a point, you know, it's really hard for me to sit here and answer that.

But it's a great question. And we will learn from where we made the mistakes, of course, but, you know, there's a lot of things we did right also. And it still doesn't always work out and you don't always have control over every aspect outside of the walls of your building, but I know how much time we spent into educating our young men of the dangers that they could face. And still sometimes kids make mistakes, but we look forward to that day, we really do, where we can say here's our program, here's what brought us to this allegation, and we will accept the ruling when it comes.

Q. Hugh, you mentioned a little bit earlier about the challenges facing going into Orlando in the neutral site game and taking on Florida State. How do you prepare for something like that? As you talked about, it's going to be loud, probably more home for the Florida State team?

COACH FREEZE: Yeah. Like I said, I don't know that it's a neutral site game, but we play in a lot of difficult environments in this league, so we'll prepare just like we do for a road SEC game. And the good thing about playing a top five team like Florida State in the opener, it's not hard to grab the attention of your players or your staff. They understand the task that is at hand. They understand that challenge quite clearly.

So, you hope you can stay healthy throughout the grind of fall camp and then be ready to give Florida State a great game on that Monday night. You'll have the eyes of the nation on you. The kids know that. They get that. So it will be a great -- and once we get into the grind of camp, that's kind of everybody's sanctuary a bit, too. And we look forward to that.

Q. Hugh, certainly your friendship with Auburn coach Gus Malzahn is no secret. You guys talk about it a lot and you're asked a lot of questions about it. In the three seasons he's been Auburn's coach, it's the only game that each game has been decided by eight points or less. Do you think that's just a coincidence, or does that somewhat speak to the familiarity you have with each other's systems?

COACH FREEZE: That's a good question. I didn't know that stat, but I think we have a lot of familiarity with each other. He's got some kids on his -- some coaches on his staff that worked with me; that probably adds to his preparation.

And probably being good friends, we want to beat the heck out of each other on that day, and we're going to make sure our kids are ready and our plan is good, like we do every Saturday.

But, man, we are good friends, and when that three-hour game is over, we'll go back to being good friends and we'll congratulate the other and pull for them. But there's probably something to the fact that we're close friends that our games are close also.

Q. In February of 2013, you sort of challenged people if they had any proof of recruiting violations to contact your compliance office. You provided the e-mail address. Is that one you'd sort of like to have back at this point?

COACH FREEZE: Yeah. Sometimes you make decisions that probably aren't the sharpest. Like I said earlier, I did mean that with sincerity. I really want everyone around our program and everyone within our program to do everything the right way. My parents raised me and Proverbs said a good name is to be desired above great riches.

And when things are that, and above that, I've kind of come to grips with the fact that my name -- I'm okay

with people that make whatever decisions they make about me.

Obviously, I serve a God that I want to make his name great. And so it does bother me with that. And so that tweet was, you know -- the intent was, man, let's find out what's going on and look into it. Do I regret doing it? Absolutely.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Thank you, Coach Freeze for your time.

COACH FREEZE: Thank you.