

# Louisiana State University Baseball Media Conference

Friday, January 29 2016

## Paul Mainieri Media Day Presser

COACH MAINIERI: First of all, Eric Fasbender is leaving us at LSU. He's been the turf manager since we opened up the new stadium. He's decide to pursue a different career path, and I think his last day is maybe Monday. I'd just like to publicly acknowledge and express my appreciation to Eric for all of his dedicated commitment and wonderful expertise to make our baseball stadium the most beautiful stadium in the entire country. We're certainly going to miss him.

Then of course, Will Davis has been with me from the day I walked on to this campus. He started as a fifth-year senior. Became our baseball operations director and the first person to fulfill that position on my staff. Then moved into the volunteer assistant coaching job which he held for the last 7 and a half years. As everybody has probably heard, Will is currently has already moved on to currently become the assistant coach at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, where he'll be the coach in waiting and take over for Jim Gilligan when Jim retires at the end of this season. I'm very proud of Will. He made amazing contributions to our program, his loyalty, his dedication, his commitment in so many different ways. And he's now ready for this job. I'm really proud of him. It's going to be an amazing opportunity for him.

Will is the 11th former assistant of mine to become a head coach in college, and that's a fact that, quite frankly, I'm very proud of. We have a tendency to count how many former players made it to the major leagues, those type of things. But to know that you might have had a role in seeing assistant coaches move on to run their own programs and hopefully very successfully is also a great source of pride for me. So I'd just like to acknowledge those two guys, Eric Fasbender and Will Davis before we talk about this year.

Okay. This year, let's talk about this year. I was thinking about it a lot, and I was thinking that probably the most important product that we will have this year with our team is Boudreaux's Bust Paste. And people say what do you mean by that? I said I think the biggest problem we're going to have this year is diaper rash because we have so many young players, and I



think Boudreaux's Butt Paste will be ready to take care of that problem.

Actually, so much publicity has been given to the fact that we lost eight of our nine starting players from our lineup going into this year. So everybody has this assumption that we are going to be so freshman oriented, and that's really not going to be the case. I think on opening day we'll probably have two freshmen in our lineup, maybe an outside chance of a third. But the rest of the lineup is going to be filled with one junior college transfer, and then six returning players.

We had six players returning of our position players, that's the extent of it. And I think all six of them will be in the starting lineup on opening night. Of course Jake Fraley is our lone returning starting player, and I think one of the best players in the country. Very capable of being an All SEC, All-American caliber player, high draft choice. He's ready to take the mantle, so to speak, and be our leader. Kramer Robertson, even though he was not considered one of the starting nine last year at the end of the year, has started an awful lot of games for us. I want to say he started close to 30 games, Bill, in his freshman year, 42 including last year. I think he started about a dozen last year.

Then we decided to move Jared Poche' into second base, and that took Kramer out of the lineup. Then he ended up getting a very sore elbow, which caused him to not even be available to us for almost the last two months of the season. But he went off to have a really good summer in cape cod. He's played well this fall. If you were out there at all for the purple versus gold World Series games, Kramer shined brighter than anybody. He hit a couple of home runs, hit a couple balls off the wall. Played terrific defense. So I hope Kramer is ready to take that starting job at second base and run with it, and really give us a very good, solid, veteran player there as well.

The other returning players to not play that much last year, I guess Papierski, Michael Papierski may be the one exception to that. Papierski probably started a dozen games, I'm not sure exactly. Probably appeared in 30-plus games as Kade Scivicque back-up. Last year at this meeting, I think I told everybody, I thought Michael Papierski was ready to be our starting catcher last year, but for the amazing development for Kade

Scivicque throughout the year and in his two years here, but specifically last year where Kade became a Johnny Bench Award finalist, an All-American, and a fourth-round draft choice, it kept Papierski in that sub role, that reserve role.

But I felt Papierski was ready to play last year, and had he been our starting catcher, would have done a fine job for us. He's an outstanding defensive player, and has made a significant improvement in his hitting as we go into this next season.

That's going to be a theme that you're going to hear from me a lot today. The work that Andy Cannizaro, our hitting coach, has done with several of our hitters to see the improvement that they have made from last year to this year, even throughout the fall from the beginning of the fall to the end of the fall, and even now as we've done individual work with the kids. Of course tomorrow, or excuse me, this afternoon is our first full squad practice, but we've been able to work up to two hours a week with individual skills related stuff. Andy has had an opportunity to work with these guys, and we've seen so many of them improve.

I put Papierski right there at the top of the list as far as how much he's improved as a hitter. When we work our way around the field, you've got Greg Deichmann is going to be our first baseman. Greg's going to hit in the middle of the order. He's got a chance to be an awesome -- I mean that sincerely. He's a tremendous athlete. Perhaps the fastest guy on our team, and that's saying something with some of the other guys we have. But Greg is capable of stealing 30 or 35 bases, he's that fast.

But he's also our most powerful guy. He can hit them as far as anybody I've ever had here, and they're usually real towering type of balls. His problem, Greg's problem before this year was he swung and missed a lot. But, again, Andy has made some adjustments with his stance, with his approach at the plate. Plus adding some experience, I think Greg's ready to take that role of being a middle of the order hitter for us and do a really good job at first base as well. It's a great story about dike man in that he went away last summer to the Northwoods League, and the first 20 games or so, he was hitting about .200, swinging and missing a lot, striking out a lot. Just not playing great. But after about 20 games, it just kind of clicked for him. And the last 40, 45 games he played last summer, he hit about 30 with half a dozen home runs and a boat load of RBIs, and he didn't strikeout as much. So he brought that confidence back with him this fall, and I think he's ready to be outstanding for us.

