

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

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USC Trojans Clay Helton

Press Conference

CLAY HELTON: Great to see everybody. Thank you for all being here. What a great opportunity for not only us as coaches but really our student-athletes. That's the one thing I've taken away from today is how grateful I am to see the smiles on student-athletes' faces.

I look at our coaches, how much experience we have in this conference, all the experiences you've garnered as coaches. As student-athletes, they only get one college experience. How hard they fought through last season, the adversity, the trials and tribulations, to be able to even be here today, be with our media resources. I see the smiles on their faces. To have a little bit of normalcy is exciting. It's exciting to start a new year. It's exciting to be able to have an off-season campaign with strength and conditioning, spring training, with summer workouts, with a fall training camp getting ready to happen.

The excitement of fans being in the stands, getting back to a little bit of what we're used to, being able to give those experiences to college football players. Exciting to meet our commissioner in this go around, to see his vision, to see his confidence. Really come away with an unbelievable first impression of what he is going to be about, how much he loves this conference and what he wants to do for it.

It's an exciting time. It's an exciting time for college football to be able to move forward.

I know that there's several topics to get into. I know you'll ask those questions. I'm thrilled to have Kedon Slovis and Drake London here with me today that I know will get a ton of questions. We're here to service you, to be servants. Let's open it up for questions and see how we can help you.

Q. What's the biggest difference between last year and this year for your offense and your defense?

CLAY HELTON: Great question.



I know defensively it's just having the opportunity and time to be able to grow, really to develop kind of the attitude of what Coach Orlando is. I remember leaving the building March 15th of last year and not reentering until July 6. Coach Orlando and Coach Snyder, our special teams coaches, having to go and basically shrink a playbook down, say this is what we're going to do, we're going to get really good at something. Really seeing those two phases advance.

In this off-season being able to see the personality of what coach Orlando brings and that defensive staff brings to the table has really rubbed off on our players. There's an edginess, toughness, discipline, accountability, really a bond between that defensive unit and what Coach Orlando has been able to create.

Offensively I was just so thankful for Kedon, being able to get the experiences that he was given last year. Some were great successes, late-game heroics, some were growth experiences from failures.

I've always thought that being a quarterback is about reps and experiences. To be away from the building, not being able to grow for four months, an abbreviated training camp, it was so invaluable for that young man to be able to have six games to be able to grow.

Now having a full off-season, seeing how his confidence was developed, seeing how the team has really rallied around his leadership, is exciting as a head coach. I think those are probably the two biggest things that I've taken away.

Coach Orlando's personality rubbing off on our defense and really the growth of Kedon.

Q. In terms of the vaccine, what has been your message to players over the course of this off-season? How do you feel that message has been received by the locker room?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, definitely. Thanks for the question.



One, I'm immensely grateful and thankful to USC through this last year and a half as we went through the pandemic. One because they provided unbelievable knowledge to our players. Two, they answered questions not only to the players but parents with different webinars. It's not every once in a while discussions, it's everyday discussions, weekly discussions amongst administrators, coaching staffs, our medical professionals at USC. What that garnered I think was a high level of trust as we went through this process.

As we've gone through now the vaccination process, I think it's produced tremendous results for our team. You look at a team that's over 90% vaccinated, all of its position coaches vaccinated, all of its operation staff vaccinated, basically 110 men that are ready to go to camp.

USC has garnered opportunities, waivers out there, religious and medical waivers that we're still waiting on. But I think that trust and respect and time that USC and resources at USC has given has really put our university and our team in a great position moving to the '21 season.

Q. Where does everything stand health-wise?

CLAY HELTON: We're about nine days away from training camp. I think we're in really good position. As you go through a really hard summer, strength and conditioning program, sometimes you'll have tweaks of some soft tissue. We have a couple of those, not many.

I think as you come out, which I can't wait, our media for the first 14 days of practice, coming out to all practices, be a part of it, I think you're going to get a great feel for where we're at.

I like where we're at right now. My prayer is at training camp we stay healthy. But I think we're in really good position right now walking in especially with our numbers and our depth at all positions.

I think we're in a position to have walking in a very successful -- hopefully we'll be able to sustain that throughout training camp.

Thanks for the question.

