

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Dallas, Texas, USA

## Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Clark Lea

### Press Conference

CLARK LEA: All right, thanks Commissioner. I want to start just by acknowledging those in Houston that have been impacted by Hurricane Beryl. On behalf of Vanderbilt football, we hope for a full recovery for the city, but also our thoughts remain with anyone who has suffered loss.

I would also like to send my heartfelt condolences to the Kiffin family with the recent passing of Monte Kiffin. Coach Kiffin certainly left his mark on our game. His contributions to the coaching profession were monumental. His legacy will continue to inspire and guide us forward.

As always, I would be remiss not to thank Chancellor Diermeier and Candice Lee for allowing me the opportunity to represent our great university, and the privilege of working with our coaches, players, and staff back home in Nashville.

It's great to be in Dallas. There is such a rich tradition of football excellence at every level in Texas. We have 21 players on our roster from this state, and we're excited for continued recruiting success here, particularly with the SEC expansion in the region.

I have three players with me today that have been connected to our program since my beginning. CJ Taylor and Gunnar Hansen were a part of the COVID recruiting class that I inherited in my first year. Both have developed into highly productive players.

CJ has been the most explosive playmaker on our defense for the past two seasons, and Gunnar anchors our offensive line having amassed 22 starts, including 17 consecutive.

You will also meet Langston Patterson today. He was early to buy in to the vision for what's possible with Vanderbilt football as our first committed player in my time as head coach. Langston finished last season as our most productive player on defense, and is poised to have great continued success in his career this season.



As we grow success, in time there will be a few guys that I'll remember as critical to setting the foundation for our program. CJ, Gunnar, and Langston are certainly a part of that group.

A year ago I spoke to you about our program taking the next step, about building on the progress we made from year one to year two. As I've said the past, success is seldom linear. Unfortunately, we dipped in our performance and fell well short of our goal of competing in post-season play.

It's a core belief of mine that challenges present opportunities, specifically opportunities for growth. With that in mind, at the conclusion of the last season, I set out to understand more about our shortcomings so that I could make adjustments to get us back on track.

I approached every decision this off-season looking to answer two important questions: What am I meant to learn from this adversity? How can we use it as an inflection point and a catalyst to our future success?

In this exercise we've changed in three fundamental ways. First, we changed the way we train. It was clear we weren't developing physically at a rate that was closing the gap between us and our league peers, and that a new approach was needed in the weight room.

This led to the hiring of Robert Steiner who brings an excellent track record of developing football teams while also building culture in the weight room. His impact has been immediate and our team has benefited in immeasurable ways from his philosophy and approach.

Second, we changed our tactical systems on offense and defense. In the role of offensive coordinator I hired Tim Beck who joins us from New Mexico State. Last season Tim engineered the No. 14 rushing offense and the No. 12 offense in yards per play.

The improvement made by his unit in two years at New Mexico State stood out to me and demonstrates the type of developmental success needed at Vanderbilt. He also



brings ten years of experience as a head coach, including a national championship in 2011.

Along with Tim, I decided to take over the role as defensive coordinator. This is a job that I know well. My belief that I can positively impact this side of the ball kept me from having to put anyone else in front of our defensive players. Consequently, I've grown closer to the team in my work with the defense, as I'm able to build connection through teaching the game that we love and share.

In taking on this responsibility, I needed to round out the staff with someone who had the experience and the strength in our operational systems while sharing in the responsibilities that traditionally fall to the head coach.

Jerry Kill brings to our staff 175 wins over 24 years as a head coach. He's built programs at challenging places throughout his career, and I can think of no one better to lock arms with as we continue our climb at Vanderbilt.

Finally, we expedited the transformation of our roster. This is required that we fully embrace changes in the college football landscape and actively participate in both the transfer portal and NIL. Falling behind in those spaces erased much of the progress we made in our first two years.

As I stated in the past, it's impossible to function in the portal without resources, and it's taken time for us to build the infrastructure that allows us to both retain our team and be competitive in that market.

Without Candice Lee's support and competitive toughness, we would still be stuck in our old strategy. As it is, we've been able to adjust and adapt, and though we still have a ways to go, we're in a much better position to support our team now than we were a year ago.

