

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Hoover, Alabama, USA

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Josh Heupel

Press Conference

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Josh Heupel is making his first appearance today at SEC Football Media Days. He's been in the conference as an offensive coordinator at the University of Missouri in 2016 and 2017. He is the only current SEC football head coach to win a BCS National Championship, which you'll question me on that, but as a player would be the key qualifier there, during his time as the starting quarterback at the University of Kentucky and the 2000 Heisman Trophy runner-up.

Separate from Josh for just a moment, Alontae Taylor is here as one of the student-athletes representing the University of Tennessee. Alontae is a member of our Football Student-Athlete Leadership Council, walked through COVID work last year, and gets credit for one of the most important quotes of the summer, when we were trying to figure it out, a lot of questions, some of which ended up in a Washington Post article. Alontae said, "Look, I'll be swabbed every day if I can play football on Saturday," and that became a bit of a guiding light for us.

So with that, from both one of the student-athletes at the University of Tennessee and a native of Aberdeen, South Dakota, now, it's my pleasure to introduce the head football coach for the University of Tennessee, Josh Heupel.

JOSH HEUPEL: Good morning. Hope everybody's doing great. So excited to be here. First SEC Media Days. Excited to get a chance to see you guys in person for the first time. I've done a lot of Zoom calls with you here over the last six months for sure, and maybe longer than that, but excited to be here and have an opportunity to represent Tennessee.

I hope you guys have had a great summer. My wife and I knew, in coming to Knoxville, that it was going to be a special place to live for our two kids, 13 and 11, Hannah and Jace, and through the month of June, obviously, recruiting was a busy time, but here in July we've gotten a chance to really partake and enjoy a Tennessee lifestyle and Tennessee living.



It's been great to connect with the community, whether that's in Knoxville floating the river, or jumping on a boat in the lake and hitting some of the trails, or going up to the Smoky Mountains and floating down the river with our kids. It's been a lot of fun.

Shoot, my daughter has picked up the game of golf and has been knocking the cover off of it. Those of you that know me know that I'm not much of a golfer, but she's been able to swindle me out there and get me on the course a little bit.

I appreciate this opportunity. It's great to be back in the SEC. As a player, as a coach, I've always admired this league, believed in what it is, the strength of it, from top to bottom. The number of talented players that you're able to recruit to this brand and compete at the highest level. It's been a lot of fun being back in here.

I'm honored to be the head coach of Tennessee football. This is one of the great and iconic logos in all of college football, steeped in tradition. It's a great honor to be the care taker of Tennessee football at this time and really proud of what our players and our staff have done in six months. Just couldn't be prouder and really excited about getting back onto the football field.

As we talk today a little bit, just had a lot of fun getting to know the former players at Tennessee, connect with the community, and this great iconic logo, be able to put a new age approach on it while celebrating the great traditions that are Tennessee football.

The first priority when I and our staff got to Tennessee was about relationships, and it still is today. That will be the foundation of everything that we do inside of our program, but that came through a conversation with our players. The first night I got hired, I had about an hour and a half meeting with them, and one of the things that I realized that they recognized that they wanted, that they wanted and needed, was connection. That's why we spent an inordinate amount of time connecting with our players, getting to know them -- their strengths, their struggles, their greatest triumphs, the hardships that they faced -- and



have had a lot of fun in doing that.

In recruiting over the last six months, our staff has put a ton of time and energy into developing those same relationships with recruits. We've started inside out in our footprint here in Tennessee and then gone across the country.

That's one of the great things about the logo is the ability to recruit from coast to coast. Our staff has done a great job of developing those same relationships with parents and families and really got an opportunity to connect with them in June as they were able to get on campus for the first time.

And the third group of people that we've really tried to connect with are our VFLs, our Vols for Life. When you look at some of the great players in college football, they've worn the Power T, and the ability to welcome them back, embrace them, and for them to give back to our current players and know that this is their home forever has been something that's been fun to start building again.

You're talking about some of the great players that have ever played the game in Reggie White, Peyton Manning, Tee Martin, Alvin Kamara, Charles Davis. Those are just a handful of guys that are celebrated at Tennessee, and for those who are still living, are able to come back and be part of our program.

That ties into the program that we will have and we want to have at Tennessee. We want to be innovative, but we want to have fun. I believe in the player experience, having played the game at the highest level and being able to hoist the trophy as a player, chasing that championship is something that you'll never forget. It's a journey that you'll never forget. But those relationships are really important as well, and we want to live those things out every single day.

That's why we've spent so much time building that inside of our program, inside of our walls, from the time that I've gotten there, if you followed us at all, you've seen us, whether it's dodgeball after a 6:30 morning workout on a Friday afternoon, whether it's a crawfish boil followed by kick ball after a summer workout on a Tuesday evening, you've seen us spend time with our players.

