

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Alabama vs Georgia

Thursday, December 5, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

SEC Commissioner

Greg Sankey

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined now by SEC commissioner Greg Sankey. We'll let Commissioner Sankey make some opening remarks.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Thank you. Always good to overcome the challenges of technology (smiling).

Good afternoon, everyone. We've conducted these media visits via video conference the last few years to bring more of you in. I welcome you to this conversation. We appreciate your participation.

Typically on this Thursday I'm in Atlanta conducting this press conference. Today I'm in my office in Birmingham. As soon as we wrap up our visit today, I will head to a memorial service honoring Bill Battle. All of you probably knew of Bill who was a student-athlete in the SEC. A coaching career that included serving as a graduate assistant at Oklahoma, an assistant coach at West Point, the head football coach at the University of Tennessee, athletics director at the University of Alabama as I became commissioner back in 2015, and obviously in between was an innovator forming what we knew as the Collegiate Licensing Company.

Bill was a colleague and friend to us all. He is going to be missed, but fondly remembered.

I also learned this morning that we lost another one of our friends, Bob Holt. Bob was a longtime sportswriter with the "Arkansas Democrat-Gazette." Bob was always quick to have a question, and that question was uniformly accompanied by some form of smile. Always a good visit. It was sad to hear of his health struggles the past few days and his passing. We extend our sympathies and condolences to Bob's colleagues, his friends and his family.



There's plenty of good news, though, all around us. I'm standing here today on a Thursday heading into SEC football championship game weekend. Incredibly proud of the success we've experienced in men's basketball, winning 14 of the 16 games in the SEC-ACC men's basketball Challenge, separate from those couple of days our men's basketball is off to an historically successful start over the first five or six weeks of the season. Plenty of basketball to play, but a great start for a great season filled with promise.

On the women's basketball side, we won four of our first six games in the SEC-ACC women's basketball Challenge. We have 10 more games this evening. I'm looking forward to the competition with our ACC colleagues.

One final note before I jump into football. The NCAA volleyball tournament begins this evening. We have nine teams competing. We wish all of them great success in the weeks ahead.

We do head into this championship weekend. It is our 33rd SEC Championship game, 31 of which have been played or will have been played in Atlanta.

When you look at national champions produced by the SEC during that time of our championship game, 14 times since 1992 the national championship game is played in the SEC Championship game. Since 2006, that SEC Championship, the national championship, has occurred on 10 occasions.

As you know, we just finished our first season as a 16-team league. We played in that single-standings format using an eight-game schedule. I've said, I'll be happy to respond if you ask, that we will learn from this season. We will use the information gained from our competition to inform our decision-making as we move forward.

Before I go to some media notes, I want to congratulate Missouri's quarterback Brady Cook who earlier today was named as the SEC Football Scholar Athlete of the Year. He joins Barrett Jones who played at Alabama and Tim Tebow who you know played at Florida as the only two-time -- he's only the third repeat winner of the award,



having won this on two occasions.

As we look ahead to the College Football Hall of Fame, we have five inductees from SEC universities: Tim Couch from Kentucky, Dan Hampton from Arkansas, Antonio Langham from Alabama, Kevin Smith from Texas A&M, and Dewey Selmon from Oklahoma. We congratulate both Dewey and Zac Selmon, who we've come to know in his role at Mississippi State University.

This was also our first season returning, if you will, to ABC. We had a prior ABC relationship, then a decades' long agreement with CBS. We're going to finish the season as the most-watched college football conference. This is the third consecutive season we've achieved that mark.

When you break down the viewership stats, SEC Conference games, those are games between two SEC teams, accounted for four of the top five most viewed games. 16 of the top 20 most watched games, at least one SEC team played in those games.

A piece of the puzzle that was really important for us is to access more over-the-air broadcast TV. Obviously that was with ABC where we will have experienced over 40 over-the-air broadcast windows. We viewed that as a fan-friendly opportunity, noting the wide exposure and broad access to over-the-air television.

In the past, so last year if we were operating in that same model, we would have had only 15 games on over-the-air TV.

