

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 15, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Texas Longhorns**

**Coach Steve Sarkisian**

Press Conference



STEVE SARKISIAN: Welcome. It's always fitting, being part of the Southeastern Conference now, to be in Atlanta. This is where you always want to be. I just want to say we appreciate all that you do in covering our sport. A ton of respect for the job that you all have in celebrating our game.

Our game's at an all-time high from a popularity standpoint, the passion and the energy. So the job that you all do is greatly appreciated.

I think before I get started, I'd be remiss if I didn't address the Central Texas and the thoughts and prayers with those families, those communities that have been affected by the recent devastating flooding, and they'll always have our continued support. Like I said, thoughts and prayers for all affected and continued support as we go.

Year 2 in the SEC. It's gone fast. Year 1 was a great year for us. Making it to the SEC Championship game in year 1, going to back-to-back College Football Playoff Semifinals, having 12 players drafted off of last year's team, 23 drafted in the last two years, leading the country there. It speaks to the development, I think, that we have going on in our program, speaks to the recruiting that's happening.

But this is a new year, new faces, new team, and obviously expectations are high for our program. I'm not naive to that. I don't put my head in the sand, and expectations are very high.

But I also say we're the University of Texas, and the standard is the standard here, and that's competing for championships year in and year out. It didn't matter when we were in the previous conference. It didn't matter now that we're in the SEC. It is what it is.

I think there's one thing that's important for us. It's not what other people think about us; it's not what other people say about us; it's about what we do, and that's taking

action and doing things the right way.

I do think we have a very hungry football team, one that is talented. I really like our roster. We've strung together now three really good recruiting classes of very talented people, but really good people that I think represent the University of Texas the right way. I really feel like we've navigated the portal well through three years, and this year was no different. I think we've filled needs on our roster where players can have an impact on our team immediately, not just to fill roster spots.

But I think this is a championship roster. Now we've got to play like a championship team, but I do think it's a championship roster. Starting on the defensive side of the ball, we've brought Anthony Hill and Michael Taaffe with us today, both All-American players for us, but it goes well beyond those two.

We've got great depth on the defensive side of the ball: Manny Muhammad, Colin Simmons, Maraad Watson, Trey Moore, Brad Spence, Ethan Burke, Travis Shaw, Cole Brevard, Jelani McDonald, Derek Williams, just to name a few, Liona Lefau.

So this is probably the deepest and most talented defense that we've had, and we've made incremental growth on the defensive side of the ball now through four years, and we're going to need to do that again. I think championships are won on the defensive side of the ball, and we've got a defensive football team we're very excited about.

From a special teams perspective, the one thing I love is that we've got all seniors. I've got a senior long snapper, a senior holder, senior punter, senior kicker, senior kickoff guy. So the experiences that they've had and what they've been through I think is going to serve us well as the season goes on. We're excited about that unit.

Then obviously offensively is where we've had the most turnover. Got a new quarterback, Arch Manning, if you didn't know. He's replacing Quinn, who had a great three years for us, but we're replacing a lot of offensive linemen. We're replacing receivers, tight ends, but that unit is really

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good. We're returning the leading rusher in the SEC in Tre Wisner, which some of you probably don't even know that, but I'll bring that to your attention. We get Cedric Baxter back with the addition of Jarrett Gibson, who played a ton as a true freshman for us, along with Christian Clark in that room.

The receiving corps is one we're really excited about. We've had receivers drafted in the first round the last two years' draft, but this group is really good. DeAndre Moore is the leader of that group, who played a ton for us last year in the slot. Ryan Wingo was a true freshman last year, who probably at a lot of other schools probably had more opportunities, but when you had the room we had, he was very efficient, had a bunch of catches in critical moments for us. We're excited about him.

We brought in Emmett Mosley, a transfer from Stanford, who had 50 catches there as a true freshman at Stanford that we're excited about, to go along with a really good recruiting class and a bunch of young guys, Parker Livingstone leading that charge of younger players in that room.

Then at tight end, we lost a really good player in Gunnar Helm. We brought in Jack Endries from Cal who was a great player there, with an uptick of players, Jordan Washington and Spencer Shannon, to go along with Emaree Winston and Nick Townsend. We're excited about that group.

