

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Missouri Tigers Coach Eliah Drinkwitz

Press Conference

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Great to be here at my third SEC Media Day. Really proud of the work our organization has been putting in preparing for the upcoming season.

You can never turn back the clock, so all of our focus is on improving our processes for this year. No matter how close our outcomes were last year, it's all about what we're trying to accomplish and prove this year.

In the new normal of college football, you've first got to rebuild your roster, and you've got to do that every year starting in December. The first way to do that is through roster retention.

I'm really proud of our staff organization and culture that we've created that we return 18 starters from last year's team. This means that those guys believe in our process. They believe in their improvement. They believe in the opportunities that they have at the University of Missouri.

It first starts there.

Then you work on adding it through your signing classes, through your high school signees, through your Jr. college, and then through the transfer portal.

We believe we've built a very competitive roster. We have over 32 players who have started four or more games in their college careers in Division I football. So we believe that we've added the competitive depth necessary to do the things that we need to do for this year.

We have most of our production returning on the defensive side of the ball, and that first starts with our defensive staff led by Blake Baker, our defensive coordinator. We return our co-defensive coordinator, D.J. Smith our assistant head coach, secondary coach Al Pogue, our defensive edge coach Kevin Peoples, and our defensive tackle coach Al Davis.

Those guys have done an outstanding job with establishing



an identity in wreaking havoc in death row defense, and we're very appreciative of those guys staying a part.

I've always heard that to be good on defense you've got to be strong up the middle. At the defensive tackle position we return five of our key contributors at the defensive tackle position, starting with Jayden Jernigan, Realus George. Kristian Williams has had an outstanding summer, Josh Landry.

We've got two younger guys Marquise Gracial and Jake Marshall who are really working to become the players that they want to become.

Darius Robinson, who started for us last year on the interior, provides position flexibility. He's here today representing the University of Missouri as one of our players. He's going to slide out and play some edge position, as well as play the interior defensive tackle position.

Defensive edge is probably the position we have the biggest question marks on our defense but feel like we've answered those questions. Johnny Walker, who has been with our program going on four years, was in that initial recruiting class that I've had, has really bought into Coach Russell's strength program and Liz Stewart's nutrition program. Has done an excellent job at adding weight; 262 pounds right now, the fastest he's been. He and D-Rob, Darius, will play our edge position. They will be in competition with some transfers, Joe Moore, whose dad is an all-time leading rusher at the University of Missouri.

Nyles Gaddy, Austin Firestone transfers, guys who can contribute.

We have two freshmen, Jahkai Lang, who played all spring, and moved DJ Wesolak who played linebacker for us last year back to his most natural position, which is defensive end.

And then Serene. Those guys look to contribute at the D-end position.

At linebackers we've got two veteran linebackers, both with



over a career 100 tackles, somewhere around a combined 250 tackles, 34 tackles for loss, 10 sacks between Ty'Ron Hopper and Chad Bailey, two SEC-proven guys. But we've now added some depth. Chuck Hicks, who was injured all last year, returns, and a junior college transfer Country, as we call him, but Tristan Newson, along with Dameon Wilson, Brayshawn Littlejohn and Will Norris are our linebacker corps.

At the corner position, we've got Kris Abrams-Draine and Ennis Rakestraw returning. Very excited about the amount of production. Both those guys combined had 25 pass breakups last year. Kris is just an outstanding young man. Was in that initial recruiting class that I signed at the University of Missouri. Started as a wide receiver. Made the move over to defensive back.

In the last game of the season his freshman year and hasn't looked back from that point on. Has been an excellent player and contributor, but he's an even better teammate, works extremely hard. He's a great father to his son Kylan, and very excited about what kind of season he can have.

My first viral moment as an SEC head coach, which I've had a few, was when we got Ennis Rakestraw to sign and commit. Ennis is going into his third season starting for us and weighs 193 pounds, has added muscle, great work ethic, been a leader for our football team. But even more than that, he's a 4.0 student and very proud of what he's doing.

