

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Texas

Thursday, December 5, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Texas Longhorns Coach Steve Sarkisian Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Steve Sarkisian, head coach of the Texas Longhorns, who went 11-1 during the regular season.

Coach, we'll go ahead and start with an opening statement, then take questions.

STEVE SARKISIAN: First of all, welcome, everybody, for being here. I think for us on our end, it's an honor to represent the University of Texas in the SEC Championship game in Atlanta this weekend against the University of Georgia.

First year in the conference, was definitely a goal of ours to be in Atlanta for this game. It's been a challenging regular-season schedule to get to this point. Know it's going to be a heck of a challenge as well on Saturday.

Georgia is a great football team. I think Kirby and the University of Georgia have been the standard of college football for about the last seven years or so. National championships, conference championships. Recruited at a really high level. Has a great coaching staff.

It's a great challenge for us, but one that I know we're looking forward to. An opportunity that we want to make sure we make the most of.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Sark, I was going to ask you about Kelvin Banks. Has he practiced this week? How is the meaning of this game changed for both of your programs since you both look like CFP locks?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yes, he's practiced.

The meaning for this game is this is an SEC



Championship. This is really hard to win. Was talking to Coach Saban a few weeks ago. There's two national championship teams that he had that he didn't even win his own division in the Southeastern Conference, not to mention he didn't make it to a game and win a conference championship.

Winning an SEC Championship is one we hold in very high regard. Being a part of this game is something we hold in high regard. Our guys have worked extremely hard to get to this point.

We take this very seriously. This is a big deal to us. I think so many times in the world that we live in, it's focusing on what's next, what's next, what's next, the CFP, the national championship. Hey, we've got a great goal in front of us that we have an opportunity to achieve, that I'm sure Kirby and his team feel the same way.

We know how hard the Southeastern Conference is. To earn the opportunity to play in this game with an opportunity to be conference champions is something we hold in very high regard.

Q. We know you've always wanted a strong running game wherever you've been. Anything special that has clicked these last two games when you have had so much success? Why do you think Tre Wisner wasn't a four- or five-star recruit?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think the one thing for the run game, so much of what we do comes off of the outside zone scheme. As I touched on about a month ago, we were just off. Our landmarks weren't great, the O-line and the running back. Our timing was off. Our run timing was off of when blocks were being made, where the runner was making his cut. We were getting some holding penalties. If we could get that rectified, the other runs that come off of that would benefit from that. I think that's been the case.

I think then with that, you start gaining confidence. There's nothing like confidence in anything that you're doing. I think our guys have a lot of confidence in their ability to run the ball, block the run, what that does for us as an offensive football team.



I don't ever get too caught up in why certain guys are ranked where and not. We try to make our own evaluations of every player. We try to rank every player as it predicates to how they can fit with us.

In our culture, in our systems, offense, defense, special teams...

Why somebody didn't give them more stars? I don't know. You probably would have to ask them. That's a better question.

Q. You've been around Texas long enough to have a really good feel about that place, that fan base. First year SEC, you're here. Can you talk about the feedback you've gotten, what you expect Saturday? Those of us here in Atlanta expect to see a lot of burnt orange show up. Can you talk about that side of it. To a lesser extent, you knew this was coming, so you had to get ready for it.

STEVE SARKISIAN: I've been fortunate enough to be part of two SEC Championship games. 2016 with Alabama, then 2020. 2016 was an amazing environment. That was Alabama versus Florida. 2020 was the COVID season, so that was obviously a little bit different.

This game is a fantastic game to be part of. What the SEC does and what they put into this game, the arena, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium is a tremendous stadium. I had the opportunity to coach there for two years with the Falcons. It's a great venue. It's great for the fans.

Clearly we know we're essentially going on the road. For a road game you play in Georgia at Atlanta. I also know there's a ton of pride from Longhorn Nation in support of our team.

