

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Arkansas Razorbacks Coach Sam Pittman

Press Conference

SAM PITTMAN: Morning everybody. My buddy Jim Cheney said NAIA means: Never an ineligible athlete, and that's how I got into school. I don't know about all that.

Thank you, Mr. Sankey. Appreciate it. What a wonderful job he does for us. We are prepared. Never is there a moment we find out something in the media, from a different conference.

We are very, very lucky, very fortunate to have Mr. Sankey as our leader.

I want to tell a story about Monte Kiffin. He was a defensive coordinator at Arkansas 1977, '78, and '79. Lou Holtz was the head coach in those three years. With his expertise of coaching defense, the Razorbacks finished 3, 11, and 8 in the national polls when Coach Kiffin was the defensive coordinator.

1978 the Grove Ridge Runners played the Miami War Dogs, Coach Kiffin came over to the game. Now, I always knew I wanted to be a coach, and Coach Kiffin came over to the game. He was there to see Todd Berry. Todd Berry was the number one ranked quarterback in the state of Oklahoma. He was not there to see any of the Grove Ridge Runners.

We lost the game late 21 to 16, and Charlie Cooper, our head football coach there at Grove, Coach Kiffin came in and asked could he talk to the team. He came in and said some unbelievable things about our toughness and fight and our grit.

I remember the impact that his speech, that it made on me. I thought, you know, as I become a coach, how we can change lives and how we can be meaningful to young athletes, young people by the way that Coach Kiffin talked to us that day. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

The other things I want to say is about Coach Saban. When Coach Saban interest in me is changed Jamie and I's life.



It changed our life financially, changed our life in myself having confidence in my ability.

Then whenever I went to the head coach's meeting, it goes in alphabetical order and I sit right next to Coach Saban. I'm not saying he took me under his wing, but I was nervous sitting next to him. I'm sure I asked him more questions than what he might have want to answer. But he answers every one of them.

I think there is a reason why I went and worked for Kirby at Georgia. Had a lot to do with Coach Saban. Derek Dooley started at Tennessee, but Coach Saban is the GOAT and he is someone that our league is going to miss dearly.

I just wanted to talk about that.

I want to thank you Hunter Yurachek. You know, we work with a great group of people at Arkansas. Mike and Bucky and Dave and Cal and Shauna and Jordan and Courtney, just wonderful people to work with. Chris Johnson just won the national championship in women's track. Just a great group of people.

It's really about what the state of Arkansas is all about. We brought Taylen Green, Andrew Armstrong, and Landon Jackson here. All three of them have Texas ties. Taylen Green obviously is our quarterback; transferred in in January. Bobby Petrino went out and handpicked him. He's perfect for what Coach Petrino wants to do for our offense, and he has great, great leadership skills. He is a wonderful athlete and I'm excited for you guys to meet him today.

Andrew Armstrong is also from Bishop Dunn here in Dallas, a wide receiver. Was our top production wide receiver last year. He's excited to be back in Dallas. You will enjoy him as well.

Landon Jackson led our team in sacks, tackles for losses last year. He was also a captain for us last year. He's right here from Pleasant Grove High School in east Texas, and happy to have those three with us.

They, along with a lot of guys, are developing a culture



along with Ben Sowders in the strength staff that's like no other. I'm so excited about this football team and I'm excited about the talent level.

Also excited about the culture, about the way these guys treat each other, the way they talk to each other, the way they go out with each other, the way they compete against each other.

Over the past four years we been invited to three bowl games. Two of the last three years at some point in the season we been ranked in the top 10. I love this team. I love our coaches. Our expectations are as high as they've ever been for this season coming up.

If we can take 4-20 to 9-4, we can deal with 4-8, too, and that's what we're going to do. I'm very excited about the Arkansas Razorbacks.

Coaching staff, we have a new coordinator, Bobby Petrino. If you're familiar with football, you're familiar with him. Did a wonderful job at the University of Arkansas and other places. Been a head coach in the National Football League as well.

