

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 16, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

Missouri Tigers

Eliah Drinkwitz

Press Conference



ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Good afternoon. Great to see everybody today. Appreciate the hospitality of being in the great state of Texas. Thank you for your introduction, Commissioner Sankey.

I want to start by honoring the life and legacy of Monte Kiffin. I want to send my condolences to Coach Kiffin, his brother Chris and their family.

You know, Coach Kiffin was the gold standard of defensive coaches in football. Obviously the inventor of the Tampa 2. His legacy on the game has impacted a lot of coaches and a lot of great players, but he also raised two great sons, who are elite coaches in their own right. In a profession full of great men and great coaches, I usually refer to the elite ones as giants in the game, but I'm going to defer to what Lane said about his father and refer to Coach Kiffin as a superhero. And so the game of football lost a superhero this week, and may he rest in peace.

Yesterday in Commissioner Sankey's remarks, he mentioned the new individuals that were going to be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame and what SEC schools they were affiliated with and that next summer we will be moving Media Days to Atlanta, and so it reminded me to call on CEO Steve Hatchell to do the right thing and to nominate Mike Leach for the College Football Hall of Fame. We need to put his name on the ballot.

Coach Leach, in my mind, and I believe in most of the people in this room, is a no-doubt Hall-of-Famer. He impacted our game more in the last 50 years than a lot of other people, not only with his legacy, but also with his football acumen. His air raid offense is the dominate offense when you look at high school football, its elements in college football and all the way translating into the NFL game. We all know Y cross. We all know that six is four verticals. We all understand that rocket laser were tailback screens, rocket to the right, laser to the left. He won 158 career games, was the 2008 Big 12 Coach of the Year, two-time PAC-12 Coach of the Year, and in 2018 was the

AFCA Football Coach of the Year. Won 11 games at Texas Tech and 11 games at Washington State. And I understand that his career winning percentage is .596, one win short of the 60 percent threshold, and I understand that standards are there for people to make decisions, but I also understand that Coach Leach would be a great value to the Hall of Fame, because of the legacy that he has, because of the impact that he made, because of the innovator that he was, because of the legacy of coaches that he left. And in my opinion, not only a winner, but a Hall-of-Famer.

And I hope that Mr. Hatchell will recognize that as CEO he has the ability to utilize his discretion to make the obvious into reality, and that obvious is that the Hall of Fame is incomplete without Coach Mike Leach in it.

In 2023 the University of Missouri had a remarkable football season, capped off by winning the 88th Cotton Bowl. Tip of the hat to Rick for such great hospitality, and I think Fin Ewing is in here somewhere, shout out to Fin.

We set some great records. We sent the most players in Mizzou history to the NFL Combine. We tied the record for most number of players drafted at the University of Missouri, but we also had the second highest APR in the SEC. So by any metric that we have, or the metrics that we have in place for our program, we accomplished our goal of chasing two dreams, developing an elite edge and playing for championships. But let me state this as clearly as I can state it. That was last year, and last year has nothing to do with this year. Okay. And so we as a team, as a brotherhood, as a coaching staff, as a group of players have to go and form our own identity. We have to go develop our own team chemistry. We have to go figure out what it means to be a tough, physical football team. We gotta understand what kind of poise it's going to take to play and execute under pressure. And we have a difficult, difficult task ahead of us. And so with that being said, in order for us to accomplish our goals this season, our football team has a lot of growth to make. And we have a lot of new faces, 20 high school players, 16 transfers, 7 walk-ons. That's 43 new additions to our football team, in order to achieve what we want to achieve this year.

You know, offensively we returned a lot of starters. We returned a lot of production. But I think in this league, in order to be successful, you have to win in the trenches, and it starts with having to replace a left tackle and a left guard that had three years of starting experience.

Now, we have as much competitive depth as we've ever had at the offensive line position with the addition of Cayden Green, Marcus Bryant, Jayven Richardson, Logan Reichert, Mitch Walters. All of those guys have the ability to fill the needs that we have, but we're going to need to play well at the line of scrimmage, and we have our hands full in trying to create the dominance that we want to have in order to effectively protect the football and run the ball that we need to in order to compete at a high level.

