

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Greg Sankey

Press Conference

KEVIN TRAINOR: Good afternoon, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Good afternoon.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Thank you for joining us. Whenever you're ready, we'll take your opening comments, then take questions from our friends in the media.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Camera is ready, be careful what I say at this point?

KEVIN TRAINOR: You're live.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Good afternoon, everyone. It's been a journey, to say the least. A lot of experiences one could never anticipate, yet we're here in Atlanta for the 2020 version of the SEC football championship game. It's the 10th time Alabama and Florida are meeting in this game, way back to its inception in the early '90s in Birmingham, Alabama.

Exciting game. Obviously had an outcome last Saturday in Gainesville that may have altered some people's perspectives. But I heard Dan's focus on this week. I think that's a true sign of the competitive spirit that we cherish, that we've got an opportunity to compete, play a game on Saturday in the SEC. We actually have three other games scheduled that day, but we'll finish our day and season with the SEC championship game, which is always important. We look forward to great competition.

Also acknowledge our other six teams that will be playing on Saturday as we work to finish what right now we anticipate being 69 of 71 total games, that includes the SEC championship game, starting September 26th, in a new environment.

We had five weeks in our season with no disruptions, six weeks that had one game disrupted, and two weeks during our season that had more than one disruption. One of



those had two, one of those had four games that were altered.

Generally it was only one team within that context that encountered a problem. That allowed us in one circumstance, Missouri and Vanderbilt, to make a quick one-day change. The remainder of our changes, I think 15 games were moved once we started. I think that number is correct. Most of those were on a Friday, generally eight days before. As we came down to this finish line a little bit more advanced notice.

I think the opportunity to play is acknowledged as important. It has been a difficult journey. I'll also indicate the opportunity to play 69 of 71 games is not unique to football.

In the sport of volleyball, our fall matches, we only lost one of our scheduled matches. That was a late disruption due to a COVID testing on one team. We lost one of our regular-season soccer games as they were scheduled. Then in soccer, played a full tournament. I think everybody knows, Vanderbilt, the conference champion of that tournament. Sarah Fuller later that same week engaged in kicking off during Vanderbilt's game at Missouri, which is one of those rescheduled games. Perhaps the most rescheduled game in the history of college football. The date was moved four times.

All of that is a tribute to our student-athletes, their commitment to play. They asked me during the summer for the opportunity to play a meaningful season. We altered our approach, started later, built in two additional conference games, which is certainly a test. The rigor of the SEC schedule in my view is second to none. That's been recognized over time given the number of postseason participants in the BCS era, the College Football Playoff era. Three of our teams having played in the CFP championship game during its short history.

Just a couple of notes. Saturday will be the eighth consecutive week in which Florida has played a game. The fifth straight week for Alabama. Alabama began with six consecutive weeks, then had some open space, one that was planned, one week not planned, and will finish



with five straight games. Again as I said, from Florida's standpoint, will play eight straight weeks.

Literally we talked about how we would set up our schedule. We didn't want to put a team in that position, yet the reality of what's happened around COVID adjustments has dictated that. We've also had a team, I have to go back to my schedule, a couple teams play six games, one play seven, then some have some disruption.

Texas A&M has an opportunity to play again this week, ranked fifth in the College Football Playoff ratings, will be at Tennessee as scheduled. It does appear clearly at this point that Ole Miss playing at Texas A&M will not happen as their season concludes on the 19th. We announced the Vanderbilt at Georgia game would not be played either.

With that, with those introductory notes, I'll take a moment to let people get in the queue to ask questions. I think those are the high points. We'll see what might be on the minds of those of you in the media.

Q. About the success that Nick Saban has had at Alabama over these last 14 years. We've seen a lot of schools, coaches, come and go as they sort of try to keep up with or catch up to Alabama. What is the good and bad side to having one school and one coach that's such a dominating presence in the conference over such a long period of time?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: You can imagine I'm going to be thoughtful in answering that because we have 14 programs that all have championship aspirations. Over time you look at the Tennessee women's basketball program, the success that Pat established. When you have sustained success, everybody wants to be at that level. That creates competitive pressure.

When I started my first year as commissioner in 2015 and '16, I had a lot of questions about, Wow, this is a one-team conference. I don't have that question any more given the breadth of success, some who have been close to the pinnacle, some have shared the National Championship achievement.

I really look at the question from a conference perspective. 10 out of the last 14 years we have an SEC team win a National Championship. That's been spread around a number of programs. But you do have to credit the sustained success.

