

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

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Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena



## Commissioner Greg Sankey

### Commissioner Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We welcome Commissioner Sankey to the podium. He'll have a few maybe general opening remarks, then take a few questions.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you. Good afternoon or good evening. Been here a few days. It's good to be in Nashville again with a full crowd.

When I was in Greenville last week with our women's tournament, doing the mental calculations of all that's happened since March of '20, came to the realization that this is the first uninterrupted basketball season we've experienced since 2018/2019.

When you put things in that perspective, you realize a lot has taken place just to conduct the games and complete schedules and complete events.

It's special to be back. It is rewarding to have the kind of atmosphere to which we're accustomed. We've had great competition. Off the court we've had a busy week. We typically gather with our presidents and chancellors during our men's basketball tournament. We did so Wednesday evening and on Thursday morning.

Thursday we had the new NCAA president, Charlie Baker, with us. An opportunity for conversation about his vision for college athletics and his leadership in the NCAA, the strategy he'll be developing to support the young people who choose to spend their time as college athletes, and how we deal with some of the pressures and expectations upon us now.

We had a third session of what we call the SEC Opportunity Forum as we look to be intentional about developing future leaders from underrepresented groups. We have associate athletic directors, an assistant commissioner from my office, assistant commissioners from our campuses.

One of the aspects this week was a meeting with our presidents and chancellors just to introduce themselves, but also to hear from our current athletic directors about their career paths.

Lastly, we have a conference network, you may be aware, actually showing both games this evening. That group has a Content Board. It's a number of our campus and conference office representatives, along with representatives from ESPN.

This was the first time we've gathered in person since December 2019, so a lot of Zoom work, just to talk about how we look at our present and how we plan for our future.

As I look forward, Rick just said at the end of his press conference, we're just over a year away from growing to a 16-team league for the '24/'25 season. We also have a transition of our primary media rights from CBS to the Disney family, ABC for broadcast purposes, ESPN and its family of networks along with the SEC Network.

The opportunity to think about what's ahead for us was an important part of the conversation.

Also spent some time with athletic directors talking about the current reality of bowl games, also the future of bowl games. We have a few more seasons left on our existing bowl agreements. Obviously there are some realities, whether it's recruiting, coaching changes, the transfer portal that have impacted bowl participation.

We've had still I think pretty strong success, desire, for the vast, vast majority of young people on our football teams to participate in those bowl games. It's still our reality. But we also know we have to adapt to the environment around us and prepare for our future beyond the '25 season when our agreements expire.

Probably some conversation about football scheduling. We'll note on the football part, just one last note, we'll be back here in July in Nashville for our football media days for the first time. We had thought we'd be here in 2020. As I noted, some things disrupted that plan. So we have a new plan.



Look forward to having a conversation with you. It's great to be back in Nashville, as I said, with an arena full of people celebrating college basketball this week.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take a few questions.

**Q. Commissioner, the NCAA seems to have moved away from taking positions on social issues. Considering a lot of the legislation that's in the statehouses, particularly around the Southeastern Conference footprint, is that a good thing at this point to allow the SEC, the NCAA, maybe to focus more on athletic issues and competition on the courts?**

GREG SANKEY: In my conversations dating back probably decades, the NCAA has to be wise in its use of its position and its communications. You also have to understand states are going to make their decisions, then we're going to have to follow those decisions.

That's true in the world of name, image and likeness, and that's true in other issues. You're seeing that now in higher education now actually across the country.

I think the transition to Governor Baker -- I use Governor Baker in this context -- is probably a good opportunity for the NCAA to evaluate how it uses its leadership position in an effective way while also making sure it focuses on its core function, which is supporting high-level competition and educating young people.

**Q. Recently Texas A&M announced its 12th Man+ Fund for NIL. How early were you aware of their plans to do this? Do you think it checks all the boxes? Is this a positive or negative step in that space?**

GREG SANKEY: We've been clear in communication with our campuses on some of our key positions. We'll continue to do that directly with our campuses.

There wasn't much notice to us, relatively speaking. That's not an evaluation process in which we're involved because our consistent position has been you have to make certain you're complying with your state laws and with the NCAA's structure, whatever it may be, around name, image and likeness.

We'll certainly facilitate those communications and did so in that circumstance.

We have constantly urged care. I think there are a lot of issues beyond merely recruiting conversations that have to be considered with name, image and likeness. I've identified two, state laws and the NCAA guidelines.

We'll continue to make that the focus of our advice and guidance.

**Q. You mentioned scheduling model. Can you give us an update there? A lot of chatter about it in the last couple weeks.**

GREG SANKEY: I hadn't noticed (smiling).

There has been, sure, and there should be. You think about the why. There's more and more focus. We now have clarity on entry date. We were very clear back in July of '21 that July of '25 was the entry date.

