

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday July 11, 2017

Dan Mullen

Mississippi State coach



THE COMMISSIONER: I do need to make a point of clarification from yesterday. I neglected to tell you the U2 song was called "Grace" from All That You Can't Leave Behind album, the last track on that album. That's notable because Dan and I were comparing U2 concert notes in Boston earlier this summer. Dan is entering his ninth season at Mississippi State, ranks third time all time total history for total wins and lead the Bulldogs to seven consecutive Bowl games and has been voted SEC Coach of the Year and Maxwell Football Club Coach of the Year. Mississippi State University head football coach, Dan Mullen.

STEVE SHAW: Thank you, Commissioner. It's quiet when you walk up. I think next year we want to add some walk-up music like the baseball games so as they introduce us, we'll sit in spring meetings and create our own walk-up music. I got to have the thing behind with Where the Streets Have No Name playing from the Joshua Tree Tour this year.

I want to thank Commissioner Sankey introducing us. He does a fabulous job for this league. I know one of the challenges especially for me going into year nine is it's sometimes easier to build than maintain, and I know he constantly works to make sure that the Southeastern Conference remains the premiere conference in the nation and always trying to think outside the box and improve us and how to continue to keep us on top and does an amazing job of that.

This is my ninth year up here on stage, and I was thinking about the time has flown quickly in those nine years some ways. Other ways, it's been quite a long time. I looked up, you know, the iPad had not even been released on my first SEC Media Days. So now everybody, I think, in the United States, there's more iPads than people. They hadn't been created the first time I came up here. So it's been a long time.

Going out to my son's baseball games and caddying yesterday for him yesterday in a golf tournament, he was

6 months old. The time's flown a little bit for me, but it's been a fun ride. You know, I'm blessed to be a head coach at Mississippi State, to be there, and have the opportunity to go into year nine. I think we've been

able to do a lot with the program over those nine years.

We're looking this year hopefully to make it to our eighth consecutive Bowl game, which would be a great fete. One of the things when I came here was to build a program that wins on a consistent basis, and I think we've been able to build and do that, and I'm really proud of that, proud of our players, what they've been able to do for us, coming off a year last year and making a Bowl game in a very unique way to me. We made a Bowl game last year because of academics, not because of our wins on the field.

And we found a lot of different ways to make Bowl games throughout the year, whether it's winning the final two games of the season. One of the years, we were number one team in the country for half a season and made a Bowl game. Last year, to win the final game of the season, the regular season, and then find out because of APR, to be able to stand in front of your team and because of the academic success that those players and the players that came before them have had allowed us the opportunity to continue our Bowl streak and keep playing.

So I'm very, very proud to be able to stand in front of the team and tell them that of how we've built the program that way. Last year, you know, coming into this season for us, we have some guys coming back. One of the things, there is always comfort when you have a quarterback that's played coming back. We have Nick Fitzgerald starting last season for us coming back, had a pretty solid year last year, lead the SEC in total offense, had a great year running the football.

You know, in quarterback development, everything is about constantly improving how you throw the football, so hopefully he's having a great summer. We can't be with them. There's a huge amount of development that goes on in the summertime at the quarterback position. When you're not around them, what they're doing on their own is going to determine a lot of your success. But we need him to continue to improve, continue to grow, and continue to develop. And if you get to look next to him, you get comfortable. And you have a guy, a running back and returning starter, Aeris Williams, coming back, who started several games at the end of the year last year in the backfield. So that's a comfortable thing.

Upfront, on the offensive line, one thing, we only have 30 combined starts on all of our offensive line coming back. But we have four different offensive linemen that have started at least one game in their career. So even though there's a young group with maybe not a lot of experience, guys have been in the moment. Guys have started. Guys have played, and that's important to us.

We have all our tight ends are back this year. You know, the position on offense, we're going to be young at is the wide-receiver position. Donald Gray is here with us today. It's great to have him here as a graduate, a senior, been a great leader for us. I know as you get to go see him, got a lot of personality, going to try to compete with me in the shoe-game today to see who has the best shoes. We'll let you all vote on that maybe at the end of the day. That position overall is going to be young.

Defensively, a whole start for us on defense this year. A lot of players, we got -- I don't think -- we don't have one senior on the defensive line. And it's going to be a young group at the linebacker position, going to be glad with some young players.

Leo Lewis played a bunch last year. Dez Harris who is here with us today, another senior from Birmingham, who is a great story. It is great having him here today. He suffered multiple knee injuries during the course of his career, never let any of adversity get to him, continued to work and fight through it and develop. Here he is as a senior having the opportunity to have a huge year.