I watched Nick, who is probably better at answering that question than I, last night on Marty & McGee of all places, just talking about the need to adapt and adjust to this environment in 2020, not the environment necessarily he

would have chosen or preferred, but the one is dictated, how one continues to adapt.

I think you have to recognize he has adapted over time, the number of points he's scoring, looking back to his early days as more of a defensive-minded coach.

Again, I take that back to the conference level because we have that kind of adaptation happening around the conference. Everyone wants to achieve that kind of sustained success.

Q. Obviously in this year, in this championship, it's so different because of the COVID era. In your mind what are the biggest logistical issues and complications that come from hosting an event like this compared to normal?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: You start with COVID testing, which has never been part of our regular season or our championship game. A lot of that happens outside of our direct involvement. We have a third-party administrator that deploys personnel on each of our campuses. Now as we bring people into a game, we have more people attached to us. That's, as I've referred repeatedly, my hold-your-breath moment. I would simply start with that new reality and wanting to make sure the game can be played.

I'll give credit to Byron Hatch, our assistant commissioner for competition, who is the director for our championship. These conversations that bring us here today started back in April. Date flexibility on the part of Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the Atlanta Falcons, the host hotels, taking what are a whole bunch of events and bringing them down to almost nothing, arriving at an appropriate attendance level.

There's been essentially a reinvention focused on we want to play a championship game. We want to name a champion. That's been the mantra. Then what can we do around that that supports that contest? What do we need to eliminate?

There's been a lot of the elimination in this reinvention. I can tell you that driving in today, I usually would be here on Tuesday, not seeing the same activity, I look forward to the post-COVID era when we get back to more of the normal operational experience.

It's been now seven, eight months of work by our staff, by the folks here in Atlanta, be it the hotels, Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau, to make this possible.

Q. I'd like to hear about the medical guidance task

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force, their role they have played not only in football but in soccer. How valuable was that task force for you to get to the finish line on Saturday?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Vitally important. Our intent was to bring the group here to say thank you. Now, some of them have games, some of them have responsibilities in their traditional roles. Some work in hospitals. So we couldn't honor them here.

I will tell you they deserve our thanks and our congratulations. They have contributed enormous time. We go back to May when we were thinking about returning student-athletes to campus, they went from a once-a-week volunteer experience to every day and multiple hours a day just communicating, thinking, contributing, discussing, agreeing, disagreeing, recalibrating. That's continued.

When we invited them back in late March, early April, we didn't have a finish line to their service. I thought there would be a finish line by now. As we flip the page into winter sports, they're working diligently on what happens in baseball, softball, track and field when we get outdoors. They have been just a critical piece and are truly unsung heroes both because they all serve in healthcare capacities, whether in athletics departments, universities or the broader healthcare and hospital systems, and then what they've done for us.

Just huge thanks. They're right at the top of those who made this happen.

I'll just offer we had a number of phone calls with student-athletes and a number of our medical advisory task force members. You may recall one of those was recorded, provided to the Washington Post, then published. It just shows I'm proud of that conversation that our student-athletes could ask us the hard questions. When we had answers, we could provide the answers. When we didn't have answers, we'd say, We don't know but we'll keep working through that. That's what we're supposed to as leaders, educators, healthcare providers.

I didn't know if they'd come back and do that again. We didn't expect doctors and infectious disease specialists, athletic trainers would be in that position.

You know what, we had other calls with student-athletes, and they trusted us enough that we would put them in a situation and properly represent them. That's just one of the many stories of how they've all risen up and served so well.

Q. To the health of the sport in college football moving forward. What I mean is name, image, and likeness

coming up. Now that the transfer rule has been implemented in college football, what are some of the kind of issues you think moving forward that you need to focus on from a conference standpoint to at least monitor? What are some issues around those two issues in particular that will have an influence on college football?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: There are probably more issues pressing on college athletics now than ever. I've studied the history of college sports. I don't make that statement lightly.

You go back to 1906 when President Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt, then convened what would eventually result in what we know as the NCAA organizationally, given the deaths in football that had occurred. Fast-forward into the '20s, the Carnegie Foundation For Advancement For Education, deep research study in what was happening in college sports. You go to the Sanity Code of the NCAA in the late '40s. The university and college divisions being created in the early '70s, Divisions I, II, and III, in the late '80s, the Supreme Court.

I'm reciting these not to just impress you with my assessment of history, but just to acknowledge how much has gone on.

Here we are in 2020 dealing with state legislative activity, Congressional legislative activity, litigation that continues, NCAA rule changes proposed through its governance system, COVID-19, a pandemic, the pressures that come with that.