One of the first observations or questions asked of me is, Wow, no one's ever waited that long from the declaration of movement until movement.

We had realities in place that really in the history of conference movement hadn't been there, mainly these granted right agreements. That meant that the Big 12, Oklahoma, Texas, the Big 12 members, the Big 12 media partners had to find their way to a different transition date. That's happened. Rightly so that's created more interest because we're going to be needing to implement a scheduling format before 2025, for the 2024 season.

We were poised to make a decision last year in Destin. I use that phrase. We had done all of our homework. In fact, if you go back to late 2018 into 2019, our membership had a conversation about the 14-team scheduling model, looking at something other than two divisions.

We actually came here, traveled here in March of '20, for our presidents meeting to present them the initial outcomes from our research. That wouldn't have predicted change at that point. I just illustrate that change was likely coming. I guess it didn't make some prediction. I think the membership was ready for something different, more frequent games. There wasn't a timeline for that. Our current 12-year cycle went through '25. Then we had COVID and everything was put on the shelf for over a year. Then we had expansion.

You start in August of '21 with an in-person athletic directors meeting, Joe Castiglione from Oklahoma, Chris Del Conte from Texas Zoomed in. We just talked about the wants, the principles, the objectives.

We went from that meeting, my staff and some advisers conducted individual interviews -- I won't give you the whole process; this isn't as painful as it sounds -- provided updates, gathered again in January of last year. Narrowed over 40 different formats down to just a handful. Really

since I would say early May, the focus has been generally on a single division model. The question then is the number of games, thus the scuttlebutt.

The single division model allows us to narrow the variants and strength of schedule from a competitive standpoint. Fairness was one of the words that was used in those interviews, in those meetings. We had to define 'fairness'. Then 'balance' was a second word used.

The outcome of the models remaining would allow each of our teams to see every team at least twice in a four-year cycle, including home and away. The key will be the number of annual opponents, one or three generally.

You should write this in pencil because things change in conference leadership. They're not changing from a number, we're focused on 16, lest anyone misinterpret that.

The ability to have our teams play within a four-year cycle is exciting for our fans. I said that right after expansion, that we want to see our teams go through our campuses more frequently.

I think this year Alabama goes to the Lexington for the first, Missouri went to Auburn for the first time post-expansion. Somebody is going to write, so I might as well offer it, Georgia has still not played in College Station since expansion, which happened in 2012.

The ability to move these programs through campuses, to campuses more frequently, have visitors travel in a different pattern I think is healthy.

How many games? We'll see.

I'll just add the conversation about annual opponents, there are a number of factors. One certainly is competitive. We want to be respectful there. But understand, we won't play a three-game schedule ever. I can assure you of that. We will play a nine-game schedule if we have three annual opponents.

A schedule has to be considered in its entirety, not simply in the annual opponents. If we play eight with one annual opponent, the same reality. There's no one-game schedule. One rival will be maybe a little bit more difficult, but that balances itself out over the entire schedule.

We also need to remember there are some really, really special rivalries. I think one of the unique aspects of our expansion is we restore rivalries that have existed before. That's an anomaly. Missouri and Oklahoma, 25% of the old Big-8 for those of you who are sports historians. Pretty good wrestling programs, too, by the way.

Obviously Texas A&M and Texas. But also Arkansas and Texas, given the lore there. I can remember Frank Broyles telling stories about going to Austin in '64. I heard Jerry Jones tell those stories, as well. Those are special opportunities.

Plus the Egg Bowl, the Iron Bowl, Georgia and Florida, Florida and Georgia, depending on your perspective, the third Saturday in October. All of those are special.

We're going to have to make some decisions. Eventually there will be a vote. I think what's exciting for our fans is we can see teams more frequently. We can narrow the disparities that exist within our two-division schedule. Without a doubt, we'll have very exciting football.

The other aspect of the '24 is when we moved to the ABC, ESPN family, we don't have the 3:30 Eastern window where everything is forced outside. We'll introduce what I think is a fan-friendlier and team-friendlier kickoff lineup through the day. Actually when we announce a lot of our kickoff times well in advance of the season. There's a lot of great progress to be made before the start of the '24 season. There's a lot there.

**Q. Commissioner, how happy have you been this week with not just the amount of competitive games taking place here in Nashville but the fact that the SEC might get eight or nine teams playing post-season basketball?**

GREG SANKEY: In my world, we have nine teams under meaningful consideration. These games have mattered through the week.

It is interesting, there's often a mentality those Friday games are kind of elimination games or bracket advancement. Those types of games are being played on Thursday. That's part of the excitement.

