

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 16, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach Jeff Lebby

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the podium the head coach of Mississippi State University, Jeff Lebby.

JEFF LEBBY: It's an absolute privilege to be here. I think back and think about the things that have gone on inside our program since December, and here we are two weeks away from report day. Man, I couldn't be more excited to get on the grass with our current roster and our football team.

You think about the transformation. 80% of our players on our roster right now, they're guys that are in their first or second year of being inside the program. You think about 16 new players since January 1, 43 midyears, then having the ability to sign five O-linemen, a couple of tight ends, a couple others on the defensive side of the ball in the spring portal.

I look back and think about where we are today. I think about how we've created some momentum inside of our building by signing a really good high school class, by signing a really good portal class, addressing the needs that we had to address to change the outcome this fall. That's all we've talked about, is our plan and our process to change the outcome.

I think about all the new guys that are part of our football team and part of our roster. The thing that excites me the most is their consistency, their buy-in. Inside our walls right now, we have great belief, we have great hope, we have great energy. Our guys are incredibly intent on getting better and changing the outcome this fall.

Everything for us points to August 30th. As we move forward, we think about fall camp, how we change the outcome. We change the outcome by the way we practice and how we do what we do.

As we get into fall camp, what was huge for us is us being able to practice the way we need to. There was a ton of conversation about that in the off-season and changing

both lines of scrimmage, changing the second level on the defensive side of the football.

With that, Coach Hutzler has done an unbelievable job on the defensive side creating that belief and buy-in while we've done an unbelievable job, in my opinion, of supplementing the staff, having the ability to go hire three former head coaches, two former head coaches at the Power Four level in Coach Rhoads and Coach Mac. Both those guys being SEC defensive coordinators along their way at different stops, having this great amount of experience to be able to help in the room.

So excited about that.

Vincent Dancy, coaching our defensive ends and outside linebackers, comes to us from Colorado, has added great experience inside the room as he was a former head coach as well.

On the offensive side of the ball, the only change and addition has been Phil Loadholt, offensive line coach, comes to us from Colorado. Done an unbelievable job with our guys in the spring, and then the spring portal class. Phil was with me six years prior before he was at Colorado last year. Got him back with me the 1st of January.

When I think about our players, I think about our locker room. The three guys that I've picked to come with me today are three guys, I mean, they are all about what we want. These are guys that have had great leadership ability. They come from completely different backgrounds, completely different stories.

I mention it, about 80% of our players are in year one or year two of our program. Blake Shapen, our starting quarterback, comes with me today, a guy that went through it last year. Gets hurt week four. Shows a lot about Blake and who he is about how he handled the situation last year, how he mentored the young people inside the building.

For him being year two in the system, year two with me, couldn't be more excited about him leading the charge on the offensive side of the ball. Him year two in the program.



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Brenen Thompson year one, comes to us. He's here with me today because this is a young man that, I do, I want to make sure all of our guys inside our locker room understand that transfers, if they can operate as Brenen Thompson operates on a daily level, they're going to set themselves up to have great success.

Brenen is a guy that is about the right stuff. He shows up every single day with great intent. He's an incredible teammate. As much as he works, he teaches, too.

So all these young guys in the receiver room right now have really taken to him, his leadership, and how he's operated since he's been inside the building in January.

Then Isaac Smith. Isaac is a guy that now is going into his third year at Mississippi State, a guy that had a ton of production for us last year. To me there's no greater spokesperson for our locker room or our defense than Isaac Smith.

When you think about the game of football, loving football, that is Isaac. This guy loves to play the game. He's incredibly physical. He's been a great leader for us. Proud of him and who he's been, excited about the year that he has the ability to go have.

Before I open it up, I'd like to thank Zac Selmon, our athletic director. What we've been able to get accomplished in fundraising over the last calendar year has been record-setting for our university. He and his team have done an incredible job creating momentum.

