

December 28, 2013



An interview with:

**COACH SUMLIN
BEN MALENA
TONEY HURD JR.**

THE MODERATOR: Welcome back. We'll try to keep the Chick-fil-A hot for you while we're in here. We'll get started with our second session here with Texas A&M University. Joining us Head Coach Kevin Sumlin, running back Ben Malena and defensive back Toney Hurd Jr.

Coach, we'll start with an opening statement from you. Maybe just talk about how your bowl week experience has been so far.

COACH SUMLIN: Well, we're really excited. We've had a great time here so far. Got here Christmas night and had a team meeting. We worked out twice at the Georgia Dome, which is a fabulous facility. Our guys really enjoy being over there. We'll be at Georgia Tech at their new facility, their indoor facility the next two days and really pleased.

It's been different for me because when I talk about Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, I don't even know what day it is. Today is a Wednesday for us, practice-wise. So we're on a different schedule. Yesterday was a Tuesday practice. Really pleased in how our guys approached it with a full padded, really lengthy workout yesterday to get back. Today we're Wednesday and we start to taper off until we get to game time.

But I couldn't be happier with how we've been treated. The Chick-fil-A Bowl and the people have been fabulous from our hospitality to the events and everything that's gone on. Our hospital visit yesterday, I thought that was very enlightening for our players.

Like I said, as we get closer to the game, more and more people start showing up so we try to get as much work done as we can right now before family, friends and everybody gets in here for the event on New Year's Eve.

THE MODERATOR: Ben, talk about what has been your favorite bowl week event so far?

BEN MALENA: I think yesterday with the milkshake challenge along with the Manning competition. It was the first time that us and Duke were actually in the same room. While everything was really friendly with those competitions, you could tell that both teams were still competing. While it's all fun and games, by adding a competition element to it, it kind of made it more fun. It was a really great experience especially we're happy that Cedric actually came out with the win, because if he would have lost, it would have been a bad week for him.

THE MODERATOR: I'm waiting for somebody to break down that Madden game for me. Can you do that for us? I mean, that was all the way down to the wire.

BEN MALENA: It was a really good game. Long story short, the last play of the game, Ced kicked a field goal on third down, which is a really good, really good call. Might have mistaken him for an actual head coach. Calling the play like that. But, no.

The kid from Duke actually blocked it, but he was offside, but we kicked the field goal, so.

THE MODERATOR: Yeah, that was the most exciting Madden finish we've had. It was the first one, but still the most exciting.

Tony, what about you? What's been your best event so far?

TONEY HURD JR.: I feel like for sure last night actually getting to see those guys up close and personal and just competing. All of us on our team are great competitors. Last night that was big for us. We want to win the competition this week and we want to come away with a win in a game. I feel like last night was a great experience to start off the competition.

THE MODERATOR: It's all about the belt. It's all about the belt. This is actually the belt stand in. The players actually retained the belt last night, and they've got it. They're taking it around Atlanta or whatever they're doing. All right. Let's get to it, guys. We'll open it up to questions. Just raise your hand and we'll get a microphone to you.

Q. Kevin, handing over your play calling duties to Jake, what do you expect to be seeing?

COACH SUMLIN: I saw something yesterday that said I vowed to do something. I didn't vow to do anything. You have a feel as a head coach about the direction that you're headed. A feel for your players, a feel for what direction you really want your program to go in. So those types of decisions are always difficult. I think it's a little different for me because I've been a part of those types of decisions. You know, the overall aspect of this program where we're headed, not just for this game but for the future, that's my responsibility.

As I said, those decisions are always tough, but I don't know how much things are going to really, really change. I just think incorporating a lot of different players into our offense is important, and I don't think, I know that's the direction we're headed in.

Q. When did you make the decision to replace coach Kenny with Coach Spavital?

COACH SUMLIN: It's something that I thought about. The way it was released was the day I actually talked about it. I know we do a lot of things that you guys find out about later on, but there's never a good time. I thought the way we do things in bowl preparation, we try to have a game week of preparation at home, and then we gave these guys a couple three days off for Christmas. Then we do another complete game week when we're here. That's why I said today is Wednesday for us.

