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Media day held Monday at Kennon Sports Hall of Fame

Comments from three coaches and four senior players

Athletic Communications

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Opening comments from Rick Stockstill, Head Coach:

"I want to publicly congratulate several of our players, [Alex Suber](#), [Mark Thompson](#), Mike Cannon, Trevor Jenkins and Ted Riley because those guys graduated this past weekend. And with Trevor and Ted graduating, all of our seniors from last year's class have graduated. I just want to publicly congratulate those guys on graduating and a job well done.

"Also, so you know, Hakeem Johnson, a redshirt freshman from Jacksonville, told me over the weekend he decided to quit and go home. He will no longer be a part of it. With that, we have a very demanding program that requires the guys to give great effort in everything they do. And sometimes, you do not think you love football quite as much as you did in high school when you get to college. He said he just did not like football anymore, so he is going to go home and go to school.

"With camp starting today, I can't tell you how excited I am about it and we are as a coaching staff. I truly believe our players are very, very excited as well. I love, and I have said this a couple times this summer, the attitude of our team. They are very focused and their intensity right now, the mental preparation for this is at an all-time high. I am just excited to get out there on the field this afternoon and get it started. We have had a great summer. They worked extremely hard through the entire offseason. We're just excited to get started and working with these guys."



Head coach Rick Stockstill addresses the media at the football media day Monday inside the Kennon Hall of Fame. (MT Athletic Communications)

Q: You kind of split your workload at quarterback the last couple of years with Joe (Craddock) and Dwight (Dasher). Is the best-case scenario for Dwight to get 95 percent of the snaps this year?

A: I think so because it is a new offense. Dwight played some as a freshman, but did not play a whole lot last year. You would like whomever your starting quarterback is to get the majority of the reps. We will go in with Dwight getting the most. I do not know if it will be that high - 95 percent - but probably closer to 90 percent.

Q: Coach, obviously when you came in there were scholarship cuts, and this is the first year you will be around the 80 mark. Do you separate to this point and after this point on how your team is judged now that you are comparable with everyone else's scholarship count?

A: I know what you are saying, but to me nobody puts more pressure or judges themselves more than myself. I judge myself just like any other coach. It is just the nature of the profession. I understood where we were at these first three years and it was a significant disadvantage. From the numbers you had available for games, but also what was available for practice. People do not realize that. If you guys come to practice today, you will see two skeleton groups going on at the same time. Two one-on-one groups going on at the same time. Two pass rush groups going on at the same time. We now finally have enough players that we can do that. Again, I am excited about these guys we have and anxious to coach them.

Q: It is a little late to be starting fall camp for you guys. What difference does it make that there is no overlap with the summer classes?

A: This will be the first one. The previous three years, our first three years of practice, always coincided with the last week of summer school. We will have their full attention. To me, in the NFL, those guys have a preseason game to look forward to every week. And for those guys, the drudgery of camp, is not as monotonous as it is in college. We are going to break it down in one-week segments and focus one week at a time. Even like high school, they have jamborees or scrimmages that they are allowed to have. We do not have that. I am glad we do not have the distractions of school this first week and we can just focus on football the entire time.

Q: Since you have been here in 2006, how much improvement have you seen in the Sun Belt Conference? And what would it take to win it this year?

A: I think there is no doubt the conference has gotten better each year. You see more teams have tied as co-champions or have won the championship outright. We beat Maryland last year, Arkansas State beat Texas A&M, Louisiana-Monroe has beat Alabama and Troy has beat Oklahoma State. We are always knocking somebody off in the "Big Six" or BCS Conferences. To me, we have

good players and good coaches in this conference. I think the league continues to get better. Who is going to win this conference? I do not know. A lot of it has to do with who can stay healthy and who plays their best on the road. I think you have to be able to play good on the road in this conference because we are all about the same. Whoever plays the best that day, from a fundamental standpoint and ball security and all those factors. I think whoever stays healthy and plays the best on the road will have the best chance to win it.

Q: Coach, entering year four, is this program where you hoped it would be when you initially took this job?

