

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday July 11, 2017

Derek Mason

COACH MASON: Good morning. It's good to see this group again. We take a look at it, I want to say thank you. I want to say thank you for taking time out today to come in and talk a little Vanderbilt football with Derek Mason. That's hopefully a fun experience for you. Hopefully you'll like it.

Vanderbilt football is on the rise. As I look at our program and where we're at and what we've done, I thought in 2016, we took several steps forward to be a better program. You looked at how we finished the season, 4-2, got us to a Bowl game for the first time in my tenure. And that was an exciting time for us. Definitely not satisfied.

This group is definitely moving forward, and I talk to our guys about it all of the time. It's about the work. It's a daily process to make sure that we can work hard to achieve, push ourselves in the right direction to become Vanderbilt men.

As I look at where we are too, we're starting to close the talent gap. When you talk about recruiting and what it looks like for us, Vanderbilt's definitely on the rise. We look to yield the top 25 recruiting class better than any of the classes we've built since I've been here, and that's growth. That's part of where we are. That's part of where we need to be. So we're moving the envelope. We're pushing the needle.

Our factors for improvement in 2017, they look a little different. I look at staff continuity and where we are for the first time in a couple of years, and I've got no movement. And Coach Lewis, who is now a consultant for me defensively will be in an analyst role. Warren Belin, who was at Wake Forest who was at Vanderbilt with Bobby Johnson is now back coaching outside backers. Both of those gentlemen made the transition extremely smooth. Any time you have staff continuity in the same voice, it allows you to move in the right direction.

As I look at where we are offensively, it's good to have Andy Ludwig back. He's in his third year coaching that offense, leading that offense. Kyle Shurmur is going to have a great year. He's going to lead this -- this team's going to lead this unit. It's all about the veteran skill players around him. You look at Ralph Webb, Trent Sherfield, Caleb Scott, these guys are ready. They



have been ready. They have come into their own. When you hear names like Nathan Marcus, Justin Skule, these guys have played football in this conference.

I said this before, but when your team grows up, you've got a chance. So as I look at where we are offensively, the future is bright, but the future is now. As I look at our defensive progression of whether I should return seven of our top ten tacklers defensively, that's saying something in a conference where you have to play great defense in order to win ball games. For me, I'm extremely excited about what the camaraderie, continuity and leadership looks like defensively.

And last but not least, when you look at where we are special teams wise, Sam Loy as a freshman had a great year punting a year ago. I have Tommy Openshaw coming back as a fifth year senior, who is poised for some postseason honors and hopefully get us back to another Bowl game.

Then I look at Steve -- or actually Scott Sypniewski, the fifth year transfer from Michigan as a long snapper. I think he is probably the key to what we need to do special teams wise. Any time you get a long snapper who makes your operation time that much better, it gives you a chance for success. In all three phases, we are better.

As I move forward, I want to say we have depth. For the first time in my tenure, I look at depth on this football team, and I truly believe we have a chance to do something special. James, James Dobson has done a tremendous job raising these guys. As I look it, we have 18 returning starters,

38 juniors and seniors on this ball club. And these guys are primed. They understand exactly what the expectation is. They work through it every day, and that's good for Vanderbilt football.

You know, I continue to talk about college football being the junior-senior sport. I can remember coming into this conference and going down to Starkville and playing against a Mississippi State team that had Dak Prescott as a junior and a host of other guys as juniors and seniors on that football team. I looked at our football team, and we took some punches. I said to

myself I couldn't wait to be a junior-senior football team in this conference. Now, I'm not having to wait anymore. We're here.

I'm not a soothsayer. I am not talking about how many games we are going to win, but I do know we have a junior-senior team. The culture, continuity, all of those things lead to special things. I've been there before, and I am truly excited what the season holds for us.

When I look at our football chemistry and our football family, and this will probably be the last grouping of things that I'll say to you, I think our chemistry is strong. And that chemistry, it doesn't happen overnight. I reference back to James Dobson. James Dobson, our strength and conditioning coach and his conditioning staff, have done a tremendous job of moving the needle for our guys. We're bigger. We're stronger. And we have more guys. The chemistry in the room is outstanding.

