

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

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Clay Helton USC Trojans



Q. How do you prepare for the upcoming season?

CLAY HELTON: I think one of the biggest things is to go back and view the experiences that you had the season prior, and to evaluate what you've done in spring football.

We've played a lot of young people last year and wanted to see their progression from their freshman to sophomore years, have done that in the spring, as well as establishing what we did good and what we needed to improve on from last year and tried to implement those in training camp coming up August 3rd.

Q. Talk about newcomer Alijah Vera-Tucker?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, Alijah is one of the premier corners coming out of high school, a great two-way player too. Has shown great signs of the man and player he's going to be for USC in these summer workouts.

I know he's earned a lot of respect among his teammates with his work ethic. Just a kind of shut-up-and-work mentality, to be honest, a blue-collar mentality. We had seen that in his time in high school. Glad it's carrying over to USC.

Q. What are the main reasons Utah has been a big matchup for you guys?

CLAY HELTON: I'll say right off the bat, Kyle Whittingham. I think he's not only one of the better coaches in our league but in the country. Have so much respect for his coaching ability, the kids he's signed and develops.

It's always been a challenging game for us. The last two years have come down to the last play, it seems like. We'll have the opportunity to go back to Rice-Eccles, which is a phenomenal place to play, an electric atmosphere with great fans, love their team and love football there.

It's always been a fun game. Always great to compete against Kyle and his team. You know you're in for a physical opponent, a very well-coached opponent. You love playing against the best.

Q. You've lost a lot of key players. What do you say to the younger guys when they're going to be

on a larger stage?

CLAY HELTON: Well, it's their opportunity. You know, that's the opportunity of SC. Every time you lose a tremendous player -- I remember losing Robert Woods and going, okay, what's going to happen? There is Marqise Lee, then you lose him and there is Nelson Agholor; you lose him, and there is JuJu Smith. So you acquire the talent that you believe in and the men that you believe in.

Now it's their opportunity to compete. The guy that is the best player for the moment is going to walk out there. There are going to be several young players that have that opportunity. It's a great mix on this team. I think about the two young men here today in Cam Smith and Porter Gustin, they're kind of what we have right now on the defensive side of the ball. Great experience, great leadership, great talent, and really believe in team success over their own individual success.

So there is a great complement of both on this football team. A little bit of youth, but a lot of guys that have played a lot of football too. Maybe not some marquee star names. There will be some star names by the end of the year.

But I really like this team for what it is. It's a team and a unified team. I'm looking forward to watching them compete.

Q. What are the star names that should be out there right now?

CLAY HELTON: The two that are here to me are superstars. You know, I've watched them play as freshmen. I think about the young men, a special group for me as well as our coaching staff, because we kind of all got in this together. It was three years ago, I'm sitting there as interim head coach, and here these guys are as freshmen and saying let's do something special. Let's have fun together, be a family, compete for a Pac-12 title.

We won the Pac-12 South. This group has won a Rose Bowl, Pac-12 title now, and now wants to compete for a national title. They're a special group and done some special things, and it's been a special joy to coach them.

Q. How did the QB battle two years ago help you going into this year with three guys?

CLAY HELTON: One it's a different situation, I think. With Max and Sam, you had a red-shirt junior that played a lot of balls. So you knew there.

This situation you have some guys that have not a lot of experience. Matt has the only experience in games. It's extremely limited. It's going to be about who the best player is in the moment. It doesn't matter his age to me, because not any of them have great experience. Who is going to be able to move our football team, move our offense and put the ball in the end zone in training camp.

Because of the reps, we will do some things that provide more reps for us at that position. We'll two spot a lot of our drills. Maybe two spot a seven on seven, some team situations. So to be able to view all positions.

We're a deep football team this year at a lot of positions. Want to be able to look at everybody so we get the best player out there. But that will be important to us to be able to make sure there are quality reps for everybody.

Q. How soon do you want to make that pick?

CLAY HELTON: We've got 25 practices. I'll name somebody before the opening game. I don't have a crystal ball because I'm going to have to have time enough to allow the kids to compete and make the best decision for the football team. So I think it will be later than sooner, I just don't have a crystal ball to when that is.

When I feel confident enough in it to make that decision, I'll let everybody know. Just like last time, I'll let the quarterbacks know and their families know first, and I'll let the media know afterwards as soon as possible.

But I'd like to do it before. I won't go out there Saturday with nobody knowing who the quarterback is. I'm not going to do that. I want our team to know that. But I don't have a crystal ball for that date.

