

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Hoover, Alabama, USA

## Florida Gators

## Coach Dan Mullen

### Press Conference

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I'm back. I think it's afternoon now. Good afternoon. Our first coach of SEC 2021 Media Days is Dan Mullen. He enters his fourth season at Florida, 13th overall as a head coach in the SEC. A bunch of stats on here, and I asked Dan for permission.

One of the unique things in life is the connections you make with people. There was a young man in Omaha I met who was there with his team. His name was Jeffery Simmons. You may recall many years ago being here, a lot of concern about Jeffery's entry.

Jeffery was a remarkable story, remarkable to meet that young man. I just said to Jeffery how much I respected how, once he entered with the noise, he led his life as a person, and still, is as a person, and Dan brought him in, coached him for two years, and then had to play against him a third year.

Jeffery is one of those instances, one of those many where we do things right. Some tough things, but some right things in college athletics. With that, Dan Mullen, the head coach of the University of Florida.

DAN MULLEN: Thank you, Commissioner. It's great to be up here. Great to see all of you again. I know he asked me about that. Jeffery is an extraordinary young man and one of the reasons why you coach is to make a positive impact on people's lives. Hopefully, I was able to make a positive impact on Jeffery Simmons' life, and I can guarantee you he'll make a positive impact on a lot of people's lives for years to come.

That's one of the reasons we coach. I know we don't always -- people don't see it that way or that part of it as the limelight, but one of the reasons, the biggest reason, really, a coach can make a positive impact on young men's lives.

I want to say it's great to be up here. It's really exciting to be back, to see everyone here, and the excitement of



Media Days, the excitement of the season coming up, being live in person again, not having to look at everyone through computer screens, and to do that. I'm really excited to be here, excited to get this season kicked off.

We open up at home against Florida Atlantic. FAU is going to be a Saturday night in The Swamp, can't wait. I know the excitement, the energy. Last year was a hard year for everybody, but now as you start to see these different sporting events, you look at things that are going on with the Lightning winning the Stanley Cup and the energy in the stadium, and you realize how much you missed that, even getting to watch the College World Series in Omaha, seeing basically the entire state of Mississippi move to Omaha to cheer on Mississippi State and have them win that National Championship for the Southeastern Conference and for Mississippi State and the people of Mississippi. Winning that National Championship was amazing.

But that energy in the stadium, those are things that we really missed, and I can't wait for that opening night in The Swamp to feel that energy and excitement of our fans and everybody coming out to see us come play again.

A lot of exciting things going on for us right now. After coming off a great year, obviously, a little bit of challenge. Offensively it will be different this year. Two first rounders last year on the offensive side of the ball and a second rounder at quarterback. Guys leaving on to the NFL. It's great to see those guys have that success and go on to the next stage, but there's a lot of production to go fill offensively that we're really excited about on the offensive side of the ball.

We have a couple quarterbacks that have experience. I know Emory Jones coming back and Anthony Richardson competing for that job with him, but if you look at those guys and what they've been able to do with the experience they have. If you get into statistics and go look at Emory Jones' statistics, he's a guy that's played a bunch of football. He's not coming in as a guy that's never played before. So I'm really excited about that.

We lost a lot of production at the receiver and tight end



position, but we still have a lot coming back. We rotate those guys a lot. We try to do a great job at creating depth at those position. Media Days last year, I know you would have said: You just lost four receivers in the NFL Draft. How do you come back with production in the passing game?

We're able to come back because of our system playing a lot of different guys, they've had experience. The next guys are going to have the opportunity to get the ball in their hands and make things happen.

Then we also have a lot of veteran players on the offensive line, especially at the running back position this year. So that's going to be -- we'll be a little bit different offensively, but that's part of the fun of coaching is being able to adapt and change and build around the players that we have.

Defensive attitude. Today we brought two of our defensive players with us, Zach Carter and Ventrell Miller. You look at the leadership those guys bring on defense that we have. We have some really young players in the secondary, but you have Trey Dean and Kyler Engel with some experience coming back there.

Really to me the attitude of where our defense is at is what I'm really pleased with. The energy, we play a lot of guys defensively, roll guys through to keep them fresh and healthy, and I'm really excited of the mindset, the attitude that the defense as a whole is bringing to the table and the leadership that they have within our program.

A lot of big things for this year. We've been to three straight new years six bowl games. Hopefully, we can get that one step further into a New Year's Six playoff game this year. I'd love the opportunity to get back to Atlanta to compete for another SEC Championship this year like we did last year. It was really exciting.

We have progress coming along on the Heavener Football Complex, which is going to be really the premier facility in all of college football, and I hope next year we'll be in a brand-new facility with a lot of exciting things happening.

