

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Will Muschamp

South Carolina coach



WILL MUSCHAMP: Thank you, Commissioner. It's great to be here. Great to kick off another football season. Excited about what we've got going on. Great to see you guys. Barry Odom said to you guys yesterday you're all in the fourth quarter; I guess we're in overtime today. You all look rough.

This is my third year in a row being on the last day. I'm going to head for the cycle next year to make sure I'm on the last day again.

It's great to be here. The College Football Hall of Fame is an amazing place. About three years ago my wife, Carol, Jackson and Whit, we came in here and spent an afternoon. This is an impressive place. I encourage you, if you have an opportunity, to come and visit this place. It is really impressive.

It's great to be in Atlanta. We have 24 players from the state of Georgia on our roster, and we have 16 from the Atlanta area. We made it a priority when we came to South Carolina to recruit the state of Georgia, and those guys are thriving at our place.

You get on I-20, it's a three-hour ride from Atlanta to Columbia, and amazing those guys come to our place and say what a wonderful place it is. And really Dennis Wonnum is a young man that's with me today from Stevenson High School. So doing really well and continue to focus on the state of Georgia, because there's a bunch of really good players here.

I want to commend Commissioner Sankey and his staff for the job they've done putting this on. It just means more in this profession and this conference. It's been awesome.

This will be my 21st year in the SEC as a player or a coach. I've been a part of five different institutions. I have a unique perspective of this league. I appreciate you as media members promoting the best league in college football. I made friends with a bunch of you. Some of you not so much. It is what it is. It's great to be here.

A lot of exciting things are happening. Columbia, South Carolina, obviously we're excited about the football season, but two things off the field that I'm

really proud of: We are going to finish in December our football operations facility. 110,000 square feet, \$50 million project that we were -- we started with on day one on the job. And it's been a difference-maker for us in our program. People have asked me all of the time: You guys really seem like you're recruiting well. When you invest in the student-athlete, like we are doing now in South Carolina and we've never done before, wholeheartedly with the football program, it makes a difference. Because when a young man and his family come on our campus and they see the investment that we're making and that development center, they see what we're doing.

It's going to be a lot of fun moving forward. I want to personally thank Ken and Cyndi Long for their generous contribution and everyone that has contributed and continues to contribute to our operations facility. They've been two great Gamecocks. Both of them graduated from the University of South Carolina. They've been very generous to our football program, to our entire athletic program and our school. We certainly appreciate those guys and certainly look forward to our friendship moving forward.

It will be named the Long Family Football Operations Center. I want to make sure I got that out.

Academically, we finished this past year first in graduation rate in the Southeast Conference and third in the nation. Really proud of that. We finished spring semester with a 2.87 cumulative GPA on our football team, which was third highest in school history.

I meet with every player after fall. I meet with every player after spring. I started going through, and the first thing we talk about is academics and looking at the different majors our guys are majoring in. We represent 27 different majors on our campus on our football team. That's impressive. I worked at some institutions in this league that had about two. We are doing a lot of good things academically in our program, and the stats speak for themselves.

The three young men with me today, Deebo Samuel two years ago was voted co-MVP with Jake Bentley by his teammates, which is really important to me, the respect you have within the organization by your

teammates. Deebo for 11 quarters last year was probably the most explosive player in college football. We're looking forward to getting him the ball a bunch and having him have a healthy senior season.

Jake Bentley and Dennis Wonnum were the second and third players in school history to be voted by their teammates team captain after their sophomore season. Which, again, means an awful lot to me, the respect they have within our organization, two guys that have been outstanding leaders for us but also outstanding productive football players.

Going into year three, we've made some progress in our program. Excited getting out of spring ball and seeing offensively. We want to be able to dictate the tempo of the game more, play faster. I think Jake plays better when he plays faster, and that's certainly -- you'll see a noticeable change in our offense as far as the tempo is concerned.

We have six offensive linemen that I'm really excited about, about 80 starts between those guys, but we do have a gap from that from the standpoint of I think we've recruited extremely well on the offensive line, but those young guys have not played. We have no experience past those six guys. We got to figure out in training camp who will be seven, eight, nine, and ten.

