

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday July 19, 2018

Gus Malzahn

Auburn

GUS MALZAHN: All right. First of all, very honored to be here at SEC Media Days again, to be back here at the Chick-fil-A College Football Hall of Fame, a great venue to put this event on.

Just a quick recap of last season, you know, I thought we were very close. We won the SEC West, which I believe is the toughest division in college football. One game away from the College Football Playoff, which you know is everybody's goal.

We have a lot of our players back that experienced that. We got the majority of our coaches, all but one, back, so I really feel like we're going to have a hungry team trying to take that next step.

Brought three of our team leaders here with us. First of all, our quarterback, Jarrett Stidham, was the SEC Newcomer of the Year. Just felt like he did a great job leading our offense and leading our team. Threw for 3,000 yards. He is recently graduated, and he has recently got engaged. So he's got a lot going on, ready for this season.

Linebacker Deshaun Davis, our leading tackler for last year, two-year starter. Really probably our defensive leader. He's like a coach on the field. He's a guy that plays with a chip on his shoulder, such intensity. He also recently graduated.

Lastly, our defensive tackle, Dontavius Russell, a three-year starter, about to be a four-year starter, which is very rare in our league, very rare at Auburn. I really feel like he's one of the more underrated players in the league and doesn't get enough credit for what he does. He's a very unselfish player, he's very consistent, and he is fixing to graduate next month.

So very proud to bring these three guys to represent Auburn.

Defensively, I really feel like our strength, once again, will be our front seven, like it was last year. And I think big picture-wise we have a chance to be as good defensively or possibly even better. Offensively, the big thing that stands out to me is our quarterback's back, and this is only the second time since I've been at Auburn in nine years that our quarterback's back, so I



think that's a very positive.

Really I think the key to our offense is going to be our offensive line and how quick they can come together. We've got three guys that have started and I think a total of 20 games. So we're very inexperienced. But I will stay this: We're talented. It's just going to be a matter of time and hopefully sooner rather than later that that group jells, and that will be a big key for us offensively and as far as team-wise.

Looking at our schedule, once again, I feel like we have the toughest schedule in all of college football, just like we did last year. We open up the season against Washington, a top 10 team, a lot of people are picking to make the College Football Playoff, in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff Classic. I really appreciate Gary Stokan and his staff, everything they do to make that such a premier event. I think three years ago we played in it. Looking forward to coming back here to Atlanta and playing a very good Washington team.

Then we get into the SEC West, which is the toughest division. It's a man's league. You got to be ready each week as far as that goes. And just like that year, we'll end the season against Georgia and Alabama. This year both of them will be on the road.

You know, overall, I really like our team. I like our leaders. There's nothing like experience in our league. And we experienced some highs, some lows, and, like I said, we were close. And I just really sense urgency and a hunger from that group.

And then staff. I feel very good about our staff. The stability of our staff is one of the best in our league, if not the best. We have all of our coaches back but one, and we replaced him with J.B. Grimes, a guy that's been with us before and been very successful.

So really our staff continuity, our staff chemistry is very strong. And to have both of our coordinators back with the majority of our players coming back is a very good feeling going into this year. Questions?

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. If you have a question, please raise your hand. Again, we'll ask that you stand and give your name and affiliation. We'll go ahead and start in the middle.

Q. You mentioned Jarrett Stidham, but the backup quarterback on your roster, how big of a competition is that going to be for to fall?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. Malik Willis and Joey Gatewood, both of those guys got all the reps in the spring when Jarrett was recovering with his left shoulder. Coach Lindsey got a lot of great information. And there's nothing like getting with the ones. Both those guys got a chance to be with the ones offensively in the spring. Malik got a chance to play last year. I feel very good about Malik and what he can do. I mean, he was one play away from playing in some big games last year. Just the preparation that it takes mentally, you know, is something that he can carry over this year.

Q. Can you talk about Dontavious. You said he's underrated. In what ways is he underrated, and is he a guy we might see playing in the NFL next year?

GUS MALZAHN: I think there's a very high likelihood that Dontavious Russell will be in the NFL. I think it's really hard to think of a guy in this league that has started for four years. He's got a chance to do that this year. He's a guy that's been very consistent. Very unselfish. He'll take on double teams to open somebody else up. He's very good against the run. He's very good pass rushing when he gets on one-on-one situations. And he's -- what I call him is Mr. Consistency. And we're proud to have him.

He would have had a chance -- if he wanted to come out early, I think he would have had a chance to do that. He chose to come back and get his degree and help lead this team and help us take that next step.

