

Southeastern Conference Football Media Conference

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Commissioner Greg Sankey

Press Conference



GREG SANKEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Obviously we're three days away from the start of a football season that, if I go back to March or play through into June in my mind, even in July and early August, seemed a bit of a mountain to climb, not fully insurmountable but a lot of work to bring us to this point. We still have some time to go, but I appreciate the opportunity to visit, will do my best to answer your questions, and rather than a lengthy presentation from me, me responding to what might be on your mind will be most useful.

With that, I'll say thanks to everyone and look forward to playing football on Saturday. I still am in the hold-my-breath moment a bit, but will throw it back to you.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the SafeTag devices. How did those come to your attention, and what have you learned from the NFL about their effectiveness?

GREG SANKEY: We would have learned initially from either observing or in conversations with the NFL, so this is a few months in my rear-view mirror as far as the initial information. Charlie Hussey, our deputy commissioner, has been the most involved in both understanding the devices, securing availability, which has been its own challenge, and working with our medical advisory task force to make sure they were useful and appropriate.

Here we are, we made the announcement yesterday. It will help us in a few ways is our view. One, I learned in a conversation with an NFL team president that it's just a reminder with I think the red light that shows up if you're too close for too long, to spread out. I think that can be helpful within the week in the athletics program and the football team that has access to these.

And then with contact tracing in game, what we learned is we had people with stopwatches and video, and we wanted to find a better way, and we think this provides a better way for that function.

Q. And the last time we talked, kind of along these lines, you said that the testing three times a week the way you were doing it was described to you as "the gold standard." Is that still the SEC's position, and do these devices help -- is it a different way to do the contact tracing because the other leagues are saying that the daily testing is significantly decreasing the contact tracing. Is this just a different philosophy of how to essentially get to the same place with different testing?

GREG SANKEY: Let me just be clear on a few issues. Number one, the other leagues aren't playing right now, and we're three days away. They'll have an opportunity to learn, and if and when they do play, I'd be interested to see what we might learn from them, number one.

Number two, the reference to "gold standard" was PCR-based testing, and that's actually in the NCAA's July resocialization of sports document that says PCR-based testing is the gold standard of testing, and in fact I read that in an academic research paper over the weekend, that same descriptor.

The use of rapid antigen testing is something that we have been using. Our medical task force is looking closely at that because we want the most accurate outcomes, both from positive and negative results.

My view is there's a testing plan, and there is a contact tracing plan. Those do intersect but are not always intersected, and we needed to figure out better ways to do contact tracing, and in a new environment we'll continue with that evaluation. And I'll let other conferences speak to their own decisions.

Q. I was going to follow up on the antigen testing. Is that something if it becomes more reliable that the SEC would look at potentially doing on a day-to-day basis?

GREG SANKEY: The key word in the question is "if," so we have built antigen testing into our protocol for probably maybe close to months now from a planning standpoint. Our campuses have used antigen testing in different ways. We announced this morning the affiliation with a third party, so we've secured rapid antigen machines, and those are being used.

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Now, the question is what is the best testing approach, what's the best testing methodology. I've used that gold standard phrase that Heather asked me about, which was identified by the NCAA in July. Perhaps that labeling is adapted, but we're going to be mindful of the best ways to complete testing to make sure it's accurate, timely and efficient.

Q. I know on the field when it comes to game day there's been some concern about the electronic whistles that are being utilized. Missouri coach Eli Drinkwitz said earlier on the call, has voiced his displeasure with it, said it's difficult to hear and it could lead to late hits and maybe some injuries. What is the SEC doing as far as the approach with the electronic whistles? Could that change before the season openers?

GREG SANKEY: I'll go back to that same document from the NCAA on resocialization of sport where we were encouraged to use electronic whistles. It wasn't a mandate, and I quickly said let's order what we need, which we have done. Eli's feedback is consistent with what we have observed independently as a conference office staff, what we've heard from officials who have used those and what we've heard from coaches and what we've observed in other games, and we have to understand there's a health and safety implication for stopping the game, so late hits, extra hits, none of that's good, not stopping play.