You saw I think about 12,000 people here on Wednesday night, between 11 and 14 and 12 and 13, close games. When you go back to March of 2016 here, one of those -- I guess I should think about the unfun days, the COVID shutdown was no fun here. We had three teams selected. In fact, I was concerned we'd only have two teams in March of 2016, which would be an historic low.

We trended on the low end of teams in the NCAA over time. It wasn't just the '15/'16 season. I, together with our campuses, pursued some changes, some that the conference made at the conference office level, a lot about support and decision-making on campuses.

I haven't seen every coach's press conference, but what I heard from Dennis and Rick articulating the relationship with their team, for all the cynicism, the level of genuine attention to the young people in their program, the ability to communicate a vision, I think that's pretty cool.

It's great that we can do that with that kind of leadership and have eight or nine teams potentially in the NCAA tournament. That's what we expect of ourselves.

In 2016, the years where we had three or four, we didn't meet our own expectations. I'm not particularly worried about all the comparisons. I'm attentive to our expectations as we should have half or over half of our membership in an NCAA tournament field.

We should always have teams, at least one team, in the Final Four across every sport. A lot of that is really difficult to achieve because of the competitive realities, but fulfilling that vision while communicating -- you listen to Dennis talk about building the young men, knowing how Rick does that, those are the kind of achievements we want to have happen competitively, educationally, then for lifelong impact.

**Q. On the eight-one-nine-three, is there a deadline for that? How is that going to actually be decided? A vote? Are you going to make that decision?**

GREG SANKEY: A few questions in there.

The way I look at the deadline, what I've described to our membership as bookends, really Thursday with our presidents providing a thorough update on our work to date, the starting point again, with the reminder that we've been through a couple of starting points.

I think the finish line is our meeting in Destin. I'll warn you that before you make your travel plans, we could decide sooner. You're still welcome to visit with us in Destin, but that's where I would look, is the outer boundary.

I'm going to give you a footnote, if I may. The footnote is we added A&M in September of '11 and Missouri in November of '11, and we played a football schedule in August, September of 2012 with both involved.

If I have to play it out longer, I will. I don't have any interest. What I said earlier I meant. We were really poised in May of '22 to make a decision. I went to Destin last year thinking we would. I think I communicated that.

Once we got in the room and people thought about some of the games that were important to their fan base, we looked at the depth of tiebreaker issues when you have a

single division, you don't have as much head-to-head play.

We looked at what was potentially going to happen with the CFP not predicting that a format would be adopted, but we'd lay out a plan for the '26 season and beyond.

We knew that conferences would be in media negotiations, I think intuitively understood that could mean some level of movement.

We just took a step back and said we can have some more information before we make this decision, so let's tap the brakes. Lo and behold, here we are 10 months later with a heck of a lot more information than I thought we'd have last May.

Those are the points, part of the reason we didn't make that decision. I think the shot clock metaphor, the buzzer is going to go off on us in Destin most likely.

The decision-making process. We're going to have a recommendation from athletic directors, a decision by presidents. There will be a vote. They could vote to authorize me to pick the format. That typically doesn't happen, though.

We'll make a decision. The First Amendment is alive and well, that was Mike Slive's quote. We've seen that already.

I think scuttlebutt is another way to describe it. Eventually we'll have a vote that will be decided by the majority. It goes back to the old Doug Dickey quote, Mike Slive's first meeting in October of 2002, we had a 7-5 vote in a 12-team conference. Mike had been at Conference USA. It's going to come back, come back. Doug Dickey put his arm around Mike and said, Commish what's the problem?

He said, Well, we just had this split vote.

And Doug said, Commish, in the SEC, 7-5 is 12-0.

We remind ourselves of that. We do different math now, but that's the expectation. The Doug Dickey principle, as I like to refer to it. Every time our athletic directors meet, we give them a set of reminders, and that's at the top of the reminders.

**Q. Alabama is having a terrific on-the-court season. Off the court they've been subject of a national story. Have you or the office checked in with them?**

GREG SANKEY: I have.

**Q. (Off microphone.)**

GREG SANKEY: I don't share those conversations. We

have an incredible level of sympathy for the loss of life. That's a tragedy. There are two people, I read today, indicted for what happened. I do consult. I received a phone call from Greg at some point that Sunday. From a personal standpoint, just heartsick and physically sick to learn the story, period.

**Q. Commissioner, with a lot of the restructuring going on with a lot of conferences, not just the SEC, do you see any danger going forward with things like what's going on with the SEC-ACC Challenge?**

GREG SANKEY: I'm really excited about the SEC-ACC Challenge. I called Jim Phillips, as somebody that grew up near Syracuse, New York, said, Whenever we have a team in the Carrier -- well, JMA Wireless Dome -- sorry, old habits die hard -- I'm actually going to go to an away game.