So with those two game weeks, I just thought it was important that we had the opportunity to install a game plan with a lot less distractions at home and to give Jake an opportunity to put his twist on it at home and think about it a little bit more, and when we got here kind of polish it up and get ready to go.

Q. I'm hoping I can catch you in somewhat of a reflective mood for once. But looking at the off-season stuff with Johnny to

the investigation of the start of fall camp to some really big games and you getting a new contract and being here today, how has that tested you as a coach and how have you grown as a coach going through a season like this?

COACH SUMLIN: There is no manual for this job. You are always challenged with a lot of different things. This year I was just talking on the way over here and we've got some visiting coaches around that have come back and are here this week that really they're not involved in bowl games, but I've talked to a lot of different people. It seems like so long ago that we were sitting here talking about all those different things. From the beginning, from August 4th when all that news hit to the game of the decade, I mean, there's been a lot of big moments this year, and that is a testament to the reason these two guys are up here, the seniors that have been through a lot. You have to remember, these guys came to Texas A&M and when they got here they had no idea that they'd have the opportunity to come to Atlanta and play in the Chick-fil-A. Because when they got here, all the things that went through this year in Alabama, and the teams that we lost to are really, really fine football teams. I think everybody knows that.

We had a chance to win, really, at the end of three of those four games. So the ball bounces different ways. But I think we've grown as a coaching staff. I think these guys have learned a lot and really, really appreciative of their experiences as I talked to them of being in the SEC. Whether we're at home or going on the road to a lot of different places. So it's all still very new to us.

But I think two years into this situation for me you're still learning. We're a part of the best league in the country and probably the best division in the best league in this country, and for us to be where we want to be, we're going to have to continue to grow as a program. Fortunately we have the administration, the facilities, and the backing that's putting us in that position to compete and win in this league.

I told these guys, these guys are going to move on. They have an opportunity to do something that no one has ever done at Texas A&M, and that is to win three consecutive bowl games in three consecutive years. You think of how long we've played football, and how many great players have been here and how many great



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teams have been here, to have that as a goal to walk away like our senior group last year was one of four teams to ever win 11 games. These guys have an opportunity to set another bar regardless of what happened this year, I think that's important to them because that's something no one can ever take away from them.

Q. How much healthier is Johnny now compared to the regular season? And how would you characterize his play in the last couple games where it looked like he might have been banged up?

COACH SUMLIN: It's interesting. We ran him a lot more the year before, and he wasn't beat up. We didn't run him as much this year. We didn't really talk about it too much; but hitting the helmet is something that is hard on your throwing hand. He battled through it. And obviously the time off, we hadn't played in a month, and giving him a chance to heal up, I think he feels really, really good right now.

I liked practice yesterday. I think he's approaching this game and feeling better. He's got a bit more bounce. I think the time off for this team, because it was a pretty good year. I mean, for these guys that are playing, this league is rough. But we gave them more time off this year. We didn't practice for a couple weeks after that last game and kind of turned it up a notch when we got back to practice instead of just keeping it going.

I think our team needed some rest not only physically but mentally with what was going on. I like our energy level right now. As you said, I think just watching practice yesterday and being around our guys they're anxious to play again.

Q. Ben, it's your second year in the SEC, but do you still feel that sense of responsibility to represent the league in the bowl game and come away with that win for the SEC?

BEN MALENA: Yeah, I mean, not only for the SEC but for Texas A&M. We understand the prestigious league that we represent. We certainly don't want to get into the loss column, especially in a bowl game. Just like Coach Sumlin said, for this senior class and this whole team has an opportunity to do something in this rich history that A&M has that no other group of players have accomplished.

To to answer your question, we do want to represent the SEC well, but I think it's more for Texas A&M than the conference.



