

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Alabama

Thursday, December 4, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

SEC Commissioner Commissioner Greg Sankey

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Commissioner Greg Sankey. We'll ask the commissioner to make some opening remarks.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you, all of you, for joining us for this conversation. I'm going to start with some opening comments about our game, our conference, a lot of what's happening around us, and look forward to hearing about what might be on your mind.

It's good to be in Atlanta. This is our 32nd time to host the SEC Championship game here in Atlanta. Our 34th game overall.

My congratulations to Kalen and his team from the University of Alabama, and Kirby and his team from the University of Georgia on earning the right to be here and play. I think we've heard from both the competitive spirit is alive and well playing for a conference champion and its meaning.

I want to thank our hosts here at Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Arthur Blank and the full team that works here, provides an incredible experience for us and for our staff, for all it's done throughout the year to lead up to this moment, for the folks in the city of Atlanta, the convention and visitors. It's a wonderful week and a great tradition.

I also want to take a moment that this is our 34th overall SEC Championship game. It will be our first without two people who were near and dear to us. We lost Bobby Gaston. Bobby was an official, played at Georgia Tech when Georgia Tech was a member of the Southeastern Conference. Led our officiating program for a number of years. Would always sit up in Suite 201.



We lost Mark Womack this fall. His impact on the football, Southeastern Conference and this game in particular is special.

I also want to recognize Bill Jenkins. He served at LSU as chancellor there. Got to know Bill during his time in that role. Just a wonderful person.

A reminder of how precious life is.

On the outside of football side of things, proud to have captured the winning number of nine games in the SEC/ACC Men's Basketball Challenge last night. Great rally by our men's teams after we lost a bunch of close ones on Tuesday evening.

Our women finish the ACC/SEC Basketball Challenge this evening. We have won six of seven games so far.

Also want to give a shout-out to volleyball, which has experienced great growth. We held our first conference tournament in 20 years down in Savannah, Georgia. We had two teams earn No. 1 seeds in Kentucky and Texas. Wish all of our teams in the NCAA tournament well.

Coming back here to Atlanta, College GameDay will be back on Saturday morning inside the Georgia World Congress Center along with FanFare.

Today we're wrapping up what we call the SEC Career Tour. We have 30 current and former SEC student-athletes visiting. We're almost at the 10-year mark of that event. We have young people now who have been working in the Atlanta area who gained careers from some of the introductions we made through the Career Tour years ago now coming to build into the lives of their colleagues who are current student-athletes or recently concluding their student-athlete experience.

We take seriously how we move young people from adolescence into adulthood and provide the platform for opportunities. We thank Mercedes-Benz Stadium for hosting some of this educational opportunity, the Coca-Cola Company, Goto Foods, State Farm Arena, South Downtown Atlanta, and Chick-Fil-A. They hosted



our group, talked about making that transition from student and student-athlete into the career world.

In the football realm, during the season 13 of our 16 teams were at some point ranked in national polls. I think one of the most notable statistics is our scoring margin was just over 10 points, actually 10.4 points per game, the scoring differential, about three points below what has traditionally been the scoring margin.

That was reflected in about 60% of our games going down to the fourth quarter. A few years ago on College GameDay, I made a quip about Sesame Street, that one of these things is not like the other. This is a special conference with special competition. We've had a remarkable year.

That includes leading the nation with 13 non-conference wins over opponents from the ACC, Big 12 and Big Ten. On the loss side, we had fewer losses in those same type of games. Only six non-conference losses against those opponents.

I recall not that long ago when there was speculation about attendance this year, the 2025 season. Our campuses have set yet another all-time-high mark for attendance at our football games with over 80,000 per game.

It's a credit to the leadership on our campuses, our athletic directors and their staffs, what is done to create special atmospheres, the competitive nature that I just described of our games. It's also a tribute to the young people who choose to participate on our campuses in the Southeastern Conference.

A couple of notes about some individuals. We announced this morning Vanderbilt's Nick Rinaldi is the SEC Football Scholar-Athlete of the Year.

We have two finalists for the Campbell Trophy. That will be determined or announced next week at the National Football Foundation event in Las Vegas. Trey Moore, a linebacker from the University of Texas, and Eli Stowers, a tight end from Vanderbilt.

That leads into the recognition of the College Football Hall of Fame inductees. We have five alums of our current SEC member institutions to be inducted. Gregg Carr from Vanderbilt -- excuse me, Gregg Carr from Auburn, John Henderson from Tennessee, Michael Huff from Texas, Terrence Metcalf from Ole Miss; and head coaches Urban Meyer, recognizing his career, including his time at the University of Florida, and Nick Saban, who obviously coached at Alabama and LSU as part of the SEC.

I should have remembered Gregg Carr since he provided surgery for one of my daughters. He's an Auburn graduate clearly.