Again, they understand what the expectation is, but they work towards it every day. So as I look at where we are, who we are, how we compete, again, it's an every day process. These guys have done a terrific job of working hard and doing the things I've asked them to do. When I look at our leadership, our leadership is really deep on both sides of the ball.

I brought Oren Burks, Kyle Shurmur, and Ralph Webb to SEC Media Day, but I could have brought three other guys, okay, and I probably had 20 to choose from because that's how much maturity and leadership we have on this football team. For me as a coach, again, I'm excited to call names like C.J. Duncan, Trent Sherfield, Justin Skule, J. Wynn, Jay Woods, Nifae Lealao, Oren Burks, Tre Herndon, Tre Tarpley. I can go on and on. We played a lot of young guys on this football team, played a lot of young guys four years ago, and those young guys have grown up. So I'm excited to see what this team does this year. We are relentless, tough and intelligent. We want to be that all of the time. That's a process within itself. That's who we are. That's what we're going to be. That's Vanderbilt football. So with that being said, I'll open it up to questions.

Q. Just with Zach Cunningham's departure, who are the guys on defense you guys are really keying in on to replace that production?

COACH MASON: It's hard to replace a good player like Zach Cunningham, but here's what happens, a couple years ago nobody knew about Zach Cunningham. A year ago, Adam Butler stepped on the scene and played as good as anybody in front for us in terms of what it looked like. We say Oren Burks, Oren Burghs is the guy. He's moving into that role. But it's not just Oren Burks. It's what is going to happen upfront. You

talk about Nifae Lealao. You talk about Jay Woods. You talk about Jonathan Wynn, those guys play a lot of football in this conference. It's three-four structure. Those guys' jobs are to make sure they keep guys off those linebackers.

Zach Cunningham enjoyed the luxury of playing behind some guys upfront that were pretty solid and pretty productive. Zach's a great player in his own right, but as I look at it, this defense is never about one guy, one player. So, with Oren being at the linebacker spot, I expect his production to go up. But it's going to be guys like Jordan Griffin whose been in our program for three years, Dmitri Moore, a newcomer from Texas, who will step on the field and play for us. So it's not about one guy. It's about how we have to absorb that blow of Zach leaving and Adam leaving as a group.

As I look at it, the production is going to come from the defense. Again, I said it earlier, we actually returned seven of our top ten attackers from a year ago. You talk about guys like Ryan White, Tre Herndon, LaDarius Wiley, those guys are productive. This defense will be stout. We'll get after people, and it should look better in 2017. No doubt.

Q. Hey, the SEC is known for running backs. Where do you think Ralph Webb fits in with the other great ones in this league? And what's made him so productive for you?

COACH MASON: Good morning, Bob. First of all,

Ralph Webb to me, is probably the most underrated back in this conference. He's the back that nobody talks about, but all he does is perform. You put him on a stage, and he's going to be big. So, for him, he's never worried about the accolades. And from year one to year four, his game has progressed every year.

Okay. The first year, could he run between the tackles? He did that. Second year, could he catch the football out of the backfield? Did that. Third year, could he pass throw? Did that. Any time you can make yourself a three-dimensional back in this conference, I think that says something.

But what's most impressive about Ralph Webb is really who he is every day. He wants to be the best. He came back this year to give himself a chance to do something. He's back and Vanderbilt history's done. He's chasing SEC history. He wants to be a top five running back in this conference. And for him, he's got his own set of goals. And if I know

Ralph Webb like I think I do, he's probably going to wind up accomplishing them. So Ralph is consistent. He gets it both on and off the field. And he has had a chance to study abroad. He had a chance to impact

the Nashville community. That's what I'm talking about. That's a pure Vanderbilt man at his best.

The best part of Ralph Webb is to come. I look forward to see what he does in 2017 because the focus can't just be on Ralph Webb. He has a complementary back. He's got receivers and tight ends that hopefully takes the pressure of the box. I look forward to see what he does in 2017.

