

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Conference

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## Commissioner Greg Sankey

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're now ready to continue with the SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey.

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good afternoon and thanks for your interest. I'm told, just like last time I was on, that we've set one of our higher volume numbers for those participating in the call.

Let me begin by just acknowledging and thanking our veterans, probably some of you fall into that category. I know, for instance, Bob Caslen at the University of South Carolina served, I think he was a three-star general when he retired from our nation's Army. And any number of others who I have met -- friends, colleagues -- who have served, and I thank them for their service to our country.

We need not forget even in these times and with the issues that we're dealing with in the SEC this week their service and how important it is that the sacrifice that has been made to support our nation.

That said, in normal times, our experience this week would be nothing short of extraordinary this year with little being ordinary. This is certainly a week unlike any other.

I've repeatedly said, really since last March, that the circumstances around the virus will guide our decisions. The reality is it is the virus that in some circumstances determines our direction.

I think it's important to remember that so far to date in football season we've completed 40 of our 70 games with a 10-game season for each of our 14 teams. That predicts to 70 games within the regular season. We recognized back in the summer that there would be the need to adjust. We provided opportunities for that. Those are not infinite opportunities, but we acknowledge the likelihood of adjustment.

We've seen disruption in every conference and in leagues at the professional level. So the fact that we have



disruption this week is not fully news. The significance of the numbers of contests affected fully is.

Candidly, the numbers around contact tracing -- and I think you've heard from some of what I've learned from our coaches' comments -- have emerged as one of our biggest challenges to playing.

We don't control those policies. We don't dictate those policies. Those policies exist in the public health domain. Over time, our test positivity rate is incredibly low among our student-athletes, something like .005 percent. Even this week the positive test numbers, even where they've risen, are relatively small. But the contact tracing has the potential to magnify even one positive test.

All of which serves as a reminder, moving forward, that adjustments have to continually be made. The basic issues around mask wearing, personal hygiene, social distancing, being fully attentive, that we are living with a novel coronavirus in our culture, in our society, around the globe, is real.

Things like those basics are true. But also the observation that NFL Chief Medical Officer Allen Sills, I read him making earlier this week and we've heard from him, spreads not taking place within games or practices, but the activities around eating, meeting and greeting. The challenge to live a disciplined life in an uncertain world is real individually and collectively.

It's also worth mentioning that to date we've successfully completed a cross country championship on October 30th. For your information, it was the first live collegiate competition I attended since March 11th. That being the Wednesday in Nashville when we had two men's basketball contests. It was also the first conference championship trophy we had presented since the preceding Sunday, which I believe was March 8th, when South Carolina was ranked number one in the nation in women's basketball. As much as I've seen they are heading into the season. That was our last completed championship.

We do have a soccer tournament beginning Friday. Our regular season included completion of 55 out of the 56 games that were scheduled. We've completed fall competition in golf and tennis. Swimming and diving is four



weeks into its competitive season.

Volleyball continues on in the fall, having completed 36 of 38 matches as scheduled. The two that have not been completed as scheduled have been rescheduled. We've got two more weeks remaining in that fall season, an indoor sport. And we're in the preparation phase, fully engaged and preparing for basketball season which tips off in two weeks.

We've accomplished a great deal. In fact, I just left a call with all our tennis coaches thanking them for their work through the fall to support healthy competition. We've demonstrated that it's possible. But we also, as I noted, were mindful of the potential for disruption.

I'm grateful for the collaborative spirit that's existed across the Southeastern Conference throughout this pandemic. And that dates back almost fully a year now. Really we encountered issues in late January. It is more present now than ever and needs to remain present for us all.

It's a difficult circumstance. No way to paint it otherwise, but we knew that challenges would emerge for college sports. They'd emerge in the Southeastern Conference, just as challenges are present across the entire society in our country.

We will adjust. I don't have all the answers today. We also know the cadence of testing means we have to have answers to certain questions before we can provide other answers.

