

University of Kentucky Football Media Conference

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Mark Stoops

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the news conference for today, Coach Stoops' opening news conference with you all. A reminder, Coach is entering his 13th season, obviously continuing his term as the longest-tenured coach in Kentucky history and also longest active coach in the SEC. Coach Stoops.

MARK STOOPS: Good seeing everybody. Appreciate you coming today. Friday I know people have wondered why I've made -- no big deal, I'm just getting some cut. I'm going to look uglier than I do right now this week, so I just wanted to give you guys some time.

I know a lot of you have been wanting to ask questions and get to this point. I just wanted to give you the opportunity. Like I said, I'll be available Friday. Just don't particularly want to be on TV with a cut-up face. That's it.

We've had a great offseason. Really excited about this football team. You know, I was just going over some things with our strength and conditioning team, and they told me this is probably the first time in 13 years that we had absolutely 100% participation. Not that you're going to have somebody miss voluntarily, but there's always going to be something pop up here and there, and this summer we had two. A situation where a freshman was late a couple of times, and his unit grabbed him and straightened it out and got him right back on track.

So it's been a tremendous offseason. It's been very quiet. Guys have put their head down, have worked extremely hard. Like I said, they've been remarkable, really. You could see that with their strength, their size, and their commitment to each other.

The fact that we've been so consistent this summer says a lot about things, and that's the way I've felt. It says a lot about them. It says a lot about the team. It's the way I have felt throughout this summer, so that's a good thing.

You know, obviously as I've mentioned throughout the offseason, it's fair to say after coming off a season where we were not very pleased, failed to meet our expectations,

our own expectations, and didn't play at the level that we wanted to, that we have to have a heightened sense of awareness, and we've got to just have a greater sense of urgency. Take a good, hard look at all the systems and processes and things that we have in place and make sure we're doing things right.

Again, just attack those with urgency. We didn't want to just move past it. We had to look at everything, turn over every stone and make sure that we were doing things to the best of our ability.

I feel like we've done that. I love the addition. I've also talked about the turnover in roster. You know, after you are coming off a season like that, I feel like it was needed in certain places, and that's a good thing. You know, we needed to continue to develop the young players in our program, and obviously we needed to attack the portal, like most people. Obviously, that's a higher number than we've ever had here, but again, I felt like it was necessary.

I feel very good about those changes. I've also said, and it's true, the continuity of our staff is super important. You know, the first time I've sat here for, what, five years where I had the same offensive coordinator two years in a row. So that continuity was important.

Obviously continuing to build defensively with Brad White and the rest of the staff, super important. And Jay Boulware, what he's done on the special teams has been very, very good, very solid. I feel very good about what's going on in all three phases.

So very excited about the staff. We have a few new position coaches that have been wonderful additions. Overall I feel very, very good. We're very excited, and it's time to go.

You know, I feel the offseason was a success as far as we needed to get bigger, get stronger, and again, be more dialed in, if you will, and make sure that things were in order. You know, when I talk about those things, I'm talking about schemes, I'm talking about the way we teach, you know, the way we lead, the way we connect with players. We've done a very good job. We've been very committed to reemphasizing those things that are super

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important to us. That's spending time with our players.

With the leniency in being able to work with players through the summer, that's been great for us. We've been able to spend more time with them. We feel like we're further along. I would say most people are because you have the autonomy to work with your players through the summer, but we've done that consistently through the summer where we actually have been on the grass with them two days a week. So that has been time well spent, and I feel much better about things as we hit day one.

So, again, I want to reiterate that we're certainly not putting our head in the sand about last year, but we're also moving forward, and it's 100% attention to this year. There's been years when I sat in here in the first press conference of the year after coming off some historic seasons around here, and I didn't talk about last year. You know what I mean? I didn't talk about the previous year because you guys would sit there and say, You're dwelling in the past.

I gave you plenty of opportunity, and I still will today, to address problems that we had, and I'm not avoiding them, but we are super excited about what's going on right now and how we move forward and what we're doing this year.

