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An Interview With:

TEXAS A&M COACH MIKE SHERMAN

PETER IRWIN: We're now joined by Coach Sherman from Texas A&M University.

Coach, welcome, and your opening thoughts.

COACH SHERMAN: Thank you, Peter. It's great to be here. It's always exciting to get ready to kick off the season.

I've been fortunate enough to have a number of Aggie functions I've had to speak at, and I have a couple more this week. Most of the work -- all of the work is done for the season for the coaches in anticipation of preseason. So it's nice to get out among the Aggie faithful and touch base with our fans and our former students, and they kind of get you all excited about the season.

We're anxious to kick this thing off and get started. We have some really special players with us today. Jerrod Johnson, our starting quarterback. Von Miller will be outside linebacker for us this year in our three-four defense. And Lucas Patterson will be a nose guard for us. Those are the three players that I brought up from College Station.

PETER IRWIN: We'll take questions for Coach. Again, if you please, your name and affiliation.

Q. Can you kind of take us through the time line of announcing the hire of Troy Walters this morning.

COACH SHERMAN: The question is about the hiring of Troy Walters this morning. Last week, as we were coming back from coaching school -- Tim Cassidy, associate director, and myself are driving back. Got word that Steve Kragthorpe had some concern about some family health issues back home, and when we got back to the office, Steve and I talked -- when he got back

to the office, actually, because he came back a day later, and we sat down and discussed it.

What I tried to do with Steve was make it so he could go home. I said, take care of your business. Take care of what you have to take care of. And as soon as that's resolved, just come on back. We'll save a spot for you, and we'll move forward that way.

You know, Steve's an excellent football coach, but, as I said before, an even better person. And didn't want to lose him.

He thought about that, talked to his family about that, but he just felt that the situation with his family up in Tulsa warranted his undivided attention, and there was no timetable, and he felt like he had to devote quite a bit of time up there in the ensuing months.

So from that standpoint, Steve decided that that was in his and his family's best interest. I respected him for it. Respect him for it. He made a family decision, a tough decision, but it was what was best for his family, and our thoughts and prayers go out to he and his family.

From that point, it was a scramble to try to find out, you know, as we kick off this season here in approximately two weeks, to find the best available coach we could find. Obviously, at this late juncture, it was very difficult.

I had some affiliations with some guys in the National Football League, some guys who are out of work, some guys were in work. We talked among the college and just started brainstorming for the best possible replacement.

I remember -- and I've always had a lot of respect because I coached against Troy Walters. A local product, went to A&M Consolidated, always followed his eight-year career in the National Football League, and also followed him when he was at Stanford and he ended up being the Biletnikoff winner.

Anyway, his name came up, brought up by Tim Cassidy, associate athletic director, and I always remembered this kid, this player in the league being a special, special player. He was a guy that was undersized, not very fast, but he

always found a way to beat you, whether punt return, catching the ball, converting third downs. He always earned my respect and our players' respect. He didn't have all the talents in the world, but he made the best of what we had. And he was able to play eight years, which is a long time to be able to play in the National Football League.

After he left there, obviously, he's been coaching at Indiana State. Indiana State, he coaches for a coach that worked for me in Green Bay named Trent Miles, who's a great coach. He's been in his system. A lot of the language -- he's very familiar with West Coast terminology, which is what our base is. So it's somewhat of a natural fit. He's from College Station initially, went to A&M Consolidated.

Brought him in for an interview on Friday and put him on the board, and I thought he did a great job of communicating the concepts that he had been teaching. A selling point for me was -- a real selling point for me was the fact that he worked in the Indianapolis Colts system, which in NFL circles it's very well known that the Colts in all of football are probably one of the most precision-driven routes of anybody, and he conveyed that preciseness, that discipline in his interview with me.

So that's exactly what we're looking for. That's what Steve brought to the table when Steve came in as a receiving coach, and now he just hands the baton off to Troy, and Troy hopefully will continue with that.

I thought Steve did a great job of coaching those guys in the spring. Now Troy comes in, and hopefully he'll continue what Steve started.

Q. With Nebraska leaving, there's sort of a void at the top in terms of marquee flagship programs in the Big 12. How close is A&M to stepping into that void and becoming what A&M football used to be?

