

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday July 12, 2017

Kevin Sumlin

Texas A&M

MODERATOR: Texas A&M University head football coach, Kevin Sumlin.

COACH SUMLIN: Good afternoon. Appreciate my sixth straight rousing round of applause when I get up here. You guys are fired up, last of the day, so let get rolling.

I just want to say a couple things and talk about young men that we brought here. You'll get a chance to meet, if you have not met them already, Koda Martin, who, by the way, is getting married here in the next couple of weeks, the 28th. I asked him was he nervous on the plane today, and he said, No, I'm not nervous about this deal. I said, What about marriage? He said, Ah, just a little bit.

As a little bit of trivia, he's getting married to Jazzmin Babers, who many of you know as Dino Babers' daughter, who's playing volleyball at Texas A&M. So, he was an assistant coach with me years ago for R.C. So he's around, he's a big old guy, he does a great job with us in FCA.

Armani Watts, who is a fabulous football player, a young man, probably going to be an All-SEC candidate again. A guy that had an opportunity to turn pro last year, got an injury late in the year but was not surgical, so sat down with him. He's decided to come back. He's doing a great job of -- with leadership on our football team, particularly defensively.

And Christian Kirk, which everybody knows is one of the best football players in the country, a guy who's dynamic, put the ball in his hands as a returner, not only as a kick returner, but has become a dynamic weapon, as a pass receiver.

And so you get a chance to be around those guys and ask them questions. I think they say a lot more about Texas A&M football than the questions that you'll get here probably in the next 20 minutes, because these are guys that, as I've said in some other venues, and I've said it in some other rooms, I can't tell you how excited I am to be around them.

You know, we are -- it's a little bit different time or place at Texas A&M right now. We signed 29 players in the



offseason, of which all 29 guys are on campus right now in the summer, and whenever that is the situation, you know, with the third of your football team being new, it can bring some animosity. These guys that are here today, and some of the guys that have played a lot of football for us at different positions, have really embraced these guys and understand the need for them to help us become the championship-caliber team that we want to be. And so the energy level in that locker room, the energy level in that meeting room is as good or as better as -- as good as it's ever been, and I think it comes from the leadership that's within.

Some of the issue that I'm sure you're going to have questions about with November, are things that we made some tough decisions about last year, and that's one of our emphasis has been, to finish and be a tougher football team. Going out and hiring Mark Hocke as our head of strength and conditioning I think has made great strides to that. And that didn't start in the season. That started in January along with the 15 practices that we had in the spring. And the pace, the things that we're doing in the offseason are a little bit different. Not a little bit, a lot different than we've been in the past.

So when you have a leadership group and older guys that understand that, that have been through the things in November that we've been through, that understand that head coach is trying to change it, and here's what we need to do and pass that along to the young guys, that's what leadership is about, and that's what we feel right now.

So, from that standpoint, I appreciate those guys and what they're doing, but from an energy standpoint, and some of the other things that are going on in our program right now, it's -- things couldn't be any better. Questions?

Q. Coach, you talked about Christian Kirk. Just how much does his ability sort of soften the blow of losing three receivers from last year's team?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, it more than softens the blow. You know, here's a guy that I think our special teams coordinator, Jeff Banks, does an outstanding job of scheming things for him in punt return game and our kicking game. Without a doubt, one of the better guys in the country with the ball in his hands and being a

leader.

We signed a group of receivers that have come in as freshmen. A lot of them came in January, and when you have a guy like Christian Kirk who takes them aside, away from when you're in the building and said, no, here, man, here's what you need to do, here's what you're going to do. You're coming with me. We need you to play. We need depth here. You're a talented young guy.

With those guys who left, to answer your question, the guys who left early, or leaving, I think that gave us an opportunity to sign some really, really quality young receivers that came in in January and gave Christian a chance to be that leader throughout the summer.

