

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Ole Miss Rebels

Coach Lane Kiffin

Press Conference

LANE KIFFIN: Thank you, Commissioner. All right. So we are going into our fourth year here at Ole Miss, which has been a very exciting off-season for us. You know, really grateful to Keith Carter, our athletic director, our chancellor, Boyce, for keeping us here, and believing in what we are building here and our Ole Miss fans in the City of Oxford have been awesome. So, excited for this fourth year coming up.

You know, to recap, we were on a really good run. I'm not going to say a great run, because we have extremely high standards. But, you know, coming off the 10-3 season, and really last year, we were 8-1, and with the ball in our hands to go down, obviously the 14-yard line, 1st and 10 with a chance to beat Alabama to have a great home win and to go to 9-1.

That was a great run for a season and nine games there. I didn't do a very good job over the year of keeping our team together, not as an excuse, but I said it up here a year ago, you know, the challenges when you have such a roster overhaul and so portal-heavy. And I've said I've always been concerned about culture issues when you do that because you don't have kids that have been there very long.

And I said one of those challenges, even if you look at the NBA when they put together these good free agent teams, if seasons don't go great, it's very hard to keep everybody playing at a high level because the expectations were so high.

So I think down the stretch there, after the Alabama game, I didn't do a good enough job of finding a way to keep our guys playing at a high level because we did not play to our standards at the end of the season.

So excited about this season coming up. There's been a ton of change. You know, 40 new scholarship players. It's kind of the world that we live in. I think everybody is experiencing that more than ever on their roster, and I think



every place has their own plan and every place does things differently, I would think -- I have to speak for myself -- based off of what you need to do at that place to win.

There's not this blueprint everywhere that would be the same everywhere, in my opinion, because you have to figure out high school kids, junior college kids, and then portal kids and where your numbers go there. And, you know, with the relief from the 25 initial scholarship counters every year, that gets more creative of how you can put your roster together. For those who are not familiar, before there used to be a cap there, so you could not have these massive roster changes that you've seen at some places around the country.

Also, Pete Golding coming in on defense, we are really excited about that change and what he brings, to bring him over from Alabama. I've known Pete and people that worked with him a long time. He's ahead of the game, very intelligent and great recruiter, as well. There's some transition there with a lot of new coaches and a ton of new players and some that missed spring, like Cedric Johnson who is here today, missed the spring.

So this fall will be really important for us in all areas but especially on defense of putting all that together to play good defense.

You know, some topics here that are out there, and so I'm going to address the portal, NIL, what I kind of call disaster that we're in. I know that question is going to come. And the reason why I break that down usually is because I do afterwards get a lot of feedback from you guys in the media or the fans that they are appreciative of coaches that really addresses where it's at and what are the challenges with it.

First off, I've always said that I think it's phenomenal that players get a chance to get paid, which is great. I do think, which I've stood up here and said before when it first happened, that there's going to be some major issues and we're creating free agency with the portal.

And with NIL, you've got a lot of pay-for-play going on and that is what it is. Those two things combining, there's not a system in place. I don't think there's any other sports at



any level that are like this, that really, you every year, can opt into free agency. Really, twice a year.

I mean, I was just thinking on the plane ride over here. What if you had that in other sports? Tom Brady, A'Jai Wilson, Lionel Messi, LeBron James, what if every year those guys can opt to free agency, twice a year, really and they have no long-term contracts? Basically everybody is not even on a one-month contract because they can leave in two windows.

It's created a lot of issues and roster changes. I'm not complaining about it because we take advantage of free agency, but at the same time, I don't think that's really good for college football. These massive overhauls of rosters every year, really, is not in the best interest of college football.

When you add the NIL at the same time, we have created, I've said it before, we've got different caps and no luxury taxes. So we've got professional sports, because that really is what we are, what's been created now, and there's no caps on what guys can make or what teams' payrolls are.

When this first came out, basically said, whatever programs have the most aggressive boosters with the most money are going to get the players. And now we are adding some states that you don't have to follow the NCAA, and now the university can take their money and give it to the collective to give it to the players.

So now we really have pay-for-play that the biggest schools with the most donors, most aggressive, and the school wants to spend the most money paying the players to play to come to their school, is where we are with that.

So there's kind of your state of the union of what all coaches are dealing with around the country. And really, a poor system that isn't getting better is now going to get worse with this. Because again, now we just -- look at recruiting rankings and you're going to see that they are usually going to follow this donor base and what schools are going to decide to give the most money to the players.

