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Auburn Tigers

Coach Bryan Harsin

Press Conference



GREG SANKEY: Good morning. We have to begin the day with us Bryan Harsin from Auburn University. Led his teams to five 10-win seasons and seven bowl games. In 2014, Bryan was the National Coach of the Year finalist. He launched a podcast series this summer that is now nine episodes in entitled "Huddle with Hars." It's one of the top-rated podcasts on Apple with a 4.9 out of 5 rating.

He and I share a mutual appreciation for all things related to the Ford Mustang. He's over the last several years been working on restoring a vintage Ford Mustang and could actually talk more mechanically than I was prepared to participate in. But I think I played it well.

His father did spend time as a professional drag racer, which started his love for motor vehicles.

He and his wife started dating in eighth grade. It's my privilege to introduce to you this morning Auburn University head coach, Bryan Harsin.

BRYAN HARSIN: All right. Good morning, everyone. Glad to be here.

Before I get started, I do want to recognize someone that was a large part of Auburn history and Auburn football. I've got the privilege to hear some of the stories here, but Buddy Davidson, who passed away on Tuesday at the age of 82, many called him Mr. Auburn. His life-long devotion to Auburn is second to none.

He came to Auburn as a student manager as a freshman from Montgomery, was part of the 1957 national championship season, became the SID after graduating. Also did that for 20 years. In 1981 became an A.D., assistant A.D., handling football and travel, other special projects. Retired in 2007.

This is what was fascinating to me: He saw every game, home and away, for 61 years, so 1957 to 2017, and he stopped his streak at 700 games as he suffered a stroke in

2014 that limited his mobility and speech.

Anyhow, to his family, our condolences, and thank you for the support and War Eagle.

Second time here. Excited to be here. I know some of you out there looking at me didn't expect me to be here at this time. I'm going to dive into that here in just a second, address the grill in the room.

Really proud of where our team is at. I'll talk about some of those guys that are with us today, the work we've been putting in.

Going back to what happened back in February, what I'm going to do now is address it. Moving forward, that will be the last time I talk about this subject.

There was an inquiry. It was uncomfortable. It was unfounded. It presented an opportunity for people to personally attack me, my family, and also our program. And it didn't work.

Right now our focus is on moving forward. What came out of that inquiry were a lot of positives. There was a silver lining in all of this. What I saw from our players and our coaches was leadership opportunities for them to step up, which is exactly what they did. You got a chance to see guys provide leadership. You got a chance to see coaches provide leadership.

What it did is it united our football team, our players, our staff, our football team. I'm really proud of our guys. I'm proud of what something like that that could be very challenging and difficult for a lot of people, how our guys stepped up and handled it.

We had coaches and players that could have went to different places, avoided all the adversity and challenges. They didn't could that.

They're here working extremely hard. They're doing a fantastic job, in my opinion, getting themselves ready to go for this season. That will be the last I talk about that. There's plenty of interviews on it. If you want any more

information on it, just go Google it (smiling).

As far as our team, there's three players with us right now. Those being Tank Bigsby, Derick Hall and John Samuel Shenker.

Derick is a guy that is instrumental in our defense, playing on the edge. In my opinion, he has grown so much over the course of last season and this season. He's a tremendous player, great worker, but just who he is as a person. That's why he's here representing our university. I'm excited about his progress he's made and where he's going with his game and also his leadership.

John Samuel Shenker, recently married, all right? He's settled down. One thing about John Samuel, he played baseball until this last year. We all know what the baseball team did. He was so proud of his guys, but I knew it was killing him as those guys got to do some of those fantastic things that our baseball team was able to do.

He's going to have a tremendous season. Broke records last year as a tight end. Continues to improve each and every day. Just his mentality that he brings to our team and to this program is extremely important to our success.

Then Tank Bigsby. Tank is obviously a fantastic player, but I think the most improved overall just in preparation, leadership and some of the things that we've seen from a really good, young player. His work ethic is second to none. He's put in the work. He does it on the off days. He does it on Sundays. He does it every chance he gets. You've probably seen some of the videos he's posted on things he's doing.

Extremely proud of those guys and of our team and of our coaches just for the work they've been able to put in since January, spring practice, how we handled that, how we've handled the summer, some of the new rules and things that have come our way. Those guys have done a tremendous job.

I'm very fortunate to work with fantastic people and to be around fantastic kids. I am excited to be the head football coach at Auburn. I'm looking forward to this season getting started.