So not only does he fill a void for us on the field, so to speak, and as a player, but he's also filled a void for us with those young guys in saying, hey, here's the things us need to do. Nobody prepares harder, nobody takes care of themselves better, nobody works harder in the game than Christian Kirk, and I think he's a great example for all our good young players, but particularly at that wide receiver position.

Q. Kevin, after two years, how would you evaluate the performance of John Chavis, that you brought him in?

COACH SUMLIN: I think without a doubt, Owen, the things that we talked about, and I was just talking about on television, you know, we have got to be a better run defense. We have to. And I don't think there's any secret to that. I think that our ability to be multiple and change things up are things that we worked on a little bit.

I think we were a pretty good defense early in the year. We lost some critical pieces. I think when -- over the course of the year when we lost a couple corners, and did some things, Priest Willis was playing pretty well early in the year and Nick Harvey got a little bit dinged up, we had a situation where we're putting pressure on some younger guys and gave up some big plays later on in the year, but we've got to be a better run defense. I think the things that we've talked about, the things we set down and discussed, the things that John has -- that we have discussed openly are things that we've implemented throughout the spring.

And so do we got to get better? It's not just John Chavis. It's across the board. It's everybody. As I told you before, Owen, we have the biggest sign in our building that says "no excuses." We're not giving any excuses, and that starts with me. So everything that has to happen, anything that we want to do, we want to be -- because we want to be a top-tier football team. We want to be a championship football team. And so

the things that we've done or we keep putting in place, and the things, as we adapt to this league, to figure out how we can get to that next level, we're doing. And that's not just him. That's across the board.

Q. Coach, what is so unique about the bond between Christian Kirk and Armani Watts, and how have you seen them grow as leaders throughout this past offseason?

A. It's weird, isn't it? Here's a guy that tries to knock the other guy's head off when he first got there, but it evolved in recruiting. I think they're the best of friends. You got a guy that's from -- he likes to tell you Dallas, but it's east Forney, Texas, it's not Dallas. He claims Dallas, Armani Watts. And you got a guy from basically east Phoenix, and I think in the relationship Armani takes advantage of Christian to get to Phoenix as much as he wants to. I've seen him on Snapchat and Instagram out there. They've been great friends. Armani was involved in the recruiting process, and ever since. And so they're guys that like to play football and are guys that can communicate with you as a coach now. They're older guys that have been through it.

You got to remember, Armani has played every snap since he's been here except when he's been hurt. I go back to going and playing the first game on SEC Network at whatever time that was when you all -- they fooled me into playing that 5:00 game in Columbia, when it was about 100 degrees to open the network, and worried about Armani Watts playing safety, and all he did was get an interception and knock a bunch of balls down and do a bunch of things. You knew right then he was going to be a great player.

So, those two get along very well. I think they compete, and it gets back to what I said. It gets back to that kind of leadership, not just on the field, but it's also that leadership off the field that creates a football team that you love to be around and these guys are -- these guys are not only good players, but they're good people and they're going to be successful.

Q. Coach, you mentioned your team's struggles in finishing as an area of emphasis. Do you feel any additional pressure this year to show your team can go out and sustain that early success throughout the entire season?

COACH SUMLIN: I don't -- listen, the pressure I'm feeling is the same pressure I feel all of the time. And so nobody puts more pressure on me than me. And my job is every year, I look at what we do and what we

do well. We want to stay ahead of the curve. When we're not doing well, it's my job to analyze it and try to fix it. And so looking at where we are and being open and honest about that with our team and with our guys who are here, I think that's what I was getting at by talking about it. All right?

You got guys who have gone through that a couple times, and Armani's been through it, and to sit openly and talk about it, here's what we're going to do, here's our plan. Here's what we're doing in the weight room, here's what we're doing in the recovery, here's what we're doing in nutrition, here's what we're doing from a toughness and physical standpoint in practice. Instead of trying to point fingers and do this and that, we're not doing that. That pressure, it never changed. It never changed from the first day I got here when we opened with Florida and lost and then went on to win however many games we won or whatever happens.

