

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 27 2017

## Clay Helton USC Trojans



CLAY HELTON: Hi, guys. Great to be back, and great to get started again with another season. Very proud of our coaching staff and our players for the work that they've put in in getting ready for this season in preparation for a great fall. You know, very proud of their mindset, too, and their approach to what we're doing.

When we started after that Rose Bowl game and making some great memories, we went to both the staff and our players and said: Guys, wasn't that awesome? Made some unbelievable memories. And every kid and every coach said: Yeah, unbelievable, Coach. To make history was something truly special.

But then I asked the next question: Are you satisfied? And to a man, not one hand rose. Because we understand what USC is about. It's about winning Pac-12 titles, and it's about winning national championships. And the fact of the matter is we did not accomplish that. That's always our goal and always our expectation.

Looking at it from the head coach perspective, there were some things that I really felt that had to happen in the off-season to be able to get to where we want to go. The first thing was to be very fortunate with the retention of our staff. To be able to keep all three coordinators in Clancy Pendergast, Tee Martin, and John Baxter, I think, was absolutely huge for us. To be able to stay within the same systems, the same terminology, the expectations the players know that the coaches have for them is extremely important.

The next thing I thought we had to have was we needed to know the reality that this is a different football team than last year's team. There are 14 men that left our team to go on to the NFL to pursue their next step. And not only were they great players, they brought dynamic leadership.

I think we addressed a lot of the talent issues, the loss of talent by bringing in 24 newcomers, freshmen that are going to help us, and also the development of the some of the kids that we red-shirted last year and some of our role players. During spring, I thought the spring training we had was a true success in that area.

The other thing that we need to do and the most important thing for me is the leadership qualities that those 14 men that left us provided. When I say the name Stevie Tu'ikolovatu, Mike Hutchings, Darreus Rogers, JuJu Smith, Justin Davis, Zach Banner, Chad Wheeler, those type of men, yes, they're great players, but they brought great leadership. Now our older brothers have left, and it's time for the younger brothers to step up.

We put in Cam Smith into that mike backer role to be the quarterback of the defense. Uchenna Nwosu and Porter Gustin to take that position where Stevie Tu'ikolovatu brought that staple of leadership for us on the front. You look at Biggie Marshall and Marvell Tell and Chris Hawkins carrying what Adoree' Jackson did for us from a leadership standpoint. Then Sam Darnold in his third year at USC now capturing an offense and being able to lead our offense to even new heights.

It's an exciting time for us, it really is, to be able to start this new season, to board 24 new freshmen. And we know the expectations, and we welcome them. We look at it as an opportunity, not an obligation. We came to USC to win championships, and that will always be our goal.

I brought two great young men with me today in Cam Smith and Sam Darnold.

And any questions that you might have, we welcome them. So without further ado, feel free to ask.

### **Q. Coach, how are you handling the idea of you guys being the favorite not only to win the Pac-12, but to get to the championship?**

CLAY HELTON: When you come to USC, you welcome those expectations. We've created a lot of momentum and a lot of confidence with what we did last season. And you look and you have guys like Sam Darnold and Cam Smith and Ronald Jones and Deontay Burnett, you have some pieces of the puzzle that are already in place, it makes you very excited for the season coming up.

But you've also got to know the reality. There are holes we've got to plug to take care of two tackle positions, a nose tackle position. There is a lot of work to be done.

Thank God we've got 29 practices before the opening ballgame versus Western Michigan.

**Q. What do you think of the rule change with the two-a-day practices?**

CLAY HELTON: It's created a little bit different aspect. It's added an extra week of knowledge. And you've got to be smart. I think coaching staffs around the country are going to have to understand that it is an extra week. We are going into the new RARA NCAA rule which gives our players a day off, a true day off during the week, which I think is an extreme advantage for them and their bodies and mentality.

But it's something that each and every day you're going to have to look at your team and say, okay, where are we? And there may be some changes. You may have a full padded practice that you were planning on doing, but you've got some injuries and you have to back off a little bit. You'll have to gauge your team a little bit more, especially for us. You're talking about five straight weeks of training camp, plus 12 straight games, so we're going to have to manage our team extremely well. And thank goodness I have a good strength and conditioning staff, training staff with Russ Romano and Ivan Lewis that can help me in that area.