We're right now I'd say in the final moments of looking at a different strategy, and so just another reason to tune in to the games on Saturday to see exactly how we start and stop play, perhaps with something that's not electronic, just to tease the open there.

Q. So it could be the normal whistles we're accustomed to; that hasn't been ruled out?

GREG SANKEY: I teased the open. Even more reasons to tune in.

Q. There's obviously been a lot of talk about the transfers, and I know you clarified some things this morning on radio in Birmingham as far as the two stipulations that allow for immediate eligibility. If a school approves a guy or is there a relief that the school that the player comes from, does that increase the chances or allow for a different interpretation, and what are your thoughts about how this rule could be interpreted amid this environment where no one's eligibility clock is technically on this season?

GREG SANKEY: I think there are probably three or four questions in there, so I'll probably miss some and I'll deal with some. One, just because there are real issues in front of us now -- I've always been careful that I don't address specific waiver requests. That's just not appropriate. That just has to be understood.

The rule can be accessed pretty easily on our website through our manual. I don't know where we put the manual, but if you want to search I've always been able to find it for myself through Google to read. Also the ability for waivers to be granted outside what the specific rule may read. But those have always been really limited.

I also said this morning it is interesting that we rely upon waiver requests rather than changing rules, and we made two adjustments that I referenced in 2018, one related to grad transfers because we saw the culture change and had to deal with waivers, which we could do so at that point. Now it's simply an exception to the rule. And then those who have postseason bans, a student-athlete choosing to leave would have the freedom to do so within the conference.

There are a set of NCAA bylaws referenced in there that get into the level of gibberish that I won't bore you with, so I observed this morning and would observe again, rule changes are always available to our membership, and we as a staff support that process. We've identified issues. We're going to see a change. We expect the NCAA rules come January around transfers, and all of that creates to an environment along with your questions about kind of what's happened with COVID and eligibility that didn't result yet in a change to that particular bylaw.

Q. -- a successful season for you this year?

GREG SANKEY: I missed the first part of that. Before you ask, we should put a note out there since you're from Tampa that the Stanley Cup finals being played in Edmonton involved two NHL teams from the SEC's footprint, and that will be today's fun fact for the media that's not football related.

Q. We're all over that one, I assure you. But my question is what would constitute a successful season for you with everything that's going on?

GREG SANKEY: Today it's a start, so we're close to the starting line. Saturday is nowhere near the finish line. We really define that by saying our focus is on naming an SEC champion this year, and that resulted in a reconfigured schedule, going to conference only, delaying so that we could start campus residence life again and have some time for that impact to lessen, and also to spread out the

preparation phase with the idea that that would support the best opportunity to play for a championship.

I think success would be standing on the field or probably socially distanced - I haven't figured out trophy presentations yet so we're not quite to that level of game management - but being in Atlanta on December 19th naming a conference champion, I would define that as a success. Saturday can be a success, the Saturday after can be a success. We're really redefining success at this point, I think, and it's a really interesting question that will cause me to think through it the rest of the day.

Q. The athletes that are waiting on the SEC to learn their waiver fate, do you expect they'll get a ruling before the season begins?

GREG SANKEY: As I said earlier, I'm careful not to talk about specific waiver circumstances. That would be in that category, that question.

Q. Can you offer any general timeline of how long it normally takes the SEC once the ball is in the SEC's court to rule on a waiver?

GREG SANKEY: We work to move through matters efficiently, but there's always been variance.

Q. I guess there's testing today and maybe Friday, so I know there's still some hoops to jump through, but just how excited are you that after the spring and the summer that you guys are right on the cusp of being able to start your season?

GREG SANKEY: First off, thanks for you and your colleagues being on. As you were introduced and asking me, I envisioned you to my left at Media Day sitting at a table usually two rows back or thereabouts. We lost that opportunity, and that probably magnifies the excitement.

