

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Oklahoma Sooners Brent Venables

Press Conference

BRENT VENABLES: All right. Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here today. Great to be back in the great city of Dallas where our roster is represented with close to 20 players. I'd like to thank Commissioner Sankey, his staff, for putting on, as always, a first-class event. And I'd also like to thank Commissioner Sankey for being in Norman July 1st and helping us, as a university, helping us transitioning to the SEC. What a great day it was. I know you got your steps in that day. But just really appreciate your leadership through all of that.

I'd also like to thank our president, Joe Harroz, and our athletic director, Joe Castiglione, for not only their leadership, but their alignment, their strength, their vision, in one of the most tumultuous in college football history, transitioning to the SEC for, again, their leadership over the last three years, their vision for where this program is going, and most importantly, positioning Oklahoma in a great way as a member, newest member of the strongest conference in all of collegiate athletics, the SEC.

I've brought three players with me today, and I would be remiss if I just didn't thank them for standing alongside with me here today, representing what I believe is the strongest group of leadership and accountability that I've been a part of while I've been at the University of Oklahoma. And the things that they stand for are all the right things when it comes to being a college football player. That's off the field; that's on the field. That's making everyone around them better. These are young men that have achieved at the very highest levels, both in high school and in college. You're looking at Jackson Arnold as a formal national Gatorade Player of the Year or you're looking at Billy Bowman, an all-American safety, Danny Stutsman, an all-American linebacker, and the humility, the leadership, the work ethic, the toughness, their love for their teammates, and most importantly, their love for their university and their opportunity. I'm just really humbled that those guys are leaders in our locker room. Very, very thankful for them, and you all are going to have a great time getting a chance to visit with them here today as well.



Really looking forward to getting things started here at the end of July. Really excited about our football team. We've got a great blend of both experience -- I believe we have, give or take, around 24 players that are going on their third or more a year as a starter in college football. And we also have this amazing foundation of youth. We have 52 scholarship players that are either a freshman or sophomore going into this year. We're going to welcome 53 players this season, that have never been at Oklahoma, in the fall to run out on the field. That's 38 scholarship players and 15 walk-ons.

We do have, again, a lot to look forward to. We have -- I love the direction of this football team and the development since January that's taken place, but we still have a lot of work to do. A lot of excitement, but we got a lot of work to do, and we still have an opportunity over the next several of weeks and couple of months to continue to develop, which I think is going to be critical as we chase an opportunity, compete for an SEC Championship.

It goes without saying, the SEC is a deep, incredibly competitive league, unlike any other in college football, and everything, everything, again, about this league is about parity. It's about competitive depth. And it's a one-possession league, as we've looked at it outside-in. You've got incredibly challenging venues. Every member of this conference, top to bottom, is committed to the excellence that this conference represents. And so as a football program, being in our first year, we are really looking forward to the challenge.

Q. Brad, I had a two-parter, if that's okay. I was wondering if you could talk about Jackson Arnold is your quarterback. I know he played in the bowl game. How big was that? What are you expecting? And I know he's won a lot of titles and Heismans and all that, but how ready do you feel like OU is for the SEC transition?

BRENT VENABLES: Well, Jackson understands better than anybody what goes into being a quarterback of a football team of the locker room, the leader, the face, the responsibilities, the challenges. What I feel best about and



have the most peace about is his ability to be able to handle the highs and the lows, the challenges, the success, the failure that a season will bring you. Nobody is more competent or more ready, even though he's a young player, and we've gotta, in some ways, be the headlights for him. That's why they call us coach. But his skill, his arm talent, his toughness, his instincts, his ability to lead people, bring out the best in people, no question about it, he's ready for his opportunity and his moment.

Q. And the success of OU, combining with the success of the SEC --

BRENT VENABLES: I'm sorry?

Q. Was that your question, Bob? With all your past history, how ready is OU to take on this challenge?

BRENT VENABLES: I really don't know how to answer that, other than we're excited for the challenge. As competitors, as a football program, you know, Oklahoma isn't intimidated as a football program. We're running towards the SEC. I think that goes without saying. We've looked forward for the last several years for this partnership, to be a part of an amazing conference, the best conference in college football.