I mentioned the commitment. I mentioned the strength and conditioning, the schemes, as far as working with the players all summer. I like this football team a lot. I think also I mentioned to you other people have asked why things have been quiet. Again, I've asked Susan and Tony to look at it. I've done no less media appearances this summer than I ever have in the past. I'm always available. Not going anywhere.

I think it starts up with my Coaches for the Kids event this past Saturday. We raised a bunch of money again. 650 men there supporting the Children's Hospital, but I told them, you know, the same thing, and I've told you before. I think everybody in this state can appreciate it if we just put our head down, go to work, and get this football team better. I could promise you that's what our players are doing, that's what our staff is doing, that's what I'm doing.

I'm here to have this preseason media conference. I'll take all the questions you want, and then I got to get my face cut open tomorrow. Then I get that face cut, and I'll still be around Friday, but I'll probably have sunglasses on. I didn't think it would be appropriate to have a media conference with my sunglasses on. I'm not Deion (laughing). He's the only one that can do that.

Q. You used the word "grateful" several times to talk about how you felt. In an offseason where you have gotten a fair amount of heat, how did you get to that

point?

MARK STOOPS: I think this past two, three years have been different, as you know. Everybody has talked about that, every coach that coaches college sports. It's different. Everybody, we all have our own obstacles, and it is what it is. I think I just got to a point where I have to embrace that situation.

I really believe we're coming out on the other side of that as a whole, and I think that's exciting. I think we went through some real difficult times.

You know, from myself I can't dwell on that. We had a rough year that I wasn't very proud of, and I've just taken the approach, let's just embrace this challenge that we have and build this football team because as you build, you've heard me talk for years about building a program, building the culture, building a program. That is still true, but it's also very true that you have to just build a team. Year-to-year you have to build a team. That's where we're at.

Q. Is the Kentucky football revenue share percentage where it needs to be to be competitive in the Southeastern Conference?

MARK STOOPS: It is. It is. It excites me because I feel like for the first time -- well, I just feel like we're going to be in a position to hopefully be on equal playing ground with everybody, and that hasn't always happened. I'm not throwing any shade anywhere. It's true, right?

I mean, I don't have to feel funny talking about money anymore. That's just part of it, right, part of all college sports. It's been a tough time, but I don't like talking about that because it feels like an excuse. It just is what it is. It's gone, but I do feel like as we move forward with the support of the administration, forever, but in particular as we have gone through this here this year and where we're going in the future, I really feel like we could be put in a position to be on really good ground. I haven't always felt that way, so that excites me.

I feel like as we move forward, these past two, three years have been rough. I really feel like we're in a position the next two, three years to really be in a good position, so I feel good about it.

Q. Chemistry, maybe locker room things weren't the way it needed to be last season. How nice is it to have guys like Ty Bryant, Jager Burton, who have seen the good and the bad of UK football, and also know that it means more to them since they're local guys?



MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I mean, those are two guys that are part of that -- that I'm talking about that have just been so consistent this offseason. I think Jager is a guy that you look at just physically, man, he's taken it to another level.

Him and Jalen inside, those are guys that have really -- they've always been solid and really good players, but I mean, I just think the way they've attacked it in the weight room in the offseason, they're just guys that can take it to a whole other level.

Ty, the same thing. You've heard me sit here at press conferences when he was a freshman and talk about how he was more mature beyond his years, and it's still the same. He's such a solid guy and a great culture guy, great team. So I'm excited about that.

Again, I think that is something that I've talked about through the offseason that was probably touchy with me because I feel like it did fall short, but I feel like it's never a bad culture. It's just not to our expectation. When you lose, you look at everything, and everything is on the table, and that's certainly part of it. I mentioned that when we looked at all of our things, culture is the first one, and we want to make sure it gets back to the level that we expect.

Q. Really big guys like Q and Deone, there's a little bit more juice. It feels like you got some twitchier guys up front that might have these big -- is it different looks than you might have been able to do in the past?

MARK STOOPS: We're going to look at all options, and even last year if you look at the scheme, if you look at the system, we're going to just make sure we're changing that at times, and we're not going to drastically change anything, but with these type of body types like you're talking about, yeah, it gives us the ability to do some other things. I don't want to give away too much, so I'm trying to guard that, but yes.