A: I think so. I am extremely proud of everything we have done here. If you look at it over a three-year period, we have had some great wins, won the conference championship, have gone to a bowl game, our kids are doing great academically and we have changed the culture from that standpoint. We are on TV a bunch and have ACC and SEC teams coming to our place to play. If we look at it after 10 years of being a Division 1-A school what this school has accomplished, there are not many that can say in 10 years that has been what has happened. I am extremely proud of our players and our coaches, along with everyone who has been involved with this program. Well, sure, we would have liked to have won a couple more games every year, but I am proud of the effort we play with and how our guys compete in everything they do. I look back and do not have any regrets on these previous three years.

Q: What are your feelings when you look at week one and going back to Clemson? How does that compare when the team played at South Carolina?

A: You know, I have said we have a lot of coaches on our staff that either played or coached at Clemson. Les Herrin was there for 14 years and won a national championship there. I was there 14 years. I do not want this thing to be about us, me or the coaches, and all our memories. It is about our players and getting ready to go play a game. To me, yes, it is where my kids were born and I have a lot of special memories, but that is all it is. I am not looking at it as a homecoming or I am coming home with all that stuff. We are going there to get ready to play a game. Sure, you will see some of your old friends, but there is nobody on that team that I coached or recruited. There is only a couple left with I coached with. To me, it is about our players and getting ready to play Clemson not about going back there. It is just another game. When I was at South Carolina, five or six years ago, we went there and I have been there and done that. I just do not want to make a big deal out of it.

Q: You go from playing a conference opponent the first game of the season every year you were here to playing it in the fourth game. How does that change your approach heading into week one and week two practices?

A: It does not change our approach. We are still going to basically do the same things we have done every August. We will still prepare the same as we would when we played FIU, FAU and Troy. That approach will be the same. I think we have to know we are playing, in my opinion, a Top 25 team in the country. We have to be ready to come off the blocks and be ready to play right off the bat. We are not going to use it as a warm-up game or a preseason game or an exhibition or anything like that. We are going prepare and try to win this thing.

Q: You mentioned it is a new offense. Is it something that will look dramatically different to fans in the stands or is it more subtleties?

A: I think it is more subtleties. I think the thing I hope looks different is our pace and tempo. At times, I thought we were pretty fast last year with the no huddle. But, there were times when we were not as fast as I would have liked to have been. Hopefully, we will have a better change of tempo and different pace in our no-huddle offense. I think that will be the thing that stands out the most. We will still run the same type of plays as we had in the past. I think the most noticeable thing will be the tempo.

Q: Is the no-huddle kind of the base approach or will you use that as a change-up pace?

A: No, we will be no-huddle and then have tempos off of that depending on how fast we want the ball snapped.

Q: You mentioned on the conference teleconference a couple weeks ago that you were going to be able to focus a little bit more on fundamental work from the outset of fall camp. Do you see that as the same degree of fundamental work for the entire roster or would you like the veterans to come in and not work quite as much on some of the basics as the younger guys?

A: You always hope your older guys, like your [Danny Carmichael](#)'s, [Patrick Honeycutt](#)'s, [Chris McCoy](#)'s and [Alex Suber](#)'s, have a pretty good memory of what we taught them in the spring. The young guys are babies and you will have to start from scratch. We will not de-emphasize anything, but you hope you do not have to spend as much time with a [Patrick Honeycutt](#) as you do with a [Richard Drake](#) as far as teaching the fundamentals of what you want at that position.

Q: Coach, how helpful was it when you saw Tony Franklin available and hired him back in February after having seen him as much as you had a couple years ago?

A: I have known Tony for a long time. It was not like I had just met him or knew of him. I have known him for a while and when I had the chance to hire him, I was excited. I think philosophically our ideas of what we want offensively match. To me, it was not a

learning curve that I have to get used to this or he has to get used to me. I was excited a guy like him was out there because sometimes it is hard to find coaches that believe in the same thing. Then, you have to coach them up or they have to convince you this is what you want. I am excited Tony is here.

