

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Texas Longhorns Steve Sarkisian

Press Conference

STEVE SARKISIAN: First thing I'd like to do is welcome the SEC media to Dallas, Texas. This is an awesome opportunity, I think, for the state of Texas, for y'all to be here to join us, and what a stage this has been and what a journey it's been to get to this point.

I want to hit on a couple things before we get going. When I was a young coach, my first job as a graduate assistant was at USC under Pete Carroll. There was a tight end coach there who was a young coach, as well, by the name of Lane Kiffin. His father Monte took me under his wing every time he came to town, and we talked football.

I learned more about Tampa 2 than anybody, so anybody who's playing me, please play Tampa 2 because I can tell you exactly who's supposed to go where, how and why because that's how Monte Kiffin was. He was so detailed. He was a genuine man. He cared for all of those that nobody cared about.

It's a dear loss, not only for the sport of football, but it's a dear loss for me and I know for Lane, and my condolences to the Kiffin family on that.

The next thing is thoughts and prayers for those affected by Hurricane Beryl in Houston and all affected areas. We're still thinking of you. We're praying for y'all. I know it's had a lot of impact on a lot of people, and this time of year with the hurricanes we're definitely thinking of y'all, and our prayers are with you.

Next I want to talk briefly about Coach Saban. I know everybody has been coming up talking about it, and you know you've impacted a lot of people who have been up on this stage. No one have you impacted more than me. I would not be standing here today without you and what you've meant to my career, to my life, and I can't thank you enough, and the impact that you've had on our game has been second to none, and I just can't thank you enough. I want to be able to publicly do that to you, Coach. Thank you very, very much.



Next I want to shift gears to talk a little bit about a couple weeks ago in Austin, Texas, and we had our SEC celebration, and what a celebration it was. You could feel the excitement from Longhorn nation, the fact that we get to be here today, this fall, playing in the Southeastern Conference is tremendous. That was a tremendous event. I was shocked, quite frankly, at the amount of people and the pageantry that was there that day.

It gave me a little sense and feel for what goes on outside of DKR on game day that I normally don't get to be a part of, and that wouldn't happen without the leadership of president Jay Hartzell, president of our board Kevin Eltife, and our athletic director Chris Del Conte. Their vision to take the University of Texas into the Southeastern Conference was one that took a lot of foresight.

I wish they maybe would have informed me before I took the job that this was what we were going to do, but I didn't get informed that until afterwards, but I said, hey, we already had to build a team that was going to beat the best team in the SEC if we wanted to win a National Championship. Not much had to change there for us on that front.

Then lastly I'd like to thank Commissioner Sankey. His guidance, his leadership, to be part of this with him, what he's been able to do in this conference, to put it on the forefront, on the national stage has been tremendous.

I was just joking with him in the back. So we flew in this morning, we landed, and we get off the plane, we get in the Sprinter van and we got a police escort to media days. It just means more? It just means more right there. The fact that we had a Sprinter van with a police escort to come to this was tremendous.

As far as our transition into the Southeastern Conference, I think the key word is respect. We have a ton of respect for this conference. We have a ton of respect for the teams, the coaches, the players and the fans. This is the elite conference in college football, and we're fortunate enough to be part of it.



We won't do anything without having a level of respect of who we play, where we're playing them, the types of players that they have, the coaching that they have, and I think on the flipside of that, we have to go earn their respect. We're not going to get anything in this deal. Nothing is going to be free. We're going to have to go earn the respect of our opponents, the opposing coaches, the opposing fans, and that's going to be kind of on the forefront of what we do.

But the beauty of this conference is really the pageantry. I've been fortunate enough to have spent three years in the Southeastern Conference. The pageantry of the games, the stadiums that you get to play against, the iconic programs, that's the beauty of the Southeastern Conference. The fact that we get to be part of it, now it's finally here, is pretty exciting. It's just a great opportunity.

