

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Kentucky Wildcats

Mark Stoops

Press Conference



MARK STOOPS: Thank you, Commissioner. As we were talking back there, he and I have been around a long time. Before Commissioner Sankey was in charge, he was the assistant and worked with us, and we spent a lot of time together. As always, just greatly appreciate Greg, what he does. In the unstable environment of college sports, there's nobody better than him and the steady hand that he has. He's just been solid as a rock for a long time.

Hard to imagine this is my 12th. Been very blessed, very fortunate to be here.

Great to be in Texas. Appreciate the plug on the bourbon. We're actually selling it here in Texas, and it's doing very well, so thank you to all you Texans that are buying RD1 spirits. We appreciate it.

Again, I'm very familiar with Texas, recruited here for a lot of years. Good to be back.

Obviously with Oklahoma and Texas joining our great conference, just makes it that much stronger. But it's kind of interesting for me because, as I go to the SEC meetings and we're down in Destin spending some time, you run into so many good friends, so many good people. I'm so familiar with both Texas and Oklahoma. Obviously with OU, Brent Venables, I've known Brent since he played, his first year coaching and worked with my brothers, been very close to Brent for a long time, and Joe Castiglione and even the president, Joe Harris, who's very close with Bob.

You go over to Texas even, and Sark and I go back to competing against each other way back when we were in the west, playing out west, and I was at Arizona and he was at USC and Washington and crossed paths many times, and Chris Del Conte at Texas, who was with us at Arizona.

There's just so many good friendships, and obviously me being in the league so many years, get along so well and have such respect for all the coaches that are in our

conference, and of course we welcome Oklahoma and Texas and make us that much stronger. It's difficult, but we embrace that.

You're going to see three of our players here today: Marcus Cox, an offensive lineman; D'Eriq Jackson, a linebacker from Georgia; and Deone Walker, who's a special individual. All these guys are very good players. I hope you get a minute to visit with them -- unique stories, great leaders, great people, and I'm very excited for them to be here and experience this wonderful event.

Wouldn't be SEC Media Days if I didn't have to talk about a new offensive coordinator, so those of you -- I'm very excited about Bush Hamdan. He comes to us from Boise. I've known Bush for a while, actually talked to him three or four years ago. I love the influence, he's got a background of working with Coach Drink, who I have a tremendous respect for. He's worked with Coach Sark. He's been around and did a great job at Boise, and very excited about Bush and what he's going to do.

Tried to keep as much continuity as I could but also wanted him to be very confident and do the things that he does to put us in a position to be successful.

I think one of the things that helps us, they give us so much autonomy to work with our players now compared to the old days. We get to spend an awful lot of time, not only the spring practices but they give us some other time to work with them. I think that'll help us with the change and with the transition.

Also have a new wide receiver coach in Daikiel Shorts, who comes to us from Houston. I love Daikiel and what he's done. He's a young guy, but he's very demanding. I felt like we need to take some steps in that area, and I like what I'm seeing from him.

Also bringing back Eric Wolford. Coach Wolf and I worked together many years ago, our first job at the University of South Florida. We were roommates and lived in a dorm and made \$12,000 apiece, I think, at that point in time. But worked with me for one stay and then went to Alabama for a few years and got him back, but I love what Eric brings



and the mentality that he has, the toughness, and obviously the recruiting that he brings to it, as well.

Defensively we're stable in that position. Brad White, our longtime defensive coordinator, does an amazing job. Our staff is intact. Excited about what we have, 10 returning starters on defense and the continuity of our staff, and we're excited to make a jump.

I think at times last year -- we have a high standard of playing very good defense, and there was times last year, much like our team, we were a little bit inconsistent, and we need to improve in that area. Jay Boulware does an amazing job with our special teams and coaches our running backs. So feel very good about the staff and the team.

Like everybody here, I had some messages here. I was really kind of coming in with a little edge, a little attitude about our team because we just want more. I think I talked about it last year, but where we're at, the margin for error, we have to make the best of every situation.

There's been some consistency. I appreciate Greg just mentioning the fact like we have been to eight straight bowl games. There's only eight teams in the country that have done that, I think only two in the SEC besides us, Alabama and Georgia, and of course Oklahoma, who hasn't been in the league but they've done it, as well. That's not nothing, but we want to improve.

That's the message with the team ultimately. We've got to get better. We've got to find a way to make those plays in critical moments to push us over the top.