You know, running back also has a lot of question marks for us. In the last three years Mizzou has had the SEC's leading rushers with Tyler Badie and Cody Schrader. And it's not as easy as just replacing Cody Schrader's production on the field. His impact in our locker room, through toughness demonstrated day in, day out and the way he performed, his leadership in the locker room and positive, contagious energy is going to be very difficult to replace.

Now, we've got a lot of really good players who can do it. We went to the portal and found Marcus Carroll and Nate Noel, both respected good players at their previous locations. We have a local product from Lancaster, Kewan Lacy. We have a running back from El Paso in Tavorus Jones. We've got Jamal Roberts. We have the talent in order to successfully run the football, but we have to do the other things. We have to lead and demonstrate toughness at a consistent basis, not only in how we rush the football, but how we protect the quarterback, how we do the little things, how we build the cohesive unit with the offensive line.

Wide receivers, tight ends, quarterbacks all have returning players who have played a significant amount and have significant -- have received significant accolades in their past. But just like I said, those are all in the past. It's about what we do this year moving forward, and they still have a lot left to prove.

Defense, we welcome a new defensive coordinator, Corey Batoon, who looks to help us improve in key areas. You know, last year we were 95th in explosive rush. We were 108th in explosive pass. We were 50th in the country in third-down defense. And so our mindset has been how do we get better. And, yes, we have to replace a lot of defensive talented players. We had five players selected in the draft in the first four rounds, but I'm not worried so much about the talent. I think we did a great job of getting

the talent into the building, but it's about forming that standard. It's about forming that cohesiveness as a unit. It's about demonstrating toughness on a daily basis. It's about how we approach Toughness Tuesday and what is our mentality on Clean-Up Thursday, and do we attack Fast Friday with the mentality that we need to in order to be successful.

I look for veterans like Kristian Williams, who's here with us today; Johnny Walker, who was the Cotton Bowl MVP; Dreyden Norwood, Joseph Charleston, Chuck Hicks, Daylan Carnell, Tre'Vez Johnson, who all have multi-game starts, to be guys who we lean on to develop that consistency and teach the newcomers the way that we want to play.

You know, we've got some significant newcomers on the defensive side of the ball that I think will make their impact, Zion Young, Darris Smith, Eddie Kelly, Corey Flagg, Khalil Jacobs, Jeremiah Beasley, Toriano Pride, Caleb Flagg. All of these guys will significantly contribute to us winning, but it's all about us developing and consistently maintaining the standards that have been built over the last four years.

Again, we have a lot left to prove to reach the level of consistency and success that we all want, and I understand that there's a lot of outside expectations on what our football program should be. I think for us the most important thing is to focus on running our race.

You know, now with no divisions, 12-team playoff, you can get caught up in a lot of what-ifs and play in a lot of hypotheticals. The only thing that I know for sure is that we're going to play Murray State week one, and we have to focus with everything we have on being 1 and 0 and consistently preparing the way we know it takes to be 1 and 0. And at the end of the year we'll look back over our 12 games and we'll see how many of those wins and what that earns us. So with that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. You guys were basically 500 the previous years, and last year you made a big jump. So you've kind of gone from the hunters to the hunted, and high expectations this year. What's the mindset? How do you deal with that with the team?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. I don't think it changes for us at all. Number one core value for us is always compete to do it better than it's ever been done before. So our mentality every single week is to always compete, and it really is not about anybody else except our own internal drive and expectations to be the very best that we can be. And so we don't rely on exterior noise and exterior factors to provide our motivation. We're motivated every day with, again, always compete mindset, developing an elite edge,



which is energy, details, grit and emotional consistency with how we train, how we prepare each day in order for us to play our best game on Saturday.

And, you know, we have a group of experienced players. I think one of the things that helped us last year was the number of players that we had on our team with career starts. And this year we really have the same. We have 22 players on our roster that have 12 or more starts in their collegiate career. So we have the expertise. We have those let-down games in our past that really help us realize that, hey, you can't take a Tuesday practice off. You can't miss Workday Wednesday. You have to approach Fast Friday with a mindset of this is what it takes to win in order for you to put your best foot forward on Saturday, and in this league if you don't, you're going to get embarrassed in a hurry.