On nine of the 14 Saturdays of the college football season, we experienced noon, midday and prime time games consecutively. We appreciate Bob Iger and his leadership of Disney, Jimmy Pitaro and his leadership of ABC and ESPN, along with the work of Roz Durant, Burke Magnus and their broad teams to present really effectively the great SEC competition from our venues.

Before I begin the Q&A session, I'll just note I did begin my morning in Atlanta where we had our ninth consecutive student-athlete career tour. We had over 30 young people from our university campuses who are former SEC student-athletes being introduced to the world of career opportunities.

We appreciate our colleagues from Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, OneDigital, Southern Company. They ended their experience visiting Porsche Cars of North America. I'm sorry to have missed that part of the trip. They met executives, had conversations about interview tactics, how they prepare a résumé, how they move from their

collegiate student-athlete experience into career opportunities.

With that, I'll turn the management of our press visit over. I'll do my best to be responsive to the questions that are asked.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Commissioner Sankey.

Q. A question about rematches in the Playoff. There was a directive from all the conference commissioners that they wanted no consideration of that. Would rematches of conference pairings hurt the appeal of the Playoff in TV numbers at all do you think?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Based on the numbers I just reviewed for our TV viewership, I would suggest not. I don't know that directive. The expectation is that the committee rank the teams.

If we have the opportunity to have four or more teams in a 12-team Playoff, you are going to have rematches. Part of that is when they occur. That would be a reality given the number of opportunities we certainly hope to access.

Q. How much weight should the results of a conference championship game carry in the CFP rankings, specifically relating to a team that loses a title game? You don't have to worry about it this year, but in general.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: I don't view that all championship games are equal, so you ask me a question that applies broadly to championship games.

Our circumstance with two highly rated teams, I think both teams should be respected for the quality of competition in which they will engage on Saturday. I think the Big 12 has much the same circumstance.

I heard Sark talk about being in the game in 2016. Pretty significant disparity between teams. Alabama won that, advanced to the Playoff consistently. I think the answer is a reality of each of those games and the quality of competition.

I think we're at the highest of that order and would expect a great game. The committee will have to decide. But I would anticipate they'll respect that high level of competition and there wouldn't be a lot of variance given the results.

There is, though, as you know, a significant reward for winning, and that is the opportunity to avoid that first round



game, have the understanding of the possible opponents, and prepare for a bowl destination a few weeks down the road.

Q. In terms of the value of championship games, would you seek in the next Playoff negotiations some sort of assurance to make sure this game isn't a detriment, whether it's including automatic berths for both participants or get rid of automatic byes for the first four so the loser of the game isn't fifth at worst?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: I think one of the realities in answering this question is we have to leave just the now for a moment and understand questions about the impact of championship games. Go back to that very first one in '92. You can actually watch the movie that ESPN Productions produced and hear Roy Kramer talking about, Hey, this may not have worked if the outcome is different.

There's always been pressures around these championship games, impacts upon the national championship. I think that's part of the competitive pressure. I just heard both coaches talk about competitors wanting to seek that competition. They want those hard tests.

As it relates to the current format, so we'll skip over the decade since, and there have been times where the impact of our championship game may have removed a team from the national championship limelight. Typically we're accustomed to that working in the opposite direction.

But let's come to now. What has to be remembered is the task that was put in front of the working group was to look at a format for the '26 season and beyond, and then the College Football Playoff board of directors, working with the management committee, asked for a review to see if it could happen earlier.

From the time of the 12-team format being introduced in '21, there was a year delay. That resulted from our expansion with Oklahoma and Texas. The next year the Big Ten expanded. All of a sudden our colleagues decided to hit the accelerator pedal. We lost a year of preparation time that it's impossible to recover.

We do have an opportunity to go through these two years of experience under existing contracts, and during that process look anew at some of the format issues. I look forward to that. What I've said repeatedly is we have to go through the 12-team process.

To your question about adjustments around byes, seeding adjustments that can be made, others have spoken about so-called automatic qualification, there will be a time for

those conversations. I think that's after we go through this experience.

We have to do so in the context of what has happened during the Bowl Coalition experience, learn from the BCS, the CFP at four and the CFP at 12.