So, your ability to seek from me when someone will play, that's not available right now. That's the adjustment that's ahead.

We'll likely test people's patience. So, there are plenty of scheduling suggestions on Twitter. I don't run the league based on Twitter, just so you know.

I'd like to share what's going on around me, but that's not the way to run a conference. We'll work with our membership, our athletics directors, our presidents and chancellors to continue to guide us forward.

We'll continue to be -- we'll continue to move forward with our efforts to support healthy competition, leading us to a conference championship in football. That's been our goal while acknowledging the potential for adjustments that may be needed.

So with that, Chuck, I'll see what questions I may be able to answer. And, again, I thank everyone for their participation. And once again, express my appreciation for

the many who have served our country over the centuries and the ability to just take a moment on Veterans Day to say thank you I think remains important for us all.

**Q. Couple of weeks back, I think it might be almost a month ago, the CDC tweaked the guidelines on contact tracing to be 15 minutes over as opposed to 15 continuous minutes within six feet of somebody who was infected for it to be just 15 minutes, I think, over the course of a day. I assume the SEC has gone along with that as well. But I just want to confirm after reading over the guidelines that that is the case, that the SEC tweaked, is still following the CDC's guidelines.**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: The contact tracing really is done at the local level with public health officials and the CDC guidelines. We don't override contact tracing policies at a local level.

**Q. I did not think that was the case, but just wanted to make sure. The other thing there's a lot of talk about the idea of pushing back the playoff. Again, this is just talk among people who don't have any say in this decision, about pushing back the playoffs with the idea that it would give maybe another week, maybe another week or two, to get regular season games in. Wondering what your thoughts are on creating a few extra weeks of regular season or championship game possibilities by pushing back the playoff.**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We have finish lines right now. So my focus is on December 19th for an SEC Championship game. I've said that. The semifinals are on the first. The championship on the 11th. The reality is if you walk in the back of my building, there's a sign that says be flexible. When you walk in, it's a reminder to everyone who walks in this building with their masks on as they put on their KINEXON device to maintain distance to your earlier question that we'll all have to be flexible. I'm not going to hypothesize about change, but I'm not inattentive to the potential that change may need to occur at a number of different levels.

**Q. Where's the discussion among college leaders on potential to move to the NFL policy which would allow high-risk contacts to test out of quarantine? Is that being discussed and where maybe is that probability?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We've not discussed that with intent among the A5. We've all discussed realities around contact tracing. In fact, I think -- not I think -- I've experienced the conversation among the full 32 conference commissioners.

We are colleges and universities located in 11 different states with 11 different state policies. We have local policies. And so we have not been able to vary from what exists as 14-day quarantining for close contacts from the CDC.

Perhaps that advice will change. I think that would be helpful. But those public health officials involved are the ones guiding that, not conference commissioners.

**Q. And I know you earlier were finding no on-field transmission or very little if anything at all. Is that still the case within the league?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Yes, from my perspective, when we dig into what happens, it's out-of-field, out-of-athletic-department behavior generally. Obviously getting into contact tracing, but you've heard from me before, part of the efforts we've made from a technology standpoint, from an education standpoint, is to minimize that.

Yet people are still living lives outside of the playing field and weight room, and that has an impact on both exposure and on contact tracing as I understand.

**Q. I was going to ask you really what Ralph asked about the question of whether there would be some consideration to explore pushing back the CFP date line. I know you said about being flexible. The one thing I would follow up with is because of the NFL calendar the way it is, because they have six wildcard games that next week, what would the discussions be like to be flexible to try to, if you guys did have to move it back, from your perspective?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: The answer is I really haven't used my imagination to think through those issues. My indication earlier is I'm focused on the opportunity to crown an SEC champion on the 19th. And if we're able to do so that wouldn't predict an alteration.

But you identify one of the factors why these notions of, hey, just change it, just adjust are not easy. The issue a few weeks ago about why don't you have eight teams in the playoff; this is the year to do.

