

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Oklahoma Sooners Coach Brent Venables

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome the head coach of Oklahoma Brent Venables.

BRENT VENABLES: Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here today. I think maybe I got y'all in a vulnerable position being day three, being the last one to speak to y'all today. I got you right where I want you.

I do want to take the opportunity to thank Commissioner Sankey for his strong leadership, clear vision, and arguably maybe at what might be the most disruptive time in college football history. He's guided us with a very unique lens and a tremendous wisdom.

I would also be remiss if I didn't mention and thank William King, co-chairman. He's been a great help to all of us head coaches over the last couple of years, helping us navigate a lot of choppy waters.

A little over a week ago I got a phone call from my boss, great friend, Joe Castiglione, sharing his news of retirement. Happened to be out of town at the time. I wasn't able to go to his press conference a day or so after he made the initial announcement.

As I begin today, I'd like to just publicly both congratulate and thank Joe and his lovely wife Kristen for 28 years of impeccable leadership that he's provided so many. The love, the passion, the sacrifice and dedication to the entire University of Oklahoma community and the city of Norman.

I've always said that you have a life that matters when you matter to other people. And, Joe, you certainly have mattered. You truly have impacted and enriched countless thousands of lives over a broad spectrum over the last three decades. That's truly what matters. That's what we all aspire to do, is to impact other people. He certainly has done that.

He's also helped, as we know, many athletic programs to unprecedented historical success over, again, every sport



that you can imagine. He's done it all with maintaining a moral compass, pure motives and a genuine love and appreciation for people.

Joe has had a Hall of Fame career. It goes without saying he's in several Hall of Fames already today. But I believe that has happened and transpired because of his unwavering commitment and dedication to winning at the highest level, but doing it the right way.

Also probably maybe his why, I don't want to speak for him, far beyond supporting the coaches in all the sports that he's helped lead over decades, his focus has been on equipping and empowering student-athletes through their athletic journey, never losing sight, in my opinion, of him keeping the main thing the main thing.

A big salute and gratitude to Joe and Kristen. We truly do love and appreciate you in every way. Look forward to seeing you soon.

Excited to be here. For all of us, I think everybody in here, I don't want to speak for everyone, that are truly in love and grateful for the great game of football. I think it's the greatest game on the planet. We're 45 days from kickoff. Like y'all don't already know that (smiling).

But I'm thankful in every way you can imagine to be the head football coach at the University of Oklahoma and a head coach in the best, in my opinion, top-to-bottom conference in all of college football.

As we know, there's a landscape that is constantly changing, and the challenges that are a by-product of that. I'm also blessed to be supported by a strong board of regents led by Anita Holloway and Rick Nagel, their leadership, along with our chairman of football, Randall Stephenson, who I believe is the best president all of college football, Joe Harroz, the tireless, collective work and collaboration have put our program in an incredibly strong position as we progress towards a new modernized version of college football as we know it.

In my opinion, there's not a better profession on this planet or a more influential profession than being a football coach.



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I'm a living, breathing testament and example of how a locker room can save and transform and change the trajectory of a young man's life.

I believe the game has never been better or more important than it is today. The life lessons learned through the locker room are all well-known. But perhaps the greatest lesson, in my opinion, is in a world that will divide, the game of football is something that unifies. I'm just blessed beyond measure to be a small part of that, being impacted in every way.

I brought three guys with me today. If you don't know them yet, you'll learn about the three players that have come with us. All three exemplify everything good about college football and our program.

These are guys that are highly competitive in the classroom. They lead from a place of passion and a love for the game. I believe they have elite leadership, as well. All three of the young men will be incredibly important parts of our success this fall, and are indicative of the type of young men we have in our locker room.

All three were to some degree afterthoughts or under-valued, under-recruited players. I love that about the game. I've been an underdog my whole life. I love pulling for guys like this. They also are reflective of what the game of football at this level is all about. It's about development in every part of their life.

R Mason Thomas, defensive end, a senior. Robert Spears-Jennings, a safety. These guys are two of the players on our current roster that are entering their fourth year of our first recruiting class.

When R Mason showed up he was 212 pounds soaking wet. Now he's over 250 pounds, one of the most fierce and explosive pass-rushers in college football. All SEC a year ago. Nine sacks. All of his best days are in front of him.

He along with the other two guys that I'm going to introduce, these are guys that are highly invested in our locker room. They lead from the front. These are guys that are unbreakable in every possible way. Just really proud to have these guys represented today.

