

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 18, 2023  
Nashville, Tennessee, USA

## Auburn Tigers

## Coach Hugh Freeze

### Press Conference



HUGH FREEZE: It's good to be back. I thank Commissioner Sankey and all the guys, Coach Cutcliffe in particular, who's a great resource for all of us. Coach is in the SEC office, and Commissioner Sankey has been an incredible support and obviously a lot of wisdom that I've sought from him through the years.

He's always shot me dead straight and been very truthful with me, which I respect and really, really admire and love.

It's exciting to represent Auburn. Our administration, President Roberts and John Cohen and all of the ADs that work with them have been just incredible, giving me and our family this opportunity to lead the proud program at Auburn and to restore it to its rightful place in the hierarchy of college football.

We know we've got a tall task ahead, but it's one that we're excited.

The alignment that I think I sense from President Roberts to John Cohen down to myself I think is at an all-time high maybe for Auburn. Obviously I haven't been there so I don't have a lot to compare it to, but the support I feel and the alignment I feel, particularly with those two guys, is very, very exciting.

Obviously we owe a debt, a great debt of gratitude to our fan base. I think we have an incredible fan base that we've sold more season tickets in the history of the program this year, and while that speaks to their expectations and their excitement, hopefully they'll give us a little patience as we continue to rebuild this roster to hopefully close the gap on those guys in this league that are doing it at a high, high level.

But we are extremely, extremely excited and proud to have brought three great young men with us today in Luke and Cameron, and Elijah. I think they represent what an Auburn man is, and they represent the culture that we want in our walls. Hopefully you'll get to spend some time

hearing from those guys, also.

It was a hard decision because we have other quality ones, also, that are great leaders, and we're going to depend upon them heavily in year one to help us find a way to compete with the upcoming schedule that we have. Even though we might have some deficiencies at some places, hopefully we can overcome those with culture and leadership and desire.

We're excited to get started. We've got a lot of questions about exactly how we're going to be, and truthfully I don't know all the answers to that yet. This is a strange feeling and in some ways for me I've never experienced going into fall camp and having so many unknowns in my mind, whether that's because of the new world of you gained some of your roster from transfer portal world or you gained it even after spring practice through the portal world, and then obviously summer enrollees come.

There's a lot of things that I'm not quite certain about, also, but excited about the opportunity to get to know our team even better.

I love our staff. I love the work they've put in in recruiting and in trying to improve our roster, and really, really excited about the opportunity to represent Auburn this fall and our great fan base.

We've been welcomed, Jill and I and our three daughters and their husbands. We could not have asked for a better welcoming to The Plains. What a great place it is to live. We're excited about putting our roots down there and building this program back to what it's been.

It's been only one of six programs to play for two National Championships in the last 13 years, and we want to return to that.

We're excited, thankful for this opportunity, obviously, to be back in what I think is the greatest program -- the greatest conference in college football, representing one of the greatest programs that I think is in college football.

**Q. You look at the SEC the last several years, there's a**

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
sports

**lot of coaches like yourself that have had two stops, guys like Spurrier, Nick Saban, you could go on and on. When you left Ole Miss did you have a feeling maybe you could be able to work your way back to the SEC somewhere? What does it mean to you to have done that? I think you're the third Arkansas State coach to be at Auburn now. I was wondering what you thought about that.**

HUGH FREEZE: All right, let's go back to did I one day -- truthfully when the ending at Ole Miss occurred it was hard to truthfully process would you ever get that opportunity again, so I would have to say at that point no.

But as time passes and things tend to settle back in and you work through -- I tell people all the time, I think that one of the greatest judges of people, and our players included and the people I come in contact with, are when you experience disappointment, failure, whether it was of your own doing or whether it was circumstances that come into your life, like Luke Deal, who's with us today. He lost his father while being at Auburn.

Those are tough circumstances, but how a person responds to those and reacts to those probably tells you more about them than the successes do.

I would be less than truthful with you if after we started having success at Liberty, particularly with it just going FBS and us being able to beat the likes of Arkansas and BYU and Virginia Tech and Syracuse and playing close with every Power Five that we played, did the thought start creeping in your mind that certain opportunities might present themselves again? Yes, at that point. But not prior to that point did they enter my mind.

Then it's an interesting fact obviously that Gus and Bryan were both at Arkansas State after my tenure there, and obviously Gus is a dear friend of mine who I talked with about a lot of things, and he's just so complimentary of Auburn and the people and the things that can happen there.

**Q. Coach Freeze, in terms of establishing a culture as far as being the new coach at Auburn, what was your first order of business or the lowest hanging fruit, so to speak?**

HUGH FREEZE: I think making sure they knew that it's defined for them. What is our culture? Our culture is based on faith, attitude, and mental toughness, integrity and love and what do those things mean to us.

