

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday July 13, 2017

Gus Malzahn

Auburn

MODERATOR: Gus Malzahn is our next head football coach.

COACH MALZAHN: All right. Good morning. Glad to be back here. This always kind of kicks off the start of football for our staff and our players. I brought three of our team leaders with us today. The thing about it, all three could have left early, and they chose to come back, and I think that's really big.

Braden Smith, our offensive lineman, All-American, First Team All-SEC. Probably one of the more talented offensive lineman. He can play tackle. He can play guard. One of the more talented offensive lineman I've had at Auburn.

Tray Matthews, our safety, led us in tackles last year, really is our leader of defense. Probably our team leader. Tray has his degree, working on his master's.

Daniel Carlson, our kicker, two-time All American, last year's special teams SEC Player of the Year. He also has a degree, working on his master's. Really on a sidenote, this is pretty interesting, both his parents and grandparents graduated from Alabama. I think that's a pretty good sidenote there. And then the fact that he got engaged this past week. So there's a lot of things going on in his life, but he is really a true weapon for us.

Just a quick recap of last year. We started out, we had some major adversity. I was real proud of our team, the way they rebounded. We went on a six-game win streak, and I really felt like we were playing as good as anybody in the country.

We had some key injuries late. We kind of limped home. Just had that bad feeling the way we finished. We felt like had a real opportunity there and just didn't seize the moment.

This season we have one of the more experienced teams coming back in our league offensively. We hired Chip Lindsey. I'm excited about Chip. I got a lot of confidence in Chip. He's going to provide more balance for us. And he's a quarterback guru, too. So I feel very good about that. And probably the thing that I'm most excited about is we have quality depth and



our quarterback position. And that's been our Achilles' heel the last two years. That gives me, I know our coaches and our players, comfort.

Defensively, our defensive coordinator, Kevin Steele, is back for his second year. Just did a wonderful job. Turned around our defense. Top ten defense. We've got seven starters back. They understand his expectations. In the spring it was like night and day compared to last spring.

They had that edge, they had that confidence, and I think we've got a chance to be really good on defense.

Special teams, it all starts with Daniel Carlson. I really feel like he's one of the biggest weapons in all of college football. Not just the field goals and the range and all that, but the kickoffs. He all but eliminates the kickoff return.

Our returners are all back. I think we got some explosive guys that can do things with the ball after they catch it. Probably the biggest question mark about the team is who is going to be the starting punter. Ian Shannon is a guy who is competing with Daniel Carlson right now. The thing about Daniel, he has done it as a true freshman, so we'll see how that goes.

Overall I'm very excited about this team. We have a lot of experience back. I think we've got more returning starters than we've had the last 12 years at Auburn, and of course in this league there's nothing like experience.

We have quality depth. And really as a head coach of the Auburn Tigers, it's the first time I can say that we have quality depth in all areas. And that's very important. We have some key injuries late the last two years, and it has hurt us.

We have strong leadership, the three guys that I brought today, but we've got a lot of other strong leaders back at home.

And probably the biggest thing that's standing out to me about this team, that they're hungry. They're hungry and they've got something to prove. And really the last time I felt this was 2013. So that's a good

comfort for me. I mean, obviously, we've got a challenging schedule. We've got some great teams in our league. We play the defending national champions on the road week two.

But I really like where we're at. And just got that feel where there's a lot of excitement around our complex, not just with our coaches, but our players. And we're really looking forward to the season.

All right. I'd like to open it up to questions. And if we could, Bob Holt, we'll give you the floor first if you want to ask the first question. I caught him off guard. He's over there sleeping.

Q. I was going to ask you who your starting punter was going to be, but I guess I'll ask you about your quarterback situation. Stidham, is he the guy? What do you think about him? What's he going to add?

COACH MALZAHN: Like I was saying, the biggest comfort right now is we have quality depth at the quarterback position. Jarrett Stidham is a very talented young man. I think that's a common sense deal. What he's done since he's been at Auburn, just his leadership. He's really done a good job trying to win over his teammates and his work ethic.

Sean White. I'm very excited about Sean White. When Sean White's healthy, he plays at extremely high level. Last year when we got on that roll, that 16-win streak, he was leading the league in completions and quarterback efficiency.

And we got two of the better quarterbacks, I feel like, and we got a young one in Malik Willis. That is a freshman that really caught my eye in the spring.

