

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Clark Lea

Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: Clark Lea became Vanderbilt University's 29th head football coach in December of 2020. He's entering his second year at his alma mater.

He begins the season for the Southeastern Conference in what is often referred to as week zero, and Vanderbilt plays at the University of Hawaii. Just a commissioner's note, I'm going to be making that trip to watch Vanderbilt play at Hawaii using my frequent flyer miles.

Clark holds two degrees from Vanderbilt. He arrived in Nashville after a coaching career that included stops at UCLA, South Dakota State, Bowling Green, Wake Forest and most recently at Notre Dame where he served as defensive coordinator from 2018 to 2020.

Vanderbilt University head football coach, Clark Lea.

CLARK LEA: Good morning. Thanks, Greg. Make sure that you get the invite to the luau in Hawaii. We won't leave you off that (smiling).

I want to start by acknowledging Greg. I'm always blown away by his leadership especially in the time of transition we're in right now in our sport.

Also to acknowledge the entire SEC staff and all the volunteers that put together such a first-class event.

It's an honor to participate in this event. It's an honor to represent Vanderbilt University, a world-renowned institution and a charter member of the SEC.

I want to take a minute here to talk about my partnership with Chancellor Diermeier and Candice Lee. Before approaching my goals for our program, I think it's important to recognize the chancellor's vision for this program to be an integral part of a thriving university community.

Before we talk about program growth, I think we need to discuss Candice Lee's vision for the growth of our program



to be a catalyst for departmental growth. With all the incredible things that are going on right now in Vanderbilt, the football program is certainly at a central point in that conversation.

It's their vision that unlocks my vision. Without their direction, their leadership, their energy behind our efforts, there's no way we could reach as high as we're reaching.

But it's because of their support that we're aiming to build the best football program in the country at Vanderbilt University, where we have the best school in the best city in the best conference with the best facilities on the horizon.

As our efforts start with their vision, it's important for me to start by acknowledging and thanking them both.

It's awesome to be in Atlanta. Had the chance last night to spend the evening with some of our alums who are doing great things here in the area. Building out the Vanderbilt football network and connecting the Vanderbilt community has been an aspect of year one that's been totally energizing to me and fulfilling to me as a member of that community myself.

It makes me proud to witness the important things that our alums are a part of, the impact they're having across the country. All of that motivates me to prepare the next generation to maintain that legacy.

With that, I have three men with me today that are perfect representations of our program: Anfernee Orji from Dallas, Texas; Mike Wright, who's from right here in Atlanta; and Ben Bresnahan, who was born in Atlanta and who prepped just down the road in Cumming, Georgia.

As you get a chance to meet and get to know these guys, understand they're examples of precisely why our football program is important. Vanderbilt football is home to many young and driven, talented young people being trained every day to collaborate, care for one another, problem solve, fight through adversity, take ownership, compete and win.



We view the members of our team as the future leaders of our community. That puts into perspective the important work we undertake in assisting them through what is a pivotal time of growth in their lives.

Our mission is to guide and support them through the many challenges inherent in learning and growth and development, while on the largest of stages and under the brightest of lights. So that's important to us in our fight, and we will continue on that mission, accomplishing this by teaching them to remain tethered to values and principles, to always place standards over circumstances, and above all else to honor our program's covenants, those sacred promises we make to one another.

I want to recognize Anfernee, Mike and Ben as impeccable representatives for our players back in Nashville. I'm excited for you guys to get to know and make connection with them today.

A year ago I talked to you about the strain of resuscitating a program, aligning a group of people who had come to find themselves under new standards and expectations while not having made the choice to be a part of it.

These standards and expectations had come to define their daily life, and by the time I was in front of you last summer, we had partly accomplished our goal of driving compliance within the new program model.

Once we reached the season, we were forced to confront our reality, and our physical, mental, technical and tactical deficiencies were evident from the start. I want to be clear that the season was challenging on many levels, but we were not victimized by that adversity.

Last fall was a necessary experience for us. It exposed the true starting point for this early start of our build as a program. The adversity of the fall broke off all the parts of us that were fake and unbelieving. It stripped us down to our studs.

From there, we started our build.

As the season progressed, we progressed. The challenges we endured together served to bind us closer rather than break us apart.

Towards the end of the season, internally we could start to feel the fibers of our program strengthening. We could start to feel the shift from a compliant program to a committed program. We could feel a brotherhood forming. And yet, even at the end of the season, we fell way short of our own program performance expectations.

