

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Alabama vs Georgia

Thursday, November 30, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: It's good to be in Atlanta. It is the 30th SEC Football Championship Game to be played in the city of Atlanta, and as I speak to you this afternoon, we are hitting "send" on a press release announcing the extension of our agreement for the SEC Football Championship Game to be hosted here at Mercedes-Benz Stadium through at least 2031. That's as an agreement we established in 2016 that was poised to conclude in 2026, and through the good work of our staff and our hosts here in Atlanta, we're pleased to announce that extension.

There's also an additional opportunity to extend through 2036.

As I alluded to, there's a long history starting in 1994, the Southeastern Conference Championship Football Game being hosted here in Atlanta, first in the Georgia Dome and most recently in Mercedes-Benz Stadium, and we look forward to Saturday's match-up between University of Alabama and the University of Georgia football teams.

Some specific thank yous. It's been an honor to come to know Arthur Blank, the owner and chairman of the Blank family of businesses, the owner of the Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United. We appreciate his commitment to college football and to the Southeastern Conference; my friend Rich McKay, the CEO of AMB Sports and Entertainment; Tim Zulawski, the president of AMB Sports and Entertainment; Frank Poe, who is the leader of the Georgia World Congress Center where we conduct our fan fair. We'll have Gameday with us on Saturday morning along with SEC Nation, and Mayor Dickens from the city of Atlanta along with Jeremy Hammond from our staff.

In the midst of the a busy week of football, we had a great rally last night in Tallahassee by the University of Georgia's basketball team. In addition to winning the last three games of the day on the men's side of the ACC-SEC



basketball challenge this year, you never want to tie, but we split those games with our ACC colleagues, 14 games played, the SEC won seven and the ACC won seven.

We're looking forward to today when we have nine women's games scheduled. We're trailing right now, so looking for a rally among the SEC women's basketball teams.

As I go back to football, we're proud that over 60 percent of our football games this season were complete and total sellouts on our campuses. The level of fan participation that we've seen over the last decade has been encouraging. Many speak of dips and decreases, but since our last expansion we've seen continuing interest. That leads us into the conversations about next year when we move to a 16-team conference, welcoming our friends and colleagues from the University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas.

Our championship game itself is the fourth time that Alabama and Georgia meet in this game. A lot of speculation, a lot of conversation happens with the CFP Selection Committee. No conference in the CFP era comes close to matching the success and achievement of the Southeastern Conference, each year and over time.

In fact, we have an enormous winning record. We have proven ourselves in this postseason format, and we're confident that we will continue to be for the 10th straight time, the only conference to be represented in each of the college football playoffs by at least one of our teams.

For our young people involved in playing football, our student-athletes, this morning we announce that Brady Cook is the SEC football scholar athlete of the year. His accomplishments in the classroom and on the field and around the community are most worthy of this recognition, so our congratulations to Brady not only for his leadership of the Missouri football team this year but also for his impact as a scholar athlete of the year in the sport of football.

We have two football players named to the Allstate AFC Good Works team, Mekhi Wingo of LSU and Ladd



McConkey of Georgia. Our congratulations to them.

As we move through Saturday's championship game into bowl selection on Sunday, we're always intentional to remind our fans that despite what you may see as speculation on social media and through various reporters, until the SEC announces its bowl lineup, those are not finalized. We move beyond the name of our bowl teams on Sunday to attend the induction, the National Football Foundation awards dinner in Las Vegas, five new members of the College Football Hall of Fame with SEC ties. Tim Tebow from the University of Florida, Jeremy Maclin from Missouri, Eric Barry from Tennessee, the former head coach at the University of Georgia, Mark Richt, and a dear friend of mine, the sixth commissioner of the Southeastern Conference who's being inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame based on his accomplishments is head coach at the University of Central Michigan, Roy Kramer.

