

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Clark Lea

Press Conference

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We are joined next by Vanderbilt Coach Clark Lea. The helmet here on the stage is Coach Lea's actual helmet from his playing days at Vanderbilt University. So if you're trying to think about firsts, that can still happen in the Southeastern Conference. I'm pretty certain it is a first to have a head coach's playing days helmet with us.

Clark began his college athletics career not far from here at Birmingham Southern College as a baseball player. He and I saw each other in Omaha for the College World Series final, where he was supporting Tim Corbin's Vanderbilt Commodores. A baseball fan growing up, his father was the team doctor for the Nashville Sounds, and he spent a number of years as a bat boy.

I'll let you know the first time Clark and I met, it was in the Dallas, Texas area, AT&T stadium, a few hours before kickoff of the Rose Bowl, the College Football Playoff semifinal. He had been named the head coach at Vanderbilt, and I had an opportunity just to say hello, not that that was memorable for him because he had plenty of things on his mind that day, but certainly at the end of his presentation, it was a privilege to welcome him in that moment to the SEC.

Which I'll do again, the head coach of Vanderbilt University, Clark Lea.

CLARK LEA: Good morning. I just want to say that I wish, or I'd always dreamed that my football helmet would one day end up in the Hall of Fame. Unfortunately, since it's here, I didn't quite reach that level of performance, but I'm glad to have my old head gear with me in my first media day experience.

I want to start with thank yous. Obviously, a thank you to Commissioner Sankey for his leadership and direction. You can imagine transitioning as a new head coach, to have that rudder and that guidance is important. One of the interesting aspects of my transition is to watch the



commissioner and his team coordinate, organize, and execute the efforts of our conference. It's a tall task, but it's easy to see why he's one of the leading voices in college athletics.

So thank you, Commissioner.

It's not lost on me to be here in person today, all the work that went in to get to this moment where we're returning to some semblance of normalcy. So a special thank you to frontline workers and medical personnel, the level of sacrifice, doing for others, putting themselves at risk. What a moment to think about all the things we went through over the past year, and to be on the cusp of a college football season with the prospect of SEC stadiums filled is a celebration.

I'd be remiss to not thank Chancellor Diermeier and Candice Lee. Wouldn't be here without them. This trip to Birmingham is a life moment for me. This is a dream for any coach. I certainly wouldn't be here without their support.

Then finally, just I want to say to everyone here how much I appreciate your willingness to show up to tell our story. Before you're a coach and before you're a player, you're a young person, and you connect to this game through your voice, your lens, your pen, and so thank you for what you do for our game and know that what you do is important.

I have two players with me, Daevion Davis and Bradley Ashmore. Both of these team members were early to buy in and embrace the change in our program. They've earned the chance to be here today, and I'm thrilled to have them represent their teammates who are back in Nashville hard at work, headed towards fall camp.

These guys have come to embody what sacrifice, commitment, brotherhood means to us at Vanderbilt. I had a chance to have a conversation with David Culley, Vanderbilt football alum and head coach of the Houston Texans, yesterday evening. One of the things Coach Culley said to me was good teams are built at the line of scrimmage, and I'm excited to have two of our very best linemen to interact and get to know today through this



event.

As a new coach, you dream of guys that are willing just to take the plunge with you, guys that don't flinch on the journey to what's possible, guys that take your vision, hold it true, and carry it to the team, and both Bradley and Daevion have been incredible in that sense.

What we've experienced in the last seven months is rare, and that's this opportunity to completely redesign an environment, and really in our redesign there's been two objectives. The first objective is to redefine what it means to be a Vanderbilt football player, and specifically, we want to assign the value of membership in this tribe internally. We want to no longer allow for external influence to shape opinions about what we do and how we do it.

The second thing, the second objective is to build the best team in the country. The best team. I think it's important in this point to recognize the fact that in this first iteration of Vanderbilt football, what we affectionately call in our building is team one, the overwhelming majority of players were recruited to a program that no longer exists.

We are connected by chance, not so much by choice. So necessarily there's a need for process to alignment. That's important because, to us, being a team isn't about the accumulation of talent. That's a part of it. But for us it's more defined in what each team member is willing to do for the next. What's the level of investment in each other, what's the level of care in each other, how do you add value to experience of your teammate. Those are the things that we look at. It's the fusion of the individuals that we're after. This idea that we're channelling personal goals into a collective effort.

Ultimately, we believe that there are like eternal verities, or foundational truths embedded in the being of team. So for us, we've been relentlessly focused as a program on stitching these truths into the fabric of what we're doing, this is through our language, through our behavior, and through our work together.