Lastly on football notes, we're really proud of our relationship with Disney, ABC and ESPN. We'll again be the most-watched conference in college football. I think what we've seen, the remarkable interest on Saturdays as we've been able to have noon, midday and evening windows, whether those are games between conference-only opponents or between an SEC opponent and a non-conference opponent, those have drawn remarkable interest.

An SEC team played in 17 of the 20 most-watched games so far this season. 13 of those top 20 were conference games between two SEC teams.

I think it's worth reminding everyone that last year for the first time in over 40 years the SEC on ABC won the Sports Emmy for best live broadcast, first time that had happened in over 40 years in the college football realm.

As we look ahead, a week from today, next Thursday, December 11th, we'll announce the 2026 SEC football schedules on a special show on the SEC Network. That will happen at 8 p.m. Eastern Time.

We announced the movement to nine conference games next year. I know there's a lot of interest and excitement about those competitive opportunities. We've announced those opponents, but we're placing dates to those schedules.

A significant fact or reality that need not be lost in the conversation about scheduling is under this new format, every two years our fans will be able to see their team compete against every other team in a two-year period. In over four years, each of our teams will visit all of our stadiums, all of our campuses, except for those neutral-site games that we have.

That's very different than the divisional scheduling model where we have 12-year gaps between a team visiting. We've had some teams not visit since our prior expansion. That's a step in the right direction.

Plenty of news around the SCORE Act shifting from football. I was in DC yesterday, had productive meetings with lawmakers and members of the administration. I'll just flat say I appreciate the willingness of many on both sides of the aisle, both houses, the administration to continue to engage in conversation on the important issues present in college athletics.

There was an opportunity to vote yesterday in the House. It did not happen. We'll continue in our educational efforts. We're going to take the time needed to try to address the questions that are being asked by members of Congress. Again, this is on both sides of the aisle. The fact that there's so much interest I think is an indication of the serious nature of college sports, the importance to our nation, our culture.

The opportunities for Olympians to be recruited to our campuses, to be developed as people and as athletes on our campuses, to be educated, to be trained to return to our campuses as part of the Olympic support program. We do that well. We don't simply put that on advertisements. We actually do that on our 16 campuses on a daily basis.

We added over 1,200 scholarships since the NCAA rules changed in the Southeastern Conference, none of those in the sport of football, and over 60% of those to women's sports. That's about real support for women's and Olympic athletes.

The issue becomes if we don't have some change around how athletics is structured and supported, and the need for national standards, which is something that Congress can achieve with us, it's going to be unstable in college sports for a long time.

I again think the fact that there are so many voices engaged in commenting on asking questions, on reaching out, even in disagreeing, I think that is an indication of a high level of interest.

We won't step away from yesterday and say, Well, we're not going to move forward. We're going to keep working in the right sort of way to educate and communicate to see if we can achieve a positive outcome.

Fundamentally when I meet with student-athletes over and over what our young people ask around the changes is the ability to perhaps at a football game be across the line of scrimmage and understand that their competitors on the other side of that line of scrimmage are held to the same standards as they are on their side of the line of scrimmage. That's about not doing things on a state-by-state basis. It's about, again, having national standards.

With that, happy to engage in conversation with the members of the media.

THE MODERATOR: If you have a question...

Q. With the advent of the nine-game conference schedule, the possibility of Playoff expansion down

the road, how valid is the SEC Championship game and conference championship games as a whole? How do you feel about the future of them?

GREG SANKEY: I'll use the word embedded in the question: 'valid'. I think you heard from the two head coaches about the validity and importance and the meaningfulness around our championship game. Others can certainly comment from their perspective.

The interest in monitoring fan interest through ticket sales remains strong. In talking last year with Kirby and members of his administration, the ability to be a conference champion, have a clear conference champion, has meaning.

I think there is validity. There has been validity.

These questions about what does a conference championship game mean, what is its impact, are not new. We can rewrap the tape from the early '90s when the conference championship game in the Southeastern Conference at least was introduced, and plenty of commentary about problems or concerns or questions, Would you ever win a national championship. I think many of those have been put to bed over the decade.

I believe there still is validity. Hopefully those are reasons that illustrate the answer to the question.

Q. Obviously we all know what happened with Lane Kiffin leaving one of your schools, which appears to be Playoff bound for another one of your schools. What was your reaction to that situation? Is there anything that should be done to prevent messy situations like this, such as the SEC having some sort of rule about schools hiring another team's coach until its season is over?

GREG SANKEY: You have to go back a number of years. We had a rule about responsibility for outreach, if you're going to contact another coach. Our outside legal counsel suggested for anti-trust reasons that be eliminated, which it was years and years ago. I think that's an illustration of the difficulty of legislating at a conference level.

My reaction? You asked me about a specific situation. We'll just back up. You can go find my quotes where I warned that in the early signing period added in December would change the calendar and the timing of coach changes.