One of my delights in life is to come to know Roy first as a colleague when I was the Southeastern Conference Commissioner and looked up to him in his role in the SEC and now as a friend throughout the years of his retirement and my time over the last 20 plus years with the SEC. It is a joy to see, will be a joy to see Roy honored with this Hall-of-Fame entry.

On a non-football note, I do want to recognize Callie Dickinson, a member of Georgia's swimming and diving team, who was one of nine finalists for NCAA Woman of the Year. That award will be announced in January at the NCAA convention.

There are any number of current issues happening around the SEC and college football. I'll touch on just a few of those. We've had a working group throughout the season in conversation on the issue of helmet or coach-to-player communication, the form of which still remains to be determined. We have worked at wearables and helmet audio capabilities from different vendors. We'll continue to engage in that research.

Looking at some of what's happened this year has accelerated that conversation. We have updated our athletics directors on these initial efforts. We've actually had some opportunity for our staff to observe the functionality of these mechanisms within full stadiums, and we look to the opportunity to work more closely with the NCAA football rules committee to see what may be possible for the 2024 football season.

We have been preparing for the 2024 schedule. Some of that has leaked out through our broadcast partner. We will announce, though, formally the full accurate and complete

2024 football schedule. We've announced the match-ups. We will announce the dates. That will happen on December 13th in a special show on ESPN and the SEC Network.

We're proud to present our schedule through these unique programming opportunities and look forward to that type of opportunity continuing perhaps with a higher level of confidentiality, though, in the future.

We have a lot of work to do for the 2025 season and beyond. That work has been ongoing since our growth, our announced expansion in 2021. We have used time wisely. We have worked closely most specifically with our athletics directors while keeping our presidents and chancellors up to date on the dialogue around the factors to be considered. Obviously the issue of eight or nine games being played within the Southeastern Conference schedule is front and center. We have an opportunity to think more deeply about the impact of the expanded College Football Playoff, to think more deeply as well about our non-conference scheduling. We've been assigned the task to the extent possible of creating more fairness and more balance through our conference schedule, most importantly the ability to rotate teams through our campuses on a more frequent basis while honoring important rivalry match-ups.

We also understand the impact not only on the CFP that I mentioned but considerations around teams seeking bowl eligibility and what the conference schedule may mean for those opportunities.

While here, we invite a few dozen student-athletes to participate in the SEC career tour. This is a tradition that has been on going since 2017 as part of our championship experience. We bring two student-athletes from each of our current 14 members. They have spent time learning about career opportunities at Mercedes-Benz Stadium with a public relations agency here in Atlanta, Jackson Spalding, with Learfield, with Trilith Studios and with Microsoft.

In the past we've involved the Atlanta Hawks, the Falcons, the Braves, Turner Broadcasting, Chick-Fil-a, Home Depot, UPS, and Delta Airlines in presenting our student-athletes to corporate opportunities and presenting corporations to our student-athletes who will be soon entering the job market.

It has been reported that I spent the early part of my week with three of my commissioner colleagues, Jim Phillips from the ACC, Brett Yormark from the Big 12, and Tony Petitti from the Big Ten in Washington, D.C., continuing the discussions for uniformity and the standards around



college athletics as we have seen the patchwork of state laws introduced beginning in 2021 and changed in the years since that adoption.

Our student-athletes ask us to pursue consistency among the standards used to contact college athletics. Our student-athletes have told us they deserve better than this patchwork of state laws. Their future colleagues, prospective student-athletes, deserve better than to have to learn how to explore campus opportunities as a college student, while also trying to figure out myriad state laws that may vary based on the nature and number of opportunities presented to them in recruiting.

These are important opportunities. We fully respect the important issues on the agenda for Congress, both in the House and the Senate and those that face the White House and the White House administration, yet it's still important for us to continue this dialogue with the desire to return some national standards to the conduct of college athletics.

With that, I'll stop my opening remarks. We look forward to an exciting game and entertain any questions that you may have as members of the media.

