

July 14, 2016



An Interview With:

CLAY HELTON

CLAY HELTON: Great to be here. Great to be the rookie in the room, and enjoying my first Pac-12 media days. It's been a lot of fun getting back with the media, doing the ESPYs last night, and seeing that amazing amount of talent in one room kind of makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck.

But it's been fun this morning answering a bunch of questions and really talking about -- a lot of them have been about transition and expectation, so I thought I'd start out there, about transitioning into the head coach role.

I feel very fortunate to kind of be in the situations that I have been in the past, having been a part of a football team last year. I think I'm a head of -- got a jump start maybe where some other new coaches have been because of the relationships that have already been built with our players, for me understanding exactly what they can do from a personnel standpoint, the trust that is built between player and coach, and knowing exactly what each kid can do by position and knowing the needs that you need as far as recruiting.

Just feel like there's not as much learning process as maybe a new head coach coming into a new situation has been. That really helped us out in spring, especially with a new coordinator in Clancy Pendergast that's learning some new kids, and also with a new offensive coordinator in Tee Martin doing some similar things that we've done in the past offensively, but to have him know those individuals and know the people around us really, I feel, gave us a jump start.

We've really continued the emphasis of all about ball going into this summer. That was a heavy point of emphasis for us in the spring, working on fundamentals, techniques, assignment-sound, physical, tough football, taking

kind of the flash away from everything and really making it about us improving as a player and us improving as a team.

The fact of the matter is the expectations at USC, the bar is set high. It's about championships. And if you don't like that bar, don't take the job. That's what we expect as coaches. That's what I expect as a head coach is to be at a championship level, and to be able to do that, we needed to progress as a football team. I learned that after the Pac-12 championship game last season.

I think that's carried over into the summer. I see the guys and how they're working, how they're training every morning five days a week at 6:30 a.m. I think they're doing a tremendous job running their own practices during this summer and doing the things that it takes, not only to come together as a team but also to produce a caliber and level of football that we're going to need for this season.

What a season it's going to be. What an unbelievable opportunity that we have as Trojans this season. When you look at it and you have the opportunity to play an Alabama, a Notre Dame, a Utah State in the Pac-12 schedule, man, is that awesome, because the fact of the matter is we live in a playoff system world, and everybody is going to be talking about building your résumé. Well, when you have the chance to play Alabama, Notre Dame, that Pac-12 schedule, you're building your résumé. But you know what you're also doing? You're preparing yourself for a playoff game. You're preparing yourself for a National Championship game, because the quality of talent that you're playing throughout the season prepares you when it matters the most, and that's those playoff and championship games.

So I can't tell you how excited we are to have the opportunity to play a defending national champion, to play one of the top head coaches in the history of this game in Nick Saban. I think it's given us a little bit of a kick-start in the summer



visit our archives at asapsports.com

07.14.16 C. Helton.doc

and really has made our football team have a little chip on their shoulder.

I can say I've been around them for six years, and that summer feels a little bit different. I'm so proud of the work that these guys are putting in.

You know, this season is about competing, and there will be several competitions. I've had a number of questions already about our quarterback positions as well as several positions, and that's what USC is about. It's about competing. We do have a quarterback battle that's going on right now. We're very, very fortunate and thankful to have some really talented guys at the position, and you know, coming out of spring, like I said, after that spring game, if we had to finish that day and played the next week, it probably would have been Max Browne, but the separation between Max and Sam Darnold was not great, and if we talk about competing at every position, it's got to be the quarterback position, also.

What will we do? What is the plan? The plan is to go for about 18 practices and see where all our positions are at, and then about two weeks out prior to playing that opening game versus Alabama, we'll go ahead and release our two deep and let every young man know what his role is going into that first game.

I've played quarterback, I've coached the position. I know exactly that you want to know and your team wants to know who the leader is going into that first game, so we'll make that going into about two weeks prior to that opening game when we go into our game week.

I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to coach the young men that you've been a part of their lives for six years that you love. Two of them are here with me today, Zach Banner, our senior offensive lineman, who is the definition of a Trojan and what we want to be as a Trojan, a young man that already has his degree playing his final year of eligibility, has been the rock of our offensive line for a number of years, and is really the leader of our group up front really on both sides of the ball. He's become the senior leader.

And then you've got Adoree' Jackson, in my mind one of the most special talented athletes there are in the country. For him to do what he did at the Olympic trials just blows me away, to be one of the top 10 jumpers in this country. To be a finalist for the Olympic trials and then do what he does on the football field and be the type of person that he is makes you very thankful, as a head

coach, that you have young men around just like these guys.

Q. Would you clarify that you were saying about releasing the two deep two weeks prior? Does that mean you'll name the official starter?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, it will be. You'll get about 18 practices, and then two weeks prior, two weeks prior to us going into that Alabama, we're going to do a mock game week, so it's actually going to be exactly the game week that will be our routine throughout the season.