So, we're here to compete for championships. How we do that, when we do that, basically, the why, with and how, that's -- remains internal, but that's my job, and the pressure for that never changes.

Q. When you lose the top pick of the draft, you lose your starting quarterback, you lose a lot of other people, parts that were real relevant to your team, how would you make a case for you're going to be even better than last year?

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah, I don't know. I think everything's relative, Kirk. I think that for most fans, for everybody, some people sum it up in wins and losses. I think as coaches, you do that a little bit. You do some of that, but you also sum it up by being a better football team because the schedule's different. Your schedule's always different.

So, you know, can you be a better football team with the same record? Can you be a worse football team with the same record? You know, I can sum it up that by looking at how we're going to play and what tempo we're going to play at, what kind of physicality we're going to play at and how we're going to finish. And if we're doing that, and, you know, the wins will come, the way these guys are approaching it.

So from my standpoint, you know, to say that we're going to be better, I know that we're doing the things that we need to do to be better, and I would not be surprised if the results don't bear that out.

Q. Coach, you were just talking about pressure. Alabama's won 17 straight SEC games by a total of like -- I think, an average of three touchdowns per game. I'm wondering how much pressure does that program and Nick Saban put on the rest of the

coaches in the league?

COACH SUMLIN: I don't know that it's pressure. I think what it is is in just about every league -- well, not really every league, but you go through a time where one team has -- is really the mark. And we've looked at it that way since we've been here. So, the pressure is that -- I don't know -- I really don't know that that's the case. I know that that's the mark that everybody wants to be. You know what you have to do to get to Atlanta, in our situation. And then you know what you need to do to try to win a championship.

And so the consistency of that program over the years did not come overnight. I think people understand that. But you can't argue that that is the mark, and that's where everybody wants to be.

So, from my standpoint and from what we do, we got a lot of games in the West to play. And you can win a lot of games in the West, and that one can take its toll on you. I think it took its toll on us the last couple of years, matter of fact.

So we've got to do a better job of handling things mentally. I look back at that game. I think we're winning the game with, what, six minutes to go in the third quarter and a couple things happen and we lose by ten points, or whatever it was, two touchdowns. And then, you know, kind of unravel after that. So, the mental part of that deal and what you do day-to-day, to get back to the question earlier, is the focus.

And, you know, that -- without question, for what Nick has done and what that program has done, they were ahead of the curve a long time ago with how they approach things, and I think, you know, that was -- has basically been the model of the people you tried to follow.

Q. Coach, how much interaction did you have with Hue Jackson and Sashi Brown and the rest of the Cleveland front office about Myles Garrett leading up to the draft in the spring, and what was the substance of their questions and your answers?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, you can probably -- I was in Philly, and anybody who saw the draft party at Myles' house, my wife and kids were with Myles and the parents, and so I can tell you this, that when they went live to the party in Dallas, that they already had the Cleveland Brown T-shirts on before the draft happened, before they announced the number one. So, that just tells you a little bit about the communication.

We've done a great job with I think our coaching staff. I think the NFL -- as much as we've complained as coaches, I think the NFL has bent over backwards here in the last couple years to try to give us an opportunity

as college coaches. I think Nick brought it up two years ago, three years ago, about the number of guys who are turning pro that were getting false information. We still have that. But I think that the communication between the league and coaches, and particularly the coaches in the SEC, has been really, really good.

And because of that, I think our players have benefitted because of our organization's honesty with their organizations, with the players that they've drafted from us, knowing what they're getting in guys that are playing very, very well in the NFL, who have careers and are doing well.

So, I think people trust us. I think they trust our organization. And because of that, you know, I've known a lot of different people at that level for a long time, including Hue, and he was a young college football coach way out in the West Coast, where it all started. So he's got a good one, and Myles is excited to be a Cleveland Brown.

Q. Kevin, I just wanted to know what kind of your reaction was to Scott Woodward's comments in Destin about needing to win more, and what have the subsequent conversations between you two been like?

