

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Tennessee Volunteers**

**Coach Josh Heupel**

**Press Conference**



JOSH HEUPEL: Great to see everybody here today. Hope everybody had a great summer. For us it's fitting that we're here in Atlanta. Obviously a lot of our roster comes from right here in the state of Georgia and Atlanta area, but this is also where we kickoff here in the AFLAC Kickoff game here in Atlanta as we get ready to start the season.

Extremely appreciative of Gary Stokan, his entire staff, the organization, everything that they've done for us and our preparation to come down here, but also affording us the opportunity to play in this game inside of Mercedes Benz against great opponents. I know there's going to be a lot of orange inside of that stadium when we kick off Vol Nation and need to make sure it's the right shade of orange.

Embarking into year five, as I was getting ready for today, I really rewound back to year one and how myself and our staff came to Tennessee and the adversity in which we took the program over.

I'm really proud of what we've done, from roster management to some of the recruiting things we've had to deal with. It's how I know our best is in front of us. What has crippled other programs in the past, University of Tennessee and our football program has been able to flourish.

You look over the last three years, 30 wins, the most wins in Tennessee in the stretch of three years of Tennessee football since the late '90s, if you look at the College Football Playoff, New Year's Six bowl wins, you look at what we've done in the NFL draft. The best stretch of NFL draft picks in Tennessee in over two decades.

While we've been able to have that success on the field, players have done an unbelievable job inside our community. Each year we've set a team GPA record in the history of Tennessee football. I'm extremely proud of what our staff and our players have done here in a short amount of time.

Defensively, extremely excited. A year ago you guys maybe heard the quote of me saying that elite defense is required, and it's our history at the University of Tennessee. It's the home of Reggie White, Al Wilson, Eric Berry, three guys that may be one of, if not the best, players at their position in the history of the game.

Our defensive staff, led by Tim Banks, but our entire staff has done a great job. A year ago, you look at us, and we're top 10 in the country in six defensive statistical categories. Since we arrived at Tennessee, lead the league in tackles for loss. Could not be more excited about what we've done but also the future on that side of the football with the leadership and the players that we have inside of our program.

Offensively we found a lot of ways to win during the course of my career as an offensive coach and as a head coach, through the air and on the ground, have found a way to be elite year in and year out. You look at what we've done, two SEC Players of the Year in the last three years, one at quarterback, one at running back.

Last two years we've led the SEC in rushing. The last four years since we arrived we've rushed for 125 yards each year. Never been done in the history of Tennessee football. Really proud of what we've done, but the guys and the staff that we have to continue to grow as we move forward this year into the '25 season.

I know, when I open it up for questions, the first one will be about our quarterback situation. So I'm going to touch on that a little bit here as I get started. We will have a competition at the quarterback position, three guys inside of that room - really proud of what they've done - Joey, since he got there in May, Merklinger and George MacIntyre, what those three guys have done since they've been on campus. They've taken the summer, developed relationships, rapport with the guys around them, their ability to compete in a positive way with each other in the meeting room and on the field, their ability to have leadership traits and to continue to grow in that. I'm really excited about getting on the field with those guys.

We've found a way to win with a lot of different



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quarterbacks throughout my career on the offensive side of the ball, and we're going to find a way to win with the guy that earns a starting spot as we go through training camp here in August.

We have three players that are with us today that resemble everything that we want inside of our program, from an accountability standpoint, leadership, mental and physical toughness, who they are inside of the community and how they impact their teammates on a day-to-day basis. Linebacker Arian Carter that is a dynamic player; defensive tackle Bryson Eason from Memphis. He's in year six with us. Really proud of the steps that he's taken individually as a person and as a player and he's ready to play his best ball. And then tight end Miles Kitselman that a year ago came into our program. There's nobody that puts more work into every single day and impacts the teammates around him in a more positive way. Great leader for us.

As we move forward here into the '25 season, I'm going to rewind to last December. Everybody inside of our program didn't like the taste in their mouth as the season finished up in late December. That's been a part of spurring us on throughout each quarter of our off-season. It's been a part of how intentional and how focused that we've been throughout the course of the summer, and I'm excited to go compete with these guys when we get here to training camp.

For us to take another step and to continue to grow as a program, it has come down -- and this is something that we've been very diligent in inside of our program this off-season. The accountability to yourself and to your teammates every single day, guys doing their job at an elite level, building the leadership that you need to have to control and command your unit and your position group, and ultimately the way that we're going to compete every single day together.