Q. Texas A & M is your all's first road game. How do you all view that matchup a month into the season as you guys try to keep things rolling this year?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. Obviously we're aware that that's going to be one of the first -- the first true road game that we have on our schedule. But there's really a lot of unknowns for us on what Texas A & M is going to be. Obviously have a lot of respect for Coach Elko. He's kicked my butt several times as a defensive coordinator and obviously has excellent acumen from what he did at Duke. You know, obviously have a lot of respect for what he's got from his offensive coordinator with Collin Klein, having gone against him the last two years. But until you figure out what their team really is in the first four games, I don't know that, you know, I can accurately portray what the expectations are going to be. We do know that we're going to have to prepare for noise and understand that they've got an excellent home field advantage that we're going to have to work really hard to replicate, and you can't just replicate it the week of the game. You're going to have to do it throughout fall camp and each week leading up to the game.

Q. Coach, I'm curious what Corey is going to bring to this defense, the way maybe it'll look similar, a little bit different than the units that Blake Baker put together. How do you see that side of the ball shaping up, and what's Corey going to bring from an attitude and an Xs and Os perspective?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, Death Row is the University of Missouri's defense, and it's had different leaders throughout its time, but that's uniquely us. Obviously Coach Batoon has come in and installed the defense and the basic DNA of what it's been, but obviously each -- you know, to me play callers are a type of artist, and each artist

paints his own picture. So obviously he'll have a few wrinkles of his own, but for us it's still going to be about stopping the run, confusing, harass, hitting the quarterback and winning situational football, which is two-minute third downs in red zone defense. So whoever the architect of the -- or whoever is in there calling the plays is going to have to maintain those three things within the fundamental structure that is set in place to install.

So he's done a really good job of that so far, and our players have really bought into that. And like I said in my opening statement, I'm more concerned about us eliminating explosive plays, which is the second biggest contributor to winning and losing in college football. Turnovers is number one. The explosive play battle is number two. And how do we improve on third downs. I mean, being 50th in the country on third down percentage is not great. So there's still areas that we can improve, and that's what we're going to try to do.

Q. Turns out we were born in the same hospital.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: There you go.

Q. Me long before you. I never ventured very far away from it, but you guys left Norman quickly. Can you talk about your family's ties to Norman and what took you to Arkansas not too long thereafter?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. Mom family all lived -- my grandma lived in El Reno, Oklahoma. Have an uncle and aunt live in Bethany and in Edmond, Oklahoma. I used to go to Oklahoma every Christmas as a young kid.

They moved to Arkansas for a job for my dad and lived in Alma, I think almost 40 years now. But fondly think about those drives to Oklahoma City. We used to stop in Sallisaw for breakfast. Used to stop at Troy Aikman's hometown, about halfway, to use the restroom and then finish up in El Reno and spent time in Edmond. So, yeah, it was one of those places that visited a lot growing up.

Q. I wanted to ask about the coaches you lost in the off season, particularly on the defensive side of the ball. What exactly did they bring to your defense over the last couple of seasons and what exactly are you losing in them and how do you think you can sort of reshape the defense around your new staff?

A. Yeah. Blake Baker, Jake Olsen and Kevin Peoples are great men and good football coaches. But I'd like to really focus on what the additions of Corey Batoon and Brian Early and Jacob Yoro are. We were able to go out and add Corey Batoon, who's been an SEC coordinator -- or has coached in this league, has been a coordinator in a lot

of different leagues and does an excellent job of teaching the safety position, coaching -- coaching his coaches to exactly what he wants. You think about Brian Early and Sack Ave, what he's done at Houston. He had five players drafted in the last five years at the defensive line. He's had players in the Senior Bowl. Jacob Yoro was the defensive coordinator at the University of Hawaii for the previous couple of years and decided that he wanted to try and get into the SEC, and obviously now with the new coaching rules is going to have a direct impact in coaching our players.

So it was really an opportunity for us to go out and improve our staff and really build a cohesive unit with guys. So I'm very excited about those guys, and I'm very excited about what the new look Death Row Defense is going to be with those guys at the forefront.

Q. Brady cook won a spirited battle at quarterback. You told us that last year at SEC Media Days. He went on to have, I thought, a really, really solid year. How have you seen him grow since that time, and what is his ceiling this year in what is a really deep year for quarterbacks in the conference?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. I think what Brady has done is continually demonstrated a competitive spirit and a standard of excellence. He's earned the respect of everybody in our locker room, not just on the offensive side of the ball, but in every aspect of our organization, from the coaches to the players to the nutritionists, because of his consistent nature.