We've added -- continued to add depth and competitive depth there, but we do have Drayden Norwood who plays corner for us from Arkansas, Fort Smith, Arkansas. He's our third corner. Actually had an interception against South Carolina last year, so feel very strong about the corner position.

Lastly is our safety position. Both our safeties have over a career 100 tackles apiece, J.C. Carlies was again in that first class that we recruited. Has three interceptions last year, which tied him for second for returners. Joseph Charleston, over 100 tackles. Daylan Carnell, ball hawk. Had three interceptions and multiple fumble recoveries.

We added two transfer safeties from the state of Florida, Tre'Vez Johnson from the University of Florida and Sidney Williams from Florida State.

We also have a true freshman, Marvin Burks. We have a redshirt freshman Isaac Thompson, and a redshirt freshman Tyler Hibbler. Feel very good about the way that safety room and the defense in general lines up.

Again, return a lot of production, but like I tell those guys all the time, nobody cares about what you did last year. It's about what we can do this year that's going to be important, and we've got a lot to prove.

On special teams we return the thicker kicker, as most people know him. I like to call him Harrison Mevis, but we do also have Blake Craig coming in as a freshman. We have a punting competition between Riley Williams and Luke Bauer, and look forward to those two guys. Riley brings the foreign flair with him as he's a native from Australia.

Deep snapper Brett Le Blanc and Tre Flynn, a transfer from Ouachita Baptist University. Very excited about those guys. Feel like we should be very deep and competitive in the special teams position.

On the offensive side of the ball it all starts up front. We've got to improve on the offensive line. We start -- it starts for us on the left side with Javon Foster who's here with us today, a native of Michigan who chose to come back last year and we appreciate that.

Him and Xavier Delgado both have 28 starts apiece at the left guard left tackle position, so that provides a lot of comfort for that side. Armand Membou who started right tackle will move to the left guard position. We added a transfer, Marcellus Johnson has 32 career starts in his career from Eastern Michigan will now play at the right tackle position for us.

We added Cameron Johnson from the University of Houston who has 16 career starts. He'll battle with Connor Tollison at the center position and/or the right tackle or left guard or right guard position. Every position is open for competition.

But we've also got a lot of guys competing for any playing time. Val Erickson, Mekhi Lee, EJ, Mitch Walters, Drake Heismeyer, Tristan Wilson, all these guys are very capable.

Look for Logan Reichert to continue to push for playing time, and there's an open competition for every position.

We've got to protect the quarterback better from last year, and we've got to be more effective on 1st and 2nd down running the football in order for us to efficiently score points.

The running back position, we return our top two rushers in Cody Schrader. What a story Cody is. Cody is a transfer to us. He started Truman State and walked on for us last spring. He does everything right. He's a graduate of our

university, is there seven days a week, works extremely hard, is a social media influencer through his workouts.

But he is a tremendous story to go from a walk-on to the lead rusher at the University of Missouri, and to be the leader that he is, I'm very proud of Cody.

We return Nate Peat. Nate was the fastest offensive player that we have on his timed 40s. Very excited about what he can contribute.

Then we've got three other guys who are going to be contributing for us, Jamal Roberts, Michael Cox, Tavorus Jones. All those guys at the running back position have an opportunity in fall camp to prove who is going to be the guy who number one can protect the quarterback, two, create explosive plays with their feet, and then three, can consistently secure the football and catch the ball out of the backfield.

At tight end, we return Tyler Stevens, Max Wisner, and then we've added two true freshmen, Brett Norfleet and Jordon Harris. I look for that position to continue to grow.

Our wide receiver room is the deepest position with great competition there. We moved Luther Burden from the X position to the slot wide receiver position with the transfer of Dominic Loft who was first team all-SEC to another school.

That allowed us to move Luther and Mekhi Miller into that slot position, and look forward to those guys being very good and it comparable to what we've had in the previous years at that position.