As far as our team goes, I think this team has been really, really focused. It's been a long time coming for Texas to get back to this stage. Last year was a tremendous run. We fell short in the semifinals in the Sugar Bowl coming off of being Big 12 champions. We set a school record with 11 players drafted in the NFL Draft, and that's a real credit, not only to our coaches for trying to recruit good players but I think to the development of our players and our program, not only on the football field but in the weight room and in the classroom and in life, that the NFL sees players in our program that can come in and enhance their teams to help them try to go win a Super Bowl.

There's an idea of obsession going on in our locker room right now. They got a taste of what it can taste like, of being a Big 12 champion, playing in a College Football Playoff, and we fell short. This idea of obsession, the obsession that our players have is one that really came from them. They couldn't wait to get back to work. They couldn't wait to get back in the weight room.

When I took the job, I don't know if I could have said that. It was almost like kind of prodding cattle to make sure that what they were doing day in and day out to get them to that point. Now we've got a team full of hungry players. It's a competitive, competitive roster, and I love that about them because in this conference you've got to have depth.

If you don't have depth, then everybody wants to talk about the O and D-line. Yes, that's vitally important, and I think we've got great depth there. You've got to have depth at quarterback, you've got to have depth at running back, you have to have depth at safety, you have to have depth across the board.

For us to sit here and say this is the deepest team we've had, probably the most talented team we've had in my four

years here, I can unequivocally say that, and we lost some really good players a year ago, but we've got a very deep football team, one that we're excited about, and looking forward to watching them compete this fall.

Of the team, we've got three players with us today. We've got Quinn Ewers going into year three as our quarterback, a guy who has gotten better from year one to year two. He's really improved from year two to year three. He's changed his body, he looks great, he understands the system.

But the thing I'm probably most proud of him about is his leadership. This guy is exuding confidence right now, and there's nothing better for anybody in your organization, for anybody in your building to walk in and to say, there's our guy, and our guy is exuding confidence. He's carrying himself the right way. He's doing things the right way, not only on the field but off the field. He's our leader, and we can unequivocally say that about Quinn Ewers, and I'm proud to have him with us today.

He's got a great belt buckle on if you guys haven't seen it yet and some awesome boots if you were wondering.

Kelvin Banks is also with us today, our left tackle who's been a day one starter since he was a true freshman. If there's anybody in our program that I would say, hey, go emulate that guy, the way he handles his business, on the field, off the field, the way he works, first guy there, last guy off the field, that's Kelvin Banks.

He's going to be a high draft pick whenever that day comes, but the way he's carried himself has been super impressive. His play shows on Saturdays, but it's who he is Sunday through Friday really makes up why he plays that way on Saturday.

Then Jahdae Barron is here with us, as well, a guy who had a tough decision to come back for his senior season, came back. He's kind of the glue on the defense for us. He's heady. He's savvy. He can play multiple positions. He's tough. I love what he brings to our team. I love the leadership that he brings to the team. So we're lucky to have him.

As far as our coaching staff goes, one thing that we have going for us is coordinator continuity. I've had the same coordinators in four years now here at Texas with Kyle Flood on the offensive line, offensive coordinator, Pete Kwiatkowski is our defensive coordinator, and Jeff Banks is our special teams coordinator.

From an offensive perspective, if you haven't ever seen us play, we believe in balance, we believe in trying to make it



hard on the defense with multiple personnel groupings, formations, motion shifts. We love to run the football. We love to play action pass. We love to RPO. That's not going to change.

If you're wondering how is it going to look with the new headset communication thing, we aren't going to change. We're going to do what we do. We're just going to try to do it better than we did a year ago.

Defensively I think one thing that we've really tried to evolve into, we've really tried to commit ourselves to stopping the run, and I think that showed a year ago. We have to be better in pass defense. There's two ways of getting better in pass defense.