By taking control of the internal perception of this program, we found a -- it's a newfound external confidence. So when you walk in our building, there's a different spirit, a different enthusiasm, a different energy that permeates the hallways that defines our work together.

It's our ultimate belief that confidence doesn't originate at the result level, but rather it's a by-product of process and preparation. So this team has a long way to go, and they're staring down a training camp that's going to introduce adversity at a number of different levels. We're going to find out a lot about who we are through the

building and the growth of this team in fall camp, but it's all in preparation for what awaits us this fall.

I'm excited for this team to learn to take preparation to performance. I'm excited to watch this team evolve as we reach for our potential this season.

Finally, we design at the source at Vanderbilt, not at the surface. We're in lock step with our university and our department in our commitment to providing an experience that's steeped in substance. We believe that this is the best student-athlete experience in the country. Our formula is simple. Everything we do is wrapped up in this identity that we're creating, and it starts with our focus on choices, on behaviors, on actions that strengthen the team. By strengthening the team, you're connected to purpose. Purpose connects you to confidence, and by confidence, I mean self-confidence, the confidence of belonging.

When you have that level of confidence, it shapes your attitude, and attitude drives daily performance, and the aggregate of our daily efforts is what delivers us to Saturdays in the fall. And a trained team can take preparation to performance to reach for the desired outcomes.

But for us, there are no cheat codes to winning. You can't simply hack your way to sustained success. We have to go the long, hard way, but we're going to do it together at Vanderbilt, and that's what's going to make this special.

Again, I'm honored to be with you today, and with that, I look forward to answering any questions you may have. Thank you.

Q. What do you think from your perspective would constitute a successful season for your team? And how much do you focus on the win-loss record?

CLARK LEA: So won't place a win-loss record or won't state a win-loss record; don't believe in doing that in any semblance. We'll say that every game that we play we'll have a plan to win, and we'll measure our results off our execution of that plan to win.

There are measurable things that show growth as a team, and there are things that can't be measured. I think both are important. In the end, I'm a competitor, and I didn't come to Vanderbilt to do anything other than win. So for me, it's about how we design this team, how we design our tactics, how we develop as people and as teammates to put ourselves in the best position to win games in the fourth quarter. We can be the best physically and mentally conditioned team in the country. We can impose our will on our opponent late in the game.



The vision is that there's a fourth quarter game where we're on our sideline looking across the field at an opponent that is wilting under the pressure that we're applying because we are the best mentally and physically conditioned team in the country, that we know on our sideline that we're ready to pounce, and we understand that their margin for error is so small because of the pressure that we're applying.

Those are the kinds of things I'm looking for as we measure performance as we get into the heat of this season, is that ability to find ways to win those games late.

Q. You made what some would consider an out-of-the-box hire, Barton Simmons, to kind of head your recruiting operation. What kind of value can a guy like that bring to your program with his background, and do you think that's something coaches will look to more in the future, guys in kind of the recruiting space?

CLARK LEA: Well, for me, first of all, as to the value, I think Vanderbilt, we need to be authentically us. We need to focus on what it means to recruit to Vanderbilt, what it means to develop team at Vanderbilt. So what I didn't want in that role was anyone who was going to bring a cookie cutter approach, this is how we did it at school X. We're not looking to create a mini version of any other program in our conference in Nashville. Again, we want to be authentically us.

Barton, as an outside-the-box thinker, as someone who's connected to recruiting but hasn't been immersed in a recruiting operation, gives us that opportunity. Barton is a friend. That's not why he's there. There is a trust level that we default to because we've known each other for so long. He's incredibly smart. He thinks on his feet. He adapts, and he is growing in his role.

If you can imagine going from being outside in the recruiting operation to being inside, there's a lot that goes into that that has to be learned, but certainly we think it's the perfect fit.

I'm excited not only with the results that we're getting right now in recruiting, but also how this projects forward, and I think that absolutely it will be a trend in college football that will be followed.

Q. A lot of times when a coach goes back to his alma mater it's to kind of rekindle the glory days, like Steve Spurrier at Florida, Kirby Smart at Georgia. I don't mean this as a personal reflection on you, but looking up at the seasons you were there, pretty rough

records. What do you remember about that time, and what about that made you want to go back to Vandy? Because I'm sure a guy with your success rate probably has had other opportunities or would have other opportunities to be a head coach.