Faith, obviously that's a word that can mean a lot of different things for a lot of different people, and certainly it

means something for me, and the bottom line is if we are going to reestablish Auburn being what Auburn should be, we must have faith in each other.

That means faith in our administration, that means faith in our coaching staff, faith in the guy that lines up next to you, and that's probably where it needed to begin, because I think that was lost for whatever reason, and I'm not one to -- when I don't walk in someone else's shoes, I'm very careful not to judge or not to have an opinion that's not based in something that I really don't know.

But I did sense coming in that the faith in the whole family of Auburn football was fractured somewhat, and I think that is where I had to start in trying to repair that.

Thankfully that helped with our new President Roberts and John Cohen coming in with me, which I think speaks to our alignment.

**Q. In the spring you talked about melding your system with Philip Montgomery's system. Where are you guys at with that going into camp? And also with Payton Thorn coming in after the spring, what's the quarterback battle going to look like this fall with him only having maybe 10 practices to win the job?**

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, I met with Philip yesterday and we're meeting again tomorrow and Thursday. The great thing is -- I want to say this the right way. I think once upon a time I was probably one of the better play callers in college football. Obviously better players make you a better play caller.

I don't know that I was the greatest play caller or one of the best play callers the last few years at Liberty. I managed the game really well and gave our kids a chance to obviously win some huge games, and we were really good on defense, and I kind of played to that.

But coming back knowing what was all-encompassing to bring Auburn back, sitting in the chair that I have to sit in, I needed help. I think the first priority was, man, hire somebody that does and believes exactly what I believe offensively, which Philip does.

And then someone whose terminology is simple as mine, because I do think I need a new terminology because there's too many people in this league that I've went and talked ball with and probably told too much to, particularly up the road from us on both sides.

So I needed that to be a comfort. We're running the same system that I've always run. I wasn't going to get away from that. It's worked for me everywhere I've been. But

Philip has helped me with terminology, so has Jake.

Obviously brought Ken Austin with me from Liberty who sits in that room. He's the smartest guy that I know football-wise and will be vital in all of that, also.

But Philip and I have a great understanding. Listen, game planning is a combination of a lot of people that go into it, and we put it on the call sheet, and obviously Philip will be the primary play caller.

But obviously I have the right to step in and say, you know what, let me have -- I need to see something. He's been -- the great thing is Philip has been in the head coach's seat and he's been in the coordinator's seat, and he gets that.

But I have great trust in him, have been very impressed, and obviously it's the same system that we've just melded into his terminology, and I needed that truthfully. I've done my terminology truthfully since high school, and I think I've had too many people get out from under me and I kind of felt some of that last year at Liberty.

I'm excited about having this new fresh addition to our system in Philip, and obviously not just Philip but the whole offensive staff, and using their wisdom to help us game plan.

But Philip will be the -- he's going to be the play caller, unless I want to step in and change that in the course of a game, which that happens all the time.

Quarterback-wise, that's going to be a challenge for us, not because -- I'm very truthfully a lot more optimistic than most people are. I think we've got a good room.

But I'm an optimist. We've been able to do things with quarterbacks everywhere we've been and produce good enough results to win.

I thought spring practice we got better there. Obviously we want to create competition in that room. That's why we brought in Payton, who's had great experiences.

I think what he adds to that room right now is incredible leadership. One of the first things he did is come in and say, Coach, is there any way someone can give me a sheet of paper that has a picture of everyone that works in this building because I want to learn everyone's name. That's the type of leader he is.

But it's going to create great competition between he, Robby and Holden, and obviously I'm excited about Hank Brown, too, but he's obviously just a freshman.

But Philip and Kent and our offensive staff got to present to me next week a plan of -- look, it's impossible to get four guys reps in fall camp and get ready for a game, so I think we've got to have a 10-day plan with three guys getting some reps, and then it's got to go down to two guys, and hopefully all will handle the competition aspects of it well.

But that'll tell us a lot about that room.

**Q. You talked about the alignment from top to bottom with administration, but just wanted to get your thoughts on where do you feel like Auburn fits in as we get ready to see a new expanded SEC playoff, and were those conversations you had before you took the job?**

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, I think in regards to our -- I would see us in the upper echelon of this conference. There's no reason -- we have the facilities. We have the support. We have the administration. You're in an area that football is important, and you're in an area that you can recruit to.

I do think that the '24 and '25 recruiting cycle will tell a large portion of the story of my tenure there. I believe that. Maybe '26 we might get three cycles, but we've got to start closing the gap on the elite programs in this conference. And when you add Texas and Oklahoma, that only increases the competition, also.