Theo Wease and Mookie Cooper, two excellent upperclassmen, along with Dannis Jackson. Those guys provide speed and toughness and experience. Ja'Marion Wayne, Demariyon Houston are guys who look to contribute.

And then we've got three true freshmen, Josh Manning, Marquis Johnson, and Daniel Blood. Not only will this group contribute at the wide receiver position blocking on the perimeter, catching balls, creating explosive plays, but I look forward to this position to contribute on special teams, as well, and embracing their role and doing whatever it takes to win.

I think that sums up everything -- no, quarterbacks.

At the quarterback competition, Brady Cook played, was our starter last year. Brady was injured throughout the spring and looks to be returning to form. Look forward to him coming back, and he's going to have his hands full

holding on to that position with Sam Horn and Jake Garcia. Both of those guys are very competitive, and in fact they played in the 2020 state championship game in the state of Georgia. Collins Hill versus Grayson, I believe. Jake reminds us that he got the win that year. Sam reminds us the next year they went undefeated and won it in his senior year. So all three of those guys have their own strengths and college experiences. Dylan Laible, a transfer, junior college transfer, is also competing for that job, and we'd look to have a very strong competition at the quarterback position.

That is probably the most efficient roster update that I've ever provided, and I tried to kill as much time as I possibly could so that I would not answer any question too crazy today and trend on Twitter. Let's see how we did.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. You're bringing an offensive coordinator; I assume he's going to call the plays. How tough a decision was that? What went into that? If you're not calling the plays, how tough is it for you to give that up?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, we have a sign in our team room that says, embrace your role, put the team first. At the end of the season it was clear to me that we were ineffective on the offensive side of the ball, and it starts with being retrospective on what do you do as the leader of the team, as the leader of the offensive side of the ball, what are the issues.

I wasn't giving us the best advantage that we could have offensively to be successful, and so it was my estimation that I needed to embrace my role more as the head coach and do the things that needed to be done there and turn over the play calling to somebody else.

I do not plan on calling plays. I plan on being involved on the offensive side of the ball just like I am on special teams and on the defensive side of the ball as the CEO of the organization.

But hired Kirby Moore who's got a similar offensive vision and philosophy as I do, a low ego, high output guy who's got a great understanding of the pass game and play action. He's an absolute grinder, loves to watch tape, is a tremendous teacher, low ego, high input kind of guy. I look forward to working with him and the rest of the offensive staff to put our players in position to be successful.

I tell him all the time, if we can just average one more touchdown a game, we're going to be in really happy at the end of the season.

We're in that constant quest to find one more touchdown, but I have no qualms about handing it over to somebody and feel like that Kirby will do an outstanding job for us.

Q. Your offenses are consistently near the top of the conference in using at-snap motion rates, paired with your wide zone approach. Could you really expand how that helps create explosives for your offense?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. We really believe that in order to utilize the wide zone effectively, you've got to create either single gap spacing or you've got to try to create rotational force on the defense. So by utilizing motions, you usually get the safety rotation, which in an eight-man front or in a quarters look, then you're going to potentially create an extra gap on the weak side of the formation or even on the strong side of the formation.

That's in essence what we're trying to do. Now with the split flow opportunities that you have and defenses back gapping, so to speak, that allows you also to combine with motion, create some confusion in the gap fits.

The emphasis on the outside zone is to create horizontal stretch to create a vertical seam, and you give the illusion of running literally, getting the defensive line movement, and then you try to create a seal on the backside and create a vertical cut.

If you can do that while creating some motion and getting some overlap or eyes in defensive rotation, you've got a shot.