On campus, a lot of exciting things happening. We have starting Friday with the Opening Ceremony, we'll have 30 Gators in the Olympics starting this Friday. So it's an exciting time.

But the biggest excitement obviously is being here, seeing all of you in person again, and the excitement of knowing that here in six weeks away we're going to be back in and playing college football in front of the Gator Nation out there in The Swamp, and really excited to kick this year off and get that going.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach Mullen, for your opening comments.

**Q. What percentage of your team has been vaccinated for COVID?**

DAN MULLEN: I'm not going to get into the specific numbers right now, but I think we're doing very well with that, with those numbers. I think, when you look at COVID and what we dealt with last year, I think our medical staff, Paul Silvestri, our training staff, has done a phenomenal job of educating our players.

Obviously, in the state of Florida, our governor has done an amazing job with the accessibility of the vaccine for quite a while now.

And we have the UF Shands Hospital system, throughout the entire pandemic has done an amazing job of what we've done. So we're at a pretty high number of vaccinated players right now, but I think that the medical staff and really looking at Governor DeSantis, what he's been able to do, and the leadership of UF Shands Hospital system on campus has really been beneficial for our program and the university as a whole.

We're getting close to the threshold numbers that you need to be at.

**Q. Given your quarterback scenario that you mentioned a moment ago, do you feel like you maybe go back to your bread-and-butter roots? Is there a tweak to your system that you think these guys will offer?**

DAN MULLEN: I guess after -- I think, as Greg mentioned, 13 years here, I don't know what my bread and butter is because we've been all over the place with every different style of quarterback. If you go back, even being a coordinator, you go back to the Alex Smiths and the Chris Leaks, through the Tebows, to Tyler Russell and Dak Prescott. There's been so many different variations.

I think the key to it is, and one of the reasons we've been successful is, never try to take a square peg and put it into a round hole. It's identifying what our guys do really well and build around the strengths of not just the quarterback, but the offense as a whole.

We will go to do that this year and build around the strengths of our quarterbacks.

**Q. I wanted to ask about a local kid from my community, Jaydon Hill, the progress he's made in**



**your defense. I know the secondary is a big key for you guys to bounce back this year. And we know, obviously after the Missouri game last year, you're a Star Wars fan. What is your favorite movie of the genre?**

DAN MULLEN: Jaydon Hill is much easier than the Star Wars question, right? You can go so many different directions with the Star Wars question. Jaydon Hill has done an amazing job. You're looking at a young guy who was injured in high school, came in, played for us, got over that injury, has continued to work, has had a great mindset, a great attitude. Obviously really -- great family, high character, excellent student in the classroom, studies the game.

You look -- I think he's going now into his third season with us. That first year, kind of learning and figuring it out. Second year you get the opportunity and take a growth to learn where you are. We really -- I expect him to jump into being a starter, being an every down player for us this season.

So really excited to see that growth throughout his career. You talk about development and you look at the growth throughout their career, people get all excited, I want to see this guy play right away. I'm more excited in seeing consistent growth throughout your career, and Jaydon is a guy that's done that.

**Q. I want to ask about Mohamoud Diabate. What have you seen from him this off-season, and what do you feel he can do with the defense this year?**

DAN MULLEN: Mohamoud is a really great athlete, dynamic player with speed of burst coming off the edge. I think he's a guy, because of that, you've seen it. I love creating matchup issues. I think, if you watched us offensively last year with guys, we try to do a great job and spent a lot of time with Todd and the defensive staff and make sure we're creating positive matchups.

Mohamoud is a guy who creates matchup issues for guys. Now, when you see him as he's growing into being a linebacker and you see him growing into the instincts of being an every down player, now is where the matchups become a problem because now I can be an every down player, a backer, but I can come off the edge, I can carry people in coverage, I understand the defense as a whole, and now I get to use my athleticism to become a dynamic playmaker.

**Q. Dan, do you think it's harder to win a championship now than when you guys did it at Florida when you were an offensive coordinator in '06 and '08?**

DAN MULLEN: I don't know. There's more teams in the league, so I guess statistically speaking it would make it harder. I think the league right now is -- that was at the beginning of where the league is today, so I think top to bottom, the league is probably even at a higher level now than it was then on top to bottom teams. So I think that part of it makes it a little harder.

There were some unbelievable high-end teams back then. I remember going in '08, the SEC Championship game was No. 1 against -- I think we were No. 2 at Florida and Alabama was 1. I think we were 2 or 3. So when you're looking there, that the high end was still there of teams that are going to compete for the National Championship, but I think the depth has certainly grown in the league and made it more difficult on a week-to-week basis.