Two other returning players that I believe will be in the starting lineup on opening night are the Jordan boys.

The Jordan twins from Barbe High School, Beau and Bryce. Beau's probably going to be our starting left fielder on opening night.

I say probably because we also have a fourth outfielder by the name of Brennan Breaux that I consider a starting player, although we can only play three starters in the outfield, but Brennan's going to play an awful lot. He just may not be in there on opening night. But Beau Jordan at left field, I've got him tabbed to be our clean-up hitter. He's not the most picturesque outfielder, but he finds a way to get the job done and makes the catches. But he's certainly not as speedy as some of the other guys. I mentioned Breaux and Fraley, and I'll talk in a minute about another outfielder.

But Bryce had a great summer. I think he'll probably be our designated hitter on opening night. Beau will be in left field. So when you look at all those returning guys, it keeps us from being that young. We will count on one junior college player right out of the gate, and that will be Cole Freeman out of Delgado Junior College. I think, is he from Mandeville High School? Lakeshore High School on the North Side, obviously.

But Cole Freeman went to Delgado two years ago, developed as a player. He actually was a gold glove winner for the junior college level at second base. But I'm going to flip him over to third base. I'm going to leave Kramer at second. And Cole's going to remind you a lot of Tyler Hanover. You all remember Tyler Hanover, played for us a few years ago. Little bit undersized. But a pesky, hard-nosed ballplayer, and that would define Cole.

I'd probably say Tyler's a little bit more powerful with the bat. But I tell you that Cole's a lot faster than Tyler. But the tenacity and the hard-nosed attitude, the hustling type of ballplayer that would define both of them. So I'm really excited about Cole. I think he'll do a good job for us over at third base.

Then we're going to have two freshmen in our starting lineup at shortstop and then in right field. Obviously, losing Alex brag man after last year is a huge loss for us. And to think that we're going to go out there and get another Alex Bregman would be pretty wishful thinking. Alex Bregman's come along not very frequently to college coaches. Those guys usually sign for several million dollars out of high school and never see a college baseball field. And three years after he came here he did sign for several million dollars, I think about six to be exact.

So Alex was just one of a kind offensively, defensively, the way he ran and so forth, a great leader of our team. But we have to move on without him now. Those are big shoes to fill, and you get nervous about somebody

coming in and trying to be the next Alex Bregman. I do think that Trey Dawson is going to be a very steady shortstop. He's a very confident kid, very sure handed. Probably doesn't swing the bat at the level that Bregman does right now, maybe doesn't have the range or ability to steal bases. But he's a very good, solid baseball player.

One of the unique things about Trey, when he was in high school in Hurricane, West Virginia, where basketball is pretty big, his basketball team won the State Championship one year, and he's the all-time leading points scorer for his high school. So he's a kids that been used to being in the spotlight, in front of big crowds. Even though he might not think there is a correlation between basketball and baseball, I do. Because a young man that stands at the free-throw line having to make both ends of a one-on-one to send the game into overtime can certainly handle hitting with the bases loaded in front of 12,000 people in Alex Box Stadium, is the way I see it.

We're looking forward to Trey being our shortstop, and I think he's going to do a good job.

The last freshman is our right fielder. Antoine Duplantis who is really a centerfielder, and we're going to go with Fraley in center, and I think Jake will do a good job there. But putting Duplantis in right field is kind of the same as putting Mark Laird in right field. Mark could have played centerfield but for the fact that we had Andrew Stevenson out there.

So the more speed we have in the outfield, the more ground we're going to cover. And I tell you, Antoine Duplantis is the same caliber of outfielders. Those two guys we lost from last year, Laird and Stevenson. In addition, he'll be a real impact player for us with the bat. He's a guy that knows how to handle the bat. He's going to put the ball in play a lot. He's going to hit to all fields, and he's got some surprising power.

In fact this fall in the Purple vs. Gold World Series. He missed a grand slam off of Alex Lang by about six inches that hit the top of the wall.

So I think Duplantis is going to be a really good ballplayer. So that's pretty much the starting lineup as I see it three weeks from opening day. Certainly things can change from now until then. Guys and girls that have covered our program for years know my philosophy about starting players. I'd like to have about a dozen guys that I can count on to put into the game at any time. So therefore I like to bring along another three or four players.

The next guys in that group, obviously, you have to have a second catcher. I think Jordan Romero is going

to be a really good player when he's in there. He was actually a Gold Glove winner for the junior college level at his position like Cole Freeman was at second base. Romero played at Catholic High School and went to LSU-Eunice for two years. And I tell you, he's made some significant improvements with the bat as well, I can tell, since fall practice.

I mentioned Brennan Breaux, a speedy outfielder from St. Thomas Moore. Brennan's going to play a lot of baseball here at LSU and going to be a really good player. And finally I'm really excited about a kid by the name of Brody Wofford. Wofford is a left-handed hitter from Georgia. He was a high school shortstop, pretty good athlete. I don't necessarily think he's going to be the left side infielder for us. Probably a first baseman and maybe a corner outfielder. But his big tool is his bat.

