

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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## Hugh Freeze

Ole Miss coach

MODERATOR: Next is Hugh Freeze from the University of Mississippi.

COACH FREEZE: As within the last five years, it's an honor to be here as part of this -- our program at Ole Miss to represent our great administration, fan, faculty and our student-athletes. It's an honor to be a part of the Southeastern Conference and to share this podium with the 13 other gentlemen that all go through the same things most times that we each share in this journey in coaching. It's really an honor.

Seems like every year that I've stood here, with the exception of my first, that there's other things that I have to talk about other than our kids. That's the least likely thing that I enjoy doing. I do not enjoy not giving our kids what I believe they deserve. But has been with the NCAA case ongoing, as I noted in our recent response to the notice of allegations, we have taken responsibility for the mistakes we have made. Our administration has taken what we believe to be appropriate action, including double-digit scholarship reductions, meaningful recruiting reductions, one-year bowl ban, and a large financial penalty just to mention a few.

We look forward to our meeting with the Committee on Infractions so we can put this behind us. Until then, I will continue to cooperate and not to be answering any questions that are specifically directly related to our case, but you are sure welcome to read our response.

Facing adversity is something that we're familiar with. It's kind of been around us for a while now, and I sure will be glad for the day to when I can stand here and it's not. It provides us, though, with a growing season. It -- you can grow as an individual, as a coach. And, obviously, you have an opportunity to model for young men that are at an age where they get to see, you know, how does a man go through adversity. It's -- if we have our preference, we would rather have it without that part of it, but we do, and it's the lot that we have inherited and that we have caused, in some cases, and we've got to make the most of it.

And what I've constantly told our players, and that they have been the biggest encouragement to me and inspiration throughout this, is we can't control a lot of



things that occur, but whatever is occurring out there has zero bearing on their opportunity to get a degree, it has zero bearing on their opportunity to develop themselves as the best player they can be, and it has zero effect on them developing themselves into the best man they can be.

And so those are blessings, and those are things that a lot of people don't have the opportunity to have, even though we have some drama around that. Embrace the blessing that you have and make the most of this growing season as we go through it together.

Some of the greatest examples that they've given, not a single kid has left the program. That says to me that something is right inside the walls, between the relationships that we have with our coaches and our players. We have 27 graduates from our 2016-17 academic year. Eight of those graduates will still be playing with a year of eligibility remaining. We had the highest APR in the history of the school at 991, second in this conference only to Vanderbilt. Coach Mason does a great job there with that.

Our overall APR is 971, which when I first arrived at Ole Miss was in the 920s. So there's been so many examples of how our kids have handled it, not to mention just the academics but also what they're doing off the field, whether it be the Haiti project that we're finishing up there or the Marks, Mississippi, project or spring break putting roofs on a house in partnership with the Freeze Foundation that our kids did.

We're doing so many things to give back, and that's one thing I think our assistant coaches drive very well between their rooms, is we've got to have two community service projects a year so our kids understand what it's like to have the platform that they have.

Shea is here with me today. He's an SEC Student-Athlete Leadership Council, and Javon is on the NCAA Ad Hoc Working Committee.

Rewinding to last season, it's not what we were used to. It's not what we wanted. It's not what the expectations are of our program. The first four years I really thought we were relevant in the Southeastern Conference, and that is what I said from day one; that

the expectation from me would be that we would be relevant in this conference.

Relevant to me is that you have a chance to win on any given Saturday against the greatest teams in college football. Last year, we -- obviously dropping the FSU game after having a three-touchdown lead, in the Alabama game after having a three-touchdown lead, it rattled our confidence.

I did a poor job of recapturing the confidence that we needed to finish the year like we had hoped we would and that we had in years past. So I've got to learn from that.

Moving forward, one of the things I did this past spring is bring in some former Navy SEALs to help us with a theme we've come up with, being accountable through adversity. That's kind of what will model our season. We have some adversity going on, and the only way I know to make it through is us being accountable to those.