It's a very relevant question. You ask me to speak to two issues: the transfer rules and name, image, and likeness. When you take a step back, there is a lot happening. It has always been a full-time job. That's a challenge for us as leaders.

On the transfer reality, we're going to come to actually a vote on a legislative change in early January among the Division I council to apply the one-time transfer exception more broadly across sports so there will be consistency. That appears poised to take place.

What you saw from the council was the application of a waiver in a more timely manner given the full analysis of the circumstance. You go back to the fall. I sensed a change around expectations from an inside-the-conference transfer rule. Granted waivers working with our presidents' and chancellors' authority.

It's a difficult issue. We're going to have to come back at the NCAA level. On the one hand, hey, it's great. The



NCAA doesn't have a transfer restriction. But we're going to have to contemplate what does that mean from academic progress, from ongoing recruiting of student-athletes. Some of that pressure needs to be there to support the proper well-being of student-athletes. I think we do that really well in the SEC, making sure that our university campuses are home. We want to provide that right kind of support.

There's a whole set of second order, third order conversations that come out of the first order conversations about just changing the rule.

Name, image, and likeness. You go back over a year now, 14, 15 months, California adopted a law, we have a law in the state of Florida poised to come online in July. I saw activity out of Michigan. You have that level of state activity.

My prediction has always been if the California law stood, there weren't legal challenges to that, we would see a domino effect. I would expect state legislative activity to be very active and almost competitive when we get into the new legislative sessions in 2021 just at the state level.

I'm really encouraged by what I've seen out of Congress, the willingness to engage. I haven't been able to view the bill that was introduced today by Senators Brooker, Blumenthal, Gillibrand, and others. The student-athlete Bill of Rights. I can't speak to that. I appreciate what Senator Wicker introduced last year, which is a specific name, image, and likeness framework with more specificity than perhaps we've seen in other legislation.

The openness to have dialogue, and I've been able to have lots of dialogue with senate leaders on both sides of the aisle in different committees, even in different houses, both the House and the Senate, indicates there's a desire to look at how we modernize and the willingness for Congress to engage, which I've opined as being something that's needed.

I don't think the NCAA policies that are up for consideration in January resolve even what's at the state level. I indicated last week a view that perhaps the NCAA should take a step back, continue our engagement at the governmental level, see what solutions might be produced there before simply acting in mid January on legislative changes. We can do that at different dates. We need to continue to engage at both the state and federal level.

Hopefully that's responsive. I know a lot of words there, but hopefully there's some help in providing perspective on those two important issues.

Q. How do you respond to criticism of the system, since you're one of the people with the power to change it, that it's not fair? What is your willingness to change it to make it more inclusive, particularly in regards to Mike Aresco's comments this week?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: I don't respond. Mike represents the American Athletic Conference. I respect that role. I have a task with the Southeastern Conference. As we made decisions back in July and August, we thought long and hard about what our season may look like. The decisions to not play conference games were difficult, but were made based on the desire to have what I was asked for, which is a meaningful season by our football student-athletes.

We added two SEC games. We have two teams on Saturday scheduled to play their 11th game against SEC-level competition. Others have suggested the SEC is not what it is this year. We didn't have non-conference games. We dominate non-conference games both at the A5 level over time and the Group of 5 level where we have those opponents as well.

We're just in a different reality where I think the Selection Committee has fulfilled its responsibility in really challenging circumstances, circumstances not contemplated when the CFP was set up.

You've heard me speak that I think playing games matters, not because I think that, but because the College Football Playoff Selection Committee has said so over time. We focused on that.

We played games last week. When I mentioned that Florida played eight straight weeks, that's not normal. That's unusual. They played a game after clinching a division crown against a rival opponent, a permanent rival opponent, not having the season. It's a lesson that every week the competitive challenge have meaning, particularly in the Southeastern Conference.

We've tasked the committee, as I said, with something difficult. That's evaluating with a general absence of non-conference competition. To me, if I were to respond to critics, I would observe it heightens the attention on how important those non-conference games are moving forward.

I truly look forward to getting back to that activity, non-conference games. We lost Arkansas at Notre Dame. You watch the great work that Sam did. Would have been a challenging game. I would have loved to have seen that game played early in the year. Texas at LSU. The rivalry games we have at the end with the ACC teams,

Alabama-USC, critically important games that would have informed the Selection Committee's decision making. I think it speaks to a system that was actually well-established.

Q. Between Mac Jones and Kyle Trask, you have two outstanding quarterbacks. Throw on top of that DeVonta Smith. You have three potential Heisman Trophy finalists on the field this weekend. How does that speak to the success of this season given so much adversity?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Mac Jones was part of our student-athlete leadership council asking that meaningful season. When you have that caliber of individual playing that caliber of football where they're recognized as potential Heisman winners...

