

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Auburn Tigers

Coach Hugh Freeze

Press Conference



HUGH FREEZE: Good afternoon. SEC media days are always an exciting time of the year for us because we know what's coming right around the corner. At Auburn we couldn't be more excited about this fall and what we've done to get to this point.

Recently Jill and I had the privilege of going to Plainsman Park and seeing Butch and his guys battle for a trip to Omaha and a few weeks earlier to see the same with our basketball team, and it just reminded me of how incredible the Auburn fan base is, that they always show up and are faithful. We've had a third straight sellout.

Our president Chris Roberts often said that Auburn has earned the right to dream the biggest dreams, and that's the way I feel about our football team for our fans this year, for our administration, and for our team. I like our squad. I like the makeup of it. I like the staff. I love the energy that's in the building, and I can't be more excited about us having a chance to prove that we can compete in every single game that's on our schedule.

Heading into our third year with respect obviously to our great league, our roster is just better. We're bigger, we're faster, we're stronger. Our culture is strong. Our chemistry and carryover in coaching is here for a second consecutive year, and most of our locker room is bought into the standard to which we think it will take for us to win football games.

We brought three great ones here today in Jackson and Connor and Keldric. I know you got to visit with them, but those are incredible human beings, number one, great Auburn men and also tremendous leaders for our football team that we will count on heavily come this fall.

We have built this fairly fast. We should have won or could have won some games last year, and we've done everything in our power to evaluate why that happened and what we can do better as coaches and then get more pieces to the puzzle with more and more players. We feel

very confident we've done both. Our expectation is we embrace the high expectations that Auburn brings, and we believe this team's potential is limitless.

Q. You're 0-4 against Georgia and Alabama your first two years at Auburn. Why do you think this year's going to be different getting those games at home?

HUGH FREEZE: Number one, playing at Jordan-Hare is a definite advantage in those games for sure, and our roster is one that can compete with those teams. We've been in the games even the first two years, but we haven't found a way to win, and that's one of the secrets, I think, to our success this year is having guys that we think we've brought in that have the combination of all of it, not just skill set, but this guy's a winner and has been proven to win and now will help us get over the edge in all these close games like those two will be.

Q. You talked about the psychological test that you and the players have done. What have you learned about yourself in those tests? Jackson mentioned doing the test on his visit. Is that part of how you guys evaluate transfers?

HUGH FREEZE: We definitely try to do that with portal kids because you're speed dating; you have 24 hours to make a decision, and I like that test. High school kids, it's not as important because you're going to have time when they get there, and you've had a window of a year or two that you kind of have an idea of knowing them.

We give them that option, if they'd like to, but portal kids we like to see that. It certainly has revealed to me some areas that I can certainly improve on in communication with particular types of players that are different, and I've tried to kind of put them -- I've had my staff kind of put them in buckets. So I have it kind of on a sheet of paper where I know the way that this kid really prefers to be coached or talked to or addressed.

It really has worked and helpful to me in that my first thought today when I saw Jackson was say to him this, and that really comes from just the discussions that we've had with people over these profiles, which I think are going to

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be very helpful to us.

Q. You lose a guy like Jarquez Hunter from your running back room, but you have a collection of them in there this year. What do you expect the usage to be? What have you seen from those guys and kind of what their roles will be through all of that?

HUGH FREEZE: Damari Alston probably has not shown his full potential, and we probably haven't given him credit for as good as he is. You have somebody like Jarquez that's in front of him, and one of the things that Jarquez had that was unique was his stamina, and he really could handle a lot of plays, which limited in a lot of games the touches that you'd see for Damari or Cobb last year. I'm really excited for them to get their shot.

I think Cobb has that breakaway speed, that explosiveness, twitchiness. Damari is a real complete back that is a really good runner, great pass protector, great ball catcher, can do it all. Then we're anxious in camp to see Durrell Robinson that we recruited but did not get to see practice due to injury during the spring. I think those three initially will be the ones that get the chance to develop our run game, which you have to have in this league. You have to run the football.