Q. Hoping you can shed some light on an exciting issue. What does the 2024 SEC broadcast window look like, and will that 3:30 game be the No. 1 game of the week or are you going to move that to primetime?

GREG SANKEY: The broadcast window has become all day from an ABC standpoint. Now, obviously there are other conferences with those affiliations. We have our ESPN, our ESPN2, ESPN U and SEC Network commitments, but one of the opportunities that's created with our new agreement is the ability to have more than only one game a day on broadcast TV.

I was just provided a note based on minutes consumed by the public. The SEC was the most viewed football conference this fall. That's really important because of the limitations we currently experience on broadcast TV opportunities. So for the ABC affiliates, looking to 2024, knowing the interest that already exists in the Southeastern Conference with a relatively small number of television broadcast opportunities, and by that I literally mean over-the-air broadcast. Knowing that. We'll expand; we're going to have more access to households.

The day itself will look much like it does now, an early window, a midday window and a primetime window. We are accustomed through our CBS relationship that the best game of that particular day was often selected by CBS to go into that 3:30 window. There was that one

double-header this year, the LSU-Alabama game that was played in the evening.

We don't have those same limits, so the best game of the day might be in primetime with great frequency. We will always have a 3:30 p.m. eastern time SEC game broadcast on ABC.

But a little bit more variability and a lot more access.

I'll also note that our staff is already working on what that broadcast schedule might look like. That won't be released until mid-summer, but remember, elements of that were on a week-to-week basis through the seasons over the last few decades.

When we arrive at media days, we expect to have right around half of our total season games identified for certain broadcast windows. Working with ESPN, ABC, the SEC Network, the opportunity to know the noon eastern time kickoffs throughout the season will allow our campuses and our fans to plan rather than having those six-day and 12-day experiences around that early kickoff.

We'll have some flexibility between the midday and the primetime games and some scheduling which is a bit of an hour differential rather than just waiting and wondering about the entire broadcast day. So great question, and really excited about the opportunity with Disney, ABC, ESPN, the SEC Network, and even the ESPN+ digital platform in the future.

Q. I feel like you already hinted at it in your opening statement, but since it's the hot topic, do you believe that the SEC should have a team in the playoff regardless of the outcomes on Saturday, and if so, do you think the committee will see it the same way that you do?

GREG SANKEY: I do. I think people would expect me to answer that I do.

The overall rigor of our schedule just starting with some simple facts, there are three teams currently ranked in the top 10 with three or more wins over top 25 teams as the rankings currently exist. Two of those teams are Georgia and Alabama.

Obviously Georgia has distinguished itself the last to years as the national champion, is undefeated to this point. We have a one-loss Alabama team that has continued to improve, has won some significant games, has won games by significant scores and has won some close games.

I think the rigor of this schedule reason the SEC has been



recognized over time. Not a secret that we didn't have the non-conference success across the board that we've become accustomed to, yet I think the level of football here is still the highest that could be played.

I'll also point candidly to the realities when the SEC teams have entered the College Football Playoff format, our success is unparalleled. It's envied by everyone else.

We've lost in the semifinal once to a non-conference team, to a non-conference team twice in the championship game. The only other losses we've experienced are to ourselves in the National Championship game.

The entire of our record is a basis for the assurance that we will have a team in the CFP for the 10th consecutive year.

Q. You touched on the SEC Championship, and I'm curious its role in the new 12-team playoff era. Is there any worry that it has less import, and for instance, teams that are seeded seventh or eighth may be better off by not playing in it rather than teams that have to play in it and teams that play in it and lose in it might risk falling out of the field?

GREG SANKEY: You think about this history of a conference championship game and the memories of Roy Kramer and what he felt when it was originally introduced, oh, the SEC will never have another contender for the SEC Championship. I'm sure, in fact, I've seen some of the transcripts and reports from some of those questions. It didn't quite work out that way.

When the College Football Playoff was expanded and more was added, plenty of speculation.

