

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 24 2019

## Clay Helton USC Trojans



CLAY HELTON: Great to see everybody. It's always my favorite time of year, coming here. It means it's football season and getting ready to get started again. It's been a great off-season for our football program, coming off of last year, correcting some mistakes in the spring and getting ready to get 25 more practices to continue instituting a new offensive scheme, a simplified defensive scheme, and continued great special teams effort.

I've got two tremendous football players here today as well as tremendous people in Michael Pittman, our wide receiver, and Christian Rector, our defensive end.

And with that, I'll answer any questions that you have.

**Q. I want to lead off with Austin Jackson and his whole situation; how has the team come to his side and supported him through donating bone marrow to his sister?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, what a great story Austin Jackson is. His sister Autumn needed a bone marrow transplant, and to be a perfect match for her and have that opportunity to help her get healthy was just a blessing from God. That's what it is. We're so glad that Austin got that opportunity over the summer to be able to do that. He's recovering from it right now. He's back with us at school, and I know he's looking forward to not only his recovery but most importantly his sister's.

**Q. Is he going to try to get back this season?**

CLAY HELTON: Right now he's training to get in the best football shape possible. We'll see where he is at the start of training camp. And we've been through this scenario before, if you remember, with guys that have been out of football for a little bit. You remember Adoree had been out with track, and we kind of eased him along in his Thorpe Award-winning season to where it was a little bit slower pace.

We'll see where Austin is come next week with it and then go from there. But we won't put him fully in until we know he's 100 percent.

**Q. Could you walk us through the additions of Chris Steele and Bru McCoy from your perspective and how that all unfolded?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, I think one of the most important things and one of the things my dad has always taught me is how important relationships are and to never burn bridges. Gentlemen make decisions and people make decisions in life, and you honor that decision and you support that decision, and know you're always there for him.

We're very fortunate to have great relationships with Bru and with Chris, and they have a special place in their heart for USC and what it can -- what they can do for our team and what USC can do for them and have the opportunity to welcome both those men into our program and them be -- and they will be major contributors for us in the future is a special thing.

Probably the biggest thing I learned from it is how important relationships are and trust is.

**Q. What's kind of the timetable for each of them? What do you think?**

CLAY HELTON: You know, right now we're going through the waiver process with the NCAA as far as whether they'll be eligible to play or not. It's not been finalized. I don't have a timetable for it because it's not on -- it's an NCAA decision.

Hopefully we'll know something before Game 1. I anticipate that. But we're in that process right now.

**Q. Is it the same process for both?**

CLAY HELTON: Yes. Basically you supply a waiver to the NCAA, and they make a decision on it.

**Q. What was your immediate reaction to learning Bru's decision, and how surprised were you?**

CLAY HELTON: I've known Bru and his family for a long time. Heck, we live about three miles apart, to be honest with you. What a fabulous gentleman and what a fabulous family. Everybody's story is different, and this transfer portal that we've had, that's the one thing that going into it I realized that each story and each case is going to be different. You're dealing with 18- to 21-year-olds that have situations in their life that they need to figure out for themselves what's best for them. And that takes time.

The greatest gift we can give somebody is our time, and to help them through the process, to guide them

and to support them. And if you do that, if you do that, that relationship stays intact.

You know, Bru and I have had a great relationship for many years, and when he came back, it didn't surprise me because I know how special USC is to him. I know how special being in Los Angeles, California, is for him. I welcomed him back with open arms and glad he's with us.

**Q. What kind of sales pitch did it require with Chris because he obviously had decommitted and had a few chances and kept choosing other places and ultimately ended up here. What did you say to get him on board with that?**

CLAY HELTON: Just the same thing that I felt and believed in, that we had a unique opportunity for him. And once that opportunity came to fruition that we had an opening, that I truly believed it was a great opportunity for him, that not only on the field but off.

Chris is a great student-athlete, and I know how important education was to him. And I also thought the timing was great for him, especially when you look at the players that we were losing off of last year's team, the opportunity to compete in a hurry and see where he's at.

