

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 16, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Josh Heupel

Press Conference

JOSH HEUPEL: Great to see everybody. Hope everybody enjoyed their extended, long vacation here over the course of the summer.

Commissioner, thanks for the kind introduction. He mentioned that the last time I got a chance to see him we were in Omaha, and as I was getting ready to come here, got a chance to see Coach Vitello on the MLB draft a couple of nights ago. Obviously the All-Star Game was here -- or is here tonight, and this is the first time I have had an opportunity to talk since I got a chance to go to Omaha and watch (indiscernible) and Blake and Coach Vitello bring home a championship to Rocky Top. What an unbelievable experience, opportunity to watch the game with Coach Barnes. Danny, our athletic director, get a chance to be on the field and celebrate that moment. Really proud of what they did bringing home a National Championship to Rocky Top, what Coach Vitello has built there and have an opportunity to have my son with me and really my entire family. So great night.

You look at the success that our brand, our logo has had recently with baseball, but basketball during the course of the winter, and you look at all the team sports across the board being in post-season play, I think it really speaks to the trajectory of our university, our athletic department, where it's going, but it also speaks to the leadership that we have there. So fortunate to work with Danny White, our athletic director, Chancellor Plowman and President Boyd. They're visionaries. They give us all the tools to go compete and have created an unbelievable experience for our student-athletes there on the campus. The brand is stronger than it's ever been and really excited about where we're at on the football side of it, but where we're going.

As I sit here today, it's hard to believe that this is the fourth year, the fourth time that I've been here at SEC Media Days, and I look back, so proud of what our staff and our players have built, the connection, the committedness, the care factor that they have for each other and the program. 20 wins over the last couple of years, top 3 in the league,



the best that it's been in 20 years on Rocky Top. As good as it's been, the future is extremely bright, and we're in a race to get where we need to extremely quickly.

Proud of the culture that we've built. I mentioned that a second ago. We got unbelievable players that care about the people around them and attack every single day the right way. And they do it right on the field. They do it right in the meeting room, but they do it right in the classroom as well and in our community.

You know, as you look at us academically, we've shattered every record over the last three years, have reset that record for fall term GPAs. I think we had 63 individuals that were recognized by the conference at the end of the regular season, and we're fortunate enough to have some of those guys here with us today.

We got three really special individuals that are with us today. They represent all that's good in college football. They represent what it means to be a Vol. I take great pride in that we could have had a lot of different players come with us here to Dallas and have an opportunity to speak with you, but these three guys have unique stories and are great ambassadors for the Tennessee Volunteers.

Keenan Pili started over 37 games in his career. Unfortunately had a season-ending injury week one of last year, decided to come back for another year of college football. He loves his experience on Rocky Top and is a dynamic play maker that's poised to have an unbelievable season.

Cooper Mays, preseason all-American center, has started for us for four straight years. It's in his blood to be on Rocky Top. His father played there. His brother played there. It's vitally important to him, and he's a great member of our squad, and he's got great understanding of who we are offensively, the ability to communicate and has great leadership skills as well.

Omari Thomas, who is here for his second time, is a four-year starter for us at defensive tackle. He's kind of the mayor inside of our locker room. He is our SEC representative on the NCAA Football Oversight Committee,



but is vitally important to who and what we are as a program and all four years there he's been a great leader every single year.

This football team that we have when we embarked on our off season when we got back in January, it's a unique roster in that we're really experienced at certain spots, in particular on the line of scrimmage, and we have some youth that surrounds them. The challenge has been that our young guys can't be young when we get to the fall.

The leadership that we have from our veterans, the young guys coming in, buying into the culture, competing every single day, this has been a great group, a great team. Up until this part of the off season, the first three-quarters of our off season, they've been unbelievable in their work habits, their competitiveness, how they've attacked every single rep every single day, and I cannot wait to get to training camp. I'm ready to go compete with these guys on the grass. And I know Vol Nation is excited about the season that we're ready to embark upon as well.