I go to the framing of your question. Let's look at the last two years. Last year we would have had a team after the regular season playing in this conference championship game for an opportunity to be in the playoff because of that conference championship opportunity.

You could have had that back -- I have to remember early in my career, I think our '15 and '16 championship games the same way. This year you could have two teams playing for a bye. Conference champions still matter and are part of the expanded format.

I don't use the word worry. We certainly think about it. We have had conversations about what it may mean. I've referenced the need to continue to think through the schedule in a big-picture sort of way. I don't narrow it down to only conference championship game because I think what we've created first has been the envy of others so

now all have a conference championship game following our lead, it provides a rallying point for your season, certainly a level of excitement on Saturday that will be remarkable by comparison, and I think that can continue into the future knowing how much SEC Championships mean to each of our football programs.

Q. The SEC conference games are broadcast in Mexico and 17 countries in Latin America. What is your opinion about this upgrade in college football internationally, and in the future do you have in your mind some plans to do synergy with Mexico or Latin American camps, maybe an exhibition game if that's possible? Thanks so much, and gracias, amigo.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you, and it was good to actually meet you after our interactions. The issue of international access to our games has been important. It was actually in my search documents back in 2014 and 2015, how do we continue to think about providing access to all of our coverage, not simply football games, throughout the globe.

For me personally, I was in the country of Oman one time talking about the Auburn-Oregon National Championship game with our bus driver, a young man, an Omani who had watched that game and was asking me questions about American football.

I've been in Killarney, Ireland, walking off a boat on a tour interacting with some of our fans who recognized me, and the same has happened in London. Those are special opportunities and reminders.

I have not had that opportunity in Latin America. I do know that our broadcast opportunities, to answer your first question, they are important, and one of the interesting aspects of my fall is this is the second international broadcast question I've been asked, the first out of the UK, on the college chaps podcast, and you've seen access increase in recent weeks in the UK. So that's very important to us.

The complexities around relocating games from our campuses are real. We have had general conversations about that possibility. But for some, moving a game that might be attended, I don't know, by 20,000 or 30,000 people is a bit easier than relocating a game from a stadium that has 100,000, 103,000, 105,000, 108,000 fans attending. The impact on our communities has been much more of our focus, providing access to those games through stadium upgrades I know is on the minds of our athletics directors, and for our purposes, back to your first question, continuing to provide international access so people can feel and experience our games remains a conversation point and a conversation.

Q. With such a deep field this year for the CFP, there's been a lot of buzz and excitement about the 12-team playoff coming. I'm wondering if you can simply explain to fans why it's not happening this year and could it have happened.

GREG SANKEY: Am I able to simply explain that? No. So that's a simple answer. I think those who stopped and resisted for a long period of time and had difficulty in answering what's the impediment and what do we need to address, and not really having clarity on that, those individuals are better at answering the question than I.

As you know, I was part of a working group to look at a range of options. You can probably quote better than I -- I think we were over 60 different models contemplated. Settled on the 12 because it met a lot of the considerations, priorities and asks.

I'm excited about the future. I think this year, as you say, is a really good indication of what it might mean and the opportunities beyond just four that will be present in the future. I was one who thought this move was appropriate, and the fact it didn't happen more timely, that's just life. We've got four. We're excited about the four, and we look forward to the 12.

Q. Regarding the future of the SEC Championship game in Atlanta, we just wanted to know what the addition of Oklahoma and Texas joining the league, are there any plans to move the championship game to another location?

GREG SANKEY: There are not. The great thing about both Oklahoma and Texas and their leadership is they very much want to be a part of the Southeastern Conference, the history now, about to be 30-year history of our championship game, 28 of them here in Atlanta is one of which they're fully aware. I think if they both or each or individually had an opportunity to participate in our championship game, there will be great excitement here from our new westward members and from any of our western members that might have access. We're looking forward to the future here in Atlanta.