Q. (No microphone.)

CLAY HELTON: I tell you what, last year I had this question at one of the radios about what I learned the most over the past couple years. Maybe last year learned the most and took away the most.

I thought one of the great silver linings of last year was how

in the moment, how important it is to be in the moment for young men and coaching staffs. As we were going through last season, you were fighting, clawing, scratching just to get to the next game, what it took to get to the next game. You never looked too far ahead, or you didn't look behind.

Sometimes at USC, you have such grand expectations of championships and championship standards, you can get caught up looking way ahead. Last year just living in the moment, All right, we have to do everything in our power to be able to get to this game from a health and safety standpoint, to be able to prepare for a really quality opponent, to make the most of each game in an abbreviated season.

Our kids took that opportunity, our staff took that opportunity to look up, and we have an undefeated regular season and we're in the Pac-12 championship game. That mentality is something that really hit home to me and really just hit me like a ton of bricks that I took away. Probably one of the better learning experiences that I've had as a coach or as a player was last season. That was definitely a silver lining for me, how important it is to be in the moment as a coach within season.

Q. How has Coach Snyder impacted your program?

CLAY HELTON: Oh, goodness. I really appreciate Mike Bohn and Brandon Sosna our administration because when we had the opportunity, they said, Coach, go get anybody you want, any school, get the best of the best.

In doing and talking to several people, interviewing several people, I walked away and said, You know what, there's great trainers that are out there, but there's also great trainers that provide great culture. As a head coach, you realize that your training staff is with your players as much, if not more, than your position coaches and you as a head coach.

An eight-week spring cycle, eight-week summer cycle. It's not just about being a great trainer, it's about providing a great culture and a great culture system. That's what Bobby, Coach Snyder, provided for us, him and his staff. The staff he put together are comprised with former head strength coaches themselves, being able to bring in a return to play specialist in Ian Bures, a former strength training coach in Chad Smith.

We're strong in that area. Under Bobby's leadership we've made tremendous strides as a team and culture under his leadership.

Q. (No microphone.)



CLAY HELTON: You never know what you got till it's gone. Heck, I missed y'all (laughter). Miss just being in front of people and having a chance to see people. When you miss the media, gosh darn, you know you're going to miss the fans, too (smiling).

To be able to, like I said earlier, have a great college experience for our student-athletes. They only get this one time. To have our fans and our alumni back in the stands, that's part of college football. That passion, that excitement, game day excitement, the band and traveler coming out of the tunnel with 80,000, 90,000 around. That's what's special about college football.

To welcome that back, we're immensely excited to have that back in the fold.

Obviously with having fans back, I could hear Graham from the press box sometimes last year yelling down at Kedon. Obviously communication will come back into play, how important that is from being able to get in rowdy crowd formats, electric atmospheres, being able to handle that pressure. That will be something that comes back into play. We welcome it because it means we're back to regular college football.

Q. (No microphone.)

CLAY HELTON: I've been a college football coach for 26 years. Teams going to other conferences, I remember the old Southwest Conference, being at the University of Houston. Changes are always made and teams are coming into other conferences.

Obviously it's an exciting topic. You realize once you get the education that it's a little bit further down the line. But I think for college coaches as well as college players, I give this recommendation, whether it's teams going to another conference, whether it's College Football Playoff expansion, our job as coaches and players is you better focus on this season, better focus on your job, doing your job. The best way you can help your football team is being productive and being successful. You help your team, you help your conference. The reality whether it is what is our conference doing, what is their conference doing, are we four teams, 12 teams? The reality is right now we're four teams and we're fighting like heck to be one of those four teams to win that conference championship, be in that Playoff.

So focus on what we are. What I'm proud of is to be in this conference. Today hit home for me. I look at the coaches that are leading these programs, and I look at the quality of talent of men as the players that I've seen today. You go, Wow, these are special people. To see the

competitiveness of our league, now to see George come in, that leadership, that excitement, to hear other teams going, Wow. We want to be a part of this.

We own the Mountain and West time zones with this conference. To see where this conference is trending to, what it can be is exciting.

What we have to do as coaches and as players is live in the now and do our job and produce championships now.

Q. You talked about using the full 25 practices to settle the backup quarterback position. Can you break down what are the boxes that those guys are going to have to check, considering they're both freshmen at this point?