He's put on already about a dozen pounds from the time he's arrived here on campus in the fall. And he's already hitting the ball with more authority. So those three guys are probably the next three reserves. The rest of the roster are talented kids that are probably going to have to wait their turn a little bit more.

So that's pretty much position players. I didn't wait for any questions. I figured I'd just go ahead and let them have it.

From a pitching standpoint, we have Lange and Poche' heading up our staff. What a great advantage that is to have two veteran pitchers now. Last year when I stood up here and talked to you about the season, we didn't know what was going to happen with our pitching staff. The only one we really knew we could count on was Poche'. Then as time evolved, obviously, Lange had a season for the ages, going 12-0 as a freshman, national Freshman of the Year, an All-American. Guys like Jesse Stallings and Bugg and Hunter Newman and Austin Bain, and a bunch of other guys started to evolve. We ended up, I believe we ended up with the lowest earned run average in the Southeastern Conference, and our pitching coach was named the National Pitching Coach of the Year because of it. Alan Dunn, who is terrific. So.

I feel very confident that we have a veteran pitching staff, I think this lineup is going to be good, and as sometime goes on. Initially I just want them to catch the ball behind this pitching staff. As time goes on, I think their hitting will continue to improve. But I feel confident we can still win games as we're going through that growth process because our pitching staff is going to give us a chance to win right out of the gate.

But I think you're going to see this team is going to be a lot better like I promised on February 19th than they

were through the fall. But I have no doubt in my mind they're going to be a much better team as we get into April, mai and June than they even are on opening day.

**Q. Just update some injuries from the fall. You mentioned Bryce a little bit. He's recovered from the meniscus okay?**

COACH MAINIERI: Yeah, it's flared up a little bit. So right now we're limiting him just to DHing, and a little bit of catching. We don't want him to do any running or playing first base right now. He had the surgery. We thought he was going, good, but it got a little irritated. So we need to give it a little rest from running and those type of things. But I anticipate he'll be full-go by opening day.

**Q. Then Bain and Nick Bush?**

COACH MAINIERI: Bain is all the way back. He's been pitching on a regular turn. He's a little bit rusty, which would be expected, having not really pitched, except for one outing in the summer and didn't pitch at all in the fall after having surgery. But I'm hoping that he'll continue to make great progress.

Nick Bush is out for the year. Unfortunately, Nick had a surgery in the fall where it's -- I don't know what they call it, but they moved a nerve from one side of the elbow to the other side of the elbow. Sounds awful. It's almost become fairly routine. We thought that would solve the problem, and then after he rehabbed that and came all the way back, the first bullpen that he threw, his elbow started bothering him again, and they realized that the ligament needed to be repaired. So he's had Tommy John surgery, and he'll miss the entire season.

I might as well just keep going. Jake Latz this fall had a screw inserted into his elbow. He should be ready to start throwing a baseball here in the next week or two. I don't know when he'll be ready to pitch. I'm still holding hope that maybe by late April into May that he might be able to contribute to the team.

Obviously, it's been frustrating for everybody, most particularly that young man. Very talented, left-handed pitcher. He actually pitched 11 innings this fall and didn't give up a run in the inner-squad games. Had one outing where he went four innings, struck out seven and really dominated. Then his 11th inning, just started not to feel so great, so we sent him back to the doctor. He actually went and saw several doctors around the country, and ultimately, everybody agreed that the best course of action would be to put a screw in there to solidify that bone.

So we've just got to wait it out a little bit and let him progress at his own pace. When he's ready to go, we'll know it.

One other injury, Cody Ducote had kind of a freak injury after fall practice was over. He fell down and cut his hand on a broken bottle or something that was under some leaves. He actually had to have surgery on his hand and he won't even be able to grip a bat until next month sometime. So I don't anticipate he'll be ready to play for at least a month going into the season. We'll see how that plays out.

Outside of that, I think everybody's healthy. We have a 34-man roster with Jake Gottfried's transfer, we can't fill that position. So we have a 34-man roster, and we have Latz out, Bush out, Ducote out. Is there somebody else? And Bush. So we're basically going with about 31 players right now.

**Q. Where is Bryce Adams? Where can he fit in as things move forward? How quickly do you want to settle on starters 3, 4, 5, however many?**

COACH MAINIERI: Well, first question with regard to Bryce Adams, Bryce is a big, strong, right-handed hitter. He actually went to Dunham High School and spent three years at Delgado. Bryce came on as fall practice went. He had a very poor summer last summer in the Northwoods League on the heels of an All-American season at Delgado.

So when you look at a sample, you're not sure which sample to place more emphasis on. Came back in the fall, and he struggled a little bit early in the fall. Then as the fall went on, he started to have some very good at-bats. Swings a little bit long, but with Andy's help, he's shortening up his stroke. He's taking some good, you know, individual work batting practice sessions. But, you know, he's probably, for the most part, limited to DH.

At first base, I'm going to go with Deichmann and Brody Wofford would probably be the back-up there. Bryce would be Bryce Jordan probably for the third spot there. But he's also battling Bryce Jordan for the DH spot. But I'm going to give Bryce Jordan a good look to see if he's the guy.

So Bryce Adams will have to wait his turn a little bit. But he's somebody I've not given up on by any stretch of the imagination. When he hits them, he can hit them a long way.