Q. You touched on the basketball success. To what extent, if at all, do you believe that's kind of a product of the, I guess, increasingly lucrative television contracts, enabling the schools to devote some more resources to that?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: I don't view it that narrowly because you don't just flip a switch and go from in 2015-2016, March of 2016, in particular, my first year as the SEC commissioner, having only three teams selected to play in the NCAA tournament, and one of those three being assigned to Daytona. That year Texas A&M was our only team to advance to the Sweet 16.

I think the comparison there is we've had a long period of growth. I think that's about commitment to discussing the right issues. I brought Mike Tranchese in. He sent me a nice text this morning. I thanked him for his work to help us move from what used to be really an RPI-based conversation, let's talk about the broad culture of men's basketball and how we improve.

We've looked at continuity of coaches. We had a decade where a lot of variance in who coached our teams. Really I think Vanderbilt and Florida with Kevin Stallings and Billy Donovan from 2004 to '14, that was the point of continuity. Everybody else had change. We've seen more continuity in recent years of coaches. I think that's a commitment to the programs, to the staffing, to the coaches, to the facilities, to the fans coming into incredible venues and building that excitement.

I think that's a lot of what happens.

Sure, there is a lot that happened with our new TV contract, but I don't think you reduce what's happened in basketball to that moment or that change. I think it goes back to a lot of building.

At 6:30 Eastern this morning I sent a text to all 16 athletics directors thanking and praising them for their contributions and their support to make this progress and make these achievements possible in men's basketball, but we've experienced this kind of success in women's basketball, the last three defending national champions, I could go on and on, but you'd probably start rolling your eyes because I'd open the brag bag again (smiling).

Q. We talked to you extensively back in Dallas about the impact of Texas and Oklahoma moving into this league. First year, here's Texas in the biggest game. Can you give us an idea of what that means, what an accomplishment it was. I understand there might be a little burnt orange in Atlanta on Saturday. Speak to that.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: A couple things.

First, when we added both Oklahoma and Texas, we knew we were adding two of the five most historically successful football programs they college level. Given their track record, you do expect a level of success.

We also had what I think is pretty unique, which is the longest runway to entry from invitation. We made that announcement of expansion in late July 2021, and there were just over three years to adjust. Remember, we had that Texas at Arkansas game in the fall of '21, September of '21, shortly after. So a little bit of experience. Steve came in to lead the Texas program around that same time frame. Had the experience on Nick's staff at Alabama.

I think there's a lot that goes into that success. The history, the support, the head coach, the ability to grow their success in the Big 12 for both of them. You always go through adjustments in coaching. You're seeing some of that I think with Brent and his staff at the University of Oklahoma. They'll continue to build there given their history.

So I expected they'd make a contribution. I expected them to compete at a high level in an incredibly deep league this year. They've achieved the opportunity to play for the SEC Championship in year one. I think that's exciting for the present. You saw that reflected in attendance, the interest when both of those programs, Oklahoma and Texas, visited new places in the SEC.

I can recall traveling through Memphis when that was kind of a Delta hub a few years ago. I was traveling out west the Sunday after Texas played at Ole Miss, and there was an incredible volume of burnt orange. I have always known that that fan base travels.

I think that's exactly what we experience in the SEC. I know the Alabama fans who traveled to Oklahoma did so in great numbers. Watching Tennessee travel to Norman, Oklahoma. I had a conversation with Chris Del Conte the Monday after the Kentucky game. I'd had it along, but I used Kentucky as an example. When they played football at College Station the first time, 10,000 or 12,000 fans made that trip.

I think that's one of the different dynamics here, a great credit to our fans, whether it's an SEC Championship or one of our high-level, high-interest regular-season games. They want to travel and be a part of our communities and our competition.

Q. I'm sure you're surprised at the angst debate lobbying going on as we get ready for the last ranking. Someone mentioned Roy a minute ago. What is your reaction when you hear now administrators, even ADs in your own league, say, Maybe it's time to go back to the BCS ranking to figure out which teams deserve to be in?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: That's why, some of you may have rolled your eyes, I went back to the historical perspective when I was asked the question about our championship game, the impact on the post-season.

I think all of that has to be understood. I was an associate commissioner doing some support work sitting in the old BCS era meetings listening to the churn over the BCS rankings.