We're not interested in just existing. I'm not here, I'm not coaching, I'm not back for the 12 years just to exist. We want to find a way to improve, use these rules, whatever it is, to make changes, to make that jump to get to the next level. It's extremely challenging. I don't have to tell you all that. You've been covering the SEC for a long time. It's extremely challenging.

But it takes us individually, personally every day, everybody every day, to do the little things to help us get to the next point.

The other thing is we're stronger together. I've listened to some of the speakers, some of the coaches, but ultimately every coach that gets up here in some form or fashion talks about the culture of our program, what we want, what we're looking for, the unselfishness. We know the world that we're in. We all are getting used to it. We all are adapting to it. But we want to be extremely demanding, and we want selfless players, and we want to play better for each

other.

Yeah, we want to enjoy going to work. I love this team. I love going to work. I love the challenge of this season. It's going to be fun.

That's ultimately -- I know you all -- by the way, I appreciate you because you're here, you've listened to 16 coaches. The commissioner introduced 16, and I'm last, and thank you for being here. I know it's been a long week.

But ultimately that's what we're trying to do. I'm excited about it. Like I said, I'm not -- I'm proud of the things we have done. We just want more. We want to continue to push. We're excited about it.

I feel like we have the pieces in place. We feel like we have the staff in place, and we're motivated. We're excited, and we're ready to roll.

I think you all are tired of hearing a bunch of coach-speak, so I'll wrap it up and let you fire up a few questions and wrap up this long week, but thank you for what you do.

Q. Kind of wondering, what are you continuing to learn about Brock Vandagriff, how he's adjusted so far. Knowing he's such an avid fisherman, has he found any good fishing spots around Lexington yet?

MARK STOOPS: Yes, he definitely can catch some fish, that's for sure. That was a big part of the recruiting pitch. But what I like about Brock is you saw him -- for Georgia's sake they won a lot of games, so they were up a lot of points, so they were able to work some of their backups even at the quarterback position because you know that's very difficult to do is get QB reps.

But when Brock was in there, even if they had a lead or anything, you just saw the way he operated. For us that's a big deal. We've always been a pro-style offense, so you know he was coached well there. You know it was complex. You know he was doing the right things, and he could come in and handle our situation, whether I made an offensive coordinator change or Liam had left or whatever happened, and I forget exactly where it was in that moment. But we felt very good about him being able to handle everything that we're going to ask him to do.

He obviously has the talent. He just needs to get under center and get some reps.

Q. All these SEC coaches meetings you go to every year, you've seen a lot of guys come and go. Greg alluded to it, now you're the dean of SEC coaches. What do you think about that because that's no small



accomplishment in this league. Your thoughts on that?

MARK STOOPS: Well, thanks for the question. Only it also jarred something that I had on my notes that I want to get to. But as far as being the longest tenured coach in the SEC, I think it's an accomplishment by a lot of people. Our administration have been very supportive for a very long time. There's a lot of coaches that have come and gone, that have worked tirelessly to help put us in this position, and a lot of players that have dedicated a lot. I feel very fortunate, very blessed. I want to continue to succeed.

Like I said, I don't look down on some of the things we've done. There's things at our fingertips that Tony Neely and Susan give me on the way here, but the other thing is since 2018, there's only three other schools that have more wins than us since '18. Again, that's not nothing. We want more, but the consistency that you have to have in this league, it's difficult. There's some great schools, some great programs that have been up and down, and we've been relatively stable.

Again, not good enough. I'm not very excited about -- we had an opportunity last year or two to wrap up the season with two ranked wins, and we let one slip away in the bowl game against Clemson. No more ifs and buts; we lost. They made the plays and we didn't. That's the motivation to go find the ways to do that.

But thanks for jarring something in my mind, as well -- because I wanted to, in my opening statements, my notes right here, I also had a note to send my condolences to Lane Kiffin and the Kiffin family, Monte being a defensive guy, just a legend and a guy that all of us defensive coaches have always looked up to. There's things that we do that I still learned from him.

I had the opportunity, I went and interviewed for him when I was a really young coach. I didn't get the job, but I can tell you this, just from the interview alone, it was unbelievably impressive, the detail, the what he did and how -- he took you on the grass, and we worked out and did things. He was an amazing man and a great experience for me just to go through an interview. It was one of the only interviews I went through and didn't get. But he was just an incredible person, and my condolences to Lane.