I do feel like with this group, we're talking about if you just go with the inside guy, you look at David Gusta. He's a guy that's 316, 320 type guy, but man, he can move. You know, he's a guy that this offseason, he did 225 38 times. He is physically what you want and very twitchy and very disruptive inside.

Then you got Kahlil, who is 292 pounds. You got Tavion. Again, I'm not making excuses, but you go back to last year, last fall and you have Tavion, who was injured the spring before, along with Josaih. Both of those guys were not even relevant last year until they got healthy, and that was way late. Both of those guys are back.

Tavion is a guy that's 300 pounds and that can move, and

he's healthy. Josaih is down. He got a little heavy because he had been injured and everything, and he's back at 320 and gives us some stout presence inside.

Jerod Smith is a guy like you're talking about that's twitchy that's 275 pounds now inside. Mi'Quise Grace is a guy that's dynamic now. He's physically on the edge. Exactly what you are looking for as well. He's, what, 272 pounds -- 271, 272. Another guy that, like, vertical in 38 inches, 10'6" broad, very athletic guy.

Then you have the addition of Sam Greene and Kam Olds on the edge as well that are both very good players and a guy like Steven who plays so hard. You got a good mixture of guys with that D-line.

Q. The secondary, you have seen players take a step where you see guys like DJ, JQ, players that played a lot last year. Where do you need to see them take that growth?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I think just consistency. Like inside at the nickel position you've got Q Scott and Jantzen that both need to play at a higher level with Q so young, but I think he's going to be a really good football player.

Then Jantzen is playing much better, much more consistent. You throw those two in with the other main four, so to speak, you have a really good group. I feel like DJ and JQ both have the size. They both played a lot. They should take their game to another level. You've got Jordan who has been a great leader. He's a guy that's solid 210 pound physically. Gives you everything you have along with Ty. So you have good experience, really good people, and as I mentioned, I think they can be a real strength. The secondary can be a real strength of this team.

So I just think where they could take it to another level, one thing is just really being dialed into the situation, football IQ, being very smart. What's the down in distance? What's the situation of the game? What's coming? Anticipating things. I think with experience, they can take that to another level.

Q. Zach Schreiner was added kind of late. What did you see from him that you all liked?

MARK STOOPS: Just depth. Depth at that position. We feel very good with Jacob Calloway. He's a guy that you heard me brag on him a little bit in the past, but really big, strong leg. Obviously you're going to need him to come along and have the consistency. We'll see when he's thrown into it and the consistency that we've had. We've been blessed with consistency at that position the past



couple of years.

So we know he has the talent. He has the leg. So we'll see where he goes.

Then Aidan Loros is really a guy that's, again, just continuing to improve and really has a strong leg and hitting it very good.

Q. When you take transfers from smaller schools, they might have shown against one or two Power 4 schools a year. What's the process for those guys now that they have to face an SEC schedule every week and making that adjustment?

MARK STOOPS: I think just that. Just that relentless pressure, and physically we've worked really hard, as always, but I think these guys -- of the addition, I've talked about some newcomers, however you want to say it. I think one thing I've seen possibly different that's a good thing, as players are getting paid, that business approach is a good thing. You know what I mean? They're really dialed in, and there are some guys that needed to get stronger, needed to get bigger, and they're coming up and doing that.

I think you see a guy like Alex at tackle playing at Bowling Green and really good player. Glad to have him. Just physically taking this offseason really, really serious and getting better.

Another one is Evan that we have high hopes for at center, but physically needed to change a little bit, and he has, and he's working on that. So we'll see, but other points of emphasis that I've talked about, you know, you look at us on the offensive line. I think it's fair to say we needed to improve in general from last year in particular on the offensive line.

Well, now we go 6'8", 326. Josh Bruan is 348. Jager is 323. Jalen Farmer is a ripped 320 and super athletic. Then Alex is 310. You got Malachi at 336, and both the left tackles are 6'8" with some size. Aba is super athletic at 325. Evans up to a solid 302 and needs to continue to get stronger, but as you can see, we got some bodies and some experience and some strength there.