We've been pretty successful at that both years, and we've got to have that continuing. There's no reason with the offensive line -- I love -- this is my favorite offensive line, when I look at it on paper and experience, size, length. So we'd better be able to run the football and protect the quarterback because I think we're pretty talented up there.

Q. You mentioned this roster and the improvements you've made, but how do you leverage it currently to be able to compete for playoff berths instead of bowl games this season?

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, you win those close games. I truly believe that in the playoff run we're going to be in this discussion because I love this team. I think we had -- now, we've got to stay healthy and we need the ball to bounce our way a couple times this year instead of against us, I'm sure, but that's our full expectation. We embrace the fact that that is what Auburn should be, in those talks year in, year out.

It takes a little time to build it, and we've been doing that. Certainly I wish we would have won more games a few times, but the future is very bright in my eyes. We've been blessed everywhere we've been to win, and I expect nothing less than that at Auburn.

Q. Could you just talk about Keldric Faulk and what he

brings on the field and off the field.

HUGH FREEZE: We owe a lot to kids like Keldric and Connor Lew, who in 2-1/2 weeks when we first got the job here, we were able to convince to come join us and now are bedrocks and leaders of our program and guys that you depend on every single day to speak truth into the lives of everybody in that locker room about our standards and how we must choose for a period of this year to truly buy in to being all in for each other and not just about self. Connor and Keldric have two of those best voices.

Keldric, many people don't know, is also one of the most giving and unselfish people I know and helped one of our current walk-ons the other day with some of his NIL money who was having a hard time trying to stay in school, and that's the kind of guy he is, and we're fortunate to have him.

Q. I was wondering if you could address your relationship with Lane Kiffin. We talked a lot this week about the antics on social media and the golf and all that, but he generally speaks highly of you when he's asked. What do you think about Lane Kiffin?

HUGH FREEZE: I'm not on social media, but I love Lane. He makes me laugh. He's a good football coach for sure. Loved his family a long time; Chris, his brother, was with me at the beginning of my journey. I owe a lot to him and his wife Angela. Monte would always come and help when he could. I think Lane's done a great job. I couldn't get away with doing all the social media, so I admire him. Go have fun with it.

Q. You talked a little bit earlier about winning the close games, and that's going to be the difference for you guys this season. What's the work you guys are doing this off-season going into this season to change that? Is it as simple as changing over the roster, changing the mentality, changing the culture of when you get to those late moments, expecting good things to happen instead of the, oh-here-we-go-again-type feeling?

HUGH FREEZE: Great question. I don't want to spend the rest of my time answering it. I'll try to answer it as short as I can. The first thing you have to do is look at you as a coach. Why did we lose those games? Well, last year they came down, those close ones, turnovers, we were the worst in the league at turning the ball over, and we did not score enough touchdowns in the red zone, and we did not play great defense on critical downs, and our field goal unit did not make some critical field goals for various reasons.

How do you improve those? You look at us first, coaches.

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We've done a deep dive into all of that to see do we need to change anything schematically. And the answer to some of that was yes, we probably need to do less, and then go get more pieces to add to the roster to where, when you do call that play, the chances of success go up because better players make better plays.

So it's a combination, but first you have to start with us as what are we doing in those scenarios, if anything, that we need to change.

Q. You've mentioned a lot here during this off-season about constructing this team, you like this team a lot, but the pressures of winning, it's a reality. Tell me what it does to you in particular, Coach, on the pressures of winning.

HUGH FREEZE: I anticipated, I accepted and expected, and I'm glad I'm at a place that has those expectations. I think, when you've done this a while, you really don't give into a lot of the pressure stuff. You all know that I'm a person of faith, and one of the things that I just, I believe is that the story that's going to be written for my life and for Auburn football and everything is going to be written, and I've got to do the best I can to turn that out.