Q. Earlier this week, Chad Morris talked about your friendship, how it goes back to your high school coaching days. What do you remember about the start of that friendship and how it's evolved to now where you're still -- both of you are now in the same division?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, I'm very proud of Chad, you know, coming from a high school coach and being a head coach in this league. Chad is one of the smarter coaches I've ever been around. He's one of the hardest workers that I've ever been around. I consider him a true friend.

It goes way back. I think I was coaching a state championship game. I think he called me and asked if he could bring him and the staff. I didn't know him at all. After that we got together I think for the next two years and just talked offensive football.

He did a super job at Tulsa. Obviously when he was at

Clemson he really got that thing going. When he got to Clemson, there was a little bit of instability. I think he was the guy that put them over the top to get them where they're at right now.

Then you're talking about a guy that goes to SMU and he took over a very, very tough situation, and to get those guys to a bowl last year was big. Now he's in our league. He'll be very successful. He's a great coach, but he's an even better person.

Q. There was a time when Auburn and Tennessee played on an annual basis. I guess how aware are you of the history of that rivalry going back, and how aware do you think your players are that it used to be an annual game between the two?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, you know, I've been here at Auburn nine years, and I think we played them twice, and both times we played them there, once when I was a coordinator and I think the first year I was head coach. This will be the first time I've been at Auburn we played them at home.

So solid team and with a new coach, and they've got a lot of energy right now.

Q. Coach, can you talk about the new NCAA redshirt rule and how do you plan to utilize it?

GUS MALZAHN: First of all, I think it's a positive rule. I think all coaches would say that. I think it's better for players, and we can help with depth. You know, it can help with some injured guys possibly. We have a couple guys that got hurt in this spring. That could possibly help with that towards the end of the year.

So I just like the flexibility that goes with that, and I think it's a positive move.

Q. You mentioned Jarrett, who was obviously a bit of an unknown here last year. So where do you see him taking the biggest leap in your offense in that second year as you mentioned as a starter?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. Last year, obviously, I think he came to Auburn, he started four games at Baylor, and he was very successful. He's very talented. You know, we -- the way he was playing, middle part of the year, end of the year was really phenomenal.

I said this before, but from a quarterback standpoint, in this league, experience, there's nothing like it. Because the defenses are different than other leagues, and I just really like the way he handled himself.

He's a very tough young man, mentally and physically. And I think our offense is in very good hands going into this second year.

Q. Coach, looking back, you say you were very close last year, you felt that way. What were you able to take from how the season ended, including the bowl loss, to maybe help as you guys go into this upcoming season?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. The bowl loss was obviously -- we didn't get it done. We laid an egg that day. That's not taking anything away from our opponent, excellent team, but we weren't happy with the way that season ended.

That's something that our team has really used to motivate them over the summer. I know our coaches feel the same way as far as that goes.

When I say we were close, I look at the big picture. As far as our goal, being the in SEC Championship last year, which it is again this year, and we did some very good things to get ourself to that point. Winning the West is -- it's a man's league, and if you win the West, you really do something.

But there's such a fine line in this conference of winning the conference championship and coming close. And we came close last year. And we've got to figure out a way to take that next step. And that's easier said than done.

But the good thing is, like I said, we do have a lot of the players that experienced how close we were, and we have our staff back that experienced that.

So, when I say that we're hungry, it's really because of that. And being close to winning the SEC Championship, being close to being in the final four, and we got to figure out a way to take that next step.

Q. I have a multi-part question. When you first met Chad, were you at Shiloh or Springdale?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah.

Q. J.B. Grimes, it's his second time back with you. What made you decide to bring him back? What does he bring to the table for the O-line? And the trip to Israel, was that your idea? Your wife's idea? How come you decided to do that? What was that trip like? What all did you do?

GUS MALZAHN: Okay. First of all, when I met Chad, I was at Springdale. I believe. I tell you what, that may have been the last game at Shiloh, okay, and then he came the next year to Springdale, to our complex, brought his staff. That's when we developed our relationship.

J.B. Grimes, a super teacher, probably the best teacher of offensive line coaches that I've been around. Very successful when he was here before, the last time, we

won the SEC Championship, we led the country in rushing, and he was our offensive line coach.

He left to go coach with his son. Got an opportunity to do that at Cincinnati. And so when we had our offensive line coaching job come open, it took me about 30 minutes to make that call, because he's the guy that we wanted. And he's such a great teacher.

And then you look at our offensive line, we're very inexperienced, but we are talented. And he's the perfect guy to coach that group as far as that goes.

And I didn't hear the third part of your question.

Q. Whose idea was it to go to Israel? Was that you or Kristi? Why did you go, and what all did you do? What was your takeaway from that?