COACH SHERMAN: Well, certainly in our fan base, our former students dream of the days of the mid-'80s and '90s where we were that marquee type of team. And when I took the job, I really felt that we had enough of a recruiting base in the state of Texas and that we had enough to sell, that we would be able to recruit players to come to make Texas A&M that type of team.

I think we're getting closer to that point, that vision that I had when I took the job. This season for us is about taking that next step, and the next step for us it to be in games in the fourth

quarter with two minutes left where you're in position to win the football game.

Last season, with the amount of freshman we played -- I think we played 18 freshman, 9 of whom started for us at different times. I thought we lacked the maturity to make the transition to being that type of team. I'm hopeful with this year, with this recruiting class, this will be our second true recruiting class of freshmen coming in. Adding them to the now sophomores who played last year, hopefully we'll be in a position to be that type of team. And hopefully sooner rather than later.

I think the Big 12 needs A&M to step up to the plate, to answer your question, and be that type of team. We're ready to accept that challenge.

Q. Coach, around the league you've got departures of some big-time quarterbacks in Colt McCoy, Sam Bradford, and there's a lot of running back talent back. Do you think the shift is back to being a more run-oriented conference?

COACH SHERMAN: I don't think so because, if you look at the guys that waited in the wings, those quarterbacks that left were great quarterbacks, but there's some great quarterbacks ready to take over in those programs. It's now time for them to step forward, and I'm sure that they will.

Hopefully, when Jerrod Johnson leaves in a year, we'll have a quarterback in Ryan Tannehill, who will be able to assume that job. That is the case, I believe, in this league.

I think as long as we have the seven on seven in the state of Texas, we'll continue in high school football to put out great quarterbacks not only in the Big 12, which they've had a major influence, but across the country. These kids are coming out of high school far more advanced than ever in relationship to being readymade quarterbacks that fit into slots in college programs, and you've got to take your hat off to the high school coaches who do a great job in the state of Texas of developing these kids.

So I don't think there will ever be a dearth of talent of quarterbacks in the state of Texas, and therefore the biggest supply of talent in the Big 12. There will never be a lack of quarterbacks in the Big 12.

Q. Mike, as good as Jerrod was last

season for you, what do you need him to do to, I guess, be better at this season to kind of take you guys to the next level?

COACH SHERMAN: To really understand Jerrod, you have to understand the leadership that he gives you both on and off the field. I thought he really this spring has really stepped that up quite a bit. Hold guys accountable and hold himself accountable as well.

I would like to see him be more efficient passer. He was about 60 percent, 61 percent last year, and I think he should be in the 70s.

I think the biggest challenge a quarterback has coming back, not only a quarterback but his coach, is that we don't clutter his mind and he doesn't clutter his mind with too much stuff and not allowing him to be the quarterback that he's able to be. Because he's so dang smart, there's a tendency to put a lot on him, and eventually it becomes stagnant, and he becomes unable to do the things that he's been gifted to do.

So I think we as coaches have to be careful we don't hold the burden to him and clutter him. He is a player who studies film constantly, NFL film, college film. He's always looking for clues; that he doesn't see ghosts out there that are going to make him see something that's not there. Because he's so dang bright about things, sometimes he can see things or anticipate things that aren't happening.

So I think he has to let the system -- you know, we have a progression read system that's worked for a lot of quarterbacks throughout time. He has to let the system work for him instead of him work the system. If he allows the game to come to him, I think it will be a lot better for him and for us than for him to just try to always make the play, always try to be the guy.

He has to just understand that there's other players on the field that have to make plays beside him.

Q. Coach, what can Von Miller do for an encore this season?

COACH SHERMAN: I think it's very realistic to say that Von may very easily have diminished statistics from last year in relationship to stats but be a more capable player. My whole objective with him is that he distracts an offense, that he causes concern for a quarterback. He takes him out of his rhythm. If he does that, he does his job.

I'm not a big stat guy to begin with, but his presence should change how an offense is

planning to play the game. If he's done that, he's done his job. For him to go back and have the amount of sacks he had last year, I think that's unrealistic. If he does, great; if he doesn't, he can still play better and not have the stats he had a year ago.

Q. Mike, the offense seems in really good shape, I guess, except there's some questions about playing some really young guys, true freshmen in the line. How big a concern is that for you, and how do you think these young guys will respond to that?