You know what, expanding the playoff in reality makes it more difficult to complete a playoff. And so there are any number of factors for all of these decisions. And as you can imagine right now I'm pretty focused locally on the disruption we've experienced in resolving our ability to have our teams compete for the championship. And the other one has not been part of my imagination at the moment.

**Q. Over the summer, I know you were even in your sunniest proclamations or forecasts, you were fairly guarded in your optimism. Given that you guys maybe have gone further than a lot of people thought you would get to get to this point, what's your level of confidence that you'll be able to get to December 19th?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I was asked last week how I felt about the season being completed. And I've run 41 marathons in my life, and I learned that halfway in a marathon is not 13.1 miles, it's someplace before miles 20 and 21. And I said, let me get through the games of Thanksgiving and then I'll feel comfortable.

And obviously that's changed. And so I have to acknowledge that you're troubled by what's happened this week with our postponements. There's still an opportunity to focus on the 19th, which is my focus.

But we have to adjust further within our programs to maintain the health that we did such a great job on early on. Our discipline to support teams and travel and meals and engagement that fosters the ability to get to the 19th.

So I'm certainly shaken but not deterred -- d-e-t-e-r-r-e-d, just to make sure we get the spelling of that last one right.

**Q. I'm wondering if what you've seen from football and everything that's gone on with it, are you concerned about basketball with it moving to an indoor environment and fans being limited at best in those environments?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Those are big environments and what you'll see on November 25th is not what people experienced at the end of February 2020, when we were in regular season basketball. I've been concerned indoors, outdoors, football, soccer, cross country, basketball.

So, yes, and with what's happening around the country with COVID rates, I think we all should be concerned. And I think I was on Marty & McGee and people saw maybe more transparently than I had been before, we're all part of solving this problem together.

So the reminder is we can't function at games like we have before. And the ability to mitigate my concerns or mitigate disruption means everybody adjusts. It's self-discipline escalates. The attention to keeping one's health is a priority. Dealing with some of the discomfort of social distancing and not doing certain things, that informs our ability to move forward.

**Q. What's the level of your concern about your playoff**

**contenders you have in your league being able to, say, have a 10-game season or if they potentially have nine, eight, or seven when the playoff committee starts meeting in the next couple of weeks trying to figure things out, and, say, you have a Texas A&M right now that if they went out, they potentially could be in that conversation. But if they play two less games, maybe that hurts their strength of schedule. Do you try to, I guess, campaign for your teams with the playoff committee? How do you think that will be handled?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We always honor the process of the committee. So we communicate with our points of contact. The reality is -- one thing I'm not concerned about is the respect that exists for playing a Southeastern Conference football schedule. That's not going to change.

The committee, I think, has recognized that since it was created in 2014. We adopted a 10-game schedule knowing the rigor. We have teams that have played for six straight weeks dealt with that rigor, dealt with it successfully.

I am absolutely certain that if we're able to play 10 or nine or our champions play 11 or 10, that respect at the selection committee level will continue.

And that as a reminder is a comparison to what others are doing. And I will hold our approach up highly. And I think everyone respects the fact that we play an incredible level of football in the SEC, whether it's in 2020 or any of the previous years, and I'm confident it will continue in the years ahead.

**Q. Greg, do you have a tiebreaker system in case there's an uneven number of games played for the division winners?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Yeah, we do. It's online. I can't quote you the Web address. We worked through that. I think I was public saying that for a few months. And our athletics directors approved that, I think, a couple of weeks ago in advance of all of this. So you can access that through our website.

**Q. I don't know if these are just different cases, but I know that with Nick Saban, he tested positive and had a number of negatives and then was able to coach. Would that apply to Arkansas' coach or are those just different cases?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I think that Arkansas indicated that he was positive on a second test. So that's a different circumstance as a result of the testing outcomes.

The protocols apply, but the difference is a negative outcome versus a positive outcome, which is like the opposite of what you would use those words for under a normal basis, if you follow me.

**Q. This too shall pass, puck drop is in two months, I did have a couple of --**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We think, right? We think.