Bobby has been a great resource for me. Not only I think he's a wonderful offensive coordinator, he also was a very successful head coach. So there is a lot of times where I'm able to run things by him and we decide collectively at times what is best for the University of Arkansas football team.

Ronnie Fouch, our new wide receiver coach come in from Missouri State has done a wonderful job. Kobe Smith with the Miami Dolphins. He is our new running back coach. Eric Mateos is our new offensive line coach. He's done a wonderful job with our offensive line. Very excited about that group.

Special teams we return or two snappers in Stein and Ngo. We have a kicker battle going on between Shipley, Ramsey, and Vito. Our punter will be Devin Bell returning from last year. Sategna, we are very excited about him as a returner.

On offense, we have a lot to improve on. We think we addressed that in the portal with four offensive linemen and three portal running backs. Obviously went out and got a quarterback as well. Our wide receiver group is returning.

But I think the most improved part of our football team this spring was our offensive line. I'm excited about that group. Defensively we were much improved from a year ago. Fewest yards allowed since 2010, best defense since 2014, and let the nation in defensive touchdowns with five.

We have to finish the season. We did not do that well. We have to figure out how to finish, win the close games. We lost five games by a touchdown or less. We have got figure that out. We feel like we're well on our way to getting that accomplished.

I like the new schedule format. I think we're going to be able to see every team in our stadium over a four-year span and be able to go to every team stadium in the SEC this year at home with Tennessee, LSU, Ole Miss and Texas, and away with Auburn, Texas A&M, Mississippi State, and Missouri.

We play seven pre-season top 25 teams. That's how it is in the SEC. They also have to play the Arkansas Razorbacks. We're excited about our non-conference opponents this year. We go to Oklahoma State week two. I really like that game. It's three hours away. They have a great program, great coach. Excited about going over there to Oklahoma State.

13 returning starters, five on offense, six on defense, and two on special teams. We added 17 high school scholarships and 22 through the portal that were scholarship players.

2024 season is a fresh start. We been working tirelessly to address areas we need improvement. Our players have shown remarkable resilience and commitment this off-season. We know our fans deserve a team that competes at the highest level.

We're excited to making that happen. The support from our Razorback community has in the wavered. It fuels our drive to turn things around. Our focus is to embrace the hog, which means we need to be tough, we need to be together, we need to be consistent, accountable, and do it with pride.

I think we've accomplished that this summer. We accomplished that through the spring ball. Every setback is an opportunity for a comeback. We have embraced that mindset.

I believe in our players and our staff and our state and our direction we're heading in. We're going to rise to the challenge for a great 2024 season.

With that, I'll take questions.

Q. I know you guys look day to day into a first game. I'm curious, you have seen the schedule? What do you think about playing your first five games in five different venues? I don't know if any other team in the



country is doing that. What do you think about that challenge and have you given it much thought?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, yes, we've obviously talked about the schedule. The deal with that is as long as we are involved in the game in Dallas and involved in the game in Little Rock, we're going to have home games. This one in Dallas is an away game. We're going to have home games that are away from our university.

I can remember -- I think we had a stretch in there where we had -- maybe it's two years ago -- where we had three home games on the schedule but played in Razorback Stadium one of those five games. Three of the five were home.

All I can say is we're going to embrace that. Last year we had the away games right there in a row, what was it, at Alabama, LSU, on the road. We needed to a better job than what we did a year ago.

The difference is a little bit the time. There will be an 11:00, a noon, a night game, so we'll certainly have to get ready for that. I do know that our first two games are going to be at night and then in the morning, and then our third game will be in the afternoon. So we'll have covered all those, so then the fourth and fifth time we go to a new venue we should have been able to cover the time frame and the game and schedule that with the kids.

Q. Last time Texas played Arkansas, it was not a good outcome for Texas. They come back to Fayetteville this fall. Coming into the SEC adds a new layer to the rivalry. Steve Sarkisian was quoted saying Arkansas hates Texas more than they like themselves. Just want to know what your response to that statement is.

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I will say this: We hadn't played Texas for years and we played them a couple years back. It was the most excited our fan base has been in a while.

