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Texas A&M Aggies

Mike Elko

Press Conference



Q. I asked Trey what the biggest difference he thinks in the previous head coach to your start of year head coaching tenure is here. He said accountability. I was wondering if you had any thoughts given that you worked under the previous head coach on what the difference is between your accountability and his accountability.

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. We haven't really looked back at all. I think one of the things that's important when you take over a program, you just be clear with what you're looking for. I'll let other people judge these differences or judge what's different between me and Coach Fisher. I hadn't spent a ton of time thinking about what's different. I think our focus is what we want our program to look like, the culture that we want, the level of buy in and discipline and accountability that we want. And that's kind of been where we have focused our attention.

Q. Coach, you are going to be facing Riley Leonard, what can the Texas A&M fans look for when Riley Leonard comes to College Station.

MIKE ELKO: I am amazed I have gotten this far and this is the first time this question has been asked of me. Him and I have joked about trying to come up with some type of scripted answer. Listen, Riley's a phenomenal quarterback. He's a phenomenal competitor. He obviously played a huge role in our success at Duke. And in a lot of ways me getting this job here at Texas A&M. And so the irony of playing against him in the opener certainly isn't lost on me. He's going to do everything he possibly can to make sure he has the upper hand on me for the first of his life. It'll be a healthy competition. I have so much respect for him, his family, who he is as a young man, and so kind of wish there would be any other quarterback on the other side for the opener.

Q. I know in your previous stint at Texas A&M, you didn't coach in the Aggies-Longhorns rivalry. But what is your sense of it? How did you get that sense of how

important that is.

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. In my four years at Texas A&M, even though we never played and we're in the same conference, it still was the single most important thing it seemed like to Texas A&M. Obviously that's something that we take seriously. That's a rivalry that means an awful lot to our fan base, to the program, the history of the rivalry, and the tradition. I have been aware of it. I was a huge football fan growing up. I watched those games on Thanksgiving. And the defense and the wrecking crew and all of that. I think it's great for the state, great for college football that that rivalry is coming back. When you have two brands like that that are that close to each other, they should play. They should play meaningful games. They should play games that really matter. And with our tradition, they should play on Thanksgiving weekend. Excited to just get back into it, and I'm sure it will be an unbelievable atmosphere the first time we bring that rivalry back in Kyle Field.

Q. I know you brought team leaders with you, obviously. Talking to them, it seems like they crave that leveling of playing field of expectations for everyone. Are you sensing those are the missing pieces that can put a team over the top once everyone is on board?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. If you look at successful organizations across the country, right, football for sure. But really anything. Culture matters. And how the connections within your program are, the relationships within your program, how much you are willing to put on the line for the guy next to you. Those things sometimes mean just as much as the offense and defensive plays that we call. And so again, I don't know different or not, but I know that's really critical. And so it's been something -- we have been very intentional about this off season, trying to bring everyone together, trying to get them around each other more. And you know, kids crave connection. And so I think they have embraced it. And I think it's been a really good experience for our program.

Q. Back in February you said Texas A&M is the flagship in the state. Why do you think that is, and what are some of the biggest advantages that you



have seen coming back to A&M as the head coach?

MIKE ELKO: I think that statement was made in reference to our role focusing with high school coaches in the state than it was comparing us to any other school in the state. I just think -- and I followed it up after with saying one of. It's not about -- we have two great brands in this state. And the nice thing now is we're in the same conference and we play each other. That stuff will get settled in recruiting battles and on the field. We believe we have an infrastructure and the resources at Texas A&M to be the premier football program in the country. We're not the only school that thinks that. I think our focus is trying to become the best version of ourself. If we do that, the success will follow with that.

Q. Coach, you talked a lot about kind of the offense and what kind of step they need to take specifically with Collin Klein. What do you think he brings to the table this upcoming season, and is he going to fix some of the frustrations that Aggie fans may have felt last year?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, again, a lot of conversation about last year. We're not trying to fix things from last year. Focus on things from last year. I think Collin brings an innovative mind, a guy who played quarterback at an elite level. When you talk about success on offense, quarterback play is a huge piece of that, and obviously our ability to stay healthy at that position will be critical. I think the thing that really drew me to Collin was his knowledge of the game of football, his intelligence level and understanding how to attack defenses. I think what gets lost a lot in these conversations about offense is style. Pro style. And the reality of it is how you attack defenses is what matters. And you can call the same play against one defense and look like a genius and call the same play against another defense and look like an idiot. And that's the nature of football behind the scenes. So I'm excited to see him put this thing together, utilize our weapons and utilize our personnel, and put us in a position to have a strong fall on offense.

Q. Coach, when you took the job at A&M, how excited were you to reconnect with Taurean York? And how impressed have you been with his play on the field and his leadership at a young age?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. It's an interesting seesaw with Taurean because we thought we had him at Duke. We lost him. And then he went out and he had this amazing year last year. We're watching it from afar obviously. Because the connection with him. You are so disappointed to think about what that could have been had you been able to get him over to Durham. And then life comes full circle

sometimes. And now just the opportunity to get back and coach him. In eight months he's everything that I thought he was. He's a phenomenal young man, great leader, does everything you would ask him to do, he's a great football player, he's a play maker, he brings people along with him. He's everything you would want in a middle linebacker. I'm excited that life has thrown in curveball and I have gotten a chance to come back and coach him.

Q. Coach, you talked about the accountability and the players have kind of embraced that accountability and the mentality of they don't want to make a lot of noise in the off season. What do you credit that kind of collective mentality from the team to?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. And we had to have some real honest conversations when I took over about where we were as a program. You know, we can't verbalize what we are. Facts tell us who we are. And we were a 12-13 football program the last two years. So the only way to change that is to work. You can't just say you want to be different and say you want to compete, you have to do it. And I think that has been from day one internal conversations that we had. And then you have a lot of great kids with great character with a lot of pride in themselves. And so that's not lost on them either. And so okay, here's a path that potentially can change the results that we've had. I'm in. So they start doing it and then it leads to success, their body starts looking different, they start feeling better, they are playing better in the spring. That brings more success. We have had a stronger summer in that regard. And hopefully that continues into fall camp and through the season. If you want to get different results you have to change what you are doing. And I think we have embraced that this off season.

Q. In the NIL era, when you get a verbal commitment from a high schooler, how much recruiting is still ahead? And how different is it maybe now to five, ten years ago about how much to keep recruiting that player?

MIKE ELKO: Honestly, of all the things that have changed, that's one that hasn't. I don't know that there's ever been a time at this high level of recruiting where a verbal commitment didn't mean you are still in a recruiting battle. We talk about it from this perspective. Once a kid commits to you, you have an X on your back. When you are all recruiting the kid, everybody is selling their school. The second he decides which school he wants to go to everyone knows exactly who to tear down to try to get him to not go to that school. So I don't think that's necessarily a unique problem to NIL. I think that's been around for a long time. Recruiting is never over. And you can hear stories in this conference of, you know, kids shifting gears walking to



the fax machine to send their fax in back in the day. And so recruiting is all the way until you get the electronic transmission of that NLI.

Q. Coach, since you joined the SEC, you have redeveloped a rivalry with Arkansas. What does that rivalry mean to A&M and what are you looking forward to in the game?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. It's a cool game that we play. It's going away from Cowboy Stadium. My four years with it and certainly this year, it's an electric atmosphere any time you go into a stadium that's filled where half the fans from one school are there and half the fans from the other. I think there's been an atmosphere in that game by playing in Cowboy Stadium. I think that certainly has enhanced it. Proximity enhanced it. Recruiting footprint and their desire to come into Texas to recruit. And us the need to keep the kids in Texas here. Whenever you have the elements you have a natural rivalry that gets created. Certainly looking forward to the last time that stadium is played this year in Cowboy Stadium.

Q. I was going to ask you about incoming freshman Terry Bussey. What you have seen from him early on in the few looks you have gotten and moving forward where you see him fitting in offense and even defense, special teams?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah. The second question I'm surprised took so long for me to get today. Terry was a huge get for us. Mr. Texas. And so getting him down to College Station was huge. Obviously he's a tremendous athlete. We think he has a really bright present and future. He's extremely young. And he still hasn't actually had an official Texas A&M football practice. We're excited for him. I think he's going to start on defense. But I do think everyone is aware that he has flexibility to help us in a lot of ways. His ability in the return game is something we want to look to take advantage of. We certainly see him developing and playing a critical role for us, not only this year but in the years to come.

Q. You came back to the SEC after coaching in the ACC. What's something that you learned there that you are taking back?

MIKE ELKO: You learn how to be a head coach. Until you become a head coach you don't really know how deep and in-depth it all goes. And so I think that's the big part of it. And learning how to lead every aspect of the program. That's critical as well.

Q. Coach, Shemar Turner gained 30 pounds this off season. And moving from defensive end to defensive

tackle. What's his off season been like?

MIKE ELKO: First of all, he had to rehab. He had a shoulder to deal with from last year. We're excited to get him healthy and training. I think he was intentional in his decision to come back to school. He obviously had an opportunity to go pro last year and chose not to. And sometimes that goes two different ways. He has been extremely intentional about the decision he made, why he made it, and knowing the areas he had to improve, I think he wants to play from a flexible standpoint when he goes into the NFL Draft. He wants to showcase teams that he can play in a lot of different roles. That was a big reason why he came back to that spot was so that he could become a flexible player. I think he's going to be a plus player for us at defensive tackle. He has tremendous take-off, he's extremely physical, he's played an awful lot of football. And I think he's in better physical shape than he has been in in his career. It's going to be exciting to watch.