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, definitely. It reminds me a little bit of I remember when Kedon was coming in as a freshman. One, we have a huge advantage because Miller and Jaxson were midterm graduates. They've been with us through an off-season and training camps. Kedon was that way. There's talented men in the room already.

You use those 25 practices to see where you're best at in the moment. I remember when Kedon went through it as a true freshman. If you remember Jack Sears and Matt Fink were in the room, two dang good quarterbacks, as well as JT Daniels. It's about where you are in the moment.

I thought Kedon had a tremendous sense of urgency to be great. I see that from Miller and Jaxson in this time period. How they treated the process in spring training. In the summer how they've led our groups when Kedon has had obligations. They've run a couple of the player-run practices, which has been a great experience for them.

But it takes 25 practices to evaluate. That evaluation isn't over as you go through the season. Those guys will be battling for a while. It's important that you not necessarily focus on, What did I do today? Where am I standing? Just progress as a player. Whoever's the best in the moment in that first game will be labeled two and the other one will be labeled three.

I want each and every one, just like Kedon did, you better prepare yourself as a starter because you never know when that time is coming. I give credit to Kedon. He prepared, he prepared, even though JT Daniels was starting, he prepared like heck to compete against the other men in the room, prepared to be ready if his opportunity came. You look at what he did his freshman year. That opportunity came, he made the most of it. Those two will be ready also.

Q. Winning obviously comes first, but how much of a priority is it to get both those guys game action this year?

CLAY HELTON: Well, hopefully we do our job and we can be up in some games. They have to be prepared for being one snap away if there's injury, just like Kedon was, in the second quarter of the first game versus Fresno State. Those guys have to prepare like starters each and every game.

Hopefully we do our job, we're up in some games, and that provides opportunities for both guys to gain experience. That's the beauty of the redshirt rule we currently have in playing college football, is you can have four games worth of experience and still be redshirted. That would be invaluable to be able to have.

We hope we can provide that opportunity to both guys.

Q. (No microphone.)

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, we've been living it, as you know. We've been living it for a while just being in the city of Los Angeles. You're talking about the number one college media market in the country, the number two pro media market in the country. You're talking about a city that is based on one-word names. I think of LeBron and Kobe, Snoop, JuJu.

That's part of being in Los Angeles, being in a championship city, a championship market. There's an advantageous thing to that. I watched JuJu before name, image and likeness was even there, our university be proactive in helping him build his brand and build his platform that enabled him to walk into the NFL and have tremendous opportunities.

I'm thankful for the resources USC has given because I think universities are going to have to do three things in this standpoint. We've lived it. We've been proactive as a university. I think one, you're going to have to provide support, which our university has done with the merger of J1S, to be able to provide content, social media direction. I think you're going to have to provide compliance of what's right and wrong to do within it. Then I think you're going to have to provide knowledge. In our merger with ALTIS, being able to say what's a good decision or bad decision as you move forward.

At the end of the day, like I tell our players, remember the most important thing, it's great now in name, image and likeness that you have marketing teams that can do their job and be able to find you opportunities. But what's your job as a student-athlete? Your job as a student-athlete is

to get your degree, to be a master of your craft on and off the field when it comes to academics and athletics, and to put yourself in an extremely positive light of how you represent yourself, your family, your team, your university.

If you focus on those three things, whether it's your degree, mastering your craft on the field, how you present yourself on a day-to-day basis, I promise you opportunities are going to come out. I watched it with JuJu Smith-Schuster before there was name, image and likeness. I watched it with Michael Pittman, what he did at USC. If you concentrate on those three things, have the support, knowledge and compliance along with it like our university provides, you're going to do great things. That's why our kids come to USC. Thanks for that question.

Q. (No microphone.)

CLAY HELTON: Yeah, I think that's one of the advantages. It really wasn't if this was going to happen, it was when. The proactiveness of our administration to be able to put these pieces in place, to educate our players when it was coming about I think was really important.

I do take solace. By doing this, now they have marketing teams that can go out and do that work so they can focus on their jobs and their responsibilities, see the big picture.