Our core values that we talk about all of the time are faith, attitude, mental toughness, integrity, and love. Faith doesn't mean they have to believe as I believe in a higher being or God above, but they've got to have faith in something bigger than yourself to be a great team.

Attitude. It's the way we talk to ourselves, what we believe about us, not what other people or whatever they believe about us. We can decide that for ourselves.

Mental toughness I believe is the secret sauce. It's the ability to get up every day and do the next right thing and then the next right thing.

Integrity. I really had to rethink my deal on integrity because of what I've learned through the situations we've gone through. Integrity is not always doing the right thing, but it is when something is done that is not right, you acknowledge it, you own it, and you move on from it, make the necessary steps that you have to correct it. Which is what I think our administration has done throughout the difficulty of this NCAA investigation that we've caused.

Moving from the training that we had with those guys, we moved into something that -- I had individual meetings with every single player. And I just decided that I can't really control a lot of things, but what I can control is the effort I put into being the best husband and father I can be and the best mentor to young men that I can be and the best friend that I can be. I can control that, and I'm convinced in our sport that there's kind of an epidemic going on to where we might not be

investing as much time as we could with our players, and so I set up an individual meeting with all. And I can't tell you the great things that came from that.

Some kids I really would like to run off I ended up really kind of liking the guy after the meeting, and we talked about what his core values are and what his moral compass is and making sure he understood the situation we're in and needing him to be all in to help us through this time because he could be a great example to everyone that watches our program this year. Those were some great things that we had going on this spring.

Moving into the fall, I'm excited about our new defensive staff. I think Wesley McGriff brings to us an energy, an attitude, and the ability -- has a rare ability to be demanding on a young man, and the young men enjoy it. That's rare for a lot of coaches. I've coached with him before. Obviously seen him at Auburn last year. He was at Vandy for a time before he went to the NFL. Excited to have him back. I thought our defense took strides.

We're going to have to get better on defense. We could not stop the run last year. We scored enough points to win a lot of games last year, but we could not stop anyone. So McGriff I believe is the right guy for that along with his staff that I'm very excited about.

Freddie Roach is a rising star. He's a heck of a recruiter, heck of a technician. Demanding on his kids.

Bradley Dale Peveto is one of the best recruiters I've ever been around in this league. And then Jason Jones. They'll have the task of getting our defense better. We need some young kids to play in the middle of that defense. You don't know how they're going to perform, but we are going to need those guys to do their particular at linebacker and at safety.

Offensively, it -- I heard Gus' closing remarks, and I echo. I've called the offense for a long, long time. We've done some really good things offensively. I became very aware in my self-evaluation with everything that's going on that to manage a program at this level, I can't be sitting in the offensive staff room all the time.

And so going out and finding a guy that understood everything that I want to do and then adding to us, particularly in areas that we were deficient in, was the priority for me. And I found that guy in Phil Longo. He put up crazy numbers everywhere he's been.

That's not the real thing that sold me on him. It's just his love for being innovative, thinking outside the box, and particularly being effective in downs where you

have to run the football, which we've been deficient at. And I think he's got a great plan that's going to help. He's a great quarterback coach that Shea will have the pleasure of being coached by, and Jordan.

Matt Luke is an Ole Miss through-and-through guy that's been like my right hand for so many years now. Love what he brings. The care, the concern that he has for our program is second to none, and his work ethic is tremendous. I think we have potential to have one of the better offensive lines in this conference, provided we stay healthy. He's done a great job of building that core. And it's taken him a few years, but we're at a point now where we feel really good about where we are in that spot.

Grant Heard took a co-offensive coordinator's job. He's been with me for years. It was time for him to get that title. Happy for him to move on.

And there's one guy I had my eye on because I kept hearing about him in recruiting. He was coming from California and getting these kids from Georgia and Mississippi and other places a trip out there, and he signs one of the top receivers in the country out of Georgia to the University of California. Kept hearing about this guy named Jacob Peeler.

When Grant decided to take the co-offensive coordinator's job, he's where my target went. I found out, I did not know this, but he's a Mississippi guy. He's been phenomenal in that receiver room and will do a great job recruiting and coaching those guys.