Q. Derek, other than just experience, what would you say the biggest advantage is to having a veteran quarterback compared to a first-year starter?

COACH MASON: Experience of having a veteran quarterback is that he understands like the system. I think the idea of getting us into the right play, I tell our defensive guys all of the time, I never called a bad defense. It's about execution.

When you start talking about an experienced quarterback, it's about him understanding, okay, what the defense is giving you and how to get yourself into a better play. That's what we need. We need his mastery of the offense to sort of take hold, and that's what I started to see last year towards the end of the season, and that's what my expectation is now.

I know Kyle just got back from the Manning camp, where he had a chance to really test that football I.Q. a little bit. And I walked into the room a couple of weeks ago, and I hear this music down the hall. I go into our team room, and I'm really expecting to see a group of guys because I hear music going on. Like most coaches -- everybody's in there. My head's bopping because the music is so loud. I go in. It's Kyle Shurmur. He's looking at Middle Tennessee. And he asked me a couple questions about defensive structure, I want to attack this guy, here's what it looks like. That's what I want from my quarterback. He's got to be that guy, not some of the time, but all of the time.

What I've seen from Kyle in the last six months leads me to believe that he is that guy. I have been waiting for him to grow up. He has grown up. I am going to give him the keys to the car and get the engine hot and let's go.

Q. Coach, you brought up both guys, Andy was the offensive coordinator and Kyle Shurmur at quarterback. What's been the mental makeup of both guys as they look to really dominate the bigger teams in the conference? What's the mental makeup of both guys into the season?

COACH MASON: It's going to get better. What do you do? You study. We're all students of the game. I'm a student of the game as a head coach. I'm student of

the game as a defensive coordinator. I definitely expect our guys to be students of the game.

Part of it is immersing yourself in who are you. What is your football game from 2017 and how is it different from 2017? Putting those elements together. Look at your growth. Look at the process. Look how we've gotten hit today and let's figure out where we're going. And that's what they have.

Andy, I told some reporters in this room a couple years ago, I mean, if we can get to the other side of this, I thought this football program would find itself doing great things. Andy Ludwig does just that. We match each other's wit. We go tit for tat. Now I'm starting to see our quarterback do the same thing. He questions things. He questions why we do certain things and what certain things look like. Again, you only question things when you start to understand what the scheme holds for you. Again, it's about growth. It's about learning. It's about mentorship, and it's about ascertaining skills and knowledge, and that's exactly what we're doing.

Q. Taking a look at your season last year, you only lost four games by a total of touchdown or less. So Vanderbilt could have finished the year at 10-3?

COACH MASON: Right.

Q. I know you touched briefly on the recruiting and depth-building. Together with the leadership that you returned, do you believe that this will finally push the program up to where those close games are actually turned into victories?

COACH MASON: Well, thank you for the question. I feel confident about where we are, and, again, the maturity, the experience, the idea of what we've had to go through. Every guy on this roster has played for nobody but me. Okay? So they fully understand what we've gone through as a program. And I try to let them know it every day. Okay? Nobody really cares about what we're doing across campus. Okay? Not in this conference.

I mean, the teams we play, they don't care about the APR. They don't care about what happens, you know, with the all-academic team. Okay? What they care about is who's winning on Saturday and how we're going to perform. And so I've gotten our guys to understand that we don't want to apologize for what we do, who we are or how we work. It's a grind, and everybody's on that grind right now.

This team has grinded as hard as any team that has been around since I have been here. Part of it is because they understand what's on the other side. They finally got a chance to see what can happen if

they play the right way, if we do the right things, if we don't beat ourselves. They are not planning on going back. That is what I will say to you. Once you taste it, the idea is to make sure you go forward, not backwards. That's where we are.

Q. Going back to the kick Zach Cunningham blocked against Auburn, that play is now illegal. I am curious what you thought of that rule?

COACH MASON: Zach made it illegal. That's nice. It's all about making our game better. They feel if the rules makers feel like that makes our game better, so be it. Here's what I know, football is still a game played between the white lines. Those types of plays make college football exactly what it is. It's great. So, for me, you know, it's part of history now. So, you know, we'll show the reel from time to time. It will be good to see, but when it's all said and done, that's where we are in 2017.