Q. Seeing your guys during the off-season, it looks like the strength and conditioning program is paying off as much as it has since I've seen in the last few years. The guys have talked about how you've given them everything that they need nutrition-wise. Can you help us with some of the stuff you've given them this off-season?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, this is a team that really wants to work. They have a tremendous work ethic. I credit Ivan Lewis. I think every year I'm going to lose a guy to

the NFL, and there were several teams coming to try to get him this year. But to have the consistency and stability to have an Ivan Lewis and his staff I thought was imperative.

Two, our nutrition program is second to none. Miss Andrea does a tremendous job for us on a daily basis allowing these kids to provide the calories they need to be able to hold their weight on a daily basis.

These guys work extremely hard during the summer to prepare, and you have to be able to put that nutrition in there for them. Whether it's supplement meals, our training table, whether it's providing them the level of nutrition at what I think is the highest level in the country I think helps these guys.

Then you have guys that are disciplined like Porter, and him lead the way. I think that's important. He shows guys that your body is a temple, it's a Ferrari, and you have to take care of it. I think he's the best example of what we want.

Q. Have you seen the results, like us that go out and see the guys work out?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, I think it's a great summer. One, because of the level of competition that's around the depth. There are guys pushing each other. They've got a little bit of a chip on their shoulder that they want to be the best in the country. I think that level of competition has helped, them just knowing what they want to do and the goals they have out there.

Q. It's such a pressure job. Has the contract extension at all made you feel any more comfortable at all, or does it change anything about the tightrope you always seem to be walking?

CLAY HELTON: One of the great things I love about the job is the expectations. I mean, I love it. It's the reason that I came to SC. I think that we all came to SC. I've never seen it as an obligation. I've always seen it as an opportunity. You know? I've always wanted to compete at the highest level, and so do our players. With that comes expectations.

We're at a place that has 11 national championships. 125 years of tradition of excellence. We represent something that's bigger than ourselves. As nice as winning a Rose Bowl was and Pac-12 title was, like I told our guys, let's don't pat ourselves on the butt until we win a National Championship and where we belong. Then we'll pat ourselves on the butt and try to get another one.

But I love the expectations. It's part of it. I probably put more pressure on myself. Contracts don't mean

anything to me. Team success means a lot more.

Q. Clay, year three. Is this program on schedule to what you envisioned?

CLAY HELTON: What I wanted was the opportunity to provide consistency and stability and a standard of play that was constant, that had the opportunity to compete not only for Pac-12 titles, but national titles regularly.

I still wake up at 3 a.m. in the morning and there is 1:49 on the clock in Pullman, Washington, and we're down three. That haunts me because I know that that game probably held us out of contention for having a chance at a playoff run.

That's the next step for us, is leaving no doubt. That's kind of the phrase that we're saying with our team, to try to leave no doubt on each and every game. Do not take any game for granted and bring our best effort to the park each and every time to eliminate the mistakes that can cripple you in a game and cause you to do some really exceptional things down the stretch.

Are we on pace? Yes. I think of the last two years to have a chance to win a Rose Bowl and Pac-12 title. Yes. Are we where we want to be? No. When we win a national title, that's where we'll want to be.

Q. What are your expectations for Michael Pittman Jr. and Tyler Vaughns ?

CLAY HELTON: Extremely high. I was very proud of Michael, especially him and Tyler, how they finish down the stretch really led our football team. I think you go back to that Pac-12 title game and him catching 170 yards' worth of balls.

Then what he did in the bowl game, the guy had a broke thumb, and he's out there competing and playing and making plays. Just a really special talent. Had a great off-season, great spring. A 6'4.5", 270-pound physical receiver that has little man skills. I expect huge things from him this year.

Q. Has he taken a leadership role?

CLAY HELTON: He already has. He's done it in workouts. Did he it as a freshman. If you remember, on special teams. He's been a big-time player since he's gotten here. He's welcomed the bright lights. Wants them. Between him and Tyler Vaughns, I think you're going to see some exceptional things from those two kids that really grew up for us last year.

Q. You brought in two linebackers. Is that a message to the rest of the league? What have you told J.T. Daniels about nailing down that starting spot?

CLAY HELTON: Well, I'll go with the quarterback

question first. I've told all the quarterbacks what it takes to be, each and every one of them, what it takes to be the quarterback here. We'll review that as we get into camp.

One, I've always said, is the intangibles. You represent USC. You're in the second largest media market in the country. So how you represent yourself on and off the field is imperative how you are the example of what a Trojan is.