Roster transformation is about more than enhancing talent and skill. It's also been important for us to address the spirit of our program and shed the mindset of our past.

We'll have 53 players on our roster this season that weren't with us a year ago. Of our 120 players, 106 have been recruited into my vision for success at Vanderbilt. This will be the first season which the majority of the team signed up for the mission we're on, which is a long way from the initial team of 98 we fielded in 2021.

When I accepted the job at Vanderbilt, I set out to build a program that serves the long-term interest of the players, one that is the caretaker of future success, the steward of holistic development and healthy experience.

Even as the context for our game changes, I will not abandon this mission. It's what I believe in and the only way I know how to coach.

With that said, we do have to adjust our course as the ground beneath our feet shifts. In doing so, we don't have to have lose or souls. We still have choices. People first; mission always.

Our challenge now is to uphold our righteous standards while embracing a more short-term strategy of winning football. This is the reality of our game now, what winning requires of us.

I'm proud of efforts we made to position our program to get back on track. I believe wholeheartedly in the mission we're on and look forward to taking the team with team four in just a few weeks.

**Q. Two-part question. One is if you could talk about the addition of Diego Pavia has brought to the team and your thoughts on Oklahoma and Texas joining the league and the fact that you host Texas this year?**

CLARK LEA: Yeah, first of all, it's just a great time for the SEC. What Commissioner does as the leader of this organization impresses me endlessly.

So the addition of two teams is great for our sport I think. I think that it's exciting. I'm proud to be a part of this league. There has been a three-year runway here, so it feels like, I don't know, they've been with us for a while. Certainly to have them as a part of the league and to compete against them is going to mean a lot.

Diego brings experience, competitive edge. We've already felt his presence in our locker room. There is a quarterback competition we're undergoing right now, and that will be true up until we play Virginia Tech. We are glad to have him just like we are glad to have the other additions to our roster.

For those that know Diego, know he's a unique competitor with just -- he just exudes edge and really proud to have him in black and gold.

**Q. Coach, you said in an interview earlier during spring that this is the most fun you feel like you've had as a head coach. Is that mostly because of your recommitment to be the defensive coordinator or more buy-in getting more players that you recruited?**

CLARK LEA: Well, I think specifically it's speaking to just being able to reconnect with the passion I have for teaching and coaching. I'm a teacher first, competitor

second.

So feeling like I have direct responsibilities over the play and the performance on the field, building trust with players through teaching them and helping them to play the game at a higher level. All those things are energizing to me.

I also feel very positively about the resilience we demonstrated in a tough December after a tough season. The idea that we're able to bolster our roster and to do things to build competition on our team, those are things as a competitor that excite me too.

Again, Candice Lee has been such a great partner in all this. We're building this program in conditions that seem to change every day. To know that we can get through some of that roster turnover and be better for it, to not lose the foundation of culture that we built over three years, to find people that fit us and come in and actually not just fit us but add to us and move us forward, those are very energizing and empowering feelings.

It's led to that coupled with the teaching and coaching, we're having a lot of fun.

**Q. New rules about coaching staff are going to place that could lead to unlimited coaching staff. Wondering what thoughts you have given how best you can deploy a lot more coaches that can coach on the field?**

CLARK LEA: Yeah, well, we anticipated this just in the design of the staff. When you look at the addition of Jerry Kill, knowing that eventually we felt like he was going to be able to be a part of and wear a headset and be influential on.

We also added Steve Gregory. Steve is someone I worked with at Syracuse and have a lot of respect for. Was secondary coach for the Lions, secondary coach for the Dolphins, who joins us as the associate defensive coordinator. He's a guy that's going to really help and support me as I take on two roles.

But beyond that, we've also retained some of our young staff that are ready to move on and to take over rooms elsewhere. But knowing that this was on the horizon, we wanted to keep them involved because we believe in them and their teaching ability, but also in the fact that they're totally aligned with the culture we built.

So retaining them and putting them in positions now to coach tight ends or stars, and to be actively engaging in that way is a way for us to just strengthen our culture and process.