Q: Offensive line play was a bit of a problem last year going into camp with all the injuries. How do you feel about that unit going into this fall?

A: If the three guys who weren't able to go through spring practice because of their injuries - [Brandon McLeroy](#), [Jake Padrick](#) and [Colin Boss](#) - if those three guys can come back and stay healthy, I think for the first time we will have some depth. We should be at least two-deep and maybe at a position, three-deep, in the offensive line for the first time. Your offensive line is going to tell you what type of team you will have. If you have a good offensive line, then you will probably have a good football team. If you do not have a good offensive line, then you are going to struggle. We got hit with some injuries last year and had to play a bunch of freshmen. I have a lot of confidence in our offensive line and there is finally some competition up there between some people, which is going to be good for everybody. It will be good for the team and for those guys. If they cannot come back and with their injuries are not ready to go, then we will struggle like it was last year.

Q: Coach, the first six games of the season include Maryland, Clemson and Mississippi State. Not exactly the easiest way to start off the year.

A: Four of the first five are on the road. That is kind of what I alluded to earlier with the question here. We have got to be a good road team and be able to have some success on the road if we want to have the type of season we want. But, that is the schedule and we are not going to back down from anybody. Our players look forward to that challenge and we look forward to it as coaches. I kind of like having those guys earlier in the year as opposed to in the past they have kind of been three, four and five through the course of the year. More so, being on the road four out of the first five, is a bigger question than Clemson, Mississippi State and Maryland.

Q: Was there any way to gauge what the win over Maryland last year did for your program and the national TV win over FAU with the way the game finished? How did it affect in recruiting or people you talked to in the offseason?

A: When it immediately happened, probably not. We could not gauge it then. But, the longer it went and when we got into recruiting and how our players felt, the confidence it gave them - and I am talking more the Maryland game than the FAU game - we have been close in some of these games when we have played the BCS schools but have not been able to finish it. We were able to finish it and I think it was a tremendous shot in the arm from a confidence standpoint on our team. I think we have great fans and great support. It juiced them up and got them excited. We beat a Maryland team that went to a bowl game and won a bowl game. It was not like we knocked off somebody that is not very good. We used that in recruiting and having the first nationally televised game with ESPN in our stadium, and winning it in the fashion in which we won it. Our players and recruits loved the black jerseys and for everybody on a Tuesday night to be able to see that, from a national standpoint, got everybody excited too.

Manny Diaz, Defensive Coordinator:

Q: Coach, you are now going into your fourth year. How much have the players changed and the type of players you want for your defense changed?

A: When we first got here, we inherited some good defensive players. I think the biggest difference now is when you look at all our defensive guys, we have depth. It is just numbers. Sort of a gauge through all our recruiting efforts is the quality of athlete we are able to redshirt. We are not there all the way but you can start to see it up front. We redshirted some guys that in the past we would not have been able to our first year here. If you look at our class, the juniors now - [Dwight Smith](#), [Jeremy Kellem](#), [Kevin Brown](#) - you can say to yourself these guys have great experience. What a year in the weight room would have done for them as a freshmen. But, that is where we stood in 2006 and 2007. I do not want to nag on the players we got, but we inherited some very good defensive football players and we love the players we have now. I would say the two biggest differences are the depth and quality of kids we have. We are so fortunate to come to work and work with these guys we have. I know a lot of coaches say that, but we have high quality character kids who are fun to be around.

Q: It seems like every year you have some key players you have to replace. How do you go into fall camp and emphasize the seriousness of what you need to do during fall camp?

A: It just happens. That is the nature of college football. You are going to replace those guys every year. It seems like every year we have been here, we have had to replace two starters at linebacker. In terms of leadership, it is something that sort of just happens. You have to be careful as a coach not to push it too much because ultimately, the kids will respect those who perform on the field. And if you try to force it and fake it, you can get an adverse affect. I think it goes back to what Coach Stockstill said in terms of whom we recruit. If we can continue to recruit players who love football and are truthfully motivated enough, then the leadership works itself out especially with the guys that are becoming juniors and seniors. We have some guys that have been leaders since the day they walked on campus, but it is hard for a freshman to tell a senior 'follow me' and pass it down.

