

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Josh Heupel

Press Conference



JOSH HEUPEL: I'd like to welcome to you Mid-State and the City of Nashville. Hope you guys have had a great week here, enjoying some music, enjoying Broadway and having some fun. This city and this area of the state, Mid-State, is extremely important to the success of Tennessee. It's a big part of our past success, as well, and a lot of great Vol fans and former players that call this place home, and so excited to see them.

It's fitting that we are here today for SEC Media Day, because in 44 days we get an opportunity to kick off against Virginia right here in Nissan stadium. Looking forward to seeing everybody in Vol Nation show up in droves for that ballgame.

As I was getting ready for today, you know, just started writing down some notes last night and really started to reflect just on the past two years and what has transpired inside of our program at our university. And where we're come in such a short amount of time.

When I took over two years ago, there was so much uncertainty that surrounded our program in late January, and because of the connection and accountability and the love and trust we've built inside of the building with our players and staff, we've been able to climb relatively quickly.

But to go back to that time, you know, we were a program that entered that fall with only 65 scholarships, the uncertainty of an investigation that was taking place on our campus. I said in a room just like this two years ago that it would be a speed bump for the program, our football program. And a few days ago, we found out that that certainly was the case.

We have navigated it in such a positive way because of the leadership that we have. Phenomenal leadership on our campus from President Boyd to Chancellor Plowman to our athletic director. We have been transparent and real and been able to close that narrative on our program and move

forward.

I'm not sure that there's a better time to be a Vol. You look at the trajectory of our football program, what's happened over the last two years and where we are going, and the energy and excitement that surrounds our building every day, our fan base, Vol Nation across the country, but the success happening in each and every sport that resides inside of our athletic department. Phenomenal leadership with coaches and great student athletes that do things the right way.

Our program has been player-driven from the very beginning. You guys have heard me say that before. It always will be. I think great seasons, championship seasons, happen because of the leadership and the accountability and connection that happens inside of the locker room. As I look back on our past success, that doesn't happen -- I talked about the 35 guys that left our program through the transfer portal right after I took over, we had a lot of guys that stayed, that first year, 65 scholarship guys.

Those guys that chose to stay that were connected and cared about the Power T, that '21 and '22 class are going to be revered and remembered in an unbelievably unique way because they rebuilt the cornerstones of Tennessee football for the future. And that ends with an Orange Bowl win last year that we are certainly excited about. Parlayed itself into the success that we've had in the NFL Draft over the last two years. Ten draft picks over the last two years, one of the highest in the country; last year, five guys drafted in the top three rounds which is second in the country.

A lot of really unique things that are happening with their future inside of the game, but also what they are doing outside, the impact that they have had inside of our community. We have reset a team record every semester that I have been there. Last semester, we finished with 3.71 team GPA. Our kids are doing it right and having a lot of fun competing together on a daily basis.

Fortunate to bring three tremendous ambassadors for Tennessee football here today. Joe Milton, Omari Thomas



and Jacob Warren. Omari and Jacob are residents of this state. They have grown up with the Power T being a symbol inside of this border. Joe obviously is a great leader and ambassador for our program.

The tough thing about choosing three guys, you only get to choose three. We have a lot of great guys that are leaders inside of our program that are part of our leadership council that were not fortunate to be here. And couldn't bring them with us but they are also great representatives of our program.

Really a lot of special moments from a year ago. As we look back on the '22 season, a lot of special moments and things that our fan base will remember forever and players inside of our locker room will remember forever. At the same time, fell short of a lot of goals we set for our program.

And I'm proud and excited for what our players have done since they have gotten back on campus in late January, their ability to reset and refocus and be ready to go accomplish a mission together. Individually grow but collectively get ready to go accomplish a mission. It's a group that's extremely hungry, they want more, expect more and we are certainly excited about embarking upon this '23 season.

Accountability and consistency has been one of the main things that we have focused on this year. In this conference you don't get any re-dos. You better show up every single Saturday or evening. You're going to play with great players, great coaches, and you have to be ready for those moments at home or on the road, and through that we have tried to increase our leadership and ownership from within our program. I talked about how important that is to me. I think that's where championship seasons lie.

The second thing is we have tried to become more physical. And when I say that, everybody thinks about the line of scrimmage, but it's really at every position and every person inside of our program continuing to grow in that way so we have the opportunity to be the most physical football team on the field every Saturday.

A ton of excitement surrounds our program. 71,000 season tickets sold. The energy is real inside and outside of our program. But as I said at the end of the Bowl game, the best is yet to come for Tennessee football. Excited about the journey for this group of guys in this '23 season and don't know that there's ever been a better time to be a Vol.

So with that I'll open it up for questions.