So I would say he's probably right, you know. The difference is Texas is certainly a different team than what we played. That was his first year there and now obviously he's a great coach, great guy. Got a wonderful football team.

But I'm glad that we're going to play them at home again. You know, I don't know if that's fair because they came there two years ago. But it's an early-morning game, so -- but he's probably correct.

You would have to ask the old hats of Arkansas, but he's probably right.

Q. Sam, got a 12-man team now. A lot more access to what people would consider a successful season. What does that do for a program like Arkansas?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I think it gives you life. I do. You know, we're all striving to get into the playoffs, including the University of Arkansas. You know, when you lose a game and it's a four team, you got a problem. Georgia last year, you know, one of the best teams in the country didn't get in the playoffs; lost one game.

So this is going to give -- I think you're going to see better football towards the end of the year because you're going to see some two-win teams get into the college playoffs -- two-loss, excuse me teams get in the college playoffs. It's going to continue to keep your team live as you move forward. Going to see better bowl games, better teams in bowls.

I think this 12 team is going to make a big, significant difference in college football.

Q. Last season we saw flashes of just how good your Arkansas team can be. This season how do you maximize on that potential?

SAM PITTMAN: That's a great question. I think this: Ours is all about consistency and finishing. Again, we lost five one-score games. I think you're going to say that -- next year you're going to say you won them or -- it's hard in this league. So I think it's going to be consistency, better game planning, got to be able to run the football.

I think we can capitalize on that. Again, I really like this team. I really do. I'm not trying to win media days. I'm just going to tell you how I feel.

I really like this team, and I think with the culture and the tightness of the team, I think you can win those games a little bit easier than if it's the other way.

Q. When you were hired by Arkansas, you were considered the best offensive line coach in college football. After you self-scouted and hired Eric Mateos, did you put a finger on what caused the struggles along the offensive line last year and how do you guys game plan to attack the portal and improve that area?

SAM PITTMAN: Yeah fair. Very fair. Talent-wise, we had to do better recruiting. You talked about my O-line background. Some somewhat -- well, we got to get better there.

We wanted to attack -- we had to go out and get two tackles. We have a player in Kutas that I really like. He

lost his confidence out there. He was the best we had but he lost his confidence out there.

We move him inside, he's a heck of a player. One the strongest guys on the team. Junior, Camona, Blackstock, and Nichols, those three guys, a little bit like Taylen Green in that his leadership is incredible but they are too.

When you have guys that don't just want to play on the O-line but want to lead. Look, bro, we got to go. We got to go. We got to go, we got to do this, extra here.

When you have those guys in there, which we have, leading like that, I think that you can get a lot better. Eric Mateos is different because he doesn't only, hey, you need to talk to him. It's not necessarily about the play that he messed up. It's about hey what's going on at home.

There is different routes to the problem. May not just be between the ears. It may be life, home, girlfriend. That's why I found Eric is great at that. The kids know he loves them and thinks about them and cares about them.

I hope that was a trait I had when the coached the offensive line. I don't know if I did or not. But I hope I had the trait that Eric has. He can make kids play better and harder by the way he talks to them and treats them.

Q. I believe I heard you right when you said 17 high school players in this recruiting class.

SAM PITTMAN: Yes.

Q. Also 22 out of portal. Was wondering just evaluation of the portal and who you consult with to just -- feels like that was -- I wasn't expecting a larger number out of the portal rather than high school.

SAM PITTMAN: Sometimes what ends up happening is you're going high school, so our goal every year is try to get to 20, okay? We did not. We want to try to get to 20 out of high school.

The next thing you do is go, okay, how many scholarships do I have? I need three O-line men, two D-linemen, and our guys at Arkansas ask me that all the time. Okay, where you going to go?

There is the next number.

And then what you hope you get is a trade for a trade. In other words, you hope that if it's April and you get -- you would be fine if you -- you don't need anybody else. Somebody goes in the portal, you trade that position for that position.

That's what happened this year, and that's where the eight -- seven came in at the end, which made that number somewhat larger.