Q: With the hiring of Tony Franklin, there were people in the spring saying his offense, the way it is run, could be one of those things where the defense has been out there for a couple minutes and then the offensive takes two or three plays to score a touchdown and then you are back out there. Is that something that will affect you guys as far as conditioning?

A: I hope it is two or three plays then touchdown. The more of those, the better. To me, that's a fallacy. We determine how long we are on the field. If the offense has to punt after three downs, there is no rule in football that says we cannot be on the field for three downs too and make the other team punt. What I like about our football team now is we are in attack mode as soon as we get off the bus. Tony Franklin wants to attack their defense; I want to attack their offense and we are very aggressive in the kicking game. You want to have a mentality as a team that they do not want to play you. I hope now when teams get done playing us, regardless of what is on the scoreboard, that they feel they do not want to play us again for 365 days.

Q: In a general sense, with the widespread use of the spread offense in this conference and country, when you are recruiting and putting together a roster, do you think of a notion of a 4-3 or 3-4 front or think of five or six defensive backs these days?

A: I think you are absolutely right. We use the term 'space' players. You can call them safeties, you can call them linebackers, you can call them defensive ends. If you cannot tackle in space, you are going to have a hard time stopping offenses these days across America. I believe the Sun Belt is very advanced offensively. I think the teams here, and the feeling is the talent is not as good, but they are on the attack constantly. Defenses, we have to react and we have our hands full every weekend in this conference. There are many great quarterbacks in this league and some great offensive coaches in this league. Whatever you want to call them, you still have to have the ability to go five or six defensive backs. What we are looking for this year is to play our 11 best guys. We might feel we have three defensive ends that we feel very highly about. Or we may feel better about our defensive line than our linebackers or our third safety over our third corner. We are always going to have the flexibility to showcase those guys and not necessarily play guys because it is a 4-3 and we have to have three linebackers on the field.

Q: Talk about [Danny Carmichael](#) and how he shores up the middle of the field. You do have to replace a couple guys there and talk about the ones who you hope will step up.

A: There is an old adage of defenses that you want to shore up the middle, whether it is baseball, football or any sport. To have a guy like Danny, not just because of he is a football player, but also with his experience, toughness and leadership, everyone can draw on that. Even though we may have less experience at outside linebacker than in years past, we may be better at middle linebacker than we have been since we have been here. Defensively, we want to focus on the holes and what is new. But really, we are excited about what Danny brings to our defense because he is the guy. It is not complicated. It still starts with stopping the run and the inside run and short distances right in the middle of the field. That is the area he patrols and he enjoys it and loves the game. He is one of those guys that will make one of those hits, an impact on the game and get all the other guys fired up.

Q: Now that the numbers for scholarships have gone up, what is the role of the walk-ons now because in the past some walk-ons have had to start games?

A: We are always looking for good walk-ons. There are good players that come to us every year. I am an equal opportunity employer. Anyone that can play. We want to play our best people. There will be some walk-ons out there that are competing for various spots, but ideally, you are hoping the depth of the scholarship players makes it harder on those guys. I remember our first year, we were looking for guys from the offense, marching band and anybody that can come in and cover for us. Philip Tanner came in, if I remember correctly, and played defensive back for us. No wonder Coach Stockstill won Coach of the Year. We feel better with our numbers now than we have in the past.

Q: Tell me a little about [Jeremy Kellem](#). What does he have to do and what does he bring to the team?

A: Jeremy seems like he was born as a twin with a football and they were separated at birth and only want to get back together ever since. The ball just wants to find Jeremy. For instance, the running back will drop the ball and it will bounce three times, and then it will turn where Jeremy is. And that is how he was in high school. He is a guy that is always around the ball and would not just make the tackle. He would strip it out, recover fumbles and intercept passes. That has continued during his time here. What he has to do is not do anything different. We have had guys in that past get excited about what is said in the preseason, but then they forgot what it took to get there. Jeremy is a very grounded kid and a great human being. Not only is he a great player, but he is a better person. If he continues to stay grounded and trust his abilities, then he will be a good player for us.