Really excited about the competition that we at the receiver position, the tight end position, and the running back position. We recruited well and we have quality depth in those areas. Those guys understand every day at practice that they've got to strain and earn their opportunities to play on game day. We've got to get our roster where every position looks like that.

But those three positions, I'm really excited about. The production that we can have, but more than anything, the consistency and performance, because of the competition that we're going to have at those positions. And, again, we've got to continue to have the entire roster that way.

Defensively, I'll probably talk about our defensive line a lot like I talked about our offensive line. I like the first group we're going to put out there. We recruited well. We have some really good young players in our program, they just haven't played yet. We are going to need in training camp to get them game ready to have the opportunity be successful in our league. That's the bottom line.

At linebacker, T.J. Brunson is a guy that really enjoyed seeing his maturing from freshman to sophomore and now going into his junior year. Our vocal leader of our football team on defense, but a guy that really had an outstanding sophomore season. I can't wait to see this

guy play this year.

Happy that Bryson Allen-Williams in his senior year, a very frustrating last year, had the shoulder injury, applied for the medical redshirt and they granted that, and his leadership. He gives us some pass rushability. A guy that can play in space, and excited for his senior year.

In the secondary, I'm concerned obviously at safety position. We only have one guy that's played snaps for South Carolina in our league. Steven Montac passed that. We're going to move Jamyest Williams to safety. J.T. Ibe is a graduate transfer from Rice. He was a three-year starter there, but I think certainly is a guy that's going to be in that competition. We need some more guys to step up.

In the corner position, Rashad Fenton, Keisean Nixon and Nick Harvey, a graduate transfer from Texas A&M. All are guys that have played well in our league. I'm excited about that, but we'll need more than just those three guys.

Our placekicking competition will probably go through camp to find out who our kicker will be. We certainly need to make improvements in that area. Joseph Charlton will be our punter, and I think he's one of the best in the country.

Deebo will be our kickoff returner. We don't plan on fair catching any, and we'll have competition, as far as the punt returner is concerned, in camp.

Our focus right now is to finish summer and have a great training camp. You can have all of the goals you want and all the expectations you want, but none of that matters unless you understand what it takes to achieve those. We're excited about having the opportunity to report on August 2nd and start practice on August 3rd.

I reflect back to the National Championship team at 2004 at LSU and the multiple conference championships that I've been a part of, and they all had great training camps. They came out of the gates fast. That's what we need to do right now, and I open it up for any of your questions.

Q. Coach, South Carolina hasn't beaten A&M since they joined the conference, but it's only four games. But I was wondering, has it or could it get to the point where you focus a little more on A&M than other opponents? And what has been your relationship with Jimbo Fisher since you guys' days at LSU?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I'll start with Jimbo.

He's an outstanding friend and outstanding football coach. He's a great developer at the quarterback position and outstanding play caller. Going against him every day for four years at LSU made me a better football coach. I can assure you of that. He'll do an outstanding job. I think of him as a very good friend.

We don't focus on any opponents more than any other opponents. That's not coach speak, that's real. We spend time in the offseason on every opponent we play. I spend the same amount of time at the office preparing for an opponent no matter who it is. We have great respect for Texas A&M, and we need to do a better job in the rivalry. We had our opportunities last year, and we didn't finish

Q. Just wondering if you think there's enough preseason buzz about that Georgia-South Carolina game right away, SEC opener, and a lot of expectations for both of these programs going into this year. You've been on both sides of that rivalry. It just seems like it's always a war when it's the first game. It's hot. It's September. Can you talk about that game and obviously the Kirby thing and Bryan McClendon, just a little bit about him taking over as offensive coordinator?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Chip, you've given me a bunch of stuff now; you know where I graduated from. Come on.

Let me go back. First of all, I got tremendous respect for Kirby and his staff. They had a complete football team last year. Offensively, defensively and special teams, they were tough in all three areas, they were well coached, and they had good players, and they've continued to recruit at a high level.