CLARK LEA: Bob, let me say first there's no better program in the country than Vanderbilt football, so that's why I'm back. There's an unyielding belief in what's possible there. That's through my experience.

As a competitor, the three years that I was there playing were the toughest three years of my career and it was hard, but it was formative. I watched Bobby Johnson methodically build that program into what became a bowl champion in 2008.

I jump in with, I guess, an accelerated perspective. I know the intricacies of what that program is about, how it fits in our university, what the recruiting profile should look like, and where the resources are.

So for me, it's seizing the opportunity we have to build something different to give this program a chance to be at its potential. I didn't return home to have a homecoming. Honestly, I thought that your opening remark was going to be a statement to my whatever I have, four catches for 27 yards in my career, whatever it was.

But in the end, this is about the belief in the student-athlete experience for me. This is a belief there are only so many programs in the country where you can truly go to a family and say, There are no compromises here. We talk in our building about being directed -- your ultimate success 20 years from now.

When I say that to my team, I share with them that I was in those seats 20 years ago. So there's an incredible binding and messaging when you're at your alma mater. The fact that we are at the best school in the league in the best city in the league and there's this convergence of resources and leadership at our university, to me, this is the time to strike.

We don't apologize for being Vanderbilt. It's not -- I mean, our expectation is to win. Hey, look, everything takes time to build to its potential, but smart people figure things out. So we're going to grip the bat and take our swing for the fences, and we're very proud of what we represent, and we're proud of what we're going to sustain over time at Vanderbilt.

Q. Curious what Mike Elko meant to you in your development as a coach and if there's any philosophies or techniques or anything that you

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

learned from him that you bring to your role now?

CLARK LEA: How much time do we have? Because Mike's a dear friend. I connected with Mike at Bowling Green, was with him there for ten months, back to Wake Forest with him, and we left together to go to Notre Dame, and we were at Notre Dame for a year together. He obviously left to go.

In my three seasons with him, I learned more football than I ever could have imagined. He's a guy that there's a shared ethos, a respect for people, a respect for the players, a certain style of coaching that has lifetime impact.

I can't say enough good about Mike Elko, who he is as a person, who he is as a tactician. He's the smartest football coach that I know. Yeah, everything that I do at some level goes back to the work that we did together under Dave Clawson. So high respect for Mike.

Q. Can you describe the evolution of recruiting talent in the state of Tennessee? Obviously, the population explosion in Nashville, and improving and increasing in the eastern part of the state as well.

CLARK LEA: Well, a lot's changed since I was in high school obviously. The level of football has improved. The population base, like you mentioned, has gotten bigger. It's a fertile ground, and we have to do a great job of being first in our backyard.

Look, not everybody is going to be a fit for us, and that is what it is, but we need to make sure the guys that are looking for a place like Vanderbilt, again, a place where there are no compromises to be made, that I want to achieve at a high level on the field. I want this to be a football decision for recruits, and it will be because we'll have the best developmental program in the country.

Again, every system that we designed is built to drive a player to his potential. But also, guys that know Vanderbilt want to know that in 20 years they're not -- we don't use the word fallback plan in our building. There's no such thing. To me it's launch to impact long term in life once you're done with football. That could be a ten-year career and you could be 30 years old, and your life and your impact is just starting. So Vanderbilt's a place that will develop that person, as well as the player, to its highest level.

Those guys that exist in our backyard, both in middle Tennessee, and obviously, as you mentioned, the eastern part of the state and western Tennessee, which has always had strength, those guys that are out there need to know that Vanderbilt is coming after them, and we're excited to build a program that they'll be proud to stay home and be a

part of.

Q. Vandy finished second in total offense and last in points per game. You brought in your new OC David Raih. What are some of the conversations you're having about boosting that offense and rejuvenating it?

CLARK LEA: We haven't paid a lot of attention to what we were because everything changed when you change systems. It's more about the focus on what we will be. We need to design around matchups. This is about how we use formations, motions, tempo to create pressure on the defense to get the matchups that are favorable to us. Every play needs to be a design, and we need to have a reason for why we're doing what we're doing.

To be honest with you, like as a defensive coordinator, life becomes pretty miserable in modern day offense, but now I get to step back and be the team coach, which means I can involve myself on that side too.

I got to say one of the things that was most impressive that Greg mentioned when we met last year before the game in Dallas, preparing for that team was challenging, not just because the players, but the design was also really well executed. It reminded me of the impact a defensive coach can have on offensive structure, because ultimately we know what gives us problems, and designing around that can unlock performance around an offense.