I don't know that I would call this a "normal feel" to week one, but it feels like week one as we're working through issues, we're working through a lot of issues around our new environment. Simply to be here, as I referenced earlier, there were probably some days back in -- we could get started in March and go all the way through until today that you're on a roller coaster, and I think our coaches have been on a roller coaster. I give all of them a lot of appreciation for their patience and for their flexibility, our athletics directors, who for a time were on daily phone calls and it's twice a week, put an enormous amount of time, our presidents' and chancellors' willingness to be patient in our decision making, and candidly our medical advisory task force who are 14 volunteers who when they signed up in late March and early April never envisioned, I think, the

amount of time they'd dedicate to this work, but they've all taken it very seriously.

So I am appreciative. I am excited. We do still have tests to play out, which are the hold-your-breath moments, and that will be a continuing point of differentiation from this season to any other we've experienced, but simply to be here is encouraging.

The goal is to play seven games. We had great weather in Birmingham last Saturday and I was talking on the phone, and they said, boy, it's a beautiful day, and I said, you know what would be a beautiful day is to have seven football games successfully on a bunch of Saturdays, so I'm looking forward to seeing if we can make that happen.

Q. The Big Ten, they were the first conference to say they weren't going to play football in the fall, and you guys forged ahead and took some hits from different people, and now the Big Ten is scrambling to catch up and play. What do you think about that, and do you have a sense of vindication, I guess, that maybe some people said, well, the SEC is just going for money, they're not doing the prudent thing, and they were praising the Big Ten, and now the Big Ten is playing catch-up to you guys and the Big 12 and SEC?

GREG SANKEY: There are probably some answers to the question embedded in the question. I respect the reality -- the Mid American Conference was first on a Saturday morning, I think, to say they're not. But in the autonomy conferences the Big Ten announcement was first on that Tuesday, I think August 11th, then the Pac-12.

Obviously when you're in this role, you have certain expectations for pressure. That was one; five and a half years ago as we were going through the interview process. I never particularly envisioned the weight around are we going to play or not, weight, w-e-i-g-h-t, even though there was plenty of wait, w-a-i-t, involved, as well.

I have had to close myself off to plenty of commentary. I said in real time the decisions of others and any information shared was informative for us, not determinative.

I credit a faculty member who never wanted to be known at the University of South Carolina, a biostatistician, who encouraged me -- provided me a mantra, which was, this is all new, so if you wait, take as much time as possible to make major decisions, we'll learn more every day; and therefore if you take that time, you'll have better information on which to base your decision. I credit her. Her guidance to me in mid-April certainly seems appropriate.

But I have to also credit those in the medical task force who helped us, the willingness to be patient among all of our members, and you can imagine there were times when patience ran short, probably will be those times over the next few months, yet we're here, and I appreciate that we're here. Despite what happens on Saturday, the opportunity to play seven games at the end of that day, there will be a bit of an emotional moment, I think, just to be through 10 percent of that conference schedule. I think that's an accomplishment, and then we've got to reset, just like our coaches do, put the film away and focus on doing it again the next week.

Q. I have two big-picture questions, one pertaining to recruiting since there's no spokesman for the Conference Commissioners' Association. With the dead period extended through the end of the year, is there going to be a definitive statement from the CCA that the early signing periods in November and December are going to occur as scheduled because historically presidents and chancellors have wanted recruits to least visit schools before signing, and we know for the last seven-plus months that hasn't been a possibility.

GREG SANKEY: Remember, we had signing in the spring where we had interrupted recruiting then, so some may have visited in person, some may not. I don't have a way to know. Right now the signing periods are planned to be conducted as scheduled.

Q. Is the CCA going to meet to address this at some point this fall, or whenever you guys meet at this point?

GREG SANKEY: We meet pretty frequently. We've had a conversation, but that's not produced a change.

Q. In your view, is there a minimum number of games that a team has to play to be eligible for the College Football Playoff this season?

GREG SANKEY: Interesting question. I start first from the framework provided to the Selection Committee. I'll use a phrase that was invented for us, which is data points, so we saw a lot of discussion about the importance of additional games providing additional data points. And that suggests to me the more games that are played, the better one is under the selection criteria.