On the offensive line, we're replacing four starters. D.J. Campbell will be the one coming back. But Cole Hudson has played a ton of football for us. We found out a lot about Trevor Goosby last year. He played in some big-time games against some big-time fronts, and we're excited about him.

But the beauty of when you have that group the way that we had it for the last few years, we had a chance to develop offensive linemen, and that's one thing that you really love to do is develop those players throughout their time and not throw them into the fire. So we're really excited about that group and what they can do.

Now, their continuity, the quicker they can gel and grow together is going to be critical.

From a staff perspective, I think one of the keys for us is staff continuity. We've had turnover position coaches, but we've had the same offensive coordinator, the same defensive coordinator, same special teams coordinator, and same head coach now for five straight years, which I think has been big for us because we know our schedule is going to be really challenging. We've got road games at

Ohio State, at Georgia, at Florida, at Kentucky, which are all going to be very difficult environments to play in, not to mention playing in the Red River rivalry in Dallas every year against Oklahoma, and then playing at home against a couple traditional rivals again with Arkansas and A&M.

We'll be the most traveled team in the SEC this year, which is a great challenge for us. We're looking forward to it. But at the end of the day, I talked about the popularity of our sport. I think the popularity of the Texas Longhorns is at an all-time high as well. I appreciate our fans and their support.

We averaged over 8 million viewers a game last year on TV. We averaged over 102,000 people in attendance at DKR last year, which was fifth in the country. Our season tickets were sold out in May for the fourth straight year.

So the environment at DKR has changed if you haven't been back in a while. It's an electric atmosphere. Love our fans and the support that they give us for that.

But I think the key for us this fall, we've got to go enjoy this journey. We need to be present, and we need to be present in the moment, enjoy the journey, and then ultimately finish the mission. We've been close. We've been there. We've been knocking on the door the last two years. But to go do that, we need to take it one step at a time as we embark on the summit that we're looking for, and that's going to take great discipline. It's going to take great commitment. It's going to take great toughness, mental and physical toughness we need. It's going to take action and doing our job.

We've got the culture in place to do that. We've got the activity on our roster. These guys have grown up together. I was thinking about Arch and Ant today. These guys don't know any different in college than playing for a conference championship and being in a College Football Playoff. That's what their experience has been so far.

So it's going to take the resiliency, the confidence, and belief and doing our best when it's needed, and that's going to be late into December and into January to accomplish the things that we think we're capable of accomplishing.

Looking forward to it. Again, appreciate all that you do in supporting college football. With that, we'll open it up.

**Q. I just want to ask over the last couple of seasons, the red zone offense has faltered a little bit in late-game situations, in big moments too. I just want to ask if the red zone offense being better would help push you guys over the hump to get you into that**

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## National Championship Game?

STEVE SARKISIAN: That was a good start, man. Got a couple jabs right there right off the rip. Clearly, the last two years we've had the ball inside the 10-yard line to score to either play for a National Championship or tie a game to go play for a national title. Huge point of emphasis of ours. Every year as a staff you look for areas of improvement, of where you can improve your team. As a coaching staff, that's clearly been an area for us where we want to improve and need to improve.

I think that our staff has put forth the effort to do that. I think our players recognize that. Hopefully we're good -- like I said, we need to be at our best when our best is needed, and those are two critical moments the last two years where we needed our best and we just weren't quite at our best as coaches and as players.

Big point of emphasis of ours. Hopefully next year you ask me a different question, saying since you got that resolved, what are you working on this year?

**Q. With the new enforcement arm, the CSC, how confident are you that if an enforcement is laid down on a team that they will do what's best for college football as a whole and not work in their own self interest?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Honestly, I have no idea. I don't know. We're in such the beginning stages of this thing. I think that everybody is operating differently. Everybody is trying to navigate this differently, and what are exactly the rules and are they going to be enforced? Nobody really knows.

One thing about me, I tend not to get into the hypotheticals of what might be. I tend not to worry about what might happen down the road. I try to keep my focus on what we're doing, and my focus is on our team, and that's -- the more time I spend on those things outside of our team, then I'm doing a disservice to our players and to our team.

