

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Alabama

Thursday, December 2, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey

Press Conference

KEVIN TRAINOR: We are now joined by SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey. Commissioner Sankey will make a few opening remarks, and then we will take your questions.

GREG SANKEY: Good to be with everyone, even at a distance. Really good to be back in Mercedes Benz Stadium, although I note it's only been 50 weeks since we were last here for our Championship Game, normally 52 weeks between these games, but the move to delay our Championship Game by two weeks caused that calendar anomaly.

That said, as we head into this game, it's worth noting it's the third time that Alabama and Georgia have met in the Championship Game. The other two opportunities being 2012 and 2018. With the announcement of the College Football Playoff selection committee's rankings, we obviously have two teams in the top three, which adds to the visibility of Saturday's game but also the importance of the postseason opportunities.

In that regard, we've set a new high-water mark with 13 of our teams poised to have postseason opportunities either in the College Football Playoff or in Bowl games, and 10 of our 14 teams reflecting this competitive level, at some point were ranked in the top 25 during this season that's nearly at its conclusion.

We look forward to hosting College Gameday around SEC fanfare along with SEC nation and our various SEC Network shows. We also want to wish our best to our postseason award, at least nominees right now. I know there will be more.

Jordan Davis is a Senior CLASS Award finalist. He's from the University of Georgia. There's only ten of these student-athletes who are finalists around their work in the



community, classroom, character, and obviously athletic competition.

Nakobe Dean is a finalist for the Wuerffel Trophy. Danny has a legacy in this conference, but we have a number of recipients, which is about the impact the student-athlete makes in the community. Look forward to seeing Grant Morgan in Las Vegas. Grant's with University of Arkansas as a finalist for the Campbell Trophy, otherwise known as the academic Heisman.

We typically have the chance to visit with members of the Allstate Good Works Team at the Sugar Bowl. Four of them will be student-athletes from the Southeastern Conference.

We've had a busy week in the college football world. It's actually been a busy season in the college football world. That's not different for us. We look forward to the game ahead, look forward to the postseason competition.

With those opening remarks from me, I'll just add, before we go to questions, in a normal year -- and I'm not sure we know what normal is, but in a normal year, we'd have one of our media friends represented at this game. That would be Cecil Hurt, but unfortunately, we lost Cecil a week or so ago. We'll miss seeing him at his game. We'll do something on Saturday just to recognize the relationships he built with coaches, student-athletes, and his colleagues in the media.

We'll miss reading his perspective on this week and the activities this week. But we wish the best to his family and many friends, and our prayers are with them.

Kevin, with that, I'll turn it over to you to moderate.

Q. Greg, you've obviously been instrumental in the SEC's growth and success and now involved in the College Football Playoff expansion discussion. Can you give us an update? It seems to be an evolving situation.

GREG SANKEY: It is an evolving situation. We obviously issued a press release through Bill Hancock yesterday at



the end of what's called the management committee meetings, that being the ten commissioners plus Jack Swarbrick from Notre Dame. We continued the dialogue, and I think that's really an important and positive note, the ability for the 11 of us to get in a room, have a model identified, which we need not forget was done so at the direction of the board of managers, to review the playoff format and identify a format for consideration. I was obviously part of the subcommittee charged with that work.

Every time we meet, there are probably a few new thoughts identified. Some directions removed from consideration, but still some work to be done. Those were noted yesterday. I look forward to the ability to do some homework of my own but also to get back together and see if we can move forward collectively with the future for the postseason in college football.

Q. Last year showed that you all have the ability to be nimble with the schedule on a daily, weekly basis. What is the latest for 2022 or really any year that you could adjust the schedule to account for Texas and Oklahoma joining or changing your schedule format?

GREG SANKEY: A couple of things in there. First our focus is on the entry day for University of Oklahoma and University of Texas, which we announced is July 1st, 2025. So we're engaging in analysis of future scheduling models. We've had, I think, two or three in person athletics directors meetings since the announcement. We're obviously involved in weekly Zoom calls. We updated our presidents and chancellors really around that date.

I don't think at all what happened last year is a model for what will happen in the future. We were changing games on a Monday and playing those on Saturday. That's not something I contemplate. Really to the essence of your question, the membership gave me the authority to modify the schedule and to do so on a conference-only basis. That happened in late July with a late September start. So there was a 60-day lead up. I don't think that's at all a model for what may happen.

We've announced a '22 schedule already. I was told yesterday the Big 12 announced their schedule. I think that's consistent with my statements about entry date. Anybody else that's moved over history, when you look back to 2011, we made announcements in September and November and accommodated entry the next season, but that was under a different state of realities.

The realities and the relationship between Oklahoma, Texas, and the Big 12 have guided our thinking around entry dates at this point. So we'll continue to focus on those dates.

Q. Here in Mexico and Latin America, year after year, this game is more bigger. We will broadcast the SEC Championship next Saturday. Could you say some words to all the people in Mexico and 17 countries in Latin America will be watching this great game. Thank you. Stay safe. Have a good day.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you, Oscar. That's a great question. You'll just have to forgive me because my English is not very good, much of less my Spanish. So I'm going to stick to English, if I may.

The first thing I would say is welcome. It's great to have the breadth of audience that we've experienced. We know, as we've worked with our friends at ESPN and even CBS, we've been able to scale up the ability to access our games, what happens with digital delivery provides opportunities heretofore unimaginable with delivery of our game.

So I say welcome. We like to use the phrase, It just means more. I think as we expand our reach globally, we kind of put an exclamation point on the end that people can join in to an exciting event, great competition, celebrate what happens with young people on our teams, experience our universities, and perhaps someday be a part of what we're doing on our campuses.