We talk about developing an elite edge. Brady is never having a bad day. Didn't matter if his girlfriend had broken up with him or if he had thrown an interception; he just loves coming to work, being in the training room. You know, we lost to LSU. He was right back in there Sunday morning ready to go to work versus Kentucky. He's very detailed and meticulous in his preparation. He spent better part of an hour every single day in his routine right now watching film, studying for the upcoming season. He's gritty. There's no question about how mentally tough he is and how he's willing to block out the external noise. And then he's always got a consistent approach. He's consistent every single day. And so I think the sky is the limit for him. Obviously for him it's not about pressing.

You know, we have 11 rules for quarterbacks, and we're not judged based off our stats. We're judged based off does our offense score touchdowns. And as long as he'll continue to be a battlefield commander and not worry about being a celebrity quarterback, we'll be just fine.

Q. Coach, you've added some pieces to your staff this

off season. Going beyond the players, where have you seen the most growth and development between you and your staff?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. I mean, I think year two with Coach Moore, who's done an outstanding job for us offensively, I think you just see a more comfortability out of Kirby and his day-to-day interactions, a more understanding of where we need to improve. You can see some of the guys that he works directly with, whether it's Derham Cato, whether it's Andy B, whether it's -- I call him Harlon Hill, but Brendan Boylan; him and Jack Abercrombie. You can tell that he's more comfortable in how he's approaching his, okay, this is where we gotta get better at, how he's being accountable to the things that we weren't good at, and I think there's just a level of comfort there within the framework of that. And I think Corey, now we're going on six months being there. He understands more my personality, what the day-to-day organization is going to be like. We have a better understanding of what the rules are now within the NCAA and what our coaching staff can piece together.

So look forward to that continuing to grow and develop, but I think, more than anything, you see a consistency and a comfortability within the office.

Q. Coach, you've had some recent recruiting battles, transfer overlap, I'll say, with Oklahoma. With that and the past Big 12 history, is there going to be a little bit of an extra edge with upcoming matchups against Oklahoma?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I mean I don't think so. We have competitive recruiting battles with everybody in the SEC. I mean, whether it was a verbal commitment that we had two weeks ago that had just about every SEC school in this room offered up, I mean, I think there's too much made of it.

We all -- in the SEC there's only about 100 players that you can actively recruit that are good enough to play in this league, and maybe not even that many based on each position. So you're going to be in battles against each other, and we don't ever take those personal. So it's great for the fans and it's great for social media, but for us it's another quality opponent on our schedule that we're going to have to play at our absolute best in order to have any type of opportunity to win.

Q. You mentioned Cayden Green. How did that acquisition shake out from your perspective and what do you expect him to add to your football team this fall?



ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. We recruited Cayden heavily in high school. He entered the transfer portal. He took visits to a couple of different schools, and ultimately we ended up getting -- we were the right fit for him.

Excited about what Cayden brings to our program. He's very consistent in his approach every single day. Obviously he's got the STI, size, toughness and instincts, to be an elite player. Demonstrated that capability last year on the field. And so for us he's provided a lot of position flexibility. I've been very impressed with the humbleness of his approach. Him and Coach Jones have a tremendous relationship. They are consistently communicating about him being a tackle or a guard and what's best for our team and what's best for him. And ultimately he just wants to win and wants to be a part of our football team.

I think him and Armand Membou, who were high school teammates, got a great relationship. They push each other every single day to be a little bit better, and I think he's been a really good addition to our football team.

Q. Coach, I guess it was just a couple of years ago you were on the proverbial hot seat, according to some of us experts. Can you talk about how you persevered through that and some of the steps Missouri has taken in this NIL era to become a championship contender?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. I mean, hot seat, cold seat. I mean, the only person maybe on the hot seat was Dennis Dodd. Where are you at, Dennis? (Laughs).

No, it is what it is, man. We all understand there's expectations with this job, and when you're not meeting them, obviously the noise picks up. But I think it's really more of a tip of the hat to the players and the coaches who believed in what we were doing, believed in the vision that we had. It's a tribute for Ryan Russell, our director of athletic performance, who I think does as good as anybody in the country developing a mindset and developing our players physically, that helped us, you know, achieve the success that we had.