It's hard to believe that training camp is right around the corner in less than two weeks. We're ready to go compete. We got great renovations that are going on inside of Neyland Stadium, one of the great venues in all of sports, let alone college football. Our fanbase is extremely passionate, season ticket waiting list of over 15,000 people, and we'll be ready to go kick off here in a little over a month. With that, I'm going to open it up to questions.

Q. Coach, you got another South Dakota native in the SEC with Kalen DeBoer joining. What's that like to have a South Dakota native on the other side of the third Saturday in October rivalry.

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. I'm not sure anybody pictured two South Dakotans being in the SEC a few years ago. Kalen is somebody that I've known for a long time. I was a little bit younger, watched him as an athlete and then through our coaching paths have crossed and stayed in contact at different times. Excited to have him in the league, great person, great coach, and we'll be ready for Saturday in October.

Q. Coach, last year you talked about, as your program progresses, inches become harder to move than miles. I'm curious how you thought your team did in moving those inches. If not, what can you do to do that better this season?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. If I said miles, I'm not sure that miles might have been right. Certainly maybe feet or yards. I'm really proud of a lot of what we did last year, you know, us finishing New Year's Day bowl, a win, the 20 wins

over the last two years, most that Tennessee has had in the last two decades. At the same time that's obviously not the standard for where we want to get to. But proud of the steps that we took. We had some setbacks on some Saturdays, but that's why you get up, line up and go compete every single day to go be your best. And this group's been fantastic. I'm really excited about the future of who and what we're going to be.

When I took this job three years ago, everybody can go back and kind of research, you know, what we were embarked on as far as challenges and how we had to navigate those, and we're at the point now where we're almost free and clear of navigating all those things. Our roster is the deepest that it's been by far, and inside of this league that's important as you go through the season. I couldn't be more excited about going and lining up with this group this fall.

Q. Coach, you and Coach Halzle are familiar with Oklahoma. Is there anything you're looking forward to particularly when you travel to Norman this September?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. First time I will have been back. It'll be unique for myself to be on the other side of the sideline. Obviously there's been a lot of Saturdays where I was on the home sideline. But there are so many great teammates, friends that will be there. Got great respect for the university, the program. A lot of friends that are coaching on the opposing sideline that day, former teammates that will be coaching on that opposing sideline, too. So it'll be unique to be back there, but excited to be there.

Q. What have you liked and not liked about the helmet communicators in your practice time with them?

JOSH HEUPEL: Practice communication, being able to take that to game day, quickest, most efficient, effective way to communicate with somebody on the field. Gives you a chance to solve some of the problems and in an immediate way. I think the thing that the players would say is there's times where they want to turn the headset off and eliminate some of that communication. So I think as coaches you always gotta be smart in how much information you're actually giving them.

Q. Coach, the secondaries you all had a lot of turnover, brought in a lot of new guys, including Jermod McCoy. What is it you're expecting from him and that group this year?

JOSH HEUPEL: Expecting those guys to play at a championship level. I love the group as far as their length,

athleticism, play-making ability, their willingness to be physical, take on destruct blocks, tackle in open space, their care factor, their knowledge and understanding of what we're doing, how they approach their practice every single day. I'm really excited about it.

I mentioned a little bit earlier, but this is the deepest that we've been within our roster, and that affords you to have the opportunity to have great competition every single day. That's on the practice field. That's in the meeting room. But that depth becomes important as you go throughout the course of the season as well, and I'm looking forward to that group taking a real step here this fall for us.

Q. Josh, it's great to see you again.

JOSH HEUPEL: James, I figured I'd hear from you at some point, man. Good to see you.

Q. You were a great quarterback at OU, and you've always been good with quarterbacks. Tell us about your latest quarterback. Such a highly recruited kid.