So it is what it is. We'll deal with it like we do with everything else. But somehow, it's got to get fixed because there's no system around it.

So, you know, we did a really neat thing this off-season with mental health training for our staff. Myself, our coaching staff, everyone in our building went through a class. I know at first, you may think -- people may think, oh, well, that's a good recruiting tool that you can say, hey -- which I didn't even know at the time, we are the first staff

to do this, that's trained in mental health -- and be able to say that to parents in recruiting. That was not the motive at all.

I talk about creating a new box, not just thinking outside the box. We do that in analytics and we do that in all areas, I feel like, in our program. We don't ever do anything because it's in that old book of how to coach and how to do things. And this mental health area was really not in that old school coaching book at all. It was shut up, go back and play, especially in the sport of football.

Just over the years of going through so many mental health issues with our players and coaches, and not having tools and not having a really good system in place besides just sending them, you know, across campus, you know, to a mental health specialist.

I was excited to do that and just excited for the education with that and the ability to see things and help our players. It's really neat because they just go through so much. Players always have, but now because of the social media and every play -- everywhere, everybody has seen every play, our players go through a lot. And remember, they are kids and they read all those things. When fans or media say, this play, or, oh, they lost the game, it's really challenging when you talk to the kids about how much that wears on them, as well as all the other issues they have to deal with.

So that was pretty neat. And with that, I'll open up for questions.

Q. The penalties at the end of the Tennessee, kind of, investigation with all that came out this past week, obviously your history with that program and other programs going through those penalties, just your thoughts on that overall.

LANE KIFFIN: Well, that didn't take long (Laughter).

I got a lot of thoughts on that case and the case at USC and the case at Tennessee and the penalties and all that. I'm not really going to get into that. We're here to talk about the Ole Miss team. You know, happy for Coach Heupel. I read where he was ecstatic about the penalties and the \$8 million fine. So that kind of probably tells you about how severe the penalties are in their eyes. I'm happy for them that they don't have to go through what we went through. So good for them.

Q. I appreciate your candor on NIL. You're the czar of college football. How do you fix it? That's the natural follow-up to your State of the Union.

LANE KIFFIN: It's like -- I tell our staff, I don't like you to tell me the problem but not the solution. So I feel like that in this one; that I don't have the exact solution because it is so complicated and the Commissioner, who is much more educated than I on these things. Because I used to say they should be employees so they can have real contracts, so when they come, you can sign somebody to a two-, three-, four-year contract. But there's way more issues. That solves one problem but opens up more when they are actually employees of the university.

I don't have the exact answers. I've always said when asked, shorten the windows so at least we know what your roster is and not so many chances for players. Because really, like I said, I like the players get paid but you don't -- there's no other system like it.

Like the player -- I've told our players. I've told our parents of our significant players, it is a great time to be a kid or a parent, okay, with where college football is. They will probably eventually fix this, so you will be this one window of a couple years where you can literally leverage your program every window or you can go into free agency and find the most money out there.

And now we are seeing you really can get paid three times if you want to. You can get paid coming out of high school. You can one-time transfer, go in, get the most money and get paid again. And then you can grad transfer and then get paid again. Eventually you'll not be able to do that, I would think, and have that leverage every semester to be able to do that. I've told them it's an awesome time for them.

Q. The Grove Collective has formed an association and plan on introducing a revenue-sharing model. What are your thoughts on potential revenue sharing in the future?

LANE KIFFIN: That mic went in and out. Can you repeat that.

Q. The collective at Ole Miss is one of seven that has formed a collective association and they plan to introduce a revenue-sharing model in the future. What are your thoughts on a potential revenue-sharing model for college players?

LANE KIFFIN: Again, I think like almost everything on this subject, there's good and bad to everything that comes in. I think that revenue sharing on the surface would be great because players are getting paid and it's coming from the money they are helping make the university.

But, again, I kind of try to think things through, and the

other things that happen when you do something, just like when everybody is like, we have this NIL, it's great, and this portal, it's great. Whoa. And I'm not saying I was the only one saying it. Whoa, this is a disaster coming because you just legalized cheating and you just told donors they can pay the players is what you did.

And it's supposed to be set up -- well, really it's for your name, image, likeness, for your marketing. Again, that's not what happened. That's not what's happening. They are getting paid to go to school. So it's pay-for-play.