Remember, that approach changed regularly. Like sometimes an annual basis with a tweak there and a tweak there. One of the things that did not happen for a decade in the College Football Playoff is the annual cycle of change.

I do think one element that has been forgotten is we don't want to go through change every year. We want to work to get things right.

Now, I know that we're in this new era and that's going to cause a lot of questions. My perspective in having lost the year of preparation that we can't recover means we're going to have more of these adjustment conversations.

I think some of the observations are fair, not all. I think some of the observations have to be distilled. Comments about the committee and where people should be, particularly if you're in that 12th ranking because you might be displaced by a lower-ranked team which was in a combination for conference champions.

When I hear people talk about that positioning, I think what they're actually saying is not a discussion about the committee's placement of the team, but should we be providing these lower-seed conference champions that access point. That's been discussed before. I think that starts to illustrate one of the new issues.

Another one of the new issues, and I raised it in the meetings, and Jack Swarbrick was with me, but not many

others, is reseeding after the first round. There are allocations for the top four conference champions. Notre Dame could be in the top four and slide to a lower seed yet still have earned that higher ranking. That was just not an accommodation the room was ready to make. I think we'll look at this and probably have another one of those types of conversations.

I also offer that we have to learn to and adapt in a time-efficient manner. So using a John Wooden maxim: We need to be quick but not hurry. I don't want us to just react, I want us to be thoughtful in how we consider these issues.

As I said before, going through the Playoff, then looking at adjustment is the appropriate time frame.

Q. Texas sent you its investigation report and response after the bottle-throwing incident back in October. Texas said it could not identify anyone responsible. Are you satisfied with their effort and their report after such a disruptive event? Depending on your answer, if you could maybe elaborate on why or why not.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: I don't comment on my communication back and forth with my schools.

They answered directly and clearly. In fact, I give President Hartzell, Chris Del Conte, even the chair of their board, credit for being very clear immediately that that conduct fails to meet their own expectations. I think that's really important.

One of the learning experiences we've had, and this isn't the only bottle-throwing experience, is we don't always have cameras where there need to be cameras. We will work to see how our stadiums may adjust.

The issue big picture is not completed. It's not concluded. We will have off-season - in fact sooner rather than later - conversations about field-rushing issues. I think we may have set a record in the number. Those create problems. We have to be aware of those problems. I understand the notion of celebratory events. That's one.

The crowd conduct. There wasn't simply one bottle-throwing or debris-throwing incident in our league or even nationally. We have to have a better management policy in place across the league.

I also know that we saw last week conduct issues in rivalry games. We have dealt with those previously within some of our in-conference rivalries. I haven't had much of a flag planting issue.

I look at what happened earlier in the day, and I think that multiplied itself later in the day. But we have to be better than each of those elements. Each of those will be part of our conversation as I noted begin sooner rather than later.

Q. If we're just looking at this year's projected bracket, if we do end up with four teams each from the SEC and Big Ten, in your mind is that kind of Playoff makeup good for the sport on an annual basis?

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: You're asking me to project out for years. I'm wearing an SEC pin, you may have noticed. People have asked me what is my objective. I'd love to have eight teams. So the conference champion and then there's seven at-larges. People will opine about whether that's good or not.

I think that's the reality of college football. This conference, the Southeastern Conference, is unique in our rigor and our depth. I think that has to be understood and recognized. The places in which we play, the level of competition. May be the eighth-placed team. If you look at our non-conference record against our Power Four colleagues, we establish ourselves uniquely as a successful and competitive conference. I view that as a reality. I would expect ourselves to continue to achieve at that level, maybe even beyond.

By the way, I don't view that as inconsistent with other sports. In softball every one of our 13 teams plays in the NCAA tournament in most of the recent years. We've had that in women's golf. I look at the projections now to have 12 SEC teams in the NCAA tournament field. Those numbers are 64 or 68.

I want us to achieve at the high level and I want us to be proud of that in an unapologetic manner.

THE MODERATOR: Commissioner Sankey, thank you for your time this afternoon. We look forward to seeing you back in Atlanta for the SEC Championship game on Saturday.

COMMISSIONER GREG SANKEY: Thank you. Be well, everyone.

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