So that delivers us to team two. In the off-season we've recruited into the gap that exists between us and our competition, adding more than 30 new scholarship members to our program in a class widely considered to be the best in program history.

We've developed into the gap with over 50 players choosing to return to our program. This is important because these returners represent our core. They've chosen to return because they're excited about their personal development within the new model, they're energized by the direction of our program, and most importantly they care about one another, they believe in one another.

That belief is representation of the foundational relationships that have formed in our building.

With that, we have the formation of team two, a team that will still be young, relatively young in experience, but will be further along in the formation of identity. We want this identity to be what becomes the calling card for team two and performance.

It's an identity that's anchored in our concept of total effort and also the commitment to our five covenants: true brotherhood, pride in everything we do, earn it every day, player to player accountability, and recycle positive energy.

A team that plays with total effort and plays together will compete with purpose for every blade of grass on the field. This fighting spirit, combined with a smart, integrative strategy, will give everything this team needs to realize its potential.

The line of progress in our program is clear internally. It shows up in subtle ways: small conversations and interactions, small habits, winning choices, silent commitments, work in the shadows.

But it also is apparent in more overt ways. On the field this spring, we had a team that was bigger, faster and stronger. That's a result of our efforts in our strength and conditioning program and a testament to Coach Hourigan's work with the team.

We had a team that started to explore what playing with total effort was about. We saw them become more disciplined and have attention to detail in terms of our operation. We saw chemistry developing within our players. All of these things are a part of the process of building a program.

Though this advancement doesn't guarantee us a change in our record, it does make us excited to continue on this



path of growth, knowing that we are on a course that's actualizing change.

So our goal this fall is simply to play at our highest level as a program, knowing that if we can replicate that, our best will be enough to deliver a shift in results.

The idea is that we maintain a disciplined focus on the parts of our performance that we control. In that way, we continue to grow this team and this program independent of the opponent we play. The focus will be on us.

Any program that sustains success must first find a level of internal confidence and consistency. We aim to do exactly that this fall.

As a program, we're excited about the changes that are occurring within our sport and feel as though that which makes us distinct at Vanderbilt also strengthens our position in a rapidly changing landscape.

It is our distinct qualities as a program and a university that create a strategic market advantage for us through differentiation. We understand what makes us unique, and we're looking to optimize that to carve out a competitive product in our market.

What we offer our team members is still grounded in the fundamentals of the student-athlete experience, with a focus on transformation over transaction, a commitment to substance over surface.

These are the defining aspects of a program that I'd want for my own children in which holistic development isn't compromised for instant gratification, and the prospect of a lifelong journey towards purpose and impact is not sacrificed for the immediacy of result.

We approach the era of transfer portal and name, image and likeness by first staying true to our core belief, which is that the best teams are still bound by the joy found in shared suffering and sacrifice and a willingness to funnel individual goals through team success.

This vision for team requires that every program member, staff and player alike, consistently defaults to behaviors and attitudes that strengthen the team, the aggregate of which is a competitive and collective force.

With that in mind, for a year now our players have had the opportunity to earn money off name, image and likeness, which we celebrate as a program and we celebrate as advancement within our sport.

We want to lead in this area at Vanderbilt. We want to

offer a robust program and plan to help our players in the NIL space. When done the right way, we are certain that NIL opportunities can enhance the quality of life for our student-athletes while maintaining the integrity of a transformational experience.

However, we believe firmly that if the earning potential of our players, our team members, is greatest in their lifetime between the ages of 18 and 22, then we and our collective system have failed them completely.

We work every day to protect the aspects of character building that are essential to long-term success. My responsibility as head coach is to enhance the experience of our team in all areas while always keeping in mind the conversation that will occur in 20 years in which a man reflects on the true value, the lasting value, of the investment he made while a part of our program at Vanderbilt.

This serves as my rudder. This helps me shape my yes and my no.

I'm proud of the work we've done to this point as a program. I'm proud of the progress we've made. I'm excited about what's to come. I'm excited about getting back to the team that awaits me in Nashville that's been fighting through the summer to continue to tile into that identity.

We are on a quest to be the best developmental program in the country. We want to set a course for our men to realize successful careers in the NFL.

Now, I use the term 'career' intentionally because you can get an opportunity in the NFL no matter where you go so long as you have the skills. But to establish a career and maintain a career, to sustain success at a high level, requires a certain specific foundation that you lean upon as your physical skills deplete.