It will be hot. I can assure you of that. Again, we need to have a great training camp to focus in on that, to focus on winning every day, to improve. And you either get better or worse, and that's really our focus right now. Certainly we know that game is looming. But the winner or loser of that game is not going to determine the East. There's a lot of football to be played after that game, regardless of the circumstances and the outcome of the game.

THE MODERATOR: McClendon as well?

WILL MUSCHAMP: That's right. I forgot that.

Bryan is a guy that in two years that I've worked for, number one, is extremely bright; number two, has a tireless work ethic; but has the unique ability to be very hard on his players, and his players still love and respect him. And that's hard. Not a lot of coaches are able to have that trait.

And I watched the guy take over a very difficult situation in a bowl game with an intern tag at the time and be organized and detailed, and did a great job game planning, but more than anything, did a fantastic job adjusting at halftime, had command of the staff, command of the team.

And you saw our players in the second half offensively, they believed we are going to win the game. They knew we were going to win the game. I thought his adjustments at halftime were on point. I think hiring Dan Werner with his experience certainly is going to help Bryan in this process, because it is a process to go through, as far as game planning in our league.

I thought he did a fantastic job, and I think he'll continue to.

Q. Two-part question. First, with -- talk about the growth you've seen out of Jake Bentley at the quarterback position. He was thrown into the fire as a guy that should have been a high school senior and the decision to bring in Dan Werner to help his development as a quarterback. And then the second part, Javon Kinlaw, he was a junior college transfer. Sometimes they take a while to get acclimated to the SEC. Talk about the progress that he's made and what are you expecting out of him as a senior.

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, Jake, first of all, again, what he did his first year up was amazing. I never -- we lost to Georgia. We had an open week. Was at my home that night, and I actually called Ray Tanner and I said: I'm thinking about playing this guy. Is that wrong? Put him in a situation.

Because the worst thing you can do is put a young quarterback especially in a situation where he does not succeed, was a hard time to get his stinger back. And he did a fabulous job and really helped turn around our season. At the end of the year, he and Deebo Samuel were voted co-MVP by his teammates. That will tell you the respect he's got in our organization.

I think some things obviously we've talked in terms of fundamentally that he can clean up. We need to take care of the ball better, especially in some big games, and not create those momentum swings for other teams.

I'm glad he's our quarterback. I can tell you that right now. And I think we're doing some things that will take advantage of his skill set that he'll be a very productive player going into his third season as starter at South Carolina.

Javon was a guy that came on campus at about 340 pounds. He totally brought into our nutrition program. He's down to about 300 pounds. I don't know what his body fat percentage is, but it's very low for a defensive lineman.

But played okay for us in the beginning of the season. Played his way in shape. Got his body right as the year went on and was very good defensive tackle in our league in the latter part of the season. And his progress, to me, is continuing to trend that way going into this year.

Q. When you think about your very first year as a college head coach, what were some of the mistakes that you made that you had to learn from to be a better coach in the future?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, until you sat in the seat, you don't know. You have no idea the different things that you deal with on a day-to-day basis, the decisions you make that affects the an entire organization. You know, I think you live and learn every day on the job. Certainly I'm a much better coach today than I was that first year. To sit there and go through the positive things you've done and the negative things you've done, we could be here for a long time.

Again, you learn on the job every single day being in an organization like this.

Q. Steve Spurrier said last week the reason he stepped down at South Carolina is because he had a bad, broken program. When you step into a situation like that, how do you fix it? Also, are you surprised Spurrier got back into coaching?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I'm glad Coach Spurrier is in coaching. He needs to be in coaching, and that's what he does best. Hopefully that league can make it and he'll do an outstanding job, and I appreciate his friendship.

At the end of the day, it's not about what you've inherited; it's about getting better and improving. That's my attitude in everything we try and do every single day. We've improved the situation from where we were, and that's because we have the outstanding support from Coach Tanner and our athletic department, our president, Harris Pastides, and our entire board. They are understanding and investing in what we know to do to be successful in our league.