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COACH SUMLIN: It was interesting, the stat is, correct me if I'm wrong, Gary, the ACC has won 11 of these, and the SEC has won 10.

THE MODERATOR: That's right.

COACH SUMLIN: We have an opportunity to try to tie this thing up, and that will be good for us.

Q. Coach, this is your first trip to one of the SEC's traditional bowl games. Can you talk about how this bowl experience compares to others you've had and what it means to try to establish your brand knowing that the Chick-fil-A Bowl is going to be joining the playoffs next year?

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah, I've been very fortunate in my career to be able to coach in all four BCS games. The hospitality here has been outstanding. You can see why this bowl game, this venue and this event will be part of the six championship sites for the college playoffs. We're very, very fortunate to be a part of that. The seniors, as Ben just talked about talked about their goals and our goals as a team, but for our younger players, this is a great experience because looking down the road as a coach you're always thinking about what is next. For us to be here in Atlanta, which it's twofold. We've got this experience that we're drawing off of and practicing hopefully for our younger players we can get back here and be a part of the SEC Championship game. Then the bigger goal is you know this is going to be where the playoff situation is going to be handled.

So, for us, this is a great experience for our seniors who are leaving, as Ben just talked about, what our goals are presently. But down the road we hope to get back here. We like Atlanta. We'd love to be back here a bunch if we can be here.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about I know that Darian's not going to be playing and Duke has a player that's been suspended. But can you talk about the Aggies approach to the ballgame knowing that Darian's not going to be on your defensive unit?

TONEY HURD JR.: Our defense is the next man up. All year long we've had some injuries and some things that have taken our defense, and we have younger guys that are ready to step up. I'm sure our younger linebacker Mastro will be ready to play. Donnie Baggs will be ready

to play, and we have a bunch of young guys ready to make a name for themselves. They've been working hard to make plays for us. But our defensive coordinator, Coach Snyder will have our linebackers ready for this game.

Q. Coach, you talked about the opportunity for this group to win three straight bowl games and how important that is. But how important is it to win the bowl game and how important is it to go into spring ball for next year?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, we treat bowl games probably a little bit differently than most people. We have three phases really, couple phases that we go through in preparation. It gives us an opportunity to work our younger players early. The guys who red-shirted and are not real starters. The special teams guys get a look at them and then develop our game plan to win.

I think from our standpoint, from my standpoint it's obvious that bowl games we like to not just enjoy the atmosphere but we like to win those games. I think it does carry over in the next year.

We talked as a team yesterday about our performance level and where we want to be and how we're going to approach this game. I think based on practice yesterday I couldn't be happier with our preparation up to this point, how these guys are handling it. I think we're going to be ready to go New Year's Eve.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe earlier was talking about he picked you up in Knoxville, Tennessee in a pick-up truck?

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah, we talked about that the other day.

Q. We were wondering when that was in your career?

COACH SUMLIN: It's kind of interesting. I had been a graduate assistant for two years and Coach Tiller moved to Wyoming. I was there for two years as a wide receiver coach. My first year at Minnesota, so I had been a full-time coach for three years. He called me and asked me about coming to interview for the wide receiver job at Tennessee. I was young. Shoot, I didn't know a bunch of anything at that point, but I knew that as a kid growing up I wanted to go to school there but I wasn't good enough.

They had the World's Fair there in Knoxville, and I was down there as a kid. That's a

long time ago. They didn't recruit me. They didn't think I was good enough, and they were right. But I had a chance to go there and interview, and he picked me up in the pick-up truck and we talked a little football that day with Coach Fullmer and rode around, looked at houses. I was single at the time. I was driving around in a pick-up truck. I've always had a lot of respect for David and how he's done things. He's had a lot of different experiences with both the Mannings, whether he was at Tennessee or at Ole Miss. Just how he's run his program with class, with character.