Q. With the expansion and new teams coming in, do you ever envision the Championship Game possibly looking at Dallas as opposed to Atlanta? We know Atlanta's great, but could Dallas ever be an option as the Texas piece comes into play?

GREG SANKEY: Well, we have great relationships in Texas, and I enjoyed attending the Texas A&M and Arkansas game at AT&T Stadium this past September. One of the semifinal sites is back at AT&T Stadium with the Rose Bowl last year and the Cotton Bowl teams represented. So we have great relationships.

We have a long term agreement here in Atlanta. Mercedes Benz Stadium, Arthur Blank, Rich McKay, the Atlanta Falcons, Arthur's entire group are incredible hosts. This is in many ways an important city. Even as we move westward, Atlanta remains an important city, not to even mention the contractual situation.

So we're really happy here. Movement of this game has not been a part of the expansion conversation at all for us.

Q. How closely does the league monitor the NIL for each individual school, and have you seen any trends that might cause concern?



GREG SANKEY: Name, image, and likeness activities are a continuing topic of conversation. We're going to have those conversations within the appropriate state laws, so some of that monitoring is limited because of the way state laws are written. So we don't have some magic calculator that comes up on a screen to look at agreements that are established.

We have questions that come to our office on a regular basis. Again, because this activity is being conducted under state laws, our typical approach, rather than providing interpretations of NCAA rules or referring to NCAA rules, refers the person asking the question back to either their campus resource or in some circumstances to the state attorney general's office.

I think in general -- and I mean this in general -- the activity has been much of what we would have expected. There are anomalies, most of which are outside of our league when we're kind of dodging scholarship limits with walk-on payments or certain promises. Those have raised questions.

One of the good things in college athletics, as competitive as it is, you can provide answers that maybe the depiction provided in a particular media article is not the complete story.

I think it's important, the question's important because we need to be attentive to this. We have had conversations about the difficulty that young people who are recruits right now, so high school seniors trying to make determinations around where to attend college or university and participate in college athletics, there's some particular challenges as they have to evaluate different state laws or campus policies rather than one standard.

We also have concerns because we've had some information being inputted to us. There are obviously reputable, good companies, good individuals involved in providing support to student-athletes around their name, image, and likeness activity. That doesn't mean that every company, every entity, or every person involved meets that standard of having the best interests of the young person in mind. There's not a lot of oversight or regulation, and we think that's an area that calls for some type of attention and potentially needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

And that really speaks to the general position of a need for a national standard for this activity because we have created some difficulties for young people as they try to manage, and I am waiting for the stories about some of the pitfalls and problems. So far most of the analysis has been about the opportunity, which I continue to think has been

conducted in a positive way, but there are some realities we're going to have to start to understand in short order.

KEVIN TRAINOR: As you stand on the field Saturday and you consider where we were a year ago, that Mercedes Benz Stadium will be full, cheerleaders on the sidelines, bands on the field, talk a little bit about how the SEC has forged through, not just this year, but the last two years through the pandemic.

GREG SANKEY: Last year we intended to honor our Medical Advisory Task Force, and that's 14 key individuals who guided us through our decision-making really from mid-April of 2020 forward. The shout-out and the appreciation to each of them, as I think they signed up for what they believed would be a 60 to 90-day volunteer effort and they're still meeting by video conference every Monday.

We actually honored that group in person with a real personal thank you event in Destin, Florida, the week that we would have normally had our spring meetings. We invited our Medical Advisory Task Force for a thank you. We intended to do it around this championship, given its visibility, but they all have their own commitments either with their teams or in the medical profession in which they serve. So I'd start there.

If I go back to the beginning of the season, my first game was in Knoxville, Tennessee. It was Bowling Green at Tennessee. And you felt a crowd for the first time. The stadium wasn't full. We obviously saw Neyland Stadium full during the season, which was exciting. And then on Saturday ended up in Charlotte for the Georgia and Clemson football game. That was the first time you felt what we had missed by having to scale our stadiums down anywhere from no attendance to 25 percent, 30 percent capacity.

Even as we walked through the spring, we pivoted back in baseball. We had a memorable experience in Omaha with a full stadium. The good news is we've been able to do so. We've been able to conduct competition in a healthy manner. We've been able to involve fans and others in a healthy manner, and it sets the stage for a really exciting atmosphere and set of activities on Saturday.

Q. Commissioner, obviously the competitive nature of the Southeastern Conference has led coaches from all over to want to be a part of the league, the Notre Dame coach leaving Notre Dame for an SEC school, to put it into perspective. But is there a flip side, with all this turnover that we've experienced? I guess I'd just like to hear your thoughts on the number of coaches that are changing location, or is this just part of the new

business model with the competition we see in the league?

GREG SANKEY: I don't know that it's necessarily part of the new business model, but we are in a big picture way experiencing the acceleration of change all around, our culture, our society, our world. Change in personnel, change in people fulfilling jobs is clearly a part of that. The days of working 40, 50 years and enjoying a pension in a corporate setting, those are gone, and that's not any different in college athletics.

I think there's two sides to the competitive focus and spirit, as you describe. One is I've really been impressed with the hires made throughout our league -- track and field, soccer, baseball, women's basketball, football -- during the past year. In a year where we're kind of in the uncertainty, the interest in people who have had great success at a high level being a part of the Southeastern Conference, I think, is a tribute to something special being present and people wanting to be something, be part of something special.

But that comes with pressures. So these individuals who take on these roles and these challenges accept the fact that the expectations are high, the pressure is real. That extends from head football coach, through every one of our head and assistant coaches in the athletic department, administrators, and even to the conference office and the commissioner's chair.

I would flip it to say I appreciate those who want to embrace the challenge and want to do it in the right way because I'm convinced that in the Southeastern Conference we can win, we can win with our heads held high, and I'm proud of the people who have chosen to become a part of this conference in recent months.

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