I've not envisioned right now, because I'm focused on playing football on Saturday, a minimum number of games for the College Football Playoff. I have reviewed the selection criteria, so I'm familiar with what I described. There will be any number of challenges in the football

season, one of which will be the work of the Selection Committee. We're going to trust them with that, and we'll probably have to answer that question a few more times with the focus is on the criteria as presented at present.

Q. Do the SEC bylaws provide for all teams to play an equal number of conference games? I know this has been addressed before usually with natural disasters like hurricanes, but because this is now a 10-game schedule, is that still the bylaw as it stands?

GREG SANKEY: Well, we've obviously modified our schedule, so if you would have dug in you would have seen eight which is now ten and determinations made around that, and we're continuing with our membership to determine because of the potential for disruption what adjustments or accommodations might need to be made. The focus is on playing football games. The focus initially was on resetting the schedule so you could maximize the opportunity to play football games. The focus went to creating some open dates, both mid-season, which are a bit "happenstancy," if you will, if I can use that as an adjective, and then a common open date at the end, but also a whole set of health protocols, a lot of attention so that we can play football games.

We'll work on seeing if we have to address other elements like the one you've asked within our 10-game season.

Q. As the commissioner of the SEC, have you granted any waivers of student-athletes transferring from one SEC school to another SEC school?

GREG SANKEY: Ever is a long time. Again, they get fact specific, so have waivers been granted? I'm certain one can just go find those pretty quickly through a search, and those will speak for themselves. But as I indicated earlier, I don't speak to the specifics of waiver requests.

Q. But I just didn't know if you as the commissioner had granted any waivers.

GREG SANKEY: Yeah, I think you could probably go find those, waivers and denials. There are two sides to every coin.

Q. Does the SEC have a tiebreaker system to determine the East and West division champion if the teams don't play the same number of games?

GREG SANKEY: We don't have at this moment an adopted variance because we had an eight-game expectation, and along the process of developing other protocols we have drafts of that very approach that have been reviewed a couple of times and will be reviewed

again before being finalized. It's important to get it right.
Good question.

Q. I wanted to ask about time frame for regular preseason SEC basketball practices getting started and then the schedules being announced.

GREG SANKEY: It's like this is where I'm going to throw the penalty flag on the football call to talk about basketball so everyone writes about this being a football conference, we should make this note.

The decision last week by the NCAA council to identify the first contest date of November 25th I view as very important, and we were in plenty of discussions but also thinking about what will the actual national start date be, so that's point one.

At the same time, that allowed the beginning of basketball activities to ramp up I think on the 21st of this week, so that would have been Monday leading in to the full practice, which I think is 42 days before a team's first game, so you'll apologize that I know that much but don't know specific dates. We're a part of that plan, as you would expect, nationally.

With that said, I think what's important to keep in mind is today to November 25th is essentially July 1st to Labor Day, the start of football season, or that weekend, and we know that much happened between July 1 and August 1 and really August 11th in the college football world. And I look at the need for continuing attention to the start of basketball season. We've done things in the healthy way around basketball with voluntary activities, the start of the summer access period. We're three days into this enhanced period that leads into practice.

So we're planning on that November 25th start. I think what the council did was helpful. I'm a member of the council, so I was a contributor to that. But there's a lot of time to go, and just like we've seen in football and in soccer and in volleyball and in cross country for our fall sports, the need to continually be attentive and continue to be prepared for adjustments and remain flexible.

Q. Since soccer was the first team sport to get started last week, how did that go for you guys?

GREG SANKEY: We had one game disrupted, but we were six of seven, 84 percent basically, a little bit above, so it was great to see. I watched Friday night with Mississippi State at Auburn. We had a triple header on the network on Saturday, which I congratulated athletics directors because that's with whom I was on the conference call Tuesday to say, you never thought you'd have a soccer triple header

on the SEC network on a Saturday in September and then a double header on Sunday.

To just appreciate how much went into that, we had remote productions, we had crews live, we had a lot of our campus production people engaged, again, our coaches' flexibility and attention to preparation, willingness to play through all of the changes, and it was the first time since Wednesday, March 11th, that we had had live competition among student-athletes.