So the revenue sharing sounds really good, but then they are like, okay, well, we are going to revenue share and that's all they get. I say, okay, well, wait. But they are still going to have NIL, which really isn't NIL for probably 99 percent of the kids, they are not really getting the money for their marketing rights. So then revenue sharing will be good, but then you're still going to have this. So they say revenue sharing would make it an equal playing field, which is what the NCAA always wants to do, make things an equal playing field. Well, obviously what we described with no salary cap and everybody operating off different budgets, that's not anywhere close.

I don't know that that fixes it. Sounds good but then you are still going to have: Here is your revenue-sharing pot that everybody is the same, but then here you're still going to have all this other money that donors can go give players. Or the way it is now, in some states, the school just funnels the money to the players.

Q. For decades, head coaches have been reminding players, don't do anything to embarrass themselves, their family, teammates and the university. Now in this new college football world that we see with NIL, the transfer portal, how much more difficult is it for a head coach to get that message across, not only to student athletes, but to staff members, as well?

LANE KIFFIN: Well, I think that's always challenging. I think the challenge now is everything they do is public. So anything they do that maybe years ago -- because the cell phone videos and everything, you know, didn't get out there -- that basically you've got to figure that someone is watching in everything you do all the time.

So it is more challenging for these guys. That is a great thing. You know, one of the few things that are great about cell phones, is that, actually, because now the players are held more accountable in everything that they do. In that way, it's gotten easier.

Q. You and Steve Sarkisian are obviously really good friends. Can you tell me how that friendship formed, if



you have any good Lane Kiffin stories about that friendship and your thoughts on Texas joining the SEC?

LANE KIFFIN: Well, Texas, Oklahoma -- I'll go backwards there. Texas, Oklahoma coming in is amazing. I already looked at our schedule, the one they put out to 2024, and I joked to Steve Sarkisian yesterday, and I said, well, I don't know any coach that would want to go to the NFL. We are in it now. Our schedule is like playing in the NFL in the SEC now, especially adding those two.

So hats off to the Commissioner for getting that done and making it the super conference of all time. Really, the way it's set up, it's really kind of like everybody else and then that when you put together the competitiveness of the schedule compared to any other conference.

I've had a great relationship with Sark. I've said before we both kind of grew up fast by being in the USC experience and being part of Coach Carroll's staff and all the great players there. I think 34 straight wins. If we can tackle Vince Young, three straight national championships.

That was really cool to go through that with him. We've stayed close. I think he's doing awesome there, and the way he's flipped the roster and recruiting at such a high level and signing Arch, I think the future is extremely bright for Texas Football.

Q. Brian Kelly mentioned artificial intelligence having intriguing opportunities in recruiting in the future. What is your opinion on that? And really not recruiting, like you said, the transfer portal to keep forming a roster each off-season that matches what you want to look for on the recruiting trail and in the portal?

LANE KIFFIN: Well, I'm the first to say up here, when I know a lot about an area, I'm going to answer. If I don't, I don't. The artificial intelligence and using that in recruiting, I don't know about that. I can give you coach-speak and pretend that I do (smiling).

But the other part -- what was the other part about?

Q. Just to form a roster based off the model of a player that you're actually looking for.

LANE KIFFIN: So the challenge on the roster is because of the different windows that you don't know what you have. You don't know what you're losing. I mean, think about it this way. I mean, imagine in professional sports -- really, I'm going to give you another window because grad transfers can still leave. They can leave in training camp.

Imagine like in professional sports, which again, we are -- so as far as it is with players, that you're coaching a player in camp and then, you know what, I don't like the way you're coaching me. I graduated, so I'm going to go. I'm going to go play for another team.

Teams know that. People, pre-portal. They know who is going in and who has graduated and they are dealing with that, too. That really messes kids up. It's really challenging for a kid. He's working out with his team in the off-season but then other schools are calling him about going there, and him being fully invested when hey, the strength coach yells at me or I don't like where I'm at on the depth chart and I can go, I can leave.

That's not a good set up. I feel like in college sports we usually always look at professional sports like, let's learn. They are usually ahead of us when it comes to systems and rules of the play on game day. So we usually copy them. And in this situation, it's like, they have this model that works about free agency windows, about long-term contracts.

Again, like I said, look at all those great players, they just leave any time during training camp, and for whatever reason, our model is not at all near theirs. So it's very -- it's very difficult.