Somebody asked me, I said, I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised at all they won ten games because of how he does things. He's a guy that's worked at this profession for a long time. Pays attention to detail, has a great situation at Duke and he's a guy that we're sitting next to each other yesterday at the SCA breakfast just talking about how things have changed in our lives. In this profession, you cross a lot of different paths and you never know.

By the way, they didn't hire me. They hired somebody else. I wasn't good enough at that point. I couldn't play there and I couldn't coach there. But everything worked out. Hopefully I'm a little bit better now than I was in my third year as a full-time assistant.

Q. He said he had trouble getting you to help him clean out that pick-up. Do you think that might have had something to do with it?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, it was. We were riding around and talking. Part of the interview process was just riding in the truck with him and getting to know him. It was a great experience for me.

Like I said, I've always had a lot of respect for how he's done things, a class act. It says a lot about him. Obscure, you get a phone call in the middle of the day from the coordinator at Tennessee, and you're like, really? Come on. Want to bring you down here, talk a little football and see if you'll be interested in this job. I think that says a little bit about him as a person. Always looking outside, paying attention to what's going on, and that was a real honor for me.

Like I said, I didn't get the job. I know who got the job. He's a friend of mine too. It's an experience that obviously I didn't forget and I wasn't impressive enough at that point to do

anything. But everything works out.

Q. Ben, can you talk about what you've seen from Coach Spavital taking the reins and kind of leading? Talk about the pace that you guys expect having the calls right there on the field and getting back on the ball and moving up-and-down?

BEN MALENA: Yeah, I think that's going to help a lot, actually, him calling the plays but him actually being on the sideline and being able to communicate faster. That will help our tempo out a lot.

He just brings the energy to this offense. The first day everybody found out that he got the job. The transition period wasn't hard at all. He's a very easy guy to respond to. But when you're thinking about offensive schemes and stuff like that you know it's going to be on full display New Year's Eve. So you won't have anything to worry about.

Q. For the seniors, have you seen any indication that Johnny has taken a senior approach into this game? Have you seen any indication that he's kind of looking to this as his farewell as well?

BEN MALENA: No, I mean, especially with me being on the offensive side of the ball and being around him all the time, he's the same Johnny Manziel as two years ago competing for the starting quarterback job. He's a work horse. He approaches every day like he wants to be better. I haven't seen anything different from him approaching this bowl game.

Q. The status of Malcome Kennedy, maybe a little overlooked that he wasn't involved in the last two games?

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah, Malcome was beat up a little bit too through the year. He's been nursing some things. Like I said, this team at the end of the year had been through a lot. Just looking at practice the last couple days, I think the rest that these guys had and how we've approached this part of the year has really helped us physically and mentally.

Every now and then as a coach you can do too much. You always worry about what your process is going to be, and different teams are different. We played a lot of guys that were younger guys and put a lot on these guys, the old guys, to play a lot of snaps this year. I think just taking a couple weeks of not practicing and then jumping back on it has really helped us mentally

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and physically. I think Malcome's part of that. I think there is a lot of running, a lot of hits he's taken, a lot of different things that have happened. But just looking at him now and like these guys we've talked about, I think they're anxious.

Being in a new environment has really kind of helped us, I think. You walk into that building and, like I told these guys, there is a lot of really, really great players that have played in this building and, the energy level just kind of rose.

Our guys have done a really good job, I think, over the course of the last couple years of accepting the challenge in bigger venues, bigger games, and I don't look for that to change this week.

Q. Tony, what are your thoughts on Duke's wide receiver Jamison Crowder and what are ways to deal with him?

TONY HURD JR.: From my point of view, we feel like they have pretty solid receivers. They have a good tight end as well. Their offensive scheme has power. They can put up points, and in the fourth quarter is where they play the best.

We know we have to play 60 minutes of solid football on defense and contain the receivers. I'm pretty sure we'll be man-to-man and throw some zone in there. But for the most part our defensive staff will help us prepare.