COACH SHERMAN: I told the offense in the spring, hey, you all probably read the stats more than I do, but regardless of what we did last year, it means nothing. You have to go back and do it again. There are no guarantees that you can have success one year and it just automatically carries over because everybody is coming back on the skill positions. So you have to work twice as hard. People are going to be twice as ready to defend you this year than they were a year ago, and it's not going to be easy. So you have to elevate your game.

In order for us to be successful on offense, the offensive line has to click. If we can't protect the quarterback, we can't get the ball into our receivers' hands. If we can't create running space, our talented running backs won't be able to run. So everything rests in that offensive line.

In our offensive line, we graduated three starters. I anticipate with six incoming freshmen on the offensive line, at least three of those guys will be either playing or starting for us at some time.

Luke Joeckel came out of spring football as a guy that held down his position at left tackle and did a fine job for us. We have other guys who are on campus right now that we haven't been able to work with that we're counting on to infiltrate that group and elevate the play.

Obviously, there's a concern because of the youth of that group, but when I see the talent of guys coming in and their capabilities, I'm excited about working with talented guys. Even though they lack experience, it's more fun than working with someone who's not quite as talented that has the experience.

So I think eventually they'll be able to rise to the position we want them to be in and the level of play we need, but it's going to be a work in progress. But our offense is predicated on their

success.

Q. Could you just talk about your progress and your thought process in switching defenses and what your level of confidence is today.

COACH SHERMAN: You know, when I first took the job at A&M, I had hired Reggie Herring, who was at Arkansas at the time, to come in and put the three-four defense in. Reggie, before spring ball, went to the Dallas Cowboys as their linebacker coach. The best coach I could find at that time -- and one of the best coaches, assistant coordinators in college football is Joe Kines. He has a bold reputation.

He came in here, and we asked him to do some things that were really magical because we didn't have linebackers, and we had a defensive lineman playing one linebacker, former receiver playing linebacker. We were trying to mix and match things. God bless Joe. He did a great job for us, did everything we could.

Joe didn't have to tackle. Players had to tackle. We missed some tackles, which certainly didn't help us very much.

At the end of the season when Joe retired and moved on, I spent about a month looking at tape, trying to analyze who was the best fit for us at this time. I wanted to get back to a three-four defense because I think we can recruit to that structure. A&M has a history in the three-four defense. We've had a great history of linebacker play in the three-four defense in the state of Texas. I felt like we could find four quality linebackers who could impact our defense.

It's harder and harder to find the big guys inside, and so that plays to our strength, I believe. Tim DeRuyter is a name, after watching the tape, watching the different games that he played that he coached in, that they played at Air Force, looking at his history, every place he's been as a coordinator has elevated their defensive play.

I want us to be aggressive on defense. I think we have an offense that should be able to move the ball if everybody does their job, and I want to be able to force takeaways. I think the three-four structure can present issues on where the pressure is coming from, particularly against spread offenses, where you can play -- you can drop bait, you can bring guys from different sides. Fairly balanced defense. So really the offense cannot predicate -- or predict, I should say, where the pressure is coming from.

I have high expectations of our defense, but at the same time, we're going to be a work in progress as we learn. I thought they made a lot of strides this spring. I thought our secondary took a huge jump this spring and really caused our offense some problems this past spring.

I think our outside linebackers with Von Miller and Sean Porter, both guys run 4.6 or better, will present some problems for opposing offenses. The strength of your defense in this defense has to be those guys being able to rush quarterbacks and being able to blitz.

The biggest challenge I think we have defensively is going to be the inside five, how quickly those inside five are going to grow up and adapt to our scheme. I thought Garrick Williams from DeSoto High School had a great spring. Mike Hodges had a very good spring. Mangan is coming back as well.

We have some pieces there, but we haven't seen it all together just yet. I'm anxious to see that happen. We have to sort out the front guys. We have a lot of numbers there, but we have to find the best quality guys who will play this defense.

As far as a comfort level, I don't know that any coach ever has a comfort level at this point in the season when he just changed defense. I do think, if we didn't do anything, just because of physical maturation -- I thought last year we were fast enough at times, but we didn't physically make the tackle, and we gave up yards after contact. I think this year we'll be physically more mature than we were a year ago with another year in the weight room, and I think we'll tackle better than we did a year ago.

And if we just tackle better without even scheme change, I think we'll be a better defense. We've emphasized that quite a bit. And also it should impact our special teams as well, which we need to impact.

PETER IRWIN: Coach, thank you very much.

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