

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Mississippi State Bulldogs

Jeff Lebbey

Press Conference



JEFF LEBBY: Commissioner, thank you, and you were spot on there. Kane has already stole the show. He'll continue to steal the show as he will terrorize Starkville, Mississippi, for many, many years to come.

I'll piggyback off the commissioner and his opening statement as we started here I guess a couple of days ago, but couldn't be more proud to be able to be here representing Mississippi State in Dallas, Texas, Dak city, obviously one of the greatest to ever do it, one that absolutely loves his university, so Dak, thank you.

But it is, it's great to be here. It's great to be in Dallas. You look at it, seven months, I've been here seven months, and as we got boots on the ground, we said, hey, what are the things that are going to be most important to us to make sure we go have a successful year one, but also find a way to create this great foundation so we have the ability to go sustain?

For us, it was the guys knowing exactly what we expected of them as they walked in the building. Our guys knowing what they were going to get into, the expectation, the culture, and I could not be more proud as we look up seven months in, getting ready to start fall camp inside of two weeks, and our guys have taken to it. They've taken to it, and they've ran with it and our culture and who we are every single day.

We talk about four things nonstop inside the program. We talk about having fun, being tough, being competitive, and then being accountable, and we break those things down in different ways, but for me having fun in the doing, that matters.

We've got 18 to 22-year-old kids that need to have an incredible college experience. These guys need to have a great experience while at State.

It's going to be incredibly hard doing what we do. We understand that. We get to do it with the best and against

the best every single day. Nobody understands that more than I do. But I want our people inside our building to have fun in the doing.

So when they walk through those double doors every day, they are able to pour into it just a little bit more because they enjoy the people they're around. They know it's going to be incredibly hard, it's going to be incredibly tough, it's going to be difficult to go do what we're going to do, but having fun in the doing to me and for us as a culture is incredibly important.

Toughness, toughness travels. This is a league that is built on toughness. Always has been, always will be. I love that fact of being able to lead our program in a way that creates opportunities for guys to be tough. Mississippi State, built on toughness and edge, and those are things that I'm incredibly proud of.

Competitive. The most competitive league in all of college football. So how many different ways can we create a competitive situation, a competitive scenario so when we get to Saturday afternoon on national television you don't get surprised by a result? So having competitive situations inside of everything that we're doing is a huge part of our program and our culture.

Then a culture of accountability, being accountable to the guy next to you. From a staffing standpoint, being accountable to the guy that you're sharing an office with or sharing a wall with every single day and doing right by the people inside the building.

I think when you talk about fun and tough and competitive and accountable, then you immediately think about the three guys that I was able to bring with me today, starting with two guys that have been at Mississippi State. They've been through a lot over the last three years.

They come in together the same class, offensive lineman who earned a starting job, played in all 12 games last year, but here's a guy that earned a starting job through spring, through toughness and through this competitive spirit of just getting better every single day. Albert is a guy who embodies exactly what we want in offensive line play and



leadership inside that unit.

Here's a guy that's a college graduate, he's from Alberta, heads to Tampa, now he's made his way to Starkville, Mississippi, and he's creating this great life for himself because he invests in himself every single day.

Our in-state guy that grew up a Bulldog, John Lewis, again, a guy that played 12 ball games for us last year, has some experience, but has earned this starting role through spring football, and he's done it through consistency and toughness and leadership and accountability.

And J-Lew is a guy very similar. We get to town, create a position change for him, not playing on the line of scrimmage anymore, stacking back, playing as a second level player, and this is a guy that has taken it and run with it and has accepted the change and been a guy that's going to play at a really high level but be a huge part of our program as we move this thing forward.

I think for all of us, we understand, being a QB guy, calling the plays, getting the right quarterback was something we had to get done, and we've got our guy. I could not be more proud of how Blake has gone about his business, how he does what he does every single day.

I think when you talk about what we're going to look like from a team standpoint, it's real similar to what we're going to look like at that position: Toughness, physicality, edge, being able to go inspire your teammates to go play better every single day, and that's what Blake has done. He's put us in a position to get off the ground the way we need to. When I watched him play, I said that's our kind of guy, that's my kind of guy, so having him year one has been huge.

Could not be more thankful to be here, could not be more grateful to our administration to have the opportunity to represent Mississippi State at SEC Media Days, and with that, we'll open it up.

Q. Jeff, I think I read this right, no returning starters on offense, only two on defense. I know it's a new staff, but how daunting is that? I saw this on social media so it must be true, that Nick Saban said he tried to hire you at Alabama when he was at OU. Could you take us through that?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, part 1 of the question, I've talked about it a lot today already, but the climate of college football, where we're at, the portal cycle that ended in December was a huge part for us having a chance to have success year one. We're talking about our starting quarterback, three of the five starting O-linemen, two

receivers, starting running back, and on the defensive side we'll have three starters from the portal, as well.

Being able to get off the ground was a huge part of it. That's not who we want to be. We're going to create edge, and we're going to be able to sustain as a program because we've got great proximity to players. We're going to be a developmental program. We've got great junior colleges inside our state which is advantage us. So those are things, as we move forward, it will look a little bit different, but for year one, we've got guys that will go out there week one that have played a lot of ball, just not a lot of ball at Davis Wade.