And you've got dynamics in locker rooms. Again, these players talk. They know what players get paid and you've got dynamics around the country of, oh, I've been here, I'd made these plays and that guy just got here and he's going to make more money than me? Again, not a good setup.

Q. You mentioned boosters, and the most aggressive and richest boosters will get the best players. Where do Ole Miss boosters rank in the SEC and can you rate the two or three most impactful transfers you got?

LANE KIFFIN: I am not about to start putting rankings out on boosters from top to bottom in the conference (Laughter). God, I want to so bad, though (Laughter). The Commissioner said, remember, we've grown a lot and you don't have to respond to every question to show everybody you have the answer. So I'm going to do that on this situation.

But like I said kind of before, you want to look at the best boosters in the country and eventually the schools that have the most money that decide to pay the players, just look at recruiting rankings the next few years. That will give you your answer.

Because again, it is what it is, guys, and you can't fault them. You've got 18-year-old kids deciding where to go.

The No. 1 thing they decide on is money, their salary. I think you guys would have done that when you're 18. You can't fault them. You see some kids, why is that kid going way over there? Going there because you're making more money.

So you can't fault them for that. That's the setup that they are in.

Q. Most impactful transfers?

LANE KIFFIN: We have so many transfers coming in so many spots, it could be hard to single guys out. So it just is what it is nowadays. We look out there and there is times that, you know, we joke, we're like, pause the film and go, okay -- we're like still learning names but we know schools.

There's the receiver from that school, there's the tight end from that, there's the receiver from that, the quarterback is USC, the running back, that's -- you end up going like, wait, our whole skill roster was from some other school. Like we're an NFL team like we drafted them from somewhere.

Q. You talked about it just a minute ago with the NIL and the locker room. How do you handle any kind of potential dissension, because you're right, the players do know who makes this much and I make this much.

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, the question is about handling the locker room with the NIL issues, and the players getting paid different, you know.

I try to teach our guys like real life, and you know, we say like pro mindset, like we have a pro mindset of how we run the program with our guys and the expectations.

So I get it, because they come in complaining. You know, I've been here, or I transferred here and this guy is going to make more money than me. You know what, I'm not saying it's fair, but get ready. That's life. That's going to happen. You're going to be in an NFL locker room and you sign a contract, and this new guy -- or you got drafted in the fourth round and this new guy coming in, you're playing ahead of him, and he makes more money than you.

Sorry to say, you want the real truth like I give them, it depends when you went in. Guys make more now than when they went in the portal a year or two ago and they used up their one-time transfer. Hey, I'm just teaching you how life works. It is what it is. You used your window. You don't have the leverage now to go in until you graduate because you can't go in a second time. So there's the truth to what really happens.

But I teach them, hey, you basically signed a contract, even though you don't have a real contract. You're here to

play. You accepted whatever the terms are that you and the collective did, so go play and figure it out after the season. My dad used to say that to coaches in the first meeting of the year. Forget your contracts. Whatever you signed, it is what it is. Let's play really well, let's coach really well and worry about that in the off-season. That's what I tell them now. The best way you make more money is to play really well.

Q. I remember vividly seeing a picture of you sitting in the stands at Pike Road High School watching Quinshon Judkins. You had T.J. Yeldon, Derrick Henry, Josh Jacobs, Damien Harris. What did you see in Quinshon that you thought was special and how much better can he get?

LANE KIFFIN: Well, Quinshon is really special. Think about what he did as a freshman to come in and have that workload. I think he led the SEC in carries and yards and touchdowns as a freshman. And like any freshman, you can get a lot better in year two.

You know, we were able to get Kevin Smith, coach, back from Miami, that's been with us before. I think that that's really beneficial for him to have him as someone that also was a great college player that's gone through all this type and that comes with it. Because that's his biggest challenge is his footwork and his pass protection, even though he's really mature and a great kid. Guys, those kids are young and now that they are getting all that attention around the country. You're the best player, all the rat poison, from your coach, and now they have got money.

So now it's kind of like, whoa, you talk about ego coming in. I mean, so this is a lot of challenges on these kids. Again, it's great they get paid, but here is a whole new set of challenges, because a big motivation for a lot of players is to get to the NFL to get money. Well, now they already have money. So there's a lot of challenges in here in dealing with ego, which is really dangerous.

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