Big picture wealth is about getting your degree and being able so when you do win the game, you do win the game, and you're 26, 27, 28 years old, that NFL pension doesn't kick in till you're 65, what am I going to do in that time period? Let's go get the 15th ranked academic degree in the country, private school education, see what that does for us. That's pretty special. Let's go be a master of our craft. Only, what, 0.4% go onto the NFL from college football players. It takes a lot to be able to get there. Focus on that.

Brands want great people to represent their products. So be a great person. Focus on those three things, get your academics, get your degree, be the best player you can be, go be a great person and great opportunities are going to come about.

Q. I happened to catch a glimpse of you and Justin Wilcox chatting this morning. Talk about your time working together and what Coach Wilcox has done with his Cal team.

CLAY HELTON: What a great job Coach has done. I've always respected him so much as a defensive coach, his knowledge on the defensive side of the ball. To see his leadership at Cal, you always knew he was a great leader. To see his leadership at Cal and what he's done with his

players, they're hard to go against. Great things are on the horizon for them.

It's good to see him. He's a fellow fisherman like me. We got caught up about our fishing adventures this summer, how our teams are doing. He's a friend. He's been a colleague, we've worked together. Got a lot of respect for what he's doing at Cal right now.

Q. Over the last four seasons for USC the defense has allowed about 80 touchdown receptions. What are you looking to do, what kind of adjustments are you looking to make?

CLAY HELTON: One adjustment we made was Todd Orlando. Todd got six games last year. He saw the improvement of our defense. I thought they did an amazing job.

I think his introduction of some nickel and dime packages, which I think are extremely important in today's time. You look at the amount of spread offenses that are going across the country, whether it's 10 or 11 personnel. It's so imperative that your defensive systems are now multiple, especially against these spread passing offenses.

So when I look up and you see the ability of a Coach Orlando to bring his system in, that could be odd front, can be four down front, can have drop eight, can hide both zone pressures, man pressures, be able to be able to fool quarterbacks. It's so important to be able to have those nickel and dime packages to be able to slow down passing attacks. That's what he brought to the table.

You saw improvement over a six-game period of time with our defense. That was in a three-week period training camp only. I look forward to seeing now after a year of investment of his knowledge and tutelage where it goes to.

Q. For a successful year for USC, not that many over the last few years, what has to be the key thing for you to be successful this year?

CLAY HELTON: The beauty of that question is I love USC because you know what the standard is?

Q. What is that?

CLAY HELTON: Championships. You can be at USC and win every game but one. If it's the last one, it's looked at as a bad season. That's being at a special place. You can have an undefeated regular season and win a Pac-12 championship game and everybody is sad. That's a special place to be.

So when you're at a place that's won 11 national championships, you know the standard of excellence and you know what's demanded. We welcome that. We welcome it as players, we welcome it as coaches. That's why we all came to USC.

Our job right now is to get back to that championship game and to win that game because we know when we win that game, it opens the doors to the Playoff and the national championship opportunities.

That mentality I talked about earlier of going in to each and every game, trying to be 1-0, getting back to that championship game, winning that game, opening those doors, that's what USC is about. Other programs may have other standards. It's not what we're about here. That's the beauty of USC, is not only being in that championship game but winning it. That's why we work so hard at what we do to be back there and to win it.

Thanks for that question.

Q. You mentioned the new commissioner's vision for the conference. What steps do you hope to see at a league level to get the conference there?

CLAY HELTON: We have a responsibility as one of the upper level teams, elite teams, tradition of excellence that USC has, I've always felt if we're successful, our conference is successful.

Yes, we have a responsibility at our program to be able to put ourselves at those championship expectations, live up to those standards. That's one thing I took away from George. I loved he said we're here to win championships, our conference as a football program is here to win championships. The conference is going to support us and those teams that put themselves in those positions to help them get there.

To be able to hear that enthusiasm was exciting as a coach. To hear some of his vision of where he sees us progressing to as a conference is exciting.

But we also know that being at USC, this league, how ultra competitive it is, not only do you have to manage that nine-game conference schedule, you have to be successful outside of conference. What a great schedule we have. How about at Notre Dame, get to play BYU and San Jose State, three top-25 teams from last year.

Be successful within our conference, have a great non-conference success story, that's going to open up some great opportunities and provide some great success for our program also.

Thank you, guys. Appreciate it.

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