Q. I think I looked on your roster and there's a dozen kids on your roster from the city of St. Louis. How important is it to recruit that city and that area in your state, and what did you learn about your football team last year giving Georgia a pretty close scare?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, we believe in the best players playing for their home state schools. Not only is that a benefit of the opportunity for their families and their people to get to watch them play, but it's also a benefit for them to build their brand. You're never more marketable outside of your own home footprint as seen by what's occurred with Luther Burden and his branding opportunities and even our defensive players, creating their own pizza brand and several other opportunities there.

Obviously St. Louis for us so far has been a very good area for us, but we're also very adamant in recruiting Kansas City, two very large top-50 metropolitan areas, top-50 media markets, and we've got to control those and own those, pick the best players that we can that fit our schemes and culture to play for us, and we feel like that's

how you build a consistent winner.

You know, last year, close doesn't count, so I don't really care about how close we played this team or that team. That has nothing to do with what we're trying to accomplish this year.

What matters to us is the details and execution to finish on the right side of the game, and so the only thing I learned about our team is that we're resilient in the face of adversity. At 2-4 it could have gone a lot of different ways, but our team battled back even after a very difficult call against Kentucky. Our team still battled and found a way to become bowl eligible, and very proud of the resilience that that took.

Again, I think the biggest sign to me that we are moving and our team believes in what we are doing is the retention of 18 returning starters on our team, guys that had the opportunity to leave and go play at other places or go pursue their dreams of playing in the NFL, chose to come back and continue their development under our leadership.

I'm very grateful to those guys for that opportunity.

Q. How do you see AI impacting the way you coach and the way college football is played?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I have no thoughts on AI in college football.

Q. You already highlighted the talent you guys have on the defensive line and the edge rushers that you guys already have. Can you speak about Nyles Gaddy and how he has adapted to the change, having transferred here from Jackson State, and what do you see in him?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I think Nyles has come in and really been hungry to learn. Obviously there's a steep learning curve, having this being his third school, how we do things around our program in comparison to what he's done in the past. It's different. It doesn't mean it's right or wrong, it's just how we do it here.

So he's adamant about trying to figure that out, and putting himself in a position to compete once we hit the ground on July 31st when we report to camp.

He's done all the things that we've asked him to do. He's been excellent in the weight room. But he's trying to get up to speed because once we start fall camp, then every competition, you've got to be at your best every day, and that room is so deep, there's so many potential players, again, you can't have a bad day or you're going to fall on



the depth chart, and that's the way you want it. That's the way great programs are built.

We're continuing to evolve to that situation.

Q. You mentioned Luther Burden is going to be sliding into the slot. Is that simply just to replace Dominic Lovett there? And secondly, Brady Cook dealing with an injury; how has he really embraced the new quarterback competition that's coming in?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, there's no replacing Dominic Lovett. Dominic Lovett is his own player and has his own unique characteristics and competitive spirit, and wish him the best in his new opportunity.

We want Luther Burden to be uniquely Luther in the slot position, a bigger body, a guy who is going to have more free access, different route combinations that he's going to use within Kirby's offense, and him and Mekhi Miller's similarities are going to allow for those guys to play off of each other where we're not as just dependent on maybe one person, and when that guy is not in, it's definitely not a play to the slot.

Excited about that. Was there a second question that I'm forgetting?

Q. Brady Cook.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, Brady Cook. Everybody would like to have things handed to them, but competitors know that the only thing better than a little competition is more competition. Brady is one of the most relentless competitors that we have on our football team. He competes every single day, whether it's running the stadiums or how he eats or how he trains.

He's one of those edgers, man. He ain't ever letting anybody get an edge on him. That's consequently caused both Jake, Sam and Dylan to really embrace that competition, and they know they've got a long way to go. The reality is we've got to complete vertical balls down the field outside of the numbers and push the ball vertically down the field, and we've got to complete them.

Whether that was injury or protection or whatever it was last year, it's got to get fixed, and whoever is going to give us the best opportunity to do that is going to be our quarterback.

They're all going to have their opportunities, and look forward to that competition.