At that point in time, I think it'll be sufficient enough a time to name a quarterback. Our team will need it, as will the rest of all positions. We have several competitions going on within our football program, so at that point in time we'll release the two deep, the quarterback will be named, and that will give us two weeks to prepare for Alabama.

Q. Can you talk about how special Jackson is?

CLAY HELTON: He's Superman. You know, to allow -- to see what he did in pressure situations, I mean, going into being a finalist, you're on your last jump, and to do what he did to make the finals is just mind-blowing to me, what a pressure player he is. But he's always been that. And to be in that type of atmosphere, that type of experience only can help you when you're in a pressure situation during a football season.

So thankful that he's on our team. Obviously he's one of the more special athletes in the country. That's why we're fortunate to have him here at SC.

Q. What excites you the most about this year, and what scares you the most?

CLAY HELTON: What excites me the most is probably the opportunity that we have to perform at the highest level. You know, when you look at playing Alabama, Notre Dame, the Pac-12 conference, you're talking about an unbelievable opportunity to show who you are and to compete, and that's why you come to SC. You come here to compete and to play the best of the best. If you want to be the best, play the best.

What's my biggest worry? Biggest worry is probably the thinness a little bit at defensive line. We're going to be a little thin there, a little bit

inexperienced. It kind of reminds me of -- remember when Damien and Viane and Toa Lobendahn were all true freshmen and I was an offensive coordinator looking out there going, oh, my God, we're playing three true freshmen here. It doesn't mean that they're not talented, they're just inexperienced.

We'll do things as coaches to be able to help us help a young offensive line. Load the box, there's going to be more pressure put on our defensive backs to play some man coverage and to help a defensive line whether it's pressures or dropping a safety in the box, whatever it might be, we'll do those things to help them, but that's probably my biggest concern is how that defensive front plays.

Q. What did you take away from last season, being thrust into the situation you're in and having to take over?

CLAY HELTON: Probably two things. As a head coach, your players look to you, how you handle adversity, and be yourself. Don't change just because you're the head coach. That's probably the best advice that I was given was just be yourself and do what you've done for the last 21 years.

But dealing with adversity and how you handle it, and then the other thing is the relationships with the players. I've always felt as a coach, especially with 18 and 21 year olds, it's not Xs and Os, it's not scheme, it is the trust that your players have in you and you have in the players. Relationships are key and really are the fuel to a lot of success.

Q. What do you expect Stevie to bring to your defensive line right away?

CLAY HELTON: I wish I could talk about possible recruits, but I'm not allowed.

Q. Having to choose between Sam and Max, how nice is it to have a choice like that?

CLAY HELTON: Oh, my goodness. Anybody in the world would love to be in the position that we're in. Just really, when you see the level of talent, especially when you have a guy like Max Browne, and I'm so thankful to have him because he just had his fourth training camp, fourth spring ball, and then to have the kind of -- not sense of entitlement, that he understands that there is competition at this level for the rest -- for every day of his life from here forward, it's about

competition, whether you're in the real world in business or whether you're at SC or whether you're in the NFL. You're going to have to compete for the rest of your life for your job. And I really appreciated him for that, for understanding that, and then having the poise to do what he did in spring, to perform like he did, because when you come to SC, there's not only going to be that one guy, there's going to be that young buck that's just as talented, that wants that job just as much, and that's what happened.

You sat there and you had Max, and you had Sam competing at a very high level. Like I said, if we had to end the spring game and had to play that next Saturday, it would have been Max, but that window was so tight, if I'm going to say it to every other position that this is good competition, it's got to start at the quarterback position. We'll go about 18 practices, be about two weeks out and then name it.

Q. If Sam wins the job, are you at all concerned that Max will take advantage of the (inaudible)?

CLAY HELTON: There's always that reality, and I think there's that reality across the board in college football right now. At the end of the day, you've got to play the best player and who's performing the best. You can't look at your other players in the eye and not play the best player. Usually if you're not playing the best player and you're losing games, they usually find a new head coach, so you'd better put the best 11 out there that you can put out there.

Q. Regarding a situation at Mississippi State where a five-star recruit, there's video of him hitting a woman, I was wondering, generally speaking, what sort of accommodations or what sort of exceptions do you make if there is videotape of something like that?

CLAY HELTON: Well, I don't have any knowledge about Mississippi State's situation, so I won't comment on their situation or anything that's going on here.

I do believe as a football coach and as a University, one of the things that we're all responsible for is the young men and women that we bring into our University, and I think that's one of the things that you look at in recruiting. It all starts with intangibles. You only get 85

scholarships in college football. You get to sign 25 max a year, and you've got to know those 25 not only have the talent but also have the intangibles and the character that are going to represent SC.