Also Coach Saban, I want to recognize him by retiring. I've been in the league now 12 years, and I really enjoyed being around Coach and listening to him in meetings. A lot of people ask me what he's like or thinking that he's overbearing or demanding in there. Don't get me wrong, Coach is passionate at times. But always, it was never about self-interest. To me, he always was worried about

college football. He was worried about the betterment of college football and making young people better. I truly believed that.

And listening to him and the arguments, the debates that we've had for 12 years and just the knowledge that he brought and still brings, people need to listen to because he's one of a kind in what he's done, and congratulations to him for retiring and still being around it.

Q. When the A&M job was open last year, were you offered it at all, and how close or not close were you to possibly taking it?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I was pursued pretty aggressively by them, and we'll leave it at that out of respect for everybody involved. There's a lot of people over the years, a lot of interactions between people, but it was very brief. I was pursued. I had a job to do.

I take great pride in -- there's only -- another stat that Tony gave me on the way here, but there's only been 19 coaches in the history of the SEC that have been 12 years at their institution. I'm proud to be a member of that group. I've been grinding at Kentucky for a long time, and very proud of that and want to continue to do that.

Again, we want more, but that's not nothing. The SEC has been around a long time with a lot of very good football coaches.

Q. I wanted to ask you about bringing Coach Shorts in from Houston and Barion Brown, who I saw in high school, an electric talent. He's done a great job as a kickoff returner for you but been a little inconsistent as a receiver, as you hired him. What are you guys looking to do to improve Barion's game?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, as I mentioned in my opening statement, very impressed with Daikiel. Brought him in from Houston. Obviously he worked with Dana there, so you know he was taught really well.

He's done a very good job. I think with Barion, Barion knows he's a special talent and can do a lot of amazing things with the ball in his hand. He's worked really hard to become a more complete player, and I really appreciate the grind that he's going through because he knows there's just a lot of little details and a lot of things he's got to focus on. He's been so talented that he's always relied on that, and he's been much more consistent and working really hard.

I'm looking forward to seeing how it translates to the field.

Q. The SEC has really steered into the offensive gurus, if you will, for head coaches since you started your time here. 12 of the 16 coaches are former offensive coordinators, play callers, quarterbacks, coaches. What are the challenges of being a defensive guy in a league that is so clearly running and chasing after that offense?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I think it's challenging in this league and in any league as a defensive head coach or defensive coordinator in general. Offenses are so creative. The speed at which they operate sometimes, the players that they have, the athletes, it's a challenge. It's different.

I always prided myself on being a great DB coach first and then translating and being a defensive coordinator, but it's different. I've been a head coach for 12 years. Offenses are different than when I was a defensive coordinator.

We've got our hands full. There's a lot going on, a lot of misdirection, a lot of skill. It's a great challenge.

I don't know if that gives you a direct answer on that, but we're trying. We're grinding away and trying to be the best.

I think obviously Coach Saban left a pretty good example, and Kirby is not doing too bad, either.

Q. Due to the injuries on your defensive line, have you seen any younger guys step up to fill those voids in a leadership role?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, we're going to have to. We really felt really good about the depth of our defensive line. It took a little hit in spring. Even at one position in Josaih Hayes and Tavion Gadson, who was a young guy that we were really looking forward to seeing him, and both of them took an injury in the spring. We'll see when they get back. But we feel like we have some depth and some guys are stepping up and working hard, and it's pretty good to anchor it with big No. 0, with Deone in there.

We feel like we'll be all right.

Q. Wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on your relationship with Brent and maybe some similarities you've seen as his coaching career has evolved between him and Bob and him and Mike, as well?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, Brent, obviously I think I saw something the other day where he was talking about, was on the Sooner Insider or one of those things on the SEC Network, but Brent was almost like a -- I don't want to say a brother or cousin or whatever, but he was very close to the Stoops family for sure, Bob and Mike. He played at

Kansas State with Bob and then watched him get into the profession, and both Bob and Mike had a lot of confidence in him and gave him some opportunities in coaching early because he earned them and they believed in him.

Obviously he's produced. I just think from afar, myself have great admiration for what he's doing and certainly proud that he's taken over Oklahoma and doing such a great job because the Sooners will always have a special place in all of our hearts for the time and effort that Bob and Mike both put in there and our family rooting for him for so many years, and Brent is going to do a great job there.

It's just fun to have somebody you know and care about still in that position.