**Q. Sam Darnold going into fall camp for the first time since the opening day started. What do you think that does for the cohesiveness of the offense?**

CLAY HELTON: It provides us, just like we're staying in the same system, to know who your leader is right off the bat, and the things that he's accomplished are things that I think help us tremendously.

But the thing that I've been impressed with Sam is his humbleness and humility in the process. We all see his skillset, but how he's approached this off-season from a work-ethic standpoint and trying to progress as a student of the game, our kids see that. Obviously there are some grand expectations for him, but he's welcomed those. That's part of being a USC quarterback. That's why you come to USC. You're the face of the program and you're the leader of the program.

**Q. Coach, how will you replace Adoree' Jackson?**

CLAY HELTON: I don't know if you can. I tell you, Adoree' is -- this is my 23rd year in college football -- one of the more special players and people I've ever been around. When you talk about a guy that's a dominant corner, can help on offense, can do kickoff and punt return, that's hard to replace.

I think we have strength in numbers this year, really. We have some individuals that I think can help us at

the corner position. We'll be finding our punt returner and kick returner. I think we've got some awesome candidates in those two areas.

We've signed several young kids at wide receiver that we red-shirted last year that are going to have to come on and have a great chemistry with Sam and Cam and provide some of that explosiveness that Adoree' brought to the offensive side.

**Q. What did you learn from the 1-3 start last year, and how did that make you a better coach moving forward?**

CLAY HELTON: I understood how important relationships are. I had a huge advantage being with myself. I had been at USC for six years. Part of being a head coach is having the trust and relationship with your players that when you are in adverse times, that they trust the process. They trust when you tell them they're getting better each and every week, that they trust you're saying the right things to them and being brutally honest with them.

Probably the biggest thing I've learned last year, it's not all about the Xs and Os, it's about the relationships with 18- to 21-year-olds and how important that is. Not in the good times, that's easy; but when things, that adverse situation, comes up, how you deal with it.

**Q. How are you a better football team this year than you were a year ago?**

CLAY HELTON: Without question, the lessons we learned last year. I thought our maturity that we gained from Game 1 to the Rose Bowl really showed. If you look at us from Game 1, I thought we were an immature football team. And we learned how to win games. We've learned how important it was to protect the ball, limit penalties, understand that it's not about the hype of the game or the environment of the game, it's about the preparation for the game. Those are lessons that we, our veterans, have carried on.

Now what is the challenge? 24 newcomers coming in and that on-boarding process to bring them on and learn our culture and learn how we win and learn what it is to be a Trojan.

That's why you love training camps. That's why you're excited as a coach and can't wait. I'm leaving right here from this thing to go have our first team meeting tonight. So I'm looking forward to that.

**Q. Sam Darnold talked about not only your X's and O's approach to the game, off the field as well. How does that make you as a head coach get that message across and conduct yourself as a player off the field?**

CLAY HELTON: The way I've approached it is the way my daddy taught me. I've always said I've got three children by birth and I've got 105 I've got the honor to adopt. So I take it from a fatherly approach. I have a 20-year-old son, and I treat our players just like I'd treat Reid Helton. It's my job not only to develop them as a football player and a student, but also as a professional both on and off the field.

Because the fact of the matter is at some point in time the game ends for all of us. I want to look up when I'm 80 and they're 60 and I can be proud of saying that's a fine young man, and our staff had a little bit of a piece of developing and going from a young man to a true professional.

**Q. What is your opinion on the new early signing period, and what kind of changes could you consider in recruiting?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, it's going to be a little bit different for us. It's going to open up some official visits in the spring for juniors, which is going to be a little bit different for us. I think staffs are going to have to kind of enhance and push forward their decision-making and evaluations a little bit.

But the early signing period, I think, is going to help with your midterm signees. We've averaged anywhere from five to ten midterm graduates a year. You're going to go ahead and get to sign those in December and step on campus in January.

Then there are some kids that just know they want to be Trojans. They're done with the recruiting process. They want to end it and they're not making any more visits and they're 100 percent sure that's what they want to do, and they can end their process, which is nice for them.

I still foresee because of the time period, especially this year, we did not have the spring official visits, so you only have fall and winter official visits, that there will be a lot of February decisions, still, also this year.

**Q. Going into fall camp, any major concerns right now?**

CLAY HELTON: Probably the biggest one is the chemistry between Sam and our new receivers. I think they're beyond talented, the kids that we red-shirted, but they haven't been in real live games yet. And to be able to see those bullets fly and see how they react will be really important to us.

