

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 18, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

## Auburn Tigers

## Hugh Freeze

### Press Conference



HUGH FREEZE: Good afternoon and thank you for staying around. I know it's been a long week for you guys. Appreciate your coverage of what we think is the greatest sport product in the nation and maybe in the world. We're partial. I know you are, too. But we do thank you for all your coverage of us.

I stand today in great gratitude and thankfulness to represent John Cohen, our A.D., and his staff, and our players, probably most importantly our Auburn family. It's been the greatest family environment and support that I've experienced at the stops that I've had. We're very grateful for that.

It starts with our second straight sellout of season tickets. We just can't thank our Auburn family enough for their faithfulness and supporting us in all the ways that they do and supporting our players.

Shout-out to Michael Williams from Montgomery. He was the last ticket bought to officially get us the sellout. We're thankful for him coming through for us there at the end.

A sidenote is that I know I've never done this, don't know of any coaches that have, but we had our Auburn Club meeting in Dallas last night. I came over to speak at that, along with Bruce and some of our other coaches. It made no sense to me to fly back to Auburn and fly back here today. I came in and stayed here last night.

Lee VanHorn, our football administrator, John Cohen's chief of staff, and our SID Kirk Sampson, went to get something to eat. One by one media started coming around. It was just really neat truthfully for me just to talk and tell stories. I know everybody's got a job to do. Then I get ready to go from there, and I see more on the way back. Then on the way to the room, there's a group of Alabama media that came in. I got to see those guys also, and ladies.

It's a neat time. I appreciate your kindness for those of you

that we got to share some time with outside of last night, kind of what we do.

There's a great excitement in our building right now. I think it's a combination of things. One, I think our players sense that there is a chemistry among our staff that's pretty special right now, I feel, that provides a confidence and an energy to our players and the way they go about chasing the standards that we've set for each other.

Secondly, I think we've upgraded our roster. Now a lot of that roster is young kids. Certainly can't predict exactly how they'll adapt to playing in this difficult conference.

But I do think those are the two reasons, along with getting back in January, a group of young men that were elected to the Culture Council decided that these are the standards.

I've had to change some. I've had to learn to listen more, that I don't have all the answers, and maybe our players are on to a few things that can help me be a better coach.

All of those discussions took place in January. It's been exciting to see them lead to the standards they've set forth for our team.

But all of those things have led to a higher accountability in our building. Again, I think that's one of the reasons that we're optimistic that we're on the right track to returning Auburn to its rightful place, being one of the top football programs in college football.

Again, thankful for you guys, thankful for the Auburn family, our administration, everything they do for us. Love to take your questions.

**Q. You open the season with five straight home games. Maybe there's an opportunity there for Auburn to get off to a fast start. Talk about the significance of Oklahoma coming to Auburn for the first time in the history of college football and what getting a win there might be going into what's a tough road stretch.**

HUGH FREEZE: Did you say Oklahoma? Oklahoma and



Texas are joining us? I got to play Alabama, Georgia and these two? Oh, great. Along with the others (smiling).

I told Commissioner I was going to say that.

The five home games in a row are not ideal for our fans. That's why I think we have some of the greatest fans. They'll still show up. They're going to be there. Jordan-Hare is a difficult place to play. We have to have the environment.

I do believe that five-game stretch is critical to our success of the season. Whether it's the Oklahoma game or the Cal game or the Arkansas game, all of those are vital, and that stretch is going to be really important to us.

We need our fans. I know it's difficult on them to come back and forth for five straight weeks. Then unfortunately, we don't have a home game the whole month of October which is usually the best weather for us. I know our fans will show up. That is a critical stretch, for sure.

**Q. You talked about last season spending so much of your time on game days and the fall focusing on recruiting. Where do you see yourself spending the majority of your time this season?**

HUGH FREEZE: It's a combination. Obviously I love what D.J. Durkin and Charles Kelly are bringing to the defensive side, organization, energy, structure that they have over there. All of those guys, McGriff and Aldridge, Vontrell, all the assistants are doing a really nice job. I expect that will be pretty much like it's always been for me. I want to know what you're doing on third down. If I have something that I want to interject on that... I have great trust in those guys.