The next is your decision-making, timing, and accuracy. That's part of being a quarterback.

The last one that's most important is how productive you are moving the ball. How you put it in the end zone, how you win football games.

For us, we're going to put those kids in some tough situations in training camp. More live situations than just throwing the ball in the air and seven on sevens. They're going to see bullets fly. They're going to have Porter Gustin breathing down their necks to see how they function, how they operate, and how the ball moves.

The guy playing the best is going to go out there in this situation. It does not matter your age. It's the guy that's going to compete and play the best and move our football team.

Q. As far as the linebackers?

CLAY HELTON: The linebackers, I brought two linebackers today because they represent what Trojans are. They're great players, they're great men, and great students. Both graduate this semester. Both are going to play on Sundays, and both are defining what Trojans are. If I bring both of them, I want everybody else to know that's what the example of a Trojan is.

I could have brought a lot of guys. There are a lot of guys like them. I think of Marvell Tell and Biggie Marshall, I think of Toa Lobendahn, Chris Brown. There are a lot of guys on this team that are just like him. I think those two guys are tremendous examples of what we want Trojans to be.

Q. As a follow to the quarterback question, I've noticed a lot of inexperienced quarterbacks not coming up fast enough and they want the game to slow down. Have you noticed that?

CLAY HELTON: No, I thought the three quarterbacks that were on campus in the spring progressed a lot from practice 1 to practice 15. Practice 1 it was like, oh, gosh; then by practice 15, it was like we've got something here, these kids are progressing.

I think anytime you put the live bullets out there in

those live situations, that's when you find out. That's what our challenge is as coaches, is provide as many real, live situations as we can in camp.

Q. Where's Stephen Carr?

CLAY HELTON: He's good right now. He's just been cleared to practice. Obviously coming off of back surgery, we'll be smart and won't throw him out there the whole practice, but we'll bring him along just like a guy that's been off.

It reminds me like Adoree' Jackson who had a great track campaign in his senior year, but hadn't had a lot of functional football movement. He was clear to practice, but we eased him into it.

We'll do the same thing with Stephen. I've had the chance to watch him run, had the chance to watch him change direction. Have asked, Do you feel any pain? And he feels great right now.

But obviously he has not been hit yet. We'll slow-pace that to see where he's at, and hopefully by game one he's ready to go.

Q. You touched on it earlier with the recent wide receiver lineage, and I think it's safe to say several other positions, like the linebackers. What is it about USC that enables and facilitates players to have that next-man-up mentality, not only on the field but off the field and the way they conduct themselves and their leadership?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, I think it goes back to that older brother-younger brother mentality and that sense of excellence in the position. Every time I see a guy leave the level of recruiting that we do here at USC not only as players but people I think is very important. Coaches are nice, but players win games. To be able to bring that level of talent, that level of person into your organization, into your team, is important.

I think that's what creates that ability to go to the next guy and to not lack production.

That's been going on here for a long time. The quarterback position has been going since 2001 with Carson, and every guy after that has done a tremendous job.

Q. What sort of feedback are you getting on freshmen like Amon-Ra and JT? You don't get to watch them, but I'm sure you're hearing things.

CLAY HELTON: Well, we actually do now. You get to watch summer workouts and summer conditioning. It is open to coaches. You can't be out there for the player-run practices. But you do get to see them move around and see their work ethic. You know both Amon-

Ra and Devon Williams have provided a great sense of maturity from a physical standpoint and mental standpoint. I've been very impressed. Usually that equals the ability to contribute.

I know a lot of the kids have been bragging on Amon-Ra and what he's been doing, and he's had that shut-up-and-work mentality this summer and is earning a lot of respect with our older guys.

Q. When you hear somebody like Jordan Palmer say there are things JT does now better than Sam, what do you do when you hear stuff like that?

CLAY HELTON: It makes me smile. I look forward to seeing it at this level. I'm never going to put too much pressure on a kid. I want him to be able to grow and to develop. We are going to give him the opportunity to compete at a very, very young age and see where he is.

I've known JT since he was in the 7th grade, and he's been in our camps. Every time he's been in those situations with USC coaches watching him in competitive situations, he's always thrived. I would expect nothing less. Jordan knows a good one when he sees one, and JT Daniels is a damn good quarterback.

Q. A schedule question, I talk to a lot of people and they say, September, Stanford, and talk about Texas, but UNLV's not bad. They're kind of dangerous in the opener. How do you get the guys ready and not looking ahead?