Our young guys don't have time to be young as we get to the fall, and that's been a part of the message that our leadership has applied to the young guys inside of our program. I'm extremely excited about the young talent and the young competitive traits that we have inside of it, but we've got to have a great training camp here to go be the best version of ourselves as we get ready for the season.

Excited to open up camp. Our fan base is nothing short of the best in college football. You look at our season ticket waiting list of over 24,000 fans, our home record 20-1 over the last three seasons, that's been a huge part of us continuing to create momentum in recruiting, and couldn't be more excited to get ready to go tee this thing up with these guys as we get to September.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

**Q. You mentioned Miles Kitselman. Obviously you guys evaluated him out of the portal from Alabama, and he took on a much bigger role for you. How did he kind of expand his toolbox with you guys, and what do you foresee his role being this year?**

JOSH HEUPEL: I think it starts with him, with his competitive makeup of who he is every single day as he walks into the building. Elite competitor, you know exactly what you're going to get, which is everything that he has every single day. He's got great football IQ and understanding as of what we're doing offensively, the fundamentals and the technique, but also understanding the scheme we're going against on the other side of the football.

He's really developed as a leader during the course of this off-season. He's always been a guy that's been able to coach the guys at his position or even during the course of the special teams as he got comfort and earned the trust of the guys around him. He's taken his leadership to a whole 'nother level for us. Expect him to play at an elite level, be a huge part of what we're doing.

The tight end position inside of the scope of what we do offensively is kind of our utility knife. Within our tempo, it gives us the ability to play in a lot of different formations if they have the skill sets that Miles has. That's the ability to play out in space, be in line, be off the ball, the ability to run, block and pass protect while being a guy that can make plays down the football field with his hands as well. He's got great understanding of spatial relationships in the scope of our pass game too.

**Q. The fortune for Tennessee against Georgia in the past, the recent memory has not been too well for the Volunteers.**

JOSH HEUPEL: Thanks for reminding me.

**Q. How is it going to be different this year welcoming the Bulldogs back to Knoxville and Neyland?**

JOSH HEUPEL: We haven't been able to be on the right side of the scoreboard in that game. That's players and coaches together ultimately being a little bit better. A couple of those games last year, it's a tight ballgame in the fourth quarter. For us it's tying all three phases of the game together.

Kirby and their staff and their players have done a really good job and played really well in those games. It will be important for us - that's week 3 - that we're ready to go play



at the level that we need to against a really good football team.

**Q. In your tenure at Tennessee, you have been one of the best fast-starting offenses in the country. You scored 41 of your last 43 games in the first quarter. However, at the end of last season, you failed to score in six of the last nine. How much of that has been a focus in the off-season, how to fix it?**

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, we certainly want to start fast. That has the ability to apply pressure and maybe change the way the game's played in some situations as the game continues to unfold. At the same time, if it doesn't, you've got to continue to play and find a way to scratch and claw and get back on the right side of it.

Proud of a lot of what we did not starting fast last year, competitive makeup to continue to play. That could be offensively, but it's ultimately all three phases playing together, having an expectation that somebody's going to make a play that makes a difference in the game.

For us, you rewind and look at what happened early in ballgames last year. It ultimately became a little bit of a snowball effect. First ballgame, we're turning it over twice inside of the red zone, and that comes down to the small details, fundamentals, and technique that you're embarking on as soon as you're starting your off-season. You're on the field during the course of spring ball and certainly during the course of summer and training camp.

You put those little things together, ultimately that becomes what everybody sees and talks about. For us, the attention to detail on the offensive side of the ball -- it could be snap, could be messes with the running back, could be protection, could be reading progression for quarterback. All of those things have got to come together for us to be what we want to be, which is a football team that starts fast.

**Q. You lost a quarterback. A lot of people lose quarterbacks in the portal these days, but you lost one at a unique time, the end of spring. What had you guys done to that point in the possibility of losing a quarterback, and what did you do in scramble mode, and going forward what can programs do to prepare for that kind of unique situation?**

JOSH HEUPEL: Ultimately at the end of the day, it's never about who's not in your building but about who is in your building. For us, you can lose a quarterback at a lot of different times: December transfer portal, spring transfer portal. You can lose one week 1, first quarter of the ballgame in your opener, and now you're on to number two

through injury, right? You've got to have the next-man-up mentality.