And then in the back end, we have some new faces, a couple junior college players coming back, but the biggest one that we -- I'm sorry, junior college players that we added to some guys coming back with Jamal Peters and Mark McLaurin back there. But the big one there for us is to have Tolando Cleveland come back from having missed last year to a knee injury coming back for his fifth year, senior year for us. He was probably our top DB last year. And now to have him come back off of injury and be able to play for us this year is huge.

Defensively, a different personality with Todd Grantham on the defensive side of the ball, running our defense. It was great to get somebody of his level to come to Mississippi State and run our defense. So in the final play, I think we have here with us today Martinus Rankin, a great offensive lineman, has worked his tail off in the program, has the flexibility -- one of the great things he got to do was play center all during spring ball. He started at left tackle last season. And as the season gets on, we do expect him to move back out to

left tackle with Elgton Jenkins moving back into center after Elgton missed this spring due to injury.

We expect to have a really good year. I like the attitude that our team has had this offseason that they've brought to the table this summer, their work ethic, their demeanor of this football team I'm excited about. Even though they're a young group. We only have 12 seniors on the roster this year and a very young football team, but I'm excited about what the season's going to hold, excited about year number nine and finding a way to still be here and excited to continue to build this program to be a program that competes or hopefully has the opportunity to compete for championships on a regular basis in the Southeastern Conference.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. If you have a question, please raise your hand.

Q. I was just curious, Texas A&M and Missouri joined the league five years ago now, what do you think about what they've added to the league? And do you feel like they've assimilated to the culture fairly well during that five years?

COACH MULLEN: I think so. Certainly, I guess we deal with Texas A&M a lot more than Missouri. We played Missouri once, one time, but we played at Missouri. My recollection of it, it was a Thursday night game, and we probably could have used an arc to get in and out of the game that night. It was -- it rained so much. So the most deafening thing was the rain pounding on your helmets and your hat that night.

But when I've seen them, it looks like a great atmosphere, and obviously they've played. They won the East several times. I think they adjusted to the league.

Texas A&M, obviously, you see them. I mean, you go to the stadium, fix in, the passion the fans have, how they play, how Kevin's built that program and how competitive they are in the West, which is a competitive league.

You have seven teams that expect every single -- every game you play, you go in expecting to win all seven teams that are on that side of the league. I think they've adjusted really well in the league and bring a lot. I know they both bring a lot to the league with their style of play, the excitement, and obviously their fan bases.

Q. Dan, you've won more games in Mississippi State than anybody in an eight-year period. Is that as good as it gets you think or do you think you can do even more and what would it take to do

more?

COACH MULLEN: Well, you know, I don't know as good as it gets. To me, I'm -- my life has no finish line. I tell the players that. There's no finish line. So we're always striving to get better in everything that we do, every single day, trying to improve and reach our potential to be the best that we can be.

There's obviously a lot more ahead of us. We have not won the West yet. We have not won an SEC Championship. We have not won a National Championship yet. So there's an awful lot ahead on the table of goals that we want to achieve as a program, but I am proud through all of the work of our players. One of the things I take a lot of pride in looking at our guys throughout the year to come back and work with us, come back, and they are around the program.

I know they take a lot of pride in what they've been able to build. And the expectations around the program have certainly changed. And the expectation is not just from the fan base and the media, but really the expectations of the players which is the most important, the players within the program, and our former players that played for me of what their standards and expectations are that they want to see, that they've helped build a foundation. And they want the guys that are there now to continue to build and continue to grow on that and continue to take us to a higher level.

Q. You've done a great job throughout your career developing and evaluating quarterbacks, first with Alex Smith and Tim Tebow, Dak Prescott and now Nick Fitzgerald. What do you look for when you're recruiting a quarterback and what did you see in Nick Fitzgerald that you thought was special?

COACH MULLEN: You know, there's a lot of different things that we go and look for within the quarterbacks. You know, the biggest thing, you got to watch them on film. You got to be able to sit down and talk to them. All of them you try to get to camp if you can within a camp where you actually get to coach them and work with them one on one.

The biggest one to me is you take things that you can coach and you take things that are harder to coach, and you really want to look for guys that have the traits that are hard to coach. You know, if they have some of the skill set and things, whether it's the leadership, the mental, physical toughness, intelligence in processing information and decision making, those are some things that are sometimes harder to coach.