CLAY HELTON: I think one of the things we've learned is every game counts. When you're trying to win a national title and present a resumé to that playoff football committee, every game counts and leaving no doubt is very, very important.

Our opening schedule with UNLV, going to Stanford, to Texas, coming back for a Friday night game after Texas against Washington State and then going to Arizona against Khalil Tate, that's a challenging opening schedule, but it also creates a great opportunity to start fast and create a great resumé.

And that's the way we look at things, is the ability to get out of the gate, play quality football teams that can create a great resumé for you and hopefully put you where you want to be come late November.

Q. What does Austin Jackson have to do to have a successful season?

CLAY HELTON: I think he's doing it right now. I thought he did it as a freshman. He contributed very well. It's so hard as an offensive lineman to contribute as a true freshman. For him to do what he did is

remarkable. I think about a young man that's on our football team right now, Toa Lobendahn, and think about him going out there as a true freshman and the consistency and stability that he's provided for us for a number of years, I see that same thing in Austin.

I see a guy that's going to be a constant force on that offensive line. Physical, tough, smart kid that is a tremendous teammate. Wants to be great. He's put a lot of work in this summer, and he's going to be a guy that's going to be competing with Clayton Johnston to be able to see who that left tackle is.

Q. What was your reaction when UCLA hired Chip Kelly?

CLAY HELTON: I thought it was going to be great for our league. When you bring Kevin Sumlin in and Coach Kelly, and Herm Edwards, and even my heart was full as a 20-year assistant to have -- to see Coach Cristobal and Coach Smith get their opportunities, it makes your league better.

That's what you want. Not only when you're trying to accomplish things in your league, but trying to accomplish things on a national scope. You want to be able to play against the best.

Obviously, being an offensive coach, having competed against Coach Kelly, unbelievable, brilliant, offensive mind that's accomplished so much. He just provides even more of a great reputation to our league having that quality of coaching.

Q. Is sport betting something that concerns you going forward? Is that something you let roll off your shoulder?

CLAY HELTON: No, it's something that's for us been an educational piece for a number of years. That's part of a compliance department and coaching staff responsibility is to always educate your players on sports betting. That's been going on. This is my 24th year of college football coaching, and that's been every year, has been that education of understanding college wagering.

College betting has become a part of our society and is allowed, but the educational piece for our players has been something that's been going on for a long time and will continue to.

Then from a coaching standpoint, you know, I've always tried to be extremely honest with the media as far as injuries and things like that and giving that information out so our players aren't hounded by that and the pressure is taken off of them for that information to be out there.

So I think with coaches being extremely honest of

what's going on with their football team as well as the educational piece, it's something that we've dealt with a number of years. Now it's just being allowed in our society.

Q. With this new red-shirt rule, would it make you more open to playing them late in the game when the game might be out of hand?

CLAY HELTON: I think it's going to help all positions. I love the new rule, first of all. I absolutely love it. I think it's great for our game, one because it's going to help the development of young players at all positions. Two, it's going to help the health of players, especially when you get to November and maybe you have some dings and some injuries.

Our game is an 80-play game, and that's usually the minimum. The NFL is 53 plays. To be able to have Cam Smith or Porter Gustin being able to be spelled rather than playing 80 plays and playing a young player if you have injuries, that creates more safety in our game. Plus it helps the development of our game.

I think it's a tremendous rule. I know a lot of coaches that I've talked to are really excited about it, to have the ability to have that luxury, not only from a safety standpoint, but from a development standpoint.

Q. Is there anything you can say or do to avoid the distraction of a quarterback controversy? I know Nick Saban was talking about how he does not want that. How do you get away from that?

CLAY HELTON: It's hard. Everybody wants to know who the quarterback is. For us, all I can do is provide the stability of knowing that whoever the guy that is the most productive going into that first week is going out there. That's my promise to our team. Promise to our team that I'm going to let them know. I'm not going to hide it until game day and say, okay, on the morning of game day this is your quarterback.

That's not fair to them. But it does take time. It does take time to see where they are, how much of the playbook they can handle.

Q. So you're saying the starter for opening day may not be the starter a month or two. You just don't know?

CLAY HELTON: You don't know in the moment. That's with every team.

Who is the best in the moment for that game, whether it's by injury or a guy's just not producing. But I've always -- I've played the position, I've coached the position. I never want a guy looking over his shoulder about, oh, gosh, I didn't make that throw in a game. We'll name a quarterback, and we're going to give him

ample opportunity to grow and to be able to see what he can do. Hopefully he stays healthy and produces. If he doesn't and there is another guy that can, we'll go that direction.