I think of how Michael Pittman came on the scene and helped us last season and then having a Tyler Vaughns, a Trevon Sidney, a Velus Jones, a Josh Imatorbhebhe, using that red-shirt year and growing from that, and now it's their time to help us. And then a

Joseph Lewis and Randal Grimes coming on board.

I think the chemistry between that wideout corps and Sam will be ultra important. I thank God that Deontay is with us, and we're getting Steven Mitchell off injury. And the tight end position with Daniel Imatorbhebhe and several others will play a big factor for us.

**Q. Can you talk about the offensive line as well?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, one of the things when I look at it, being realistic, the interior core is still there. I think of Nico Falah, I think of Viane Talamaivao, I think of Toa Lobendahn, those guys have played a lot of ball over the last three years. And then I think of guys like Chris Brown and Chuma Edoga, even though they haven't been starters, they've played a lot of ball too.

Our biggest challenge will be able to fill those two tackle roles. I know Chuma will have an opportunity to be one of those guys. He had a successful spring, very athletic. Has played a lot of ball. Then our challenge will be to find that other position.

**Q. You talked about the leadership and getting guys to trust you and doing that through the lessons you learned. In how you overcame that, is there any sense of validation for how you approached your job to kind of get through it?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, one of the great lessons I learned, again, it was advice from my dad when I first took the job, one, be yourself and do what you believe in and don't change. I believe 18- to 21-year-olds can smell falseness in a heartbeat. I think you've really got to believe in what you're doing. If you believe you're heading in the right direction, stick with it.

We're such in a production-based business, and everybody wants instant results. But you have to sit down at times and say, okay, did you improve from Alabama to Stanford, from Stanford to Utah? Are you headed in the right direction? Even though you're not getting the results, do you believe in what you're doing right now? And if the answer is yes, continue it. No matter if the whole outside world is saying, hey, are you the right guy for the job? Do what you believe in so you have no regrets and be the person you are each and every day.

**Q. Do you enjoy being in this position more than, say, where you guys were last year coming in?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, well, it's a normal position when you're at USC, and you have to welcome it. It's the reason that we came. Again, like I said, I see it as a great opportunity rather than an obligation to be able to have that opportunity to be in that role. That's where you want to be. You want to be at the top.

The reality is this, it's easy to go from where we were to number three in the country. It's harder to go from third to one. And that's our challenge right now. It's going to take a lot of hard work during camp and a lot of young guys developing in a hurry for us to get there. But that's always going to be our expectations, and we welcome them.

**Q. I'm sure you saw the poll here, you're picked to win the conference. Kind of look at that and say that's about right?**

CLAY HELTON: I think one thing about our conference, if you look at it from top to bottom, it's ultra competitive. The reality of the Pac-12 South, I think we've had a different champion about each and every year. If you don't bring your "A" game, you're going to get your butt beat. That's just a fact.

The way I look at it, it's nice to have those accolades now, but we are a production-based business, and usually they look at the end of the year where you're at. Thank goodness they don't look at the beginning of the year, or I may have been in trouble. But at the end of the year, you add them all up, you take one game at a time, try to treat every game like it's a playoff game, and hopefully you've got enough to put yourself in a position to win the championship.

**Q. How are you preparing your players to deal with all the expectations?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, well, we started right from spring training camp with the question I asked: Are you satisfied from last season? And if you're not, we've got a lot of work to do. Because we're going to be expected each and every year to be in that position. That's why we came here to USC. Every day, that's why I wear this bracelet, 11 national championships and 25 Rose Bowls. I know it's our opportunity and our obligation to be able to change those numbers, and it reminds me each and every day we've got to work towards that.

**Q. Any guys that didn't play last year that stood out in the spring that you're looking forward to seeing again in the fall?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, I tell you, one that stood out to me that had a really good spring was Velus Jones, to see his explosiveness. Some of the things he could do not only as a receiver, but coming out of the backfield, some of the things that Adoree had done for us, I think is going to be a huge help.

I'd love to see the progression of Michael Pittman also, and the way he's accepting his role. Then it was nice to see Tyler Vaughns and Josh Imatorbhebhe after a red-shirt year really starting to learn the system. You can see the light bulbs kind of clicking on.