We have a little bit of an interesting schedule with five home games. I'm sure we'll get into that with some of the questions.

With that, we'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. We often hear the importance of self-evaluation, personally, from a team concept. What did you learn in year one that will help you in year two moving forward?

BRYAN HARSIN: I think self-evaluation is the number one thing we should all do every year. We go back after every season and review what did we learn. It goes all the way back to everything from nutrition to what we're going to do in a fourth down situation.

But as far as for myself, I mean, just being a leader, being the head football coach, being in that position. You go back, evaluate, how did I do those things, how did I lead. Really you want to evaluate did the message get across and get executed. The vision that was provided, was that being executed like I expected it, and did I provide the right expectations and standards for those things.

In a lot of ways, yes; in a lot of ways, there's areas to improve. I think that just goes back to your communication and relationship with your players and your coaches.

One of the things in this off-season, we made some changes. We have some coaches on our staff I've been with. We have some new coaches that have been brought in that I think have been instrumental in getting to where we are right now. We've had some new players through the portal, high school players that have come in that have been great additions.

My biggest take from last season is I think, as we build, we got to continue to lay out the expectations, we got to continue to have great conversations, we got to continue to build relationships with our players.

I think the one thing that's made the biggest difference is bringing some guys in that are helping to make that happen, as well. The alignment that we all need to have in order to be able to execute those things at the level that we all expect.

That's what I've taken away from that. We'll continue to keep growing and developing each and every day. Just like our players, it's no different for coaches. Everybody that thinks they've got it all figured out, they're wrong. Every day you're striving to get better, every day you self-evaluate and every day you got to figure out a way to get better.

Q. I have been listening to your podcast. Thoroughly enjoying it. Harder to do, put a winning football team together or rebuilding -- I think when you were talking to Dana, you talked about rebuilding a Trailblazer. Rebuilding a car or putting a football team together,

which is harder?

BRYAN HARSIN: Yeah. Well, there's a lot less pressure on building a car. I can tell you that (smiling).

It's all part of the process. I think everybody, I'm sure everyone in here, has something that you do that has a process, whether it's your work or something that you personally enjoy.

Building cars, being around cars, that's something I personally enjoy, something I grew up doing. What I had a chance to be a part of taught me about details, preparation, safety, all those other things. But our football team is the focus.

I'm glad you've enjoyed the podcast. The coaches get to come over, we spend four and a half, five hours at my house, we're just talking. That's time spent with coaches on my staff where I get a chance to know them even better, they get a chance to share their story. That's fantastic people.

That's the purpose behind it, for everyone to hear what these fantastic people have done to get to where they are. We all go through the same challenges. We all go through a lot of adversity.

As far as our football team, that's the focus, the number one thing. It happens each and every day. We talk about 1-0. We talk about how do we make today the very best day for every player, coach, staff member in our program, how do we do that collectively as a team. To me, that's really what the goal is. That's what our mentality has been.

I think that's why we made some really good advancements in our program is because we've had that identity. That will show up. We get into practice, start doing the work to get ready for the season, those things will -- they're going to show themselves. I'm proud of that, where our guys are at, because of those reasons.

Q. Going into year two, recruits may have questions about the identity of Auburn football. You have got some work to do on the field this upcoming season. What is the messaging to recruits about why choose Auburn at this point? How are you internally addressing some of the negative recruiting that might be happening?

BRYAN HARSIN: I think the message is: watch. We got to go out there and play. That's the beauty of what we get a chance to do every Saturday, all right? When you get into the arena, you have the opportunity to go out there and settle the score, all right? You have a chance to

compete. That's really what we do this for. We do it so that we can get into that arena and have that opportunity.

We've told our recruits: watch. I think the ones that have been on our campus, they see the energy and the vibe, what's happening, how the players are responding, coaches are connecting, everything that we're doing.

There's a great energy in our program right now. There's alignment in our program right now. I know those recruits and families feel that when they step on campus.

Auburn sells itself. It's a beautiful campus. It's a phenomenal stadium. The people there are fantastic. Everything about it is what you want to be a part of.

Now we got to put a product on the field that players want to be a part of. We want to go out there and be successful. Our guys know that. We know that.

But our identity, I mean, we're going to develop our players. That's one thing. I know there's been a lot of conversation about name, image and likeness and the portal and all that. But we're all about development.

We're trying to develop these guys so that when they leave, they're ready to go on and be successful and continue what they've built in our program. I mean, that's one of the best gifts you can give anybody, and I learned as a young coach and experiencing that as a player, is development. We can't forget about that.