I do anticipate a good amount of burnt orange there. How much? I don't know. Tell me how much the ticket prices are and I can probably tell you how many Longhorns are going to be there. If the prices keep going up, that means we're buying the tickets. Looking forward to seeing Longhorn Nation there and supporting us.

Q. You didn't hesitate to go to Arch Manning with three minutes to go in a scoreless game in a hostile environment, which speaks to your confidence in him. How did he handle that moment? Why didn't we see more of Arch running during the regular season?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think part of it is I was really fortunate, I think Arch was fortunate, to get so much experience early in the season. When Quinn got hurt,

really got two and a half games under his belt, two starts. Started the first game we had in the SEC against Mississippi State. All those things I think gave him confidence, but also gave us confidence in him.

He continues to prepare at a really high level. So inevitably as you work your way through a season, sometimes you got to keep a few things up your sleeve. That's the way it goes.

Q. You talked about being involved in this game before. Now you're in it as a head coach for the first time. With the expanded College Football Playoff and the prospect of it expanding even more, what do you think is the place of these conference championship games? Do you think they'll continue to have a place, or can it be a little bit of a burden to have to play in them when your Playoff hopes are on the line?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I can't speak to every conference. Having been in the Big 12, what that meant for us to win that last year, what that environment was like. Then having now the opportunity to compete in this game.

Our players work really hard. This is a year-round thing. Being a Division I Power Four football player, the demands of what's asked of them on the football field, the classroom, in the communities, all that they do. What an awesome reward to be able to play in a game like this, on a stage like this, at the highest level.

I don't think we could think of two better teams from a talent standpoint. Georgia's an extremely talented football team. Got great coaches. We feel like we've got a pretty good football team. We think our coaches coach well. An opportunity for a rematch, if you want to call it like that, for the fans.

That's what competing is about. You want as many opportunities as you can get to compete because of the hard work that you put in.

Again, there's layers to the season of college football. I understand that. Whether this can contribute to some of the seeding... I hope especially in the Southeastern Conference's case nobody gets punished for playing this game.

It's a little bit of a war of attrition in our conference. I always kind of chuckle at people. Oh, yeah, we beat an SEC team this year. But you didn't play it eight straight weeks. You didn't have to go play in some of these environments that people have to play in week in, week out, deal with the injuries that we have to deal with in our conference.



The reward to play in a championship game like this is one that we cherish. On the same token, I surely hope this year and the years to come that nobody ever gets punished if they don't come out on top in this game because it is a real grind.

To earn the opportunity to hoist that trophy is a great one. I hope, if anything, we get recognized for making it to this game, not getting punished for the team that doesn't come out on top.

Q. Yesterday we didn't get a chance to talk to you about signing day. Wanted to get your thoughts on that. In particular, Jonah Williams, maybe a little bit about his recruitment, and what is going to be the plan for him when he gets here? Is he going to go straight into baseball, then hit you guys in the summer? How are you going to balance those? The last part of the question is, transfer portal, unfortunately, in the sandwich that you have, it opens on Monday. Have you had to have conversations with guys this week, unfortunately? Do you know what areas you would like to address?

STEVE SARKISIAN: All right, let me think about all that.

Q. I'm sorry.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Let's go back to the recruiting class.

We're super pumped about this recruiting class. This is a very talented group of players that I think not only fit the physical characteristics of what we're looking for by position in our program, but I think meet the character and are going to fit nicely into our culture.

I think it's a really versatile class with a variety of positions, highlighted by high-level players. As always, we really pride ourselves on recruiting the high school ranks. We think when we can get players in here young, then immerse them into our culture, into our off-season conditioning program, develop them as we go throughout their career, that's when we really reap the benefits of having these guys in our program.

This class is no different. I think 20 of our 24 guys that signed will be midyears, early enrollees, which is an all-time high for us, which is fantastic. We get them in winter conditioning, spring ball, which is huge for us.