How ready we are, we're excited for the challenge. I think you have to go through it. I think it's probably -- as a coach, I think going through it gives you the best litmus test. There's nothing that you can read about or even watch on tape, to be honest with you. We know the challenges from a roster standpoint, you know. The trenches is where this conference is decided usually year in and year out, incredibly challenging from that standpoint. The length, the speed, the play at quarterback, the coaching acumen from top to bottom. Again, you're not going to sneak up anywhere, any week in any venue and show up and luck up and win. And so it's a conference that's about earning what you get, and I think going through it a season you'll figure that out. You'll figure out what was good, what wasn't good, the areas of your program, your roster that need improvement so that you can match up and have an opportunity to compete for championships.

Q. Two new changes to college football. You're going to have live video on tablets on the sidelines in between series. You're also going to have communication in the helmets till 15 seconds left. How big is it that Danny Stutsman is coming back to this defense?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah. In regards to the new legislation passing, the sideline tablets is going to be able to show live video. I think it's a great resource. I think

making sure -- you have very limited amount of time to coach through these moments on the sideline. It'll be useful in some ways, and you just want to make sure that it's not distracting in other ways.

In regards to the helmet communication, I think it's going to allow offenses to be even more efficient. Again, you only have it on one guy on defense. It's a little different than the NFL. There's a few teams in the NFL that do a little bit of tempo at times, but a little bit different from a defense's perspective.

And, again, sometimes, again, too much communication can be a bad thing, too. And so you'll find that balance as a program and as a player. Some players will receive it better than others. But it can be a real competitive advantage to me offensively to be able to be in the ear of the quarterback 15 seconds prior to snapping the ball.

And then having Danny back, it's tremendous. I mean, he's -- what I have the most appreciation about is his motives are pure. And certainly he's got big dreams to be an NFL player, but the humility and the decision-making process and like I'm not -- yeah, I can get drafted at a pretty high level. He had an excellent grade. And I've had plenty of guys take the grade and go with it. But he wants to go and have a long career in the NFL, a career of longevity, one that he can immediately show up to the NFL, the most difficult league in the planet, and make an impact wherever he is.

But he also is just 20 years old. So he had a real practical process that he went through, like I have so much more to give to the University of Oklahoma and to that locker room, and he wanted to be one of the leaders to help take us into the SEC and leave his legacy and leave his mark that way.

Q. Brent, you touted how many players you guys have from this DFW area. How do you anticipate recruiting maybe changing to continue landing guys like Jackson Arnold or Billy Bowman, knowing how imperative recruiting an elite roster is now going against schools like A & M and Arkansas for those same guys in the same league?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah, again, we've been going against all those teams for decades, and so it's always competitive. The one thing that I know about teams from the Southeast Conference is the coaching staffs, their recruiters, their facilities, their fanbases, their history, their heritage, everybody's got a lot to sell. And people from a recruiting standpoint are absolutely relentless. From beginning to end, there's nobody that's not that way in the Southeastern Conference. So you gotta -- it's a long race, and, again, tough to get good players, but the good thing is



there's plenty of really good players for everybody to get. And you gotta be able to win the race, and running the race with endurance probably is the best advice.

Q. Brent, I saw a quote from an SEC coach saying that OU's biggest adjustment will be along the line of scrimmage. Back to that question, how do you evaluate the status right now at the line of scrimmage for the Sooners?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah. I mean, I think we're in good shape, and we'll find out where we need to be better. And, again, I'm certainly far from satisfied. Over the last two-and-a-half years we've worked really hard at developing a roster that is balanced, that's strong in the trenches and in all the right places. We've had guys leave to graduation. We've had a lot of success on the offensive line. I think Coach Bedenbaugh in the last decade has had 13 guys drafted on the offensive line. I think 10 tackles, as a matter of fact, which is the best in college football. So we're going to lose guys. And so we gotta attract guys as well.

So wherever we're at today, we're focused on continuing to enhance that part of our team and to recruit more competitive depth. But I really feel good that we have somewhere in that 9 to 11 range on the offensive line that are guys that can play winning football for us. And on defense you're in that 10 to 12 range up front on our defensive line.

Now, again, there are several guys that maybe don't have this depth of experience, but I trust my eyes and what I've been able to see. And wherever they're at -- we've got several young guys that will be a part of those numbers that I spoke about, and this is a game of development. So going against good people is going to make them better, and so we'll be able to get a really good litmus test going through our schedule this year.