I think that's something through character, through discipline, through toughness, through conviction and understanding what that truly means, through integrity, class, those things are what college is all about. Those are things that we're providing guys with an opportunity to learn and develop in our program.

It's really about that. I think when you get on that campus, too, that spirit, that energy, that vibe, they know it. Now we got to go prove it on the field.

Q. You talked about your staff, retooling it. One guy that's going to be crucial, wide receiver room, a lot of guys that need to step up and produce. Landen King, a guy you converted from tight end, has said some very special things about Ike Hilliard. We saw what he did at Florida as a player and the NFL. What kind of impact has he had so far?

BRYAN HARSIN: Yeah, Coach Hilliard, immediate impact. Ike is one of those individuals that when he walks into a room, there's a presence about him. You know he knows what he's talking about.

I think the first day he was in that room with those wide receivers, he told them that he loved them, that he was there to help them get better.

When he spoke to our team -- we do this exercise with every one of our coaches where they got a chance to get up in front of the team and talk about leadership. Ike has been there. He's done it. Everything those guys want to do, he's been a part of it. Before he began his talk on leadership and what he thought that is and how he was going to explain that to our guys, he told our guys, Look, I'm here for you. If there's any questions you have, anything you want to know, just come by and see me.

It was very cool, just right to the point. If you want to be a part of something at the next level or you want to know how to do it, he's a guy to go talk to because he's been there, coached it. He's done those things.

As far as just his knowledge on the football field, in the staff room, second to none. This guy is phenomenal. I mean, we're very fortunate to have him. I love working with him. I love his energy, love his enthusiasm, love everything that he brings to the table.

Those wide receivers now, when you got that guy standing up in front of you, if you're not listening, you're crazy. He's just got that presence about him. So he's got the attention of that room. He's got the attention on the offensive side. He's certainly got the attention of the team.

He's one of those additions, just like some new players coming in, he's one of those guys that you bring into your program, makes an immediate impact. This guy is a difference maker. He's certainly that.

Extremely excited about Ike and happy that he's with us and looking forward to what he's going to do with that wide receiver room. Now he's got more depth, more players. He's got guys to go out there and compete. I think that's going to be a big part of that room succeeding in the future.

Q. What has Zach Calzada brought to your program, and what plans do you have for him in that quarterback room?

BRYAN HARSIN: Zach has been awesome. He's really been awesome. One thing, when you're talking about quarterbacks, I would say any position, but when you transfer, this goes for all transfer guys, for whatever reason that first opportunity that you took didn't work out. Also being a young player, transitioning to that second year, you also realize you don't know what you don't know coming in.

The one thing about Zach that I appreciate when I asked him, What are some of the things that you've learned, like I was asked today, it was really just about what it takes to be successful at this level playing that position.

Every day he's been there, just the work ethic, the focus, the attention to detail, the little opportunities to do more when he has a chance to do that, has really become his foundation.

So we appreciate that. We appreciate his leadership. We appreciate just his work ethic. He has experience. He's played. The only unfortunate thing is we didn't get a chance to have him in spring because of his shoulder going through all the team periods because we hurt him during the season.

It's one of those that you go back and look on it, you're like, Damn, I wish that hadn't have happened. But he's with us now and he's getting his opportunities in the summer. He's going to be full go in the spring.

So to me he's provided a lot. I think that quarterback room, the competition in that room, the mentality in that room, Coach Kiesau has done a great job, because we're obviously going through a competition right now. Every single one of those quarterbacks, they bring something to the table. They're all pushing themselves.

They know it's really about them, when they get their opportunity to make it count, but also support each other, be great teammates. Hey, we'll make a decision on who gets to play. Maybe it's a couple guys that get an opportunity to play down the road. We don't know that yet, but there will be a decision made at some point going into that Mercer game of who our starter's going to be.

Q. Looking at your schedule this year, obviously it's hard, one of the toughest...

BRYAN HARSIN: Does anybody have an easy schedule in the SEC?

Q. I don't think so.

BRYAN HARSIN: I haven't seen that either.

Q. Five straight home games, how important is it to get off to a hot start?

BRYAN HARSIN: Home or away, you want to get off to a fast start regardless. It's great to be in Jordan-Hare Stadium. It's so unique. People have asked me. I've never been a part of that. How it was all set up and done, I'm not asking questions. We got five home games. When

we were flying over here with Tank and Shenk and Derick Hall, we were talking about different places they played, venues and all that.