Q. We talked with the folks from Duke. This bowl game has been ranked the sixth best bowl game of the season this year. Coach, talk about what you think makes this comparing offense to offense and defense to defense, what are some of the things you think makes this game exciting on that level of caliber with some of the BCS games?

COACH SUMLIN: You know, you're playing in a very potent Duke team. A team that's won double digit games, beat Miami, Virginia Tech, Carolina, North Carolina State represented their division in the ACC. So they're a very, very well-coached football team. They're disciplined and they're good.

I talk to these guys all the time. When you get around New Year's Day, New Year's Eve, there are not a bunch of bad teams playing. You've earned the right to play around that time.

For us, I think just from a national standpoint, kind of hike last year, but this year too,

we're in a time slot where -- I probably shouldn't tell this story. I told everybody yesterday -- we're in a time slot that's unopposed. And everybody in the world will be watching this game because there is nothing else on. Whether you're at home or you're at a local establishment, that game is going to be on television.

So from our viewpoint, from a branding standpoint, it's important how we play. It's a great opportunity for us to put on display who we are as not only a football program, but as a university.

I think our guys see that as an opportunity to show who we are. For these guys who are seniors for their last football game in college, that's a big deal. To know that you're playing on New Year's Eve and there's nobody else on and kind of like the NFL guys talk about "Monday Night Football". We're New Year's Eve and there is nobody else watching. Everybody in the world is going to be watching. It's a great opportunity for these guys and for our university to display who we are.

Q. Ben and Tony, what stands out about this match-up to you guys?

BEN MALENA: Well, for me, like Coach Sumlin said, for me personally, and I'm pretty sure Tony can add to it too, but this is our last college football game ever of actually being on the field and strapping the helmet up for Texas A&M. With everything that we've been through starting our freshmen year until now, changing. We're fortunate enough to get a great head coach in Kevin Sumlin to make us even better, but most importantly finish out our collegiate career in the win column.

It's like Coach Sumlin said, playing in a slot where no one else is playing, all eyes are going to be on us and on this university. We're just looking forward to representing the University well.

TONEY HURD JR.: For me, I feel like defensively this is a great challenge for us. We've had a lot of ups and downs, a lot of injuries and things we've overcome this season. But we want to start this -- this game is the start of next year for our team. And we want to start for next year on defense, we want to start well. I know Coach Snyder has been through a lot this season with our fair share of ups and downs. But with our younger guys, we want to show they've matured and overcome the odds. They're prepared to play well. For our defense, this is a great opportunity for us. They have a great offensive scheme, great offensive coordinator. Like I said earlier, they play

well in the fourth quarter, so we know we've got to come ready to play, and I'm just ready to get back on the field and have some fun.

Q. I know in a profession that is based on outcome and performance, how difficult is it to do the right thing if a player steps across the line and says, hey, you're not going to play in this big game?

COACH SURLIN: You know, that's all part of it. We're in the business of a lot of people see Saturday. But we're in the business of growing young men. One of the reasons -- one of the crazy reasons, probably, I like college football is because of that. When you have 17, 18-year-olds, it's kind of like clay. We try to mold those guys and take their experiences. Because we've got guys from different backgrounds, different home lives, two parents, one parent, no parent, and try to get them at the end of three, four, five years to be successful. Football ends for everybody at a certain time. Some guys sooner than later. But ultimately what we're trying to do is raise people to be good husbands, people that are going to contribute to society in a positive way. Learning those lessons can be difficult sometimes. How you handle that is part of your job in college football.

When you have 85 scholarship guys and 40 walk-on guys, everybody's got different issues. How you approach that as a team, how you approach that personally, I think it's important. To get guys to learn lessons -- sometimes they learn lessons the hard way, but I think that's part of our job. That's a huge part of our job not just on Saturday, but every day in trying to get guys to do what's right. Have we been perfect at it? Probably not. But I think our guys can tell you that we have a standard.