Q. With Hendon Hooker, you had a transfer that came in and had some success at the quarterback position and now you have Joe at quarterback who is a transfer himself. I know you saw that growth with Hendon. Talk about what it's been like for you to watch the growth from Joe.

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I think one of the great stories in college football in the era of the transfer portal is his trust and ability to recognize areas that he can continue to grow in and trust the people around him; that we have his best interests at heart. Understand that within our scheme, he's going to have an opportunity to do everything he wants to, which is be one of the best players in college football.

Through that process over the last, you know, 18 to 24 months, he's continued to grow in his comfort of who he is, what he's about and how he wants to attack and approach every single day and how he wants to grow as a football player, meaning fundamentally at the quarterback position, along with understanding offensive and defensive schemes so that he can put his eyes in the right spot, get his body in the right spot to be consistently accurate with the football, and then how he wants to impact his teammates.

Nobody inside our program was surprised by the success that he had when he got his opportunity last year as a starter. He played extremely well when he got into football games throughout the course of the season. But his preparation, his urgency, how he practiced, all those things led himself and everybody inside our building to believing that he was going to play at that type of level. And he's got a lot more out there.

He's had a great off-season for 15 practices in spring ball. Did a great job of working, navigating the pocket, and being extremely accurate with the football. I'm really excited to get back on the grass with him during the course of training camp. I believe he's poised to have a great '23 season.

Q. You have been around college football your entire life. What does it mean to you to be on the college football Hall of Fame ballot and what do you think your players know about your playing career and also the National Championship that you won at Oklahoma?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, they don't know enough about my playing career. Day 1 in training camp, make sure we put a couple highlights up there (Laughter). None of them me running around, either, by the way.

It's a great honor to be looked at in that way to be on the ballot to be potentially a part of the Hall of Fame. A year ago, got an opportunity to recognize one of our teammates,

Roy Williams go in, such a special player and had such a huge impact on the game and what we did there at Oklahoma. Those things only happen, though, because of the players that I got an opportunity to be in the locker room with every single day.

Very grateful to all of those guys, everybody on the offensive side of the ball, the offensive lineman. It was a special team and it's certainly made a huge impact in my life, part of why I'm up here today, to be honest. And so forever indebted to those guys and very appreciative but humbled by that recognition as well.

Q. A lot of Oklahoma fans, they remember your time very fondly and have followed you along now that you've become a head coach and watched your career. I know that relationship with OU is a little complicated, but what was it like seeing Oklahoma on the schedule in 2024?

JOSH HEUPEL: The relationship with Oklahoma really isn't complicated. I have got nothing but great memories of the people and my time there. I certainly do. It's a huge -- I got a chance to talk about Mike Leach a few minutes ago backstage in an interview. And, you know, everybody there helped shape who I am and where I'm at today, and still got a lot of great friends and teammates that live back there.

So the opportunity to go back to Oklahoma, yeah, I wish they were coming to Knoxville first. I say that jokingly, but looking forward to that opportunity. That's a long ways down the road, man. Focused on '23, but that will be a unique day in my career, obviously to go back there.

Q. You've been able to retain your entire coaching staff aside from Kodi Burns and Alex Golesh since you've been on campus. How big is stability of your coaching staff in your program?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, you try to create a culture that coaches want to be a part of; they feel like they are part of the process. You want to create a culture where families get a chance to be part of the process as well. I grew up the son of a coach and those are the greatest memories of my childhood, and so I think it's really important that they are a part of it.

If you do those things and you have the resources that we have at Tennessee, you're able to have some stability within your staff, which is vitally critical to your players; them understanding what they are walking into every single day, not having to rebuild an entire relationship from the ground up. We have been able to replace those guys and you want staff to grow, too, right. Like Alex will do a great

job down at South Florida. I want guys to get head jobs from where we are at.

But guys are not just leaving to take another job, either. So we have actually been able to promote from within because they were the right guys. There's so much consistency. All the things that we were navigating as you take over a program, and in year 1 and in year 2, I think was vitally important that we've been able to have that, and it's a big part of our continued growth this off-season here in '23.

Q. Could you expand on, you said, you feel Alex will be a great head coach. What are his traits? Why do you think that?

JOSH HEUPEL: Competitive. Willing to work. I think those are two traits that drive you every minute of the day to continue to help your program grow. And, you know, you look at that, it's where the starting blocks are in my opinion. Then he's got great ability to communicate, and he's hired a lot of really good people, some of them were in our building a year ago, some young staff that will be great coaches.

So I'm really excited about where he's going to take that program.