I watched myself and we've got an NCAA championship that's moved to the spring, but you saw SEC-level competition and intensity. It was encouraging and a really good step.

We had a cross country meet scheduled Thursday, which the remnants of the hurricane kind of washed out given the weather, and then in Gainesville they had a cross country meet Friday, so I think that officially was the first intercollegiate competition since March, and we're prepared to have some more of that this weekend.

Q. You've mentioned a couple of times August 11th. I feel like that might be a "30 For 30" coming up in the coming years. From your perspective what was August 11th like from the office of the commissioner of the SEC?

GREG SANKEY: You really have to go back to the Saturday before, which would be the 8th, and I don't want to give you an overly long answer, but that's when the Mid American decision was made. We talked through the weekend. I think that was documented among the autonomy five commissioners.

Ironically, my annual physical was early the morning of August 10th and I had a sense of what was going to happen nationally, and my blood pressure was still a calm, cool and collected like 118/72, I think. Of any physical accomplishment I had this year, my blood pressure staying in good shape in my mid-50s that particular day was encouraging.

But we had on the 10th a lengthy call of our athletics directors, video conference, and then later that evening with our presidents and chancellors just to say, here's where we are, here's what I think is going to happen nationally. Monday night the Mountain West announced its decision to not play in the fall, and then on the 11th as you identified was the Big Ten and Pac-12.

I'll go back. I had a weekend in late July with presidents and chancellors, individual calls because I wanted to make sure we were walking through this experience together,

and they were all very supportive of taking our time. They knew the importance of the return of campus life.

It was a bit of a shock to say to them, here's what I think is going to happen with some of our autonomy five colleagues. I had some uncertainty about others, yet kind of what we had set up in mid-July remained a theme, the let's be patient, let's use the time to continue to learn. We knew we needed to make some decisions about our schedule and start date before we began full practice, and so you saw that in late July, and we tried to inform that decision that brings us to what we are planning to see on Saturday. A lot of people were a part of that.

Even as the disruption was occurring, even though we've had disagreements and debates about any number of things, way back in March we had a long really, really intense discussion about just allowing two hours of virtual film study via iPad, and compared to some of the decisions we made, that seems small, but it helped us work in this new environment with a new operating rhythm and make decisions we never really envisioned, but again, puts us in the place to play Saturday.

So I hope that is a perspective that answers the question. I may have moved too broadly, but that's how I look back on those few days. It was three or four days that connected to the effort to stay in communication, provide information, to walk through this experience together, and we've continued to do that leading up to what we want to see as kickoff and seven games and completion of seven games this Saturday.

Q. It's believed in our world that the NFL was a big domino in this whole scenario of college football taking place this fall. Is that true, and how much of the NFL and what they are doing was a factor in keeping football a reality this fall?

GREG SANKEY: I've never thought about it in that direct a context. We knew early on as we observed what the NFL did with really free agency and moving forward with their work, the draft and how they adapted the draft to the virtual world. That was learning for us relative to potentially media days being changed. The ability to visit with Dr. Allen Sills -- Dr. Sills back in 2010-11 served on a task force we had on some medical issues, so we've known him and kept a great relationship, and he's obviously based at Vanderbilt Medical Center.

I've had the opportunity to participate in group calls and individually with Commissioner Goodell and learn from him but also with various NFL team presidents.

I would say to net it out, all of that information was very

helpful, but college football is not the NFL, so I always knew we were going to have to make our own decisions, but we wanted to learn from the NFL, from NASCAR, from Major League Baseball, the NBA, the PGA. It would have been certainly difficult if the NFL decided not to play in the fall, if the high schools decided not to play at all in the fall, and to be the only football endeavor standing, but that was never a reality that we saw, and so I would lean more towards the benefit of information sharing and learning how to adapt to this environment is the place where the NFL has been enormously helpful for us, not that everything is the same, nor will it be the same because college football and the NFL are distinctly different, but I think their willingness to share information has been much appreciated and very helpful.

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