**Q. Coach, after the Bowl game last year and the opt-outs that you guys had, you said, hey, something's going to need to change with the postseason. Just wondering your feelings on the proposed 12-team playoff, and are you for that?**

DAN MULLEN: I don't know. You have to look at it. Honestly, I could pull up my Jurgen Klopp and say, that's a question for Commissioner Sankey. I'm just here to coach football. I think change -- I think, when the playoffs started, if you'd have asked me, you created the four-team playoff, I'm sure someone did, if you ever look back in the files. I said, it's going to change a lot of things about college football, not immediately, but it will in the long haul, it will change a lot of things about college football. I think eventually it will, and eventually we will end up getting to an expansion. I would imagine that would come sometime in the future.

I think we're still learning. It's interesting to see. Last year we had several opt-outs during the Bowl game. Now, last year was also a very, very difficult year as a whole mentally and emotionally for players, and the previous two years we didn't have any opt-outs for Bowl games.

When you look at it, I don't know if that was a one-off or how that was going to change in the long-term picture of how that will change things, but it's going to be interesting to see.

I think college football will continue to evolve, and once the playoff system started, I think that was just the first step of the college football old Bowl system that you knew and the college football we knew changing into the future.

**Q. I was just wondering what your thoughts are on the name, image, and likeness now, how things are going**

## with you guys at Florida?

GREG SANKEY: It's a learning curve, obviously. You're looking at the state law that we have in Florida, and any time you're adapting to a new law within the state and a new law that directly affected our football program, there's a big learning curve.

I'm really excited about it. I'm excited about the opportunities it presents our players. I think it's great for the players, but I think there is a big learning curve.

We had a team meeting on it this morning, of continuing to educate ourselves, educate each other, continue to grow and learn within the law. What's the best way to help the players operating within the law and doing things the right way?

So I think we're going to be on a learning curve here for a little bit of time as we get into it. I have to get special name, image, and likeness lawyers interpreting the state law to make sure that we get it set the right way.

**Q. What caught your eye initially about Emory Jones, like going back years ago? Where has he grown the most in all this time you've known him, and what are your expectations of him?**

DAN MULLEN: I think you know me with quarterbacks, I have very, very high expectations of my quarterbacks. My expectations are very high. It goes back to recruiting. When I got hired at Florida, I had a message that Emory sent me. I just sent him a text. He was committed to another school at the time, and he sent a text.

And he says, "Coach, when this shakes out, be ready. I want to be your quarterback." And not, "I want to look at Florida, I want to consider this or I'm thinking about flipping schools." It was, "I want to be your quarterback."

So that part, when you look at who guys are, is so critical and who they become. Then if you look at his progression -- I mean, he came in as a very celebrated high school player, highly ranked player, and I think for a couple years now, he's learned, he's grown, he's developed. He's a completely different player he was when he walked in, in his understanding of the game and in his maturity.

I have a lot of respect for guys. I think, if you watch and you look at a lot of guys who have had success throughout the years, he had an opportunity to look at a Kyle Trask, who went from pretty much an unrecruited player, who came in and worked, prepared, bought his time, learned how to do it the right way, all of a sudden was a Heisman Trophy finalist and now is an NFL player and a second

round draft pick in the NFL.

When you look at that, you look at a Dak Prescott, who didn't play for his first several years on campus, and now is one of the highest paid athletes in the country this year. I think Emory has shown the maturity early on that it wasn't I have to play from day one, it's I have to continue to be developed from day one to prepare for my moment and my time, and that's what he's been able to do.

As I said, you're looking at a guy, as he comes into the season, he's not coming in with a stat line of nothing. He's coming in with a stat line that he's played in key times in significant games. I think that's huge, and it's prepared him for this time.

**Q. Dan, what's the biggest reason that your defense never figured it out last year?**

DAN MULLEN: I don't know about that because I think, if you look in different games, we're a very maybe erratic defensively at different times, but there's a lot of different things that go into that. There's some games we played really, really well defensively. There's games where I thought we played well, but statistically maybe weren't great.

And if you look in a lot of those games, if you were going to play us on the other side of the ball, you had to play a different style game maybe than you wanted to or expected to and take a lot of chances because we were going to try to score points and keep up with us, or we jumped out to a big lead and you were just kind of -- you know, just throw caution to the wind to try to put up yards and points as fast as possible.

There's other games, one or two early in the year, I certainly think the learning curve of missing a spring practice and the time off and the speed of the game of going to tackle live for the players and the time off of not being able to do that, I think that showed early in the season, and that improved as the year went on.