GUS MALZAHN: Kristi's been wanting to go to Israel probably for about the last five years. And it was our 30th wedding anniversary. And then it just so happened this year most of the month of July is a dead period, and so went ahead and made plans. We went with our old pastor, Ronnie Floyd, at Cross Church in northwest Arkansas.

It was an unbelievable experience. Gone nine days, which was a little bit out of my comfort zone, gone that long. But it was well worth it. I would encourage everybody, if they haven't been, to go.

Q. You talked about Jarrett a little bit, and he talked this offseason about having a little more freedom at the line of scrimmage, calls and checks. How much will that play into what you guys do, considering the experience he got from last year?

GUS MALZAHN: You know, he's back for a second year, and he understands our offense very good. He understands Coach Lindsey's expectation. He's like a coach on the field. And towards the end of the year, they were thinking the same, talking the same.

So going into this year, he's going to have freedom to get us in the right play, to check us out of a bad play. We have a lot of confidence in him, and really looking forward to him leading our offense.

Q. Two-part question. First, you guys have been known to -- you developed thousand-yard rushers each year in Auburn, and you've run the football really well. But the last two years Kam Pettway and Kerryon Johnson both got banged up. Could we see more of a committee approach with a lot of the young talent at running back? And then second question, from our community, from Madison Academy, Kerryon Johnson had a lot of success, but talk about right tackle Austin Troxell and the

spring he had and his development thus far?

GUS MALZAHN: Right now I'd say this: Running back-wise, if we played today, Kam Martin would be the first guy out there. But we do have four or five other guys that we feel very good about that's competing for time. Like you said, we've had nine straight 1,000-yard rushers at Auburn. That's all-time SEC record. And I really feel strongly that that streak will continue.

If you look back at our success, we usually try to have two guys as far as that. Unfortunately, you know, after the regular season, both our guys were a little banged up. There's nothing like depth. We're working hard to get that done.

As far as Austin Troxell, we're very excited about him. He may have been one of the MVPs of our spring from offensive standpoint. He's got a chance to be a really good player. I know Coach Grimes and Coach Lindsey are extremely excited about him.

Q. Gus, can you talk about the second half of the Ole Miss game last year? Matt Luke, some of the players have called that kind of a spring board for them. What did you see different in their play then?

GUS MALZAHN: You know, of course. Wesley McGriff, their defensive coordinator, I consider a close friend. They played extremely hard, what I remembered. Matt Luke, he's a winner.

They're a talented team now. I mean, they've got a lot of talent specifically on the offensive side of the football.

As far as the second half, I don't remember specifics, but from a coach's standpoint, you always know that the other team is fighting their guts out, and I felt like they were.

Q. Coach, opening this season in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff and recent announcement you're coming back in 2020, what appeals to you about playing in that event, and can you kind of talk about the pros and cons of opening the season with a game like that?

GUS MALZAHN: I think it's very positive from our standpoint. We're just right down the road from Atlanta.

A lot of our alumni are here in Atlanta. Any time you get a chance to play in the same venue your conference championship game is played on, I think that's a very positive thing.

As far as Washington is concerned, you're talking about a top 10 opponent, one of the best quarterbacks

in college football, one of the best running backs. Coach Petersen is -- his name speaks for itself. He's one of the best coaches there is.

It will be a good challenge for us. Like I said, and I tell our staff, this is a good measuring stick for where this team is the first game and get a chance to come back here. And like I said, Gary Stokan and his staff, they're second to none. Has turned into the premier kickoff classic game. We had the opportunity, I guess, three or four years ago to play Louisville here, and like you said, we're going to be back here in a couple years playing North Carolina.

So it's a big thing for the Auburn Tigers to be here in Atlanta playing in it.

Q. Gus, I don't know if you think about this, but you're the only coach left in the league who has beat Nick Saban, I mean, Alabama. I guess what do you think about that? And obviously there's been a lot of coaching turnover, six guys at new spots this year. What do you think about you being the only coach to beat Nick Saban at Alabama, the coaching turnover? And also how is Will Hastings doing in his rehab, and is he still, I guess, taking the redshirt this year?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, I don't get caught up in other coaches and all that. All I know is you're at Auburn and you play Alabama. That's the Iron Bowl. That's the best rivalry in college football. And to win the West, you got to beat them. Every year our goal is to win the SEC Championship, and the West is part of it.

And we know what we're getting into. They know what they're getting into. And that's just part of the job description at Auburn.

And what was your question about injury?

THE MODERATOR: Will Hastings.

Q. How is he doing, is he still --

GUS MALZAHN: Who's that?

Q. Will Hastings.

GUS MALZAHN: Will Hastings, our receiver, tore his ACL in the spring. He's off to a very good start. His rehab is going excellent. We're hoping we get him back by the middle of the season. Last year he had a great season. He's one of our go-to guys. He's an impact player.

