

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: LSU vs Georgia

Thursday, December 1, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

SEC Commissioner

Greg Sankey

Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: Thanks, everyone, for being here. It's great to be back in Atlanta. We're actually in a year where it feels even more like normal. Last year we came back, we had a full crowd, we had our fanfare events.

This year we've added our Legends back in for the first time since 2019. We'll be honoring a set of 14 men that played football in this league, or on some of our campuses before they were a member of this league. They'll be honored tomorrow evening.

As we continue to honor the 50th anniversary of the onset of Title IX, tomorrow evening we're really pleased to have Joan Cronan, formerly the women's athletic director, she served as the interim overall athletic director as well at the University of Tennessee. Joan will be the recipient of Mike Slive Distinguished Service Award to recognize her contributions to the conference.

We're here for football. Before I jump into football, as commissioner, I want to recognize that we have seven volleyball teams still playing in the NCAA tournament. That competition begins today. That's the most of any Division I conference, a tribute to the support provided on our campuses to the sport of volleyball, the growth that's happened over time.

We have a team competing in the College Cup tomorrow in North Carolina, that's the University of Alabama. I think we're at our highest legal level of the number of soccer teams selected into the NCAA tournament this year. A tribute to the overall support of college athletics.

In the sport of football, specifically from a talking point, painting the picture of our strength, we had 11 of our 14 members at some point ranked in the top 25 this year. Eight different schools have made appearances in the top 10. As a league we won 10 non-conference games



against opponents from autonomy five conferences. That's more than any or conference.

You start to overlay some of these statistics, you see the difficulty of winning in the league on a week-to-week basis. That's obviously altered the record of some of our teams who I think are very much among the top 25.

We are the only conference with four non-conference victories against opponents currently ranked in the top 25 and have 11 teams that are bowl eligible under NCAA rules.

Looking forward to an outstanding game on Saturday between LSU and Georgia. Only one time since 2006 has the winner of the SEC Championship Game failed to advance to the national championship game. But we know that every time you compete, there's an opportunity for a victory and a defeat. I expect that both teams will bring their best competitive spirit and preparation into the game on Saturday.

With that introduction, rather than me talk about various events that I think people may want to talk about, I'll go ahead and open up the opportunity for questions.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Questions, please.

Q. Now that expansion has been resolved and your lungs are no longer burning from that marathon, you wonder what your thoughts are on the sport itself, the SEC going to one division?

GREG SANKEY: The first question being about the sport itself, I think there's a health in football. I obviously work from our universe outward.

There is a period of two weeks where I attended four games where I was in stadiums over those two weeks that the cumulative total of attendance would have been almost 400,000. In other words, we were at peak capacity over and over at over. That's not unique.

Even during our rivalry week when we had some teams that may not have been in bowl competition, you watch fan



turnout in stadiums. Maybe not full capacity but certainly close to it.

Our viewership numbers, the top 10 televised football games, by memory, in seven of those there's at least one SEC team participating.

Overall the health here is strong.

My view, which I've communicated, is part of our commitment to keep football strong nationally, is the need to rethink the College Football Playoff format, to bring people into that opportunity while still determining a national champion.

I think for that reason, in some ways more than any other, the decisions that have finally been made this week are important for the game.

I do believe that we have to look carefully at the nature of college football. There's a lot happening. I've had any number of meetings already where we went into COVID knowing that the transfer rules were going to change, the portal was introduced. But really the important elements of lacking the need for permission to speak to another school, which seems kind of ancient in its approach. Now we've updated that. The changes around year of residence. Those two modifications were most important.

You layer on top of that COVID. You layer on top of that COVID eligibility extensions. A lot of movement that took place. Now the name, image and likeness activity that's ramping up clearly involved in recruiting, which we never want.

There's a lot of change that I think bears or puts a weight upon the game that causes me to think on a daily basis about how do we continue to strengthen college football, how do we communicate about our adjustment to the game to make it an even more healthy game in which to participate. How do we show the care that's provided.

I think all of those are important elements about being very honest in an evaluation of the game's status right now, recognizing its strength in determining how we can help the game of college football go forward in the most effective way possible.

Q. Now that the Playoff is set for 2024, what is the timeline for deciding the SEC announcing a new schedule format?

GREG SANKEY: We'll see. We wanted several pieces of information, one of which was what would happen with the College Football Playoff. I think probably even with you I

shared back in May, June, when we were in Destin that we were poised to make a decision but felt there were some important data points.

At this point we would look to the first few months of 2023 as the opportunity to refocus. I learned during that COVID summer of 2020 not to set hard-and-fast deadlines because we may want some flexibility in setting a specific finish point for our conversation.

We have a need to move forward, though. I would anticipate in the general sense sooner rather than later those decisions will come to conclusion.

Q. Obviously the expansion of the Playoffs sooner rather than later are going to change college football. What do you expect it will mean for the conference championship games, not just the SEC, but across the board? Do you expect that broader opportunity in the post-season to elevate the importance of conference championships or have no impact?