COACH SUMLIN: You know, Scott and I have known each other for a while, even before he came to Texas A&M. So, we've had a lot of conversations before that. Might have been conversations after that. I'm not going to get into what those conversations were about, but, you know, it's -- like I said, for me, my job, nothing changes for me. And, you know, you've been around me a long time. Nobody puts more pressure on me than I put on myself and nobody wants to win more than I want to.

And so whatever's said, whatever the conversation, whatever's written, it's not going to affect how I do my job and it's not going to affect my day-to-day operation. So I've been doing this almost 30 years.

And whether I was the wide receiver coach at Wyoming and Joe Tiller said, If they don't catch the ball, you're going to get fired, and I was making \$19,000, and that's the early -- I had a red little Fiero. Remember those things? You don't remember them. Where they caught fire in the back and all that other stuff. There was just as much pressure then as there is now. I'm being honest with you. So like I told them, You better start catching the damn ball.

That's the same approach from my first year as a full-time coach to it is now. I have known this for a long time, regardless of what people say or what they do. Nothing is going to change the way I approach life, and nothing is going to change the way I approach my job.

I've known what's at stake ever since I got into this.

Q. Hey, what would you say is your quarterback situation going into camp? Is there a front-runner? Or how do you think that's going to go?

COACH SUMLIN: Not really a front-runner right now. I think I know that all three guys are really capable. You guys have seen Jake Hubenak. He's played for us, I think, the first couple years. He's traveled. He's at Oklahoma State, went back to Blinn and came there, he's traveled a little bit. He's older. Been in games. I think the first couple years he's a little tentative because he was behind some guys and really wanted to learn. But I see him right now as a mature guy that understands that he wants it.

Nick Starkel, which is another guy that was committed to Oklahoma State, but 6'4", 6'5", can throw it through the wall. Could have played for us last year after Trevor got hurt. Came to me, really, week eight, nine, eight, and said, Coach, if you need me to play, I'm out of my red shirt, ready to go. Son of a West Point grad. He's one of those guys. He's been in the program a year and a half now.

And then Kellen Mond is a guy we signed in January, signed early, came. Really a phenomenal athlete, one of the top guys in the country coming out.

I tell you, the big thing that gets back to what I just talked about, those three guys have done a phenomenal job in the offseason, working together, organizing 7-on-7s, moving the team, being leaders, enjoy each other's company.

But we'll see you in the fall. We'll see what direction we go. Noel Mazzone does a great job with them.

The good news, Bob, we got more starts coming back in our offensive line even by losing two tackles. We had more starts coming back in the offensive line than we had last year. We have two really, really talented running backs in Ford and in Trayveon Williams. And I said this on television. Trayveon is the first true freshman running back in the history of Texas A&M that rushed for 1,000 yards, and there's been some pretty good damn good running backs at Texas A&M in the course of time. So he's an electric player.

With all of the starters up front and Christian Kirk, this offense will be quarterback friendly. And the guy who understands that he doesn't have to do everything because of the players that are around him, like Keith Ford and Trayveon and Christian Kirk and a number of other talented players, that understands he doesn't have to do all that and takes care of the ball and can make some plays for us, that will be the guy that will play for us.

I'll go ahead and apologize to you, Bob, for five years ago for cutting you off. I apologize. It's a newer, kinder me.

Q. That's all right.

COACH SUMMLIN: You got over it. You got over it. You got to deal with Bret, anyway, so that's your pittance. Anyway.

Q. Kevin, you were active in recruiting Jarrett Stidham twice. What is your assessment of him as a quarterback, and how do you think he's going to impact Auburn's offense, particularly an offense that struggled to throw the deep ball against you guys?

COACH SUMMLIN: Jarrett's a very, very talented player. I really hope -- I cut you off at the end, because I heard you say "against you guys." I hope he doesn't play the deep ball against us. But he's a very talented young man. He's a guy in high school, I thought he was as good as he was. We had to make decisions in recruiting at our place, and we made those decisions.