**Q. 3, 4, 5 starters?**

COACH MAINIERI: Yeah, I get that question a lot. It's funny about that question. I was doing an interview this morning on the radio, and somebody asked me about developing a four-man rotation. I said, you know, when you think about Major League teams, how many Major League teams are dissatisfied with their fourth and fifth starters? How hard is it? Ben, you've been

part of Major League teams, right?

You always hear the managers complaining they don't have a good fourth and fifth starter. When you think of a Major League organization, how many pitchers are available to them? What is a Major League organization have? 150 pitchers in their system, plus they can make trades and so forth. Well, we have 15 pitchers in our system, and we can't make trades. So to develop four really good starting pitchers is a difficult task. There's not many schools in the country that have that luxury.

This may be a year that we're able to do that, and we're hopeful that we can, because we do have some experience. We do have some quality guys. I mentioned Lange and Poche', Poche' and Lange, I'm sure that question's coming up. Who is going to be pitching on opening day? And we'll save that one for later. The third starter, the fourth starter, we still have some candidates that we're going to let battle out for that.

Riley Smith is a junior college transfer from San Jacinto Junior College who we're extremely high on. Real bulldog on the mound, got a great arm, has always had a good changeup. And Alan Dunn has taught him to spin that ball and throw a breaking ball. Now he's added that to his repertoire. He was drafted last year I want to say around the 30th round. We thought we might lose him, actually, because they were going to overpay him, but he stuck with his commitment. He came to school, and we're happy that he did.

He's got a chance either to be a third starter or perhaps even a back end of the bullpen guy for us. Austin Bain of course is another guy. If we were to start the season tomorrow, probably Smith and Bain would start the Sunday and mid week games. But we still have other candidates. The left-handed pitcher, well, he's from Fort Lauderdale. But he came by way of Akron University. They discontinued their program after last season. So because of NCAA rules he was immediately eligible. Didn't have to sit out a year as a transfer.

He's a crafty left-hander. I tell you, when he pitched against our guys in the fall, he carved them up a lot. And he's not a strikeout pitcher, but he does -- you don't hit a lot of balls hard off of him. He's your prototypical, Jamie boyar, Ryan bird, I'm even going to throw a South Carolina kid out there, Michael Roth-type of guy. A guy that just knows how to pitch both sides of the plate, change his speeds and so forth.

So I don't know if I'm going to use him as a lefty out of the pen or perhaps a mid-week starter at some point.

Doug Norman is another guy that's started games for us in the past that I think is probably in the hunt for one of those starting jobs as well.

But I would really like to see us have four starters, and if we get four starters, you'll be the first to know.

**Q. You talked about the youth and having the pitching to sustain their growth early in the season. How do you feel the schedule lends itself to this young team learning to play the college game?**

COACH MAINIERI: Well, the schedule for non-conference games, we don't really like to go on the road in the preseason. We get an awful lot of fans here. It generates a lot of revenue for our athletic department. Our fans, you know, love to see our team play. We have a unique situation here where we're able to play a lot of games at home. Occasionally, we'll go on the road.

But when you don't want to enter into a home and away agreement, it's hard to get some of the premier programs to come here to play. So we do get a lot of calls from schools from different parts of the United States that want the experience of coming to play at Alex Box Stadium.

Quite frankly, I think it's kind of neat to play a lot of different teams. I don't know how many teams we've played since I've been the coach here. But kind of this unofficial goal, we're going to try to play all 30 teams before I'm finished, I think. But some of these teams, you may not have -- our fans may not have heard a lot about. But I can tell you through personal experience that these are really good teams. Probably you take Sacramento State. You don't hear much about them. They don't have a football program. They're out on the west coast. This is a team that's going to be in the Regionals next year. They're going to win their conference out there on the west coast.

Their coach, Reggie Christiansen, I know him from my days at Notre Dame. I coached against his team when he was a coach at South Dakota State, and we had played a team with a more hard-nosed attitude, confident attitude than that team. And I'm sure Sacramento State is going to be a very formidable opponent. Also during my days at Notre Dame, we coached against Ball State.

Listen, one year Ball State had two first round pitchers coming out of their program. I think they've got four players in the top 150 prospects in the country this year. So Ball State's going to be a very talented team, and a very good team. Probably will win the Mid-American conference.

Fordham's a school out of New York I don't know much

about. Cincinnati, of course, they have one of the most beautiful facilities in the entire country, and they hired a new coach last year who is trying to turn this program around. They had a first-team All-American last year that's no longer with them. So we look at all those teams that come in here with the greatest amount of respect.

Our mid-week schedule we're going over to play Lamar in Beaumont, that's going to be a very challenging game. Next week we go to Thibodaux to play Nichols. They beat us last year and they won 35 games or something last year. That was the most wins they've had in many years. So I think we've got a good balance of teams that because we're able to play at home, our players can feel confident when they go out there and play the game and know that they're in a comfortable environment, so to speak. But at the same time, it will be challenging. We'll be ready to play when the SEC schedule comes around. I'll guarantee you that.

**Q. Can you tell us who you have right now? You're looking at the setup and your closer?**

COACH MAINIERI: Yeah, I can't say for certain there. But I can tell you that the guys that are going to be pitching from the sixth inning on are pretty much the same guys last year that I thought did a fantastic job for us.

Hunter Newman, for example, I think he only gave up a couple runs, if I'm not mistaken, in 40 innings pitched last year. Jesse Stallings had some terrific moments. I think he had 12 saves and needed to develop some secondary pitches. Parker Bugg who came up with a great slider last year, did a terrific job for us. I think those three guys to start with.