Really, I could go on and on with the team. After last season we had a meeting and looked at all facets of the program and our strength and conditioning team. I really challenged them because they are amazing. They've done a remarkable job for a long time, and they have my full trust, but I did challenge them because I'm, like, yeah, we need to be bigger and stronger, but yeah, we need to be more athletic. We need a lot of things.

There was a lot of pressure put on them, and they've really delivered. Now it's up to us and our staff to make sure that we have a great camp. There's always that fine line. Again, I'm not making excuses. Went into last fall camp worried from the previous spring because I had three guys out for the year and multiple other injuries and guys that were already out with surgeries. It did have an affect.

I can't pull back. We have enough depth. We have enough bodies. We've got to go, and we've got to be physical in camp. I think it reared its ugly head in the season with critical goal line situations, critical third and fourth and ones. I own that. You know what I mean? I can promise you, we've already done that in the spring. We went full-tilt, live critical situations. We can't hold back anymore.

The bodies are the bodies. It is what it is. We'll continue to try to be smart and respect our players, but we have to have a physical camp, and we have to work in critical situations.

Q. Can you talk about the tight end where you played a lot of 12 technique last year? You lost some bodies and have some new guys. Other than Josh and Willie, what's behind that that you can count on?

MARK STOOPS: Well, Henry. I think Henry is a guy we talked about a lot in the spring, Boyer. He's a big, big presence. Not only a good blocker, but I'm going to tell you, he shows up in the pass game as well just with his size. Henry is really good, and of course, Skinner is going to be a great addition as well. He's definitely a presence out there that you feel him.

Q. I think there's only three returning guys in that wide receiver room. When you have so many new guys fighting for positions, how do you determine, kind of wade your way through the competition?

MARK STOOPS: I think that's a good point because, you know, there are a lot of guys. There's moments where one of them is showing up in certain practices and all that. I think it's got to be consistency. That's going to be a good competition through this camp.

You know, you got guys that have played a lot of football for us in Mac, you know, Ja'Mori, of course, and Fred. Then you bring in Kendrick Law, JJ Hester. You bring Hardley as a guy. Troy Stellato has played a bunch of football at Clemson. Then DJ Miller is the freshman that so far -- he was here in the spring and so we've seen a lot of him. There are a lot of -- there are some good bodies there.

I think it's consistency. I will say what's nice about it is we're out there in the summer going through what we call OTAs, but just out there working with them. There's sometimes not a lot of difference, you know what I mean, with what units are going. There's a lot of good, fresh legs out there.

I think it is also fair for me to point out that we need that group to step up. We need them to be consistent. We need them to step up. We need them to make difficult catches, and we need to be able to rely on them that they're going to make the plays when we need them to.

Q. In the spring Brad mentioned he thought his biggest question mark was edge guys. You brought in some guys to try to help with that. Can you talk about that group?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I think if you look at -- we're based out of a three-four, but we obviously get the four-three. If you look at our edge with the bigger bodies, you look at Mi'Quise Grace and Jerod Smith and Brian Robinson and Javeon Campbell and all those guys. Of course, we can move Kahlil out there as well at times and be much bigger.

I think improved, much better. Mi'Quise is a great addition. Jerod is a guy that we've had high hopes for from the beginning, and he's just coming into his own and going to be a really good player for us. Then you look on the other side, and Sam Greene and Kam Olds. Those guys are very good football players.

I think Sam is another one. Since he's been here, just physically just his body, the suddenness in what he plays. He's one of those guys that just has a lot of pop to him. He's very stout.

Then Kam, he is up to 245, pushing 250, and a guy that could bring some pressure off the edge, and we needed that. I think it's definitely a position where we needed to improve, and Steven Soles is a guy that just plays very, very hard and can create pressure as well. So improvement in that area, and again, it's another group, just like I talked about with the receivers, we have to have the consistency there. We have to have the depth.