So we anticipated it. I do believe that there is probably a negative return to too much. You know, obviously like any situation, the more voices you have the more opinions you have, the more important it is that as a leader you hone in on what you want to do and set a course for everybody.

But certainly we feel we were positioned to take advantage of that rule, and we will look to continue to do that moving forward.

**Q. What really drew you to that New Mexico State brain trust? What do you hope they're able to bring to your program?**

CLARK LEA: Well, I've always wanted to go to Los Cruces. Just kidding. I've always had a great respect for Jerry Kill. As a young coach, competed against him I think 2013 in the Texas Bowl. He was at Minnesota; I was at Syracuse.

Just in watching his team play then, I just remember having such admiration for the style of play. Jerry is a guy who has such a reputation for program building and, again, the respect that people have for him in our profession goes beyond just the wins and losses.

It's how he's done it. That struck a chord with me as a young coach, and I continued to follow him through my career.

So I happened to cross paths with him in 2022. I had a chance to introduce myself and exchange contacts, and followed his progress at New Mexico State, and the bowl game in year one, was celebrating that for him from a far.

Year two is one the most impressive coaching jobs that I think our game has seen. They opened -- it's a ten-win season. They opened with a loss against UMASS. You think about the competitive toughness it takes as a leader and belief in what you're doing after suffering a setback like that in game one.

But my attention was really grabbed after they went to Auburn the week after we played them and were able to steal a win on the road there. You know, I probably watched that game nine or ten times start to finish the next week.

When I say start to finish, the inner cut where you go from play one to the final play and watch every phase and every snap. I wanted to see the anatomy of what he built. I saw a defense that was sound, solid, and simple. Played together and played hard.

Saw an offense that was creative in design but not gimmicky. I saw a quarterback that was a maniac and suplexed a linebacker on the sideline early on in the game, and one of his only mistakes where you threw an interception. It was impressive.

At the time I thought we would just go and visit them in the off-season and get a feel for their process and what can we take from them, what can we learn from them. When I made the decision to go in a different direction on offense, I knew I wanted to take a look at Tim.

All the analytical measures, his numbers stood out, and we made the connection and he's a great addition. The fact that Jerry comes is icing on the cake. I feel so privileged to have him as a part of our staff. I'm learning from him every day and he's a great asset for us.

**Q. You added a lot of depth from the transfer portal. Also added depth in your staff. As you look back from spring practice to now as a unit, what are some indicators that your program is headed in the right direction for 2024?**

CLARK LEA: Well, we've played a lot more football now than we have in the past. You kind of have a feel for how your team is performing in the systems and competing in the systems.

Obviously just like every other program, our kids we're GPSs on the field so we've got measurables telling us we're moving in the right direction.

But one of the things that I feel like is most impressive is the speed has increased, but so has the weight. So like when you look at our edge players, average weight gain from January to now, addition of 16.4 pounds. That's impressive.

You talk about the tight end group averaging 12 pounds of weight gain.

Safeties averaging ten pounds the weight gain. I can go down the list.

What you realize is we're becoming a faster team, becoming a bigger team.

So independent of just seeing performance in the systems and getting a little more exposures that way, we can see the physical development of our roster.

And again, for us, especially early in on this build, we're not positioning our squad the best we can unless we're making those gains.

I credit Robert Steiner with that. I credit his philosophy and his approach. Our players will do the same today when you ask them. He's been an absolute rock star for us and I'm glad to have him.

**Q. You promoted Jamaal Richardson earlier this off-season. What did you see in such a young coach to feel comfortable putting him on the field?**

CLARK LEA: Are you friends with Jamaal? Okay. Just kidding. Here is Jamaal Richardson: Passionate, high energy, positive every day; a young coach who knows how to hold people accountable.

Like I was so impressed with his willingness to come to me at times and say, coach, I don't understand what you meant when you said this; or coach, I didn't really take that the right way. What was that about? Just to have those hard conversations, they came so natural to him.

He holds the respect of our team. He holds the respect of that corner room. He's relatable of our players. Here is guy, as I'm getting older err and older unfortunately, here is the guy that knows what that player experience is really like.

So I've got so much faith and confidence in Jamaal. I'm so excited to be helping him in his process for growth. But as a young coach there is so many things that he does naturally and instinctively that serve as a great foundation.