We're team 124. We're the 124th team that's representing USC, and the young men that you bring in better represent what you stand for because they're coming in your family. I've always said, I've got three children by birth, and I've got 105 that I've adopted. When you come into our family, you know, you'd better be a special not only player but also person because you're going to be around my children, you're going to be around my family as a football team or my immediate family.

It's very important. I think that's one of the qualities that everybody is looking for right now. It's not only talent, it's character, especially in today's media realm.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Stanford being the No. 1 seed in the conference and kind of where you guys are and where you think that you actually fit in?

CLAY HELTON: Well, they deserve to be. They're the Pac-12 champs right now. You know, one of the things that I saw us winning the Pac-12 south and playing that Pac-12 championship game, you know, leaving that game I thought there was changes that we had to make to be able to be where we want to be and be a Pac-12 champion, and it starts with being more of a fundamentally technique-sound physical football team, because at the end of the day, you may wind up and play Stanford again in that game, and we have to play better than we did. We lost twice. The fact of the matter is we lost twice to Stanford last year. So we've either got to stay the same and get beat or change.

So the things that we've done over this off-season I'm hoping transfer over to compete with not only Stanford but the rest of our league.

Q. You acknowledged your newbie status. What has surprised you most about becoming head coach at USC?

CLAY HELTON: You know, just the day-to-day, just what I thought. One of the changes I felt like I needed to make as a head coach, I think one of the things you've got to look at, what your capabilities are as the head coach and what the responsibilities are. In last season it was a strange situation. Yeah, I had to play offensive coordinator, had to play game planner,

had to play head coach. There was a lot of balls up in the air juggling. And the biggest thing that I took away from that is that you can't do it all.

The greatest leaders put terrific people around them, and that's why I thought it was so important to keep Tee Martin, Clancy Pendergast, John Baxter, having those coordinators, Ivan Louis, our strength and conditioning coach, surrounding us with great pieces of the puzzle where I can delegate authority and worry about our football team, worry about fundamentals and technique, worry about managing a football team on a day-to-day process and being involved in everybody's life rather than just the quarterback or just the offense. I've hired great men. I'm going to let them do their job. That's what I learned primarily from last season.

I'm so glad I got that training experience because you can't do it all. I don't want to be a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. I'd rather be known as a great head coach than a great play caller or offensive coordinator. I'd rather be known as a guy that helped his team and his coaches get better and focus on them rather than the Xs and Os of the game.

Q. You mentioned Adoree' Jackson before. Is he going to be strictly on defense?

CLAY HELTON: I've had that question a bunch today, and really the primary focus, and we've sat down and visited about it a bunch already, Adoree' and I have, and his primary focus going into training camp will be on defense because you've got to look at the team aspect. And you look at the team aspect right now, what's our weakest point probably going in? It's our defensive front. How do you help a defensive front? You load the box. You play man coverage. Who does that put more pressure on? It puts more pressure on the defensive backs.

So I really feel for Adoree' to become what I think he is, one of the best DBs in the country. I really want his primary focus going into training camp, to work the defensive back position.

Now, being a smart person, is he electric with the ball in his hands? Yes, he is. Are there going to be situations throughout the season where we'll need him to return a ball or two? Yes, in the kicking game, yes. Is there a special play that can be designed offensively for him to help us put points on the board? Yes. But I think right now going into training camp, his primary focus will

be on the defensive side of the ball, trying to help our defensive line.

Q. Talking about the other guys on your staff, in the summer period where your players aren't coming in, how do you find yourself leaning on your strength coaches?

CLAY HELTON: I was so fortunate to have Ivan Lewis. He was a big key. I can't tell you the number of NFL teams that tried to come in and snatch him away. Really I treated it like we had four coordinators going in. We had an offensive and defensive coordinator, special teams, and a strength and conditioning coordinator. The guy won the National Coach of the Year for strength and conditioning a year ago. He's so important to our team. There's only eight hours a week you can get work in the summer, and he's around them more than our coaches. We work as coaches basically 11 months of the year, out every day, and July is the one time that you do get to be with your family as an assistant coach. It is the time you recharge your batteries before going into training camp and working every day of your life from August 1st until the signing day in February. Ivan is so important and really a huge key to our success, so I'm so glad he's here.

Q. How do you think the true freshmen might help you this season?

CLAY HELTON: The guys that really stood out to me, and I'm so glad we had seven mid-termers come in. That experience that they gained. And then you've got 12 more that reported to our Bridge program.

You know, some of the guys that just stand upright off mind, one, the thinness of the defensive front, Connor Murphy is a guy that I think can really jump out and help us, especially when you -- I look at his brother Trent and what he did at Stanford, and being a pain in the butt, I felt like he was there for ten years. But Connor I think can really -- his size, being 6'6" plus, 265 pounds, really a physical presence, I think it come in and help us.