Q. Brian Robinson, where is he at, and what do you need to see from him?

MARK STOOPS: I think he's a guy that's still putting it all together, but he's a guy that's very conscientious. He works very hard and cares a great deal. He is coming along.

Q. The projected inside linebackers, for a guy who red-shirted last year to gain strength, and converted safety, can they hold up to the pounding in there?

MARK STOOPS: Well, Alex did. Alex was one of our better players all last year. Where he was in tackles? Was he -- one or two. So Alex has already proven. He's past that. He was recruited as a corner. I thought he might be able to play corner. I liked him out of high school a lot. I'm, like, no, he's starting at corner. He's a big corner.

Anyway, he's a guy that's proven himself, and he is one of those guys that has been a great leader. Just had a great summer as far as physically taking it to another level. Last year was a great -- I would say I was just so pleasantly pleased with him a year ago making that transition, moving inside and how well he played a year ago. I expect him to take another step.

With Dave and Rayner, he's a guy that he has to continue. He's one that -- quite honestly, he has to make sure he continues to get stronger and bigger. Our whole football team has. He likes to -- he lingers around the same weight all the time, so we just got to try to continue to make sure he physically can hold up. That's why you go get a guy like Landon, who is 240 pounds, in there and is a thumper. We really feel good about him.

Then two guys that have taken big steps that we've liked all along is Grant Godfrey playing behind him as well. Then on the other side behind Alex is Antoine, and Antoine is a guy that came in that could just lightning fast, 190 pounds. He's up to, I think, like, 216, 220. He hasn't lost a step. I mean, he can run.

We feel like we're developing that depth behind him that I agree with you we need because it is hard to hold up in there. Without calling him out -- I'm not calling him out, but he just needs to hold up.

Q. You've gone almost 29 minutes without mentioning a QB, and no one has asked you about it.

MARK STOOPS: Good (laughing). Let's go prove it.

Q. (Off microphone).

MARK STOOPS: We feel good about it. We all know we need to play better at that position, but we all know we need to play better around him. We need to give him some time. We need to make tough catches. We need to have balance, and we need to help those QBs out.

I feel very good about those guys. With having above Beau Allen back as such a mature, smart, almost like a

player/coach third, we could invest a ton of reps in the top two guys, and they need a lot of reps. Just continuity and just continuing to develop that rapport within the receivers and the O-line and getting the reps. Zach and Cutter are two guys we feel very good about.

You guys are invited to practice. You've been to practice. You're going to come. I think we opened it both days this week, right, Friday and Saturday, to you all, to you guys and open to the public on Saturday. You'll see them participate, and you'll see what they can do, but I have a lot of confidence in both guys. We'll go from there.

Q. To piggyback off that, if there was a game tomorrow, who would it be?

MARK STOOPS: If there was a game tomorrow, Zach would be under center, but this whole depth chart is going to move before -- well, not the whole depth chart, but it can. It's all open to move by the first game. We have a lot of practices to go through.

Q. Then, second year in a row, you got an SEC game week two. A lot of schools play three non-Power 5 schools or Power 4 schools to get to the season started. How important is it to start fast for you guys since you are playing Carolina?

MARK STOOPS: It's Ole Miss, you mean? Yeah, we got a big game in week one. Honestly, I'm not just saying that. It's not coach speak. I think you all can recognize that's a team that is picked to win the MAC and a very, very mature football team and well-coached and everything. You know, that's going to be a big game. That will get us prepared because we have to be prepared for week one.

Yeah, we go Ole Miss. Just, in general, talking about the schedule, it's awkward this year as far as where the byes are and all that. The back half is going to be -- I don't even like looking at it because of the way it falls with no bye and the teams that we play, but it's just an awkward schedule.

Again, remember, we're embracing it. We're optimistic, and we're excited about it. It is what it is. I can't change that. I can't change when our byes are. I can't change who we play, when, and all that. It is what it is. Bring it on.