Q. You know, going back last year against Tennessee, what did that win not only mean for you as a team, but for you personally?

COACH MASON: For me personally, it took us to a different spot. It took me to a different place. It took me all of the way back to my first game at Vanderbilt University and time delays and the storms and the unkept expectations to now truly understanding exactly where we were. You know, on a cool November night, we're sitting there and we're watching Vanderbilt play as good of football as any team in the country, and that's a special moment.

I just had a chance to see the video when I was sitting in the back, and it always stirs up emotion. It takes me back to that time. But here's the thing, I know this, that was one moment in time. This program's got to go forward. That's only the beginning. Okay? We built something here on West End that we know is special. I'm not trying to convince anybody to get behind it. The movement's already started. We're here. We're moving in the right direction. If you want to see great football, if you want to have an opportunity to see a great team doing great things, come check us out. Thank you, Hannah.

Q. Hey, I was curious about Kyle Shurmur. Obviously the guy's taken some heat at different times in his career. Is it fair to judge quarterbacks by wins and losses?

COACH MASON: I think -- I think in our game, that's the only thing quarterbacks are judged by. Okay? When you look at what we do, you know, as coaches, we're just about wins and losses. When you look at quarterbacks, they're no different. Extension of the head coach. They have to be able to play big on a big stage. They have to be able to perform big on big

stages.

Kyle Shurmur has impressed me because it has rolled off his back. You're talking about a young man that grew up as a coach's son. He grew up with professional athletes as a young guy. He's never been worried about the media or expectations of the media. He's good with who he is. He knows who he is. He has a head coach that knows who he is. For me, I tell Kyle be who you are, have fun, lead your group. Let's make sure we can move this program from where we are to where we need to be. That's really the focus. I love this group. I love this team. They love me back. And right now, we feel we're in the midst of a renaissance. Let's have some fun.

Q. Coach, you talk about what's on the other side and having built depth. What is the ceiling in your mind for Vanderbilt football?

COACH MASON: You know, there is no ceiling. It's good to see you by the way.

For me, what it comes back to is this, there's only two types of people in this world, limited and limitless, and you got to figure out which one we are.

We work extremely hard every day to make our mark and figure out exactly where we're going, and you earn those every Saturday. So we'll start where we're at, you know? Right now, we have no victories. We have no losses. We line up versus MTSU and figure out where we are and we'll go from there. I do know this, this team's got something special behind it.

I feel the energy. I understand who they are. And they understand where they're at. To you, Jared, hopefully you get behind the movement because we need you. We want you. Come check us out on West End.

Q. I just wanted to see if there's an update on Frank and Tae after their shooting?

COACH MASON: Ed, how you doing today, man? Nice suit, man. Like it.

Q. Thank you.

COACH MASON: Right now Frank and Tae are doing well. These young men are healing well, obviously. Everybody here understands, you know, what they were involved with. I'm just glad they're safe. You know, when I look at these young men, I want to make sure that they were safe.

I don't agree with the decision-making process of these young men all of the time, but I do know this. These young men are healthy. They're safe. I talked to Frank two days ago. He can't wait to get back with his teammates. These guys are suspended indefinitely,

but when you look at it, I'm just trying to get young men from where they are to where they need to be. Making good decisions is what we're about.

I obviously believe that these young men and what occurred does not reflect the processes of our program, but here's the thing. Growing up is what we have to do. And that's a daily process. So these young men are safe, they're happy to be in contact with their head coach, but they do know and understand to whom much is given, much is expected.

Q. Just real quick, when you took the job, I'm sure you had an idea of what it would be like to be a head coach. Now, obviously years in, has it gone as expected or gone better than expected or worse than expected?

COACH MASON: Well, I can tell you, when you take a head coaching job, you have no idea, you have no idea what it takes to be a head coach until you actually sit in that seat. The ride has been fun. It's been difficult at times. It's been hard but fair, sad but true. It is what it is. Your record tells you what you are. It makes you go back to the drawing board.