I don't know if there's one thing to say that it was statistically was not where we want to be, but when I look and I go through game by game situations, I think it's easy to identify in this game here were our issues, and it wasn't one specific thing.

**Q. Alabama will be visiting Gainesville for the first time given the quirks of the SEC schedule, first time in ten years. Just talk about the opportunity to play that game in sort of a non-neutral setting and have the home crowd for that game.**

DAN MULLEN: Yeah, I think it's really exciting. I don't want to get the commissioner in trouble here, but I'd love us to maybe do away with the permanent crossover team so you get these type of games more often. I think for the players, for the fan bases, I really think it's exciting to see some more of maybe mixing up the teams from the west and playing two different teams each year instead of a permanent crossover. I think that would be really exciting so you get this matchup.

I think that's going to be an exciting day. It's going to be a great atmosphere. It's going to be a fun game to be a part of, and as you said, for ten years we haven't seen it. We'd love to see that more. There's ten teams that will visit -- there's non-conference teams that will visit The Swamp a lot more than conference teams. I think you'd love to see maybe a better rotation of those teams.

**Q. I also had a schedule question for you. Your take on this, it's interesting, you've got a front loaded kind of home schedule, and after October 9th, you don't play another conference home game. I want to get your take on how that might shake out.**

DAN MULLEN: Well, yeah, because our conference home game is in Jacksonville this year, and when you play a neutral site game, it kind of throws off your home and away schedule. We have one already set, I think you know. I mean, I don't know how you'd ever do it, but if the league ever wanted to go to a nine-game schedule, which I don't think anybody's jumping up and down about right now, but I guess what you do is play four home, four away, and a neutral site game, and you could find different ways or matchups that everybody got to do that. That would be one interesting way to do it. Then you have the same number of home and away games.

But our one game in that stretch that would be that would be the Georgia game, and that's going to be in Jacksonville.

**Q. You mentioned Jeffery Simmons a little bit earlier, your overall tenure there at Mississippi State. How much do examples like him still stick out as something you try to incorporate with what you're doing at Florida?**

DAN MULLEN: Well, a ton. I think, when you look at players and you look at guys that have become successful, as I touched on earlier, the most rewarding thing about being a coach is seeing a young person become successful and accomplishing goals and living out their dreams. There is no -- to me, there's no more rewarding thing as a coach than that.

We've won championships. We've won a lot of games, lost some games, but really the thing that sticks to me as rewarding is helping a young person accomplish their goals and their dreams in life. So those are the ones that stick with you.

I had a lot of great players that played for me throughout the years, a lot of guys at Mississippi State that played for me, and when you see the success stories they have -- and I'm not talking about, obviously, Jeffery in his personal life, Jeffery in his football life, extremely successful, but you can go all the way.

It's beyond football. It's guys on the field and the success they have off the field and the family men they are now is one of the things that makes you most proud of as a coach, and that's really the most rewarding thing that you get as a coach.

**Q. Wondering with Josh Heupel coming over from the state of Florida, if you can share any thoughts or insights on what you think about Josh Heupel.**

DAN MULLEN: I was going through my years. I don't know that I ever faced him. I know he's been successful everywhere he's been throughout his career, and so I think he'll bring a lot of excitement.

I know offensively they're always a challenge. They're an exciting team to watch, have a great system, put up some big numbers. So it will be a great challenge to finally get the opportunity to go against him.

**Q. When you look at Alabama's recruiting success in the state of Florida, I think they've pulled more five stars from that state than any other school, even the Florida schools. How do you go about battling that? Are you concerned about that? How do you go about changing the tide of that?**

DAN MULLEN: A couple things. They've built the program. Nick's been there a long time and has done a good job of building a consistent program and consistency within his program. I guess the short answer of that is -- I mean, there's -- nobody asked my opinion on ratings. So maybe I'd rate everybody differently on who we go after and who we want, that way.

But for us, I think the facilities that we're getting caught up with, when you look at the University of Florida now and you look at the only school in America that is a top ten public university academically and really considered a top ten football program consistently over the last three years, you're looking at that change. You look at the facilities we have academically, the opportunity to play in The Swamp,

the opportunity now with name, image, and likeness and what that means to kids in Florida and how they'll be able to brand themselves within their hometowns in Florida.

Then you look at the Heavener Football Complex coming up, now to catch us up facility-wise with other teams in America, that's really, I think, how it's going to change where, if you look at it, that's a school of saying, hey, I don't know if there's a better place you can go in America than Florida. If you want the complete package, if you want every aspect of it with alumni connections, with the education, with the opportunity to play for championships and the facilities, I don't know if there's a better place than Florida.

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