Embedded in your question is situational work too, finishing drives with seven points, so on, so forth, all of which are part of the philosophy that we're bringing and the mindset that we're developing within the program.

Q. You talk about rebuilding the program from the ground up. Just wondering what do you have to do to do that? And what does putting that plan look like into practice?

CLARK LEA: I think every program is unique. This isn't the first one that is facing a rebuild or a restructuring. That's not unique to us. But what is unique to us is the history that our players have experienced within the program. The challenge of holding people to different standards and expectations in the same spaces that they occupied before is real. Everything they confront needs to be different, and we can't be afraid to be drastically different.

So you can't know -- I don't know that you can devise a blueprint. I think my knowledge of what Vanderbilt is, what Vanderbilt could be certainly helped in setting a course for the change that needed to happen, but I didn't really know

what the need was until I stepped in front of my team for the first time.

As I've gotten to know the need, I've been able to do what I feel like is a better job of seeing the need and filling the need. Again, being willing to adapt and adjust along the way.

It's a relentless job. It's a job that takes constant time and attention, but it's also one of the most rewarding experiences at this point in my life, where every day I get up and my feet hit the floor, and good day, bad day, whatever, I get to be the head coach at what I feel like is the best university in the best city in the country.

I have a chance to impact the lives of people that will be the future leaders in our communities. I mean, the impact we have at Vanderbilt football in forming leadership for our country is real. And not everyone can look at their job that way, but that's the responsibility that me and my staff have at Vanderbilt. So the significance of what we do in restructuring the internal perception and the mindset within this program will have a ripple effect to societies and communities 10, 20 years down the road that will be significant.

So those are the ways we view our experience and how we view our job, and obviously we take a lot of energy and pride in doing it at a high level.

Q. Since that \$300 million number dropped in April for the Vandy United Fund, how much of a difference have you noticed and your staff noticed in terms of receptiveness on the recruiting trail with prospects and maybe even high school coaches?

CLARK LEA: It certainly has an impact, and it will continue to have an impact. I think as those -- that number becomes conceptualized in diagrams and those are released, as shovels hit the ground, I think we'll continue to see a positive impact in recruiting.

The focus for me has been rehabbing the team in the locker room. It's the people that matter the most. It's making sure the staff is aligned in messaging, making sure that we have command of our language with our players, that we're building meaningful relationships there. That has required a lot of energy.

For this program to reach its potential and sustain success, this facility is going to go a long way in making that a reality for us, because we want for people to walk on campus and say, Hey, football is important at Vanderbilt, and this will be a visual example of that investment.

So it's a -- Vandy United is a huge momentum swing for us. My responsibility now is to prepare this team for when those facilities are built, that we're ready to occupy them and win in them.

Q. First of all, good morning and welcome. For a program based in a larger city I know the NIL issue is still evolving, but how do you see down the road, what are those conversations like inside the building, how that could impact recruiting down the road for your program?

CLARK LEA: I think the primary focus right now is on our current student-athletes. It's this idea. And for me anything that puts a Vanderbilt football player front facing to our community, I am for. Anything that improves the quality of life of our student-athletes, I am for. The fact that we are in the biggest city in our league's footprint is a huge possibility or potential, so we're very aware of that.

I'm in lock step with Candice and Chancellor Diermeier and our efforts to support our players and to guide them through the process for them to be able to monetize name, image, and likeness.

As far as the recruiting impact that goes, certainly the idea that you throw a rock off our campus and you're hitting a lot of really impactful businesses, the music industry is right there on our back porch. So there's a lot of exciting opportunities there, not to mention there's great food in Nashville too, which I got accustomed to in my move.

Yeah, so we're thrilled about the chances. We want to be -- we want to be mindful of the fact that this is new, it's exciting, but it's new, and we want to take a long term approach to make sure that we're doing this the right way that allows us to build the best possible team and also for these guys to optimize their name, image, and likeness.

Q. What's the story with your helmet being up there? Have you had that thing for 20 years? Did someone find it for this?

CLARK LEA: A football player's helmet is like, next to kids, one of the most important things that we keep with us. No, I've kept it. It's been in a book shelf. Obviously, as I've taken other trips and other jobs I keep it at home, but there's, for me, a physical representation of what I invested here, and it's in my office now. It made the trip down with me here.

It's just a connection to my time as a student-athlete, and part of it, to go back to the first question, both the things that I celebrate in my time as a student-athlete, but also the things that I came back to change about what it means to

play football at Vanderbilt. Keeping that reminder nearby just, again, is another way to keep my focus on what's really important.

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