And you look at the new operations facility, the different things that are going into that. Our indoor facility is as nice as anywhere in the country. That development center will be as nice as anywhere in the country. Our fan base is as passionate as anywhere in the country. What we're doing academically. Our living conditions

for our players are as nice as anywhere in the country.

So we're investing the way you are supposed to invest to win a championship, and that's what we'll do.

Q. Only a two-part question. First of all, rate the competitiveness of the SEC East. Obviously you guys had the SEC champion come out of the East for the first time in a long time last year. And, two, what do you think -- if you could think -- one or two things you think you're better at as a head coach at South Carolina than -- maybe that you learned from your days at Florida?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I would say our -- the competitive edge in the East is very good. You look at some teams, and Mark Stoops has done an outstanding job at Kentucky. Derek Mason went to a bowl a year ago at Vanderbilt. He's got most of his squad back, including Kyle Shurmur.

I go back and look at the quarterbacks that are back in Missouri. You got Drew Lock, you got Jake Bentley at South Carolina, you got Jake Fromm at Georgia. There's a lot of competition. Feleipe Franks and Dan will do a fantastic job at Florida. Top to bottom on our side, there's a lot of competitive teams on our side.

So as far as your second question, I think as much as anything, there's mountains out there to deal with, and then there's molehills. And there's times that I probably tried to deal with everything instead of understanding that there's certain things you can't control and you need to move on, but control the things you can control and do a really good job of things you can control in your organization.

The things you can't control, just keep moving on.

Q. Defensively, just looking back at the numbers from last year, I know, obviously, you being a defensive guy want that to be better. What is the next step you guys got to do as a defense?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I think number one we need to be more effective with four guys rushing the passer. We improved tremendously at the point of attack in the run game. We have to continue to do that. When we had two linebackers last year and T.J. Brunson and Skai Moore that erased a lot of things in the run game. That may have been a misfit because of their instincts as linebacker. So that is something that obviously losing Skai, we have to have Eldridge Thompson, Sherrod Greene, we need those guys to step up for us.

We'll be better than we've been. I think that's the key to it. We didn't allow a lot of explosive plays in the secondary. We have to continue to do that, and we have to be very opportunistic defensively. We got to

continue to do those things and take care of the ball offensively and create opportunities for our team defensively. To me, the biggest thing is we got to be more effective rushing the pass with four guys.

Q. Coach, what do you remember about the game against Missouri last season, and how do you prepare for that team, especially the offense this season?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, I think they may be a little bit differently offensively. As far as schematically of what they do, I'm sure that they're going to still play

Drew Lock's strengths, and that's throwing the football down the field. He's a very effective deep ball thrower.

That game was a game that we didn't start out extremely well. We moved the ball down the field. I think we missed a field goal. Deebo Samuel's kickoff return is what swung the momentum of the game. That was a huge momentum swing in the game and got our guys a little more confident in what they were doing. We were able to run the ball late in the ball game and keep Missouri out of the end zone. Not many people did that, but that day we gave up some yards, but we didn't give up points.

Q. You know, there's four former Nick Saban assistants who are now head coach in the league. You're playing the other three guys. There's obviously been a lot of hires from his staff in the league.

What do you think about his influence? And the more you guys that are in the league, do you think that helps kind of a chance to knock him off because he's 12-0 against assistants, but maybe the more you guys get in the league and understand his program, maybe the odds increase you might be able to beat him one day?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, I think obviously, you are what your record is. Nick is the best coach in college football because of the accomplishments he's had. He's done an outstanding job running his program from a scheme standpoint, from a recruiting standpoint, from a development standpoint. You name it, he does an outstanding job.

Athletic Directors are always looking for the next mold of what that could be. And I think that's what's provided myself and other guys opportunities. Not to say that we haven't done a good job and a job in the role that we had with Nick, but that gives you opportunities to get, you know, a chance to be a head coach. But at the end of the day, I guess if you do have more odds, you got a chance somebody's going to eventually beat him. Hopefully we'll continue to get

that to happen.

Q. Coach, I have a one-part question for you.

WILL MUSCHAMP: Thank you.

Q. You're welcome.

WILL MUSCHAMP: Chip Towers gives me a four-part question.