Q: You touched on it a few minutes ago, but can you talk more about the quarterbacks in this league? Coach Stockstill said he thinks it is one of the more underappreciated aspects of the Sun Belt. There are a lot of different types of players. How does it make it for preparations throughout the year?

A: I am a believer the quarterbacks in the Sun Belt can match up with any conference in the country from the standpoint of depth. And I do not know if, and I will let the experts decide, that is because not so much the body type because we recruit the kid that is 6-0 or 6-1 and can play or larger leagues get the ones that are potential NFL quarterbacks that can throw the ball over the roof of the stadium. But if you look at the quarterbacks, and I will let you come to your own conclusions, of the teams we play in the BCS

Conferences as opposed to who we play in the Sun Belt, I will take the quarterbacks in the Sun Belt any day. There are some outstanding quarterbacks in this league, who can hurt you running and can hurt you throwing which always creates another problem for the defense. People always say, 'well, you played against such and such team from a BCS Conference and then turn around and play a Sun Belt team and had a hard time stopping them, but why is your team fluctuating?' We are legitimately playing better personnel. People just cannot get over the perception that in the Sun Belt the offense cannot be as good as an SEC team. But it is absolutely true. There is no question about it.

Tony Franklin, Offensive Coordinator:

Q: Tony, when you came into Troy and Auburn, the personnel was not quite there for your system. Is it more so here and does that make the transition easier?

A: The transition definitely has been easier than the other two places. Part of that is the philosophy and personnel that they recruited to versus what Coach Stock has recruited to. It definitely has made it easier. Also, the fact that they have already been doing this because the style of play is very similar. All the coaches are in, the players are in.

Q: You did not get the full season to see your system through at Auburn. Is there any personal motivation this year to make this work because of that?

A: No. I have had people ask me that before. I have been coaching 30 years and have absolutely felt no need to prove anything. I enjoy coaching. I am a good teacher. It did not work at Auburn. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong person. I was wrong to have done it. They were wrong to bring me in because it was not a good fit. I am just here to be a good coach and teacher and hopefully win some games.

Q: There is a stat going around that says it takes a little while for your system to catch on. Is that by design or just personnel?

A: Definitely not by design. I have never taken a job where I have said I will wait until the sixth game before we get good. I think everything is based upon talent, camaraderie and not just on the team, but also with the coaching staff. And sometimes with transition, it is more difficult than with those who have not done this style of play, especially the tempo part. It was a really unusual thing, although not as unusual as it was a few years ago. It takes some players longer than others, but I do know at Troy it took us until the sixth game of the season before everybody kind of got on and we knew what we were doing. At Auburn, I did not make it that long so I do not know how long it would have taken there. Here, I do not think it will take as long as I think because we have good players and they have already done something similar.

Q: Is there an ideal type of player at quarterback that could run this system?

A: I think what you do is if you find, like this case, what I have come into, a situation where the quarterbacks are already here and have been recruited, is that you take what they do and you try and adjust the offense around that. The ideal quarterback is someone who is big, strong, fast and could run and throw perfect, but there are not many of those. We are very fortunate here we have Dwight (Dasher) and Brent (Burnette), who both are very talented kids. Dwight runs around very well and is a good thrower. I think he is a pocket passer. He is a guy who can sit back in the pocket and find throwing lanes. He is that first. He is a runner second. And Brent, he is a very capable quarterback who knows how to win. That is the thing I like about him most. He was extremely well coached in high school and his fundamentals are almost impeccable. Therefore, we have two really talented kids to work with.

Q: Seems like tempo is the buzzword of the offseason as Coach Stockstill talked about the offense this season. Is there a number of plays that you set as a goal entering a game? If there is, does that number vary dependant on the opponent?