I mentioned before, Riley Smith was a candidate maybe for the back end of the game. If we don't use him as a starter. What we do with Austin Bain is a little up in the air. What do we do with John Ballard? Does he become a situational lefty or a starter? We're not 100% sure yet what we're going to do with those guys. But those are pretty much the names.

Alden Cartwright and Russell Reynolds that will be ready to contribute. I like the depth of our team. I hope we don't have to start from inning one and try to piece it together like we've had to do a few times last year. But what I'd like to do is have a good, solid pen from the sixth inning on.

**Q. With so many freshmen, you have a message to them about the situation? How big the box is, the program, or when they sign on, they know what they're getting into as far as what LSU baseball is?**

COACH MAINIERI: That's always the 64,000 question. How quickly does a freshman adjust to the environment here with the bright lights? Today's going to be a unique experience for all of those freshmen when you all go out to the Box and want to talk to them. This will be more people than they would have seen at their High School games, and it's the media asking them questions.

So, how do they adjust? We'll see. I wish I could tell you absolutely for certain. I'm sure some will handle it better than others, but they better handle it, because this is the way it is at LSU. We've tried to prepare them mentally in our own unique ways of doing that for the scrutiny that they'll be under, for the fan, for the fans to have access to them with autographs and conversation and so forth. Just, when you have a lot of people coming to the games, you know, they want to see you do well. Sometimes when you don't do well, they let you know about that, and you've got to learn to deal with that as well. Criticism, praise, keeping everything in the proper perspective.

The great thing about being at LSU, coaching at LSU and being a part of LSU, you're under the spotlight here. And if you're afraid of it, you came to the wrong place. So you have to embrace it, you have to enjoy it, you have to do the right thing, but you have to have, beyond everything else, great composure and poise and self-confidence. And that will carry you through.

So we've tried to prepare them well. I think they're going to handle it fine. As I mentioned, we're going to have probably two freshmen in our starting lineup on opening night. If I had six or seven, I'd probably be a little bit nervous. But I think the two freshmen are going to be able to handle it. The other six returning players are going to be fine.

The junior college kid, Freeman, and I'm sure it will be an adjustment for him. But he's got a couple of years of age under his belt. He's a 21-year-old junior instead of an 18-year-old freshman.

I think as time goes on, I had a question about the schedule. One of the things, I think back to 2009, when we won the National Championship, we started that year with Austin Nolan, Mikie Mahtook, and Tyler Hanover as reserves. Because we were able to play a lot of home games and those players were on the roster and on the bench, when we had a victory or a game that was on its way to a one-sided victory, it allowed me a lot of opportunities to put those guys into the games. And they become more accustomed to the speed of the game and bright lights and all that stuff.

So by the time we're 20 games into the season, I can feel confident plugging a Tyler Hanover in at third, or 30

games into the year, Mikie Mahtook into the outfield, or 40 games into the year with Austin Nolan into shortstop, knowing they're a little more prepared than they would have been at the beginning of the season.

**Q. Normally, when you have sophomores breaking into the lineup, and you may have three or you've got four juniors or seniors that are there. Now these guys are getting thrown in there. And like you said, one of the Jordans may be in the middle of the lineup. Are those guys mentally ready for that responsibility?**

COACH MAINIERI: Well, again, we don't have a choice. Last year we started the season and we had a couple of underclassmen in the lineup. Because I could see a year from then, now, that there were going to be a lot of guys leaving. We had a lot of seniors last year, and underclassmen that were eligible for the draft. But as the season progressed, it became obvious to me that Jared Foster should be in the lineup. He was just bringing too much to the table. Rather than having a platoon with him and Fraley, I thought we'd be a stronger team with Foster playing every day.

Chris Sciambra, when he got an opportunity, he did some tremendous things. Gave him a chance at Arkansas his first night. He drives in four runs, three with the bases loaded triple. The next eight plays, he gets four hits. What I was going to do? Take those guys out of the lineup? We were a better team with them in the lineup. I thought we had a shot to go for the National Championship, and we went for it.

I knew that I'd have to pay the piper this year a little bit. But at the same time, sooner or later guys have to take the big plunge. Guys have to jump in. Whether you feel like they're 100% ready or not, they have to be ready. They have to do it.

So Deichmann, the Jordan boys, Papierski, those are guys that have been around here. It would be different if they hadn't been around at all. Papierski is the only one that's an out of state guy. They've been here, they know the atmosphere and all of that helps them to be mentally ready. We recruited those kids here for a reason. We thought they were good ballplayers, and now they'll get their opportunity to show why we had confidence in them.

**Q. The other question, you look at the polls and you're fourth in the conference, and second in your division. Have you ever seen something like this where you've got so much competition?**

COACH MAINIERI: Yeah, every year I've been here, actually. It seems like it's that way all the time. Couple years ago, I remember we had six teams from the SEC

West and the top 15 teams in the country. This year, of course, Brian is speaking of Florida, seems to be the consensus, No. 1 team in the country. Vanderbilt is pretty much a consensus two or three team, and Texas A&M is a consensus three or four team. We're five in two polls and seven, I think, in three others, and 11th in one.