One, got to cover people better. You've got to guard people better. You have to have people that can guard them. You also have to have the schemes to guard those people. But you have to have a better way to affect the quarterback. So we've really tried to invoke that into our team of how do we create more of a pass rush to affect the quarterback, which I think we've improved upon this year, and we'll see the benefits of that.

Then on special teams, we're an aggressive special teams unit. We try to go block the kick. If we're not going to block the kick, we're going to try to return it for a touchdown. That's just the way we operate.

Coach Banks does a great job with that, and looking forward to another great year.

When you have depth on your team like we have right now, that's when your special teams can really start to rise up because we try to play our best players on special teams, and when you've got multiple good players, now that depth can permeate to special teams, so we think we're going to be even better on teams than we've been in the past, and we've been pretty good.

In the end, for our team, we have to be mentally and physically tough, and that's the way we preach. That's what we teach. That's the way we work. That's the way we work in the off-season. That'll never change.

For any of you who have ever been to Austin, Texas, in July and you start walking in DKR and running in DKR at 4:00 in the afternoon, you'd better be mentally and physically tough, and that's what our guys are doing right now.

I'll say a couple things in closing, and then we'll get to questions. At the University of Texas, the standard is the standard. Part of that standard is our culture. Our culture

is what makes us who we are. We take a lot of pride in our culture. We pour into our culture. We are a very connected group. We love one another. We work with one another. That's not going to change.

But at the University of Texas, part of the standard being the standard is competing for championships. I'm up here talking about football, but it's at every sport. It's at every level. Regardless of the conference -- and that's to take nothing away from the SEC -- our goal is to come into this conference and compete for a conference championship. It is what it is. That's why you go to the University of Texas. So that won't change.

I want to leave you with this: When I took the job at the University of Texas, and I walked into DKR and one of the first signs I saw was a quote that I've put up now in my office that I'll always and forever hold onto. The pride in winning tradition at the University of Texas shall not be entrusted to the weak, nor the timid.

That's not going to change now that we've changed conferences. We're going to go attack this thing. We've got a ton of respect for this conference and the teams in this conference, but we're going to go attack it and try to win a conference championship because that's why we're at the University of Texas.

We're looking forward to it. We're looking forward to renewing rivalries with Texas A&M and with Arkansas. We're one of the few schools with realignment that has benefitted from realignment that we've gotten some rivalries back, and so we're looking forward to those things, as well.

It's going to be a great year. We're looking forward to it. Thank you. Hook 'em.

Q. I think we all totally get why Arch would come to Texas and basically face the prospect of perhaps sitting for two years, the support system he's got and everything. But I wonder if you could recount what that conversation was like, that that may be the case, that you're going to get the training, you're going to get enough reps and experience here to get where you want to go?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think that's something historically for us, part of your recruiting is your track record. We've been fortunate to coach some pretty good quarterbacks. We've been fortunate to do it for some decades now. We've been fortunate to have some really good quarterback rooms, and I think the Manning family is pretty well aware of that.

I think they trained Arch to try to put himself in the best position to try to play in the best conference in America and then ultimately put himself in the best position to further his career playing in the National Football League.

With that, I think Arch's development has been important to the family, and he's reaping the benefit of those things. It hasn't been very difficult at all. I think it's been pretty simple for him.

Q. You haven't used a big rotation in your receivers, it seemed like, and with good reason. You don't want to take Xavier and A.D. off the field. But with so many in the portal, so many young receivers coming in, including Wingo, might you expand your rotation and play more of them, or it just makes it more competitive in practice?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think it's twofold. We are going to play more receivers. I think the length of the season, and because of not having all of the rapport with Quinn, some of that we'll have to feel out as games go. It is a very talented room for sure, and we've got three great transfers.

When you talk about Isaiah Bond, Matthew Golden, Silas Bolden, three really good experienced football players that came from good football programs. We had signed a very good class the year before with Johntay Cook, DeAndre Moore, and Ryan Niblett. Then with this incoming class, I think it's pretty fair to say Ryan Wingo is a really good player for us.