A: Not really because you never really know based on the defense what is happening on that side of the ball. There could be a lot of three-and-outs and you get the ball, of course, there is going to be more plays. If there is 10, 11, 12, 15 play drives when the other team has the ball, there is not going to be as many. What we want to do is maximize the number of plays that we can. The second year I was at Troy, we were a lot better than the first at doing that. I think in the second year, we averaged 81.5 plays, which was No. 1 in the country. And part of that was because the defense played really well. We got the ball back faster a lot of times. And I think in this case, it will be the same thing. We want to maximize, we want to make first downs and move the ball. We want to play fast because there is such a huge advantage to playing fast. It makes coaching so much less important. I do not like to match my wits against defensive coaches because they are always smarter than I am. I just play fast, then they cannot coach as well and we have a better chance.

Q: As more and more defenses get a look at this style of offense, how do you each season go in and figure out innovative ways to change things up, add new wrinkles, go forward and stay ahead of the game?

A: It is funny because about three years ago at one of the seminars I do where I teach high schools this offense, I told them they

had about five years because when Indianapolis won the Super Bowl, the way they had won it, where they were shotgun and no huddle with fast plays and changing tempo and then New England won it with empty sets and they were throwing the football 50 times a game and at different times, everyone thinks it had this trickle down effect. But I like to think this style of offense has had a trickle up effect. It actually started in high schools. High school coaches are always the most innovative coaches there are. It trickled up to college and then last year you saw it with the Miami Dolphins in the NFL. I think every year there is a gimmick of some nature that everyone is trying to do. I think Urban Meyer (Florida) was the most creative of all the coaches by actually taking the old triple option and running it out of the shotgun which nobody thought could be done. And now there are a lot of people who are copying that. We are copycats. We all copy what is successful and what others do. One thing in this style of play is that it does not matter if you play fast enough because it was somebody in World War II, maybe George Patton, I do not remember who got credit for it, but they said 'fatigue makes cowards of all men'. I think that is the truest thing in all sports because when you are tired, you cannot play as well. If you know in this offense what you are doing, then you have an advantage over the defense by just playing extremely fast. Regardless of what you do, if you do it fast, it should work better.

Q: When you go from the SEC to the Sun Belt, is it any less of a pressure that you feel?

A: It is funny because the pressure from me, the most pressure I have had ever had, is outside of football. Football has never been a pressure thing for me. From my days as a high school coach at Murray High in Calloway County in the 1980s, that was pressure. I did not feel football pressure, but you feel the human pressure of people not liking you or liking what you do. But the football part of it, no it is not different whether it is the seventh grade championship game or the SEC Championship game. I do not think it is any different. Kids play and people care about it. Like Manny said, the Sun Belt Conference is pretty dang good. Go ask Texas A&M about Arkansas State or Oklahoma State with Troy or Maryland last year with Middle Tennessee. Ask Alabama if they want Louisiana-Monroe back. It is a good conference with good coaches and good players. It just so happens we do not get as many of them as they do.

Q: Do you have any hard feelings towards Auburn at this point? And do you think you are capable of not having any hard feelings against them?

A: I think you are a huge liar if you say things do not bother you when something like that happens. But when you say Auburn, that would mean everybody in Auburn. And the answer would be no. Are there people there that will not be coming to my birthday party and I am not going to invite? There are a lot of them, but there are also a lot that will not invite me. It was a human experience and I am going to learn from it. I am glad it happened. I am glad I did it and I am glad I got fired. I am glad I went through that because in the long run, it makes me a better human being. I have learned from it and I have things that I can teach these guys, teach my kids and teach myself. I hope I can still learn because I have learned a lot from it.

Q: You could have gone to different conferences, different schools. I am sure there were other offers. You could have sat out a year or two. Just in general, why did you come to Middle Tennessee?