What I'm most excited about, you have Joseph Lewis and you have Randal Grimes coming on board, that's going to be a huge help for us. Then you can sleep at night because you've got Deontay in your back pocket and Steven Mitchell who has played a lot of ball. It's a talented group that hasn't seen a ton of experience, and we've got to get them those reps early.

**Q. Last year was an incredibly tough schedule, Dallas against Alabama and a couple big early-season games, but at home against Stanford, at home against Texas. How do you think that might help your team start the season?**

CLAY HELTON: One of the things, we've had tremendous confidence playing in our place. You look at last season and look at playing in the city of Los Angeles, we've had a lot of success. So when you open up with Western Michigan, who had a dynamic season last year, and then go Stanford and Texas, all three at home -- obviously we love our home-field advantage. We'll take it every time.

But we know those are going to be three fist fights. We learned from last year how important it is to start fast. You can do all you want in October and November, and we've been really good, but if you don't start fast, it's hard to get where you want to be. It's going to be critical for us to open up those three ballgames and be hitting on all three cylinders.

**Q. Coach, not too long ago you were a freshly minted Pac-12 coach. Do you have any advice for the coaches at Oregon and Cal?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, like I said before, be yourself, do what you believe in. The one thing I have seen just looking at what Coach Taggart has put together and what J-Dub has put together, they've put together great staffs. They've surrounded themselves with really quality men. Then you put the personnel that both of them have. They'll do great. They're two really good ball coaches. You know, we'll play Cal. Oregon we'll see later down the line maybe. But they're going to be two forces to be reckoned with. They're quality coaches.

**Q. Just being on campus, have you noticed -- I know last year you talked about going to your son's orientation and nobody really bothered you there. Are you getting stopped more on campus now? Are you feeling like a rock star?**

CLAY HELTON: No, usually I can take the hat off and show this bald head and still nobody knows who I am. If I don't wear the hat, I'm usually good. No, it's something I'll always try to put our players to the forefront. I really don't want the spotlight and don't have to have it. When you're talking about Adoree'

Jacksons and JuJu Smith and Sam Darnolds, that's what does my heart good. My job is to raise them and let the media hopefully tell their stories and let them move. I'm already living my dream; I'm trying to get them to their dream of getting a USC degree and playing in the NFL.

**Q. Do you sense, though, more of an excitement on campus?**

CLAY HELTON: Oh, yeah. You sense it in the community, in the city, going around. It's one of those things when you finish off like we did with a Rose Bowl victory and the confidence and momentum, obviously people get excited.

That's one of the special things about USC. It's got such a special relationship with Los Angeles and the Southern California area. It's 125-year relationship, you know? Not only with the alumni, but you don't even have to go there, just the citizens of Los Angeles understand how special the place is, and they want USC to be great. Doesn't matter how many pro teams are around, we welcome those too, the more the merrier. But that relationship, I think, carries a lot of weight. And when USC is rolling, the city is very happy.

**Q. So you hear that when you're out?**

CLAY HELTON: Oh, no question. They want USC to be great. No matter who the coach is, who the players are, that relationship between USC and Los Angeles I don't think will ever go away.

**Q. How was it when you were 1-3 last year, were you avoiding eye contact?**

CLAY HELTON: No, I had tons of support, and I really think I had an advantage. I was a first-year head coach, but it wasn't my first year at the university. So the relationships that I had over six years really carried weight, not only with our players, but more importantly with our alumni and our fans, that they were at least willing to give me the time to see it through and to progress our team. And I appreciate them for that.

**Q. Are you seeing anything encouraging out of the young guys like Isaiah now?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, it's been really neat. I love the new rule that was instituted a couple years ago of being a coach, and you could actually watch them work out and do strengthening and conditioning through summer access. You get to see them move around a little bit, see their work ethic, hug their necks and get to know them. So it's been neat to watch them work.

This group's different. They're talented, but they've got a really nice mindset right now of wanting to help our team. They understand that individual success only

comes from the team's success. And I love how they're listening to their older brothers, listening to the older leaders on our team and really following them. So I'm hoping some of them can really contribute this season and help us with our goal to win a championship.

**Q. Come April a lot of NFL teams would love to see Sam Darnold's name at the top of their draft board. What advice do you have for him to go through the process whether to sign or come back?**

CLAY HELTON: Capture the now. Capture this moment. Capture today. If you're worried about things that could happen five, six, seven years, whatever, months, you're not becoming a better football player and you're not helping yourself. So thank goodness he is who he is, because he is a perfectionist. He is a student of the game. He believes in team success over his own success. He's more worried about helping our football team. And to do that, you have to focus on yourself, how you're getting better and how you're helping your team in Game No. 1.