To think I've got seven quality players there. Now, is it going to be a seven-man rotation? That will bear itself out, but I do think we'll play more players than we have in the past, we'll rotate more guys than we probably have in the past, and then as we work ourselves through the season -- when you start playing this many games, I'd love to tell you we're not going to get injuries. Injuries are going to occur, so we're going to play more players probably early in the season than we have just because you don't have some of that experience that we lost from a year ago.

But this isn't a lack of talent. This group is very talented and by far and away our deepest receiver corps that we've had in four years.

Q. There's a lot of Heisman hype with Quinn and Carson Beck. How does his demeanor make him ideal to deal with all that external noise?

STEVE SARKISIAN: You know, I think Quinn is probably like the coolest guy in the room. He doesn't get caught up in what a Heisman -- if you asked him, would he even know? He's just not caught up in that stuff. When Quinn

gets free time, he's going to go hunt or he's going to go fish. When he's here, he's going to work, and he's just working on his craft. He's being with his teammates.

Even in game, when you think about Quinn, when he shows those moments of emotion on a great throw, it's almost like shocking to people because even when the bad moments occur, he stays so calm and so cool in the moment that with the hype, I just don't think we have to worry too much about that. He's more focused on trying to win a championship, playing the best football he can play, being the best leader, the best teammate he can be. That's probably more important to him than what award might be down the road because some people are saying he might win it.

There's so much football to go play, I don't think he's worried about it at all.

Q. Sark, I know you probably would have loved to have hit the ground running and won 12 games in year one, but what changed over those two years, building up to year three? Why was year three so much different? Why did it click?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think part of it was our culture. We had to keep building our culture, the things that were important to us, and that takes time. It takes time to learn the schemes.

You bring in coaches and you have an idea of what you want to run, and that's nothing against a previous staff, but maybe they didn't recruit the types of players that fit what we wanted to be and how we wanted to play. So that takes time, too.

There's development of players in your program, so hey, I'll tell you this much, 5-7 in Austin, Texas, sucks. That was hard. That was hard on me. That was hard on players. That was hard on a lot of people. 8-5 was a little more palatable for people.

But as you continue to stay committed to who you are and you stay committed to your course of action, you stay committed to what you believe in, over time you start to reap the benefits of that.

With that comes sometimes you have to -- people that were supposed to be good players when you arrived maybe aren't playing as much and maybe the guy that fit you a little bit better, you have to recognize and you have to play him a little bit more.

But everybody earned their opportunity in our program over the past three years, and the beauty of that has been our



players recognize that, and then now they know the process to go make it work.

I was telling somebody earlier today about a story about the leaders on our team. When we had Bijan Robinson and Roschon Johnson, everybody raved about their leadership ability, but we only had a couple of leaders.

Last year we raved about the leadership of about five or six guys, Jordan Whittingtons of the world, Byron Murphys of the world. This year I could probably tell you I've got 25 leaders because these guys have grown up in our program. They don't know any different than our culture.

So now I don't even have to speak very long about what we believe in because they live it every single day, and I watch them live it every single day. That's the process, right? You're trying to develop leadership; well, leadership takes time to develop. You just don't anoint a guy a leader if he doesn't believe in the core values of the organization.

Q. Last year you talked a lot about the versatility of the team and helping you win in games. With J.B. gone and the receivers and J.T., what do you see as the next natural evolution for the offense?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think without telling Coach Norvell at Colorado State what we're going to do in week one, part of it is we always try to stay on the cutting edge. I never want to get stale offensively. I know what I said earlier, we're going to be who we are, but with that comes all of the subtle tweaks and things and formations and motions and personnel groupings and how do you group people the right way to take advantage of it.

Part of that is trying to play your best players. Part of that is how do we tax the defense. So we do have a very versatile offensive team. The fact that we've got very versatile runners, we've got versatile tight ends -- the addition of Amari Niblack has been great; Juan Davis, who I've been so impressed with coming out of spring ball and this summer; Gunnar Helm, we found out a lot about him when J.T. went down last year. We use an extra tackle at tight end some. We try to do a lot of things to people to make them prepare for it.