You can coach someone to throw. Now, there's all different levels of that, but you want to look at the

things that are harder to coach. And if they have certain part of those skill sets, then they have the potential for the things that are coachable. For you to really grow and develop with them and help teach them, they're going to have a huge upside as players. And a lot of those guys, those are the things that we look for because the names that you mentioned, all different shapes and sizes, all different maybe skill sets. All of them have tremendous mental and physical toughness. All of them are great leaders in their own way. All of them are great competitors in their own way.

You know, and I don't get honed in on there's only one way to do it. What you want to look for, do they have those traits of being a winner. And I know that might sound coach cliché, but one of the things Dak Prescott says when NFL teams call and ask about Dak Prescott is he won. He took Haughton High School to levels they had not been to. He took Mississippi State to be the number one team in the country. People are surprised he took the Dallas Cowboys to the playoff. He's a winner.

If you want to look at a quarterback, a big trait is does he win. And all of those guys that you talked about all had tremendous success at every level that they played football at.

Q. Coach, I'm going to keep you in Dak mode for just another couple minutes. Have you put him in touch with Nick just to give Nick an extra resource, an extra mentor? And secondly, what do you expect from Dak Prescott in year two as a pro and why do you think so many NFL teams missed on him in the draft?

COACH MULLEN: You know, I don't -- why they missed him in the draft, I have no idea. Each team, one, when you get to the NFL, everybody is looking for something different. You may not be looking for a quarterback or someone of his style. That's very unique where you might slot a quarterback in this year's draft or what you're looking to get in that position.

It's hard to say teams missed on him because you don't know what their strategy going into the draft was. But for the first party, he does. I know they talk. I don't know if it is on a constant, regular basis. I know he remains there as support for Nick, and he remains there for everybody in the program.

I think one of the great things about Dak Prescott that I saw and a great moment for him that explains how he -- what his beliefs are in Mississippi State and how he sees our program, was at the women's Final Four last year, where you see a lot of former players, maybe they're up in a box sitting in a VIP protected lounge. Here is the quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys in

Dallas at the woman's Final Four, and he's jumping up and down with a towel in the middle of the fan section going crazy. That shows his passion for the university, not just with Nick, but as with all of our players. Dak as well as other former players always want to give back and be there to help guys that are currently on the team on and off the field in their futures.

Q. I'm curious, did you anticipate the kind of impact that Nick Fitzgerald was going to make last year during this time or were you even somewhat taken surprised by what he was able to accomplish?

COACH MULLEN: No. I knew the skills that Nick had. I thought, you know -- you know, I think people before -- we thought, you know, since the day he's got on campus, he was our most athletic quarterback. You know, and so we knew he had the athleticism. We knew he was a great runner. He ran a lot of wishbone in High School.

So when you get into making decisions in the run game, that that was going to be very, very natural for him. And I knew he had a really strong arm. So it was going to be how he adapted to playing every day, his decisionmaking within the pass game. And I think from game one to the final game of the season, you saw a great deal of improvement with him doing those things and understanding the system.

So I wasn't surprised, even though I know coming out of high school, he wasn't a very highly rated player, didn't have all of the accolades that a lot of other recruited players had, but I knew he had the skill set. And I got to see it every day at practice that not everybody else got to see. I really wasn't shocked with some of the success he had last year.

Q. Coach, you are opening up your SEC slate with LSU this year. You had a couple really tight games with them in the past. Is that a rivalry that's kind of budding for you guys? You enjoy that type of environment against that kind of team?

COACH MULLEN: It is. It seems to come down to the last play of the game the last several years right down to the wire. And, you know, I think when that happens, I think coming into it, the guys almost expect it to be that way. They expect it to be a tight four-quarter battle. And when we're going to play a team with all of the talent that LSU has, you got to be able to play for four quarters, to continue to make plays all of the way through the final whistle, or we might have to find a way to make a play -- make the play on the final play of the game to go in and the mental toughness and focus you have to have throughout the course of that game when you're playing a team with the talent that they have.

Every single down, they have a guy that can make a difference, so you have got to be focused on everything you're doing. And over the last couple years, it seems that it's been that type of game right down to the final whistle. And we've come up on the short end the last two years, but you know, I think our guys have the confidence that we can go make the final play this year and being at home and get that home-field advantage to try to find a way to win it.

Q. Nick didn't have the best games against LSU, Kentucky, Alabama, but each time, the next time he bounced back. What is it about him that kind of allows him to flush bad games and step up the next time?

