

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

LSU Tigers

Coach Brian Kelly

Press Conference



BRIAN KELLY: I'm not starting until that's over.

Go Tigers. Love it.

Well, welcome. It's an exciting part of this month, because we're close to football season.

Clearly as a football coach, we love this part of the year. I think what stands out to me is that when I get this opportunity to talk to everybody, it's really about generating the continuous excitement from our fan base for LSU football.

We have an incredibly passionate fan base. We've sold over 75,000 season tickets. We led the country in season tickets sales. As we get close to the season, you get these opportunities in front of the media, and I know you want to talk specifics, talk about some of the hot topics that are confronting us.

What confronts me is how we continue to generate the incredible support. That means what are we about to do? And that is continue the vision of graduating champions at LSU. Every single day that's what we talk about.

I know you find that hard to believe in a sense, but that's what we talk about. We are still college. This is still about college. This is not the NFL. And that's a great thing for a guy like myself that started in had Division II and has worked my way through five different programs. It's really about the student-athlete and the relationships with student-athletes. And helping them get to that goal of graduating. And helping them get to the goal of winning championships.

So we have a clear process in place for our guys. That process is what I love to do. I come up here every year because I love the relationships with players. I love developing our players. I love the ability on a day-to-day basis to have a transformational relationship with them so when they leave our program they're successful in the

NFL, successful in life.

And I know sometimes it's sound bytes and quick observations, but that's my life work. I'm much more interested in the significance of what we're doing than just the success.

So I start my talk with you about certainly excited for our fan base and this season. I'm more excited for our players and the opportunities they're going to get to continue in this developmental process.

So when you talk about how you get there, you need to look at where we started. When we started in 2022 we didn't have a full roster. We needed to upgrade our guys' mindsets as it relates to academics, and we've been able to do that with this first year and 2025 having a perfect GSR.

That to me are some of the underpinnings that I know you're more interested in talking about other things, but this is what excites me about LSU football, our ability to graduate our players now and to move them on and see the success that they're having in the NFL.

Because they're prepared. They're ready to handle what the NFL has to offer them. For me, that's success, right? That is success. Because it's significant. We're talking about young men that are now able to get a degree and play for championships and move onto whatever their vocation is.

The expectations are always high. We've got some outstanding players. I think you start always with the quarterback in Garrett Nussmeier. I think when you look at Garrett, what he brings is a mindset of a coach's son. That is I'm always looking to improve. Every day he comes to workouts, every day I comes to practice, he's looking for areas to improve on. I would tell you that experience is going to be his best teacher in the SEC. Having played a year in the SEC and seeing what needs to happen on a consistent basis is most important.

He brings the individual trait that coaches love because he wants to be taught, coached. He wants to be coached

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hard. He wants to be coached in a manner that gets him to be the best version of himself.

I love that about Garrett.

We've got Whit Weeks here today. Whit is our driver. He brings the passion, but passion without focus is irresponsible. He's not that. He's got incredible focus. He's got incredible passion. It rubs off on our entire defense.

And he wants to obviously outplay his brother West Weeks, who is a pretty darn good player as well. Add Harold Perkins back to the mix who was out with an ACL last year, a player that can make plays all over the field. It gives us an incredible linebacker group.

Chris Hilton is with us today as well. I want to say Chris had a very difficult injury last year, one that really didn't allow him to be the player he is. He runs 22 miles an hour. He is a guy that can go get the football. He can change games, and we didn't have him virtually the entire year.

That was frustrating to him and difficult for him, but he fought through it. Had a great end of the season for us. I love the way that he has now used his personality, which isn't one that if he gets up here he's not going to say a lot, but he's respected by his teammates about what he does every day and how he handled injuries last year.

Many of you know that we went into the transfer portal to really build depth, championship level depth across the board. Guys like Patrick Payton from Florida State; Barion Brown from Kentucky; Nic Anderson, Jack Pyburn, Bauer Sharp, just to name a few. Mansoor Delane at the safety and corner position.

I could go on and on. And I've missed some and I'll make sure when I get to some of these other locations I bring their names up as well, because so many of them are deserving to be talked about.

(Zoom froze.) And we do pretty darn good in baseball. We do pretty good in gymnastics. Do really well in all of our other sports. But the game day experience at LSU is incredible. It's because of our fans. They're so passionate and knowledgeable. When you go into that stadium they are watching the game. They are following every play.

And that as a football coach, that's the captive audience that any speaker wants, that any teacher wants.

It's such a captivating audience and they're passionate about LSU football that they've delivered for us much as you know, I had \$1 million gift, my wife and I, to help

support or NIL. That was the league gift because I knew how passionate our fan base was.