Then I can't wait to see some electric guys come in like Jack Jones. I think he's got a chance to be Adoree'-like, to help on both sides of the ball. He's great with the ball in his hands, can be a great defensive back for us. I'm really looking forward to him jumping out.

But the rest of the freshmen, they've been working very, very well, Malepeai, Iosefa, all 12 of the young men that have come in, what a

tremendous benefit it is for us in college right now to have those guys in and have them working out. I can't wait to see them on the practice field and see what they can do.

Q. What can you tell us about Chris Taulbee?

CLAY HELTON: Big Kangaroo is his nickname. I'll tell you what, he's one of those guys that has an extreme amount of talent and really a guy I think really benefitted from sitting behind and redshirting last year. I think grooming his technique, and then working with John Baxter through the spring has been so beneficial. I've never seen a guy that could kick a ball about five different ways, but he can, and he can place it anywhere he wants. So I'm really thinking he's going to be a tremendous asset to improving our special teams. It's one of the biggest phases for us to improve, and it was huge to get John Baxter here to be able to lead that charge.

Q. The last few years at USC have been pretty chaotic. What does it mean to just be a part of recreating some stability?

CLAY HELTON: I was so happy to obviously get named the head coach, but I was happy for the kids, also, to have somebody they knew, somebody they trust, and somebody that would have a jump start of knowing personnel, of not having to build relationships or trust. You know, and our message as coaches, we want to be a constant force in their lives every day, a stable force in their life every day, and they know what they're getting.

I think it's very important, and I'm very happy that they've got the opportunity to be around this staff, that a lot of them know. They know a Tee Martin. Older kids know a John Baxter and a Clancy Pendergast. I think that will provide a high level of consistency for us and hopefully transitions into a lot of wins.

Q. How did the team benefit most from Adoree' Jackson's Olympic trial participation?

CLAY HELTON: Well, I'll tell you, I think it's a great statement to what college is. To be able to have two-sport stars I think is something special. And what a moment. You know, like I said earlier, to be on your last jump, to try to get to the finals, and you know this is it, and to be able to be in that type of pressure situation and perform,

what an experience.

How that doesn't carry over to football, I mean, you're going to be in that situation, it's going to be 4th down, and you're going to be lined up on the best wideout in the country, and to be able to perform on that level on the grandest of all stages, that can only help you when you get back to football.

To be able to have him now, he's got basically from now to September 3rd to now transition back to football, I'm so happy for him and so proud of him that he got the opportunity to do it and he was so successful being a Pac-12 champion, being a finalist at the Olympic trials. Just a great story.

Q. How much Alabama film have you guys watched to this point? Obviously there's been some turnover there, but what impresses you most about them?

CLAY HELTON: I think one that just leaps off the tape is the coaching and just the way they're coached, and it's not -- you can go back five years. We've got tape from five years ago. They're still as well-coached. You're talking about --

Q. The penalties or --

CLAY HELTON: No, just assignment-wise, the style of football they play, the discipline they play with. You're talking about one of the greatest head coaches in the history of the game in Coach Saban and maybe the best in our generation. He's just somebody that's been a family friend, coached with my dad at the Houston Oilers. I've had a relationship with and just have the utmost respect. When you watch the tape, you know you're seeing a Coach Saban-coached team. That's what jumps off.

Q. Would you have ever guessed to have your first game as head coach against Nick Saban?

CLAY HELTON: In a dream to have that opportunity? You know, why do you come to SC? You come to compete, and you want to compete at the highest level. If you don't like that, don't come. So to be able to play the defending national champion, to be able to play a gentleman that you have the utmost respect for that's the leader in our profession, that doesn't make the hair stand up on the back of your neck, I don't know what does.

That's why you come to SC to coach or play. I've kept on saying, if you want to be the best, play the best. We have an opportunity to play one of the best schedules in the country, if not the greatest opportunity to show who we are. Play Alabama, play Notre Dame, play the Pac-12 schedule. It's what dreams are made of.

Q. How do you think Clancy will impact your preparation?

CLAY HELTON: It's going to be fun to watch. I can't wait to watch it. You know, I've been doing it for 21 years. My dad is a coach for 40 years. I've been around the game a long time. Two of the most brilliant men I've ever been associated with are Lane Kiffin on offense and Clancy Pendergast on team. So to see that chess match and to see that played out, I wish sometimes I could just have a box of popcorn and watch it. But to see that chess match that's going to go on is a lot of fun.

Obviously there's some familiarity between the two knowing each other, and they've changed a little bit since the last time, but just watching tape on Alabama's offense and some of the wrinkles that they've put in, what Clancy has learned from his last stint in the NFL and some of the things that he's captured, there are some subtle changes that will go on and take place. It'll be really interesting to see. Should be a lot of fun.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.