That pays forward once we get on the football field. I believe that connection matters when you face adversity, that you know the person standing next to you, to the left or the right, and you can depend upon those people.

That also plays into how we've embraced the NIL, name, image, and likeness. You look at -- I just look back on my

career as a player and the opportunities that would have been afforded to me while I was playing, not just when I got done. I think there's a unique opportunity for players to embrace that, for programs to embrace it, to educate our players, for them to take advantage of it, and for them to grow.

I think Grant Frerking, one of our wide receivers who currently runs a business while he's a student-athlete as well, said it best when he said: This is an opportunity for our players to grow and have awareness of their brand and who they are and what they're trying to accomplish long term in life.

And they get an opportunity to do it from the moment that they step foot on campus. There's not a better place in America to do that than Knoxville, Tennessee. Top five in every social media platform. You look at followership. You look at the city of Knoxville itself within this league, one of the most prominent cities. You look at national worldwide headquarters that are located in Tennessee, or in Knoxville, it's a special place to come play college football, and everything and anything that you want to do in the game and outside of the game has been done at Tennessee and will be done again.

Finally, before I open it up to questions, I'm going to talk about the way that we want to play, and I think a lot of people get caught up in the offensive style of football. Certainly, we want to play fast with tempo, but as an entire football program, we want to play fast and be physical, but when I say the word "fast," I'm talking about in the way that we play, not just from play to play, but how we play the play.

To do that, you've got to be able to put your kids in a position to understand what they're doing, to unlock their natural opportunities of who they are, their physical capabilities, and let them go play.

You look at the last three National Championships offensively, I think every team has averaged over 520 yards on offense. You look at what we've been able to do in our track record as a staff at the previous two stops at UCF and at Missouri, top five in basically every offensive category the last three years. The two years previous to that while we were at Missouri, led the league in total offense. This is a quarterback-friendly offense that's going to allow us to play and apply pressure to defenses every single Saturday that we step on the football field.

Obviously, we understand that in this league the line of scrimmage is extremely important too, but I think the tempo on the offensive side of the ball gives us the ability to create an advantage in that aspect. We've got to continue

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

to recruit and develop big, large people up front that will change the line of scrimmage as we continue to play.

We've got a great amount of guys that are coming back, on both sides of the line of scrimmage, offensively and defensively, from last year's football team that have an opportunity to be a strength for us.

Defensively, we've hired an experienced staff. Coach Banks, you look at his track record everywhere that he's been, the ability to create negative plays over his track record at Penn State. We're going to play physical. We're going to play fast. We're going to be aggressive defensively. He's done a great job of incorporating multiple scheme. Our kids have grabbed onto it, latched onto it, they understand it, and I think that's going to allow them to play fast and free when we get to Saturday afternoons.

I know I'll get asked this question in a little bit, but we were hit by the transfer portal certainly before I got to campus, but that's been a double-edged sword, and I say that meaning we were able to add eight guys after spring ball through the transfer portal as well, and I think, as we've gone through this summer and we get into training camp, those guys are going to have an opportunity to help us out as we get on the football field this fall.

I appreciate the opportunity to be in front of you. Excited about getting to training camp here in a week or so with our players. Excited to run out of the tunnel on September 2nd and make that right-hand turn behind Smokey and ready to play in front of 103,000 at Neyland Stadium. With that, I'll open it up to questions.

Q. You brought up the transfer portal. First opportunity to talk to you since some of those guys have come on campus. Can you hit on some of those guys, what you're getting on those players that are coming in.

JOSH HEUPEL: Absolutely. Our SID and I had a bet what was going to be the first question. I tried to hedge off the transfer portal before it got started, but I'm glad you came right back to it. It is. Obviously, our roster changed. By the time I got there in late January, there were a large number of kids in the transfer portal. At the same time, we've been able to add really quality individuals inside our program. We love the player, but we love the person too and what they're bringing as far as the culture piece inside of our program.

Some of those kids, we've had relationships with, whether it was a coach being at a previous school and knowing them every day, or through myself or other staff members who had recruited them coming out of high school.

So I feel really good about what we've added. A majority of those guys we really feel like are going to play meaningful snaps right from the get-go when we kick off in September.

A handful, or a couple of those guys, I should say, are guys that will have to earn it, like they all will, but guys that are going to develop in our program.

I think for us long term, the benefits of the eight pieces that we've added here after spring ball is a majority of those guys have multiple years and will be able to help our roster as we move forward as well.

Q. Coach, obviously, this program about 20 years ago was used to competing for championships and has gone through a lot of coaches the last 10 or 15 years trying to get back to that. How big do you think the chasm is from where the program is now to where it was then, and what is your vision for getting it back to that?

