

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Mississippi State Bulldogs Coach Mike Leach

Press Conference

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Mike, I promise to buy a book and catch up. He's been on "The New York Times" best seller list with *Swing Your Sword*; also written a book entitled *Geronimo, Leadership Strategies of an American warrior*. Spent some time in Africa in May on a safari, and we learned in the back hallway he and I share an appreciation for stand-up paddleboarding.

Head coach of Mississippi State University, Mike Leach.

MIKE LEACH: All right. I'm not a big opening statement guy, and plus you guys are going to ask whatever you want to know anyway, so let's just go ahead and get started. Is there any questions?

Q. I wanted to ask you about -- you had some of the most productive quarterbacks in college football history in your time as a head coach. What are some of the things you look for when you're recruiting a young man to fit in your offense?

MIKE LEACH: The most important thing and the hardest thing to really gauge is the guy that elevates the play of the other 11 players, or the other 10 players. So you want a guy that elevates the play of the team because that's the ultimate role of a quarterback. That's the most important thing he does.

Then after that, I can't get to square one unless they're accurate, and then do they make good decisions. Yeah, coaching has a role in working with a guy to make good decisions, but you need a guy that's accurate and do they make good decisions. If they don't do that, I don't think they can play quarterback.

From there, the others, which you got quick feet, which I like quick feet because it helps you in the pocket. Are they fast? And I think there's a difference between quick feet and fast. Then strong arm and big.

But if you think of all those things, the NFL Hall of Fame is



full of guys that don't have every one of those things I mentioned, but I do think you have to have the top two, and then after that, really good quarterbacks have a presence to them as far as their ability to elevate the players around them.

It might surprise you, but you can't see anything up here, just lights.

Q. You started off the first year of the program kind of in a tumultuous year, to say the least. How important is it going to be for the program to get back to normal and have fans back in full force at Davis Wade?

MIKE LEACH: I think it's critical. I think it's critical, not just to us and because we want it that way, I think it's important to our fans and everybody else to get in the normal routine where you kind of elevate and everybody feels enriched by having the opportunity to watch and participate in football in a normal fashion.

Certainly as coaches and players, that's incredibly important to us. Because football, really good football, it's a by-product of routine, and when you break up the routine, I think it's difficult.

In our case, of course, it was difficult because new staff and a very young team. So perhaps even more disruptive. And that's the key to just kind of do the same things over and over again and just do them better and better each time, and that's kind of what a routine gives you.

So I think that, yeah, I think that it's very important we get back to normal.

Q. Two questions: First, what's Tennessee getting in transfer JaVonta Payton from your school? And then two, Commissioner Sankey had mentioned there's 1,600 players in the transfer portal and 1,100 are still there. What opinions do you have about the transfer portal right now?

MIKE LEACH: Well, as far as the transfer portal goes, I don't -- I think that too many -- well, there's way too many people on there. There's a point to where I remember



when I was 18 and I think that a lot of people remember when they were 18 and of course see it in other people, and I think too often there's a temptation to cut and run. I don't think that's always the best course because you learn a lot by persevering and sitting in there and pushing through adversity.

I mean, heck, when I was in college I thought about leaving or going to another place, all that stuff, throughout college and even law school. I think that there's a point to where there's a huge value later on to persevering through adverse situations, and I think that college football deliberately creates adversity because it's a competitive situation and you're wanting to develop skills to be competitive so that it brings out the best in everybody.

I think that -- just like you mentioned or alluded to, I don't think that all those guys are going to find a place to go. I think in the end they would have been better off where they started rather than not play, but in some cases, another opportunity, a better opportunity, I think that has to be carefully evaluated. I think that sometimes it is necessary to make a move.

I think also, though, it's too easy to transfer right now. I think that the people used to consider their situation more carefully when they had to sit a year if they transferred laterally.

Q. You've been running your air raid offense for decades, successful and multiple conferences. What's been the key to the longevity of that scheme? And was there a smoking gun last year to y'all's struggles, or was there not enough practice time or personnel didn't fit it maybe as well as you'd have liked?