The Vanderbilt experience in every aspect, on campus, within our program design, provides the fundamentals necessary to form such a foundation and will ultimately drive our players to be great pros.

What is most important in this quest is that we simultaneously acknowledge that at Vanderbilt we do not believe in backup plans. One of our guiding principles as a program is that better people make better players and that our student-athletes aren't on two competing paths in life, that of a student and that of an athlete, but rather they're on a singular journey to their personal best.

It's our job to realize that personal best. In that sense, we



look forward to each one of our team members launching into impact, living a life of purpose and substance long after their time when the game is done.

We know in time Vanderbilt football will be the best program in the country. As I said a year ago, there are no cheat codes, shortcuts, no hacks that will allow this to happen overnight. This is still about going the long, hard way, independent of the trends and headlines generating the most attention right now in college football.

We are engaged in what has become a unique form of team building. We are a relationship-driven, student-athlete-focused program that values the holistic development of our people over all else. To us, this isn't an antiquated concept. It still matters. When you do the right things, the right way, with the right people, with respect and appreciation, you will not be denied.

When you're smart in design and disciplined in your approach, you win out in time. That's Vanderbilt football.

Before I open for questions, I just want to take a moment to honor the late Jimmy Williams who we lost less than two weeks ago. He was a Vanderbilt legend, he was an SEC legend. Jimmy touched so many lives, including my own. I'd be remiss not to recognize him today on this stage.

On behalf of Vanderbilt football, I send my love to his family, specifically to Chandra and Ace, and all his friends. We're going to miss him dearly. Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Coming into this year, you talked about expectations and things you learned prior to last season. What are some things for yourself that you want to get better and hopefully rub off on your team as you get ready to start the season?

CLARK LEA: Thank you for the question.

One of the things that becomes a reality when you're in this role is that your development begets team development. The better I am in my job, the better everyone else in the program can be in theirs, whether that's anticipating problems, doing a better job of communicating effectively.

I think specifically where I want to be better is a cohesive strategy for each game where we're looking at the complementary aspects of playing winning football and I'm doing everything I can to put the best competitive product on the field. That is my responsibility.

Our goal is to play, fight and win each game. I need to be

on top of it in terms of empowering all three phases to interlock and to become a force on Saturdays.

Q. Earlier you mentioned the changing landscape. With regards to name, image and likeness being in the city of Nashville, how has that impacted your program so far? What do you see as far as the future of NIL being in Nashville?

CLARK LEA: Yeah, we have a great partnership with the city of Nashville. Obviously we're right in the hub of a lot of activity, specifically with where our campus sits.

We've definitely seen benefit in that. I think as we continue to strengthen our team and strengthen our brand as Vanderbilt football in the city, we'll continue to reap the rewards of being in such a fruitful ground.

Certainly we value our relationship with Nashville, and we think that, in that NIL landscape, our location strengthens us.

Q. You have two stalwarts on your defensive line from my area. I was able to watch both of those young men play in high school, Daevion Davis and Malik Langham. What are your expectations for both of those guys on your D-line and for your defense this year?

CLARK LEA: I'm so excited for those two guys. Daevion is recovering from injury. He's fighting his way back. He's done a great job in being on top of his rehab. He has attacked that just like he attacks everything in life. We'll be excited to get him back.

He was a leader for us. He was a captain for us a year ago. He's part of the heartbeat of our program. So we certainly value Daevion both as a player and person.

Malik has made a ton of strides within the program. I thought last season he was injured and started slow. I thought he came on late. We're looking for him to capture that level of competitive spirit and effort he played with at the end of the season.

He has the physical measurements to be a force in our league. We're excited to watch him actualize that. Have a lot of work to do ahead of us to get there, but both those guys are two of my favorites. We're fortunate to have them as part of our program.

Q. Daniel Martin from Marietta High School is one of the members of your recruiting class. What have you seen from him in the first year with the program?



CLARK LEA: Daniel was an early enrollee for us. His skills are apparent. We knew that in recruiting. Just like any freshman, he needs room to grow and development, so we're going to give him that room. We're excited to see him come back after a summer of training and obviously the experience through the spring where he got to know the structures of the defense, how we operate.

That will give him a great launching point heading into fall camp. He's athletic, he's long, he's got range. Like any freshman, we have to give them room to develop into the players they're going to become. But we're certainly excited about Daniel.

Q. How have you watched Mike Wright and the quarterback room progress overall? How important do you think mobility is in quarterbacks in the modern area?