So, you know, he's going to be successful. It's just a matter of when and what time. He brings a lot to the table as a guy that can move around a little bit, but a guy that's highly accurate and can throw it. So I wish him the best of luck and wish him success.

But I didn't like the way you said "against you guys" at the end, but that's okay.

Q. Kevin, huge shoes to fill with Myles Garrett and Daeshon Hall going to the NFL. Now that you've been able to size up Michael Clemons, what do you see from him and also the guys that will fill those shoes?

COACH SUMMLIN: You have a number of guys. Qualen Cunningham has played a lot for us. Jarrett Johnson comes as a shock, for those of you who don't know. He's No. 40. He's not as big as Daeshon Hall. But believe it or not, last year he had the same sack total, same amount of production as Daeshon Hall did and played half the time. He's played a lot of football for us. He understands it's his time. He's been playing behind those two guys for years, so he was interchangeable on both sides.

Michael Clemons, as you said, is a guy that came to our place to really replace one of those two ends. He's probably the one or two -- No. 1 or 2 pass rusher in the country out of junior college. 6'5", I don't know, maybe 6'6", 260, something like that. We got to get him in shape.

But everything he's done with workouts and our

strength coaches and around our players has been phenomenal. And just in case you guys don't know, his nickname is Cyclops. So I'm into recruiting anybody who's 6'6" and his nickname is Cyclops. I don't care if he's got one eye or not. If he can rush the passer, he's good with me. Michael has come in and done a great job.

Tyree Johnson. We got to have some depth. You don't ever replace a player, like just the next guy is Myles Garrett. But by committee and by who we are and maybe with Michael being the type of talent that he is, he can generate some things early, that can give us the pass rush, or the guys who are there while Michael Clemons continues to really develop.

Q. That sounds like something Joe Tiller would say, but were those kind of the exact words? Was it \$19,000? And when did you realize that if a left tackle who broke up with his girlfriend whiffs on a block, as a coach, that could be your job?

COACH SUMMLIN: As a graduate assistant -- I was in private business, and then I became a graduate assistant, and Mike Price took a chance on me at Washington State, and Joe Tiller was there, talk about a rough room. Mike Zimmer -- not the nice Mike Zimmer now, the mean Mike Zimmer back in the day that used to be D coordinator when he was 29, Joe Tiller, were kind of my guys.

Joe got the job at Wyoming, and he couldn't find anybody cheap enough or stupid enough at that time to go to Laramie from the convention for 18,000-some dollars. So I got there. I've known Joe Tiller since I was 18 years old, because at Purdue -- it's kind of a strange thing, at Purdue he was the defensive coordinator and I was a linebacker. So we got to Washington State, and he was the offensive coordinator. I said, How in the hell does that happen? So these questions all asked of me right now, right? He explained to me how that happens, so I moved to offense too. He said, If you learn what we're doing here, with empty and no back, and he'd been in Canada and done all that, you'll have a job forever. I said all right. That sounds good, if I want to do this.

He got the job at Wyoming and hired me as a wide receiver coach. I've known him since I'm 18. I'm kind of his boy. You know how it is and the deal. And then one day he walks up to me in the middle of practice, and he's just like furious. He said, If they don't start catching the damn ball all the time, I'm going to fire your ass. I said all right. Immediately I had the same conversation with wide receivers.

And the rest is history. We had couple All-Americans, Ryan Yarborough lead the country, and shortly after a couple guys that nobody ever heard of that were 1,000-

, 2,000-yard guys, and I moved on from there.

By the way, I want to say something. Joe's not doing real good right now. Just keep him in your prayers. He's back up at his ranch. And he's always been a great mentor to me. I just want to say publicly how much I appreciate what he's done for me, not only as a player, but really give me a start as a full-time coach, and just keep him in your prayers.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

COACH SUMLIN: Thank you. I appreciate it.