I thought we might fly under the radar a little bit this year. But I don't really care. Actually, I do care. I'm glad we're ranked where we are. Do you think really our fans or the people that care about LSU baseball want to hear about a rebuilding year? Come on. That doesn't exist at LSU. Every year you're expected to compete. We're going to do that. We're just going to have some younger players on the team.

In our league, if you can compete favorably in the Southeastern Conference, then you know you can compete favorably for a National Championship and certainly getting to Omaha, because we have the best teams in the country right here. As Brian mentioned. You're talking, we're fifth in the country and fourth in the SEC in the preseason poll. That's really amazing when you think about it. But you wouldn't want it any other way. This is why coaches come here. This is why players come here. They come here to be tested against the best players or best teams not named LSU. And that's what we're going to do. So bring it on. Let's go. Let's have some fun.

**Q. You had so many veteran leaders on the team last year. I'm wondering where you expect to get that veteran leadership, especially in the lineup?**

COACH MAINIERI: Yeah, well, it depends how you define leadership, too. Are you talking vocal leadership or just guys that can produce? I'm a big believer that the best form of leadership is to go out there and play really well. Show the other players that you have great confidence in yourself.

First of all, you've prepared yourself well through your practice habits and how you went about your business each and every day, how you handle your success and failure with equal dignity. Coming through in clutch situations when your team needs you the best, for me, that's the best form of leadership.

So, really, everybody's going to be a leader in their own way, as long as they're going out there and producing. Obviously, when you have experienced players, they have a better chance to be successful because they've been through the rigors of an SEC schedule already. We don't have as many guys that have done that in our everyday lineup. So it will just have to be one of those jobs in progress of who takes on a little bit more of a vocal role as a leader.

But clearly you can look at Fraley and perhaps Kramer Robertson, and certainly when you look at the pitching staff and you see all those guys that I've already mentioned, the veterans, they're going to be leaders in their own way. So I'm not overly concerned about that. We as coaches have to provide a lot of leadership as well, so hopefully we can handle that job.

**Q. Can you expand on Fraley a little?**

COACH MAINIERI: Fraley's first fall here as a freshman was about the worst thing any of us have ever seen. We were wondering why we recruited the guy, okay. He comes back in the spring, and it was like a light switch went off. All of a sudden, he started showing all these remarkable athletic tools. And the reason why we recruited him.

From that point on, he's been such an outstanding player for us. But his sophomore fall was okay. It was better than his freshman fall. But I can tell you, this past fall he played like an All-American. He looked like a first-round draft choice. He hit the ball all over the park. He hit it out of the park. He ran balls down in the outfield. He stole bases. I mean, we get a lot of scouts coming out to our inner-squad games in the fall here and they were all raving to me what they were seeing with him.

I think Jake was ready for that bust out season. He's had two fine seasons for us, but I think he's got a chance to do something special. He's going to play three hole, he's going to play centerfield. He's that one veteran player that all are going to look at to provide that leadership that you asked about.

**Q. When did you realize that Antoine was going to be your starter? And three guys, three freshmen from the Lafayette area, is that a lot for your time here?**

COACH MAINIERI: Let me answer the second question first. The Lafayette area has become very vital to our LSU baseball program. Obviously ULL has developed a tremendous program as well. They've got plenty of good players in their program. But we've been able to dip into Lafayette and get some pretty good players. I'll refresh your memory, in case you need me to: Mahtook, Stevenson. I mean, these guys weren't bad.

**Q. Three at one time, though.**

COACH MAINIERI: Yeah, now we have three. So two of them are from the same school that produced Stevenson and Mahtook, St. Thomas More. Then the third one, Antoine Duplantis, is from Lafayette High School. Brendan Breaux and O'Neal Lochridge are two boys from St. Thomas More who have been committed to us for a couple of years. Wonderful

young men that are going to contribute to our program in a very significant way, and I hope they keep producing players for us.

But this Duplantis kid, his recruitment was a little bit different. We almost had our entire recruiting class finished. And I went off in the summer to Atlanta the summer before Antoine, all of their senior years in High School. And I really went to see the guys that were already committed to us, to see them play for a few days as we were preparing, and they were going to sign in November and preparing for the future. And Duplantis was on that team. Duplantis had come to our camp a few years ago. And at the time he was just kind of weak and overmatched, and we didn't think much of his chance of playing for us.

When I saw him playing that summer in Atlanta that senior year, he was like a completely different player. He had gotten stronger. He played with more confidence. When I watched the game, he jumped out to me like a sore thumb. He comes from a lineage of athletes, LSU athletes by the way. His father was a great pole vaulter here, and I believe he was an alternate on the '84 Olympic team as a pole vaulter. His mother, who is from Sweden, came here -- and let me see if I get this right. She was a pentathlete or heptathlete. I'm not sure exactly what they do. So heptathlete, and a volleyball player. So she was a great athlete. His older brother just finished last year as a senior as our best pole vaulter in the track team here at LSU. And he's got a younger brother who has the world record for pole vaulting for his age. He jumped 17.2 in the high school track meet the other day.

Antoine's the black sheep of the family. He's not the pole vaulter, he's a baseball player. He's not the pole vaulter. He's a baseball player. His family doesn't know anything about the sport. It's great. I don't have any parents up there yelling at me because I don't know what I'm doing. He's the baseball player out of the group. But he brings that athletic gene that the rest of the family shares.

When you watch him play, you'll see what I mean. He just looks like a gazelle out there in the outfield. He runs, he can run them down. He's got a good arm. He's got great hand-eye coordination as a hitter.