Jonah being one of those guys. Coach Schloss and I have a good plan in place for him to join the baseball team this spring, but obviously find our windows and find our time to start getting him immersed into the football side of things,

too.

That's always a challenge of being a dual-sport athlete. Some of your free time isn't always all of your free time. When you make a commitment to playing both sports, some of that free time is now dedicated to the other sport that's not in season. His will kind of fall into those lines.

He's a really dedicated young man. He's got a great work ethic. He has a beautiful family. They're all very successful people. They know about discipline and hard work.

I suspect that he's going to come in here ready to work in both sports. Hopefully he can have a lot of success in both sports. We'll see how that goes.

As far as the portal goes opening on Monday, we're holding off having any discussions with any players until after the game. Naturally, I'm sure, like other schools, we're going to have some guys that are going to want to go in the portal. We're going to have some guys that want to go in right away and some that maybe want to wait until our season is done. I support that, I understand that. This is the day and age of college football that we're in.

At the same token, we may have a few needs to fill through the portal. We don't make a living in the transfer portal, but we do when depth concerns come about at specific position groups because of attrition one way or the other, injuries, players leaving early for the NFL Draft, players transferring out of our program, sometimes you have immediate needs at position groups that we'll have to address.

Again, we've got a little bit of time for that. We're trying to manage everything as it's coming at us here. With signing day being yesterday, SEC Championship game on Saturday, transfer portal opening on Monday, there's definitely some moving parts. But I think our staff has done a really good job of compartmentalizing those things. The people that are responsible for what they're responsible for are handling their business.

Q. On Monday a couple of the guys said your favorite phrases again. The standard is the standard. Be enamored with us. How much of this team's success has been they bought into the psychology of what you preach to them, the messaging that you are giving to them? Along with that, how much time do you spend thinking about the messaging that you're going to deliver to the players?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, well, I think we're fortunate with this year's team. I try to remain really consistent with

our messaging. From the day I arrived, I still use a lot of those same things that I think are important to the success of our team.

For a lot of the leaders on this team, they're three and four years into hearing a very consistent message to where I think there's a belief in what I'm talking about. There's nothing more powerful than the players speaking the same language as the head coach in that locker room.

For a younger player, it's not just me once every three months talking about something. It's a very consistent message that I think the players then can reciprocate to one another. I think that in turn builds the belief in what we're trying to do.

I do spend a fair amount of time on our messaging. I spend a lot of time in the summer because I think everybody has that first meeting of the year, every head coach goes for an hour, hour and a half, talking about the goals, how we're going to get there, what we're going to do.

I try to make a point, whatever I talk about that first meeting, that's not the only time I talk about it. I'm going to come back to those things periodically throughout the season. Again, I'm trying to stay consistent with the messaging.

Every week I always have a little something different. Part of our job as coaches, yes, my job is to get them prepared to play and perform, play to the standard which we want to play, but also a part of our job is to correlate football into life lessons. How they can take some of these learning experiences in college football into the real world, into their own lives moving forward. Hopefully we've laid a foundation for them to deal with some of the things that real life presents to them.

Q. Your quarterbacks, you guys have done a really good job of managing them. In this day and age, especially with the portal, how challenging is it to be able to develop guys and retain guys, get guys to their peak?

STEVE SARKISIAN: We just start developing 'em. I don't get caught up and worry about, Well, he might leave after a year, he might leave after two, he might leave after three. It's like, Hey, he's here today, let's coach him to the best of our ability, whether it's in the classroom, on the grass, in the weight room, fundamentally, schematically. We just pour into him.

I know as a coaching staff, even in the quarterback room, even from a team perspective, Maalik Murphy was a guy in

our program for a couple years, did a nice job. He really developed. Started for us last season. Then decided to move on at this time a year ago right after the conference championship game, decided to transfer.

We've all followed him and see the success he's having at Duke, the play making he's made, winning a game on the last play of the game a week ago. I think they won nine games or something in the regular season. We like to think that, hey, we helped put this guy in maybe a little bit better position to have some success in life.