No, I think we've had great communication and collaboration there, so on my list of worries, that taking place or not taking place is not remotely on the list.

We are attentive. When we visit with our presidents and chancellors and athletic directors, I do something that I used to do when I was commissioner in the Southland Conference, which is talk about membership issues. It's always for other people. But we're attentive to what's happening around us.

We're very much focused on our expansion to 16. It's not simply adding two members, it is a new era. That's what we experienced when we went from 12 to 14. That's the focus.

I've been very intentional not to talk about our members, not to talk about a number. I know others have done so. But we'll be attentive. We're not recruiters. We're very much focused on our desire for excellence across the board.

That doesn't produce a lot of worries about those events. It doesn't produce a level of concern about bowl games even. Those are conference-versus-conference affiliations. I think those opportunities can be there. That's why we spent time working through some of the bowl thinking with our ADs earlier this morning.

**Q. Another topic that always receives a lot of chatter is officiating. How happy with the way officiating is going in the conference? Could you specifically address the replay?**

GREG SANKEY: Sure.

I'll start with the replay reviews and then hold me

accountable to the first part of your question.

We've been an aggressor in the use of replay, in my opinion. We want to use technology to have more correct outcomes. That's the underlying philosophy. Not that we'll be perfect, but that you can use technology or try to deny that it exists and take some Luddite existence, and that's not reality.

If we don't use replay, everyone else in the arena can see on the big screen, which is more clear than my TV at home, or their phone, whether things are right or wrong. Some of those are obvious, some not obvious.

I didn't create replay. I may not have wanted replay, but we have a responsibility to use replay.

You know what, it does become disruptive, certainly. But wrong calls live a long time. When I look at football, because you didn't just ask about basketball, although we're here, we were an innovator with the collaborative replay. I think we may be the only conference that uses a centralized replay system for men's and women's basketball, the same for baseball and softball, the desire to be ahead of things.

We've learned a lot from the NFL, NBA, Major League Baseball. I think that's helped us officiate games in a more effective manner, period.

Big picture of officiating? I don't think anyone says, I'm satisfied. It is a dynamic game where people are faking and running screens, changing signals so that people don't know what's going on. The word 'deception' I think is actually against the rules officially in the rule book, but there's a lot that goes on in a game where you're trying to make the opponent think one thing is happening when you're actually trying to do something else, and officials have to evaluate all that in the moment.

I think our officiating programs across the board have continued to improve. In men's basketball in particular, Mike Eades is in his third season, he began in the 2021 season, came off the court maybe a little bit earlier than we would have expected, had worked the highest level of Final Fours. I think is enormously respected in our league.

We've seen young officials progress, which is exciting. We focused on building diversity into our programs. We talked about an official who may have an opportunity really early in his career in the next few weeks. We've at least nominated an individual. I think those are really good signs.

Will everybody be happy? Will they point fingers? They

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will. You saw a ball go off somebody's hand. Official made a split-second decision. Went to replay, and the call was changed, correctly changed. That's the benefit of replay. Took a little bit of time, but at the end of the day at a critical point in the game the call was correct. We can't get them all perfect because you may not have the angles, but I think that's a beneficial resource we can use.

**Q. You've been an advocate for services for athletes, mental health, sexual assault training and stuff. With the incident with the shooting at Alabama, the car crash at Georgia, are there other areas that you think the conference has a role in maybe advocating for expansion of things that might put an end to those tragedies?**

GREG SANKEY: Training and education are subject to the individual decision-maker. Those are the realities of life.

I spent actually time when I visit with students and student-athletes, I had an opportunity back in September with the Missouri team just to observe. I have a little card that I'll hand out that says, The key to life is decision-making. If you can figure out how to make better decisions in life, you're going to have a better life.

One of my positions that I communicate to groups when I speak, I'll sound like your parent, there's not a lot of good in life that happens between midnight and 5 a.m. unless you're working in a hospital as a doctor or nurse because you're helping people.

You have to make decisions in advance about how you're going to live. Oftentimes decisions in certain areas are the best decisions you'll make in life, where I'm going to be, how I'm going to function, who I'm going to be around.

I'm confident, because I've asked the question, that that type of change, education, counseling opportunity, and communication is included within our athletic programs.

You're absolutely right, we'll have candid opportunities, just like we did back in 2015 after the football team took a stand in Missouri. We had to learn from that. We had to learn from the summer of 2020. After the shooting in Charleston, I was asked about some position statements. I've been very intentional on some key things. The display the Confederate battle flag. We had conversations about that.

Those conversations have not stopped. They've not been overly narrow. But recent events will even broaden that level of dialogue.

THE MODERATOR: Closing remarks?

GREG SANKEY: Thank you. I hope this has been helpful. Let's go watch some basketball (smiling). All the meetings are behind me.

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