Part 2, Coach Saban, just an honor to have conversations with him as we went through some things. Could not be more thankful for opportunity, and at the time it was something where I felt like needed to be exactly where my feet were, and he did pretty good. He did pretty good.

Q. John Lewis is going to be filling a big void at linebacker with Bookie Watson and Jett Johnson gone. I know you weren't there with those guys, but he's got a lot on his shoulders this year. How confident are you he can step up as a leader on and off the field for this program?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, J-Lew has done that, that's why he's here today representing us. A guy that he's going to play alongside with -- there's multiple guys inside that room that are going to give us a chance to create depth, but a guy that, again, comes to us from another SEC school, Stone Blanton, has played at a really high level, has played inside this league, knows what it's supposed to look like. He's another guy, along with some others, that will help us fill that void.

Q. How did your time under Brent Venables the last two years help you prepare for this job, both under Brent but also just your time at Oklahoma? Secondly, what can people expect from Jackson Arnold?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, getting an opportunity to work for Coach V the last two years, he created an opportunity for me to go back to my alma mater and be able to get that thing off the ground with him. A great experience for me is being able to see him do it from year one to year two and being this great coordinator who had an incredible amount of success and being able to get into that head coaching chair and find ways to keep getting better.

It was all about what's best for the program, it's all about what's best for the people inside our room, as consistent of a leader and a man as there is, I believe that, in all of college football. Indebted to him forever for giving me that



experience.

Part 2 to the question, obviously Jackson, I think everybody understands who knows that scenario and relationship knows how I feel about him and him having the ability to continue great quarterback play at that university.

Q. You coached and played at OU, you coached at Baylor. The seasons you spent with Lane Kiffin, what did it teach you about the SEC and get you prepared for this challenge?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think without a doubt just understanding the week-to-week grind of it, and have talked about this already today, but it's not week 3, 4 and 5, it is truly week 8 through 12 and understanding the lines of scrimmage, the depth that you have to find a way to develop through the season to create depth at all positions, but most importantly at the lines of scrimmage, is something that is to me an advantage because of living it.

Q. You're coming into the SEC when it's tougher than ever with OU and Texas coming in, but you're also coming in when the 12-team playoff arrives. What does that opportunity do for a program like Mississippi State, which is outside the Alabama-Georgia axis and you don't necessarily have to win the SEC or get to Atlanta to make the playoff? What could that do for a program like Mississippi State?

JEFF LEBBY: Well, I think there's nothing but good coming from the expanded playoff. You have the opportunity to not be perfect in the regular season and then get in and go chase it and have a chance to win a championship.

I think for all of college football, the excitement in the fan bases, for us, specifically Mississippi State, I think it opens a door and it creates a door. We'll always and forever make sure that we're talking about maximizing every day, every opportunity, every single season and fighting like heck to be in that top 12.

Q. Everywhere you've gone you've had a top 10 tempo pace with your offense, usually about 23 seconds per play. With the new rules of having communication until 15 seconds left on the clock, do you see yourself using all 15 seconds or going even faster to confuse defenses that may have that communication?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think a little bit of that is a balancing act, and still being able to have some ball control and some game control while creating great tempo and great opportunity through how we play. We'll never be any different than what we've been from the mindset of

knowing that we get to dictate how the game is played because we have the football. That will forever be the case.

So being the aggressor and being pedal down will be who we are, but being able to change the pace a little bit, I think it makes it a lot easier being able to have communication.

Q. I know you raised the two terms accountability and toughness. Is this going to follow you along with recruiting, not only in Mississippi but along the transfer portal lines?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, to me you have one opportunity to protect the program, and that is by who you choose to be inside the locker room. So finding the right people and finding the right guys that will thrive in our incredible college town and our community will be forever important because that is how you protect the program and that's how you protect the pick.

Q. As you look back at the stops you made before becoming a head coach, what's the best practice or piece of advice that you got to make it to this point?

JEFF LEBBY: I think consistency and being exactly who you are, being comfortable enough in your own skin to where, when it doesn't go perfect, not changing. Making the changes necessary, but being exactly who you're supposed to be at that moment because that ultimately is probably the biggest reason I've gotten the opportunity I've gotten today.

Q. You got the opportunity to go head to head with Steve Sarkisian last year and Oklahoma in the Cotton Bowl. What did you learn from that experience from play calling and offense that you'll carry into DKR this season?

JEFF LEBBY: I think from a situational standpoint just knowing that there are so many games inside our league that are decided in the last two to four minutes of a game. It's so similar to the NFL, and that's an incredible example of the game is played, there's all four quarters, but is there situational mastery and can you find a way to make the play and call the play and put your guys in positions of success to go win the game?

There's just this heightened awareness to me inside of our league because so many close games every single week. That was great experience for me. It's great teaching tape for our guys, both sides of the ball, as we go back through that.