But ultimately, I don't really have a seat at the table on the story, but I do know that we won't give into anything because we actually want the expectations, and this team deserves them. They're good enough to go and meet them. So we welcome them. We're glad that people are actually talking about, man, watch out for this team. This team has done some things with their roster that's made them better. Now we've got to start winning the football games that we have a chance to win.

Q. Obviously as you guys self-scouted and decided you wanted to go into the portal and improve on the offensive tackle spot, talk about Xavier Chaplin from Virginia Tech and Mason Murphy from USC. How does that transform your O-line led by Connor Lew?

HUGH FREEZE: We get three veterans back in the middle with D-Wade and Connor Lew and Jeremiah. And we also get the return of Too Tall, who's a two-year starter for us that can rotate for all of those, and now you have two veteran tackles that have played a lot of snaps that have the length and skill sets that really, I think, improve us from the past two years.

I've got to bring along a couple of young ones in Dre and Tyler Johnson and some of those guys, but feel really, really good about our first seven guys.

Q. I just wanted to ask specifically about Caleb

Wooden, a former starting safety for Auburn who appeared in 10 games. From your perspective, what kind of player is Caleb, and what qualities or skills do you think he could bring the Arkansas program?

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, he had a bright future, and I assume he's still working the way his work ethic was here. I think he's a solid, solid SEC football player, so I would expect him to contribute.

Q. Are you tired of having to defend playing golf?

HUGH FREEZE: I really haven't had to defend it. I just -- you know, it's something I enjoy doing, but I assure you it does not take away from my time working to take Auburn back to the top of the college football world.

Q. Last year Jackson Arnold was behind an offensive line that gave up the most sacks in the entire country, a receiving group that had all five starters out for most of the SEC season. Coming into this situation now and the elevated talent around him, what do you think his ceiling could be around this Auburn offense?

HUGH FREEZE: I loved Jackson out of high school. I think everybody did. He was a Gatorade Player of the Year, top quarterback in the country coming out. Boy, he fit everything that I believe in doing offensively, and Coach Nix believes it. We've been together a long time, and he just fits that.

So I knew how I felt about him then, but of course you're doing this speed dating here and things weren't great statistically or whatever performance-wise. Then you have to do a deep dive into why was that, and can I get past whatever that was. When you evaluate it, you said it, he had several different play callers, injured offensive line and receivers, and yet when you pull all of his throws, I still saw that there it is, that's what I saw. There it is again. He still has that about him.

Then you look at his toughness, and in the Alabama game putting his team on his back with his legs, and I mean, he had some tough runs. So I knew he had the toughness to him. And now it was just a matter of, man, let's give this guy a restart and let him regain his swagger and confidence, and I knew that the receiver room we had could assist in that, and it did pretty quickly when he found out, man, I make a good throw in this area and this one-on-one, our guys are making plays.

I've seen that swagger and confidence come back pretty quickly.

Q. Auburn hasn't had a cycle like this since

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post-World War II, 46-50. How important is getting off let's talk some football to a win in Waco on Friday night? Talk about the culture. In spite of the two years before you, I don't blame you for that, and then the roster being what it was when you got there, you hadn't had a mass exodus. That says something is going right there in the culture.

HUGH FREEZE: I'll give credit to our assistant coaches and leadership council for the culture. I talk about it a lot and set the tone of it and talk about what I would like for it to look like, but without their help and assistance, I think it's pretty difficult in this day and time to get that in a large percentage of your team.

There is zero hiding from the fact that that first game is a big game, and we must embrace that too. That should help elevate our focus all throughout our fall camp because we're playing a very good football team that has a very good football coach in Dave Aranda.

Q. You talked about watching Jackson and seeing the throws and everything that you thought you saw in high school, you could see little spurts. But what do you see that he improved most on from what you saw at Oklahoma to what you saw through spring and so far throughout your 7-on-7 in this off-season?

HUGH FREEZE: I don't know that it's fair for me to compare what he was asked to do at Oklahoma to what he's asked to do here. That's difficult, and particularly he had several different play callers.