I think now there are more factors involved. But, in fact, going back to the moment where we added the December signing period, you saw earlier terminations of coaches

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during the season. Then the need to rapidly hire a coach in late November and early December.

There are opportunities for adjustments to the calendar that at least in my view probably won't solve everything, but could provide a healthier environment.

Where there are solutions, so that you're not disrupting a team's season, I think those should be pursued. Unfortunately, the environment we're in doesn't allow and hasn't resulted in some of the changes that even the basic change, like removing that early signing period from kind of compelling people to make change rapidly, has taken place.

That's how I view things.

Can changes be made? Absolutely. Is it just the recruiting calendar? Likely not. Perhaps it's a competitive calendar that can be explored. But those are multi-level issues where people have different opinions. We've added a transfer portal on top of that signing period that adds to the complexity.

I think everyone would agree, and forget particular circumstances, you take a step back. Whether it's a roster or a coaching staff, looking at something other than maybe a medical emergency, we should be able to have competition through the year with those rosters and coaching staffs intact. We ought to figure out how we can adjust on a national basis to make that happen.

Q. Are you satisfied with the way the CFP chooses teams with the Selection Committee?

GREG SANKEY: I respect that they've been assigned that. You used the word 'satisfied'. When you're me, you're never satisfied, right? You're always trying to figure out I think there should be more.

I've had different views of outcomes over the years. This is an incredibly strong conference, an incredibly deep conference. We as a staff I think are thorough and effective at providing information through the agreed-upon channels.

We respect that we have charged the Selection Committee with making those decisions. We'll see what happens on Sunday.

Q. Is there room to alter that in the next negotiations to change the way you select teams?

GREG SANKEY: Is there room? We spend time in annual analysis of the selection process and outcomes. Members

of the committee later in the spring are available for dialogue with the CFP Management Committee. That produces questions. You saw the introduction of a different strength of schedule analysis, a strength of record metric that are used. I think it's important for us to understand how those are used to dig in more to the evaluation.

I also think more about the metrics that are used, and are those weighted properly. Those are things that can only be learned when decisions are made.

But I look forward to that conversation. Is there room to make adjustment? We just saw there were some adjustments introduced last year. That would be an indication of yes. The process of agreeing upon those involves more people than only me.

Q. What would your pitch to be to the committee for both of these teams to go ahead into the Playoffs (indiscernible)?

GREG SANKEY: I think I missed a word in there.

Q. I'm wondering what your pitch would be to the committee for both of these teams to make the Playoff regardless of what happens on Saturday?

GREG SANKEY: Well, we provide that information directly, as I just indicated to Michael's question.

I think the reality is these two teams have distinguished themselves. Alabama ends up the No. 1 seed in our game because of our tiebreaker, the strength of that internal conference record analysis being where the tie was broken.

Conference championship games have existed. I don't think that the suggestion to the Selection Committee is it's their policy or responsibility to determine whether they exist or not. They do.

We're going to have two high-level teams that I think have earned their positions in those rankings. We're going to look for a great game. The Selection Committee is going to make its decisions.

But the strength of what both teams have done over the entire season has already been recognized by the Selection Committee, and I would expect will continue forward through Sunday's selection.

Q. Along those lines, from a Texas perspective, you probably have heard a lot of dialogue coming from Austin this week when they've talked about their



strength of schedule, head-to-head wins they have playing in a conference as tough as the SEC, but still being on the outside looking in. I want to get your thoughts on Texas relating to the committee. They seem to be confused as to how things are being ranked. Maybe even to another degree Vanderbilt, as well.

GREG SANKEY: As we start providing our information to the committee, obviously you begin with the thought that we have 16 teams that are eligible for selection. That narrows over time.

When we began in the month of November, one of my observations is plenty of commentary about our schedule. There's a lot of times, even with this nine-game idea, it becomes half empty. You're going to have more losses certainly. There is a path for teams with multiple losses to the Playoff. We've continually reemphasized that.

I view that there are seven of our teams at the conclusion of 12-game season over 14 weeks that merit inclusion in the Playoff. We entrust the committee to make those decisions. We make those presentations directly. I think we do a really effective job at sharing the 'why' that those seven as it is right now merit inclusion.

We even go into the top 25. Just off the top of my head, Missouri and Tennessee, because I think it was more recent in my review, Tennessee lost to four ranked teams. You can make an argument that they're just outside of that group. That's the kind of rigor that's present in our schedule.

That's what we reinforce over and over across the spectrum of our eligible teams with the understanding that we have entrusted a Selection Committee to make the decisions about the participants.

This league is unique in its rigor, its expectations, its competitiveness, that scoring margin across the board applies. I think that has to be considered with a different lens perhaps than some others.

THE MODERATOR: Commissioner, thank you for your time this afternoon.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We look forward to seeing you all here in Atlanta for the SEC Championship game on Saturday.

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