**Q. Is he the best quarterback in the city?**

CLAY HELTON: Sam Darnold? You all have to do that opinion. My job is to coach him. I will say this, he's an extremely talented individual that is not a finished product, and we're continuing to get better every day. We're very fortunate in this city. To have him and Josh right now, how cool is that? I think it's great for college football. I think it's great for this town to have two quality schools like USC, UCLA as academic schools and as athletic programs. With those two quarterbacks, man, that makes for a heck of a story.

**Q. You don't want to pour gas on it by saying your guy's better?**

CLAY HELTON: No, I'm saying we have two quality quarterbacks in this city, and I'm glad they're in this city. They make both teams better.

**Q. Having the incumbent starter at quarterback, Darnold, and you mentioned the key dates early in the season, how much are you hoping that maybe that helps you kind of get through that early portion of the schedule?**

CLAY HELTON: Having Sam in a stable position, and I go back to the importance for all of our players, how important it was to keep our staff cohesion together and have those coordinators be with us again for another year. Usually when you have the success that you do winning a Rose Bowl, finishing the way you did, a lot of times those guys get stolen or taken away. Credit to our coaches, they believe in the process and what we're doing and staying. And to be in that second year system with a Sam Darnold and being that comfortable I think can only be an advantage.

**Q. Sam Darnold has made some incredible plays, I was just talking with him and it reminds me a lot of Brett Favre and what he sacrificed with his body. At the same time, you're looking at this for him not to get hurt, are you guys going to pull back the reins a little bit or just let Sam be Same?**

CLAY HELTON: Part of his greatness is his creativity. You know, if you remember, he was a point guard in high school. His vision and his creativity to be able to find the open guy and to extend plays is part of his game. Where I thought he improved from his first start to the Rose Bowl was his ability to choose when to get down and when to run. His competitiveness tells him to run every time, and what he really got better at was keeping his eyes down field, finding the open man. But also when he broke contain and started to run, he was not acting like a linebacker every time. Getting what's there. Getting out of bounds or getting down.

And that's where we try to teach him. Part of it, you don't want to handcuff his creativity, because it extends plays. But you try to teach him when to pick and choose the physicality at the end of the play.

**Q. I covered Jodie Lewis all his senior season, all the way up to commitment. How is he doing?**

CLAY HELTON: Oh, doing tremendous. Physically he looks like JuJu already. I know he's 18, but he looks like he's 26. So physically he's doing extremely well. He's trying to learn the playbook right now. But he has some natural, God-given gifts that we can't wait to use. I like his approach thus far this off-season. He has a very business-like approach right now. Not just enjoying being in college, but he's got a mindset that he wants to contribute to this team.

**Q. Sam said he got all the players together, he and a group of your leaders, last season to have a team talk. And I think that adds a lot to the chemistry of the team. What do you think?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, no question. At some point in time when you're developing leadership, and we've challenged our guys, it can't all come from myself and the coaches. True teams and leadership comes from within the locker room also. So that was the big challenge going into this year. Those 14 men that we lost were dynamic leaders. Now it's Cam's turn, it's Sam's turn, it's Uchenna, it's Porter Gustin, Chris Hawkins, Marvell Tell, Biggie Marshall, it's those guys are going to have to spread the message of what we're trying to get across, especially to 24 newcomers, onboarding them to what it is to be a Trojan.

**Q. Ronald Jones II coming off an incredible year and no more Justin Davis, do you envision him as a three down back and how do you approach that**

**on a game to game basis?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, we have a huge advantage at that position. One, because of the depth at the position, and having guys that have played before too. I think about Ro-Jo, I'm so proud of him, how he's become an every-down back. He was a true runner out of high school and really learned how to catch the ball out of the backfield as well as become a pass protector. Truly became an every-down back towards the end of the season last year.

Then I think of Ced Ware and Dominic Davis and the contributions they've already made to our team. Now you add a Vae Malepeai coming off a red-shirt year and Stephen Carr and what he can bring to the table, the position is very bright and very solid. Obviously Ro-Jo has the most experience out there, but we'll find the other guys that can help contribute, no matter what age group they are in.