Facility upgrades at our stadium, the announcement of our new indoor practice facility, all the things that have happened to get us where we need to be. Incredibly appreciative to him and his team for that.

Again, privileged to be here. Couldn't be more excited to get on the field with the guys this fall. With that, I'll open it up to questions.

Q. With some of the Blake Shapen's injury history in the past, could you go a little in-depth of your quarterback depth?

JEFF LEBBY: We have a room right now that's got great depth to it. Obviously the addition of Luke coming over from Florida State playing as a true freshman last year, having to live some things, a kid that is incredibly talented, top 75 player in America coming out, just a year removed from that. Excited about him. A big athletic kid that can do a lot of things. He provides great depth.

The signing of Kamario Taylor for us, the highest ranked QB to be signed at Mississippi State. A young man that has an incredible amount of potential.

We have a room right now that has layers to it, which I'm very excited about. Again, Blake has done an incredible job leading that group. Those guys understand, man, the expectation of how we have to work at that position inside our program.

Q. After seeing Michael Van Buren up close last year, how would you assess what his future could be as a quarterback?

JEFF LEBBY: He's a talented young man, a talented young man that has the ability to be a good player as he continues to grow at the position.

Q. Commissioner mentioned something about family, how important family is. When you think about your family, in particular coaches' wives, what role do they play in your personal success?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, she frees me up to be able to do exactly what I love to do every single day. They're the head coach of the household. That's a very, very real thing.

My appreciation is unmeasurable for everything that, man, they go through. It's fun as heck to have them so connected and right in the middle of the chase.

Q. Yesterday Steve Sarkisian talked about how joining the SEC has opened some recruiting grounds for his program. Does that go both ways? You're the son of a Texas high school football coach. Does that help y'all recruit Texas when you have two schools in the SEC?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I think just the ties help. Then obviously just some regional awareness with both of those schools being inside the league now.

I think there's no doubt us having the ability to go into east Texas as much as anything, be able to pull from there, will be something that's critical for us.

Q. When you have this much roster turnover as you guys have this season, how do you go about achieving consistently this year?

JEFF LEBBY: For us again, we're going to get things done and change the outcome this fall because of how we practice and how we prepare. That's the reality of it.

I've talked a ton all day about, man, we also have to



become a team. I feel like our football team today is a lot closer and a lot more connected than it was a year ago, even with all the turnover. I'm excited about that.

I believe that's because of guys like Brenen Thompson. When you find a guy that's, one, flat good enough to be able to be a difference maker on your team, but is about the right stuff and the right person, they have a chance to truly impact not just in between the white lines on the field but in your locker room.

That's what we're looking for constantly. A guy like Blake Shapen being able to be back for year two, that's how that happens. Isaac Smith, now year three for him at Mississippi State. You have to have guys that are about the right stuff.

Then we have to go practice the right way to change the outcome.

Q. You look at the running back position, you bring in some transfers, including Fluff Bothwell, bring in some freshmen. What is that position looking like in 2025?

JEFF LEBBY: I'm excited about the running back room. We bring back Davon Booth, Johnnie Daniels comes back. Both those guys for us last year, our two leading returners from a rush game standpoint. Then having the addition of Fluff. That room right now is probably the deepest room on our roster.

There's a great expectation for production from that group. It's a group that has done a great job. They were third on our football team from a GPA standpoint, have just crushed it on the field and off the field. Proud of where that room is, but excited about their chance to go have great production.

Q. We continually mention the new faces on your roster. What is the identity of Mississippi State football that you want to instill in those guys to see success on the field?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, we do. We talk about fast, physical, fearless across the board. So we want our guys to understand that's how we're going to operate. When we talk about how we will win in the fall, we talk about effort and we talk about physicality, execution. Those three things are what is going to give us the opportunity to go win. But our day-to-day, being fast, physical and fearless in everything we do is a huge part of who we are.