I'm going to let the powers that be figure that out. My job is to be the best head coach I can be for the University of Texas.

**Q. I was curious about the linebacker position, how strong you feel like it is. I don't know if you moved Colin around from edge rusher to linebacker.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Great question. Our linebacking room, what we've tried to do in that room -- and we'll see if it all plays out -- we tried to make it a really versatile room. We know about the versatility of Anthony Hill, his ability to

play off the ball and off the edge. Liona Lefau is a steadfast player for us there. We love the development of Ty'Anthony Smith, how far he's come and excited about him. And we love the addition of Bo Barnes, the physicality that he brings and the speed factor that he brings and the size.

But we also moved Tre Moore to linebacker and brought in Brad Spence, two guys that play off the edge and play off-the-ball linebacker. If you really look at the body type of a Colin Simmons, he really can do those types of things.

So we're trying to create a room where we can give multiple looks but still stay true to who we are, but you've got to have the players to do that. I think that we've recruited that room that way, and I think PK has done a great job of evolving the defense with Coach Nansen to allow our players to utilize their versatility to make it difficult on our opponents.

**Q. With the recent news today that Tyler Atkinson committed to Texas and you got Justus Terry last year, how do you come into the state of Georgia and get those guys, and what's the importance of locking up some national big-time recruits?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I can't speak directly towards any recruit. I'm not trying to not answer your question, just so you know the rules there. I think in this day and age of recruiting, one thing is of note. Players are leaving states all over the place going to other states to go play. We've had a ton of players leave the state of Texas and go play at other schools. We've obviously made it a point to recruit more in the southeastern region.

I think, when we moved into the SEC, it was a lot more natural for players from Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Georgia to be willing to come play at the University of Texas. They were already kind of going to A&M because they were in the SEC, but now that we've joined the conference, it's a lot more palatable for those families and for those kids to want to come play at Texas knowing that we're playing in the Southeastern Conference. So we've tried to take advantage of that.

Again, we don't major in that, but we do definitely try to recruit the high-level players that fit our scheme that are made of the right stuff not only as football players, but as people. So far, so good. Like I said, we recruited Florida, we recruited in Georgia, we're recruiting Alabama, we're recruiting Louisiana, and it's been good to us. But at the same token, we're still recruiting the state of Texas. We've got a lot of great players in our own state as well.

Again, I think we've got a good product, and the product is



what we've been putting on the field and in the classroom and the success we've had as a team, success our players have had in the classroom, and then the success that our players have had getting drafted in the NFL. I think all of those things adding up, we're an attractive school for players to want to come take a look at.

Then if we can start to develop the relationships the right way and start to weed out some of those that are just there to take the trip and really hone in on the ones that we think fit us, then we try to take advantage of it.

**Q. Arch Manning carries himself like he's 30 years old. How will that maturity benefit him as he takes on the challenge of being a starter?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think he learned a lot over time, right? For Arch, he grew up in this era of seeing high-level football. He's watched Super Bowls. He's watched gold jackets getting put on. He's been to playoff games. He's been recruited at the highest level as the No. 1 player in the country. He watched Quinn navigate through the ups and downs of being a starting quarterback at the University of Texas.

I think the one thing you'll find out about Arch is, one, he's very even keel about him. Two, he's very quick witted. He's got a great sense of humor about himself and he's okay to laugh at himself, and I think that's a great quality to have because, at the end of the day, there's going to be adversity that's going to strike this season, and we all talk about resiliency and grit and all those things that are needed when adversity strikes, but I think some of that resiliency can come from calm, remaining calm. Arch definitely has that about him.

He's a great guy. He's a great teammate. He's got an unbelievable work ethic. And I think, if he stays true to himself, that's going to help him navigate these waters as they present themselves. We've got to do a great job of supporting him around him, as coaches, as players, and ultimately I think he's prepared for the moment, but now it's just time for him to go do it and enjoy doing it quite frankly.