JOSH HEUPEL: If you go by wins and losses, right, we're not where we need to be for sure, but the only time constraints you put on that are ones you put on yourself.

I have a different perspective a little maybe of the opportunity that is Tennessee football, and I say that from my playing experience. I went to Oklahoma when they hadn't been to a Bowl game for five straight years. When you get the right alignment from president to chancellor to athletic director to head coach and you hire a great staff and you're consistent and you're accountable, I feel like you have an opportunity to move things forward quickly.

There's certainly challenges we face as a program, but there's great opportunities, and that's why I came to Tennessee. This is Tennessee. This is one of the iconic programs in all of college sports, in all of college football. We have an opportunity to celebrate the great traditions while putting a new age approach on it. Our kids and our staff, they're all there because of that. They chose the power of T for those reasons. Our staff chose the power of T for those reasons.

We're going to go out and compete every single day and push forward.

Q. The third game in October versus Alabama, it's been a long time since Tennessee has been able to defeat them. For one, what have you been told in the community about how important that game is, and what will you be doing to try to rectify that and get a win versus them?

JOSH HEUPEL: Absolutely. That ball game is huge to the



fans and to the players, on both sides of it. You come to Tennessee to play in games like that. This fan base loves football. They breathe it 365 days out of the year, man. If it's recruiting, they care about recruiting. If it's spring ball, they care about what's going on on the field.

It's not about just one game going forward. Our players understand we're only as good as our next performance.

For us as a coaching staff and players, we have to take a one-day approach at it, and that means we can control today. We can't control three months from now. We can control today. If we take care of today and follow that up consistently, we're going to put ourselves in the best position to get where we want to go long term.

Q. Anything you miss about Orlando? And also, how much different is it recruiting in the SEC maybe than it was at UCF?

JOSH HEUPEL: I miss seeing you, Mike. That's what I miss. My wife, our family, I'll speak for our staff too, the guys that came with from the previous stop, that's a special place. It's got a great future ahead of it. This is a special opportunity, unique set of circumstances that felt like it was the right opportunity.

Orlando's a great place, man. If we miss one thing, it would be the beach that's 45 minutes away.

Q. You played the quarterback position at a high level. You were an impact transfer for Bob Stoops at Oklahoma. I know you evaluate the position thoroughly. Talk about adding Joe Milton, and what did you see out of your quarterbacks this spring, such as a Harrison Bailey, that made you want to add to the QB room this season?

JOSH HEUPEL: Competition is the greatest friend that any coach has. You have to have it in that room. It's going to drive the players inside of it when you're not around it. To me, Joe's got a unique skill set, a strong arm, accurate passer. I think he's a very bright young man that's picked up on what we've done so far really well. He's talented. He can spread the football field from sideline to sideline and vertically and has a unique skill set with his size and mobility to use his feet as a weapon as well.

Q. You've talked about doing things with a new age approach. Just what does that look like?

JOSH HEUPEL: It's going to take a lot of different forms. It's the way that we communicate inside of our building. Every interaction that we have with players, with staff, with janitors, it doesn't matter who it is, creating and harnessing

energy inside of our building.

I think that's a really important thing that we've tried to build with our VFLs too is harnessing that energy and creating positive momentum that surrounds our program where our kids feel that every single day.

It's the way that we interact with them outside the game, the things that we've talked about and I've done with our players in the 5 1/2 months that we've been here. As we move forward, it may be different opportunities as far as what the uniform looks like when you run out on the field. Look good, feel good, play good.

We want to create a positive player experience from the moment that they step on campus until they're done but have a long-term relationship with them that lasts forever.

Q. I know a lot of positions are opening camps, specifically the quarterback position, as we already mentioned. How long until you start cutting down those reps and start singling down the two guys, one guy, three guys, whatever the case may be. How long at camp?

JOSH HEUPEL: There's competition at every spot. There's no job that's secure at this. You have to earn it every single day. That's the rule in college football no matter what. You have to earn the right to get a rep, earn the right to prove that you're going to be on that football field and that we can trust you.

I think the quarterback position, it's really important that every other member of your team, offensively and defensively, see that that guy has earned the opportunity to be your quarterback. When there's a bad play -- and there will be at some point -- they've got to know that's the right guy for them that's leading that football team, and that only comes through time.

As we move, guys are going to earn more reps. Guys are going to earn less reps. Once they've done that, we're going to move at that rate. Obviously, we'll have a starter before we get to kickoff, and looking forward to that competition.

Q. You mentioned line of scrimmage in your opening remarks and how it's kind of different in the SEC. We hear that a lot. What makes it different in this league, and how difficult, I guess, is it to build that? Secondly, you've been out of the league a few years. As you kind of dig into the tape, is there anything schematically that's really changed that's kind of caught your eye?