Our stadium, I don't think there's a better one in the country. Just being a part of a couple games last season, it's phenomenal. To be around our fans, to have those teams coming in, playing in Jordan-Hare. We're excited about that, to have a chance to be home for five straight games. Doesn't provide that travel and some of those things you talk about as a coach, we're going to face adversity on the plane, all those other things. Who knows, maybe the bus breaks down on the way to the hotel? There's something that goes on that we'll have to challenge ourselves to overcome.

Yeah, we're excited about it, and I'm looking forward to those five games at home, having great crowds, great support. That environment that we all know is the best in the country, to be out there going crazy and cheering on our football team. Hopefully we're having success through those five games.

We get into the back half of the season. It doesn't really matter who you play, you get into that half of the season, that stretch right there, that's the one that really determines, especially in November, who's going to have a chance to be in those Playoff games, who has a chance to play for championships.

Q. How has your attitude changed over the inquiry in February and what did that teach you?

BRYAN HARSIN: I kind of talked about that. I mean, that's one thing, again, anytime we're going backwards -- this is what I've told our team. Anytime we're going backwards, talking about the past, we're not moving forward, talking about the future. That's about it. It was quick, to the point with our players. We moved on.

That's where our guys are at right now. We're focused on bigger and better things. Like I said, this has brought our team closer. It's made us, in my opinion, a much stronger football team and program. That will continue.

Q. You're clearly familiar with Texas and Oklahoma. How steep do you think their learning curve will be once they join the league?

BRYAN HARSIN: Well, they got time. That's one thing. I follow Texas. Just having a chance to coach there, I've always followed that program. I've always appreciated people that were a part of that program, and my time with Mack, being in Austin. I know some of the staff there as well, both staffs really.

That opportunity, when that comes, they're building their teams. They're figuring out in their own conference right now. They got to win now. That's really what the focus is, I would imagine, for those teams.

When it comes time, when they enter the league, who knows by then, there could be a few more changes at that point. We don't know that. This thing has changed significantly in a short amount of time.

Both those programs are powerful programs. They got a lot of support. Playing in that league, both of those teams, that Red River rivalry, that's a big game. So you understand the passion that each fan base has.

We're bringing two really good programs into this conference to be a part of what we're doing here.

Q. Yesterday Kirby Smart spoke of the importance of Georgia getting their home game back in Athens against Florida. I'd ask you to reflect as an Auburn man, how important was it in Auburn history when Pat Dye was able to move the Iron Bowl back to the Auburn campus as far as the importance of that home recruiting weekend?

BRYAN HARSIN: Yeah, I was never a part of that before. I've heard the Pat Dye story. That was a part of it, I think everybody thought that was the right move. That was big-time for him to get that done.

Having a chance to play in your home stadium, that's a special opportunity for your teams. It's the reason why guys come to your programs, because they want to play there, they want to be a part of that.

I think what Pat Dye did, making that happen, and certainly what we experienced this last year in the Iron Bowl, those things, you just don't get that I don't think in another venue, in my opinion.

I don't know all the details of what Georgia is dealing with and things like that. As far as what Coach Dye was able to get done for Auburn and Alabama and how that Iron Bowl has worked out, everybody knows in the country what the Iron Bowl is, doesn't matter where you are. If you watch college football, you know that game and you are watching it. Whether it's played at Jordan-Hare, Tuscaloosa, either way, people are going to be viewing that. It's a big game and it's just different.

Q. You guys had a great one in Fayetteville, then the rest of the season didn't go your way. How tough was that? How has that impacted motivation for the guys?

You had two veteran SEC guys as coordinators. You made changes, promoted guys you were more familiar with. How has that worked out? Why did you decide that was important to do?

BRYAN HARSIN: Yeah, the Arkansas game, that was a good game for us against a really good team. Coach Pittman has done a tremendous job in that program, without question. You could tell. That's one of the most physical teams that we played. You knew that going in. You knew that mentality was going to be a part of that program.

We were very fortunate to win that game. Our guys did play well, we executed well in that game. The second half of the season didn't go our way. There's reasons why. After every game you evaluate what were the things that happened. There are things that we can control. There's things that we can do better.

That's a continuation of just learning from that, applying it to the season.

Second part of the question was?

THE MODERATOR: About the coordinator change.

BRYAN HARSIN: The coordinator change.