That's the premise of our program. How can we serve others? How can we get them better? Ultimately, sure, I'd love for them to have that success here. I'm also a realist of the day and age and the state of college football right now where guys can move on.

I don't get caught up in, well, he's going to be leaving next year so what's the point of developing him? We just keep pouring into these guys. I think that's a healthy way to go about it.

Q. Given the diversity that you like to have in the running game, it's interesting to hear you talk about outside zone being so important this year. Why do you think it is that that has become such a staple? How does that help open up other parts of the offense?

STEVE SARKISIAN: It's been a staple for us every year. That's the premise of where we begin our run game. I think a lot of people, outside zone is a little further down the list. It's a very intricate run. It sounds easy. Everybody run to the right or left, the running back just go, kind of ride the wave. It's a little bit more intricate than that for us.

There's a lot of communication that has to take place. There's a lot of fundamentals and techniques that are needed. There's a lot of timing that is needed on those runs.

But the rest of our runs that we have kind of come off of that. The play-action pass game starts to come off of that. We always start there, then we build from there. We go back to square one every year and we start there, then we build from there.

This year happened to be one of those years where it took us a little longer to really get it right. I feel like we're kind of hitting our stride at the right time with that run. Then in turn, that's helping the other runs start to come to life.

Q. Barring injury, Jake is going to at least tie the all-time starts record at Texas. What is going to make



him a constant presence for you as a leader and your center?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Right, no, I think it starts with, one, his work ethic, his drive, his competitive nature. He's a guy who has worked extremely hard at his craft, not only physically but mentally. We rely on him a lot at the line of scrimmage in communicating calls, the run game, the pass game.

I think he's got really good rapport with Coach Flood. I think he's got really good rapport with both quarterbacks. I think he's earned a ton of trust from his fellow offensive linemen, them believing in what he's calling and why he's calling it.

At the same time I think there's a great deal of respect for Jake in our locker room for the toughness, the mental and physical toughness he possesses to go along with just the uniqueness of the leadership that he has. Here is a guy that's a graduate, already here, decided to come back for a senior season. I think he's reaping the benefits of it all and enjoying the moment.

He's a fierce competitor. I think that's where it all begins for him.

Q. When you made the decision to pull Quinn in the second quarter of that Georgia game, even that night but long-term, why do you think he was able to respond so well? How much trust and confidence do you two have to have in each other in a decision like that?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I mean, truth be told, probably wasn't very happy about it, you know? As the coach, I felt like it was the right thing to do in the moment, to give him an opportunity to kind of recenter, regroup, take a minute to watch a drive or two, get him into the locker room, then have him come out and play a good second half, which I thought he did. I really thought he did a nice job in the second half.

Like I've said before, I wish we would have played a little better around him, wish we would have coached a little better around him.

I thought he competed at a high level in the second half of that game. Sometimes that's part of the job. That's why they call us Coach. You have to make some of those tough calls sometimes.

In the end, I do believe when Quinn, whether it was that night, the next week, tonight, two years from now, there will be a moment that will come to him that he'll be, I'm glad

Coach did that. It made me get recentered. The ability to respond to that adversity is one that I think has always been a trademark of Quinn's.

He's dealt with injury. He's dealt with some play that wasn't his best early in his career. He's dealt with people always wanting, expecting more of him. Every time he responds. The guy is a steady sea. He won't get rattled.

I didn't think that was going to rattle him any more. My goal and hope was that, if anything, it would have sparked the competitor in him to play even more charged than he had been. I think it worked.

You're just always try to push the right buttons in players. Again, ton of respect for Quinn and the job that he's done for us, not only this season but for three years. For him back-to-back seasons get us back to a conference championship, more than likely an opportunity to play in the College Football Playoff I think is a tremendous honor.

He deserves that. He's been a great teammate and a great leader on this team.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time this afternoon. We'll see you here in Atlanta on Saturday.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Thank you.

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