There's a lot of good players. They all can't go to the same school. Obviously the transfer portal world adds another dynamic to it, how good you are at holding on to the ones you do have in your room and then attracting ones that can go in and fill some holes for you.

Hopefully we can be very good at that, at creating a culture where our kids want to be at Auburn and want to stay at Auburn. Obviously On to Victory is a big factor in that, also, and keeping our kids here that have produced and created value for themselves in the name, image, and likeness world, so all that's going to play a role in it.

But I see no reason why Auburn shouldn't be one of the upper half and competing every year.

Look, if you're in the upper half of this conference, you get a break here or there, you're in the playoffs. Then you've got a real chance. That's where I see Auburn.

**Q. You've been a great offensive mind and always had a knack for creating explosive plays, and I know after spring one of the mantras was to add explosives to the offense. I wanted to know how you see Brian Battie fitting in, and also Caleb Burton from Ohio State, and how quickly do you teach them your scheme that you**

**just said you've had the same scheme for your entire career?**

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, really excited about both those young men you just mentioned.

I think Battie -- really when we took him, truthfully I was like, man, this guy is too small to play in this league and run inside the tackle, but he's going to really help us in the return game and he's going to really help us on some special designed outside runs.

Then we get into practice and we start running inside zone with him and the guy is wiggling through holes and falling forward, so I got really, really excited about him, and I think he's going to add great value to us.

Caleb Burton, I think his high school tape is phenomenal. Obviously signed with one of the premier programs in the country and now we're able to get him and have four years with him. Hopefully he'll be ready to go and add something, some playmaking ability to us this year.

I think wide receiver-wise for our offense to work that we've always run, we've got to have production there. We've got to be able to win some one-on-ones there.

I think I'm a ways away from saying exactly where I think we are. Two of our better ones didn't go through spring because of injuries, but they seem to be back and I'm excited to see what they bring in fall camp.

**Q. Your spring theme was flip the script. What needs to be flipped at Auburn?**

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, I get that. I teach a series every spring and fall. I have to give Mark Batterson credit for the flip the script plan. I write it to fit my personality and my team, but I get things from him quite frequently, truthfully, that I do ask him. He's a good friend and he allows me to use his stuff.

But the first thing that I think had to be flipped was the mindset, because I really believe as a man thinketh, so he is. What do we think about ourselves at Auburn, and they had heard so much and will hear so much about what people's opinion are or where you should be picked to finish and all of these things.

But man, we first have to rewire the way we think. That's the first thing that I think needed to be flipped, and that's why I chose that as the spring theme.

**Q. What are you doing in terms of financial literacy with NIL? You've got 18, 19 year old kids; suddenly it's**

**the Beverly Hillbillies, they've got NIL deals, a ton of money, and they've got 30 people back home hitting them up. Are you having those serious conversations? Also, how much is it changing the culture in the locker room when, say, one guy is getting a big NIL deal and the people around him are not?**

HUGH FREEZE: This one could take a while to answer, but the education part I think is absolutely vital. We're creating a SOAR Program within our building that stands for the students and their opportunities that they're getting, both athletically, academically, and with the resources that they have.

I have five people that work in that arena. They don't have anything to do with football. They have to do with our player development, and how are we going to educate them.

We also depend upon, once a deal is done, after they've gotten to Tower Campus and a deal is done with On to Victory, they have an incredible board that is set up with financial advisors that are willing to help them do that.

But I tell every kid that I think you're very, very wise if you take us up on the resources we're offering you. Ultimately they get to make that decision, but I do think you're dead on that if we're not educating them, then we're just setting ourselves up for even more issues.

I think it's incredible that young men get to benefit. Do I think that at some point it needs some more parameters around it? Of course. You've heard that.

But I do think that managing the locker room is one of the things that keeps you up at night as a coach right now. I was very candid with our team and said, listen, how many of you wanted the NIL opportunities? How many hands do you think went up? All of them.

I said, that's great, but you also need to know that it will never totally be fair in your eyes, but accept it as a blessing and be accountable for yours.

Will everybody hear that message and accept it? I sure hope so. I think the ones that do are going to have a better chance to have a better team, but that's the reality that we live in, that life is not always fair, and everybody won't look at everybody else in the sportswriter world or in the coaching world and feel like I got the fairest deal that he got.

Until we start -- we need to quit looking at other people because comparison is the chief enemy of joy. It'll steal it

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and it'll steal from our team.

We've got to focus on, man, the facts are that I'm very blessed that I am getting this education, that I am getting the opportunities that a collective deal may give me. That is a blessing. So rejoice in that and go work as hard as you can to get a better blessing.