At the end of the day, having guys that want to compete along with their brothers inside of that locker room, building that connection, but also having the right guys in there.

At the end of the day, I'm really excited about who we have in there. The addition of Joey to who's already inside of that group, highly competitive guys that are smart, that have the physical traits to be successful. Teammates have grown to have great trust in those guys through the course of this off-season during the summer, and now it's about getting to training camp and going and competing. Somebody is going to earn the opportunity to be our starting quarterback through that process.

**Q. You're 2-2 in that rivalry against Alabama. That's typically pretty streaky. What do you think you guys need to do to take the reins in that rivalry this season?**

JOSH HEUPEL: That game is a long ways away from where we are today. I think in this entire journey it's important your team controls the controllable, which isn't yesterday, it's not tomorrow, it's where you are right now.

If this football team is focused on that journey day in and day out, we'll have a chance to grow to be a team that can go down to Tuscaloosa, compete, and hopefully find a way to win.

It's one of the greatest rivalries I've ever been involved in. It's a really unique game in a really unique setting. A couple years ago, we weren't on the right side of it, but I'm looking forward to going down there and competing with this group when we get to that point in the season.

**Q. A lot of the talk around personnel departments, general managers. You have a unique setup, it feels like, from my understanding from 35,000 foot, Jake Breske, Billy High, and Brandon Lawson. Can you discuss what all three of those roles are? You have a wily veteran defensive line coach, got his lumps around the league in Rodney Garner in Georgia and Auburn, did phenomenal jobs there. How has he helped bring back that Tennessee defense to where it's supposed to be and the standard it's supposed to be? How has he helped you all through the first few years starting back in '21?**

JOSH HEUPEL: Absolutely, personnel department, scouting department for high school, transfer portal when those times open up, recruiting department, everything that goes into the day-to-day operations of that side of it, being able to coordinate all those things together, ultimately



cohesively make decisions on what's right for the future of our program as far as our personnel. We've had that in place since I got there. Really proud of what all of those guys have done and who we have in the building because of the strategic way that we've approached it.

Rodney Garner, a guy that's coached 35 years, I think, inside of this league, understands what it takes to win on Saturdays, but the approach and the plan that you have to get there. Does a great job of fundamentals and technique, the development of our guys. You look at the success that we've had up front. I mentioned leading the league in tackles for loss over the last four years, guys that have been drafted -- James Pearce, first-round pick. He's done an elite job up there.

That's a big part and key philosophically of how we want to play on the defensive side of the ball. With the scheme of Tim Banks and Rodney being a huge part of that, Coach Levorn Harbin being a massive addition to what we're doing on that side of the ball, Marion Hobby coming back, a guy that played at Tennessee, coached at Tennessee. He's been in the NFL. Having him back in the building, we've got a plethora of resources for our guys that sit in that defensive line room.

**Q. This off-season you were able to add Seth Littrell as an offensive analyst, a guy that's coordinated and coached some really high-powered offenses. What kind of impact do you think he could have on the 2025 offense?**

JOSH HEUPEL: For Seth, somebody that I've played with, got great trust in. He's the kind of guy that's going to be clear in his communication to me. His experience as a head coach is another tool that he brings to us. He's had elite offenses with great players, done it at an extremely high level. His knowledge, expertise, his understanding of some of the things that we do offensively and the ability to bring some creative things that are maybe good additions to what we're doing.

Seth has been great for us since he got there in February, and we expect him to be a big part of what we're doing.

**Q. You mentioned that open quarterback battle headed into fall camp. What are the benefits of not naming a starter, and what traits are you looking for in the guy who will eventually earn that spot?**

JOSH HEUPEL: I think it's important. We talk about it at the beginning of every year. You earn everything in this game, and you certainly do inside of our team room, and that's who you are, your understanding of what we want to be -- fundamental, technique, scheme. It's how you

compete every single day. It's what you're doing off of the field.

That's certainly true at the quarterback position. I think it's important, through my career as a player, as a coach, different spots that I've been, I think it's really important that everybody on your team sees that guy earn that job as well.

As you get out on the practice field, their ability to command everything that you're doing on offense, the ability to handle bad play and reset, the ability to handle a good play, go play the next play, the ability to impact the guys around you in a positive way -- you know, run game checks, protections, all the things that go into playing that position. I think it's really important that the guys around them see them earn it.