CLARK LEA: It's all about moving the ball. One way to do that is with a mobile quarterback. Mike Wright is one of the best in the country in that respect.

We want him to develop as a total quarterback, which he has. He's demonstrated leadership abilities, too. We're excited for him to enter the fall as our starting quarterback. He knows that he has to earn that every day. That's part of our covenant.

On top of that, we're fortunate to have a second quarterback with a ton of game experience and starting experience in Ken Seals. I want to say this because I think it's important. We had a challenging conversation at the end of spring to set a course through the summer. Our staff got together and said, What is the best course forward here? What is the right thing to do to set a trajectory for our offense?

The end of that conversation was communicating that Mike was going to enter the fall as a starter. Obviously that conversation is easy with Mike and harder with Ken.

I want to just give credit to Ken Seals because in an era right now where 9 out of 10 times that player that's getting the disappointing news makes a choice to move on, Ken Seals set his jaw and made a determination that he was going to earn it every day.

What I've been proud of from the two of them, one of the challenges that I issued to them both was we have to cease to compete for that spot alone and start to compete for the personality and identity of our team, meaning their position as leaders in our program is more important, the team success is more important than that battle between individuals.

We can be great competitors on the field, and I expect that, I expect ruthless competition for that job every single day, but we have to be collaborators off the field.

I've seen growth and maturity in both those guys in that respect. It's going to go a long way to develop the other 10 positions on the field independent of who the signal caller is.

We're excited for that competition, that battle. We think Mike has a lot of skills that we want to use. Ken Seals has proven that he can do it as well. We have young quarterbacks that are anxious to take their swing.

In our program, competition is the ultimate motivator. We want that to be true at every position.

Q. Having spent three years with Brian Kelly at Notre Dame, what is about him, his approach, his style, that makes him successful?

CLARK LEA: Well, he's a great dancer (smiling).

Coach Kelly, I would count him as one of my greatest mentors. He took a chance on me as an unproven commodity. I was a linebacker coach having never coordinated. He gave me the opportunity of a lifetime.

It wasn't just that he gave me the job and said, Hey, you go do it, let's see if you're successful, but he invested in me every single day.

I learned a lot from that experience, from the development of that relationship. But beyond that, I think I reflect back on my time with him more in this role than I ever did while I was sitting with him. Learning from his methodology. Coach Kelly is smart in design. He cares about the little things. He wants attention to detail in the program. He's accountability-based. He cares about people. He's a big proponent of the weight room, building out your team physically and mentally.

All those aspects we've carried forward as a part of our program, too. There's no mystery in his success. He has done it over and over again. It's been fun for me to reunite with him in this conference. I count him as a dear friend and a mentor. I'm excited for him at LSU.

Q. I know you obviously weren't part of the 0-10 season a couple years ago. It's been a while since Vanderbilt won an SEC game. Your first three SEC opponents were combined 37-6 last year. Two teams played for the national championship. How much is the losing streak in the conference weighing you

down? When you look at who you have to open against, how daunting is that?

CLARK LEA: Well, I respect your question.

The answer to that question is: not at all in all aspects. We don't talk about that. We don't spend time on it. We don't tally up the collective records of our opponents. That's just not who we are.

We're not fighting to win an SEC game, we're fighting to become a dominant force within the conference. Obviously winning in the SEC requires winning that first game. But when that happens, it's not going to be a huge celebration. We're going to celebrate everything at a high level, but we're going to shift focus quickly to the next opponent because that's what winning programs do.

I don't take ownership of anything that happened before. I certainly take ownership of last season. We fell way short of our expectations. But we are simply trying to build the best version of Vanderbilt football in year two independent of our opponents.

We think if we can reach that level of championship performance within this team, that replicated over time we're going to have a lot of success. That's our focus. That will continue to be our focus. Thank you.

Q. From a competitor's perspective, what is it like coaching in the SEC, more specifically being in the same division as the defending national champs?

CLARK LEA: I think as a competitor, you want to do this at the highest level. The SEC is the highest level. So what that means is your systems are stressed and strained in every way imaginable. It's, like, part of the fun and the joy in doing it.

There's not a Saturday where you can sit back and relax. You have to bring it at your highest level each time you play. No matter who it is in our conference, it's going to be that way.

Again, I think as a competitor your goal is always to do this at the highest level, to compete and play the best, to win at the highest level. Membership in this conference gives us a chance to do that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time this morning, coach.

CLARK LEA: Thank you.

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