**Q. I've been told by coaches in the game that no one is better at second-half adjustments in college football than you are. I was wondering, how do you approach that, and what are your keys to success there?**

HUGH FREEZE: Well, what coach said that? Was it Coach Saban? That would be nice if it came from him.

I do think we've been very good at that through the years. We typically have been able to come out and have good adjustments.

Truthfully, I always hold a few things until the second half. I don't know if that's wise, that I think are going to be good. But I've instructed our staff, let's kind of hold on that until the second half.

I don't know, I lean on our coaches a lot. It's not just me. It's us getting in and everybody saying this is exactly what we're getting on second down, this is exactly what we're getting on first down, and then you being wise enough to use the analytics that you have to say -- coaches are creatures of habits, and if this is what they've done on every 2nd and long, then what is our best call. That should be the first call we make the next 2nd and long we get.

That's not some mystery or -- I'm sure other coaches do the same thing. I don't know. I make my O-line coach change his clothes at halftime if we're not doing well. I don't know if that helps, but I do. Matt and Luke started that for me truthfully.

We were losing our first game at Ole Miss to a 1-AA opponent and it wasn't going well. He changed all of his clothes and we rolled up a bunch of numbers the second half, and from that point on, our entire five years together, Matt knew he had to change clothes at halftime if things weren't going well.

**Q. Does that include his underwear?**

HUGH FREEZE: I don't know. You'll have to ask him that. I'll have to spring that on Jake, our O-line coach. I haven't told him that yet.

**Q. Is Jarquez Hunter going to be available to participate in the beginning of fall camp?**

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, I'm not allowed to comment on university's policies or procedures at this point.

**Q. When you talked a couple of months ago you mentioned there about the talent gap between you guys and some of the teams. Do you think it's maybe too early to tell? Do you have a better idea now? And as you go into fall camp, what kind of things will you look for to try to figure out how close you might be?**

HUGH FREEZE: Here's what I really believe. I want to be careful not to -- I love our team. They're my team. They're Auburn's team. We're going to coach the heck out of them.

Does our roster from top to bottom look like Alabama's, Georgia's, LSU's, Florida, A&M, Ole Miss? I don't know yet. I know a couple they don't because I've watched the tape.

Do I think we've improved Auburn with the additions that we've had since I've been there? Yes. Does that mean we close the gap at all? I have no clue.

I do know we improved Auburn, and I hope that means that we somehow close the gap enough to -- if we have a good game plan, to be in some of those games in the fourth quarter and have maybe a shot to pull an upset.

It's too early for me to really say, but I do know we improved our roster. But at the same time, they're constantly improving theirs it seems like.

**Q. A couple questions ago you mentioned you-know-who. How important are the games against Alabama in the Iron Bowl, and maybe the overshadowed rivalry against Georgia for you all?**

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, I don't think it's overshadowed at all. The Iron Bowl is what it is, and I don't have to be educated on that. I've been a part of some big rivalries and understand that in most polls this would be No. 1 in the rivalry, so I know what it means to the people that support our university and our football program. I won't need to be educated.

I've always taken great pride in walking into a new program and saying, listen, they currently are the gold standard and this is what we want to be. We welcome that opportunity and we welcome that challenge.

I have great respect for Nick. He's actually a good friend, and what he's done there. But there are so many good coaches in this league that do such a great job, and many of them do it with less than what others have.

But I relish the opportunity to play the Alabamas and Georgias, and I know they're tall tasks and I know who you're going to get measured against in my tenure there.

I'm excited about those games, as our kids will be.

**Q. You mentioned talking to your players about NIL and things like that and being in the locker room. For you in your career in the wake of Northwestern, what kind of tenor have you tried to set when it comes to the idea of hazing? How do you treat that team bonding experience to help mold your locker rooms?**

HUGH FREEZE: You know, team bonding should be done for us through our core values, which should represent love for each other, integrity for each other, mental toughness for each other, and we show that in the way we prepare and the way we go about it.

But the leadership of the locker room has got to help, all the coaches. I've learned through the years to never -- until you walk into a certain situation, I certainly don't have all the facts or the comments or the situation or circumstances.

But I know for us, you sure would hope that -- there has to be accountability from our staff and from the leadership of our team that we are doing things in a manner that represents our core values and how we want to treat people in general.

**Q. You said that Greg Sankey has always shot you straight. Can you explain what you mean by that?**

HUGH FREEZE: There's never been a time when I had a conversation with Commissioner Sankey that he wasn't telling me exactly what the truth was and probably had great wisdom behind it. Whether I liked it or not, I always felt like, man, he really has thought through this and he's really telling me what he thinks is the truth and best. I respect that with people.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports