

Quotes from today's Media Day

Coaches, players meet the media

August 8, 2011 · Athletic Communications

HEAD COACH RICK

STOCKSTILL: We are very excited to start the season off this afternoon at practice. I am excited about this team. I like the attitude and character of our team. I like their commitment and how hard they've worked up to this point since the bowl game last year. I think we had a great winter program, our spring practices were good, and the work they have done this summer has prepared them for this season. We are in pretty good shape physically. We have a couple



of guys in limited roles, which have not completely healed from the surgeries they had in the off-season. Some of those guys may not be able to participate for another four or five weeks.

How much significance is put on pre-season rankings or ratings? It doesn't affect me either positively or negatively. I know what my expectations are, and what our expectations are as a team, and they are not based on public opinion or pre-season rankings. Our mindset doesn't change from year to year, based on expectations from the outside. It has no bearing on me, or this football team, or how well we play at Purdue.

With the loss of players like Dwight Dasher and Phillip Tanner, how will the experience gained last year by guys like (Benny) Cunningham and (Logan) Kilgore help this year? Benny has played a bunch the last two years, so he is experienced. D.D. Kyles had a good sophomore year, but didn't play as well last year, so he should be ready to have a good year. Logan and Jeff Murphy both got their feet wet in the first month of last season. They are not ready yet, but they don't have to be right now. We have several practices before we go to Purdue to get them ready. They've both got a wonderful attitude, are extremely hard workers, good team mates, good team players. They just want to win like everyone else in this program.

You have a different offensive coordinator again this year. How will that affect your offense?

Will you still play fast? Having two new coordinators is not going to change what we do schematically. We are going to be the same up-tempo team on both sides of the ball. I think the thing that people will notice most this year is that our quarterback is not the runner that Dwight Dasher was the past few years. Obviously, we won't have as many quarterback runs as we did last year.

Dwight carried the ball 20 times a game, and our quarterback this year may carry it seven or eight times a game. That part will be different, but that will be more to having new personnel than having a new offensive coordinator. We are still going to do the same things we did last year, we are going to be four-wide, up-tempo, try to go as fast as we can. Last year, we had high expectations, but our own expectations were higher than people on the outside. From that standpoint, there was no pressure. But this time last year, at this press conference, all we were talking about was Dwight and the situation he was in. We don't have that distraction this year, so there is a better feel going into this season. And that was a distraction, not pressure.

Are there some positives there, kind of a fresh start, with the new coordinators? The big thing about Steve (Ellis) and Willie (Simmons) is that they have been in the program a while. Willie has been in the program five years, and Steve's been here three years. I love our coaching staff. I love Willie and Steve. I think they do a phenomenal job. They are passionate. They both have all of the qualities that you look for in a coordinator. I am really excited about these guys. They don't have to learn our players. That is a comfort level for them, and it is also a comfort level for our players, too. They know what Willie is going to be like every day, and they know what Steve is going to be like every day. That is important for players to know how their coaches are going to respond on a daily basis.

Team leadership and chemistry were both tested last year; can you talk about this year in that regard? That is the challenge every coach and every team has every year. Every team changes, so it is a yearly challenge that we all go thru. We had a lot of distractions last season, and I never felt that we were close as a team or as a staff as I would like. Credit last year's team and staff that, considering where we were after three quarters of the season, where everybody was digging our grave, we didn't quit. We kept fighting and battling and got into a bowl game. When we got back from the bowl game, I knew we were going to be a really young team, and I wanted to start early talking about chemistry, talking about leadership because we didn't have a lot of experienced guys coming back. On offense, the ones we had coming back just got out of the hospital, so they weren't able to go thru the winter program, our spring practice, and were limited in what they could do this summer. I made a real effort to preach being a team, and stepping up in a leadership role.

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR STEVE ELLIS

Coach Stockstill has said his No. 1 concern is the front seven on defense. Are you comfortable knowing the largest concern is on defense? I feel good about it. Our guys are definitely going to be up for the challenge. They've worked extremely hard this offseason and I spoke to those guys last night. I'm excited about this group. We've got some young guys that haven't played a lot, so we're not experienced like we were last year. But those guys are very talented, so we're excited about it. We're ready to practice today and we'll have a better idea after today what it's going to look like.

Coach Stock has talked about last year's lack of defensive intensity. Is that something you can inject in young players? I think it's the type of guys we recruit. We are an attacking, aggressive defense. We want guys to go after the offense. The first day, those freshmen and JC guys are going to get a chance to see how it will be at Middle Tennessee. We're going to be aggressive, we're going to be attacking, and I'm excited about it.

What are you looking for in the young linebackers? The first thing is to see how those guys are conditioned. We want to make sure those guys know assignments and know schemes. If you watch

their high school football tapes, they're good football players. So for those guys to come here, to buy into our system, to buy into what we're trying to do defensively and understand the team needs - that's the biggest thing. Don't be a great player, just understand team defense. Be a family, be close and let's do what we need to do to get this thing going in the right direction.

How much adjustment has it been to become a coordinator? The biggest thing is that you come to work every day. When I was a position coach/special team's coordinator, you take the same philosophy and same beliefs you take doing that role as you do a coordinator. I've got great trust in (the defensive coaches). For us, it's the same old thing. We'll come here, go to work and put the time and effort in. It's great to compete. Anytime you're in a line of work or a position of ownership, you want to have good leadership from a senior standpoint or a freshman standpoint. So for us, like Coach Simmons said, it's more of a title standpoint, but we're here to do a job.

Is Darin Davis responsible for calling the signals on defense? Darin is very capable of doing that. It depends on how other guys develop. But I think as a team unit, we have to take pressure off of those guys and put those guys in the best position possible for making calls on defense to go and attack the football. After two-a-days are over with, as a staff we'll get together and decide who will make the calls. But right now, our biggest things are forcing turnovers, playing tough, playing physical, and we'll take care of that part of the game later.

Who do you think would be the first guy prepared to step up? Corey (Carmichael) did a lot last year. He did a great job for us. Very tough, physical and has a good understanding of football. His dad was a high school coach, so he has a very high IQ for playing the game of football. Steven (Roberts) is a guy we're depending on. He's coming off his ACL injury, but we're expecting a lot out of him. He's big, he's tough and he can run. Christian (Henry) is another guy, so we've got about four or five guys at that position that are good players. We're going to keep developing those guys from a coaching standpoint to see who will be the first guy to take that snap. But again, to be a good defense, to be a good football team, if you've only got one guy at that position that you can count on, then you're not going to be very good. Our job is to make sure we've got three capable guys going out there anytime, at any point in the football game to be productive for us as a defensive unit.

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR WILLIE SIMMONS

On if he plans to move the offense toward the running game...

I think it's our job as coaches to mold our scheme around the players we have. We no longer have a quarterback that's going to carry the ball 20 to 25 times a game. The guys we have are throwers first and runners second. There will still be a running element involved in the offense, but we have to fit our scheme around the players we have. We have talented running backs who are more than capable of carrying the ball and talented wide outs who can catch the ball as well. So one thing for us to do is to figure out what our guys can do early and develop a scheme within what we do philosophically to maximize our potential.

On whose offense it is - Stockstill or Simmons

The great thing is we share the same philosophy. Ultimately, it's Middle Tennessee's offense. Of course, somebody has to call the plays and I'm fortunate enough to be blessed with that position. Coach Stockstill and I have been together for over 10 years now and I played in his offense when he was coaching it. All of the offensive coaches share the same philosophy and I think it brings cohesiveness to this staff. The players see it and they believe that we're all on the same page and

beat as one heartbeat.

On what the QB needs to show to know he's the guy

I think the most important trait a quarterback can have is the confidence from those other 10 guys. When they look in his eyes, they know he's going to get the job done. Once that guy develops it with those guys, we'll know he's the guy.

On the adjustment of becoming a coordinator

"It's no different than what Coach Stockstill talked about earlier. You have seniors graduating and freshmen coming in, so it's a different team and different staff because it's another year. We have to all be on the same page regardless of whose leading. If everyone isn't following, it's not going to work. We have a great situation now where everyone on the staff is all on the same page. Our team is all on the same page. Everybody's playing for Middle Tennessee. Coach Stockstill has done a phenomenal job of conveying that oneness that we're talking about. We're talking about being a team, and that's everyone included. Players, coaches, equipment managers, water boy - it's everyone involved and I think we're headed in the right direction."

On the running back rotation

If you look around college football, pro football, any level, you don't play with one running back anymore. The days where guys get 30 carries a game are over. The game has sped up on every level, so I think you've got to have more than one capable guy. If you've only got one guy, like Steve (Ellis) said, you're going to be in trouble because you're trying to protect that guy. All the guys we have bring different traits to the table. Benny (Cunningham) is just an all-around football player. From top to bottom, he's probably our best football player just because he does so much. He never comes off the field unless we're on defense. He's a smart football player and natural leader. He does everything well. He works as hard as anybody we have and he's just a fun guy to coach. D.D. (Kyles) is a guy that has a world of potential. With the ball in his hands, he's as good as anybody we have to make plays, explosive plays. He's the guy that's just got to continue to be consistent, do the little things right and focus on the details. Both of those guys are more than capable of helping us be successful on offense.

On solving the turnover problem

One key thing we try to teach them about turnovers is fundamentals. The main thing that causes turnovers is poor fundamentals. A quarterback late on the throw, receiver short on the route, running back not securing the ball - that's where probably 90 percent of turnovers come from. If the guys do what they're coached to do and work on their fundamentals every day, then it cuts the turnovers down. Of course, no one has ever played the game and not turned the ball over. We know it's a reality, but it's our job to get better at fundamentals and stress the small details that prevent you from having the 3, 4, 5 turnovers a game that we had last year. We just need to be a more sound and more well-coached football team.

PLAYER QUOTES

Running Back Benny Cunningham

On new offensive coordinator Willie Simmons ...

I feel like I have a good connection with him since I am a running back and he is my position coach, so I trust him. I know what he expects from the team and that is to give everything we have every day and push the tempo. The entire offense trusts him and we need to bring it together and go out

and execute.

On the new season ...

I feel like this season gives everyone an opportunity to start fresh. Last season is behind us and in the past. We start today and decide how we want the season to go. It does not start the first game of the season; it starts today. If we go out and just focus on taking it one day at a time and winning each day, then I feel like we will be a good football team.

On stepping into a leadership role ...

I just have to go out and give great effort. Now being a leader, I feel like it will not be much different this season because I have people like quarterbacks Logan Kilgore and Jeff Murphy and safety Derrick Crumpton and linebacker Darin Davis with me. I do not feel like it is that big of a role for me. I just have to go out and work and participate with these guys and make sure to keep the tempo up and I will be fine.

On the team being under the radar ...

I feel like it serves as motivation. Being overlooked is going to push everyone. If you forget where you are, it will remind you that you have not accomplished anything yet. Entering the season highly-ranked can get to some people's heads. We do not have to worry about that this year. Everyone is starting at ground zero and we need to go out and earn our respect.

Quarterback Logan Kilgore

On how last years' experience will benefit them this season ...

Last years' experience is going to help a lot because we will know what to expect heading into each game and what it will be like from traveling to pregame to the game. I think the experience will go a long way.

On adjusting to new receivers ...

I think Coach (Justin) Watts has done a great job with those guys as far as communicating what we want on specific routes. It should be a cookie cutter type of thing. If we are running a certain route, it should be run the same way by every receiver. In addition, there are guys with different strengths. Wide receiver Sancho McDonald is a taller guy who is a deep threat and then we have other guys who are smaller and quicker. It can be a different type of throw depending on who the receiver is, but with the amount or repetitions we do, it should not matter.

On his experience at the 2011 Manning Passing Academy ...

I think hearing things pertaining to turnovers was extremely important. We were 120th in the country in turnovers last season. Handling the football is something I hear from the coaches and is something that was stressed at the camp. As a great football player, you will have the opportunity to make the great plays that show up on highlight films where you can show off your ability. However, for every 3rd-and-six where you need to take four yards and punt on fourth down, it can be just as important. Hearing that from Peyton Manning and the other guys at the camp talk and hearing them talk about preparation and knowing when to take chances and when to just tuck the ball and take a sack was extremely important. As a young player, you want to make every play and throw an 80-yard pass every play. To hear those guys say that it is ok to throw a short pass and live to fight another day was very important.

On being compared to former quarterback Dwight Dasher ...

I feel like with the way I carry myself, I do not need to necessarily be compared to anyone else. What I do off the field is the same and it does not matter if it is myself or running back Benny Cunningham, quarterback Jeff Murphy or any of these other guys. As far as doing the opposite of what former quarterback Dwight Dasher did, I feel like I certainly want to take care of the football. I feel like that is the focus. Turnovers will get us beat and it is not a matter of skill level or anything else. It is a matter of being smart and taking care of the football and punting when we need to punt and realizing that sometimes it is better to rely on our defense than force something that is not there. I think last year we tried to do too much sometimes and we tried to score 14 points with one pass which cannot happen. If we have guys covered down field, there is nothing wrong with completing a short pass to running back Benny Cunningham because all it takes is one broken tackle for a big play to occur which is just as high a percentage as throwing the ball down field. I do not feel like I need to compare myself to Dwight Dasher. I do not feel like I need to do the opposite of what he did because there were lots of positive things that he did. However, as far as carrying myself the right way off the field and not being a distraction, I would definitely like to step up and be a leader.

On feeling of changing of the guard ...

Any time a new year begins you have seniors that have moved on and new guys that will step up. One thing about this team that is different than last year's team is that last year was looked at as a veteran team. This year, while we certainly have senior leadership, we have the entire team that is stepping up and becoming leaders. We have freshmen, sophomores and juniors stepping up and pushing each other. It feels like a collective team effort rather than just the seniors stepping up and underclassmen being quiet because it is not their team. This is everyone's team. Our coordinators have told us that the best players are going to play. It is not a matter of who has been here or anything else. Whether you are a redshirt freshman or a fifth-year senior, the best player is going to play and I think everyone is excited about that.

Quarterback Jeff Murphy

On how last years' experience will benefit them this season ...

It is not just the experience of playing as both I and quarterback Logan Kilgore got to play a good bit last season. The experience of going on road trips and sitting in on meetings and the fact that we have been through a fall camp and day-to-day activities during the season is a tremendous advantage.

On developing a rhythm with different receivers ...

We throw so much with every receiver that we get in sync even before the first game of the season. I do not think it is a problem that we rotate lots of receivers. I think that gets fresh legs on the field and it can only be a good thing.

Linebacker Darin Davis

On Defensive Coordinator Steve Ellis ...

He is a very enthusiastic and energetic coach. He brings an excitement to our defense which brings an excitement to all of the players. If you have players who like a coach who brings that little bit extra then you will have a great team. If you have a bond together and your team and the coaches are all on the same page then you will have great chemistry.

On playing "big-name" opponents ...

We take every game as a normal game and take them all one step at a time. There are no big games on our schedule. The only reason a game is big is because it is next on our schedule. So,

whether we are playing a team from the SEC, Big Ten or Sun Belt, it is just another game on our schedule that we want to win.

On possibly having the opportunity of calling the defensive signals ...

As a senior linebacker coming up in this defense, I have always wanted to be the signal caller. It is an opportunity to be a leader on the defense. We have people like linebackers Craig Allen and Corey Carmichael whose older brother was a good player here. Right now, there is a learning curve that they are going through, but they are great players with lots of talent and ability. However, you also need senior leadership on the sidelines and on the field. If Coach Ellis would like me to be the signal caller, then I will.

Safety Derrick Crumpton

On Defensive Coordinator Steve Ellis ...

We know what to expect from Coach Ellis. He has been working with the cornerbacks for a couple of years. He is a very enthusiastic coach and will bring enthusiasm to our defense. He is also going to bring a hard-nosed mentality to our defense that I feel we were lacking last year. We are excited to get on the field and begin fall camp and begin working with Coach Ellis.

On having new starters on defense ...

I am excited to have the opportunity to lead such a young and energetic group of players. We have young players like linebackers Leighton Gasque and Christian Henry. Those types of young players are going to enter our system and I feel like they are going to step up and make plays. Aside from that, I look forward to being around a new group of players and having the opportunity to lead them with the very best of my abilities.

On the comfort level with new players ...

The players who are going to start this year and the players who are going to see more playing time this year are players who I have been playing with for years. As you may know, I was not a starting safety, but I was a backup last season and I was on the third team as a freshman. I have been playing with guys like safety Denzell Guerra for several years. Even though we have only been playing together in practice, practice makes perfect. I feel very comfortable playing with guys like Guerra and cornerbacks Arness Ikner and T.L. Edwards and they are guys who I know are really hungry to begin fall camp and begin the season. As far as team chemistry, I feel like we have great chemistry and I feel like that is something overlooked when talking about our secondary.

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