Q. Larry Fedora's comments about football being under attack and about potentially our country going down if football is under attack. I was wondering if you have any thoughts on that?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I don't think our game's under attack. I don't know a whole lot about Larry's comments. As far as CTE and concussion, all of those things that we're talking about, I feel very comfortable with the policies and procedures we have in place at University of South Carolina. We have a neurologist on the field. We have a neurologist in box game day. We have a neurologist at practice.

Our training staff works with Micky Crum, who is a specialist in Pittsburgh that really changed our whole procedures when I was at Florida of our concussion protocol. I think the more research we're able to do, the better off we're going to be. The number one point of all of this is health and safety of our student-athletes. That's number one. And I feel very comfortable about our policies and what we have in place at the University of South Carolina.

Q. How did recruiting J.T. and Nick come about and what are some of the details that you can share how you guys got them in?

WILL MUSCHAMP: A former coach at Rice reached out to me about J.T. and said he had interest in playing for us, and that's really how all that sparked and the high school coach that had coached Nick, at I believe Lancaster in Texas reached out to Travaris Robinson our secondary coach and our defensive coordinator about the opportunity to come to South Carolina.

Q. Coach, what did that victory over Michigan in the Outback Bowl, obviously Michigan, I think they are the winningest program in college football history. What is the victory like that in a bowl game, what sort of affect did it have on your program, the confidence of the players may be recruiting?

WILL MUSCHAMP: There's no question to end the season with a victory always helps creates momentum in the offseason going into Spring Ball. Against a program like Michigan, it certainly creates momentum in itself. And I think the way the game happened, we're down 19-3. To come back in the second half to play extremely well offensively in the second half against a

very good Michigan defense, to make some stops on defense, the way the game came about and the way we were able to finish the game certainly gives you confidence. It helps in recruiting. When you're on a national stage at a place like the Outback Bowl on national TV January 1, that always helps your program.

Q. I know your relationship with Derek Dooley. I'm curious what your thoughts were when you found out he was coming back to the league and what he maybe learned from between now and his last time when he was in the SEC?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, we've talked a couple times. It was great to have him back in the league. I know he's excited about the opportunity to be offensive coordinator. He's got a great quarterback and a lot of really skilled guys and I think four or five offensive linemen back from last year. Again I can't speak for what he's learned, but certainly great to have him back in the league.

Q. There's so many former Saban assistants now in the SEC, how do you think that's going to affect play this year?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, I think they're all quality coaches. I think a lot of Jimbo Fisher and Jeremy Pruitt and Kirby Smart, I think all of these guys -- when you work for Coach Saban, it's a total education in the game of football, recruiting, all of the things that you got to do to be successful.

And certainly, each one of those guys will have their own spin on how they want to do things. Jimbo won a national championship at Florida State. It speaks for itself. Kirby had an outstanding year last year. So again I think they're all quality coaches and friends.

Q. You've never lost at Tennessee as a head coach. Just curious how he see the state of Tennessee right now as a program and where do you think it will head with Jeremy Pruitt?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I think Jeremy will do an outstanding job. He's got a really good staff in place. Again, they'll do a good job recruiting. It all comes back to players. I know one thing, they're hard on the recruiting trail. They're doing an outstanding job. I know what quality coach he is and the guys he brought in on his staff. So they'll do a good job.

Q. Coach Muschamp, why do you think you always go last?

WILL MUSCHAMP: I don't know. I wasn't scheduled to a year ago, but Kirby wanted more vacation, maybe work on his basketball game because he never beet me at Valdosta State. So I switched with him, just trying to be a good teammate.

Q. Coach, you said one of the things you learned at Florida was not to worry about things you can't control. Things like what?

WILL MUSCHAMP: Well, I think as much as anything, whether it is dealing with a player issue, you know, staff issue, play to your strengths. At the end of the day, I'm a good defensive football coach. I'm a good special teams coach, and I can recruit. I think those are things you got to stay in your lane as far as those things are concerned and move forward and that's what we've done.

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

WILL MUSCHAMP: Thank you very much.