I thought it would be unique to him and a great timing for him, and he saw the same thing. And he's another kid that has always had USC -- been a special place in his heart. Obviously his family is right from here, mom and dad is right here, and he's always been ultra respectful to myself, our staff. And when he came back, it was just -- it felt natural and comfortable to him that that was the right time and the right place for him. I'm glad for him.

**Q. How difficult is it to create rules that kind of govern that entire process?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, you know, the one thing going into it, I thought that -- I reminded myself that people are 18 to 21 years old, and each story is different. You take Velus Jones, for example, Velus has got a family situation at home with a grandfather in ICU, and how much he loves his family and how hard a time it was for his family, and he needed to figure things out for himself and see what was best for him. And at the end of the day he came to agree with that USC and getting his degree and being here with his brothers and playing for his brothers was important to him and what he wanted. And he got the blessing of his family, and it was great.

And then there's other situations that young men get a degree, and they want to garner a bigger role and a grander experience. And I welcome that. I ask them to

do one thing: Get their degree.

So I think each case is different, and the greatest gift you can give somebody is your time, and I felt like going in, knowing there would be a ton of people that put their name in the transfer portal -- I think we were over 2,500 for about 300 spots -- that you were going to need to help young men. And that's part of our job as coaches, is to be able to guide and teach and help young people.

**Q. When people ask you how is this year going to be different in terms of like a bullet point, this way, this way, how is this year going to be different for you guys?**

CLAY HELTON: If I had to say it in one word, I'd say accountability. Accountability to each other, accountability to our fundamentals, accountability to protecting the ball, taking the ball away and the accountability of not having penalties. Those are the things that cost us games last year.

So if there's one word, I would say accountability.

**Q. With the transfer portal, what's your policy on guys who enter?**

CLAY HELTON: Like I said, each case is different, and there's certain situations that when a player leaves, it might be best for him. And had that discussion with him that, hey, if we choose to go this -- I'm going to help you in any way I can, help you find the right place. But it's your opportunity to have the chance to find the best place for you, and we'll find the next opportunity for somebody to fill that role.

And then there's situations that I think kids need time, and there were some kids on our football team that needed time, and I want to make sure I granted that. I didn't lay down a hard-line rule of, oh, if you put your name in the portal, you're not a Trojan. Each case was different, and I wanted to help each kid.

**Q. You touched on Austin Jackson. Are there any other players that could possibly (indiscernible)?**

CLAY HELTON: You know, initially, I'll get the final injury report as of next week. We have a couple kids that are coming off surgery that will be really close by. Matt Fink is coming off a minor knee surgery that he should be -- he should be ready by the time of camp. It'll be really, really close. And a couple kids with a couple calf pulls and things.

I'll have a better idea for you. We've still got basically another week worth of rehab, and in a week's time a lot of things can happen, so I can't want to give you anything false.

**Q. What were the discussions with Daniel Imatorbhebhe?**

CLAY HELTON: Daniel is doing well. Daniel is this year going to focus on finalizing his master's degree as well as continuing to train. But he's doing well. He won't be with us this season, but is doing well.

**Q. Could he come back?**

CLAY HELTON: I look forward to watching him play in the 2020 season. I really do.

**Q. Has the door completely closed on (indiscernible)?**

CLAY HELTON: Right now, YK is in the transfer portal right now, and we'll see where that goes. We'll see where that goes. YK is finding out what's the best situation for him, and we're doing the same.

**Q. Can you address the guys in the class who didn't make it (indiscernible) and what happened with those situations?**

CLAY HELTON: You had said some names. Can you go through them.

**Q. Watson, Levi, and Trey Davis is now in the portal?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, Trey has a family situation back at home that he put his name in the portal that he may need to garner a better opportunity closer to home. And then Jalen fell just short of eligibility requirements for transfer regulations.

**Q. And Levi?**

CLAY HELTON: (Indiscernible) fell just short of eligibility requirements, as well.

**Q. You had so much success the first two years, and obviously last year was what it was. You personally going through last season and in the off-season, what did you learn about yourself as a coach since you were here last year at this event?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, you know, probably the most important thing as a leader is that when you have good seasons like a Rose Bowl year and a Pac-12 Championship year that you give the accolades to the people that are around you that got you there, and when you have a 5-7 season that you own it and you own it yourself as the leader and you look at yourself truthfully of what you have to do to get better.