So Jamaal is a guy that's going to have a great run with us at Vanderbilt, but we're going to be talking about him and his career for a very long time.

**Q. With Texas and Oklahoma joining the league, the University of Texas has a winning record against every SEC program except South Carolina and Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt has an 8-3-1 record against the University of Texas. Haven't played since 1928, but hey...**

CLARK LEA: I don't think it's important.

**Q. 8-3-1 is 8-3-1, and coming to Nashville in October. What are your thoughts?**

CLARK LEA: Well, independent of the football that was played in the '20s, listen I'm excited to -- I've got a ton of respect for Coach Sarkisian. In 2020 we competed here in Dallas at the Rose Bowl. It was the pandemic year and I was at Notre Dame at the time and he was running the offense at Alabama and it was one the most challenging offenses I have ever had to plan for.

Got a ton of respect for him and the program he's building. It's taken time for him and he's taken time with the foundation. Yeah, I think in year one here where Texas and Oklahoma are now a part of the SEC, to have a piece of that and a game with them is really exciting.

The fact it's in Nashville, you know, I'm proud of that and looking forward to competing with them, and I think it'll be a great celebration of where the SEC is and a celebration of where our game is headed.

**Q. How do you expect the addition of helmet communications to change playcalling, especially on the defensive side?**

CLARK LEA: Well, because in college offenses are no-huddle and most use tempo, I think we're still going to need to utilize signals from the sideline. I think it's going to be advantageous for us to have a line of communication to a player on the field. Certainly believe that that can be used in a positive way.

Maybe there are occasions against certain offenses where you have the time to group that defense together. We haven't -- used to be -- this is probably ten years ago, maybe 15, you would start fall camp going through your defensive huddle. I mean, that doesn't happen anymore.

I don't expect there to be big changes that way. I do expect the line of communication to be helpful. Maybe in certain situations you have a chance for a linebacker or safety to get the group to go and deliver a message from the sideline.

**Q. With the league continuing to expand, it gets tougher and tougher. What type of player works at Vanderbilt and what's the sell? How easy or how difficult is it for you to ask young men to come and play in this conference?**

CLARK LEA: Well, the type of player that works at Vanderbilt is the same type of players that work at any of our peer institutions.

We want to be competitive for every player because we believe in the product that we sell. I think in the NIL world, some of the long-term significance of that choice has been undercut. I do believe that.

I think we have to adapt our recruiting approach and our thought process, again, to capture the short-term strategy that I mentioned earlier and not just the long-term approach.

The great thing about choosing Vanderbilt is that decision

gets better overtime. In 20, 30 years you'll be as proud of that decision as when you're 17 or 18.

But the SEC is a great draw. It's probably I would imagine for my peers, too, the number one aspect of choosing a school to play in a great conference where you're playing against the very best. It's a great interview for the job at that all these guys want and should want and that's to play in the NFL.

It's something we believe in wholeheartedly. I don't believe in backup plans that way. I want these guys to pursue an NFL career every single day of their lives. I just happen to believe better people make better players and how you do anything is how you do everything.

The time and attention you put going to class on campus and living your life and standards in everything will make you a better pro, and when we send players off to the NFL -and that is going to happen. I know we've had a little bit of a slide that way, but we've been developing young people in our systems, and with our work in the transfer portal we are going to send people to the NFL that are prepared to be pros.

And though your talent may get you the opportunity, it won't keep you there. You got to be a productive player. To be a productive player at that level you better have routines and processes in place and a discipline in place because it is a grinder.

That may get you to a second contract. It's going to be your ability to be a leader and to engage with the community, and to -- as your physical skills deplete, to continue to add value to an organization, that will get you your third.

What better place to train for that than Vanderbilt University?

And with respect to recruiting, listen, we are going to get stronger and stronger as we continue to adapt and adopt strategies that mirror our peers in the portal and NIL space. We have a greater product to sell in the best league in the world, so we expect to continue to field a team of players that look like the players that we play against every Saturday.

We're part of the way there now. We've still got a ways to go, but I am really proud of the progress we made that way, and I'm excited about continuing this growth internally.

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