**Q. Over the years, how have you seen Michael Taaffe go from being a walk-on to someone whose voice is respected in your locker room and being a bigger leader?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Probably the coolest story on our team right now is Michael Taaffe. Here's a guy who was a state champion at Westlake High School two years in a row, state championship game MVP two years in a row, has scholarship offers to go to other universities. His lifelong dream was to be a Longhorn and walks on at the

University of Texas. All he did was work hard. He never put a ceiling on himself.

I think in his mind he always expected to be an All-American safety at the University of Texas as a captain representing us at SEC Media Days. I think that's how this guy thinks and that's how he's wired.

So now when you chronologically look at his path of walking on, being scout team players of the week, earning a little bit of playing time on special teams, earning a little bit of playing time on defense, to becoming a regular down player on defense, to becoming a front-line starter on defense, to becoming an All-American on defense, it's like, how do you not respect the guy? All the while, the way he carries himself and the way he represents the University of Texas and our community, I think is something to be admired.

I think that's what his teammates do. They respect him; they admire him. He's probably as hard on his teammates as he is on himself, and he's probably harder on the other walk-ons than he is on himself because he had to earn what he got.

I couldn't be happier for him. It is huge for us that he decided to come back for his senior season. His leadership, his ability to communicate in the back end for us, he is like a coach on the field. So just proud of him and proud to be his coach. Like I said, I think nobody deserves the accolades that he's getting more than Michael Taaffe right now.

**Q. This season Horns Illustrated is going to write a lot of stories. We're going to post a lot of social media posts about Anthony Hill, about Arch Manning, about Michael Taaffe. But who should we absolutely not forget to mention in these stories when we write about them? Because these teammates or these coaches or these unsung heroes we never hear about are the reason why they're so great.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think we have a bunch of great stories. I referenced Tre Wisner, like this guy's gone unforgotten. He was a 1,000-yard rusher in the Southeastern Conference last year. It's a fantastic story of who he is.

I think there's so much work that goes into developing our players. You think about our strength staff, you think about nutrition, you think about academics.

I'm going to brag on our academic team for a minute. When we got to University of Texas at the end of our spring semester, we had a 2.32 team GPA in 2021. I





couldn't believe it. I said, man, I know the University of Texas is a tough school, but that's really low. What was the byproduct of that team GPA? We went 5-7. We had zero players drafted in the NFL draft.

So we pour into the academic side of things, we pour into the culture. At the end of the spring semester in year 2, we have a 2.78. The by-product is 8-5, five guys drafted, one first round draft pick.

At the end of year 3, the team GPA is a 2.98. We go 12-2. We win the Big 12. We go to College Football Playoff. We have 11 guys drafted, two first rounders.

At the end of last year, we have a 3.27 team GPA. We go 13-3, we go to the SEC Championship game, we have 12 guys drafted, three go in the first round. At the end of this past spring, we have a 3.31 team GPA.

So a lot of people get a lot of praise in the development of our players and the program and the commitment that everybody puts into this, but I think Jeff Nelson and his team and academically what they do, as well as our players of buying into the idea of who you are some of the time is who you are all the time, so how can our GPA go up every year, our wins go up every year, our draft picks go up every year? It's amazing how the correlation of those things occur.

There's a lot of credit, a lot of stories that go into that, but that would be one we probably should tap into and write about.

**Q. I wanted to ask about a key member of your staff that's from our backyard, Boaz, Alabama. You started your relationship with him at the university on the coaching staff, and you took him with you. He was key to helping you develop Quinn Ewers and recruiting Arch Manning. Talk about AJ Milwee and the role he plays and his development as a coach.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Coach Milwee is a vital piece of the puzzle for us for sure. We forged a great relationship at Alabama when I was the quarterback coach/offensive coordinator. Coach Milwee was an analyst on staff. He had just come from Akron, where he was one of the younger offensive coordinators in the country.

When I got the job at the University of Texas, he was the first guy I hired. We had worked step by step all through those two years at 'Bama, winning a national title, brought him here to Texas, and he's grown into now he's not just our quarterback coach, he's our co-offensive coordinator.

Definitely, there's nobody I work closer with on a daily

basis than A.J. Milwee, from the development of game plans to the scripting of practice to talking about play calls during the game to recruitment of players. I think he forges a great relationship with all the guys in that room.