You can either hide your head in the sand or you can address the issues, have very brutally honest conversations with the men around you of how to get better and institute that.

And that was the biggest thing. The address issues, to make changes that needed to be changed, to put a

point of emphasis on some things that I felt beat us last year, make those corrections, and now move on to the 2019 season.

**Q. You've talked a lot about being authentic to yourself and you've said before your players know when you're not being authentic. Can you kind of turn the intensity up a little bit more (indiscernible) what was that like doing that, and did it feel right to you?**

CLAY HELTON: Well, it was important for our football team to understand how we got beat, especially down the stretch in those last four games by seven points or less in each one of those games. It was nothing that an opponent did. We beat ourselves. You know, when you turn the ball over two times in the red zone at Cal and two times in the red zone at Notre Dame, you have critical penalties down the stretch. You don't acquire turnovers.

We did some things with lack of fundamentals that make you just an average football team rather than what you can become.

And for me, that's where -- that's my job, and that what I told myself going in, that I'm going to hire the best coordinators that fit what we want to do offensively, defensively and special teams, and I'm going to focus on what wins football games, and I'm going to have a passion towards that. I'm going to make sure our players feel that because when they feel it, they know there's a sense of urgency, an importance, and it's demanded of them.

So, yes, the heat got turned up a little bit in the spring, and I felt it was nice. I thought our kids thrived off of it. I thought they enjoyed it, and at the end of the day, kids love to be coached, and they love to be coached hard.

**Q. I know your dad is a big voice for you in terms of bouncing ideas off of. After what you went through what you did last season, is there anybody else you talked to?**

CLAY HELTON: You know, I talked to other coaches, especially going through the hiring process. Some of the best advice I got -- you know, the first hire with Cliff was such -- had to have a sense of urgency because of the early signing period.

But the other thing that came about in hiring Graham, Graham was always at the top of my list, but to have the availability, did not have the rush because we had about 90 percent of our class signed and really be able to talk to some other people, college and pro, there was so much that I learned personally as a coach and being able to acquire a tool or two from each and every guy that I talked to.

And that was some of the best recommendations that I got, was take your time in the process, don't worry about, oh, everybody wants to know who it is right now. Learn from other people. Heck, you may be playing against them one day and be able to garner a tool or two.

And that whole process I got a lot out of, some of the best advice I was given, is don't worry about popular opinion, do what you believe in, and then take the time to go through the process and get not only the right guy but to learn a lot of valuable material along the way.

**Q. What do you learn from Graham? What has Graham taught you since he's been here?**

CLAY HELTON: How simple college football can be. That we all have grand ideas and grand schemes, but it's not what we know as coaches, it's what our players know. And to be able to see a Devon Williams as everybody saw in spring really come alive within the system, to be able to see kids like Amon-Ra and Michael Pittman bounce from outside receiver to inside receiver, to learn conceptually, it's more about the kids mastering their craft than you trying to out-think your opponent. It's about them having great fundamentals and technique.

So I think the greatest thing that he's shown me is how simple the game can be for the student-athlete and focus on him getting better fundamentally and technique-wise rather than trying to out-trick somebody.

**Q. You obviously talked to him about his philosophy in the process, but going through the spring, was there anything specifically that really surprised you or caught your eye?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, really two things. One, I was very appreciative in Graham, and it was one of the things that I saw -- you could see it in the stats sheets, when you come out of North Texas, you see them rushing the ball 2,000 yards and then having a top-10 quarterback. When you watch the tape, Graham takes what the defense gives him. If you're going to line up and load the box, he's going to throw it 60 times. And if you end up dropping eight and playing cover-two, he's not going to force the pass, he's going to run the ball and let a rusher get 200 yards in a game.

To be able to see him not script, to just play call and train himself during the spring was a unique tool that I really enjoyed, and Clancy did it, too, where we would just script the personnel groupings and let them call the plays based on the situation. Played a lot of situational football. I thought it got not only our players better but

it made both play callers better. Those are probably the two things that I saw coming out of spring that I enjoyed.