Q. Coach, Josh Heupel talked about it earlier. You go way back with him. You won a National Championship with him. You coached him; you coached with him. Can you talk about your relationship with him and what that reunion in September will look like?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah. So I was speaking about Josh earlier. I have this deep appreciation for Josh, certainly first and foremost as a player. To experience my first National Championship as a coach, I've always looked back and said, man, we couldn't have done it without Heupel. His leadership, what he was able to do from a transformation standpoint to our locker room, you know, the guts and the toughness that he played through that 2000 season. So I've always held him up here on this

pedestal when it comes from a player's standpoint.

No surprise, as a coach's son, the level of success that he has had as a coach. I've stayed in touch with him pretty much every step of the way through this process. We competed on the field in 2014, and he went to Utah State and then to Central Florida and then to Tennessee. So we've stayed in touch through those moments of success and some of the moments, the challenges a football season will bring you.

So a great friend. He and his wife, Dawn, and their children, really good friends of ours. And just really happy for him and the success that he's had. No surprise. He's always been a winner.

Q. Y'all play Tulane in week three, a game that probably looked a lot easier at the time that it was scheduled than it does today. How does playing those tougher out-of-conference games help prepare your team for the rest of the SEC schedule and can you tell me what you expect from that game?

BRENT VENABLES: Well, again, I look at -- we don't have a preseason in college like, say, the NFL does. So we have respect for everybody we play, and anybody can beat anybody. And the last time Tulane came to Norman it went down to the last drive or two of the game and Tulane having an opportunity to win, and certainly we know they beat USC in the Cotton Bowl year before last.

So I don't know any other way to prepare for the season other than you practice and you play games. And so this will give an opportunity to see where you're at, and every week is a season of its own, and so we'll treat it as much.

Q. Do you think "horns down" should ever be penalized?

BRENT VENABLES: Should be penalized? Like on the field? Is that what you're referring to? I don't really have an opinion. Football is a game of emotion and intensity and passion, and if they say that's going to be a penalty, then don't do it. And if they say it's, you know, a free-for-all, then have at it. So everybody is different. Everybody celebrates different. But whatever rules that they have in place, we'll follow those.

Q. You and Texas are in lockstep going into the SEC, and I don't know if you and Sark will be sharing information as you all go in the conference together, but do you see --

BRENT VENABLES: Probably not.

Q. -- your rivalry changing in any way?

BRENT VENABLES: I don't. I don't. It's as deep-seated and hate-filled and emotional of a rivalry as there is in all of college football. So I don't see how the conference affiliation will make a big difference. What I would say is that, you know, that's one of many games that you're going to have to find a way to grind it out. If you think that one is emotionally taxing, you're going to go into a lot of venues that the pageantry is going to be real, the stadiums are going to be completely full and a lot of people are going to hate your guts for three hours or so. So I don't see it diminishing that series and the emotion and the pageantry, the intensity of it whatsoever.

Q. Coach, every coach that has stood on that stage so far has been asked about Texas or Oklahoma and what their impact is going to be on the league. What do you think that says about Texas and Oklahoma joining the SEC?

BRENT VENABLES: Well, again, I think it's a partnership of elite with elite. And, again, two programs that in the history of college football take a back seat to nobody. The SEC doesn't take a back seat to anybody. From our leadership to the quality of the teams -- and, really, it's every single athletic team on those campuses; it's unmatched. And so we both have programs that have had elite-level success with all of our athletic programs, certainly football included. And I just think it fortifies what was already the strongest conference in all of college football.

Q. Brent, I wanted to ask you about the new rules of analysts being able to coach on the field. You guys have quite a handful of guys. How big of a difference is that for you on the field and how are you going to approach that as a head coach?

BRENT VENABLES: I think it's fantastic from a development standpoint in helping young coaches develop in the profession, getting opportunities, creating value for themselves, having experience through it, maybe even having another lens, now that I'm just not standing there with my hands in my pockets; I'm actually having to -- or I actually get to coach every day. I think in some ways it'll help you be more efficient, and I think you have to be careful that more is not always better. But it does give you another lens and another set of eyes and maybe, again, for you as a staff to be a little more efficient. And I think ultimately the players, if done the right way, will be benefactors of that.

Q. Obviously Jeff Lebby was on your staff the last couple of years and now he's entering his first head

coaching job in the SEC. Just overall, what do you think of him as a coach and how do you think he'll do as a head coach?