MIKE LEACH: Well, we just had a short window, and we're a very young team. I think that we just have to continue to improve and evolve as a team. I think that there's a reason that the NFL's adopting so many air raid concepts and that the last however many, probably ten Super Bowls there's been a super number of air raid concepts in all of them.

Because, in my mind, it's an efficient way to move the football because you utilize personnel and utilize the space that you're provided. So I think it's a good way to do things.

As far as a smoking gun, I think you're always trying to improve. One way to improve, at least in our case, get older. Rather than be one of the youngest teams in the BCS, I think the youngest, get older. But I was very proud of the way they competed and improved as the season went on.

Q. What kind of season did you think Will Rogers had? How did spring go? I know you brought some other quarterbacks in. What's the quarterback pool look like, and what's that competition going to be like in fall camp?

MIKE LEACH: I thought Will did a really good job. True freshmen don't start very often, and part of the reason is they're true freshmen. But in Will's case, we needed a guy that could go out there and play. I thought he did a very good job, especially as far as being composed and played with a level of -- at times looked more experienced, certainly, than he was.

I think he steadily improves. He's a tireless worker, works a great deal on his own. Also is one of those guys that does elevate the players around him. We got a lot better quarterback room than we had last year. We're still a relatively young group other than Jack Abraham. Jack Abraham has got the most experience in the room from when he played at Southern Miss. Then we've got some really promising young guys too, Sawyer Robertson and Daniel Greek.

So we're looking forward to what unfolds this year. And it will be competitive, it will be very competitive, and the biggest challenge is going to be sorting out how to deal the reps because you don't have enough reps to consistently rep four quarterbacks. So we're going to have to sort out who's toward the top and narrow it down to two and go from there.

Q. Bobby Bowden reportedly has a terminal condition. This has just been reported. I know your roots are out west, but you came up under another kind of iconic coach yourself, LaVell Edwards. What do those kind of coaches mean to the game, and where does Coach Bowden kind of fit in in kind of the pantheon of the greats?

MIKE LEACH: I know Coach Bowden. First of all, he's a tremendous person, just a great person and a great example as far as a person and has a tremendous family. But Coach Bowden has been an example to all of us. He's one of those guys that made us all want to coach when we were younger, made it exciting. Coach Bowden threw the ball before most people were inclined to.

When I was young, in high school, junior high, I used to watch his teams because they're a team that was liable to upset teams ahead of them, and that's as they started throwing the ball around, became more and more explosive. Of course, by the time I got to Valdosta State they were the top of the country and had the opportunity to go down and watch them practice numerous times



because they were close to Valdosta. We'd drive down and watch spring practice and things like that.

He's just a tremendous guy, and I don't think the game would be the same without him.

Q. I know you've been an advocate of the four-team playoff; they're possibly expanding to 12 teams. Is 12 enough?

MIKE LEACH: It's never enough. I'll tell you, Dr. Keenum, our president, is on that committee, so I know they're in good hands. I think that part's outstanding. I think 12 teams is a huge step in the right direction. I personally would like to see 64, and you could format it out pretty easily, but I think it's a huge step the right direction, and I look forward to it.

Q. You came into the league in an unprecedented year with a ten-game conference schedule. What did you think about the week-to-week preparation and talent level that you saw in the league in your first year?

MIKE LEACH: It's obviously a very talented league, no question. It's kind of a lot like when I left the league from Kentucky, when I was offensive coordinator at Kentucky and then went to Oklahoma. So it was kind of like then, just every team's good and that sort of thing.

You know, unique from the preparation because there was a certain amount of wondering who was available to play from one week to the next. That definitely had an impact on the preparations. No, just an impressive league, impressive places. Didn't necessarily get the full effect of the stadium. Obviously, the crowd is far more animated than a lot of people like the cardboard people in there. I couldn't help but think of The Twilight Zone.

So then they'd turn the PA system up a little louder. No, looking forward to the crowds because that's what makes this league great and all leagues great is all the unique places to play, and the crowds provided a great deal of that.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about Jack Abraham and how he stacks up with those quarterback attributes that you mentioned. Also, have you played two quarterbacks in your past? Is that something that could evolve from this quarterback room?