**Q. Is there a good anecdote or example that speaks to how that heightened accountability has been kind of bought into?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, you know, I thought one of the most important hires any head coach could make is their strength and conditioning coach. It's probably the most important high, to be honest with you. We lost a good man in Ivan Lewis going to the Seattle Seahawks, but to garner Aaron Ausmus who has run two SEC programs, has been at SC, had run this program, and also the crew that he brought in, the assistant coaches that he brought in underneath him had led college programs, and to see that commitment to accountability in their group, it has been -- there's nowhere to hide. Every day, whether you're in the strength and conditioning, whether you're with our coaches, everybody is accountable.

It's been really neat to see Aaron and his group lead our program through this point in time right now. It's been a really special time for us. It's been a great summer, and I can't wait to see the dividends for this fall.

**Q. What was the conversation with Aaron like? Because he had been out of coaching for four or five years. What was that conversation like when you approached him about the job?**

CLAY HELTON: Just true joy. Any time -- and it wasn't what people -- I don't think he minds me saying this. Aaron Ausmus loves his sons, and he wasn't leaving Los Angeles, California, for any job and leaving his sons, and had turned down many jobs and found a job in strength and conditioning that allowed him to still be in the field but be in the equipment side.

But he's always been a teacher at heart. And to have the opportunity to teach again and to see his enthusiasm and to see his energy and the guys that he's brought in that a lot of times when you hire assistants, sometimes there's a guessing game because you don't get to see them coach. He got to go to those places while in the equipment business and be able to watch those guys train. There was no guessing game.

So he brought in guys that are truly studs in their profession, and just to see his joy of coaching again after that break, you could see there's a definite appreciation to what he gets to do on a daily basis.

**Q. Was there a specific time last season when you thought I need to change up the offense, and at**

**what point did you think -- you went from probably a pro offense, I guess, to more of a -- is this a duck-and-chuck? Anyway, was there a point in the season where you said, I need to change things up?**

CLAY HELTON: Well, there was two situations that stood out to me. One was Notre Dame towards the end of the season, and to see in that game plan we kept it extremely simple, and to see the effectiveness of the quarterback in that game, I think he was like 29 of 32 in the first half, and it really made me feel like, wow, to be able to spread the field and use all our weapons, to try to keep it as simple as possible, I think -- I know this is the direction that we need to go.

The other thing that I wanted to be able to do is I knew we would be a younger team, and there's special athletes like a Devon Williams that's on our team and freshmen, we always get very talented freshmen, and Ra St. Brown is another one that I wanted to have the availability to have the offense simple enough where a freshman could come in and really contribute at an early time period.

And to be able to watch this system in the spring, it's exactly what I wanted. Kids picked it up within three, four practices and were ready to go with it.

And so those are probably the two situations, just, one, having a chance to call a game and be able to see where we could take the offense; and then, two, seeing that I didn't want any confusion or hesitation from our skilled athletes and to allow Devon Williams and kids like himself to really thrive and not be confused, not have hesitation, but to be able to take the brain out of the process and just let the talent prevail.

**Q. And this is -- are we doing the air-raid? Is there a specific name for this, duck-and-chuck?**

CLAY HELTON: I don't think it is the air-raid, to be honest with you. I've watched college football and how it's changing, and you look at the teams like Oklahoma, you look at the teams like Alabama that have had specific MO's that now have spread the field more, it's not necessarily taking the run away, it's not throwing the ball 80 times in a game. It's more taking what the defense gives you.

We've got a tremendous advantage in my opinion in the college football game because of where our hash marks are, and to be able to attack every inch of the field, whether it's vertically, horizontally, in between the tackles with the run game, it's very, very important to be able to use all of your skill players and not combine them in a box.

And you've seen teams -- the best teams in the country

start to spread out and use that field and use their athletes, and they've proven that they can win National Championships.

**Q. You've made a lot of changes, most pretty positive, but you made a change with the media for like Tuesday and Wednesday practices, reducing to stretching and then answering questions afterwards. What was your thought process in leaving the media out?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, we had -- number one, not keeping the media out. We've always had a great relationship with the media and always want to be able to help you do your job at all times. And that's why we allow -- we do do media Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, and provide two days to be at practice for 30 minutes. You know, we're ahead of every other, I think, standard practice in college football.