So then it's a split between managing your roster and the issues that come with that. Recruiting offensive football for me, which is pretty normal. I would expect I'm in the offensive room a large, large percentage of the time to make sure that me and Nix and Kent and the guys that are going to be involved in making a call at a critical time, we're all on the same page.

I would say it's probably split like 70% there, then 30% combination between recruiting, you'll have player meetings, issues that arise. That's my best guess.

**Q. We talk about a lot of the young guys you added, the Freeze Four. How are you helping to utilize them this season and what can you tell us about those guys?**

HUGH FREEZE: Excited about the upgrades to that room, whether it's in the transfer world with Dre and Robert Lewis

and Sam Jackson. We felt like we had maybe the top wide receiver class in the country with Cam and Perry and Bryce and Malcolm.

Cam was able to be there and go through spring, so obviously we have had more time with him. Payton has had more time with him. We were very excited and thrilled with what we saw. He's going to have to play. I think the others have the capacity to do the same. They look the right part.

They're going to be critical into our success. We've got to stay balanced. You got to run the football in this league. You have to be able to have guys that give a quarterback confidence that they can win in a one-on-one situation. I think we're much closer to that with those guys coming to our roster.

**Q. Talk about the addition of Percy Lewis at left tackle. You transformed your offensive line last year. What was the thought at adding him? Secondly, the improvement of Connor Lew.**

HUGH FREEZE: Connor Lew already a leader. I think he's a phenomenal football player and young man. I think he's an NFL center. We're excited about him. The snaps he had last year as a freshman, obviously he did really, really well.

Percy, you can't get enough tackle bodies in this league. It allows us the freedom to move D. Wade inside where I think he's going to play at the next level and naturally fit.

It's fun to be around Percy, too. He's got one of the best senses of humor. He's from a down home country place like me. I tell people all the time, one of the funniest stories in his recruitment, obviously there's a lot of things that you talk about in a short amount of time with transfer guys. But he told our assistant O-line coach, The only thing I have to have to make sure this is finalized, this is where I'm coming, is a spigot.

Assistant O-line coach had no clue. I'm from the country. I knew exactly what he meant.

I said, You tell him we'll find a place with a spigot.

He loves to wash his car. He's that kind of guy. Glad we have him. It allows us to move D. Wade inside. Need Tyler Johnson to come on and be the swing guy for tackles.

Tate Johnson is another that will get a lot of rotation. He can play all three in the middle.

**Q. You bring Payton Thorne not just here today, but you bring him back for this upcoming football season. With you bringing him today, the expected starter. What are the differences from a year ago to this year to be the guy once again, not to bring somebody in through the portal, to put the program in his hands?**

HUGH FREEZE: The portal, I'll be the first to say I'm not the greatest portal recruiter that there is. I don't know. I like developing players and getting to know them and being with them. I'm not saying that's the right way. I know I'm going to have to adjust. I'm already starting to adjust. There are more changes coming.

I just felt like we could put some pieces around him that would allow him to reach his potential. I've seen it on film. I think he was really, really solid in another Power Five conference. I think he's proven he can use his feet to move the chains when we need to.

I believe, with the confidence he's sensing right now from what he sees in the staff room, to feeling like he's got a Dre Lambert Smith out there that can win, that's done it, and successful young guys. Smith is having a great spring, too. Camden Brown, some older guys.

You combine those two things, the confidence that he feels in year two with us, combined with Rivaldo, people like that. I hate that I'm always leaving people out.

I think the combination of those two things is going to provide him the tools to have a successful year. He knows that he's got to produce. We don't run from that. I like what I see from Hank and Holden. Walker is going to be really, really talented. So there's guys there to push him.

