

Big 12 Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 13, 2023

Arlington, Texas, USA

UCF Knights

Gus Malzahn

Press Conference

GUS MALZAHN: First of all, we're extremely excited to be here. This is a huge moment for our program, to be a part of the Big 12. A lot of excitement.

Brought five of our leaders with me today, first of all our quarterback John Rhys Plumlee, a guy that I actually recruited out of high school, went in the portal two years ago; transferred from Ole Miss; did a very solid job for us. He is in a great spot to take that next step really as our team leader.

Wide receiver Javon Baker, a guy that I also recruited out of high school that transferred from Alabama. He led us in receiving yards last year. I think he's set up to really have a big year.

Offensive lineman Lokahi Pauole is one of our leaders up front. He started I think three straight years and this will be his fourth year. Just a phenomenal, tough leader for us.

Defensive tackle Ricky Barber is a guy that transferred from Western Kentucky two years ago. He's had two phenomenal seasons. Really feel like he's got a chance to be one of the premier defensive tackles in the entire country.

Then defensive end, Josh Celiscar that has also started -- this will be his fourth year to start. He was one of our team captains last year and really does a super job as far as the leadership is concerned.

As far as our roster we've returned six on both sides of the football. We have our kicker and our punter back, and both of those guys were phenomenal last year. We brought in 18 transfers, and most of these guys weren't just starters on their previous teams, but quite a few of them were impact players.

So that quality depth that you really need when you go take the next step to another conference, really feel good about that, specifically on the O-line and D-line, which you can't



have enough quality depth as far as that's concerned.

As far as our staff, most of the guys on our staff have been with me for a long time. Most of our staff has been with me when we won championships and played at a high level in another conference in the Power Five.

But overall we've just blessed to be here. We're really excited about coming to this conference and playing a very challenging schedule.

Q. We've heard a lot about the excitement. I'm curious what your level of excitement is just personally as you get ready to make this move, and you've obviously coached at the Power Five level before; what do you anticipate being sort of the biggest challenges as the program moves to the Big 12?

GUS MALZAHN: For me personally, I'm very excited. This is a great conference, one of the best football conferences in college football, and probably the deepest from top to bottom. So I'm very excited about that.

As far as challenging, the great thing, we've had over a year, almost a year and a half to get prepared for this moment, and talking about having quality depth when you move up conferences and leagues, and specifically on the O-line and D-line.

We've worked extremely hard, and I really feel like today going into fall camp that we do have quality depth on both lines of scrimmage, and that was really by design, and we really feel good about that.

Just the overall excitement of the challenge of playing these great teams in this league is what's exciting for us.

Q. Gus, you've added Darin Hinshaw to be your new offensive coordinator. What does he bring to the program, and how has he kind of been able to ingratiate himself to the offense you want to run?

GUS MALZAHN: I brought in Darin to really open up our offense, push the ball vertically down the field. We were a top 20 offense overall in college football, but our yards per



completion were really high, like 88th in the country, something like that.

And then to develop our quarterback, specifically John Rhys Plumlee, and he has done an unbelievable job. John Rhys is like night and day to where he was at this time last year.

And then he's one of the all time greats in UCF history. I think that's important. He was with me the first year when I got this job off the field, so I know him well. He's a great person and he was really the right fit for us.

Q. The Big 12 is what UCF has wanted for a long time from a competition standpoint, but how do you view the move from a geographic standpoint where you'll have to travel double the mileage in conference play this year and there's not really a natural geographic rival within 12 miles' driving distance?

GUS MALZAHN: Well, I think the biggest challenge we have is what you just said. We have five conference road games. The new kid on the block, we expected that. A lot of travel.

As far as the prep before the game, it's not going to be that big of a deal. The big challenge will be if you play a night game and you get back and the sun is coming up, getting prepared for the next week. But that's something we'll adjust to.

Like I said, it's like anything else, you adjust to it, and of course next year we'll have five home games, so that'll be a game changer for us, too.

Q. When you look at the past couple winners that have been here in Arlington, Baylor was the preseason at No. 8 in 2021; in 2022 TCU was seventh to finish No. 1. Do you think it's not only the deepest conference but also potentially the most open conference for a chance to come in right away and make an immediate impact?

GUS MALZAHN: Well, I think it is the deepest, I will say that. Those two examples you just used is a great example of that. As a matter of fact, our first conference game is on the road at Kansas State, and that's no treat. Our first home conference game is Baylor. The last two champions, so that's a huge challenge.

But like I said, it's a deep conference. There's no -- when you look at your schedule, there's no off weeks. You've got to bring your A game every week. That's really what stands out to me coming in as a new kid on the block.

Q. About a 31 percent blitz rate with a lot of success

last year but Travis Williams moves on to Arkansas; Addison gets promoted up. Are we going to see the same amount of blitz? Cover three quarters? Are we going to have some different wrinkles in the defense?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, Addison Williams, he'll bring some wrinkles. Addison was with me at my previous job when we played really good football. He is kind of one of those young, innovative guys. Our focus has been putting pressure on the quarterback, and of course this league is one of the best offensive leagues, if not the best offensive league. You will see some changes. You will see some unique pressures.