A: Rick (Stockstill) and I had talked before about it, actually the first time he came here. We were close, but things just did not work out at the time. We have a common friend in Chris Hatcher at Georgia Southern, who has been one of my best friends in a long time. Chris always talked about Rick over the years about how much he meant to him when he was a young coach about how to recruit and how to evaluate young people. And he liked him as a human being. We had that common person. And my wife and I are from western Kentucky. My parents are getting older every year and it was an opportunity for me to come home basically. I am only two hours from my hometown. And I really think what they have done here, and what Rick has done, has built the beginnings of something special. This is a nice community. You have a chance here to build something pretty neat and for me to have a chance to be a part of it, I am excited about that and hoping to build on what they have already done.

Q: With the year off from the conference, do you still go back to visit some of your older scouting notes or do you come in with a fresh mind as far as the teams you are playing against?

A: The teams are like all of us - they change every year. Different coaches come in and different coordinators change. I am not just a real big guy worrying about what Louisiana-Monroe is going to do. I will worry about it that week we play them and basically, my philosophy is, everybody plays something pretty simple. They are either man or zone on every snap. There is not a whole lot they can do. We just have to do what we do better and really not worry about they do.

Danny Carmichael, Sr., Linebacker:

Q: You played as a true freshman. What advice do you give the new freshmen coming in?

A: It seems like we get this question every year about linebackers being young and inexperienced. Last year, we had players without a lot of experience, with Ivon (Hickman) getting his first snaps and Andrew (Harrington) coming in not playing that many snaps. We came out and we were the heart of the defense, and I think it will be the same way this year. I have a lot of confidence in the guys I am playing with and they are working hard. I feel like we will have a good year. You just have to tell the young guys to learn the defense, stay focused, keep your head up and keep learning.

Q: What is that shock like to a freshman who might have to go up against a "big time" player this year?

A: To me it is an opportunity to be able to play against guys like that who probably have a future in the NFL and it is an honor but at the same time it is just another running back.

Q: What does it mean to the program to have the SEC and other big teams come here?

A: It just shows where this program has come from getting these teams in over the years. It shows how we have grown as a program and that we are climbing that ladder. To me you have to approach each team the same way and having them come in here is just an opportunity to get another win.

Alex Suber, r-Sr., Defensive Back:

Q: What role do you think the secondary will play and kind of bring this defense along?

A: I believe the team is growing on the defense. (Rod) Isaac, (Jeremy) Kellum, KB ([Kevin Brown](#)), those guys are really excited about playing. They have a lot of experience and they will be big on helping the freshmen guys because we feel like we need everyone to play this year to be successful.

Q: You started here as a running back and then switched positions. Looking back on it now, do you think that was the best decision to move you over?

A: I am a competitor and I am always up for a challenge. At first, it was really weird moving over but the coaches really helped me. At first, I was just playing on raw ability and they really helped me with my technique.

Q: How much has the defense improved personally and as a whole?

A: I think the biggest thing is that we have been tackling a lot more and recruiting more athletic guys which has helped us move more laterally and that has helped us to do a lot more on man coverage.

Q: Is the motivation higher for you since you missed the end of last season and have been off the field longer than most of the other guys?

A: It is definitely a motivation when you are out and do not get a chance to play. This being our senior year we really want to do big things for this program and this team.

Patrick Honeycutt, r-Sr., Wide Receiver:

Q: What would it mean to you to finish your career as Sun Belt Champions?

A: As a senior, you always want to do big things and go out on top. I think going back to a bowl game would be fitting for this senior class. The team we have right now is extremely close. We hang out on and off the field since we are so close. I think it will carry us a long way.

Q: What was the hardest part about learning this offense?

A: It was not that hard to learn the offense. For the most part the plays are pretty simple. It is just the speed and play calling and how fast it is going to be which is what we are really going to have to adjust to.

Q: You had a really good relationship with Joe Craddock last year. How do you get the same chemistry with Dwight (Dasher) now?

A: It just comes from working out, pass routes in the summer and practice trying to get your timing down and hanging off the field. I think that is where it is really going to carry it out.

Q: Did you know a lot about Tony Franklin before he came here?

A: I had heard of him. My dad is a high school football coach in Alabama so I had heard a few things. When he got here, I was nothing but impressed. He has been great to us so far and I am really looking forward to fall camp.

Q: What was your reaction when you first heard his name pop up to be the coordinator?