**Q. We think, right. You're part of the management committee that commissioners have set protocol for the playoff. Is there a conversation to be had about minimum qualifications standards at this point for the playoffs? In other words number of games to be played? I talked to a few of your peers before this season, and they seemed to indicate that would be in the future. And also the discussion about pushing the playoffs back, whether it is or not, is there a conversation to be had there on maybe finding a way to do it in a central location for 10 days?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Couple things, first, since you brought the NHL into the conversation, let it be noted that two NHL teams from the SEC's geographic footprint played for the Stanley Cup championship. Where were they, in Edmonton?

**Q. Yes.**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Just for the record. And the year before, an NHL team from the SEC footprint won the Stanley Cup championship, as you're familiar.

So with that, I'll take the bubble one first.

I've not been -- we're not playing in a bubble now in college football. You mentioned a 10-day bubble. As I look at it, you're actually contemplating more like a 24-day bubble, because you'd have to get through that two-week advanced process. Otherwise the notion of just moving and thinking you're playing and everything's fine, you could have issues arise within that 10-day period as you described it. So I've always envisioned -- more of the talk has been about college basketball and bubbles and moving in and out.

If you're really talking about a bubble and you look at that as work, you've got that lead-up time and then you can play. It's a much lengthier process. I've not been a part of those conversations.

And then you're going to have to go back to your second question because I was so intent about the footprint and competition.



**Q. Minimum --**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Yes, I've addressed that previously, which is we as a group have established selection criteria for the selection committee. And you're all familiar with that information.

And previous discussions made very clear that every game played is an important data point. So playing more games inherently are part of that consideration. I think that's a fundamental. That's different than you have to play six or seven or eight.

And when we did have those conversations at the CFP level among colleagues, none of us could predict how many games would be played. And so there's a bit of acknowledgment of variance. But I tend to think that guidance to the selection committee still has great meaning, and the ability to have more data points is important. The rigor of our schedule is an important consideration. And their evaluation of each team is important within that context.

**Q. You had mentioned one of your finish lines, one of your priorities is the championship game is December the 19th. Would there be a point in rescheduling, attempting to reschedule games where you would prioritize games that would have an effect on division races over those that would not?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Would there be a point? There certainly could be. Is that right now? I mean, there are a lot of possibilities still at play, and that latter reality has to guide us forward to provide that opportunity to determine that champion properly.

**Q. Would you like to see a little bit more inventory in the warehouse in terms of games played -- this weekend's games and perhaps next week's schedule as it develops -- before you start making decisions like that?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: More games played would be helpful in answering that question, but in a time when we don't have a lot of luxuries around us, I don't know how long the luxury of seeing more games played will exist before we have to make rescheduling decisions.

**Q. Curious when you're talking about December 19th as your message to coaches to say you've got to wait until it's mathematically impossible for teams to be playing in that game. And then also with respect to Missouri-Georgia, was the opinion last night that that game could move forward and then it changed with**

**Missouri's issues this morning?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Let me back up. I've not talked with any coach, which I think is a tribute to the spirit here of "let's keep playing" about December 19th and hypotheticals around things.

I think the focus is on what do we do to need to keep moving forward. So, it's shorter term that informs the longer term. It went through another round of testing and had some results, and the reality is we have testing conducted on Sunday, results Monday, testing Tuesday, results Wednesday, testing Thursday, results Friday.

And I've spoken to Friday being my hold-my-breath moment. The reality is we have those throughout the week. I just haven't chosen to say -- anything can change on relatively short notice, but that's reality.

And we make decisions. I've been intentional about saying you wait to make major decisions. I don't know if week-to-week games are major decisions. They certainly seem like it right now. So you wait as long as possible so you have the best available information to figure out what guides you forward. And that's just -- we announced a game on Monday where we had some clarity. We announced two on Tuesday, and then we announced the circumstance Wednesday. And those are independent based on the circumstances and the information to help us make the best decisions.