BRENT VENABLES: I love Jeff. Jeff is one of my favorite people on this planet. He's always in a great mood, his perspective on life and the game of football and on the locker room, real juice and energy, genuineness and positivity. He's a coach's kid. So the game and the locker room have always been a sanctuary for him, which helps him be a very successful coach.

So really confident. He'll do a great job. He's aggressive. He's innovative. He relates well to people. He brings out the best in people. He has the ability to instill confidence in the simplest ways. And I know he's put together a really outstanding staff. He's led athletic director, Zac Selmon, known him for a long time. Zac is an assassin of his own, young athletic director that has a tremendous future as well, and I know the passion in Starkville, Mississippi is very real, and so they'll support him in all the right ways to be successful.

Q. Welcome to the SEC.

BRENT VENABLES: Thank you.

Q. OU announced that they have a new football recruiting structure, specifically, Curtis Lofton as a General Manager, similar to Courtney Morgan at Alabama. What inspired this structure change and how do you feel like it'll give you an edge in SEC recruiting?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah. And I really look at it as an opportunity to -- I'm focused on our locker room, and what I have an appreciation for is our leadership, from our athletic administration, again, Joe Harroz and Joe Castiglione, for their forward thinking, for their ambition, looking ahead to where things are moving. And it's constantly changing, evolving. So we've set up our systems in such a way that allows us to be flexible, to be able to pivot when we need to. Things haven't really landed in a hard space yet, but this allows us the agility to be able to manage wherever it does land.

And at the end of the day, it's recruiting. There's a professional way to look at it. In some ways we're like the NFL, and many ways we're not. We don't get to draft. We don't have multi-year contracts. And so things are in some ways the same, but many ways not. This gives us a way in the collegiate model to hopefully put us in a position of strength when it comes to not only resources, but most importantly, with our systems in place.

And at the end of the day, it's all about helping the players be successful as we build the strongest roster that we can. And so from player evaluation to player acquisition to player retention, that's really the focus. That sounds like a recruiting staff to me, but there is a piece of it, and Jake Rosenthal and his organization, partnering with them is going to allow us to manage some really choppy waters, and I say choppy only because we haven't been there before.

From a potential salary cap of some sort -- when this does all land, there will be some sort of a salary cap. And so we'll be able to tap into their expertise and their skill set to help us be on the front end and the cutting edge, if you will, of that space.

Q. With Ted Roof going to UCF and Jeff Lebby, as mentioned, going to Mississippi State, can you talk a little bit about Zac Alley as your defensive coordinator hire that you handled this winter and Seth Littrell and Joe Jon Finley taking over as co-OCs?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah. So I know there are coordinator changes, and going into the SEC with coordinator changes, on paper that sounds really daunting, and in some ways maybe it is, but our relationships go back a long time. Obviously, Joe Jon and Seth were already internally at Oklahoma; known both of those coaches, Joe Jon since he was 17 years old, recruited him from Arlington High School. Played for his daddy, Mickey Finley. And Seth, you know, he was a sophomore captain football player for us on our National Championship team, and we've all kind of grown up in this profession together.

So I've had a different type of lens when it comes to those two young coaches; incredibly skilled, both of them, tremendous instincts for the game, great, great toughness that our players will benefit from. They understand ball. They understand the locker room. They understand what competitiveness looks like, and they understand what it means to be a great teammate and to bring out the best in people.

So these are leaders of leaders. What they were as players, they have the same skill set and talent as coaches. So really excited about transitioning and continuing to move forward as an offense with those two guys in charge, along with the rest of our staff on offense, Bill Bedenbaugh, Coach Jones, Coach Murray and the rest of our support staff; fantastic group of men, really talented.

And then Zac, again, he's got a unique story. Zac was -- he came directly to Clemson and jumped into coaching as a freshman at Clemson. His dad played at Clemson. His brother was a baseball player, played at Furman. And Zac

was an outstanding player himself. He just chose not to go the walk-on route or the FCS route as a scholarship player and chose to chase his dream as a young person. Incredibly bright, always forward thinking, always has the players in mind when it comes to learning and being able to play fast and aggressive. But has tremendous innovation and skills.

But he's a fundamentalist. He's demanding. He knows what excellence looks like, and he's blended well with the rest of our staff, who, again, most of them he had previous relationships as well. So it's been a fine-oiled machine, if you will, up to this point.

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