Obviously it took a team effort from the administration. The ever-changing world of NIL and transfer portal, you have to be flexible and be in a position to take advantage of it. And we had several leaders in the political realm, Kurtis Gregory obviously being one, who really championed the effort for us to be at the forefront, and now you're hearing reference to the Mizzou model of NIL, which I think is a tribute to our administration, our president, Mun Choi, our board of curators and to a lot of the politicians in Jeff City, who have a love for the University of Missouri and

understand that the University of Missouri is a window to the six million people of our state, and we have an opportunity to represent the best of the best of our state. And our core mission at the University of Missouri is derived from educating the state of Missouri.

One of the things that our success has allowed us to do is accurately portray what kind of unbelievable AAU accredited education that you can get at the University of Missouri. Most of you all probably don't know this, but we have the number one nuclear medicine reactor site in the country at the University of Missouri, and it is a phenomenal thing that fights cancer every single day and it's on the forefront of that.

So I think the opportunity to have success so that you can show off your university is a positive thing for everybody in our state, and we're proud to represent the University of Missouri and wear the black and gold.

Q. You lose Cody Schrader, obviously, who was invaluable to your football team last year. You replaced that production with Marcus Carroll and Nate Noel coming via the transfer portal. What do you expect out of that room? Are you expecting one of those guys to emerge and be your bell cow back or are you looking more of a running back by committee approach? How do you replace the production lost from what Schrader provided year ago?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah. I mean, I think for me it's not necessarily as much about replacing the production. It's about how do you replace the person. Cody Schrader was as unique a person and teammate that I've ever coached in my entire career. The toughness that he displayed on a daily basis, the amount of care, how driven he was to be the best that he could be, how much care he had for his -- the rest of his team.

I'll never forget. Houston Nutt came and spoke to our team in fall camp, and he talked about these are the best days of your life. And Cody Schrader still talks about that. And he told our team, hey, man, I'm now in the NFL, but I promise you, these are the best days of your life, and he really embodied that.

And so for us about replacing him, I'm not worried about the talent. Cody was an extremely talented player, but we have talented players in that room. It's going to be more about can we replace the consistency, can we replace the leadership, and can we demonstrate the toughness that Cody demonstrated on a down-in-down-out basis, whether it was picking up the quarterback or sticking it up in there for an extra yard or being consistent in how he practiced every Tuesday and Wednesday. Those are going to be

the things that we have to replace; and do Marcus, can Nate, can Kewan, can Jamal, can Tavorus consistently do that, because that's what it's going to take in order for us to achieve the success that we want to achieve.

Q. With the potential to play as many as 17 games, does it add emphasis to recruiting 1 through 85 and making sure that you guys make the most of all those scholarships? I guess with your recruiting trending upwards, I know you spoke earlier about the law change, but I am curious, like is there any way you can quantify, I guess, the difference that that has made for you guys in terms of winning some of these high-profile recruiting battles that you've been able to recently?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I think I -- I think the question that you're asking, that I heard, was as far as playing 17 games, you're going to have to be as competitively deep as possible, and for us that was an extreme focus for us in recruiting out of the transfer portal.

You know, last year's success, I think, can be directly attributed to we had I think it was 32 players who had started five or more career games in their college career. This year we have 31 players that have four or more career starts in their game. We have 22 players that have 12 or more college starts. It was a direct reason that we went out and recruited three transfer linebackers, because in the course of playing 13 games the past two seasons, we haven't been able to stay healthy enough at that position. So we knew we had to get more depth at the linebacker position, which also translates to what kind of special teams you're going to be able to play.

I think the whole balance now with recruiting is each individual coach has to decide how he wants to build his roster and where do you want to invest your NIL dollars and how much are you willing to invest in players who may play early and may not play early, versus what do you want to invest your NIL dollars in from a standpoint of contributions right now. And that's a battle that each coach is going to have to pick and decide on, and for us we have a formula about how we do those things. But in order to play 17 games at a winning level, you're going to have to have competitive depth unlike anybody has really faced before, which I think is more challenging now than ever because of the transfer portal and players who leave to go play at another opportunity earlier.

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