Q. What are the conversations like in the conference

when the SEC is pushing for uniform legislation, but some schools such as Missouri have helped support or shape the state laws that have advantages for their schools?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I'm going to let the administration and the presidents and the ADs and the commissioner work together on that side of it. All I know is what I'm responsible for right now and what the state law is right now for the University of Missouri, and that's what's going to affect us currently, and that's what I'm going to operate on.

There's a lot of things that we wish for, but we actually know what is right now in college athletics, and I'm going to embrace what is and what currently is the reality on the boots on the ground or cleats in the grass, so to speak.

Our state legislature, and I'd like to thank Governor Parsons, Lieutenant Governor Kehoe, Attorney General Bailey, Senator Rowden, Curtis Gregory, Dean Plocher, Speaker of the House, all those guys working really hard to try to do what they can that's in the best interest of our student-athletes at the University of Missouri and providing them the opportunity to utilize their name, image, and likeness to the best of their benefit, and there you go.

Q. What do you tell Jake and some of the other transfers you have coming in about the level of play that's expected in the SEC and some of the unique challenges that this conference provides?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I mean, I don't think anybody is blind to the fact that the best of the best play in our league. It's produced the most number of NFL Draft picks, 16, 17, 18 years in a row.

I think anybody that knows what they're getting into when they get in this league -- but at the end of the day it's football. Football is football. Their past experiences and talents, it says in the Bible, "Your gift will make room for you and bring you in front of great men," and they've obviously been given a great gift and opportunity to play this game. I want them to rely on that and not put too much pressure on them about what the stage is that they're playing in.

Q. As you hired Kirby Moore from Fresno State and you guys put your heads together, you went through spring practice. What position group or groups did you feel like as a staff improved the most offensively since you know that seems to be the side of the ball you want to improve on the most going into the season?



ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I think the wide receiver room is the area that we have to improve on the most just because of the amount of talent and depth that we have there, and those guys have got to be key contributors.

Then I would say that the offensive line is still a work in progress. Midway through spring, we lost our offensive line coach. We were able to hire a tremendous offensive line coach in Brandon Jones, and has got a tremendous amount of experience and expertise in what we're trying to do on the offensive side of the ball, and he's transitioned seamlessly. Those guys working together, trying to get our best five in the rotation, is going to be critical for us.

It's going to take us a couple of weeks. Obviously we're going against a tremendous defense, and that competition every day is only making our guys better.

But I love the way our guys are attacking, and offensively there is a sense of purpose, and there's a sense of something to prove for those guys on that side of the ball.

I have a lot of confidence in what they're going to do this year.

Q. You talked a little bit about Sam Horner earlier. He's a dual sport athlete who plays baseball for you all, as well. How would you say that's helped him on his football journey, and how does that help him with the competition and the chemistry of that quarterback room?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, obviously I think Sam going out there -- he was injured about I think maybe his fourth opportunity to throw, but he went out there versus TCU and through three innings at about 95 to 96 off the mound. I think that confidence in his ability -- that ability to go out there and use his natural talent to play at an elite level has translated over to the football field.

When you come in and you're learning and you're unsure of yourself and you're not getting maybe the game reps that you wanted to, maybe there's some like am I really going to be good enough, and then he goes over in baseball and goes out and is throwing that thing 95, 96 for three innings, I think he realized, yeah, I've got the ability. I've just got to put it all together. I've got to put it all together.

It wasn't just about the natural talent. Sam is a naturally talented young man. It was about everything else off the field, whether it's controlling his diet to making sure that his diabetes is under control, making sure that his weight was adjusted, making sure he's getting sleep, making sure his grades are right. The best players have low-drama lives

off the field.

Sam is not a drama guys; don't make that assumption. But just getting the grades, adjusting to college athletics, learning. I think this spring, having to have that baseball/football/spring football, all that together has really caused him to really get a focus, and he has really been -- had a great spring and tremendous summer, and look forward to seeing what he does when his opportunity is presented to himself in fall camp.

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