There's not a day or a moment in the day where I don't feel very comfortable, if I can't do something, that AJ Milwee can handle it and handle it at a really high level. So we're very fortunate to have him.

**Q. Yesterday Lane Kiffin came up here and said they're trying to operate within their cap, but they didn't necessarily feel like everyone else was doing that. Curious how you, and maybe Brandon Harris, figure out how to operate within your cap? Who's worth what? Who's not worth what? Do you feel like everybody else is playing within the rules?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I can't speak on behalf of everybody else. I really don't know. Like I said, you know me well enough, I don't have time or energy to worry about what everybody else is doing. We're trying to build a roster that is one that can withstand the test of time. We never wanted to come here and be a one year wonder team and then the next year be not very good. So we're trying to be sustainable for a long period of time. I think that that's what good programs do.

So managing that takes a lot into account. It takes a lot into ultimately the production of players. Are they performing? We've created this environment that this is a production-based business and sport, and so are players producing, one? Two, do they uphold the standards of the organization off the field? If not, then that could be a factor.

Three, we've got to retain those players because, as much as we've built a really good roster, I promise you other schools are trying to hire our players off of our roster to get them to transfer, and our players are very transparent with me about that.

Then the fourth piece is then we're trying to recruit to our roster, and so you only have so much money to go around. You've got to be mindful of that. You just don't want to be reckless with what you do. Now more than ever with the cap in place, you really have to be effective and efficient, and you have to make sure that you're filling your needs on your roster with high level people when you know another high level person is leaving and/or is this a depth move?

So it's no different than -- it's easy to say the NFL Draft you only get so many first round picks, but man, your roster is really made up of those third, fourth, and fifth round picks. It's not a whole lot different than that. We only have so



much money to go around.

We've got to do a great job of evaluating. We've got to do a great job of rewarding those players that are doing it at a high level in our program so they don't go anywhere else, but we've also got to continue to develop our players as they grow and make sure that our players aren't doing this for the idea of money.

I think sometimes, quite frankly, it hurts us a little bit in recruiting in the fact that, when kids come on our campus, one of the first things we do, we don't talk about NIL. We don't talk about NIL or revenue sharing or publicity rights until the very end, and that may hurt us on some kids, but if a kid is coming to Texas for that reason, we don't want him anyway. We want kids that want to be at the University of Texas because of the school, the coaches, the team, the culture, all those things that go into it, and, oh, by the way, you can get publicity rights or revenue share and so on and so forth.

If you're coming for the other reason, he's probably going to be the guy in 18 months that's back in the portal going somewhere else where they're going to offer him more money because I can't offer every player the most money that he might get offered by another school. It just doesn't work like that anymore.

**Q. Earlier you talked about how you have a hungry team. With back-to-back playoff appearances, how do you keep your team hungry and battle complacency?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think there's a fine line there of what does complacency look like, of monitoring it, and I watch the intent of our players. I watch the way they work. I watch the way they interact with one another. I watch the way they compete with one another. I don't feel complacency whatsoever amongst our players.

What I do know about our team, I think Anthony hill was a state champion in high school. Colin Simmons was a state champion in high school. Michael Taaffe was a state champion in high school. Tre Wisner was a state champion in high school. I could go down the list. We've got winners in our locker room, and we specifically and intentionally recruited winners into our locker room.

So when these guys are going into the locker room after a loss in the semifinals, I promise you it hurts them. We don't forget that feeling. So we're back to work, and the leadership on this team is full of winners, and that's the way they want to go about the season is try to go win a championship. That's the goal.

**Q. You mentioned the traditional rivalries of A&M,**

**Texas, and even threw Arkansas in there. Whether it's your fan base, whether it's your program, where does Arkansas fit or how do you view Arkansas compared to A&M?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: From a fan base perspective, especially the traditionalist fan base, they love the rivalry with Arkansas. I think naturally, when I took the job, I knew of a rivalry with OU. I knew of the rivalry with A&M, made sense. I found out about the rivalry against Arkansas when they whupped our ass the second game of our career when I got to Texas. So that rivalry got really good really fast for us. We respect it. We honor it. It's a heck of a rivalry. It's a great game to be a part of.

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