Derrick Nix, Maurice Harris, can't say enough about these men and how they take serious their charge to capture the hearts and minds of the players in their rooms. They've been phenomenal recruiters for me. They've been with me from the start. They're dear friends and what you want to model for young men that they can be like as a husband, father, and professional. So, thrilled with our staff.

The depth chart, again, offensive line-wise, I do believe, you know, that we've got a chance to have one of the better offensive lines in the country, really. And those guys, if you start with Greg Little and Royce Newman and Javon Patterson and Jack DeFoor, Sean Rawlings and Eli Johnson, Jordan Sims, Daronte Bouldin, and Alex Givens, Rod Taylor, I think we've got a two deep that is extremely solid. And Matt's going to do a great job with those guys and being the leadership of our team. They are the guys that you really want to put out in front that can lead. Our receiver group has been talented for years.

I do believe that this is a really talented group, not as deep maybe as some that we've had, but our outside

guys in A.J. Brown and DeMarcus Lodge and D.K. Metcalf, you know, I think those guys are special players, all three of them. Inside Van and Markell Pack are real special. And Tre' Nixon is a young kid that I think has a chance to be really good.

Replacing Evan Engram was never easy. He was a phenomenal player for us. I do believe Dawson Knox has a chance to be a really special player. And, you know, we're excited about what he can become. Octavious Cooley and Ty Quick kind of provide a different type of tight end. Jason Pellerin, many of you know of him as a quarterback. I do think he has a chance to pitch in with Dawson Know and be a really good player also.

Tailback-wise, Jordan Wilkins is really our go-to guy right now. We hope that the kids, you know, that are returning from injury, like Eric Swinney, who we loved and thought was really, really talented, tears his knee up his first his career at Florida State. He was not able to go through Spring Ball, so we're a little unsure of him.

D'Vaughn Pennamon is going to be a solid back, as is Eugene Brazley, who has great experience. But Jordan Wilkins is a guy we're looking to for tremendous leadership.

Defensively the strength is up front. Coach Roach has great players like Marquis Haynes, Charles Wiley, Breeland Speaks, G-Mac, Austrian Robinson and Benito and Cooley and Ross Donnelly, Qaadir Sheppard and Victor Evans. Those guys are some deep talented guys that I think our defensive line is going to be very solid.

Linebacker-wise, we've been less than adequate last year. And we've got to have some better play there. And Bradley Dale Peveto will help them improve. But we need DeMarquis Gates and Willie Hibbler, Jarrion Street and Bing-Dukes and Donta Evans and Brenden Williams and Taylor Polk to really improve at that. Maybe a young kid in Mo-Mo or Josh Clarke could also do that.

Then secondary-wise, I feel really good about our corners, particularly if Ken Webster can come back. His loss in the first game last year was devastating to us defensively. He was our lockdown guy. And Jaylon Jones and Cam Ordway are back, the Moore twins and Breon Dixon playing a nickel spot and Jalen Julius at corner. Zedrick Woods and Deontay Anderson and C.J. Hampton and Myles Hartsfield are solid, solid players that played a lot of snaps for us. But we really need Javien Hamilton or Custis or D.D. Bowie or C.J. Miller to step in and really help us in the middle of our defense there, defensively.

Special teams-wise, I believe Gary Wunderlich is one of the better in the country, and Will Gleeson has been a solid punter for us. Excited about Mac Brown who is a punter that we redshirted last year out of Minnesota that really has a strong leg and can flip the field. Chadwick Lamar and Jack Propst will battle it out for long snapper duties.

We're excited. Can't wait to start. I want to talk about something other than all of the drama that's been going on, and I really want to get on the field so these kids can dive into their craft of becoming a better football players and student-athletes.

I'll take some questions now.

**Q. I'm sure you're aware that the lawsuit Houston Nutt filed yesterday. He mentioned you and the administration creating a smear campaign. I wonder what your reaction to all that is.**

COACH FREEZE: I would absolutely love to share my opinion on it. Unfortunately it's a legal case, and I can't comment.