Robert Spears-Jennings, he played both ways coming out of high school. Moved to safety as a freshman. Didn't play a whole lot, like a lot of young players. Needed to transition and learn and grow. He's become one of the fiercest, fastest, most explosive instinctive safeties in all of the country. Second on our team with tackles, 66. Forced four fumbles, which I think is one of the tops in the country.

Be it a December grad, along with R Mason as well. Also R.J. was an all-academic, all-SEC performer as well. Chasing excellence is what he's always represented.

Then John Mateer. As I've said a few times here already today, tremendous capacity. Every day John is wide open. He's a guy that deeply cares. He's a guy, along with the other two players, that are part of the 2025 version of the Oklahoma Sooners. Turned down more money to go elsewhere because of belief and vision in the program. A connection to Coach Arbuckle. This is a guy that wants to win at the highest level. A connector. A guy that leads from the front. As he plays the game, he looks like he's in fast forward a lot of times. A great competitor. Super athletic. Throws the ball really well on the run. Makes a lot of good decisions. Very self-deprecating. Likes to have fun. Can laugh at himself.

He handles those tough moments that are a part of every day. Go to the practice field, going against the type of guys he's going against every day, he's going to have some tough moments. He handles it all. He has the right questions to ask and takes responsibility and lays it on the line each and every day. Through three years in college up to this point, 3.5 GPA. All academic honors in the league he's coming from, as well.

Really excited about those guys. I chose those three, they have positioned themselves through a body of work to be heard and influenced and impact their teammates in the simplest way.

I've said that the most important thing that every player in the locker room should covet is the respect and the trust of their teammates. They certainly have done exactly that.

They show up every day with something on the line. That's what I love about these guys. Y'all are going to enjoy them as you get a chance to interview them here today.

We've had a lot of changes since January. I'm sure that most coaches stood up here and talked about a lot of changes. That's the environment we're at today between a portal, recruiting, new coaches, new offense, a new GM structure.

We've also had tremendous retention, which foundationally for me is what it's all about. Continuity, guys returning with experience and are highly invested in the locker room. They're attracted to the vision of the program. That's incredibly important to me. No doubt we've improved our roster. Again, I believe that we've created a better overall staff with the additions that we've brought in.



Top to bottom we've made great gains in the weight room with building more mass, improving our strength, point of attack. We needed to do that. We had a lot of freshmen that played a year ago. Our bowl game, our top 48 players on the offense, defense, two deep, 24 of them were freshmen. We needed to become more functionally strong and be a better point-of-attack team.

Our defense was pretty solid in that space. Offensively we struggled moving people like we need to in this conference, a conference that's made up, in my opinion, of lines of scrimmage.

We have improved our strength, gotten faster. Our acceleration numbers... I'm not here gassing and reaching for everything. I want to quantify a lot of hard work our guys have put in over the last several months.

I think the last two years combined, you look at the total number of snaps in college football, we have some of the top numbers when it comes to playing for freshmen and sophomores. I really believe the experience that's returning, along with the new additions, is going to put together a great product here this fall.

Got five new coaches. Coach Arbuckle, Coach Kuceyeski, Coach Wilson, a former offensive coordinator at Oklahoma, and former head coach at both Indiana and Tulsa, offensive coordinator for a good while at Ohio State. A great friend of mine. Really successful coach. One of the best play callers that I've ever been around. He's also on our staff.

I hired two linebacker coaches, an outside linebacker coach that's been a coordinator at an elite level. He'll be my outside linebacker coach. Then coach Nate Dreiling, who coached our inside linebackers. Also been a really good coordinator as well.

All these coaches along with our new front office staff, Jim Nagy, the depth of people he's brought into the building as well. Hit the ground running. Ton of fun. I love their energy, their buy-in, the things that they've added to our culture day in, day out. It's been fantastic.

A change as we all know is inevitable. Nothing ever stays the same. Every year my job and my focus is on how to move the program together, move it forward, face the new challenges, the headwinds that are a part of all of it that you experience every year, but maintaining our mission during that process and not flinching even when maybe a lot of people are.

Had a blast this spring, this winter, even this summer, when we're allowed to be on the practice field with this

football team, being with the guys. Been a ton of fun.

They've worked their tails off. I love the focused passion, focused intensity, the competitiveness, the energy, leadership, the edge that these guys show up every single day with, day in, day out.

Every year you have to recreate, reinvent, develop a new identity. I'm excited about seeing where that goes. But I love what I've seen up to this point in time. A lot goes into creating that identity, the challenges that will present will also shape an identity for this football team.