But the bottom line, to have a chance to be a great defense, you've got to be able to put pressure on the quarterback rushing four, and we really feel like our roster, we've done a good job bringing in some and then developing, and then recruiting. We've got a freshman class coming in that has three defensive linemen that I think are going to be as good as any in the country in the future.

Q. Gus, as you've scouted the teams in the Big 12, have you noticed certain characteristics about style of play in this conference and what generally it takes to be successful?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. I mean, great offense is what stands out to me first. You've got to play good defense or they'll run you out of town.

Then the second thing that stands out to me is there is big time coaching. There's some great coaches, not just head coaches, there's some great coordinators in this league, too.

It's a really, really challenging league.

Q. You got a question earlier about maybe longer geographically to travel from Florida but it's also an advantage having Florida as the flagship school in the conference. How do you use being the only Florida State as an advantage at UCF?

GUS MALZAHN: It's a huge advantage. Now that we're in the Power Five recruiting, we recruit against the three larger schools in the state and it's been a game changer as far as that. I really think the fan bases are going to really enjoy Orlando. There's not a better place in the country to live, vacation.

There's no NFL team. The best brands in the world are there. We've got a great environment as far as our bounce house and everything that goes with it.



I really feel like it'll be a great spot for opposing fans to come.

Q. You were in the SEC for a long time. I was curious, to piggy-back on the style question, what are similarities or contrasts between life in the Big 12 as you predicted and your times in the SEC?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, well, to start with, the last two years I've Zoomed my Media Day, so I feel more comfortable right here today.

You know, it's just the excitement of playing some of the best teams in college football week in and week out and that grind that goes with it. That's what excites me. Just the profile of our program taking that next step.

There's a lot of excitement, and like I said earlier, I think the best thing for us is like we're not in a rush. We had time to prepare for this moment and building our roster and our staff and everything that goes with that. Terry Mohajir is as good an athletic director as there is in the country, and me and him have worked together strategically to get this moment, so we're really excited about it.

Q. You mentioned that you're going to be traveling for a few of those conference games. Talk about what Joey McGuire has done at Lubbock, Texas, and how tough that game is going to be?

GUS MALZAHN: Well, Joe is one of my favorites. He's a former high school coach just like me. I used to recruit his high school. We know each other well.

He's a big-time coach and he has that program really going in the right direction. That's a tough place to play. It's about a four-hour plane trip and all that. It's going to be late in the year, I believe, that we play them.

That'll be a challenge, but we're looking forward to it.

Q. Just curious your thoughts about being in the same conference as your former player Dillon Gabriel and what you saw from him last year?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, well, first of all, Dillon is a phenomenal player. That's what stands out. The year I had him I wish he hadn't got hurt. I think it would've turned out a little different.

But every day in practice he would do something and you'd go, wow. He's a phenomenal player. We're playing against them and we're going to have to play really, really well on defense, anytime you're going against a great

quarterback.

Q. For the first time in Big 12 history, the state of Florida, known as the speed state, is going to be in the Big 12. How do you plan on taking advantage with that?

GUS MALZAHN: Well, I mean, we are fortunate to be in Florida. There's no doubt. Great place to recruit. I would say our overall team speed is definitely good.

I think that is a big part of coaching a program in Florida, and we've got to use that to our advantage. I will say this: You turn on the film of these players in this conference, they got real speed, too.

Like I said, you're talking about some of the best teams in college football as far as week in and week out.

Q. You were known from your time at Arkansas and at Auburn for your hurry-up no-huddle offense. With the rule changes concerning first downs and the clock running, the last time they made a change like this was 2006, and all of a sudden running teams dominated, defensive stats went down because there were longer possessions. Are you going to or do you see yourself changing your approach as far as time of possession, playing with tempo, because of the rule changes?

GUS MALZAHN: No. We're going to continue to put the hammer down. My first year in college football was 2006 when I was at Arkansas when they implemented that rule. You're exactly right, that's what happened.

But I think this change is not going to be that drastic. It may limit a few plays a game, but I really don't think as of right now it's going to be that drastic, and we're planning on putting the hammer down and playing as fast as we can.

Q. You talked about how deep this conference is and how good from top to bottom it is. What do you think UCF brings to the table in adding to how deep that conference is?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, I really feel like we're a program that's on the rise. When I took this job, I really thought it was a gold mine, the potential.

I really felt strongly we would be in the Power Five in a short period of time. I didn't know it was going to be in the Big 12, but just the potential, like I said earlier, in Orlando, the best brands in the world, no NFL team. We have a young fan base. I think the average alumni or graduate is 37, something like that.

So the sky's the limit potential.

We've got a very young, energetic fan base, too, social media oriented, which I think is huge for the future as far as NIL is concerned.

I think it's a program on the rise, and like I said, we're blessed to be a part of this conference.

Q. With college players now being paid and compensated, does that make them professionals, and should they be treated as such, or are they still kids?

GUS MALZAHN: You know, we're just operating from the same standpoint other than they're getting NIL money. We're trying to keep the same philosophy with our players, relationship, pushing them, building that team-oriented locker room.

But I will say this: We're in probably the most unique time in the history of college football. In the last two years, college football has changed probably more than it has the last 50 years. I really believe that coaches that adapt to the new age of college football is going to have an advantage, and that's what we've been trying to do. I'm 57 years old and I'm old school, but I've got to adapt.

I'm real excited about coaching at this time.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.