But I also mentioned to you that he came about six inches away from a grand slam to deep right centerfield off Lange in the fall. So he's got bat speed that produces some pop as well.

Now I realize I'm giving this kid a lot of pump up here, and he hasn't ever gotten a college baseball hit yet, right? But I did the same thing with a kid named

Bregman, when he was going into his freshman year, and it turned out all right. So let's see how Antoine Duplantis turns out. I have a sense he's going to be a pretty good ballplayer for us. And it's amazing he was virtually the last guy in our recruiting class.

**Q. Following up on what you were talking about, Fraley had the terrible fall his first year here and went back over Christmas and got much better. I don't know how much of a sample size you have because you haven't started doing much. But can you see anything similar, young guys that came in that had bad falls. Went back, cleared their head and they're a little better now?**

COACH MAINIERI: It's not as big a sample because we're just doing individual work. This is kind of a pain in the neck time. We had all these individual works, limited to two hours and so forth. But I think in the end it actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise because we got to work with these guys on an individual basis that sometimes you don't get to do when you have your four hour practice. You have a full batting practice session, you have a scrimmage game. Before you know it, your four hours for the day is up. This gave us a chance to work individually with some guys.

I can tell you that Trey Dawson has made huge strides. And I've given all the credit here, besides to the kids, to Andy Cannizaro. I watched Trey, the things that he tried to do with him during the fall, and it was a slow process. But it was an uphill climb, but there were two steps forward And One step back. Just watching his batting practices now, he looks like a totally different hitter, more consistent and so forth.

Cole Freeman is another one. Cole Freeman has this huge gift. He can absolutely fly. I mean, this kid is capable of stealing 50 bases if he got on base enough, okay? But in the fall he swung like he was 6'5", 220 pounds with big -- you know, just trying to muscle balls. Andy has absolutely helped him make a transition to be more of a handsy hitter where he's putting the ball on the ground and just on the line instead of hitting balls in the air and wasting his tremendous speed. If this kid just puts the ball on the ground and keeps it out of the air and he can hit 300, I'm telling you, he's going to be an offensive force for us.

I think Papierski has made huge strides, even though he's not a freshman. Duplantis was already pretty developed in his hand-eye coordination. I would have to say those are the guys that I've seen with huge improvement.

Jordan Romero is another that I thought made huge improvement from the fall until now as well. I

mentioned Brody Wofford, but that was more the result of added strength that he has put on. He's gone from he was skinny as a rail to now he's put on some beef on his body just from eating and lifting and getting stronger over the course of the last six, seven months. Now he's starting to hit the ball with more authority. He's got more in him, too.

**Q. Have you determined or kind of thought about your one, two, three hole hitters and how important is that to solidify at the beginning of the season? Especially the leadoff hitter?**

COACH MAINIERI: I know everybody wants to talk leadoff hitters. But when I put a lineup together, I start with the middle of the order. We have to have somebody -- it does no good to get guys on base if we don't have somebody to drive them home. So we're going to start out the middle of the order with Bailey, Beau Jordan, and Greg Deichmann. There is not a lot of experience there outside of Fraley. It's kind of blind faith that I have in those kids, but Beau Jordan is one of those guys, man, that you just want to see him up there in those clutch situations. He's going to compete as hard as anybody can possibly compete. And Greg Deichmann is a guy that can really hurt the other team. I mean, you make a mistake to him, he's going to lose it. So you want to have some power in that middle of the order as well.

So if you look at those three guys in the middle of the order, of course I've raved about Duplantis so much, you've got to assume he's going to be in one of those top two spots. We'll probably give Kramer Robinson a chance as well. If he does it, then we're going to have nice combination at the top with a good middle of the order. Whereas maybe at some point in the fall, I thought the lower half of our lineup might struggle a little bit. The improvement that Dawson and Freeman and Papierski have made, I think the bottom of our order might surprise some people as well. You throw Bryce Jordan in there, or Wofford or somebody like that, not going to be bad.

**Q. Are you satisfied with what the new ball did for offense last year or do you feel more needs to be done?**

COACH MAINIERI: Well, I think it helped. I think I told you before the year last year that I thought it would make somewhat of a difference, but not a huge difference. I think more can be done. I wish we'd go to the minor league ball where the core is a little more lively. They've lowered the seams, which helped, and we've hit a few more home runs. The pitcher is throwing the ball because of the lower seams. I was surprised. But that was almost unanimously they like throwing it more. Less blisters. They felt like they could get more movement on the pitches.

But I'm a guy that loves offense. I'm a fan of the game, and I wish we could hit more home runs and so forth. And I think a more lively ball. I don't see the bats changing, but I wish the ball would but at least it was better than it was before.

**Q. Jared Poche' has been very good the first two years. What is the next step for him? What does he need to polish up to become really elite?**

COACH MAINIERI: If you look at the body type that Jared is, he's a stocky built kid. If you project a guy, you would rather see a longer limbed, leaner guy knowing when he puts more bulk on he's going to improve his fastball and those kind of things. So really I always felt all along with Jared, what you see is what you get. There wasn't going to be great improvement in velocity and those type of things.

Yet this fall, his velo jumped up a tick. He's been 89 to 90, touching 91 once in a while. At the end of the fall, he was throwing 91 to 93 miles an hour. Now, if he can maintain that, and I don't know if he can, but if he can, that will make him a lot better. His command is continuing to improve because of experience.