Couldn't be more excited about what I've seen up to this point in time. This is a team I love to be in the building with every single day. I believe they have what it takes to claw our back to where I believe Oklahoma belongs. The expectations here and in the locker room are to win at the very highest level and to compete for a championship. That's always been the way it is here at the University of Oklahoma. We embrace those standards and expectations of excellence.

You choose to come to Oklahoma to coach or to play on the biggest stage, in the biggest games, and you accept everything that comes with that. In the new era of college football, we expect to be a program that is a year in, year out consistently a Playoff contender.

I believe the sum of all of our parts with this football team, the 2025 version, gives us a chance to have a really good football team.

Got a lot of work to do, a lot of improvement to do through the next several weeks in fall camp and even into the season and the challenges, how that will shape us, help us get better.

But the margin for error is incredibly small. We know that. This is a conference that is full of teams that will punish you on every given Saturday if you don't show up and get everything right.

Looking forward to competing with this group of coaches and group of players.

With that I'll be respectful of your time, open it up for questions.

Q. Have you ever played a football season before without any wide receivers? Given all the injuries, how has that position improved?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah, I think it's hard to do. Certainly is hard to get a first down or two.



No, as we've said, and I'm going to take this moment just to say what type of a future I believe that Jackson Arnold and Mike Hawkins, both of those guys, put in a really tough spot as first-year players. The supporting cast... They can't play quarterback by themselves, to put them in a really tough position based on what happened. Both of them are going to be incredibly successful in the future. Yeah, that made it really difficult. No excuses.

What you would ideally like to see on any given Saturday, if you're going to be competitive and have a chance to win, is an offense and a defense and a special teams that complement one another, not compensate for one another. When you give the ball back more than you take it from the opponent, I know this, it's hard to win.

Q. (Question regarding Red River.)

BRENT VENABLES: Well, I would say two of the three years we were at some key positions were in a really tough spot. I think two years ago was reflective of the type of game that it should be, will be moving forward.

Yeah, we got to play better. Got to coach better. Got to play better. That's a wonderful venue. As good as there is in all of college football. I've said it a lot. It's better than any national championship environment that I've been in. I believe part of that is because of all the corporate, not a national championship game. You're looking at 30-plus percent corporate that aren't really invested. There's not a heartbeat in that stadium in the Cotton Bowl that's not heavily invested with a little bit of hate in their heart.

We'll get back on track, look forward to that opportunity in October when it gets here.

Q. The improvements you have made on the defensive side of the ball have been well-documented. Outside just the obvious, which is the personnel upgrades, what have you done from a cultural standpoint and mindset change getting a dominant defense back in Norman?

BRENT VENABLES: Great question.

I think it goes without saying that we had a lot of guys that were scarred up, guys that were still here on the roster. A lot of guys that were scarred up. Didn't know how to play and prepare the right way. It's not like a knock on anybody. I don't think had the confidence, probably most importantly. That takes a lot.

You nurture that. You develop that. You recruit that. Then, man, you're relentless about chasing excellence and

see what it looks like every single day.

You got to be a therapist, a coach, a teacher a motivator. I love that. I love building things. I like building things to last. So we literally started from the ground up.

This, again, will be the first year we've had guys in our program that have been here for four years, six players on defense. I expect the more you play, the better you get. It's a developmental game.

Culture, mindset, how we do what we do, how we practice, the passion, the intensity, should be like a game mindset every rep. Those are game reps. To get the buy-in is not an easy thing to do, as many coaches will tell you.

I've always chosen, instead of making my guys do something, I can get them to do whatever I want. I want to inspire and to motivate and to challenge. That's how we've created the buy-in with our players.

To get our guys excited to go dominate practice, dominate the minutiae, the meeting room, to play at a really, really high, elite level.

That's been fun to see the change. We're not anywhere close to where we want to be and where we're going to be. But we're moving in the right direction. I'm proud of all of the work that's gone into it from both the players and the coaches.

Q. Of course we know Jim Nagy very well. Big-time scouting background, Super Bowl champion. Talk about the relationship you two have and how did that come about to add him to your organization?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah, love Jim Nagy. Love his staff. Always been a long time fan. Our paths crossed many, many years ago at a couple different spots.

He's first class. He's been really good for a long time at the highest level of football. He's got a great football mind. He's a tremendous human being. He's been a great partner in our collaboration to make us more efficient and make us right. That's been a lot of fun to watch that.