**Q. Yeah, Hugh, you talked about how you helped your team handle adversity. But how have you helped your family handle it, especially almost every other week, there's -- in social media, or whatever, it said that you'll be fired no matter what --**

COACH FREEZE: Yeah.

**Q. And the second question is how confident are you that your administration has your back?**

COACH FREEZE: Yeah. I'll answer that one first. Extremely confident. They've been unwavering in their support of me. They obviously witnessed me for five years run a program. So they've been unwavering, and I'm greatly indebted to them for that.

The family is maybe the most difficult part. It's just -- the social media world is -- some of it can be true, some of it can not be true, and, unfortunately, kids my kids' age seem to always know what's going on on it.

And I've kind of gotten to a point now where I'm almost callous, and really you focus on the people I can control loving on is my wife and kids, my mom and dad and my family, my brothers and sisters and those, and then the friends I have that know me for who I am, then your players and the Ole Miss people.

And that's kind of the mindset that I've just gotten into. That's not quite as easy for your kids. And so it has taken a toll on that, and it's made me be much more intentional about conversations that you have with

them about life, about good times, bad times. We got a lot of good years.

My family and I, man, we've enjoyed the ride at Briarcrest, at Lambeth University, we had two of the most enjoyable years, Arkansas State was incredible. And then we've had a lot of great things happen at Ole Miss that they've really enjoyed.

So now they're getting a taste of what the other side can be like when your dad's not quite as popular with a lot of people, and it's -- it's been a growing experience. Some have handled it better than others, but there's no question it's been one of the greater challenges for me as a father to really make sure they understand the value of loving one another, and what you can learn from difficult times that you're going through.

**Q. With your team facing a bowl ban this season, are there any extra steps to keep your players motivated for the upcoming year?**

COACH FREEZE: I think this has the potential to set up our staff to have our greatest hour. One of our finest moments could be the fact that our team could model for whoever chooses to watch us, for the Ole Miss family, for whatever outsiders, you know, when all of this is said and done and we're able to move forward and have our say one day with the Committee on Infractions and be held accountable like with whatever we need to be held accountable for, which we will. I've said that every time I stood up here.

We can model for a lot of people, you know, what it can look like for people that genuinely care for one another and look at what we do have as a blessing, and then set an example of how you go through difficult times.

Now, I've got to work hard. I've put a lot of time and thought into my approach. Might go for it on fourth down a lot more. I don't need a whole lot of nudging to do that.

But really the approach of whether it's the Leadership Council that we have with our players, we're going to have to have great leadership from that locker room. Because what happened last year, where we lost some confidence after dropping big leads to two quality opponents, if that happens again, you know, that can be a difficult challenge.

But it's one that, man, I believe our staff is ready to embrace. We've had many talks as a staff. I talked to these players quite frequently. I spent more time in individual conversations with our players than I ever have before, and making sure that we were all on the same page together with this.

And we went through the shared adversity, being

accountable in that in the spring. That will carry over. I got a theme for fall camp to where, again, they hopefully recognize -- they can help them recognize their blessings that they have with the scholarship that they have, to be developed as a man, a player.

They got 12 opportunities to play in the greatest conference in America, and you can prove a lot in those 12 games one way or another. And certainly we wish we had it where we could have some carrot at the end of those 12 games, but right now that's not reality for us. So, what is reality and how do we deal with it? And I get to set the tone for that.

**Q. Just with everything that's going on, generally speaking, how do you think all of this has affected your legacy at Ole Miss?**

COACH FREEZE: Yeah. I think -- I think with a large portion of the Ole Miss people, they know me for who I am, and, you know, but there's no question that it's been negative in some people's eyes, and I think you have to come back to what I want my legacy to be, and that doesn't get to be determined probably from 20 years from now.

I do have a plan of this is what I would like to be known as and to be known for doing. And I've got all that written down. And I've got to make sure -- the only thing I can control is not how people view me because they read some article or they perceive something to be this way, what I can control is doing everything today that gets me the result that I want 20 years from now from the people that really matter.