We had 1,600 supporters follow that up that raised that number to about \$3.5 million. That's the kind of passion that we have at LSU.

It comes back to the one goal that I started with, that's I want to graduate our players and play for championships. Whether it's on the field, in the classroom, in the community, it's developing great young men on a day-to-day basis.

That's the significance for me. It's wrapped in that much more than just the success.

So I know everybody is excited about the season. Everybody here is excited about it. We're certainly looking forward to the opportunity. We open up with a great program in Clemson. I know Dabo very well. Respect him and his program and the accomplishments they've had. We played against each other several times when I was at Notre Dame and just have a ton of respect.

But we've also been 0-3 in openers at LSU under my watch. We needed to do some things differently this year. That is embrace this opener. Embracing it in a manner that this is a big game. It's a tangible goal for our football team to want to be 1-0. That's not let's warm up into the season. We want to be ready for this football game. So we're doing everything in our power to give our players the opportunity for that success.

Exciting season. Excited about the ability to continue to develop our program and our players. Looking forward to our opening against Clemson University.

Thank you very much.

Q. You mentioned your donation and the other donors' donation to build the roster this year, to get to a championship level. How sustainable is that long-term not only at LSU but other programs of similar resources?

BRIAN KELLY: I'm not going to do a million every year, no. I know that wasn't your question. I'm kidding.

Look, I think it's the nature of where we are in college football. We have revenue sharing, NIL. Look, we're early on in the process here. This is the first step towards what we're trying to put together.

I'm excited about college football. I'm excited that we have something in place relative to revenue sharing. NIL is still



something that we have to navigate through.

So to answer your question, I think we still have to be thinking about how we continue to build or support for NIL, because it's not going away, nor should it. As well as revenue sharing.

We're in the first stages of where we need to be, but we have to still be moving in that direction.

Q. Historically LSU quarterbacks in the past have had a pretty significant jump from year one to year two. What do you anticipate Garrett Nussmeier's being as he gets that experience in year two?

BRIAN KELLY: That's a good question, Emily. I would say that when you're comparing him to Jayden Daniels and Joe Burrow, that's a high bar for anybody, right?

But Garrett is at LSU because he loves LSU. He wants to lead our football team to a championship. If the Heisman follows with that, I think he's good with that.

I answer the question this way because all of our conversations with him aren't about individual goals. They're about how do I lead this football team to a championship. All we've seen is him leading, him being selfless. His selflessness is going to be the differentiator from last year to this year, as well as the experience he had playing against really good SEC teams.

Q. I'm curious to hear some improvements you want to see from your defense this season?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, I think we have an outstanding defensive coordinator and defensive staff. Blake Baker is in my opinion elite in the field of defensive coordinators. We needed to give him some more tools.

Look, I've been the head football coach at LSU and I know that we have not played the kind of defense necessary to win a national championship. I think we put a roster together in this offseason, along with young players that have taken lumps along the way as they've developed, and given Blake now the tools to play championship level defense.

Clearly the 2023 offensive football team we had was good enough to win a national championship. We weren't good enough as a team. A lot of that had to do with addressing some shortcomings we had on defense. We think we've done that.

I love our roster, our team, the camaraderie of the group, the seriousness and the focus, intent. So I think we're

going to have a defense that's going to be representative.

Look, any time you go on the road and play a team like Clemson you better bring a defense with you.

Q. LSU has traditionally played in-state schools. What do you think the benefits and maybe any bad points are of doing in-state schools and football?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, when you're trying to balance a schedule, and I've been a proponent of playing the toughest schedule that we can relative to the SEC, there needs to be balance to your schedule as well. Because you're looking at opportunities you want to give to your players. You want them to play for championships.

You don't play 12 SEC schools, so now you're open with two opportunities. In the state of Louisiana we have such a passionate base. Why not play the schools from our own state and share in the revenue?

If we're going to have to pay somebody to come in and play us, why not play the in-state schools and take care of them. We have some great schools we're going to play. Louisiana Tech and Southwest Louisiana this year. Excited about those. So really about sharing with those that are in the state and balancing the schedule.

Q. Coach, wanted to ask you, reflecting back on the SEC spring meetings, the narratives that the mood shifted in the room on the different playoff models. Share some insight as to why that shifted, one; and then, two, another popular narrative is the Big10 wants to see the SEC increase their number of league games to get on board. Just your thoughts on that, having coached in that region for several years as Notre Dame's winningest head coach?

BRIAN KELLY: Thank you for that last piece. That was very nice of you. The check is in the mail.