Q. You talked about the college football playoff for a minute. 17 games for the two final teams. Do you think conferences who get rid of the championship games to take one game off the schedule, and would you like to see the teams this host games adopt the NFL model and keep hosting until the final championship game?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I would like to get to the damn SEC championship game is what I would liked to do, you know. I will say this: The game has hurt the league in the past. I don't think it -- and I don't know if that's fair. I don't know if Mr. Sankey would agree with me. I remember at Georgia to hurt us and obviously this last year hurt Georgia.

It's not going to now. Obviously. Will there be some communication about that? Probably. But don't you want to see who the conference championship -- who is the winner?

So I would personally hate to see that game go. I know 17 is a long season, but I do think this: I think whoever is the top seed has an opportunity to host. I think they've earned it throughout the year. I think that would being the best way to do that.

Until you get to the bowl situation. Then we cannot cut any of the bowls out. None. Those are a way to get better and get your younger kids practicing. I don't mean Orange, Rose, all that. I mean, Liberty, Mayo. We need to continue to keep those.

Q. You brought three guys who played Texas high school football here today. Now two universities from Texas in your conference. How is that going to affect recruiting for ya'll?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, you know, we try to put a six-hour radius around Fayetteville. Dallas is in that radius and we jump on down to Houston.

Texas, there is so many kids down here that can play. If you look at our state, you know, we just don't have a populated state, so we may have anywhere from six to eight kids that can play football in the SEC. At least in our opinion.

That doesn't make us right. But at least in our opinion.

You may come into Dallas and get, what do you think, 50

probably SEC players at least just in this area. So the more we can get on the team obviously the more familiar, the more stories we can have, the better off we'll be and the better we can do here, Dallas, east.

Q. You added Bobby Petrino to your staff. Had a big name in Arkansas. Wondering how your meshing with him might be better than it was last year at Texas A&M?

SAM PITTMAN: Man, that's hard to say, because I'm not positive what happened over at A&M. Here is what I know: I hire people. I give my opinion. He's the offensive coordinator, Travis is the defensive coordinator, and that's, his responsibility. Eric Mateos is the D-line coach. I am the oldest GA in the country. I'm helping him.

I would want to work for me. I would want to work with me if I was an offensive coordinator because I'm going to let you go get them. Now, I've got any ideas and I'm going to come in and have my tape up there and go, okay, I see this, I see this, I see this.

But I would think if you ask Bobby and Travis and Scott, they say he gives me the freedom to run what I think is best, and I don't know about A&M. I don't know that. I just know we've given him the freedom to go score points.

Q. Speaking of Bobby, for those of us that don't get to see you on a daily basis and see your interactions with him, what has it been like having him back in Fayetteville?

SAM PITTMAN: It's been great. I mean, he's passionate. He likes to win, likes to win and score points. So it's been great.

Again, I mentioned it before. I had Barry before that I could bump some head coaching questions off. As I get older the questions aren't as many, but -- or as I get more years of being a head coach.

But it's like a security blanket. I got Bobby there. I had Barry there. I had Bobby there that I can run off things. Both of those guys are not, hey, we need to do this, this, this.

I'll ask them a question and I want their opinion and they know it. We'll agree on it or won't, but we're both grown men. If we do, we do. If we don't, we don't. We move on down the road.

That's been very beneficial to me, and I really like him and I have a lot of the respect for him.

It's just -- he spends more time in my office than anybody, and I apologize to him. I don't know if he likes it or not. I do make him talk to me a lot.

Q. Last year you and I discussed hire of Travis Williams, how aggressive he was from UCF. You said not a lot of cover zero will be needed. Looks like 52 plays came in cover zero. This defensive line and how talented they are, is the plan to be even more aggressive with blitz, maybe more cover zero?

SAM PITTMAN: You know, I had a question earlier today about close games, tight games. Some of our discussion has been about our aggressiveness during the end of games defensively.

You know, I think Travis did a wonderful job for us last year, but I don't want to handcuff him either. 52 of those plays, will it go up? Probably.

But I do think we're a little bit better at corner and a little bit better in the safety spot to be able to cover zero, cover true man. That we can do that.

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