And, you know, I've had to come to grips with that; that everybody's not going to come around to that. So, who is really important to me, and let me do today what will help me get that result in 20 to 30 years.

**Q. Coach, you've lost most of your return game. Who are some of your candidates to take guys' places?**

COACH FREEZE: First guy that jumps out to me is Jalen Julius and Markell Pack and Van Jefferson, but the guy I'm really excited to see is D.D. Bowie. Really can't wait to see him field punts and maybe even kickoffs. I think Jordan Wilkins and Eugene Brazley can also do kickoffs. But really excited at the possibility. Tre' Nixon is another one. But really would like to see D.D. Bowie and see how he handles that.

**Q. Ole Miss isn't the first program that's been under investigation by the NCAA, and it's not going to be the last. As the head coach of the football team, as the CEO of this business entity inside a university that's too big to fail, how do you present corruption inside this program?**

COACH FREEZE: You know, it's -- I've said all along that the whole scope of college athletics, particularly football in the South, is so big and very difficult to manage, all the tentacles that it has, I think, again, that you, as the CEO, the head coach, we've got to continue daily looking at ways that we can monitor our compliance system.

I need help with that, and you got to have a great relationship with our compliance department. And obviously educating your boosters is huge. And we've constantly, throughout this four to five years, just constantly adding things to that to make sure that you've been very responsible as the CEO to make sure you're doing everything within your power.

Is it possible to always do everything? I don't know. But it's a difficult task. It's a tall task because there's so much stuff to manage and so many people that you're not around or may not even know, but we've been challenged with the task as the head coach that we have got to set the tone and then monitor it properly.

And we're constantly adding to that, and I'm open to suggestions by our chancellor and our A.D. and our compliance people, our legal team always as to how we can do that. And you have to hire people that you trust, and you hope that your trust is well placed in that. And that's -- you know, that's not always -- people are not perfect. And none of us are.

And so it's a tall task, to answer your question, and I think it has to be worked on daily. That's why I'm not calling offense anymore, really.

**Q. Hugh, how important is it that Shea Patterson become the overwhelming face of this program and to make sure that this locker room doesn't fall apart?**

COACH FREEZE: I think it's a great, great question, and it has to happen. And I think the great thing is I think his ceiling can be really high. I don't know that I can help him at all or that our coaching staff can help him with his release. It's pretty good. One of the better I've seen coming out of high school. His feet can -- you know, maybe Longo can help him some with that. His running around, I wish we could take credit for training him to do that, but that just comes natural to him.

But the one area that I really believe is vital for him to be the guy that you just described for us that we need is his preparation in the film room. I really didn't get to see a lot of that last year, because, you know, I mean, he's on cruise control, running scout team, thinking that's not going to happen this year, and all of a sudden you got a five-day window to get yourself ready in -- with a team that's already played nine or ten games at

that time.

Well, now is the time that he needs to start prepping for the South Alabamas and our first few games, UT Martin and California, so that he -- if he can get to the part mentally where he understands what they are trying to do to stop us and how he needs to -- and if he can see it before it happens, I think his ceiling is -- as far as being the leader and a successful player on our team, I think his ceiling is very high.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned in your earlier statement that you want to talk about your players and on the field and all that, and I'm sure any coach would say that, but with the drama that's gone on, you being in a situation today, taking the bullets for this, who is at fault most for you having to answer questions about the drama around the program?**

COACH FREEZE: Well, I mean, we obviously have created it in and around our program, you know, the length of it, we can set here and debate all of that. But you can't -- we've got to be responsible for the areas in which we were deficient in, that we didn't -- that we didn't either react or act properly, or whether it was staff or whether it was boosters.

So we have to own that. And me being in the position I am, I've got to stand and look people in the eyes and take that. And, you know, I'm -- I have been doing it for several years now, and it's -- I'll certainly be glad and rejoice and thank God when it's over, but in the meantime, I've been charged with leading us through this time. And so I've got to look at myself, our staff, our boosters, our people and our players and try the best I can to manage that while we go through it.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach, for your time.

COACH FREEZE: Thank you.