GREG SANKEY: Thanks for the question.

Anytime you are a part of change, there are unknowns. We have gone through an evaluation. And by 'we', when myself, Jack Swarbrick, Craig Thompson, Bob Bowlsby were talking about formats in the subcommittee, we had a lot of conversations about how can you make sure the communication around the importance of conference championships is clear.

If you go back to the onset or the introduction of the current College Football Playoff, there was plenty of debate about the importance of conference championships.

So our effort was to make clear that conference championships remain important, and conference championship games thus remain important.

If you take this weekend in the SEC, for example, and think forward to a 12-team Playoff, we've actually brought a team into the conversation in an even more serious and intentional way as it relates to being in the national championship.

I think when you back up, you likely heard this through the day, Brian referenced it as I walked in to the end of his remarks, you bring teams into consideration through the month of November.

For us, we've established something here in Atlanta that's very special. There still is a need to determine a conference champion just as we do in every other sport. And I think there are a number of reasons why conference

championship games will remain viable even as we go through this transition into an expanded Playoff.

Q. More teams in the Playoff, more opportunities for the SEC --

(Audio interruption.)

GREG SANKEY: -- I would anticipate the opportunity for three, perhaps four of our teams total, between the conference champion and the at-large teams to be fully in the mix on an annual basis.

Q. I don't know if my question got muddled or not, but I was referring to the likelihood of the SEC playing in one division.

GREG SANKEY: It wasn't muddled. I was so focused on providing an excellent answer to the core part of your question that I just moved on (smiling).

We'll see. That's been a focus. In fact, I spoke a few weeks ago, and someone tweeted breaking news, the SEC is focused on a single-division format. I actually said that during my Media Days remarks just down the street from Mercedes-Benz Stadium where I'm located.

The reality is we've looked at 40-plus different scheduling models. At present the one that has generated the most interest among our membership would be a single-division model matching the top two teams in our conference championship game in the future.

That's an important continuing conversation. Not to say we won't revisit some other model, but that's the focus.

It's the focus upon expansion of the conference rather than upon expansion of the Playoff. So our focus for expansion right now is that July 1st, 2025, date that has been formally announced, and I've reiterated that with some level of frequency, noting that things can always change, but that would be the sequence of events for that consideration.

Hopefully that's clear. The focus is on a single-division format. That doesn't mean there isn't the potential for introduction of another model remaining in divisions, altering division format.

I don't think this quad or pod model had a lot of interest once we dug into the details. You'll recall probably last year at this time I made great news by saying we did look at a format that has our own playoff involved, that you use part of November to advance teams to determine a conference champion that could then play forward. That went into the file folder pretty quickly.

We'll focus on the expansion of our conference as the primary starting point for a new scheduling model and continue, I would expect, in our current two-division, 14-team model until that time that expansion of the conference takes place rather than expansion of the playoff format.

Q. You talk about being back to normal. How come you wanted to do this remotely as opposed to the tradition of having both coaches there on Friday and mugging for the trophy and such?

GREG SANKEY: It's really a matter of convenience. One of the benefits, if you will, of the COVID experience is we can manage schedules in I'm going to say a healthier way so we're not trying to cram a whole bunch of things in once our teams hit the ground.

The ability for Brian and Kirby to be on video conference facilitated that. I think that's one of those adjustments that, in addition to accommodating their schedule, we bring a whole lot more media into the conversation because not everyone who's on this videoconference is necessarily going to be here on a Friday afternoon for that press conference.

That's some of the points of thinking that have caused us to continue this adaptation and benefit from some of our COVID-era learning.

I'm sorry not to see you, though. I'll give that shout-out to you.

Q. I want to ask you about your thoughts on Hugh Freeze's return to the SEC, especially with his past transgressions?

GREG SANKEY: I look from this point forward. We're informed by people's past. Hugh and I actually had an individual phone call earlier today, very positive. That's not the first phone call he and I have had in the last five years.

I appreciated the way he responded during his press conference, and I respect the fact that he and I over the succeeding year since his departure from Ole Miss can have candid and honest conversation.

He's now the head coach at Auburn University. I wished him well. There's a lot of work to do. He kind of brought me up to speed on some of that this morning. I'm confident there's been plenty of opportunities for learning over the years and look forward to working with Hugh again.

Q. Following up on Hugh Freeze, new coach question,



this has been a long-standing issue, obviously the lack of Black head coaches in the FBS ranks. We're going through another round of coaching changes, hires that appear to be going obviously to mostly white coaches. Is there anything you see that can be done to address that situation? How troubling is it to you that in a sport that's 60% Black athletes, no more than 10% of the head coaches are Black?

GREG SANKEY: To answer the first question, is there anything that can be done, the answer is absolutely. The people who are involved in hiring decisions make a decision to expand perhaps beyond where their normal pool of candidates are, to look specifically and invite people into the consideration.