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. Was highly recruited because of his athletic traits. He's got the ability to throw the football sideline to sideline, vertically down the football field, extremely accurate, loose, quick-triggered arm. He's got the ability to extend and make plays with his feet. As a runner, evading and making a play down the field. The thing that I've loved about Nico is when he came into the building, he wanted to earn the respect of his teammates, and you do that through your actions, not your words. Everybody understands how hard he works to become the best that he can at his craft. He takes great ownership in his skill set and developing it, understanding of our offense, and just, you know, as a young player, gets his first start in the bowl game. One of the best compliments you can give to a quarterback is when they go from the practice field to the game field, it slows down for 'em. During the course of the bowl game, it slowed down for him. Thought he was in great command out there. Now, there's a lot of things that he learned from that game. He's had a great urgency in his preparation all off season. I'm really excited to see his growth and development as a young quarterback throughout the course of this '24 journey.

Q. Josh, can you reflect on -- 25 years now since you came to Norman; you're going back to Norman in September. Guy that came in with you. Brent's the head coach on the other side. OU has joined the league that you've established yourself in. Just the crazy nature of your journey as it relates to Oklahoma.

JOSH HEUPEL: Barry, I feel like only you could have predicted that all these things would happened 25 years

ago, as the grand wizard of Oklahoma media.

You know, Coach Leach recruits me. Brent, I got great respect for Brent, playing while he was coaching, but also being beside him in the staff room. I don't know that I ever forecasted they were coming into this league, Oklahoma. It's just -- those are two really good brands coming in. Obviously Oklahoma, my experience there, I think it's an exciting time to be in this league and really unique that I'll have an opportunity to go back to Oklahoma. It'll be a completely different viewpoint on that Saturday afternoon or evening, whenever the game is. But it'll be unique for me. Got family that still lives back there. A lot of friends, teammates, coaches that I stay in contact that coached me while I was there, and obviously administration, too. So it'll be a unique Saturday.

Q. Josh, why did you ultimately not bring Nico lamaleava here?

JOSH HEUPEL: It's not about why I didn't bring Nico. It's about why the three guys that I talked about earlier are here. These are guys that are in six-year-plus that have unique stories and are great ambassadors, but great leaders inside of our program; and felt like, you know, in our track record, my track record of who we brought here, we've brought veteran guys, and so it's not about Nico. It's about these three guys, why we made that choice.

Q. Coach, Chris Brazzell is a guy who's gotten a lot of hype this off season, the Tulane transfer. Talk about what makes you so excited about him, and then the rest of that wide receiver group, the luxury it is to help a young quarterback with some of the talent you've got in that room.

JOSH HEUPEL: It's always a luxury as a quarterback to have guys that have the ability to separate, create bigger windows, to have length, to go up and attack the football, have the skill set to defeat press at the line of scrimmage, let you get the ball out of your hands, not sit back there and take a bunch of hits. Chris is somebody that's got a lot of talk about because of what he's done on the field. Been a great teammate, but he's been a dynamic playmaker up until this point as we went through spring ball, and his best is still coming. He's continued to grow and mature physically. Just his strength, explosiveness, size to his frame, what he's done since he got there in January, really excited about him and looking forward to having a great training camp with him.

Q. Josh, back on Nico, it sounds like the learning curve, that you're expecting him to hit the ground running and it's not going to be any wait till mid season to gain your form. Is that accurate?

JOSH HEUPEL: I certainly hope not. You know what I mean? We want him to hit the ground running. He's a young quarterback. Played really well in the bowl game. He's going to continue to grow. Through all of his experiences here throughout the course of the season, he's only going to continue to get better from all of those. But we expect him to play at a really high level from the very beginning, and we need that from him.

Q. Josh, relationship with Tony Vitello and how you've been able to use the baseball program to kind of cross-recruit with football. What has that been like for the last three years and how have you used Vitello to maybe land a few players on your all's roster?

JOSH HEUPEL: At times there's baseball-football guys that you're recruiting. So having a clear dialogue with him I think is really important, him and his staff. But I think one of the great things, when it's going good, it's going good all year long as far as your logo being in front of recruits. And so what Coach Vitello has done on the baseball side of it or Coach Barnes has done on the basketball side of it, those are great experiences for recruits when they come to campus. They get a small taste of what Vol Nation is like and what game days are going to be like in front of 102,000 inside of Neyland Stadium.