Q. In these days, you're almost in a rare situation where you've got a quarterback you've had now going into your third season he's been here. With the transfer portal, is it challenging or how grateful are you that you're not having to deal with getting a quarterback up to speed, out of the portal, and get them up to speed in your offense all before the season starts, and how nice is it to have Joe in this situation?

JOSH HEUPEL: It is rare that you're able to keep quarterbacks inside of your quarterback room. The days of having, you know, four or five quarterbacks consistently, I think those are probably not real anymore. Guys want to have the opportunity to play and compete early. I think it's rare that a young man like Joe is able to sit back and trust the people around him; that we have his best interests at heart, recognize the areas that he can and needs to grow in to become the player that he's capable of. And also know that if I stick this thing out and I compete hard every single day, I'm going to grow and in what we do offensively, going to be able to do the things that I wanted to inside of a college football landscape.

Those are rare things and it takes a really mature guy, which Joe has proven to be.

Q. Being an offense that prioritizes pace, I'm curious

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your thoughts on the new rule change with the clock no longer stopping on first downs, and potentially there's a rule with the hash marks aligning themselves with the NFL. Your thoughts on that potential change?

JOSH HEUPEL: The clock rule at the end of the first half, I think everybody is going to be playing in the same way. I don't think it's going to have a dramatic, different effect on us versus another offense.

How you manage your time-outs might be a little different at the end of regulation or the end of the half. All in all, we'll see what the numbers play out to be. But there's a series of the game that's probably taken away in general for every team because of some of the clock rules. But we'll see how that plays out during the course of the year.

Q. What does it mean to the interior of your defense to have Omari Thomas not consider going into the Draft and what does his personality bring to your locker room?

JOSH HEUPEL: Omari is a guy that loves to have fun. He's got great energy every single day. He's become a really strong leader and being able to command guys, and that can be positively or it can be trying to get them to go accomplish the things that they need to in the weight room or on the practice feed. He's got a great voice inside of our locker room. As I said, a tremendous leader.

Vitaly important for us as we continue to try to take steps on the defensive side of the ball. A year ago, we took a massive jump in our ability to defend the run. Omari and the guys that we brought back a year ago were a huge part of that. Expect all of those guys to make another jump. They did a great job in spring ball, fundamentals, technique, consistency play-to-play and day-to-day.

And one of the other areas that we have had to improve upon is the ability to affect the passer with our front four, not just bringing pressure. We need that because of situational football. We have to get better on third downs, third-and-long in particular. And I thought those guys did a great job this spring, Coach Garner and Coach Ekeler, what those guys have done up front, really happy and really pleased and excited to get to training camp with them.

Q. With Texas coming into the league now, which school has the real claim to being able to call itself UT?

JOSH HEUPEL: There's only one real UT. One right shade of orange.

Q. How much of a catalyst was the Florida game, given the history of the series, the recent history, that is, and the rivalry to you guys season last year?

JOSH HEUPEL: Catalyst, yes, at that point in the season, but every season there's steps that you have to take and in some ways, there's benchmarks, but there's opportunities for growth.

I thought throughout the course of the football season last year, we continued to get better a majority of the season and that's what good teams do. The Florida win was a big one, absolutely, for our fan base as much as anything. Meaning many recent years, we had not had the same amount of success as we would have liked to.

But for our players, there was great confidence going into it, and, yes, great confidence coming out of it as well.

Q. What's moving the needle more in college football now from when you played coming out of South Dakota, offensive or defensive coordinators, and what are expectations of a defense against an offense like yours?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, my expectation for the defense that we are playing isn't for them to have a whole lot of success, but that's my viewpoint.

In football, you've got to play all three phases together, offense, defense, and special teams. And at the end of the day, we are always trying to find a way to be plus one. That can be 3-2 or whatever it needs to be. At the end of the day, every side has got to grow together.

Q. Wanted to ask about tampering. That has certainly been a subject that's been brought up quite a bit here lately. How big of an issue is it, and what would be a good starting point to alleviate this issue?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, how big of an issue it is, I don't know. I think there's so many people that are involved in the recruitment of players. Could be high school coaches. Could be workout facilities. Seven-on-seven coaches, whatever. There's so many different dynamics that go into it, I don't know how you stop the communication completely at any one point.

So I don't have a silver bullet for that issue. Similar to a lot of other issues that maybe we are trying to navigate inside of college football, but there's a lot of smart people that are working on finding answers to those things.

Q. Besides wins on the football field, what's a goal or goals for you as a head coach at the University of

Tennessee?

JOSH HEUPEL: Standard at Tennessee is to win championships. It's pretty clear. You know, I think we are Top-10 in the history of college football in wins, first round draft picks, Bowls, Bowl wins. The standard is to compete at the highest level and win championships.