COACH MULLEN: You know, we spend a lot of time with the quarterbacks on -- you know, it's all about the next play. You know? I mean, hey, you come out and you light it up eight games -- if he can light it up the first eight games of the season next year and be talk of the country and be leading the Heisman Trophy voting, if you get tired of that attention, just throw a couple picks and everybody will stop talking about you.

But it also works the other way. If you don't like how they're talking poorly about you, let's not worry about what happened in the past. Let's worry about going and throwing and scoring some touchdowns on the next play, on the next drive, in the next game. You got to have a short memory, a short memory in the emotional side of it. I can't get too upset about having a bad game and I can't get too excited about having a great game, but I have to have a long memory of what happened to not make the same mistakes that I've made. Whether good or bad, I got to learn from every single play as I continue to move forward. Nick, that's part of quarterback development, and he's bought into doing that.

Q. Dan, you mentioned that you wanted to see Nick Fitzgerald progress more as a passer and improve his completion percentage, but you also mentioned how young the wide receivers are. What's your level of concern with him being able to do that with that young group?

A. I think part of it for him is those guys working together, having trust in what they're doing. I do think a guy like a Donald Gray that's been in the program, that's a great worker of setting that bar high of the expectations of the receivers, having some experience at tight end at running back help.

One of the great ways, if you want to improve your completion percentage as a quarterback, which Nick has to do for us, is to make nonspectacular plays. You know, don't be afraid to take a check down. Don't be afraid if they're sinking. Hey, I'm

just going to take an underneath throw over and over and over to get you up before I take a shot down the field.

Young quarterbacks struggle with that. They want to hit the long ball, especially a guy that has a strong arm like Nick, I want to take shots down the field. A lot of times in High School, they think that's the big play. I want to go make a play happen. Those nonspectacular plays help. And I think for him with the experience is managing the offense that way. Take what the defense gives you. Don't be afraid to check it down or throw it down underneath. We'll open up some throws down the field, which will help him not just increase his completion percentage, but also help out those young receivers where he's not forcing the ball down hoping they go make plays in shots down the field, that he's taking educated shots down the field to those guys where they are in better position to make the plays and help them game confidence.

Q. What is the greatest area of growth that Nick Fitzgerald can show this year? And also Bret Bielema, as a new father, what advice would you give him for that role?

COACH MULLEN: I tell you what, the one thing I think he's going to learn, I'll start with Brett, is learning how to make sure you balance your life and balance your life out. And I think it's going to change him an awful lot. You know, the greatest thing you have is, you know, win or lose on a Saturday, you're going to come home to a family that loves you. You're going to come home to a family that's very disappointed maybe if you lost or really excited that you won and a family that takes on maybe a lot of pressures that we deal with as head coaches, but to make sure that you don't make it about you. It's about them. It's about being a family and loving on your family and their growth.

You know, I take great pride in, you know, going out. This time yesterday, I was a caddie in a golf tournament in Georgia, walking around for my son over their lake house, to take pride in those moments. I love being a caddie rather than being a head coach in the Southeastern Conference.

The Nick part, you know, for him, it is the constant development of being a quarterback. Guys, if you look at skill sets, Nick's got size. I'm not going to make him any taller. He's got a great physical -- physique build at about 230 pounds to be a quarterback in this league. He's a great runner. And he's got a strong arm. So he has the skill set to do it. But it's the development of a quarterback.

I bet if you look this summer, Tom Brady's working on

his pocket, his throwing, his throwing motion, how do I become more accurate, how do I become a better passer. That's a skill and that is a skill you can constantly work on. So the biggest strides we need to see in Nick is his consistency throwing the football, the balance, the accuracy, the decisionmaking of when he's getting the ball, how he's throwing it, what type of throw, is he taking a little off it on this drag route, is he leading receivers, the accuracy, balance to maybe make an off-balance throw and not just I'm set in the pocket to make a throw. How quick can I get the ball out of my hands in a bubble screen when it's there? How can I stay in the pocket a half a second longer or slide the throwing lane to make an easier throw for me? Those are skills that are developed over a very long period of time. And the more you develop on them, the more successful you'll be as a quarterback.

Q. Dan, the stardom of Dak, has that opened more quarterback recruiting doors for you?

COACH MULLEN: It certainly hasn't hurt for us. We're going to find out down the road and how it goes for us. I think one of the things, over the last several years, whether it was being number one in the country for several years, looking at a lot of success, our guys had three guys in the

Pro Bowl last year for us and the success guys are having at the NFL level or a guy as Dak where you have a former player that now is really almost on a one-name basis in the sports world, which is pretty special.