I'd add Kyle Pitts for his performance as well. You could argue there are four potential finalists given outcomes, maybe even beyond. I think fan bases will jump on Twitter and say, You didn't mention this person or that person.

I think it shows when we were asked to provide a meaningful season, we did. It shows when you play this much against SEC teams, those expectations are high. It challenges you to rise above.

I said when people were asking about playing this season, in fact, I visited with a member of the New York Times editorial board, I said we're going to try to move this forward. They didn't think we should in the editorial. I said 2019 was LSU's time in football, Joe Burrow's time, other members of that team.

I can go back. You go back to the mid, late 2000s, Tim Tebow's time, the Florida Gators' opportunity, Cam Newton, Auburn's time.

I said I don't know whose time it will be this year. I feel the burden to provide that opportunity. It's fulfilling to see how that opportunity was provided in difficult circumstances and how so many people, even at this Heisman talk, have risen to the level of performance that has named them, potentially, as a finalist. I'll put a period on the end of that sentence.

I will say for every team, every student-athlete who played football, volleyball, soccer this year, I don't know if it's a 10-year or 20-year reunion, I want our universities to invite them back to be celebrated.

We have people miss Senior Day because we had games that couldn't be played. The accomplishment this year to play college football, I don't care what the record is, I think

is of great significance. It's about perseverance, grit, the mental challenge.

I saw Mike Leach's comment about a joyless season. It's certainly been different. I hope in 10 years or 20 years every one of these teams is invited back to campus for homecoming, celebrated, that they take great satisfaction in doing something that frankly had never been done before.

Q. Coming into this season versus other seasons, coming in with COVID-19, you've been with the SEC over 13 years in different capacities...

KEVIN TRAINOR: We lost you.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: I heard you at 13, and I was going to say it's just past 18 in November. Are you still with us?

KEVIN TRAINOR: We'll take the next question.

Q. I can't help but want to ask, in those 18 years, being commissioner of another league, coming back to the Southeastern Conference, maybe what Commissioner Slive taught you in the years before you took over? How valuable was that time, five years now as commissioner?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Yeah, five and a half. I'm counting like this is dog years. I called Roy Kramer back in July, I said how long were you commissioner? He said 12. I said, Well, I have five. This is like a dog year. At the at the end of 2020, 2021, I'm going to claim 12 like he did (smiling).

One of the great things for me when I was commissioner of the Southland Conference, you're at the end of the hallway, you realize when you're an associate commissioner, you get to provide input. My team makes decisions. They have authority to make some decisions, but the big ones come down the hall to you. When I stepped into this role, one of the great lessons for me was just knowing that being in the big chair is very different.

Being commissioner of the Southland Conference created a created a friendship opportunity with Mike Slive. I said repeatedly, before Mike was my boss, he was my friend. It was more after he was my boss, we were still friends. That's a credit to him and a privilege for me.

There was a particularly difficult day when I had my head in my hands in 2010. We had a bunch of things pressing on us, the earlier question of all going on.

I was sitting in a chair in the office that's still there today. It was 6:30 in the morning because he wanted to be there really early. I was trying to think through the problem. I had my head resting in my hands.

He said, What's wrong?

I said, I don't see the way forward.

Every so often he would grab a cigar, he would never light it. He just chewed on cigars. He smiled and said, Someday we're going to look back and laugh at this moment.

I said, Mike, I don't see anything funny right now.

He came over to me and had a copy of the Rudyard Kipling poem 'If'. If you can keep your head about you when all around are losing theirs, is how it begins.

When he retired in this very hotel where I am right now, the Hyatt in Atlanta, I had two framed prints of that drawn. Kathryn Poe Switzer is now my executive assistant helped. Calligraphy, just well done.

I gave him one of those poems framed nicely, and I kept one. I said, This will hang in my office for as long as I'm the commissioner of the SEC.

If you want to know a lesson he taught me is to look at that poem almost on a daily basis. As things were happening, football seasons were being canceled in early August, I read the entirety of that poem that hangs to the right of my desk and my phone in the SEC office.

The ability to take your time to think, take a breath, but to keep your head about you when perhaps others around you are going different directions was a critically important lesson I can point back to when he shared that with me.

KEVIN TRAINOR: We will conclude our time with the commissioner. Thank you for your time.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Thank you, everyone. Stay healthy. Look forward to awarding a trophy on Saturday evening, approaching the finish line for the 2020 regular season this year.

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