But here's what I know. Every year you strip it down. You strip it down. And, again, your record is who you are. You take those parts, you look at it, you say to yourself how do you rebuild it? So you're looking for pieces. Whether it's recruiting, whether it's staff. You're trying to find answers.

And I feel like now it's different. I'm not searching for answers. Still looking, but not searching. Okay? Truly understand who we are, what our mindset is and how we need to play in this conference. Our style of ball is really unique to Vanderbilt. We understand most people are spread offenses in this conference. We're not going to be a spread offense. We'll have spread-like principles, but we're going to run the football. We're going to take advantage of the one-on-one matchups outside. We're going to play great defense. When it comes to red zone defense, we're going to make sure that you kick field goals. That's what we want to do.

We are going to play hard on special teams, because every special teams down has a chance to change games. Especially when you look at how games were a year ago. So it all matters. And I tell our guys this all of the time. The only thing we're running out of is time. So make the days count, count the days. Let's get this team ready to ride.

And it's coming quick. Hopefully you get a chance to see what you want to see, because I know I'm looking forward to it.

Q. Derek, I know you relish facing elite coaches. Alabama is your SEC opener this year. What are your thoughts on facing a Nick Saban team, and what influences maybe has he had on you as a defensive guy?

COACH MASON: Well, it starts with me with facing Coach Stockstill. He's pretty elite. He's been to five consecutive bowl games. MTSU is going to be a worthy opponent, and we have to go there and play.

I take this thing one day at a time. But in speaking about Coach Saban and his football team, there's nobody right now that's doing it better, you know, when you look at longevity of his program, what he's done, how he's built it. He's built it around who he is and how he sees football, and that's extremely important. Because that's about being who you are.

He is what he is all of the time. I sat in meetings with him and, believe me, I like his demeanor. I like the way he handles himself. I like the way he coaches his football team. So I respect it.

But here's what I tell you. I don't fear anybody, and our team as well. So when we line up to play Alabama, we got to line up to play Alabama. We have three other opponents, starting with MTSU. That's where we sit today, and that's where we'll be. When we face Alabama, we're going to be ready to play.

Q. Coach, last year you had Ralph on the punt coverage team, a few plays where he was kind of throwing his body around on the field. Can you tell me about the philosophy of putting maybe your best player on punt coverage and maybe some of the benefits of that?

COACH MASON: It's Zach Cunningham, it's Ralph Webb, it's C.J. Duncan, it's everybody except my quarterback.

Here's what I believe. Every young man wants to play in the NFL. Well, not every young man is going to be first, second, or third round draft pick. The reality, you have to make your way on teams.

In our program, everybody matters, everybody counts, everybody is going to get their turn. If you want to be a starter on offense or defense, you better play special teams. I don't care if you're defensive tackle. You better be part of the special teams. That's where I came from. Being in the NFL, we had the same mentality at Stanford, it's no different here. It all matters. Every snap, every play.

These guy us can't run, can't hide. You're not going to be an offensive player or defensive player, you're going to be a Vanderbilt player. That means playing in all

three phases, if we can get you on all three phases.

Hopefully it's a defensive guy that can play offense and give us some offensive production. I'm not limiting guys to where they can play. I say it all of the time. The more you can do, the easier it is to get on the bus.

Q. Last year Georgia scheduled Vandy as its homecoming game. Did that play any kind of role in Vandy scheduling Georgia as its homecoming game this year?

COACH MASON: One more time.

Q. Last year Georgia scheduled Vandy in the homecoming game. Did that play any role scheduling Georgia as its homecoming game this year?

COACH MASON: I'm glad you told me, because I don't know. That I don't try to get concerned with any of that stuff. It's good for the media. It's good for the fan base. I'm just trying to win ball games, trying to put our guys in position to be successful. That's what I talk about all. Time. It's not where we play, it's how we play. We got to make sure we show up and play football, whether it's homecoming or Veterans Day game. To me it's about putting our best football out there and me making sure that our guys are prepared. Hopefully that answers your question.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach Mason, for your time.

COACH MASON: Thank you.