Q. I did want to ask about building a program, and you've done it at a couple of places. It was Central Florida and now at Tennessee. With the portal and all the portal that entails, is it easier, harder to build a program how you'd like to?

JOSH HEUPEL: I think the portal has positives and negatives within your own roster. Right? You lose some, you gain some. The portal gives you the ability to go patch holes on your roster quicker than it could happen just through general high school recruiting. It's a little bit like junior college recruiting used to be where you had immediate needs and had to patch your roster.

Q. Coach, can you just talk about the impact of your two new assistant coaches with Inge and Sims heading into this fall with just what they've been able to do in the spring and summer so far?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. Two guys that are elite teachers, that are relationship driven. Their ability to gain trust from the players inside of their position rooms as quickly as they did parlayed itself into both of those position groups having great springs. And they've had great summers, too, but just the on-field experiences. Our linebackers I thought played with great eyes, linemen assignment, their communication, their ability to obstruct blocks. They are

playing their best football as a group that they had since we've been there. And Coach Sims has done an unbelievable job with the running back. It's a young group, outside of Dylan Sampson, that have really grown in their understanding and their football IQ. Really excited to see him continue to develop that group here as we get into training camp.

Q. You just mentioned Dylan Sampson. What kind of role do you expect for him to have this year, maybe increased opportunities for him?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. He will have increased opportunities. He's a guy from the moment that he got there had great feel, pace and vision. He's done a great job with the ball in his hands and out of his hands. He's become a really good pass protector. He's got the ability to help you in your return game as well. After his freshman year, his ability to impact his teammates, Dylan is one of the strongest leaders that we have inside of our locker room. Just a dynamic personality that isn't afraid to call on his teammates and make sure that they're meeting the standards. He's going to have a great year for us.

Q. Coach, a schedule question for you. Two years ago you had that game at Pitt that I really thought kick started you guys early in the season. And last year you didn't really have one of those. Well, you had the game in Nashville last year, the opener. But this year you've got that NC State game in Charlotte the second game. How important is that for you to get a game like that, a tough nonconference game early? Do you think that can serve the same purpose as that Pitt game did two years ago?

A. Yeah. Every season is different. I'm not sure you want to necessarily go into overtime to kick start your season. But it certainly helped. NC State's a really good program. Coach Doeren has done a really good job there. They're a really good football team. That will be a big-time matchup Saturday evening over there in Charlotte.

Q. Josh, it's been a few years since you've been to Fayetteville. They're on the schedule this year. Just your thoughts about preparing for that game.

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. Always a great venue. Fanbase is extremely passionate; and early conference game, on the road, know that that will be a big test when we get to that Saturday.

Q. Josh, NIL has become a bad word for a lot of college football fans. But can you talk a little bit about the positives for your guys, just some of those personal stories that you've seen and the differences

that it's made?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah. I wish I had it when I was back in Oklahoma playing. You know what I mean? I think, you know, for our players, in their lives, with their family, it's afforded them opportunities, and I think that's important. I do truly go back to my playing days and feel like, you know, you wanted to be a part of it and have an opportunity to use the game in a positive way for your family as well. And so for our guys, being able to increase their brand, their notoriety and also be taking care of their families is a real positive.

Q. Coach, it's always darkest before dawn. We hear college football is ruining NIL, the portal and everything, and here is Tennessee all of a sudden brought in 62 million in donations last year. It's pretty much idiot-proof college football. Season ticket sales. What do you tell people that keep trying to kill the game?

JOSH HEUPEL: This is the greatest game. To me this is the greatest game that there is. You look at the experience that young people have from 18 to 22, 23 years old, their growth as a man, and the game affords that. You learn how to set goals. You learn how to handle success. You learn how to handle failure. You learn how to lead. You learn how to get yourself ready to be the husband, the father that you want to be when football ends, and it ends for everybody some day.

There's a lot of obstacles within the landscape of college football in today's world that we gotta navigate, but there's a lot of really smart people that can help us navigate it the right way, and I'm excited about the future of football.

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