

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 16, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Keenan Pili

Press Conference



Q. I cover Oklahoma and Josh Heupel is really known as leading Oklahoma to their last National Championship. I want to ask you about his coaching style, what he gets out of his football team. Does he ever talk about his days at Oklahoma?

KEENAN PILI: Yeah, yeah. I think I've heard him a couple times talk about it for sure. I feel like I understand, though, the competitive nature he probably had at Oklahoma, and transferring over here to Tennessee as a coach. Competitive guy no matter what you're doing, whether it's basketball or playing a game. Coach Heupel is competitive. I can see why he was successful at Oklahoma.

Q. Can you describe Nico and his abilities to play the quarterback position and what challenges he might present a defense and to you in practice and how has he helped you be a better player?

KEENAN PILI: Yeah. I think we all know Nico. He's very talented. The physical part is pretty easy to see when you see Nico play. One thing I've seen from Nico over this offseason is really his mental side of the game and his growth as a player. He's really found a way to get some respect in the locker room, just his humility has drawn a lot of people to want him to lead, and I think that's kind of been one of his greatest attributes so far and the way he leads us is through that.

Q. Boo Carter is someone who's come in as a highly rated recruit. What impresses you about him and do you see him making an impact on the field this fall?

KEENAN PILI: Just the way he moves. He moves really well and makes some plays, his frame. You can tell by how he carries himself he loves football, and you can tell he cares. But I'd say most importantly those talents that he carries. The sky's the limit for him as he goes on throughout his career.

Q. Talk about being able to bounce back from the injuries that you sustained and being one of the few to get a seventh year of eligibility in college football, what it means to be the middle backer starting for the Tennessee Volunteers.

KEENAN PILI: It means everything. It means everything. I don't take the role lightly, the things that come with middle linebacker and the things I'm expected to do. I prepare in a way that I know my teammates will trust and respect me.

Just excited and excited to come back and play. I have been around, so I'm excited to play another year and to be here.

Q. What was your "welcome to the SEC" moment where you were like, wow, the competition here -- this isn't high school anymore.

KEENAN PILI: Yeah, man, I see it every day at practice. I remember when I first got in, you could notice for sure. I felt especially with the guys up front, the big boys. Not just big boys, them big boys move.

I'd say yeah, seeing those guys work up front, seeing the chaos they create. I was like, oh, yeah.

Q. Injured in the season opener last year, but you continued to serve as team captain for the entire season. You stayed involved. Just the sort of stuff you did with the team to keep your football senses strong and how it benefitted you going into this year.

KEENAN PILI: Greatly. You kind of see the game, and I've had my injuries before, but being here at a new school and being able to see it from this lens, you kind of grow mentally, and especially you see the game in a different lens. You're able to kind of see where things break down because you're not on the field. You can see the big picture. I feel like it's always helped me being able to zoom out a little bit, see the big picture, see what the coaches are wanting to get done. I took that year under my belt, used it to my advantage, and hopefully help me next season.

Q. What's the most challenging road site in the conference?

KEENAN PILI: Road site? Man, I'm excited for all of them. I haven't been nowhere on the field, so I'm just excited for that.

I know there's some hostile environments in this conference, and been able to experience those last year. I want to experience them on the field in pads, get the real experience.

Q. What can you say about the other players at linebacker for Tennessee? Speak to what you have at that position.

KEENAN PILI: So much. We're deep. We're deep. Like we talk all the time with my linebackers, they're young, but you'd never expect them to be how they are now. They're not young. The type of work and sacrifices they make for just this room as a whole is crazy. We have tons of linebackers that can step up and do the role. That's how much trust I have in those guys, some competitors. Every day, day in and day out, they show out the same people. That goes top to bottom, even the new guys that have come.

Q. Your teammate Omari spoke about creating turnovers. How do you practice creating turnovers individually?

KEENAN PILI: Every opportunity we get a chance in practice, whether it's punching at a ball, trying to make a chance into an interception, reading an offense, whatever it may be, we've got to practice it. We talk about it all the time with Coach Banks. We go over it after every practice; hey, how many takeaways did we try to take away? How many punches at the ball did we have? How many missed takeaways did we have? So it's constantly on our mind. I feel like the more we talk about it, the more we can speak it into our game, as well, and then fine tune it.

Q. Oklahoma has joined in the league for the first time and everyone is getting acquainted with everyone. What do you know about Oklahoma, their history, their tradition? Are you familiar with them at all?

KEENAN PILI: Yeah. I wouldn't say I know too much about the tradition, but I'm familiar that that's a program. They've got some rich history. Grew up watching teams like Oklahoma and even Texas now joining, play. So I know they're great programs and have a great history.

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