So the exciting thing for me is we've got depth. Like I say, that's been our Achilles' heel the last two years.

Q. Gus, hot topic this week throughout SEC Media Days has been who can catch up with Alabama and what they've done. Obviously that's magnified inside the state that you're coaching in and at Auburn. What makes you believe that this season you can catch up, and how do you believe whether or not you've been able to do that through recruiting and then also in developing the players you have?

COACH MALZAHN: Well, I mean, obviously they're on the top. I think they won it the last three years. They're number one recruiting class in the country every year, and they're playing a high level.

What I do like about this team is they have high expectations. Their goal is to win the SEC

Championship. And to do that, you've got to beat Alabama. And the last two times we beat them, we won the league and we played for the national championship, winning one of those and coming close to a second time.

But we got them a home. That's a positive. But we have a very confident team.

Q. I just wanted to ask, obviously Kam Pettway is your starter, but Kerryon Johnson is one of your more versatile players. How are you planning on using him in the new Chip Lindsey offense?

COACH MALZAHN: You talking about Kerryon Johnson? Yeah. Kerryon is one of our most versatile players. He's an excellent player. I know the thing with Chip, he was brought in to provide balance and worked extremely hard getting the ball to the back side of the backfield. Really that's K.J.'s strength. You see that will be a little bit difference than what you see in the past. Kerryon is an excellent running back in his own right, too. He's a tough guy, he can catch and can do a lot of things.

Q. Tim Horton has been saying that finding the third running back has kind of been an issue. When you look at Malik Miller's injury last year, what do you think the impact is going to be for you this season?

COACH MALZAHN: Well, you know, he's a guy, just saw him in the weight room the other day. He's a guy that's gotten bigger, he got faster. He played very well when he got the ball last year before he got hurt.

So it will be good competition. We got three, four guys right there who be competing for that third spot behind our two veteran guys, and he'll be in that mix.

Q. If there's a trend on defensive fronts, maybe it's more toward three man, I guess you guys are kind of multiple up front. What do you like about the three man? Versatility? What is it you like about playing three man?

COACH MALZAHN: Kevin still likes -- he likes to mix it up. He likes to go four down and three down, and I think doing both, you know, I think gives offenses -- presents some challenge. The thing about a three down front, you know, obviously they can do some different things with some athletes on the edge. It puts a little more pressure on your tackles.

The thing about an odd front team, you better have some pretty strong offensive tackles, especially in the run game if they have some good anchors. And it puts the center on the island a little more than it would four down front.

Our league, if you look at it, it used to be about half and half. This year we expect probably to have more odd front, see more odd front than we do even front. So you just have to have the ability and -- to be able to run the football versus both.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Braden Smith. I know he was a physical freak already when he came to you, but he was always kind of a shy guy. What kind of growth have you seen from him in terms of vocal leadership and on the personal side as he's kind of blossomed during his time at Auburn?

COACH MALZAHN: You're exactly right. He is a quiet guy. The first two years Braden was at Auburn, I would get short answers, you know, and sometimes maybe just a grunt, you know? He has really come a long way from a leadership standpoint. The fact that he's here and wanted to come be a part and represent Auburn, I think that says a lot about him as a person.

His skill set. And like I said earlier, he's -- we've had some very talented linemen, offensive linemen during my eight years at Auburn, and he's right in the middle of that.

His versatility, he's played guard the last couple years. Really think he'll probably play tackle more than likely this year. And he could have left early. If he would have left early, I think he would have been picked up pretty quick. So, the fact that he came back, that really helps us.

And, you know, if you look at it, when you got guys that have a chance to leave early and they're that talented and they choose to come back, that's usually the years that you got a chance to do something special, and he's one of those main guys.

Q. Coach, what have you learned about Jarrett Stidham and his ability to escape the pass rush and his ability to throw and run down the field?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. I've got a lot of history with Stidham from the standpoint -- we actually recruited him in high school. He's a good athlete. He's a lot better athlete than people think. I think he started at wide receiver his sophomore year. He can return. He's got a 35-36 inch vertical. He runs a 4.6.

In our league, you have to escape. Things are going to break down. The defensive lines are too good. You have to have a quarterback that can escape pressure, keep his eyes down the field, know when to throw it, know when to run it, and protect the football and make good decisions.

We had a chance to really evaluate him in the spring. Our defensive line is pretty talented. And so we got a

lot of good information. And we like the way he reacted, too.

Q. Not many folks are talking about your linebacking unit with Deshaun Davis, Tre' Williams, and Darrell Williams there. Can you talk a little about that unit and what they bring to the team?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. Last year they really came on. Travis Williams is our linebacker coach, and he just did a super job with those guys. And they just got better and better. They were playing downhill, hitting gaps, very secure tacklers.

And the fact that they are coming back, both those guys are like quarterbacks on the field. They can dissect what the offense is going to do. They can get the front set. They're two as good of linebackers that we've had together since my eight years at Auburn. We've got depth there, too, like you said, with Darrell Williams and some other guys. That was a big part. Those two were a big part of our turnaround on defense last year.

Q. Could you talk about Marlon Davidson? What do you expect out of him as a sophomore and pass rush in general?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. Marlon Davidson -- we lost Carl Lawson and Montravius Adams. So we need some guys to step up and fill that void. Marlon Davidson is a guy that started as a true freshman. From the moment he got on campus, he didn't look like a true freshman. He looked like a veteran just with the way he practiced, his work ethic, how tough he was. And he's a handful. He got a chance to be an impact player. I can't say enough good things about Marlon.

Q. You said in the past a move to the East would make sense geographically for your program. What specific methods would there be in a development like that if that ever happened?

COACH MALZAHN: I think our commissioner already answered that the first day. I think it was brought up, Coach Dye said something about the map and all of that. I just confirmed, yeah, if you look at the map, that does make sense.

You know, hey, I like the way it is right now. I mean, the West right now is the best league in college football. It's a man's league. You got Alabama right now that is the top of the deal. And I like playing against them. I like playing against them every year. I like playing against LSU. I like Ole Miss and Mississippi State, Texas A&M. So, I think that was probably a little bit blown out of proportion, but I like the way it is.

Q. You mentioned the 2013 team feeling the same way. What similarities do you see early on

compared to that team?

COACH MALZAHN: Well, really the biggest similarities I see from that team, this team, is how hungry they are. And in that 2013 team, you know, they went through a storm the year before. They were embarrassed. They wanted to redeem themselves. And they had that edge to them that just brought everybody together and just do that little extra more that it takes, and they were an extremely close team.

This team, we got more starters back than we've had in the last 12 years. We were close. We were close. Like I said, we were playing as good a football I felt like as anybody for six games. We had some impact player injuries. It is what it is.

We weren't happy the way we finished. And so those guys had that chip on their shoulder of rebounding. We got to redeem ourselves. You know, from a coach's standpoint, that's what you want. And when you got a chance to have one of those special teams, they have that characteristic, and so that's the reason I brought that up.

Q. Gus, you've talked about the defensive turnaround of last season, and you nominated Kevin Steele for the Broyles Award. He didn't end up as a finalist. Do you feel, especially considering the statistical turnaround that was so dramatic, do you feel he got enough attention and praise nationally for the job he did last season?

COACH MALZAHN: You know my opinion. He should have been right in the middle of that thing. What he did turning our defense around, if you remember what he did this time last year, our number one goal as head coach is getting us to play top-ten defense. We weren't anywhere close to that the year before. So for him to get us to play top-ten defense, I think we were seventh in the country in scoring, just did a super job in the red zone, third down. And his defensive staff did a super job along with him, but Kevin was a big part of our success last year.

I really like where our defense is right now. They're so much further ahead. And the thing about Kevin Steele is -- and he's a great coach, but he's a great person. He's a great person. He truly cares about our players. He's a great relationship guy, and I say we got a chance to be really good on defense again. And that's what it takes in this league.

Q. Coach, if you would please address your two-grad transfer offensive lineman in Dunn and Bell. What do you expect and how they may fit into the mix?

COACH MALZAHN: Both of them will have a chance to really help us. Wilson Bell is our mountain of a man.

He's big. We recruited him really hard when we first got here in 2013. So to have him added to what we've got, that's a big help.

Casey Dunn was a phenomenal player at Jacksonville State, two-time All-American. He's a big guy. He's a smart guy. So both of those guys will definitely be in the mix. Depth up front, I was telling the group earlier today the depth up front on our offense has been as good as it's been. You can't have enough depth on the offensive line in our league.

Q. Coach, how much involvement does Cam Newton continue to have with the program and with the players? And what does it mean to the program to have somebody with his pro resume, MVP, et cetera, involved in, to whatever extent he does, kind of being a resource for the players?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. Cam Newton is one of the better players to ever play college football. Obviously MVP of the league and took him to the Super Bowl and all that. Cam's a great person. I'm very proud of Cam, not just what he's done on the field, but off the field. The example he's been for younger kids, he's got a great heart for youth and the things that he does off the field.

Cam will come back from time to time. He was at two of our games, I believe, last year. And when he has off time, he likes to come back to Auburn. It feels like home to him, but I'm very proud of Cam. And I would say this since you asked, with all the referees in the NFL and all that, they need to protect him like they do the rest of the quarterbacks.

Q. Obviously the nonconference schedule is something you inherited, I assume, when you took the job. What had been the positives -- what have been your reactions to play Clemson at home in a home series? Has that been good with our program?

COACH MALZAHN: Yeah. We have a little history with Clemson. When I was coordinator in 2010, we won the National Championship. We played them at home. It went down to the very end. So that's always a good rivalry for both of our fans, especially the location. The fact that they're defending national champions, we're playing them on the road early in the season, it would be a good measuring stick of where we're at, and we're still sick about the loss at home last year, you know, but they're a good team, I said defending national champions, but I do like that rivalry.

Q. You have been a run-heavy team up until now. Who are some wide receivers that we can look forward to seeing this year, maybe some guys that are flying under the radar?

COACH MALZAHN: You know, you look, most of our receivers are back. We had the number one receiving class recruiting two years ago. You know, I think as a group, this is a very talented group of receivers. And in the spring, they really took that next step. And so that will be a group[-- and we're going to throw it. We're going to throw it quite a bit more, and that's going to be a big key for those guys to make one-on-one plays.

I can list everybody; Nate Craig, Kyle Davis, Darius Slayton, Eli Stove, Ryan Davis, John Franklin. I do need to say something about John Franklin who is an ultimate team player, played some quarterback in the spring primarily at wide receiver and really he can run. He's one of the fastest guys I think in pads I think I've seen. So looking forward to him making that transition. And he'll also play some special teams. And I think he's got the ability. You know, people say when you put the ball in his hands, he can do something with it. And so you know, I'm excited about that.

But we have numerous -- I would say that's probably one of our areas that we have a lot of depth. Kodi Burns has got a good problem with the depth that he has. Will Hastings is another guy that really had a good spring that is really coming on. And Jason Smith is another guy that's made a lot of plays for us.

Q. Hey, Gus, do you miss calling plays? And what was it about, I guess, Chip Lindsey that made you feel good to be your play caller? Also I couldn't help but notice a couple minutes ago you talked about how you like playing the West. You mentioned every year team but Arkansas, was that a --

COACH MALZAHN: You know what, I think you asked threw me off by not asking the question the first time. No. Arkansas definitely. I have a lot of respect for them. And of course, we go on the road this year as far as that goes.

So, what was your question? Oh, calling plays. You know, Bob, this will be my fifth year to be the head coach at Auburn in this league. And you know, I came up offensive side of the football, offensive coordinator. The first year, just hit the ground running, you know. And then the second and third year, trying to balance that, head coach, offensive, call plays and all that. And I learned a lot. I learned a lot the last couple years. And it just got to the point last year where best for the team, I need somebody else to call plays.

And we got on a roll. And we were playing very well. And I think if we hadn't had those key injuries, I don't know -- we would have had a pretty good season I feel like. And so after the season, you kind of step back, and you evaluate things and what is best for our team.

And so that's really where I'm at. And, you know, Rhett moved on.

And Chip Lindsey, which I have a great comfort with him, he was with me in 2013 in an off-the-field role and really was a right-hand man for me. He's a former high school coach. He understands our core offense. He is very good with the passing game with the RPOs. He's a developer of the quarterback. I got trust in him. He's going to do this thing and do it very well. So it's kind of the transition of being a head coach, being a head coach at this level, in this league. It's a little bit different than other leagues.

Q. Gus, I know you're pretty good friends with Hugh Freeze. He's obviously got a challenging situation where they can't play for a title or a Bowl game. How do you think he's going to handle that?

COACH MALZAHN: You know, I mean, Hugh is one of my good friends in this business. He's one of the good guys in college football. And you know, they're going to be extremely talented on offense, and their new defensive coordinator was our co-defensive coordinator last year, so I expect them to have a very good team.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach.

COACH MALZAHN: All right. Thank you, all.