Q. You got a late addition in Seth, running back. What's he bring to this team? What do you like since he's been here?

MARK STOOPS: He's a big-time player. He's a big-time player. He's good in a lot of areas. He's explosive. He's got a lot of experience. He's dynamic. Dante Dowdell is another one. Man, he's everything we thought. He's a

really physical guy and really good player. I'm proud of Jamarion. He's really improved and gotten better. He's one that kind of that mentality that I've talked about, kind of just put his head down. He's been quiet, just been working. Heck, he's almost up to 200 pounds. He's a guy that I think he was 198 or 197. He's a guy that just physically is getting better, and there's good players around him. So there's good depth there.

Q. About Seth, he was open about how much he learned from what happened at Oklahoma. In the transfer process how do you do your homework in a situation like that? How helpful was it that Coach Boulware was there?

MARK STOOPS: Incredibly helpful that Coach Boulware was there and knew who he was as a person along with other folks that I know around that program and everything. So obviously it's very important. You do a lot of background, a lot of checking and everything, but he's really come a long way. He's learned. He's made a mistake. He has to make the most of it. He's been a very good addition. I love his personality. He's fun. He's energetic. He does his job. He's dynamic.

Q. Speaking on the receivers, Ja'Mori is a guy who decided to stay, despite not having his best year. We don't see that a lot of in the current landscape of college sports. Can you speak about his loyalty to the program and how he has embraced a leadership role?

MARK STOOPS: I think Ja'Mori is one of those guys, he came from the FIN Major. He had such a great career there, caught so many footballs. Then came here, and we were working our way through a tough season last year. It was frustrating on a lot of people, but I think the way he showed up and made plays down the stretch probably had a lot to do with that.

Just appreciate him and the way he's grown and how hard he's worked, and he's trying to be as good a leader as he can and working hard with that group. So really appreciate him.

Q. Mark, in November you mentioned that this program isn't as far off as the day you walked in the door here. Are there things from back then when you were building this program that you can use now, or is the sport is so different that that's not even relevant?

MARK STOOPS: Yes and no. Of course, there are fundamental things that you can always lean in on that -- heck, I could go back to Hayden Frye and playing at Iowa and being a graduate assistant with Hayden Frye and some fundamental aspects that you will always hold onto.



That part of it, yes, there are.

Then there's the piece that changes. Yes, it's definitely changing. As I mentioned, I think -- you know, again, same analogy. You program-build, and you certainly don't put your head in the sand when you make mistakes or things can be better. You know, you have to look at everything. I'm a big boy. You know what I mean? I don't get sensitive to those things. You better address them. Look at them and get better.

There's also certain aspects that, you know, you just better build a good team. It's kind of like in the NFL. They have a great team. If left tackle or starting quarterback or whatever it might be, you know -- we fell short last year. That's on me. I've said it over and over again. We didn't have all the pieces in place. It wasn't like everything was a mess. We just didn't have a good enough team, and that's on me. Didn't have the right pieces in place as well.

Were there other aspects? Yes. I'm not denying that either. It's always magnified. There's always things, you know what I mean, that comes up when you're not as good as you want to be. Take it all.

Q. Was it challenging to kind of convey that message during the recruiting? How do you feel like the summer recruiting went for you all?

MARK STOOPS: The portal going back to last season with the portal, we were a top-10 portal and did extremely well there. Again, without crying or going back, I mean, having a few resources helps, right? Let's not put our head in the sand. You have to have them. Then with this cycle through this summer, I've been very optimistic because I feel like now you're somewhat -- we feel like there's some outliers out there, but you're working within a cap. You have a fighting chance if there's some semblance of a cap, if you will, right?

I feel like that has given us a good fighting chance, and I'm very pleased with the way this cycle is going for recruiting when we sign them in December. I love the way that's going.

Q. On the offensive line, talk about building depth there as well.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah.

Q. Is that a goal? Do you feel like that could realistic I be in the rotation?

MARK STOOPS: The first guard in, you can move Evan up, Jager to guard, right? That's the first inside move,

okay? So you got two guards. I'm sorry. You got two centers. Then you have the guards that could swing along with Aba. Aba is going to be ready to play. He's a guy that we really feel good about.

So that gives you five inside as Hayes continues to come along. Hayes is one of those guys, like we've had for years here, that you give them time, he's going to work his way into that rotation as he continues to put his head down and get better. I appreciate that.