Q. (Question about the defensive line.)

JEFF LEBBY: That was a huge point of emphasis for us. Again, we've talked a ton about roster and the change and

the turnover. But inside the defensive line room and at the defensive end position, 10 new bodies since January 1 have come in. And that room has added great depth, but I think we've added some real play-making ability.

We've talked a ton as a group and a staff and a unit in creating negative plays, creating sacks, finding ways to create turnovers will be a huge part of our success this fall. Those are things that you can go measure every single day.

Having the ability to change the D-line was huge. Again, we're nowhere close to where we need to be. We got a ton of work to do. From a body standpoint, we're in a much better position.

Q. Your schedule ranks among the toughest in the nation, particularly the home slate. How do you, as a relatively new head coach in the league, view some of these matchups as opportunities rather than obstacles?

JEFF LEBBY: For us it's all about opportunity. I think I had a great awareness of what the league was when I was able to get the job. That part of it wasn't going to change.

For me and our guys, we understand what the gauntlet looks like. That's exciting. What a great challenge, what a great opportunity. Our guys will be excited to go chase it.

Q. What stood out to you about Mario Craver and his time with the program?

JEFF LEBBY: When Mario was with us, he was a guy that had the ability to make big plays and stretch the field. That was in between the white lines, that was the kind of player that he was. That's who he was in high school. That continued.

Q. What are your thoughts on the eight-game versus nine-game schedule? Revenue sharing kicked in July 1st. Lane Kiffin was here a couple days ago saying that the cap enforcement is something he's concerned about. Your thoughts on that.

JEFF LEBBY: I think for us from a scheduling standpoint, it is, at the end of the day, it's going to be what's best for the league. I think all of us as coaches have our own opinions, but the conference at the end of the day is going to do exactly what we need to do to continue to strengthening our position.

That to me is exactly what it's going to look like. The rev share position, a ton of unknowns. We're going to have to go through this cycle, see where things land. Everybody

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has questions on it. That's where we're at.

Q. I think you were the only program to play the three SEC Playoff teams on the road and the Big 12 champion on the road as well. How did you keep the team as engaged and competitive throughout the year? About the schedule, I'm wondering what the attrition was like by the end of the year with the schedule you played.

JEFF LEBBY: For us, the second piece to the question, attrition was very real. Again, I talked a ton about roster, as you guys know. We've had to change and flip the roster so that we can go practice the way we need to practice and to have the ability to sustain at the back end of the schedule. That is something that's going to be very real.

As we went on the road to four Playoff teams, last year four Playoff teams will come to us this year. To me, you keep the belief by exactly who you're supposed to be.

I think that people watched us last year and saw us at the end of the season, anybody with a football eye saw a team that did. There was great belief, there was trust. Guys playing incredibly hard. We were nowhere close to having the outcome that we wanted to have.

That's what everything has been about since December. It's been about changing the outcome, finding a way to win, creating that inside the locker room every single day. To me, again, we change the outcome because of the way we practice and how we do what we do throughout fall camp and the week.

Q. Other than California, state of Mississippi has more junior colleges than any state in America, 17. Recruiting has changed a lot. Per capita Mississippi puts out more NFL players than any state in America. How do you look in state to do something other people can't?

JEFF LEBBY: To me, one of the greatest things about my job is there's great proximity to players. From a junior college, high school players, we have great proximity players. We have to keep the best at home. That's something we are straining to do every single day, finding ways to evaluate from a junior college standpoint, know exactly what you're getting is an advantage for us. Finding the right ones to be able to take.

I think it is an advantage when you're looking from a roster standpoint that back half of your roster, the last 20 to 25 spots, having the ability to have some older guys from a junior college standpoint that can fill some of those spots to be able to create and the size and physicality and just the

maturity you need to go practice the way you need to.

We're always trying to create advantage. That's what my job is all about. We're trying to do that with the proximity to players.

Q. You go way back with Brent Venables, played and worked for him. What intangibles does he bring to the table that will help OU get back on track?