Q. I was wondering, how do you feel about the cornerback position across the field from Max and in the slot? What did you learn from the spring, and what does DJ Waller add there?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, DJ Waller is a transfer from Michigan. I like DJ. He has great length. We need some size back in our secondary, and Jake Kauwe is getting better, Nasir at corner I feel could make a big jump this year, as well, and Jantzen Dunn is another guy that he's done some good things at nickel. We feel like he's making some progress, can play corner. Of course Maxwell, we think the world of him. He's a difference maker. He's an elite player, a guy that will play on Sundays.

I feel like we have more depth than we've had. It jumped up and bit us a little bit last year. But again, no whining, no crying, no excuses. Everybody in here has injuries, and it hurt us a little bit late, but we'd better go fix it.

Q. Do you mind sharing which job you interviewed with Monty Kiffin for? Was it with the Bucs?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it was with the Bucs when Coach Gruden was there.

Q. You've got nine starters back on defense. In this day and age with the portal, that's pretty rare. How do you feel about that and just your defense for the season?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I like our defense. I like the group. I like the leadership. As I mentioned from a previous question, I feel like there's some young guys on the defensive line that we're continuing to progress. We just addressed the cornerback situation. I feel like we've made some improvements there and some young guys are growing up, hit the portal. Overall we feel like it's a good group. You need the depth. It's a long season. You need

some impact players. We have some experience with J.J. coming back up front and Deone and Tre'vonn Rybka and Octavious Oxendine.

We feel very good about that. We have a transfer in Georgia with Pop Johnson. Pop is an impact guy. He's a big, physical dude, and we needed that.

I think we hit the portal at every position except tight end. We felt like we have really good depth there. But we didn't go too heavy in that. I want to say maybe 12, 14, and over the two years we have 26 transfers. It's been a good mixture for us. We haven't had to dive into it too heavy, but certainly supplemented our roster, and it's helped us in this past year. Like I said, we've dipped into the portal for every position, with the exception of tight end.

Q. I think most years you get to play two or three non-conference games. This year I think you jump into South Carolina game 2 and Georgia game 3. What are your thoughts on two SEC games so early, and then I'd probably be remiss if I didn't ask your thoughts on your guy John Calipari going from Kentucky to Arkansas.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah. With jumping into the league play so early, first of all, our entire focus, it's not just coach-speak, you've got to be ready for game 1 on the 31st against Southern Miss.

But with the league games coming up so quick, you'd better be a little bit conscientious of how you're handling camp, what you're doing, where you're prioritizing your time, and making sure you're prepared to play some big games very early.

It's a long season. It works both ways. The last year we had the opportunity to play some non-conference games and build into it, and then, I'll be honest, it was pretty difficult to go seven or eight straight SEC games. That's a brutal stretch and takes its toll on you mentally and physically. This year it's mixed in a little bit better. And of course we always end the season with Louisville, and they had such a tremendous season, such a good program. They were very good last year. We were fortunate to go up on the road and beat them to cap the season. But that's tough after a tough SEC gauntlet.

With Coach Cal, I wish the best for him. Really, he and I have had a really good relationship for a long time. There was one little blip on there, but we're both big boys, we're both friends and have spoken, and I'm sure he'll be successful at Arkansas and wish him nothing but the best.

As a matter of fact, his son, just saw Brad in Lexington a

couple weeks ago, through recruiting or doing something, and spent some time talking with him, so they'll do very well.

Q. Tyreese Fearbry kind of popped in the bowl game. What is his potential as an edge rusher and what are you looking for from him? And two bye weeks this year; is this something you and other coaches would like to see more often, maybe a scheduled week since we're tweaking everything else?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, Tyreese did make some games last year, and we need him to. We need that edge rusher. We need J.J. Weaver to really be consistent. He's shown flashes for years. He's been around a while with a lot of experience, and we expect a lot out of J.J. But Tyreese is stepping up and we need him to. We need to get back to having that edge pressure and at times be able to rush four and get the pressure you need and play coverage behind it. It's obviously a mixture and a balance there that we're always fighting.

And with the byes, it is what it is. I do look at it each year, how we prep, how we go about our business, trying to tweak things to make sure we come back and play well because that wasn't always the case. I'm well aware of that. I know certainly some of you that cover us on a regular basis understand that.

I look at things every year and just try to make sure we put our players in a position to be successful and don't just stay status quo, especially if the results aren't what we're looking for.

I want to make sure we utilize the bye weeks as best we can. There's always a balance there if you want to get some recruiting in, you want to give your players some rest. It's a long season, get them healthy, but you also need to get better.

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