I think not just a quarterback, it opens up a lot of the doors with recognition of the program. I don't know that we'll reap the benefits of it, but I tell you what, there's a lot more people around the country that know an awful lot about Mississippi State than maybe did three to four years ago.

Q. When you were at Florida, you had two quarterbacks essentially, Chris and Tim. And Mississippi State, you had an awful lot of stability there where you've been fortunate enough to have Dak and Chris Relf around for two, three, maybe even longer. How tough is it to have that kind of stability where you don't have a lot of turnover, you're not shuttling a kid in and out every other year? Does the transfer situation make it tougher, or is the type of quarterback that can be a Dak Prescott that hard to find?

COACH MULLEN: Well, I think, one, the quarterback position is tough with some of the transfer situations. We've had some guys transfer and leave out of the program during my time frame, maybe not as many as some schools, but we've had a couple. I think it goes back to your program and how you recruit those guys,

you know, and what you look at and say, okay, here's our plan for you. Here's how it's going to happen.

You know, I mean, for as much attention as Dak Prescott got, he sat the bench for a little bit. He took his time to develop. And I think when you've built that foundation for guys, it is -- they see it from the people that were there in front of them, you know? Whether it was Chris Relf kind of building himself into a starting position, then Tyler Russell taking over and being a starter. Tyler's career got cut a little bit short by injury, which opened the door for a Dak Prescott to come in.

You know, Nick waited his turn and continued to develop and learn from a guy like Dak Prescott. Now he takes the reins, and Keytaon Thompson now for us, who I think is a great up-and-coming quarterback, enrolled early in January for us. He gets to look at the process, the development process, and understand that it's not an instant gratification, overnight process to become a star at the quarterback position, to learn things that way in how to develop, and it -- as you teach that to the guys, as they learn that, as they understand that coming into recruiting, one, it allows them to make a good decision about your school, that it's not all about, hey, I have to start as a true freshman the first game, it is how am I going to be developed to be the best quarterback in America over the course of my college career.

And when they make that decision to come to your school for that reason, it allows you to build and develop quarterbacks the right way.

Q. I'll make it a two-parter, then. First, in the spring, you said you would use tight ends more in the offense. Does that mean using more 12 and 13 personnel, or does it mean just going to the more out of 11? And, second, Donald Gray, how is he different after an offseason in which he was really one of the only veterans in the wide receiving corps?

COACH MULLEN: I think to the first part, one, we are, because our offense is -- even though we are a spread team. To me a spread team is we're going to try to spread the field or do what we need to do to create advantageous matchups. If we're going to create an advantageous matchup being in 12 or 13 personnel with tight ends, we might use that personnel grouping, but doesn't mean we'll be all bunched in with those tight ends with everybody on the line of scrimmage. We might use their size or different matchups to create it or to spread the field with bigger tight ends. And but if you're in a smaller defense, we might bring them in and use that as advantage, because we have some veteran players at that position.

Donald Gray, I tell you what, to get to the Donald Gray part, he has done an amazing job. You know, when guys -- I meet with guys really before -- when I sit down with them in January, going into their senior year, I sit down with them and say, okay, what do you see in your football career, because right now it has less than 12 months in your career. And if you'd like it to extend beyond that 12-month period, you're going to have to do something special. You're going to have to really be special to take your game to the next level. So you better become desperate every single day in how hard you work.

Because to get to that next level, they're going to look -- they're not looking to just take -- they're not going to take just the best player, best receiver off every team. They want the best receiver in the Southeastern Conference. So don't just compare yourselves to the guys that are on our roster, compare yourself to everybody in the conference. Compare yourself to everybody in the country. Compare yourself to people that are already established at that next level if you want to go play beyond these next 12 months.

Or you only have 12 months left in your football career, how do you want to be known when you walk out the door and finish it? Do you want to leave anything, any rock unturned in your development and growth as a football player? Donald, in that meeting, took that very seriously.

I tell you what, I don't know if we've had a guy that's worked harder. Very rarely does a day go by where I don't look out a window and Donald Gray is catching the jugs, working routes, doing different things. He's one of the first guys in the building, last one to leave every single day. Working to make sure that he's uncovered every stone to develop himself to be the best player he can be for this upcoming season.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach Mullen, for your time.

COACH MULLEN: Yeah. Thank you. Have a great rest of your summer.