And I tell you this, Alan Dunn has worked with him on cutting his fastball. It gives it slider action. He's always had that big curveball. Now in hitter's counts, he doesn't have to lay his fastball in there. He can get break action on it, without giving up too much velocity or command. And I think that's going to help him as well. I've got a lot of confidence in Jared. He's like the ultimate warrior out there.

**Q. I see you added Brent Bonvillain as a graduate assistant. How did that come about, and what do you think he brings to your staff?**

COACH MAINIERI: Well, Brent was a pitcher on our team in 2012 and 2013, pitched in the College World Series for us. Wonderful young man. He started at Nichols State, transferred to Delgado and then came to LSU. So I want our guys to graduate, and we've had pretty good success in our graduation with all of our players.

Brent decided after he played pro ball and got released, I'm just going to jump into the work force. So he took a job, and for two or three years I've been kind of haggling him to get back here to school. Then finally one day we were having our Thursday morning academic meeting with our academic advisor Kirstin DeFusco, and she said I got a phone call from a kid named Brent Bonvillain out of the blue. I said, you did? I said great, and as soon as the meeting ended, I called him and said get back to school. So he did, he resigned his job. Fortunately, our administration was

very accommodating for him to help him a little bit financially to keep the scholarship that he had when he was a player here to help make it feasible for him to do it. So he came back. He joined our program back this semester.

He's got one semester to graduate, and he'll be our undergraduate assistant coach. We'll have him coach first base for us, which we know the last few years we've had Matt Edwards, Buzzy Haydel, Blake Dean. It's a nice thing if you can put an undergraduate coach at first base, because it allows you to keep your hitting coach in the dugout to be able to talk to your hitters in between at-bats and get a plan of what the pitcher is trying to do to him and to make mechanical changes and those type of things. So I was really kind of befuddled as to what we were going to be able to do. We might have had to put a player out there to coach first base.

So by Brent coming back, it gives us an undergraduate coach to put out there. But also he's a good left handed batting practice pitcher, especially with the guys that we think are going to be in there every day, like Fraley, Deichmann, and Duplantis. For them to see a lot of left-handed batting practice, I think it will help them when we face left-handed pitchers.

**Q. So obviously we mentioned this before already, but one of the big story lines and themes will be can the LSU Tigers withstand all of these big losses that they've had, all of these veteran guys. And your response is we don't really have a choice. We have to do that. If I was going to ask you what gives you that confidence that you can do that? Is it the talent? Is it the confidence that those young guys have? What makes you believe you can do that?**

COACH MAINIERI: There are several things. When you put that jersey on over your head and it says LSU across your chest or Tigers across your chest, you realize what you're representing. You're representing a state. You're representing a university. You're representing a community. But you're also representing a lot of great ballplayers that came before you, and you expect yourself to perform at that level.

The other day we had a team meeting, and I took the players into the Hall of Fame room at the Wally Pontiff, Jr. Hall of Fame room, and I just spent a half an hour in there walking them around and telling them the story of LSU baseball. These kids are 18 years old. Many of them don't know who Skip Bertman was, for goodness sakes. They weren't born when Skip was coaching practically.

So I had to tell them the history of who Ben McDonald

was and this great game, and that great game, and these great players. And they go in there and their eyes get as big as grape fruits and they start to realize, wow. I need to step it up a little bit because we've got a great tradition here at this school. So that's one thing that gives me the confidence is them knowing the standard that we have here.

Secondly, we recruited them because we thought they were good ballplayers, so I think they have the talent to play here.

Thirdly, when we play at the box and we've got 10,000 to 12,000 people there, and people are so enthusiastic. And we have media coverage and all this stuff. It just gives them another sense of confidence that they're next in line and it's their turn.

So, yeah, and I get to know the kids. I watch them practice. I see how they're committed and what their skills are, the leadership on the team, all those things give me great confidence that we'll be ready to go. There are going to be some growing pains, there is no question about that. Even if you've got a veteran team, no season is perfect. You're going to have ebbs and flows throughout the year. People have a tendency for everybody to think the sky is falling in every time something bad happens or we lose a ballgame, but in this sport, you just can't win them all. I remind our players all the time.

When we won the National Championship in '09, we lost 17 games that year. We lost two home series, one to the team that finished last in the SEC, and one to a Big Ten team that was coming out of the snow. Yet we went on to win the National Championship. So you just can't panic in this sport. You have to stay the course. You've got to believe and you've got to keep making the decisions that give us the best chance to be successful.

**Q. Alex Lange, he's the ultimate trump card, isn't he?**

COACH MAINIERI: Well, we've got to be careful about that, you know, because just because Alex went 12-0 last year with a sub-2 ERA doesn't mean everybody's going to just lay down and let him do it again. He's not going to sneak up on anybody. He's talented. He's a wonderful kid. I think he's even better now than he was last year. But he's got to go out and execute his pitches and do the things that it takes to win. Sometimes, you know, we take people for granted just because they did well last year. I don't think you can take anything for granted. Just because he won 12 last year doesn't mean he's going to win 12 this year.

Just because Poche' won nine last year, doesn't mean he's going nine this year. Just because Fraley hit .350,

doesn't mean he's going to hit .350 this year.

It's a day-by-day game. You've got to be ready to play each day. With that said, let me put it this way: I'm glad Alex Lange's on our team, okay.