Then what's key beyond just the interview process is making a decision to name an individual from an underrepresented group as a head football coach.

Again, I'll go back to my Media Days remarks. One of the glaring gaps in our league is the lack of anything but a white individual leading our teams as head football coaches. We've not had that. We've had as many as three individuals leading who are African American.

Then you look across the inventory of our sports, women's basketball, men's basketball. Last year these teams have had success. We had volleyball openings. We had African Americans hired to the two volleyball openings.

We had an African American hired as a head soccer coach. We had recently Charles Robinson at Arkansas as our second African American leading our university in either the position of president or chancellor. We've seen diversification across this league, but not in the role of head football coach.

We continue as a staff with our university leadership and with our athletics directors how can we help them in their hiring process. We'll continue to do that looking forward.

So I can speak candidly about it. I have to have decision-makers engaged in making that decision. I think across the nation we're all attentive to the reality of building diversity within our staffs, whether it's the leader of a football program, basketball programs, track and field, athletics director roles, even though leading our campuses as presidents and chancellors.

Q. With the expansion of the Playoff, I assume some teams, if they don't get a bye into one of the bowls or advance, they're not going to have a bowl experience. Correct me if I'm wrong. Does college football run the risk at all of losing some of its current identity? Does

it run the risk of being perceived more as NFL light, especially with NIL and transfer portal which looks like free agency?

GREG SANKEY: Well, there's a lot there unrelated to the Playoff. I think the basis of your question was about the bowl experience around the first-round playoff games, what that means. Then the other elements were attached.

I'll go back to the Playoff.

The Playoff format of 12 was a process of considering a variety of issues identified through the first six or seven, eight years of the College Football Playoff, one of which was access. The opportunity for teams to play for a national championship. The recognition that the college football regular season, compared to any other college sport, has a small sample size from which to evaluate teams. The opportunity to recognize conference champions and to provide an opportunity beyond just those A5, if you will, conferences, for teams to have access.

There are always going to be realities or outcomes from that kind of process that manifest themselves in change. One of the ways to bring excitement and maybe involvement in the game was to include campus sites for the first round. That's a balance of interests of teams, of communities, of players, of management, and for our fans. That creates a change.

Now, I'll go back to the question on the second element. There's a lot happening now around college football. That care to which I spoke, well beyond whether first round games are identical to bowl experiences that have been present in the past or not, I think there's been a reality of change happening around the game. It's not a bowl experience when people opt out. They don't have that bowl experience. So the fact that there's an on-campus game strikes me as somewhat immaterial in the scope of matters.

The issues around transfer. So I spoke to some of the old thinking of permission granting. We changed that part. Division I Board of Directors acted to maintain a one-time transfer application moving forward. So we're going to see continuing change around the opportunity for transfers. We're going to see accountability applied to programs that bring people in and don't see them forward to graduation under the mechanics of the transfer rule that's adopted.

Candidly, under name, image and likeness, that's affecting every sport that we have. There are healthy opportunities present, but over and over what we're hearing is not name, image and likeness. What we're hearing is states that have laws not enforcing the laws they have or deciding

really for competitive purposes to back off of those laws.

That is why, even though there's great difficulty in trying to achieve a federal solution with Congress, and we have a changing Congress, the need for a national standard remains.

I had a group of student-athletes here under our career tour last evening. Two months ago we had a group of men's and women's basketball leaders from our campuses. In the summer, football and our Student-Athlete Advisory Committee.

Over and over their ask of me is for a uniform standard, is their primary desire as student-athletes. That's not a late '50s conference commissioner trying to identify concerns and problems. That is the young people affected by the name, image and likeness asking for uniformity.

Do I think I have concerns about the game going forward and the layering of these issues? I do. That's why I attempt to speak candidly when asked about some of our realities, but some of our needs moving forward.

Q. (No microphone.)

GREG SANKEY: I do think it speaks to the competitiveness of the league. We have a slogan about wanting to graduate every student-athlete and win every championship. If you can do those two things, you have great influence in our world.

The second part, when I introduced it, I said, We might as well embrace what our fans think every year, which is this is the year we're going to go 12-0. That's across 14 campuses. You see progress from time to time in different ways.

It is remarkable to think where we were last year with LSU's program and the work through the season to continue to build the buy-in of the players to succeed in critical moments that gives them the opportunity to play for a conference championship.

I think one of the great stories in our league is what Courtney Deifel, for example, has done at Arkansas in softball. You probably didn't think I'd go to a softball representation. To build from the bottom over time to two consecutive championships. The progress I cited in volleyball.

I think the desire to succeed among the competitors in our league is an encouragement. Regardless of predictions, expectations, to watch them engage in play every week, week after week, it provides you this opportunity for a

competitive reward, I think it's pretty special.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Commissioner, thank you.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you, everyone.

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