Then with the tackles, I feel really good. Obviously Malachi is a guy that was thrown into the fire into a very difficult situation for him a year ago, but learned from it. Getting better, getting stronger, getting experienced. I really feel good about that.

Then with Darren is a freshman that it's going to get a lot of reps because he would be the fourth tackle right now, but hopefully, you know, through a three-man rotation until he comes along. Yeah, I feel better about the depth. Certainly you feel like you have eight guys that can start.

Q. You mentioned this last spring or this past spring did you all meet as a staff to do a better job of evaluating people coming through the portal both as players and as humans. You have also said that the leniency and the rules allowed you to work with the guys a lot more. Can I assume that's why you feel so good about this team because you've had an earlier chance to get to know them?

MARK STOOPS: Any time through the evaluation period, I think everybody wants to be better or be the best they can at that, right? I mentioned in here many times, the NFL could come in here and work guys out and meet with them and things we can't do, you know what I mean, before they draft them, and they make mistakes, right? It happens.

So when I say that, again, I don't say it like that's the headline. That's common sense to improve and get better and that you are going to hit on. We're going to hit some home runs on guys that nobody thought we would hit home runs on. You don't really talk about that, but the misses are magnified. You don't want to do it, and bringing guys into the program that maybe are great kids, but maybe can't play at this level, that's not good for anybody. Certainly you don't want to bring people in here that don't meet your standard with your culture and don't meet their standard with playing. Now you're really in a bad situation. You don't want to do that.

Then with the team, I think it's just the proof is in the pudding with them. I think, as I mentioned, with us starting all the way back to last offseason there was a lot of work to



be done, and I feel like they've done that, whether it be all the way back to last winter with strength and then you take it to the mat drills or fourth quarter drills and things we do in that, the mentality that they had, the toughness that they showed.

Then through the summer and the consistency with what they've attacked things have been impressive. As I mentioned, the fact that they've been darn near absolutely perfect on attendance and also on time is pretty remarkable, pretty consistent for an awful lot of workouts.

Then with our timeline on grass with them this summer has reinforced that. I think they've been very good, very consistent, working very hard. That's what we need to do. You know, to them they're pretty resilient. They don't really listen to a lot of outside noise. They kind of just put their head down and go to work.

That's where I said maybe the freshness of 50 new faces that weren't here that didn't have the negativity of that last year, that is refreshing. That helps in certain ways. I like that. You know, the heck with what happened last year. I wasn't part of it. They're worried about what we're doing now. That's fun.

Q. How do you feel that your team has that mental toughness to -- if they experience adversity, how will they move past it kind of this season?

MARK STOOPS: I don't know that. I just know what we can put them through to try to prepare them for that and the maturity that I see in them. That's all I can judge it on because we haven't experienced it yet.

I can promise you when I talk to them, that's one thing you talk about. When we hit adversity, because it will happen, how we respond. We try to prepare them the best we can by the stress that we put them under through these last eight months. They responded to that. I like the attitude. I like the space that they're in. That's really all I can judge it to at this point.

Q. Mark, you kind of just praised unprompted earlier Jamarion Wilcox. We saw some flashes from him last year. Mentioning the steps that he has taken forward in his maturity, how much better do you think he can be right now that he's taken care of those?

MARK STOOPS: I think we all saw the talent when he was running the football, and I think you all can understand if you are sitting here and you're making those decisions, I think we all understand competition and depth drives a lot of things, right? He hasn't flinched.

He's kind of just gone through the process, and that's all you can ask of any young man. So I really appreciate him of embracing the competition, not running from it, and putting his head down and just getting himself better. That's all I ever challenge any young man, my own children. Let's not worry about anybody else. Let's worry about you and how do you get better? He's done that.

Q. A kick returner, obviously Barion was one of the best in history the last three years. Did Kendrick slide in there like he did at Alabama?

MARK STOOPS: He's definitely first option. He is. Maybe a guy like Jamarion too, but K-Law is strong and can run and has some experience, so he's definitely one, yeah.

Thanks for understanding.

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