JOSH HEUPEL: Having been in the Big 12, this league,



and then having been in the AAC, the line of scrimmage is different, and it's the size and the length of the bodies, you know what I mean? Up front, inside, it's their girth. On the edges, it's their ability to have length and speed. I think that the difference in the league, or the number one thing that jumps out to you.

You can tell that just by the NFL Draft. The number of bodies that get drafted up front in particular across the board in this league, and I think that speaks to what you're saying is the difference in the league certainly. Was there a second part of your question?

Q. Schematically has anything changed since you left the league that caught your eye?

JOSH HEUPEL: I don't think dramatically there's anything. There's ebbs and flows in everything that goes on in college football, from being more 12 personnel to being spread in 10 personnel. If you look at us offensively, that's one of the things that we take great pride in, is being able to be multiple but change with what we have on campus. It might be four wide receivers, it might be two tight ends. It's whoever's going to compete and play at a championship level.

Q. You mentioned those eight transfers after spring ball. One of them is JaVonta Payton, a wide receiver from Mississippi State. What kind of player can he be for you this fall?

JOSH HEUPEL: Just watching him, strength and condition, he's fast. He's explosive. He's got a natural set of hands. I really feel like he's got an opportunity to compete and earn a spot and be a difference maker for us this fall.

He's experienced, and I think that's important too. Just that wide receiver room, we have a little bit of age on the top, but we're really young underneath. So his experience, having played in this league, I think is important for us and was an important piece for us to add this spring.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the transfers on the defensive side of the ball. I believe you have two at each level of the defense. Is there anything special you all will do during fall camp to try to improve on the cohesiveness or get them to gel together, or will you just kind of let fall camp to run its natural course? Who are some of those defensive transfers that have stood out to you so far?

JOSH HEUPEL: In particular, we were hit in the transfer portal on the defensive side of the football. I feel it was important that we added depth and experience on the

defensive side of the football coming out of the spring ball. We were able to add a couple bodies at each level. We kind of pinpointed that going into the process as we got probably midway through spring and felt like we had a handle on what our depth looked like.

I really do feel like all those guys are going to have an opportunity to compete and play and play meaningful snaps for us this fall.

Q. You didn't get to the part about what's the difference recruiting at UCF versus recruiting in the SEC.

JOSH HEUPEL: I think in some ways it's earlier here on the top part of your board. I think that is probably the biggest difference between the two.

Q. With the fast-paced offense, how do you balance keeping that up-tempo style without wearing out your defense and keeping that in mind?

JOSH HEUPEL: I think it's important that you balance it when you're going through practice. We have ebbs and flows in how we communicate and what type of tempo we play with during the course of practice. I think it's important that you manage the game and manage end-of-half situations extremely well and understand that there's a pressure you can apply by scoring too quickly or moving the ball too quickly at certain points in the game. So you're trying to eliminate a possession or two by the way that you play at the end of those halves.

Q. Do you feel more prepared, more equipped for this job than compared to when you left Missouri for UCF, your first head coaching job? If so, just how exactly?

JOSH HEUPEL: I think you grow with every experience you have, as a player, as an assistant coach, as a head coach. This job is different than the job I took over at UCF, and every job is different, whether it's your recruiting base, your conference, your location, the university. There's so many factors that go into it.

I think that I obviously have grown over the course of my three years, and being able to communicate and build a program from the bottom up.

Q. You say it's a quarterback-friendly offense. We've definitely seen that in the past, passing for upwards of 300 yards per game, but in the SEC, we also know that the run game is just as important. I just want to know how the running backs fit into your system.

JOSH HEUPEL: I think that's the misnomer about what we

do offensively. You look at, when we were at Missouri, we set a Power Five record for the fewest amount of zero negative yard plays and then reset the record the following year. When we took over at Missouri, they were 125th in the country in total offense. We ended up leading the league for two straight years in total offense.

We're very balanced in our approach. You look at our numbers, run and pass, we're extremely balanced.

So our ability for us, it really starts with the run game. It starts with the five guys up front, your tight ends, if they're playing. They're located in the core. And then our running backs have to be great with the football in their hands. That is a position that we're relatively young at, were hit by the transfer portal, but really like the guys that we have on campus.

Q. You obviously worked with Barry Odom at Mizzou. I was wondering what did you think of Barry? He's obviously still in the league at Arkansas. Wondering what you think about him. I know you don't face each other this year, but maybe watching game tapes getting ready for this job, what you thought he did at Arkansas this season.

JOSH HEUPEL: Bright, passionate, extremely competitive, tough, disciplined -- those are the things he brought while I was there at Missouri. Watching him from afar at Arkansas, I thought they took strides as the year went on defensively.

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