Through the course of training camp, we don't have a set timeline on when we want to announce somebody as our starter. Once somebody earns that opportunity, then they'll be named that guy.

**Q. NIL has become such a unique factor in college football, whether good or bad, however everybody looks at it, but for you all, balancing that some of the adjustments you all have had to make obviously with the new profit share, how do you do that while also keeping some of the things that made college football so unique for all participants, coaches and players alike?**

JOSH HEUPEL: Certainly what's happening around the game has changed quite a bit and certainly recently has changed dramatically, but what it takes to be successful once the ball is teed up has not changed. So you've got to have tough, smart, relentless competitors that love football and care about the people around them.

Throughout the recruiting process, we're trying to not just identify the physical traits you're looking for, but also those personal characteristics and traits and competitive makeup as you try to build a locker room of the culture that you want to have. You've got to constantly help that grow and foster that, but you've got to recruit to it as well.

That's something that our staff, our personnel departments are all intentional on.

**Q. With Joey coming in as late in the off-season as he did, have you had to accelerate the install process with him in some way? Does that concern you because of how much goes into the quarterback position?**

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, got there in May. It's something





that we've been through before as a staff. Took him through our spring installs once he was there on campus. He got a chance to digest those things. You get into summer, you're able to kind of repeat some of those things. He's continued to grow in his understanding of what we're doing and also the verbiage that we're using, maybe identifying defensive structures.

There's so many nuances that go into it, to having clear communication on the meeting room, on the practice field, and then ultimately on game day as well.

Is it an accelerated process? Absolutely. I think anytime you have a guy that's played a lot of football and sat in college meeting rooms offensively, he's been able to be a part of different things, he's able to draw on those experiences, correlate it to something that maybe he's done before, and kind of expedite the growth process as well.

**Q. We heard a lot, we had Commissioner Sankey, we heard Coach Kiffin, Beamer, all weighing in on should the SEC play eight or nine games. What are your thoughts there? How important is it when you look at rivalries, especially third Saturday in October being preserved, how much does that weigh in on your decision?**

JOSH HEUPEL: I think the rivalries, the special games, different for each fan base, are a huge part of what fan bases look forward to and those experiences that they know they're going to have, whether it be a home game, road game, or neutral site game. I think those are special things that make college football a part of what college football is.

Certainly you've got to balance the ability to play our conference and be able to travel and experience different sites. I'm going to leave that to the commissioner to find the right balance on that side of it.

Eight or nine games, ultimately I'm not making that decision either, but I think the commissioner did a really good job of kind of showcasing what an eight-game schedule looks like inside of this league and the historical data of how different that is from maybe playing a nine-game conference schedule in another league.

**Q. I married into the Hamm family from Collierville, Tennessee, so I hear Vol talk all the time.**

JOSH HEUPEL: You married up, Buddy.

**Q. The power of T, how big a deal is it for you? And you made a statement which I have the utmost respect**

**for, nobody's bigger than the power of T. We know what that was about. But how fired up are you about playing football and getting all of this other crap out of the way and Saturdays on the banks of the Tennessee River?**

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, anybody that knows me knows that I'm ready for talking season to be over; ready to go tee it up and go play. There's not a better fan base in all of college football.

You look at Vol-Navy, 150 boats tied up on the river. They start showing up on Wednesday, some of those things. Those boats are sitting there all year long that travel from all over the country in preparation for September, October, and November inside of Neyland Stadium.

Our walk to the stadium is the most unique thing in sports that I've ever seen or experienced. 30,000 to 35,000 every Saturday. It's college football as good as it gets. Inside the atmosphere, there's not a more passionate fan base. To be a part of this iconic brand, to be leading this program with the type of leadership that we have on campus, with who we have in our staff room and the players we have inside of our locker room, it's why I don't consider it a job. I get a chance to go compete every single day with people that I absolutely love.

**Q. Wondering about the hurry-up, no-huddle offense, where it's gone, how it's evolved since it kind of blew up about a decade ago.**

JOSH HEUPEL: That's a little bit generic there maybe in the question. You're just talking about where it was 10 years ago and where it is today? I think it's still a part of what's going on inside of college football. There's been some rule changes that have maybe impacted some of the times or the moments during the course of the game where you can use that to your advantage. Some of those have recently changed here over the last couple of years.

It's a way for us to try to apply pressure on a defense. It's not what we do every single play, but it's a way for us to try to apply pressure, and I think that still rings true today as well.

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