JEFF LEBBY: Toughness. Consistency. Conviction. He is going to be very, very true to his process. He is the same man every single day, not letting result dictate who's going to show up in the building every day.

Those are the things to me that are going to create stability and help them down the road.

Q. We talked about your on-field staff. As far as part of your off-field staff, the strength and conditioning coach probably spends more time with the players than anyone. I was blessed to have Shaud Williams on my show when he retired from the NFL, getting ready to start his journey. Talk about his impact on your team. Also one of year young coaches, Erroll Thompson is trying to climb the coaching ranks now.

JEFF LEBBY: Don't have enough great things to say about what he's done for the program. His impact, the day to day. To me he's a guy that gets it. He's lived it. He's played it. He's not asking anybody inside that locker room to do something he didn't do. I think there's great value in that.

Talk about consistency, Shaud is incredibly consistent. Thankful for what he's doing as he's continued to grow our program, the strength and conditioning program, the way he has and we have.

Getting E.T. to come back home, he's been great. I do, I love having the ability to hire former players. Mississippi State means something to E.T. I want it to mean as much to everybody in that locker room as it means to me. That's definitely the case with him. He's got a bright future.

Q. You talked about so many of your players having only one or two years of experience with this team. How are you hoping to create a new culture with so many incoming transfers and recruits?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, we're not trying to create a new culture; we're going to be exactly true to who we are supposed to be, what we're creating.

I think the difference in the team today compared to a year



ago today, besides the physical parts of it, are we closer as a football program and as a football team.

The only way you do that is you spend time, you have to take the right people. I've continued to talk about that. Protect the locker room, protect the pig by taking the right people. That's what it's all about.

Again, I think from a culture standpoint, that is the buzzword. I think the people inside our building love being there, they love each other, they embrace the hard, are ready to go chase it.

Q. Mississippi State baseball, new head coach coming in, basketball doing great right now. How does Mississippi State football get back to the top?

JEFF LEBBY: Yeah, I'll continue to talk about it. We're going to change the outcome because of how we do what we do. It's not going to be anybody talking about it; it's going to be the work that we put in, the ability to go practice the way we need to practice with everything pointing towards August 30th. That's how we change that.

Again, women's basketball, men's basketball in the tournament. Baseball, the excitement with Coach O coming in. Softball getting in the post-season. It's our turn to go do our job.

It's not a turn that you get; you have to go earn it.

Q. You touched on there the job that Zac has done as athletic director. When you look at the athletic department as a whole since he's been here, what have you seen that has been the greatest, I don't know, improvement that he's done in his time, short time, so far?

JEFF LEBBY: Most administration staff was in place when I got here. I think what you see from the top down is connection. You see trust. You see people wanting to do it for each other.

When you see that every single day, just like we all know, it does, it starts at the very top of it. There is, there's great alignment, great connection, constantly fighting to continue to build these relationships with our fan base, but also our donor pool, continue to grow that the way we need to be able to go sustain the way we need to.

Q. Could you talk about the role and impact that Coach Rhoads and Mike MacIntyre have had on your staff.

JEFF LEBBY: Both have been great for us. Again, they're

both guys that have lived it, been coordinators inside this league, been Power Four head coaches, and they love to teach.

I think the coolest thing about both of them is there's zero ego. They're trying to make Mississippi State football as good as they can possibly can as fast as possibly they can. They are all into that.

Having the ability to go supplement and support Coleman as he leads that room and leads the unit, I think has been awesome.

Q. To be able to have a guy like Isaac Smith buying into the culture and the identity that you have in an era where so many players see results and want to enter the transfer portal, what does that do for your development?

JEFF LEBBY: It does a ton. For me that was a great statement in that he has great belief in what is going on. Again, the result was far from what it needed to be.

Isaac sees what we see. He has great understanding of what it expectation is. This is a guy that does it the right way. Proud of him. Love coaching him and excited about his opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

JEFF LEBBY: Awesome. Appreciate it. Hail State.

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