MIKE LEACH: I doubt we'll play two quarterbacks because that's not just an adjustment to the quarterbacks, it's an adjustment to the team and the players around them.

Jack is accurate, makes good decisions, has quick feet is

how I would categorize him. The other thing he brings to us is the highest level of experience at the position that we have on our team.

Q. Speaking of cardboard people, do you think you and your offense maybe got a false sense of where you were after that LSU game, and what did teams do to adjust to it so quickly after that?

MIKE LEACH: I think that one thing -- I don't think we got a false sense as much as we were an evolving team and so was LSU. I think that we played several other quality teams extremely close. Then I think that in some cases our experience caught up with us, in some cases, although everybody had it but you never knew where it would hit, who was available to play from one week to the next. But we got better as the year went on.

Q. On the defensive side of the ball, you guys got a couple quarterbacks there in the secondary that are getting some preseason honors. With that many covering the back half of the defense, do you feel like you guys can get a little more up front and get some pressure on the quarterback?

MIKE LEACH: Well, we were pretty good at pressure last year and will continue to be. I think we have some good guys in front, and then I thought that both of Martin and Emmanuel both got better as the season went on. Then, of course, they're both great workers. You know one thing both of them have is they just love to play. Those guys that love to play, that always want one more snap, tend to get better because they find an excuse to be on the field rather than an excuse to be off of it.

But I do think that they're key. Then, of course, we need to solidify the safety position.

Q. Nick Saban said yesterday that his quarterback has earned almost a million dollars so far in NIL deals. Just what effect does that have on recruiting when players have that sort of earning power at other schools?

MIKE LEACH: I don't know. I think that that's still evolving. I think that we'll all know a lot more in the future because it's happened quite suddenly. I guess we'll find out.

I think Mississippi State's a great place to establish your brand. I think that along with this, as far as professional and that type of thing, there's other things that go along with it, and I don't know that these will surface.

People talk a lot about the parallels with the NFL. Other things that exist with that sort of thing is guys get traded,



guys get drafted, and guys get cut. So does that become a piece down the road? I don't know.

The other thing that I'd like to see, I think you've got to still encourage guys to graduate because I think that, in general, things are better, families, the individual, the schools, the more people that graduate.

Also, it's got to be less tempting to hit the transfer portal if things don't go your way. I was talking to a good friend of mine, and we were bouncing this around, and what if -- and this is a what if. There may be holes in this idea. But what if, when you sign a guy, on graduation they receive, say, \$100,000 or \$150,000 on graduation. You only get it if you graduate. You have to graduate. If you graduate, after you graduate from that school, you get \$150,000.

Now, if you transfer, you don't get the \$150,000, but if you stay at that school, you graduate from that school, you get \$150,000. One, I think -- and the amount of money, I don't care what the amount is. The amount could be whatever. I just don't want a bidding war, and I think that, if we end up with bidding wars, that will definitely hurt football. But as far as money, that sort of thing.

And the other thing I think we've got to keep an eye on is encouraging people to graduate and not making it so enticing to transfer.

Q. About the baseball team winning their first National Championship, have you talked to your team at all trying to motivate them about using that success, the baseball team's success to kind of replicate this season?

MIKE LEACH: Well, I think it inspired everybody. Everybody is really excited about our baseball team, and we're in a unique situation. Our football complex is literally across the street from the baseball stadium, so our guys go to the baseball games a lot more than they probably do at most other campuses.

The biggest thing is your focus on the day-to-day improvement. I mean, the better you do that, the better your results in the end are going to be. But seeing guys that they know go out there and have success -- because our baseball team had a certain amount of adversity throughout the year, and then of course really got hot there at the end. So I think it inspired and impressed everybody.

Q. Mike, was there a moment a few years ago when you were at Washington State that you thought you might be the next head coach at Tennessee?

MIKE LEACH: I talked to Tennessee, but that thing never

-- well, nothing ever got nailed down. Then pretty soon, they had a coup d'etat there. You guys can sort that among yourselves, but that's pretty well-documented.

So, yeah, I didn't end up in the middle of the coup, so lucky for me.

Q. This will be the first season that you return to Kyle Field in a long time. Does that hold any significance to you, and what are some of the memories that stand out from your past trips there?