You know, for us, that starts in the Eastern Division, which everybody knows that there's a lot of good football that's played in that division.

Q. Speaking of recruiting, obviously it's a big part of the game. Brian Kelly mentioned this week that in the future, he thinks AI will be a driving force for intriguing options, trying to see what player profiles out there fit what you want to do offensively, defensively. What's your opinion on that going forward?

JOSH HEUPEL: AI is infiltrating in so many different areas from business, I'm sure in sport, too. Eventually it becomes a resource probably for everybody inside of college football. You know, how quickly that part takes inside of our program, I can't give you an answer on. But I'm sure that at some point it will.

Q. The Knoxville News Sentinel reported that the Tennessee Attorney General may have used the NIL law in the state to threaten to sue the NCAA and maybe prevent a Bowl ban. I know it's a different regime, but what's it like to have the state AG behind the program and be willing to support the school's athletes?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, I said it earlier when I opened up in my opening remarks, just, you know, our administration and their willingness to fight for innocent student athletes. I mentioned the 65 scholarship players, walking in that first season because there was huge hurdles in our first two years to get to this point that we have had to climb out of.

The easiest thing would have been for our administration and me, too, is to take a Bowl ban in year 1, but that wasn't right. The guys that were left were innocent guys and new staff. There's nobody left from the administration in our athletic department to the football side of it, football staff, to our players that was really involved.

And so it was right to compete and give those guys an opportunity to fulfill or have an opportunity to fulfill all of the things that they wanted to inside of a college football season for those guys that were going out.

You know, appreciate our administration and everybody fighting for those guys.

Q. I had a two-parter. If you forget the second part, Kevin will help you remember. He's good at that. I know you talked about Joe already and he was experienced before the Orange Bowl, but how big was it for him to have the kind of game he did for him, the team, everybody? And you mentioned the investigation. How good is it to have some closure behind that and have it behind you?

JOSH HEUPEL: For Joe, I think it solidified all the work that he put in that he would go out and perform and play. It was proving himself right as much as anything it. Wasn't about proving anybody wrong. It was about proving himself right. It was great for him and the guys around him to see that hard work does pay off and take advantage of your opportunities and be prepared when it comes.

The second part of your question is what I'm going to ask.

THE MODERATOR: How it's been resolved.

JOSH HEUPEL: For the NCAA stuff, our current roster have not thought about it or focused on it very much. I can tell that in the way the team meeting went after the news came out. I was out of town, so we had to do it virtually after their workouts, which was right after the news came out.

But for how we handle recruiting, the guys that signed with us in the last 18 to 24 months that trust what we were saying to them, the transparency of the dialogue that we had with them, it was unbelievably satisfying to get over that hump. You're not dealing with unknowns now, not dealing with other programs that are beating you up in some way sensationalizing what's going to happen.

I was able to have great trust in what our administration was talking to us about. We were, you know, consistent and clear on that messaging to our recruits, and that's why we have been able to recruit at a really high level. But it's great to have it in the rear-view mirror, not something that you're driving by all the time.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Squirrel White from my state. He had a big Orange Bowl. Your guys have done a great job developing Cedric Tillman going on to the NFL and now Jalin Hyatt. Talk about his future. He really stepped up in that Bowl game when both those guys didn't play.

JOSH HEUPEL: Young player that we knew was going to play at a really high level when given the opportunity. It's been great to see him grow from a quiet young kid that came on the campus to somebody that's got a ton of

personality and energy and affects his teammates in positive ways.

Great work habits, is tough as they come. From day 1, he's willing to stick his face into anything and be extremely physical and complete really hard. He's got elite speed, great ball skills, has the ability to be a great route runner. Anticipate him having a great year; you guys saw him perform really well in the Orange Bowl.

Q. One of the sexiest aspects of your offense is that vertical choice; a really underrated aspect is the eclectic approach that you have in that run game, only 12 reps separated your most-run run concept from your sixth. Would you mind elaborating on how having that type of balanced approach on the ground really does help facilitate things on the back end and help things come open?

JOSH HEUPEL: I love your passion and energy for our offense, man (laughter). Might need to bring you in on the recruiting pitch.

I think people get caught up in the perimeter numbers and the quarterback development and the quarterback numbers that are out out there. Everybody that studies it understands that the secret to our sauce is the ability to run the football.

Coach Ellerbe and I have been together, I think we are going on year eight now, three different stops. He does an unbelievable job from game plan to fundamentals to teaching overall scheme and concepts on the other side of the ball. Our guys continue to grow from year 1 to year 2. They play synchronized in the tempo that we play at, the ability to communicate and get everybody on the same page. Does an unbelievable job. So I appreciate you recognizing all those things.

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