

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Tennessee Volunteers

Alontae Taylor

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Tennessee defensive back Alontae Taylor. He's a senior. We'll ask him to make a comment about the season and we'll take your questions.

Alontae, as you head towards the 2021 season, talk about your excitement for getting started.

ALONTAE TAYLOR: I'm super excited just to be able to have 102,000 people scream our names again, being able to run through the T and do the Vol walk is exciting. The biggest thing is being with this team and having my family come to the games as I go into my senior year.

Super excited, but at the end of the day, we have a lot of work to do, and that starts in training camp.

Q. You tweeted yesterday that it was a dream for you to come here. How is it going so far? A lot of new defensive players since spring practice entered through the transfer portal. How are they gelling with the defensive staff and the players right now?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: It's going awesome. I can't really explain it. I smile so big when I get that question because it was a childhood dream for me, but right before I came, it was the very last goal that I wrote down on my checkoff list. So being able to do this and represent my university and this football program is a blessing.

Then as far as the defensive guys, we have a lot of changes, a lot of guys coming in. We've been working really hard and just being able to work with them and get them into the playbook and be able to break it down for the younger guys but also the guys transferring in, just kind of talk ball with them is fun.

Q. I wanted to ask you about one of your mentors. The old saying is it takes a village to help someone reach your level. I have a really good friend who played a part in your journey, Ken Keller. I wanted to

ask you about him. Are you still close to him? And what kind of advice and role did he play in getting you to Tennessee and now becoming a great player in this league?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: Yeah, Coach Ken was a guy who believed in me at a young age for the Little League tryouts in baseball. So he picked me up, and he kind of told me the whole story with that. Then I didn't know that he was an Alabama fan, and back then I wanted to play baseball. I never really cared about playing football, even though I did play it.

So he was like, what kind of fan are you? What's your favorite college football team? I told him Alabama, I guess, because I didn't really know. He kind of talked to me a little with that and helped me with my recruitment. He never persuaded me to try to go to 'Bama or not.

Throughout that, he came to games. Last year he came to maybe six games with my family, and this year he'll be coming to more games with my family.

So a guy who talked to me a lot about keeping my faith in God and making sure I stay on the path that He's made for me and trusting in me and a guy that loves me to death and I love him and his family.

Q. What was your initial impression when you first met Josh Heupel?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: Coach Heupel actually couldn't come to the facility the day that he was hired. So we had like a little -- he made a video for us to like look at as a team. We had an 8:00 a.m. meeting, I believe it was. That was pretty fun.

The biggest thing was whenever he came to talk to us about what he wanted for this program, what he was going to bring to this program, but the biggest thing we took from that was how he said it took actions and not words. He would show us throughout his actions. Some of his actions are building a team with team activities and things like that and building that family feeling. So that was probably the biggest impression is just him saying that.



Q. I wanted to ask you about the newcomers in the secondary specifically, Kamal Hadden and Brandon Turnage. I also wanted to get your thoughts on Kaemen Marley. I know you haven't had a practice-type setting with those guys, but in workouts, what have you seen from those three, and what do you think they'll bring to the table this fall?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: The biggest thing I could say is hard workers. Those guys come to work every day. I work out at 7:00 in the morning with Brandon, and me and him have a lot of conversations about where he just came from and things like that. But just seeing how hard he works and how dedicated he is to what he's doing is fun.

At the end day, you never know much about a player until you get thrown into that fire, whether it be scrimmages or normal practice. Looking forward to going to work with those guys and hoping to help them play as best as they can, as a leader for them.

Q. Obviously, having a new coach usually means a rebuilding process, but being a senior, obviously there's an urgency for you to want to win right away this year. What encourages you or what has you optimistic about the season that you guys could win this year or at least maybe exceed the expectation that's maybe people have for the program?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: Yeah, I have a lot of faith in this team. I've been playing for this team for a very long time, as you mentioned. I see the hard work that we put in. At the end of the day, college football is a thing where anything can happen, so I have a lot of faith in our team and a lot of faith in our coaches.

I just pray that we trust in them and we just keep going as far as they want us to go and we just work hard in the weight room. By doing that, it comes with leadership and it comes with our own team, not just the coaching staff.

Looking forward to that and trusting in our team. Because I see what they can do, and I just hope we can show that to the world.

Q. Alontae, what is big for you when it comes to starting fall camp? You're going to be doing in the morning, trying to get off to the right start with the defense. What are your expectations for the rest of the group as you guys get going?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: I would say consistency. Camp's long. Camp's hard. Just making sure you keep that same energy and that same passion from the first day of camp to

the last day of camp.