We have some things that we believe in and basically what's right and what's wrong, and there are consequences to everybody's actions, good and bad. Those decisions are made and they're difficult. They're difficult for our football team, but they're difficult for those individuals and those families. We communicate that. That's part of life.

I've seen it all different ways. In 26 years of coaching, guys grow out of bad situations and become real contributors to society later on in life. My biggest deal is not -- Saturday is a big deal, wins and losses, obviously, because if you don't



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win, you don't have a job in this business. But when I see guys come back from tough backgrounds and then come out to practice with their wife and little boys and they're husbands and fathers and knowing where they came from and having the opportunity to go to Texas A&M or go to different schools, get a degree and be productive from a background that maybe that wasn't possible. We've got a lot of first time-first generation college graduates. We have an opportunity in this profession to really change families lives. To your point, you know, to me, that is the bigger picture.

Q. Now you played in this game in '78, right?

COACH SUMLIN: No, '78? I'm not that old.

THE MODERATOR: '84.

COACH SUMLIN: Six years is a big deal now. I'm getting up there, but '78, come on. I was 14. No, actually, I was 3. I'm going to say that. No, '84.

Q. Can you talk about that experience as a player versus the experience coming back as a coach?

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah, we played the Virginia Cavaliers. Coach George Welsh was the coach. We didn't know much. I didn't know much about it at Purdue. We started watching tape, and it was like, man, this quarterback is pretty good. Who is that guy? And it was a guy named Don Majkowski, the magic man who we contained for about a half. They started running option. I said, man, this guy is fast. Barry Ward, and Jim Dombrowski, that is all I remember. Those three guys were really good players.

So we hung on for a while, and in the fourth quarter we got sideways, but we had a great experience at Fulton County Stadium back in the day. We actually stayed at the Marriott and had a great, great bowl experience, great time.

I told these guys, I said you know you're getting old when you're coaching in a bowl game that you played in. Not in '78, all right. And the bowl game was a different name at that time, so I'm getting up there. But we had a great experience then.

And for these guys I am asking -- somebody asked the other day how many guys have been to Atlanta before? And I looked around and we probably had five or six hands shoot up. So it's been a great experience for these guys

coming here to Atlanta and experiencing something that that's the great thing about college athletics too. These guys have come through, been in some venues they haven't been in before in the SEC, and coming to Atlanta I think you can hear it out of their voices, they're loving this place and excited to be here.

Q. Ben, you kind of mentioned looking back, but can you kind of reflect on being a senior and the fact that you've had these struggles and now where you guys are and that you're leaving this A&M team and I guess a little better than when you got here?

BEN MALENA: Yeah, I'm glad the tables have turned. One issue that doesn't get talked about a lot is the huge success A&M has had over these past two years is Kevin Sumlin. He immediately the first day that he walked in and in that team meeting in the Auditorium, I'll never forget it, he said, look, if it wasn't me, it will be another guy. So you better get ready quick. From that moment on we realized that it's a new time here at A&M.

Also with the SEC move, you know, we went in and took it as an approach. Everybody knew we were going to have a really bad, tough year our first year in the SEC, and Coach Sumlin let us know we have enough talent on the schedule to beat everybody on the schedule.

What he has done for this program and where he has taken it, especially when I first got here to where we are now, I mean, you really can't explain it. You really can't describe it. Just from a team aspect, and the competition we had last night, I was talking to Nate. We came in together, and we were like, man, look how much fun we're having now. Rather than I don't want to say not having fun. But getting to enjoy the experience that's we're having now.

We're blessed to be in such a great bowl game. It's like he said, those five or six hands that went up when he said how many people have been to Atlanta, this is my first time being to Atlanta. I'm enjoying every minute of it.

I just think where we have come now, especially as a senior class, the spotlight of this university that it's on right now, I just think it's great. I'm honored to be a key component of it being the way that it is now.

COACH SUMLIN: You will not have to run after practice today.

BEN MALENA: I appreciate that.
COACH SUMLIN: You've got your sprints
cut off. That's a good deal.

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