Eli Stove is another one that was a tough blow. We lost him with an ACL. Those two tough blows that we need other receivers to step up in their absence until we get them back.

Q. Coach, obviously, you played Georgia and Alabama last year. How similar are those teams defensively from, I guess, a schematic talent standpoint from what you saw? And can you encapsulate the difference between the two games last year with Georgia, the regular season and SEC Championship game?

GUS MALZAHN: Schematically, obviously with Nick and Kirby being together so long, it's going to be very similar. You know, there's little tweaks that they'll do different, but they're very similar. Both of them had very good players. I tell you that. They're both extremely talented. I'm not going to set here and say who is more talented than the other, but you would put both those teams' talent level towards the top if not at the top of our league as far as that goes.

And then the regular season, we played extremely well at home. You know, then the next, I guess, two weeks later we had to play Alabama, another No. 1 team at home, and then a week later we had to turn around and play Georgia again.

So I believe we played champions and defending champions three out of four weeks. That's a tough challenge, there's no doubt. But that's part of it. That's kind of what we talked about as our staff, talked about as our players; that that's a schedule we have and that's who you have to beat to win this league. And so hopefully we'll be better prepared to take that next step.

Q. You guys were undefeated at home last year and may have one of the better home field advantages in the league. What do you see as the difference when you go on the road and why are you so much better at home?

GUS MALZAHN: I would say probably most teams are better at home. We do have one of the better home field advantages in our league, and, you know, that's a big thing. And when you go on the road against the top teams in this league, that's very challenging. Matter of fact, when you go on the road against anybody in this league, it's challenging. Obviously the more talented the team, the tougher it is.

There's some great venues in this league. Some of the toughest places to play in all of college football. And our home field advantage is real.

Q. Compare this year's front four on defense to the other ones you had as head coach and thinking back to the 2010 team when you were the offensive coordinator, does this one remind you of that one any?

GUS MALZAHN: I think so. We had Nick Fairley that year. He was a dominant defensive player that entire

year and really lead that group.

Just from a talent standpoint, front seven, I've been at Auburn for I guess nine years, and this is a group that's at least as talented or more talented than we've had. That's the strength of our team.

But like we said, we got to continue to get better. We got to continue to prove. We hadn't arrived. Our front seven hadn't arrived. They know that. But we do have a very talented group up front.

Q. Gus, Jarrett Stidham had quite a whirlwind offseason, as you alluded to. He has gone to the Elite 11 camp, the Manning Passing Academy, getting engaged, he's going to California here in the next day or so. You have not previously had quarterbacks this active in the offseason. How do you think he's handled it, and how do you feel about your quarterback having such an active offseason?

GUS MALZAHN: Like I said earlier, this is only the second quarterback I've had since I've been at Auburn that came back. He's definitely earned all of those accolades and the ability to go to the Manning camps and Elite 11s, it's a great experience for him.

He's a mature young man, you know, and, like I said, he's got experience. So we feel very good about his focus coming in. I know he's chomping at the bit for August 3rd to get here and to get out there and lead the offense and lead the team and see where it goes.

Q. Gus, you guys -- the second half of your schedule, you play three teams that are former Saban assistants, and you play Saban. As a coach in the league, how has that, the proliferation of assistants at other schools, affected the league, and how are you going to prepare for that second half of the season?

GUS MALZAHN: Was your question that the other teams have a tough schedule as we do at the end? Is that what you're saying?

THE MODERATOR: Saying the effect of Nick Saban's assistants coaching other teams and the effect of the toughness facing that at the end of the season.

GUS MALZAHN: Say that again.

THE MODERATOR: The teams you play the at end of the season --

Q. You have Tennessee, Texas A&M, Georgia, those are all former assistants of Nick Saban --

GUS MALZAHN: Okay, the former assistants.

Q. How has that affected the league, the proliferation of those assistant coaches, and how are you going prepare for I guess the Nick Saban gauntlet in the second half of the season?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. I mean, they're all good coaches. All of those guys have been with him when they've won. You know, but when they get on their own, when everybody gets on their own, it's their own team. Everybody is different. There may be similarities scheme-wise, but each coach is going to have their own personality and everything that goes with it. So I really don't read too much into that, honestly.

Q. Since you were kind of at the center of it, do you have an opinion on Central Florida's claim as a national champion over Alabama?

GUS MALZAHN: I really don't have an opinion on that, other than the fact that they got after us, they played extremely well that day, and I thought they were very talented team. Got quite a few guys drafted. Their coach at the time is an excellent coach and did a super job. I don't get into that debate as far as that goes.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach, for your time.