But when I sat in that conversation with Jackson, it was clear that he had some confusion. So I would say that the one thing that I believe when I see him operate right now is there's very, very few times he is confused on what the expectation is on a given concept, a given play, a given RPO. His decision-making has been pretty dang high.

So I think that is what I would say. I mean, he has the same skill set that he had there, but I do think he has a really good understanding of what we're wanting to accomplish, and he has the skill sets to do that.

Q. Was there any strategy in taking the quarterback from Oklahoma considering you guys open up the SEC with them, or is that just a bonus?

HUGH FREEZE: I hadn't even thought about that, so I can't say that played any factor into it at all. It seems -- but that is, in this new world, for us offensive guys, that's a little unsettling because we lost a quarterback that's at Baylor now too and we open up with them the first game. So I don't think there was any strategy in that either, but it does

make for an interesting week when you start thinking about, oh, heck, if it's the same system and verbiage, that's something you do have to think about.

Q. Talk about that relationship between Nike and the transition between the Under Armour and what we might be seeing in the upcoming season.

HUGH FREEZE: We're thankful to be partnering with Nike. Mr. Knight and his wife Penny, have known them for years. I've never worn sneakers with a suit before, but I felt like it was appropriate to celebrate our turnover and partnership with them that began July 1.

It's been nice to see. As things roll in, it gives us multiple opportunities for our young athletes all across Auburn to go see it and celebrate it multiple times. So I think there's an excitement in the air to be partnering with Nike for sure.

As far as everything that goes into the decision, man, that's way above me, but our kids are excited. I know that our partnership with them will go well.

Q. You've talked about having Alex back at kicker, but the rest of the special teams unit, how much more improved do you think they can be this year? What have you seen from them with Chad now being --

HUGH FREEZE: First, welcome Chad Lunsford, who we're excited about running our special teams, back. He did a really nice job all spring of getting us installed into the stuff that he's going to do.

Fortunate to have Reed Hughes back and to be our snapper. He's been very, very consistent. Obviously he didn't get a lot of credit until something goes wrong, and that hasn't happened many times for us. So we're thrilled to have him back.

Hudson coming over from Oklahoma State, very similar to Oscar, can rugby, can stay in the pocket and kick it. So we feel like we're in solid hands there also.

Then having both Alex and Towns handling the kicking duties, we're glad to have Alex back for sure. He was very, very consistent in our year 1 in field goal attempts, so glad to have him back. I think he plays a key role in us winning those close games that we may not have also. So we're thrilled to have him back.

What would make us better is I love this team and I love our team speed better than in the past, and that makes special teams a lot better when you have faster guys on the team. We're just, from top to bottom, I think we're a little faster and a little longer and have some more depth



that will help on those teams.

Q. A decade ago, the hurry-up no huddle was all the rage. How has that evolved, and do you see it coming back?

HUGH FREEZE: It seems that most of us that were totally committed to that world, which I was, it won a lot of games, but it seemed as defenses transitioned and found ways to catch up with us, that it's kind of shifted back.

There's still some, I would say, that are totally committed to it than others of us that are really trying to play the best complementary football that we can and maybe lessen some of those snaps that your defense has to take. So that's where I've kind of landed right now as a mixture, but I think it's because, man, these defenses having to play a lot of snaps troubles a head coach.

Even if you're one that's committed to an up tempo pace, you've just got to be careful. It's hard to stop offenses these days. There's just a handful that have elite defenses that can shut down offenses. To me, it becomes a factor of, all right, what do we need to win this game? If there's a way we can move the football and lessen the snaps on our defense, I would lean toward that method immediately.

Q. Traditionally your offenses like to utilize the tight end. With this receiving room being so deep, are there going to be personnel packages where perhaps there's less tight end utilized?

HUGH FREEZE: Yes. I probably have not gone 10 personnel a handful of times in the past three to four years. It's probably been five to six years before you can look at our stuff and know we were in 10 personnel a decent amount of time.

You will see in the past few years we've obviously been 11 and 12. The you definitely will see some more 10-personnel type pictures.

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