**Q. What's your understanding on the status of the Vegas Bowl at this time?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: It's out there to be determined. I think that's what was indicated in a press release a week, week and a half ago -- a week ago seems like a decade. So forgive my memory on the exact language.

**Q. Then my swing at the playoff question, Greg. You talk about flexibility and the like. The only actors in the football ecosystem who seem immune to that at the moment are the bowls. And I realize there's more bowls than just the playoff, but how much of this is being boxed in artificially by, frankly, the Rose Bowl being a game that wants to play on the 1st where if the two semifinals just move to the 4th, that would seemingly buy everybody every conference, you yourselves, potentially an additional week to move back championship games to the 26th? How much of this is being kind of artificially constrained by Selection Sunday the 20th and the thought that the semis must be on the 1st due to, mainly, one of them being the Rose Bowl?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: In my conversations about naming a champion on the 19th, I've not thought about the Rose Bowl or Sugar Bowl or January 1, per se, as a priority. So, I've got to focus on trying to complete a season. At some point we have to have a finish line. At some point we have to have a finish line.

So I don't know that constraints necessarily are artificial. We're just trying to act as responsibly as possible given the circumstances in front of us. And finally I'll add when we projected September 26th as a date -- you can pick whatever date -- the ability to get to that as a starting line, since I used finish line a moment ago, all of this is going to be guided by circumstances around the virus. And my mention about being flexible is really about what happens around the virus, not about some date or some event.

**Q. I know you mentioned that with the positive cases a lot of it has to do with the off-the-field issues. With how widespread this has become this week -- and I know there's not an outbreak, it's more contact tracing -- but with the positive cases is there a common denominator between why this week there seems to be such an issue?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Not that I could evaluate and provide. I could hypothesize, but many of you know my reluctance to deal with hypotheticals. It's a reality and no matter the exact set of issues that put us here it's a reality with which we have to deal with and work to move forward.

**Q. I know it's disappointing when you have to postpone games and you'd like to get them all in, but if my math is right you guys have played 85 percent of your scheduled games. Given all the circumstances how good do you feel about that?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I'll bump it up even higher. I think it's 95 percent of our games we've been able to play through last Saturday and now we're here. So I'm at least going to take the half-full perspective.

And I spoke to virtually the Memphis Quarterback Club -- I taped it, I think, last week today -- and said, wow, if you told me in July we'd be here the first week of November and would have accomplished what we've accomplished, I would describe that as positive, as success. We have higher expectations for ourselves and so given what's happened, I focus on what's ahead.

But when I run through what's happened in soccer and volleyball, I think that's an accomplishment. I think what happened at the Blessings around college golf was great for college sports, great for our student-athletes, the drama

of the men's individual competition was special.

I watched Mississippi State and Auburn play soccer, the very first competition we sponsored after those basketball games on March 11th. There was a hand ball called in the penalty area. And the anguish on the Auburn student-athlete on whom the whistle was blown, it was an illustration of how much this means.

I'm at cross country, the happiest conference championship ever. I got a note from the Kentucky cross-country team just saying thank you. The dominance of the Arkansas cross-country teams but the appreciation they shared to have the opportunity, I think that means a lot to me. None of us thought this would be easy, simple.

The fact we're here is a tribute to a lot of great work. The challenge ahead is to refocus, elevate that level of discipline and let's move forward and crown a champion and that's the objective and to do it in a healthy way.

So I think you're free to follow up, even though you're Tigers fan, I'll give you another one if I didn't deal with the question fully. But to be here as a tribute to what's happened. To be dealing with this reality is a disappointment because we have such high expectations for ourselves.

**Q. I have a follow-up question on a different subject. Doesn't really apply to this season but one thing on the teleconference last two, three weeks, coaches have talked about a lot of the positive test results from travel, being on planes and hotels, and they mentioned how small the visiting locker rooms are. And I know that's nothing that anybody can fix this season. But just going forward, is there any thought or has there been any discussions about SEC programs making bigger visiting locker rooms -- not to be plush like their home locker rooms, but make them where they are bigger and safer in a situation like this?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: It's a conversation that needs to be had. I don't know the infrastructure demands -- I know a number of our programs where they've had the ability to provide more space have gone now to the visitors.