Q. The third Saturday in October is the rivalry, it's been in Alabama's favor the past few years. For you personally as a senior, what does that rivalry mean to you? And with a new head coach, what are your thoughts on this year's game?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: I hear that all the time, the big rivalry with 'Bama, and what does it mean to me? At the end of the day, all games are as important as this one game. I don't look at it too much as too much weight to put on my shoulders as far as going out there to perform. You want to perform the best that you can whether you're playing Alabama or you're playing a smaller team. Week in and week out, just making sure we bring our best foot forward.

What pushes me every day with that is working with these guys and just letting them know, hey, everyone talks about 'Bama, everyone talks about Georgia, everyone talks about Florida, whoever it may be, but that first game is just as important as a 'Bama or Florida game, playing Bowling Green.

Q. How discouraging was it for you to see so many of your teammates choose to transfer during the coaching transition? Why did you choose to stay, and why do you feel like so many others did not?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: I wouldn't say it was discouraging. We knew that it was a big dent into our team when everything happened. Talking to those guys, those guys reached out to me, I reached out to those guys and just wished them the best. I'm big on making sure you do what's best for your family and yourself.

Seeing those guys go was hard just because we built that relationship, and from that, we'll have a family forever.

As far as why did I stay, I'm the third in my family to go to college, and I told my mom that I would get my degree before I left. I tried to get that in three years last year, but it didn't really work that way. That was one reason.

And the second reason was this is my state. I'm from the state of Tennessee, and the University of Tennessee means a lot to me. Wearing orange and white is a privilege and it's bigger than me, and wearing that Power T on my chest is bigger than me.

Staying here versus going somewhere else was never really too hard of a decision to make. I knew I wanted to stay at University of Tennessee, and I tried to keep as many here as I could. And those who left, I don't have any hard feelings for those guys. I wish them the best.

Q. Can you speak on your leadership, both last summer during COVID, but also on campus being a part of VOLeaders and going to Belize and different things you've been able to do in that aspect.

ALONTAE TAYLOR: My leadership role has grown a lot since I was a freshman. Being part of the SEC Leadership Council, being vice president for SAC at the University of Tennessee, and going through a VOLeader program where it's a yearlong program where you learn more about your leadership skills and ways you can grow as a leader.

Taking a trip to Belize for those 12 days was an eye-opening experience for me. First time I've been out of the country, first time I got a passport. All those things were new for me. But the biggest thing I got from Belize is having passion and respect for your country. People in Belize love their country. The kids there are awesome. Kids there have a passion for playing soccer, what they say is football.

Coming back here was an eye-opening experience for me and allows me to respect what I have going on here but also being able to share how I grew as a leader for my team.

During COVID, it was hard to lead, but we had Zoom to make sure everyone was on top of the things they need to be on top of, whether it be school or working out and eating right and also their mental health, making sure their mental health is fine, and staying positive and knowing that one day we'll get to play college football again.

Q. On that leadership topic that you were talking about, what's your experience been so far with name, image, and likeness? Can you include any either personal experiences or advice you've given to your teammates on how to handle that?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: Yeah, so while I was in Belize, they actually had a meeting with compliance who talked about the NIL. So I didn't get to sit into that meeting with them. But as a leader, I kind of just preach, just make sure you know what you're doing, making sure you're checking off all the boxes so you don't run into any issues later on.

For me personally, for the NIL, I've had a lot of opportunities with that, but I actually haven't tapped into any of those things.

I'm really focused on just making sure I'm healthy and making sure I'm going into camp the right way, but the biggest thing is making sure my team is ready for camp. I'm not so focused on how much money I can make on my

name right now, more so what can my team do so we can be the best team come the fall.

Q. On the quarterbacks, that's always been a leadership position. How important do you think it is to get clarity at some point at that position to have one person to kind of help you lead in such a critical position?

ALONTAE TAYLOR: I feel like, when you have a group of quarterbacks like we have, it's really hard to just say we need to have a clarity of who our quarterback is going to be.

All of them are great quarterbacks, all of them are smart guys, respectful guys, and they're all leaders on our team. Just make sure they're working hard, make sure we stay on top of them.

As a corner specifically in their passing game, being able to talk to them, what do they see, what do I see, things like that that could help them out as far as bettering their game is probably what's most important to me.

At the end of the day, I don't think rushing to figure out who your quarterback is going to be is a smart thing. I feel like just let it play out, let every guy work as hard as they can and may the best man win. At the end of the day, our quarterback room is big, it's deep now, and I feel like they all respect each other.

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