A: I thought we were going to score a lot of points and put up big numbers, so we will see what we can do this fall.

Q: In your time here you have seen crowds growing and growing. How much does that help you guys out when you are playing?

A: It helps us out tremendously. When we go to away games the crowds are usually bigger so you tend to get a little more up for the games so when the crowds are bigger at home it is helping us out. It makes us feel that coming home is a good thing and we have a good crowd base.

Q: When preseason projections come out how do you feel? Do you agree or disagree?

A: I do not really pay attention to that kind of stuff. I just worry about how good I can be, the team can be and do not pay attention to the other stuff.

[Phillip Tanner, Sr.](#), Tailback:

Q: Ending your career with a championship type season, is that the legacy you want to leave of yourself here?

A: That would be wonderful to leave on top as a senior and not regret anything. Then you will not be sitting at home saying I should have done this or that. To come in as a true freshman and win the conference, it is like wow, 'is it going to be like this every year?' Then as a sophomore it was not and junior year it was a lot of hope but this year something inside me says this is the year. Hypothetically, if we do not win conference or go to a bowl game but if I can sit back and say that I got better from my freshman to my senior year, I would still take that as success. I define success as getting better each and every day and thinking about the game and not just what is in the win/loss column. If you look at the North Texas game, where everyone said [Phillip Tanner](#) had the best game but if you watched the film I had a missed assignment on just about every play. When you look at success you have to look at everything not just the touchdowns and yards.

Q: Would the team prefer to play at home toward the end of the season or start the season at home?

A: As long as there are two goal posts, two end zones, hashes and a football field, whether it is at home or on the road, our goal is to go out there, get better and win. Of course we love being at home because we are in a great place and have a good fan base every year. Football is football whether it is at home or on the road.

Q: With the new tempo you are the only running back with significant carries on the team. How is that going to affect you and are you expecting to go 80-plus plays?

A: It actually helps me because going into the spring or the summer I got those guys, and while I was teaching them, it helped me teach myself and get better also. We have great guys this year and I told the incoming freshmen do not come in with the mindset of giving [Phillip Tanner](#) a breather, go in with the mindset I am going to be a starter. With that mindset they will not settle for less and it will have the team playing harder and harder because at times I will have to come out of the game and I do not want the offense to have the mindset that I came out of the game so we can not run the ball. That is why I have the guys keep their heads up and keep working hard each and every day.

Q: Looking at the schedule the first five or six games it is Clemson, Mississippi State, Troy and four of those five are on the road. It is not exactly the easiest way to start off the year.

A: Not really, but like I said I just like playing ball. Clemson is just another team, Mississippi State, Memphis are the same way. I actually like playing those guys first instead of opening up with a conference team. I do not want to say it gives you more room for error but it gives you a chance to see what you need to work on.

Q: How do you guys like the black jerseys and would you like to do it every year?

A: In our generation, it is all about the fashion and looking good, playing good. We were really excited about the black jerseys but I would just make it a blackout game and not just a home jersey. The city of Murfreesboro has come so far to bleed blue and I think it is a respect thing to the city and fans that we are still Blue Raiders. I think the significance of it would not be as important if it was more than one game or a home jersey. This year it is really important because it is against Memphis and their colors are also blue and white. They will come in their blue and white and it will help us see our fan base and make the Blackout game that much more important to us.

Q: Given the experience of a bowl game, how does that make you want to go again before you get out of here?

A: It is a big motivator. Just practices with the time coming back and knowing that you have another game. At the end of the season whether you are a freshman or senior you do not want to turn your equipment in and that is why the last game is so important. I gave away my conference ring that first year with the mindset I will get another one and that is my goal. It would be nice for me and my team and it is just a moment that I would like for everyone to enjoy.

Q: What do you think of preseason projections?

A: I am the least preseason guy. I do not think I own a preseason magazine. I have no idea where we are ranked but preseason is preseason. I do not need paper checks. You do not get a conference ring for being No. 1 in preseason. There are still four quarters of football to be played.

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