Yeah, those guys, Jeff Schmedding and Eric Kiesau, both those guys, I think, one, let me just back up a little bit, I do know 'em, but they're very qualified to be in the roles that they're in.

Jeff Schmedding is one of the best football coaches I have ever coached with. I'd like to say I've coached with some really good coaches and been around some great and fantastic people. He knows the game. He prepares himself. One of the best I've ever seen. He's able to articulate the vision and message that he wants to get to the staff and the players.

He's one of those guys, as a head coach, you don't have to worry about. He's going to get the job done. It's more important to him than it is to me, and you want to be around guys like that.

Eric Kiesau is no different. Coached wide receivers, have known him for a long time. Got a great story. We work really well together. I think we mesh well. I think the ideas I have, he has, the staff has, are all going to be implemented into what we do on the offensive side of the ball.

He can organize people. He can align people. He can get

his vision and message across very clearly.

So both those guys, they're great coaches. That's the reason why they're in the position that they're in.

Roc Bellantoni, who's is going to be our special teams coordinator, he's been a head coach before, been around football quite a long time. He's one of those guys that knows the position that I'm in, how important that special teams coordinator is, to go relay the message to the entire football team. That's one of the beauties of your special teams coordinator, he gets the whole entire team.

All three of those guys, I don't worry one bit about what they're doing each and every day and how they're doing it because their jobs are more important to them than it is to me.

You just want to be surrounded by people like that that are driven and motivated. They want to be the best. They want to be great.

Everything I've seen from our players responding to those coaches has been absolutely perfect. Those guys are doing a great job connecting. They're communicating. They're doing all the things they need to be doing at coordinators.

As far as the staff cohesion, I think the reason why we're a lot further along is because those three are leading that and making those things happen.

Q. The running back group and the defensive line group have gotten hype, deservedly so. Is there any other position group that's flown under the radar that you think will shock people this year or surprise people this year?

BRYAN HARSIN: Well, I think there's a lot of other positions. I'm really excited, I like our tight ends. That's a part of what we do in our offense. I've always felt like that group will continue to shine in some of the things we're able to do offensively.

But I'm excited about where the O-line is at. I think the guys are stronger, bigger. They put a lot of work in. That's been a group that since I got to Auburn has kind of been under the microscope. We've got to be able to handle the guys up front, do a great job, especially with two great tailbacks behind them. I like where the O-line is at.

We'll see where our secondary ends up. We have some good, young players in the secondary. You haven't seen them. They're unproven on the football field. We get to see them every single day, the work that they put in and

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

what Coach Etheridge is doing with that group. Those there are just a couple that I feel good about and guys that have stood out.

Q. You went on a lot of stops during the spring. What were some of your favorites? As an Auburn coach, how important is it to you to keep the Georgia game, to keep the Alabama game?

BRYAN HARSIN: All those events, you got a chance to be a part of a few of those as well. Anytime you're with Bruce Pearl, it's no fun, all right (laughter)? Those of you that know Bruce.

Bruce is phenomenal. Allen Greene was at a few of those. Dr. Roberts was at a few of those. President Roberts was at a few of those opportunities as well.

We don't get a chance to go out in the spring and recruit. Those are opportunities for us to get around people and talk about our program, where we're going, just share that message.

Every single event, I wouldn't say there was a bad one. Every one of them was fantastic. We had a good time. Bruce and I, Cole Cubelic, Andy Burcham, they got to help with that. We got a chance to answer some questions.

Those are always a good time. I appreciate that. We enjoy doing those things. So that's an important part of just what we do, an important part of building those relationships, connecting with people, sharing that experience as well.

What was your second part?

Q. Scheduling Georgia, Alabama.

BRYAN HARSIN: Yeah, so just as far as those games, I mean, go back. Georgia and Auburn, right? There's history. Alabama-Auburn, there's history. Those teams, I mean, we're going to play each other. There's history in those games.

I know this, I know our players are excited about having an opportunity to play those teams.

One of the things, too, it really fits into our footprint in recruiting. Georgia has great football players in that state. Alabama has great football players. So I think those games, whether it's the Iron Bowl or having the chance to play against Georgia, those are important games for Auburn, certainly ones that you want to play in and you want to be successful in.

Right now those are the games that you get an opportunity to go in there and play well, win those games, it changes your season, it propels you very quickly to be one of the more successful teams.

I'm sure that will continue. Certainly it's something that in the history of these programs has been really, really important to where we are now.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time this morning.

BRYAN HARSIN: All right, thank you.

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