Both of those work together, the two questions that you have. This is what I mean: I think we would push for as many teams as possible if they were evaluated based upon what their schedule looks like.

And so that's why both of those questions dovetail together, in that if we're talking about win-loss record, they're not all the same based upon what conference you're in and who you play.

So how many teams in this probably have a lot to do with how are we going to select them. What's the selection process going to be. I think at the end of the day, that selection process will probably be having the end in mind



first.

And that will then generate the answers to the other questions in terms of how many teams and what's your conference schedule look like in terms of how many you play.

Q. Everybody know you had four players from your offensive line drafted, including I guess Will was the fourth player overall. What kind of progress do you think you made in rebuilding that line? Can it be as good without Will and guys like Emery Jones?

BRIAN KELLY: I don't think you replace a Will Campbell. Certainly having four drafted, they were well regarded and certainly Brad Davis has done a great job in coaching them.

But if you're trying to address graduation in a knee-jerk reaction and not having that planned in advance, you're probably going to take a hit on the offensive line this year.

We have been grooming some players for their chance and their opportunity. You remember I started Emery and Will as true freshman in the SEC and they held their own. We think we have gone a step further, that we don't have a start a true freshman this year but guys we developed.

Then we went into the transfer portal, brought in Braelin Moore at center, Josh Thompson, some veteran guys from the Big10 and the ACC who have been in wars. So you're adding those two guys to the mix.

DJ Chester started every game for us last year at center. He's a multiple player guy. Can play guard or center. And then we've got some younger players that are going to step up that started in the Bowl game, and we'll see how that plays.

But I'm bullish on our offensive line. I think we're going to be able to produce the kind of things necessary to be a championship team.

Q. It seems from like a 35,000 foot view, there has been a little bit of a philosophical change from a positive perspective. Transfer portal class, hire some phenomenal coaches, support staff. Just feels like there is some good vibes in the program. Talk a little bit about your relationship with the Associate AD Austin Thomas and how your day-to-day working relationship has been with him in the past year and a half?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I think Austin has done a terrific job in this new order that we're in. Brings a lot of experience

being at multiple schools in the SEC; his ability. He's extremely bright and innovative when it comes to the revenue sharing plan we had in place, and certainly NIL.

But he also knows it's about surrounding himself with great people as well. I've given him the opportunity to go out and do that. We've hired some great people that will help in personnel, in recruiting. We've hired some great people in our player dev area that will keep the players. Retention is important as well. Retention is key.

And then somebody that can also assist him with contracts and the day-to-day, because he's involved in a lot. So I've got a great relationship. It's new for me, right? I've never had a general manager.

But I thoroughly enjoy the relationship, and really the ability for both of us to grow and learn as we go through this exciting new part of college football.

Q. You're one of the fortunate ones that has a veteran quarterback this year. Talk about the difficulty of playing that position and growing into that position in this conference.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I can't underestimate how important the development was. I think we all -- you all saw it. Jayden Daniels' development in year one to year two was astronomical if that word even suits it. It was incredible.

Garrett Nussmeier will have a similar jump. It's because you go on the road and it's sold out. You play teams that are so well coached and so balanced and have great players that you have no choice but to learn, develop, and get better, or you're going to be left by the side.

So that's why I'm so confident that experience in this league at the quarterback position is the most important thing. Could you come in and play as freshmen? Absolutely. But there will be those moments where you look like a freshman. You look like a first-year player. Garrett will tell that you. And he wasn't a true freshman. He had seen it, been there.

Being on the field in those situations when everything around you and your best is needed, you need experience. That to me is why he's going to be very successful.

Q. You talked a little bit how we're sort of still in this new stage and iteration of college football, college sports.

BRIAN KELLY: Yes.

Q. When it comes to broader governance, whoever it



is, I guess what is it that you want to see from those in charge leading college sports, whether it's structure, whether it's consistency in rulings, what do you want to see as a football coach?

BRIAN KELLY: Transparency and consistency. Those two words are probably the most important thing as we continue to move forward.

Now, other thing we would like federal government involvement. I got the Christmas list here. I can go through them all. If we start with transparency and start with the clear communication necessary and consistency and approach, look, I know this might not be what you were asking, but it's got to start with coaches.

It's got to start with us. I mean, we have to be the stewards of this. There has to be a moral high ground. Ethics in this. It starts with us. It starts with coaches.

I was at a speaking engagement a few weeks back, and every question about the NIL was trying to find a way around it, trying to find a way to bring in revenue in some other way. Sooner or later we have to take the stand that transparency, consistency, ethics, and morality are at the core of this.

If that's where we are we're going to be able to move to the next step and be able to continue to make progress.

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