Then in game what are we going to call that game that maybe they didn't practice quite as much or hey, they have a deficiency here, let's go attack that a little bit more. I'm not trying to avoid the question, but sometimes it's we implement an offense and then we tap into different aspects of it from week to week that we think behoove us to be successful.

Q. Coach, you have the unique experience of having

coached in the Iron Bowl and the Red River Rivalry. Last month in Destin your athletic director said the Texas-Oklahoma game was a bigger game, a bigger event than the Iron Bowl. What is it about that game that makes it a bigger event than the Iron Bowl or other SEC rivalry games?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think this, and I've been fortunate. Like I said, I've been part of the Iron Bowl. I've been part of the Apple Cup in Washington. I've been part of SC-UCLA. I've been part of some great games.

This is the most unique game for sure that I've ever been a part of. When you pull into the State Fair and you start smelling those corn dogs and turkey legs and there's fans from both teams and then you get in those locker rooms and the locker rooms literally are 20 feet apart and you're staring at each team, and one goes first, the next one goes next, and it can get a little contentious in there, but that's okay.

As we come out, when we come out of that tunnel -- and that's OU's tunnel -- and we're staring at a sea of burnt orange, you just want to get there. It's a unique game because half of the game is a home game. The other half of the game is a road game. I had to learn that the hard way in year one. We got stuck in OU's end, and we were false starting. We couldn't do anything right. So you have to play to that style of game.

But it being split right down the 50, it's the who's who on the sidelines, and I'll tell you this about both teams. Both teams play as hard as they possibly can play in that game, and again, that's to take nothing away from any other great game that I've been part of, but this one is uniquely special.

I think Norman is about 2 1/2 hours from Dallas. We're about 3 hours from Dallas. The fact that we kind of come upon the State Fair here in Dallas is really special. So it's a game that I'm humbled and honored that I get to be part of. I'm getting to go coach in my fourth one. Looking forward to the opportunity.

Q. Coach, you mentioned rivalry games, of course. Since you've been here, what have you heard about the Texas-A&M rivalry, and what kind of buzz is there for this game coming back?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, it's a great game. It's a game, like I said, that divides households and one that -- it's interesting, our players, I listen to our players talk sometimes, and they're like, our players are probably way more excited for this game than most fans would probably think because we haven't played the game in a while.



But the majority of the players on our two rosters probably went on visits together at if not one school, both schools, and one guy chose Texas and one guy chose A&M.

I think there's a great deal of excitement. I know Coach Elko has done a great job in that program in his short time being there. It's going to be a great environment in Kyle Field Thanksgiving weekend, so we're definitely looking forward to it.

Q. Obviously what you guys have done in the last three years, building momentum, building belief, you wanted to do that anyway, but taking that into the SEC, on the list of intangibles, how important do you feel like that is for your program?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, it's critical. This is an elite conference. It's going to take week in and week out work ethic, preparation, innovation, toughness, perseverance, mental fortitude, if you get knocked down, to get back up. It's going to take all the stuff we went through the last three years and put it in one year because that's what this conference challenges you on. You're playing at an elite level week in and week out.

I think that's -- those three years have to roll into this year. That's my challenge as a coach is to get our team in that frame of mind but yet still enjoy the experience. There's nothing like playing college football. It's the greatest sport in the world. I know we're going through all sorts of different changes right now, but the popularity and the excitement around college football right now is bigger and better than it's ever been.

Through all that stuff, all that stuff I just talked about, I want to make sure our players enjoy this. You think about it, I talked about three rivalry games in one season. How many schools get to say that? We're looking forward to it. It's going to be a great opportunity, and look forward to seeing you all. If you haven't been to the Red Rivalry game, you should come. It's an amazing game.

Appreciate you all. Hook 'em. Thank you.

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