We want to continue to be allowed to have the media do their job. But it was something that we felt in postseason play worked very well for us and we wanted to go to. I wanted to go to.

If there's any special request, I'll always -- as you've seen in our relationship, I've always be available for you, always. But I want our student-athletes to be able to concentrate on their job and focus on their job when it's time for them to work.

We'll always make access to our media. It's always been a great relationship, and we'll continue to, and we'll always make Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday available. Five out of the seven days a week we work with our media relationship.

**Q. Going back to accountability, did you solicit any information from players about what they felt was lacking last year or things they thought needed to be strengthened?**

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, we had hard conversations. That was part of the process. You always do exit interviews with your seniors, and being able to garner information, and you know, it's not always great information, but it's the information that's needed for you to improve.

Again, you can either do one of two things. You can either pretend like everything is great and put your head in the sand, or you can try to become the best team in the country and be willing to make the changes that are needed and don't have feelings.

I hope that's the one thing you've learned from me, I don't have a lot of feelings when it comes to the game.

I just want our team to be the most successful it can be. Whether it's me improving in some areas, whether it's our team improving in some areas, not only do I listen, but the things that I know will help us, I'll institute. And that's what I've done in this off-season.

**Q. Was there anything that really surprised you, anything you didn't realize, things you heard from your guys?**

CLAY HELTON: No, one of the things that I think all great relationships do, if you love somebody, you tell them the truth, and you tell them the hard truth sometimes.

The one thing that I've always had here over my ten years here is great relationships with our players. And I've always told them to be honest and be truthful with you means I love you. And I've asked for them the same in return. You know, if you have a care and concern for myself, my family, tell me. And that's why I've always had an open-door policy. Guys will always come in my office. They'll always speak their mind, and we'll work it out. That's why you see we do have great relationships.

**Q. USC's great teams have been teams that people didn't want to play; what's it going to take for USC to be the team that people don't want to play?**

CLAY HELTON: I'm going to put -- I'm an O-line coach's son, so I believe big men win championships. I believe obviously skill players can put points on the board. But at the end of the day, I truly believe the offensive line and defensive line control games.

One of the things I'm very excited about, this is the first time in a few years I really feel like offensively our offensive line has showed tremendous leadership. The Austin Jacksons, the Jalen McKenzies of the world, the Andrew Vorhees of the world. Even Alijah Vera-Tucker has come out of his shell in this off-season. This is a group that really have been waiting, just watch them grow up, and now they're in their third year, and you can see their confidence and them controlling the offense.

And then probably the strongest group on our defense is our defensive front. I've got one here today that's been an unbelievable leader that's had a tremendous off-season in Christian Rector.

But the big men are controlling our team right now, and that's what you want to see. The best teams that I have been on, the offensive and defensive line have thrived, they control the team, and they've controlled the line of scrimmage.

**Q. One of the criticisms, fair or not, the perception**

**has been a lack of physicality. Would you like to address that?**

CLAY HELTON: Well, I thought the 15 practices we had in the spring, if everybody was out there, we went to the letter of the law as far as full-pad practices, as far as tackle practices, and we'll do the same in training camp. If you ask our players, I think they'll tell you it was a very physical practice. It's been an extremely tough off-season, and it'll be a very physical training camp.

We will go to the letter of the law.

I will say this: I think every head coach that is smart manages his football team based on where his football team is at. We were very healthy in the spring, and it allowed us to be that ultra physicality.

And we're in a good position right now to start out that way. You're going to see the opportunity to be able to have three scrimmages that we're going to play as close to the vest as games as we can. I can't wait until August 17th to get in that Coliseum and have our fall classic and be able to sit there with our fans in the stands, get some performance anxiety, split up into two teams, put the play clock on and play ball and treat it like an NFL preseason game. That's going to be something that I think is good for our team and garner some experience for our young kids.

If that's not physical, if that's not challenging, I don't know what is. But we're going to go use every opportunity we can to get better.