Some of our footprints just have limitations. And, yes, it's a needed conversation. Even the officials, I've had pictures of officials just sitting in the hallway to stay away from each other.

We have the KINEXON device on our officials, and it turns red. I'm sitting here with Herb. He has his mask on. I took my mask off to communicate. As soon as he comes close within six feet, it starts flashes red. And all those

behavioral adjustments are on our mind now. But within the structural realities of our football stadiums, what can we do to improve that situation. That's been a topic already and certainly will be a topic moving forward.

**Q. I'm curious, given all the upheaval in football about the thinking of a relatively normal men's basketball schedule that was put out with just one open Saturday for makeups and how much flexibility is going to exist if we see similar things to where maybe multiple games per week might get postponed by one team.**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: The lesson from what we're dealing with now is disruption when it occurs has the potential to be for multiple games. So that reality is present.

If I back up, before we put out that schedule, we actually encountered the postponements associated with Florida and Vanderbilt's football program. And I observed to our athletic directors, I think I observed to the head men's basketball coaches -- I've not been on the women's basketball coaches calls the last few weeks -- but said if you're looking for potential for disruption, part of our learning experience is that could be up to two weeks which is four games.

We have to avoid that. You want to avoid that is the right way to state it. We built in some accommodation at the end, probably, for two games max. And then you're just going to have to deal with winning percentages where games may be lost. You'll have to accept that disruption as a reality.

And given the scope of basketball season, the effort to play multiple games in a week, that's a reality that has informed the consideration. It's informed the explanation. What it's not done is caused us to build in a whole set of additional weeks into the season as you've seen. But the short answer is I acknowledge that reality and we'll have to adjust accordingly if meaningful disruption occurs.

The one reality in basketball, we do have a 14-team postseason event where you have an opportunity to compete for that tournament championship. And I'll assume that some thinking is guided by that reality. But still you want to try to minimize disruption, accommodate adjustments. But there are limitations. So I'm sorry, back to you, Chuck.

**Q. You had mentioned earlier I believe that you said 40 out of 70 SEC football games have been completed. Is that accurate?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Yes, that's right, to date,

correct.

**Q. Based on where you thought this thing might be going in July, I realize that the numbers are much better than the other sports but football is a different animal. Back in July, would you have been relatively happy having completed 40 out of 70 by Veterans Day in November?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: That's a fascinating question to think through. I'm driven to a Wayne's World quote about living in the now. I'm living in the now, man. And you want to meet the high expectations. And do I take a certain level of satisfaction given where we were in July to today, certainly. Never any comfort in that. But yet focused on the challenge ahead because of what's present right now.

**Q. Is there a date that y'all have in your mind where you need to decide if these games are postponed this weekend can be rescheduled; if so, would it require moving around the conference really the entire schedule for the latter half of the season in order to fit in some games like LSU and Alabama where the December 12th open date has already been filled?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: The best way to answer that question is to observe what we adjusted I think almost two and a half, three and a half weeks ago on Friday we moved I think five or six games.

It affected the involved teams which were Florida and Vanderbilt. And it affected uninvolved teams, like Georgia and Kentucky, come to top of mind. LSU was in that as well.

And that's going to be the reality moving forward, and the ability to adjust games and modify the schedule. And we've said this to our membership repeatedly: It will affect more than just the involved teams.

I'll say thank you. I've tried not to be on the present through this, since that's not possible. But when we have important information to try to deal with it directly and hopefully in a way that's helpful. I know it's challenging times for us all, and I appreciate your work.

I may have different views from time to time, but I hope you all stay healthy and I look forward to seeing you in person, perhaps sooner, but certainly later. And again thank you for your work and thank you to our Veterans for their service.

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