MIKE LEACH: It's one of the greatest places to play on earth, and I said this when I was at Tech. That's one of the Carnegie Halls of football there. I mean, that -- that Kyle Field, first of all, it's gigantic and holds a ton of people. The grass is impeccable, and of course, the Aggies are always highly motivated. It's a fun place to play.

I've got some great memories of our games at Kyle Field over the years. Yeah, it was a fantastic experience. It helped that we won most of them.

Q. How have you addressed vaccination with your team? And what are your vaccination situation right now?

MIKE LEACH: First of all, we let the doctors handle all that, so I don't have anything to do with that. We let the guys that know what they're doing handle it.

Q. Tiger Woods rivals on the PGA TOUR have credited him with eyeballs on TV sets, salaries going up, purses going up. I'm wondering, do you guys in the SEC sort of credit Nick Saban for some of the same things going on in the SEC, as far as exposure, salaries, all of that?

MIKE LEACH: I've never really thought of that. Obviously, Nick's a great coach and everybody respects what he's done, but the other thing is -- and with all due respect to Nick -- the SEC wasn't exactly invisible when he got here.

The SEC goes back a long, long time. You can go through a long list of great coaches that have been in the SEC, and I think the SEC's commanded -- well, they've commanded attention as far back as I can remember.

Well, let's see. I figure I was 3, so 57 years I can vouch for the fact that the SEC has commanded attention.

Q. Just a followup question on the vaccination. Are you vaccinated? And then why or why not?

MIKE LEACH: If I was or I wasn't, I wouldn't share it with you. But again, we leave that to the doctors and anybody's



doctor or care provider.

Q. Austin Williams is a veteran receiver in your program. He's here today. Since you've been at Mississippi State, how has he come along as far as a veteran presence for your offense?

MIKE LEACH: He does an outstanding job. The thing that Austin brings is the consistency. He's got a certain -- I think that sometimes people forget how important consistency is. It's vitally important, and it's also something that, if you've got a real consistent guy that's a great example, other people draw from that.

So Austin put us in a position where early on, as we're teaching our offense, you could count on clips of things being done the right way at the right time and to illustrate a lot of points that helped speed up coaching because of the example that Austin set.

The other thing is he's a natural leader and a smart guy. So I think that creates a level of stability, and the more Austin Williams and Aaron Brules you have, the better you're going to be.

Q. Dan Mullen threw out the idea the other day of getting rid of the annual crossover game to be able to open up the possibility of more of these matchups. Do you have any thoughts on that, to not see such a long disparity with some of these matchups and potentially not having those annual rivalry games with a cross-division rival?

MIKE LEACH: He talked about getting rid of what again?

Q. The permanent crossover game.

MIKE LEACH: I've heard it proposed, and I think it's a good idea that, because the SEC is so big and there's so many teams, I mean, there's guys you don't see for like six years or whatever it adds up to. There probably ought to be some crossover between the east and the west maybe instead of just catch rate the entire east or west.

More crossover in the conference as a whole; I think that would be a good idea.

Q. Well-documented that you taught a class at Washington. Can we expect you to teach a class at Mississippi State, and is it harder to be a teacher or a coach?

MIKE LEACH: We've talked about it actually, talked about it. It was really fun interacting with the students in that type of setting. The thing that was most exciting to me was the

speakers we had. I mean, we had some just incredible speakers that had amazing experiences all over the world.

One guy was instrumental in busting the shoe bomber and some guys that had really done some incredible things for their country overseas and things like that.

So it was just to talk to those guys and hear what they had to say both before, during, and after the class was pretty good. I've talked about it. I haven't done anything yet, and obviously last year was such a disrupted year that we didn't make much headway on that. I wouldn't be against it.

Coaching and teaching, it's really quite similar. Yeah, I don't know. One's indoors. One's outdoors, and you have more space obviously in coaching. If you get ticked off in coaching, you can pace off a variety of directions. Oh, you don't get in trouble for swearing as much in coaching. So coaching does definitely have its advantages.

But the teaching, that was exciting. Yeah, I would look forward to doing it again.

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