We're literally just kind of starting the root system. He hired his last few guys just several weeks ago. Went through our very first cycle that was halfway done when he jumped in.

I think you'll really see the fruits of the labor of the vision of what we want to do and what we want to become through that space over the next couple of cycles recruiting.



They love it. What I love about Jim and his staff is they're really passionate about what they do. They care about people. They love building things. They work well together. They've got those types of skills.

It's been fun so far.

Q. Can you talk about just some of the young guys that maybe you expect to play this season for you. I know you return a lot of experience. Are there guys that you expect to contribute in a big way this season?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah, up front on offensive line, I would say a couple of the guys you'll see a lot of Eddy Pierre-Louis, who didn't get to campus until last summer. I think you'll see Daniel Akinkunmi. I think you'll see Mike Fasusi, Ryan Fodje, freshmen, offensive linemen that are mature beyond their years mentally and physically.

On the defensive side of the ball, I would think a few names that you may or may not know. Danny Okoye, pound for pound might be the best athlete on our football team. I think Reggie Powers is also someone that has great position flexibility, plays a lot of different positions for us.

Courtland Guillory, a young man from Houston that showed up on campus. A corner that loves to compete. That's probably his best quality and trait. Long, super athletic. He loves to compete, shows up every day. He's a dog. Plays with tremendous effort, lets you coach him hard. I love that about Courtland.

Thinking out loud here.

Inside I think you'll see a lot more of David Stone. Trent Wilson has had a really nice transition from high school, as well.

Then Omarion Robinson is a guy that got here in January that has tremendous range, great instincts, natural safety as well.

Those are the names that jump out at me right away. But the test of the season will tell.

Q. Quick question about the bowl game against Navy. You had the unique challenge to face them. You did a better job than most teams slowing down the unique offense. Having seen that, what was it like preparing for Navy? I saw the quarterback run great at Washington State last year. Can you or should other teams implement more what Navy did?

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah, appreciate the question.

We didn't give up a back-breaking 90-yard run that was a third of their offense early in the second half. Don't know that we slowed 'em down. Our job is to win on defense.

I do think that elemental option football is alive and well in college football, and the NFL for that matter. They do it from different formations. Sometimes they get to the same formation, may not look the same from a Navy standpoint, but they actually do a lot more of it than you think.

I think option football has always been part of successful offenses.

Defensively I've always had an option mentality when defending a lot of the spread offenses as well. Especially in the plus-one run game, which is what the option football is all about, with the quarterback as a legitimate runner, plus-one run game that everybody does to degree is a huge part of stopping people on defense, and offensively the success.

Q. How do you navigate this rebuild while absolutely having to deal with the changing tide, NIL, recruiting? It's a different set of circumstances and you're not used to having losing seasons.

BRENT VENABLES: First of all, I think everybody is dealing with the same challenges. The 'poor me' is not part of the conversation.

I say it's complicated, more so than it's ever been for young people, the process of choosing a school. But I think it's great, too. I think it's about time. We've got to do a good job from a leadership position of helping, whether that's program by program or us in a leadership position holistically in college football helping these young people be good stewards of this space, continue keeping the main thing to the main thing.

Again, holistically develop these young people, help them maximize a small window that's there in college to develop, to play the game as long as they can play it but be prepared for life beyond the football field. That day is coming when they have to hang the cleats up.

Listen, there's always been change in college football decade after decade after decade. Is this a lot? Yes, no question. But do I believe in our leadership? I do. We're going to put structures in place that helps us all navigate this in the right kind of way.

The structures are no good if people go beyond those structures. Otherwise there's going to be a lot of carnage in college football and college in general, college sports, if



leadership doesn't have full buy-in on trying to move the game together and progress it the right way.

Q. You took Auburn the distance last year. What do you remember most about that game?

BRENT VENABLES: Well, I mean, as we know, it's one of the more difficult places, venues, to go and play. I think Mike Hawkins, that was his first career road start. I don't think anybody has ever done that in SEC history, come out with a win.

I think the guts and the toughness from Mike Hawkins, our ability to overcome a lot of self-inflicted mistakes, penalties, et cetera, drops. Then the ebbs and flows of the game of football, man. The dramatic comeback, the two-point conversion, the critical stops, going on the road, the fight, the guts, the toughness that our players exemplified.

Seen many teams that are on the wrong side of that in that scenario, being down at one point I believe to start the fourth quarter by 11 on the road. Had a bunch of babies out there making plays and finding a way to get a win.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

BRENT VENABLES: Appreciate it. Boomer Sooner.

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