Q. How have you guys as a staff in seven months



come in and changed the culture and put your stamp on Mississippi State so far?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think being incredibly intentional with who we've brought into the building. When you look at the defensive side of the ball, I wanted a defensive coordinator that was similar from the standpoint of toughness and passion and edge and having great command and knew exactly who he was and was a guy that was incredibly talented and being able to go create this culture in the defensive side of the room and on that side of the ball.

So we have, we've got people inside the building that have great passion and energy for taking young people places that they can't take themselves. That to me is what it's all about, and we'll continue to add pieces to the puzzle that way.

Q. I noticed that it seemed like Lane Kiffin had some fun on social media when you got hired. Maybe you had a little fun back. I was wondering what you said about that. Also we covered Cody Kennedy at Arkansas and you added him. What went into that? I assume Kendal Briles probably had a hand in that?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, a ton of respect for Lane and what he's done, the energy he's created. I'm not going to talk a ton about the social presence. I'll let him continue to tend to that game.

But again, my time there created an experience for me that gives me the opportunity to hopefully be able to create advantage, and that's what it's all about for Mississippi State.

The next piece in hiring Cody, yes, he had system knowledge. He had SEC knowledge. He had great familiarity with how we do what we do with his time with Kendal, which was a huge part of bringing him on board.

Q. You've obviously coached against Texas a few times. You had some success this season. How do you think that's going to help you when you guys head to Austin this season?

JEFF LEBBY: Just familiarity, knowing the personnel and knowing a little bit about the system. I do, I think from my time before being able to be in Austin and know what that atmosphere is like, I do, I think that'll be good for us, be good for our staff and be good for our guys, knowing a little bit more what to expect and not being an incredible amount of newness.

Q. Your offense uses extremely wide splits. Your

family's offense uses that. How have you seen defenses in the past few years try to counteract those wide splits, especially in the passing game?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think we saw it in the Big 12 quite a bit when people started going to a little more of the true three-safety defense, and that was something that we did, we saw a little bit while I was in the SEC and a few other stops.

But that's something that's not very popular inside our league. That hadn't been shown to just take off and catch here, which will be interesting to see.

Q. You mentioned the Mississippi JuCos. I'm curious if the nature of the players available in that pool from junior colleges has been impacted by the fact that a lot of schools are now relying on D-I retreats.

JEFF LEBBY: I think it's not being recruited as hard as maybe it once was because of the transfer cycles and the portal windows. Again, I think I mentioned it in here, have talked about it today, but to me that's advantage us because there's still such great players inside our junior college ranks inside the state. Signed a good amount this past year and hoping to do so in this next cycle, which is going to be big for us.

Q. You've had some time to work with your team. What kind of team are we going to get opening day?

JEFF LEBBY: I think you're going to get a football team that's excited to play. A team that you're going to be able to tell is prepared and loves to play the game of football, and that's my biggest thing is when we run out of that tunnel, everybody in Davis Wade understanding we're there with great purpose, with great passion, and be able to go win football games.

Q. I'm not sure who you might have ticked off at the SEC office, but I noticed in your first two road games, it's Georgia and Texas. Wonder what you thought when you saw that.

JEFF LEBBY: Again, to me, that is part of the league that we're living in. I've continued to talk about this. You want to do it with the best. You want to do it against the best. We're going to have every opportunity in the world to show everyone actually who we are as a program and as a football team, and I look at that as an opportunity for our guys.

Q. Headset communications was mentioned earlier. You guys play with an extreme amount of pace. Are you still going to be using signs, or is it going to be



relayed to the quarterback and then he's ultimately going to have to communicate with the other --

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, there will be. There's some operational things that will change, that will continue to change, and I think there's going to be this cat-and-mouse game as you're inside of the game, if you're signaling, if you're not, the 15-second mark. All those things kind of come into play if you're going to call the game.

Q. Playing with pace on offense, how much do you have to be cognizant of what it's doing to your defense, and have you been able to find a balance that really works for both sides of the ball?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think so, and I think I mentioned this earlier, mentioned ball control and game control. Those two things are incredibly real. Putting our guys in positions of success is what coaching is all about. That will be -- that will be up to me to make sure that we're living on the right side of that and always going to be very aware of it.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Seth Littrell. I know you worked closely with him as an analyst last year, now he's the offensive coordinator at Oklahoma. What does he bring to the table as a play caller, and how would you say your offenses are different, spread versus air-raid kind of?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think there's a ton of similarities from a run-the-ball-first mentality, that toughness and the lines of scrimmage. There's great familiarity from a system standpoint, some guys that he had hired at North Texas were guys that were inside the tree for a long time. So he had kind of made that change. He had made that change into much more our style.

He brings a ton of experience. He brings experience as a head football coach. He brings great experience as a coordinator and as a play caller and a guy that's done it at a really high level. He does right by the people, does right by the kids, and he's going to fight his butt off for his university.

Q. The SEC typically in the past has been considered a defensive league, but that seems to be changing over the last few years. We've seen explosive offenses come through. Seems to be kind of your brand of football. How do you think the future of the SEC looks balancing offense and defense?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think time will tell, but there's going to be great give and take. There's such great defensive coordinators inside our league and there's such great defensive players inside our league that I never see it truly

being lopsided the other way. I do, I think that's because of what our league is based on and the tradition of it and who everybody is.

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