**Q. I remember in 1981 when Coach Bryant set the record against Auburn. Coach Dye said, Only difference in the world between us and them, they put their pants on like you do, we start playing out of the same deck of cards as they do. I heard a great description of you from a coach in another school. He said, A lot of these coaches during the pandemic became COVID recruiters. I can assure you Hugh Freeze is sitting on the front porch with the mama and the grandmother, talking about life. Talk about your philosophy as a coach in building a proud program.**

HUGH FREEZE: Well, there's no question that's my comfort zone because that's the way I was raised. Me building genuine, authentic relationships is important to me that last the test of time. I don't think money can buy that. That is time and investing in people.

Being a very imperfect person, but a person of faith, I

believe that's what I'm called to do through this coaching profession.

I don't know how to do that without those front porch conversations or them sitting on my back porch at our home in Auburn, them seeing how I interact with Jill and Ragan and Jordan and Madison, and now granddaughters in D.J. and Hudson, how I interact with our staff.

That is my comfort zone. It is a family atmosphere at Auburn. I tell people all the time it's one of the, I think, last few public universities that has that true essence of faith and family running through it.

Am I going to have to adjust and do the 24-hour recruiting more? I don't know. We'll see if relational coaching will withstand the onslaught of other opportunities these young men will have.

Whoever told you that is absolutely correct that I'm much more comfortable recruiting a family and a young man and being able to work with them over the course of a few years so that he reaches his potential as a player and as a student and as a man.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about the development of Damari Alston and what he brings to the running back room.**

HUGH FREEZE: When you said his name, the first word that pops in my mind is 'leader.' Two times he's been elected to the Culture Council unanimously. He has wisdom for a young man. So you combine that with his a dang good running back, too.

I love our running back room. I'm fine with nobody talking about them. I really am. But Jarquez and Damari and Cobb I think are three really, really good backs. Damari is kind of the leader of that group. But Jarquez is very quiet. I love that about him. He works his tail off. Damari, if you need something to be said to the team from that room, it would come from him, and people would listen.

By the way, our prayers are still with Brian Battie and his family as he's still recovering from his incident that happened this summer.

**Q. Throughout the week we've heard from the likes of Kirby Smart and Carson Beck on how hard it is to play inside of Jordan-Hare. What was your reaction to that?**

HUGH FREEZE: Jordan-Hare, it is a special place. I think opponents enjoy the atmosphere, and certainly we hope they don't. I think when you reflect on the memories you

want to make in this conference, that's what you want.

Again, I said it earlier, but we have the greatest fans. Our fans are incredible. The student section two hours before the game has it packed out. It's just an incredible environment that gives us an advantage, I hope. We've got to be more consistent for them, particularly at home.

There were some great moments this year. The one thing it does is it makes me feel like, Man, I want to deliver a product to them that they leave there saying, Man, I enjoyed the heck out of watching our team compete because of their faithfulness.

I do think, man, we live in a world right now that there's a lot of stuff going on. This is one place in the SEC, like at Jordan-Hare, where you come together with love and a common cause, and the unity is there in Jordan-Hare.

Heck, it's that way in this conference. We go a bowl game, I remember winning the Sugar Bowl, everybody is yelling, SEC, SEC. I'm certain they come from different beliefs and backgrounds. But football in the South, it draws people together, which is probably something we all need right now.

**Q. What is going to be Auburn's number one strength season?**

HUGH FREEZE: I would hope it's our run game. We return a lot of experienced offensive linemen. That running back room and tight ends are very solid. Our quarterbacks can run it enough that it makes people have to worry about that also. You would hope it's that because when you can do that, you have a little control over the clock and the game and kind of how things are going.

It may be me wishing that and hoping that. But I like our running back room. I like our O-line and our tight ends. Hopefully it's that. As you know, it will hopefully lead to some explosive pass plays also because of us being effective in running the ball.

That's probably what I would say should be our strength with the guys we have returning.

**Q. Talking about college football coaches getting burnout, assistant coaches, whatnot. What are you doing as a program to make sure your assistant coaches, your staff members, your GAs, actually get to enjoy a little bit of life outside of the building, especially going forward with what's coming in college football?**

HUGH FREEZE: Really difficult. There's days I

experience that same feeling. I'm certain everyone, if they're honest, says that they would.