Q. Just wanted to get an idea of your thoughts on Bobby Petrino being announced as the new offensive coordinator in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

GREG SANKEY: You know, it was interesting, no one asked me my opinion last year when he was announced as the new offensive coordinator at Texas A&M, so he's been back in the league. There's history. But I consider that to be history.

I had the opportunity to work with Bobby when he was a head coach at the University of Arkansas. Obviously things changed. He's been back for a year, by all accounts did well in his work at Texas A&M, and I look forward to saying hello to him next time I'm in Fayetteville.

Q. I'm wondering, depending on the success of Texas with the Big 12 Championship and possibly making it into a playoff, how does their success help the SEC going into next year?

GREG SANKEY: I had the opportunity in October to be a part of the OU-Texas or Texas-OU game. I try to walk the line finely on those rivalry games. I was blown away by that experience. The level of excitement around the game itself, but the interaction that existed between myself and just fans in attendance -- I had to walk through the old Cotton Bowl stadium, narrow stairways, to catch up. Went to find Jay Hartzell from Texas. I had seen Joe Harris, the president at Oklahoma, walk through the fans, took pictures, heard the SEC chant from both groups.

I think that's an indication of a base level excitement about our new relationship. The game that day between at that point two undefeated teams magnifies the natural excitement, and I experienced some of that last year in Austin when Alabama played at Texas and this year when Texas played at Alabama. I experienced that day in College Station when Oklahoma scored the eruption from the Texas A&M fans. I think that's what makes our conference special. Both of them will fit into these rivalries. They'll be in new places with new experiences. We'll send our teams to Austin and Norman, many of them for the first time.

It is going to be an incredible season in '24, and an incredible future for the Southeastern Conference as a 16-member league.

Q. Just wanted to get your thoughts on what the slogan "it just means more" means to you.

GREG SANKEY: You know, it began in a creative experience with TRG, our ad firm, as we were trying to create just some spots and a tag line that fit the Southeastern Conference. We'd never hit it right.

I walked in, and I said what we have doesn't work, and I was asked, well, what do you think sets the Southeastern Conference apart, and I said, what we do just means more. They asked me to explain that. I actually started with our universities and their leadership role in our states over time, remembering the Southeastern Conference was created in the midst of the great depression, the economic,

the educational impact, the social, the cultural impact, the sport's impact, the rallying point that our universities represent in our region. It just struck me as having so much more depth and meaning where there might not have been major league baseball teams or NFL teams, it was a college athletics program, a college football team, a college basketball team, history you hear about college baseball and how our baseball has improved.

People could touch, they could feel, they could be a part of. When you're in those moments, the pregame last Saturday, it's probably my fifth time to be at that game at Auburn, is unlike any other. The hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

When I talked about walking into Kyle Field at the end of that game between OU and Texas, they announced the score, the roar, and you find the passion around Texas A&M and that rivalry.

The first time I walked into an Alabama-Texas A&M game in a brand new Kyle Field as the SEC commissioner and just felt the passion that day. Being in Fayetteville, Arkansas, when they played Texas in 2021 by happenstance just weeks after our announcing our expansion to 16, that's a special moment and defines it.

I could go on and on, to be in the Swamp, to be in Jacksonville, the Ole Miss-Georgia game at night, Sandstorm. I'm proud of what Vandy is doing around their facilities, the sellout string at Kentucky. I was there when Missouri first captured the east division, and that crowd was palpable. I was there in '13; that's where I saw a kick six happen; a night game in Baton Rouge, the Egg Bowl that I was at Thursday night. You could just go on and on, and you transfer that to basketball.

I think just speaking those names and those places and those stadiums and those experiences illustrates that tag line in a meaningful way.

I'll finish the answer with the interactions with people who have been part of that experience, some of whom are on this Hall of Fame list, others who are in the College Football Hall of Fame, texting Archie Manning earlier today to have Eli and Peyton here to relive memories, that's a description of what means more to people.

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