The calendar has gotten pretty crazy. It feels like the dead time is getting shorter and shorter.

But I do think I, probably as good as any, probably a question our assistants need to answer, but I think I get them out of there as much as possible, whether it's February in the dead period or July in the dead period. Hey, guys, it's Wednesday night, go home, eat dinner with your family. We can come up here early in the morning.

I'm pretty good about demanding that of our guys and just trying to keep them as fresh as possible.

There's no question that is a great challenge. The one thing I think that we as coaches and administrators and Commissioner Sankey, everyone, we're hoping that we can get some structure that is as equitable as possible that maybe settles maybe some of the recruiting time that is demanding so much of our time.

**Q. This year you moved Ken Austin to an on field position in January. Talk about what kind of influence that may have on your team this year having him on the field.**

HUGH FREEZE: I've had two incredible quarterback coaches in my time. Very blessed to have Dan Werner and Kent Austin. I think Kent is one of the best fundamental quarterback coaches I've ever been around. I think Payton will experience the results of his wisdom. He's very, very intelligent. Can teach coverages as good if not better than most.

I think the job he did with Malik Willis was phenomenal. Malik went from not seeing the field to being a draft pick. While people will say Freeze gets some of that credit, truthfully it was more Kent Austin and Jesse Stone that are our quarterback staff that really do the work.

I see the big picture and I tell them, This is what I want, now you figure out his footwork and all of that. Kent is humble. He has been a coordinator and a head coach. Has experience. But accepts his role and does it with humility. I feel really comfortable with him.

**Q. You've been great as an underdog in your career. What is it that you're able to get your team up for big games? Something specific in the planning or pregame message? What helps you achieve that?**

HUGH FREEZE: Truthfully that's probably a weakness of mine because maybe I should plan the way I do for those

when we're not the underdog. I don't know that that's accurate, but it makes me feel that way.

I don't mind being the underdog. I enjoy going to places that have great programs. I enjoy going to play Georgia and Alabama. We should embrace that. LSU, Ole Miss, all the difficult places that we're going to have to go. I've always enjoyed that.

I let it be known to our players that I enjoy it, and you better, too, you better enjoy it. So embrace those opportunities because truthfully you take a Liberty team into Arkansas and win, into Virginia Tech and win, those are memories now. Those are memories. An Ole Miss team into Bryant-Denny and win. Those are memories.

So it's opportunities, and maybe I need to figure out how to be more consistent in the motivation for all 12 games. We played really well in the Georgia and Alabama game this past year. We were right there with chances to win those games. That gave me more confidence that Auburn can return to being Auburn.

Look, there's only six schools - y'all correct me if I'm wrong - since 2010 that have won a national championship and played for one. Only six. I get to coach at one of those six.

That is the belief our fans should have. That's the belief our administration should have. The way they support our program financially and everything else that they do for us. That is certainly the view our players should have. We want recruits to see it that way.

I mean, six in the nation. I get to coach at one of those that has won it and played for it since 2010. We're very blessed. But we need to get the roster right. I need to make improvements where I need to with our staff so that we're more consistent in all games, not just the underdog role.

**Q. You talk about players that are under the radar. Rivaldo Fairweather had a good year for you last year. Talk about him coming back, what an advantage that is, and maybe some of your other younger tight ends in the room.**

HUGH FREEZE: Rivaldo is talented. We'll use him in a lot of different ways, 12 personnel, make it look like 11. 11 personnel, make it look like it's 10 personnel. We'll flex him out, move him all over the place. He has great catch radius and really good ball skills. I think he's flying under the radar also. I think he's a very, very talented player, probably one of the better tight ends in this league.

Luke Deal, just an ultimate leader, sixth-year guy.

In-the-trench guy. Captain-of-the-team guy. Frazier can do a mixture of both. We're excited about the things that he can do also.

We need to bring the younger kids on. Micah is talented. I expect to play all four of those guys.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Freeze, thank you for your time this afternoon.

HUGH FREEZE: Thank you, guys.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports