

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Missouri Tigers

Elijah Drinkwitz

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the podium the head coach of the University of Missouri, Elijah Drinkwitz.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Reminds me a little bit of Disney, just got back from Disney with the family. I was going to say that fight song reminded me of Disney because they play it. If you didn't know, Walt Disney was born in Marceline, Missouri. Y'all remind me a little bit of Disneyworld: tired, ready to go home, tired of coaches whining up here.

Good morning, everyone. I was very excited about the opportunity to come to SEC Media Days which marks the end of vacation season, which is one of the two main reasons that I coach college football: free gear and vacations.

Now it's on to football season. Based on what I've heard from the rest of the SEC coaches, it looks to be a really, really exciting upcoming football season, incredibly tough competition throughout.

I was sent a text message the other day by one of my good friends that said: What a privilege it is to be exhausted by a challenge you choose for yourself.

That's something I think about a lot when we talk about college football and college athletics. We choose to do this. I'm blessed to be the head football coach and incredibly proud of the opportunity to serve the great state of Missouri as the head football coach of the University of Missouri.

To represent the six million people who live in our state, it's an incredible privilege and opportunity. Very appreciative of the support of our Board of Curators, Todd Graves. Incredible leader in Dr. Mun Choi. Our athletic director Laird Veatch empowers us to be the best football program that we can be. It's just an honor and a privilege for our family to call Missouri home, and we're blessed to be here.

Really proud of the football team we will field this fall. 38



new scholarship players. 21 came from the transfer portal, 17 from high school. We built a roster to compete this season. We value production over potential. We have 20 players on the defensive side of the ball who have started more than one game in their college career. We've got 12 players on offense who have multiple starts in their collegiate career. We have three on special teams.

Our three representatives today have 85 combined starts among them. That's Connor Tollison, Daylan Carnell and Zion Young.

Commissioner Sankey mentioned those three young men, juniors and seniors, 41 of our players and 15 staff members, we went on a service trip to the mountains of Jamaica in May. We were blessed to be a blessing. That's something that as a program we want to live by. We want to use the platform and the opportunities that we have to impact and empower communities.

We wanted to go and serve. That's exactly what we did. We spent four days building a home, building a bathroom, repairing three roofs, adding a room to the medical center there. We built a home for a single mother with three kids. It was an awesome opportunity to spread hope throughout the community of Harmons.

They didn't care that we were football players. One night we divided up into groups of three and four, we went and had meals in people's homes to get to know the community. They had no idea. Really when we talked about football, they thought we were talking about soccer. They didn't care about Americano football. What they cared about was we cared about being an impact to their community. It was something that was really eye-opening. They appreciated it enough that we would show up.

We wanted to have an impact on them, but in truth, they had more of an impact on us. Maybe it was the lack of air-conditioning, the one-, two-minute cold shower you could have. Trying to put 41 guys in bunk beds. Maybe it was the fact that water is very scarce in Harmons. Most people don't actually have running water in that community.

But it changed us. It made us different. It made us realize



that we're very thankful for the opportunities that we have. I'm very thankful to be the head football coach of the University of Missouri. I'm very thankful for the ability to do this. I know our players are, too.

With that, I know there's a lot of burning questions in this room by the 14 of y'all that showed up (smiling). Just as a reminder, I'm not going to answer any questions about the Epstein files, the Radiation Belt, whether or not it was possible for Lee Harvey Oswald to get three shots off in seven seconds. I will answer questions about Mizzou football.

I would be remiss if I didn't say that Bob Holt was a graduate of the Missouri school of journalism. We miss him today and think about him often.

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

Q. You shared with local media your expectations for Sam Horn to remain with your team despite being drafted by the Dodgers.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah.

Q. Can you share what y'all's conversations were and what the game plan was for you?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, first off, congratulations to Sam, Jim and Beth. What an awesome accomplishment, awesome opportunity for that young man to be that good of an athlete, to be able to play, I think he threw 15 innings this year and had an outstanding season. We're so proud of him to be able to compete in two sports.

Sam has been adamant this whole time to compete and win the job in the SEC, play quarterback at the highest level. Had conversations with his representatives. He was going through his Tommy Johns surgery, or the rehab process going through spring. That really hasn't changed.

We had discussed it, Sam had relayed the message, his agent had relayed the message to all the baseball organizations that he was going to play football this fall. So nothing's changed.

I called him the day of the draft to make sure he was having a draft party. I called him after he got drafted. I told him the day he got drafted I was proud of him, and I would see him at 6:30 workouts in the morning.

Q. How do you create a culture and a chemistry with such roster turnover, especially among the upperclassmen?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I think that's why we decided to take the mission trip to Harmons. Nothing builds cohesion and trust and respect like shared adversity, putting people in adverse situations, see how they'll respond. There's nothing more adverse than putting 300- pound offensive linemen, defensive linemen in bunk beds with no air-conditioning. I think that was one of the ways. Obviously our strength coach, Ryan Russell, our Elite Edge Program on the first four, preaches and teaches that.

You have guys like Connor and Daylan who have been here their entire careers. They know what it looks like. They know what the standards are, what to uphold them to.

I think our staff combined with our strength staff and then getting shared adversity helps create cohesion.

Q. This year Missouri gets to renew a rivalry with Kansas. You get them at home. How excited are you at Missouri and the fans of Missouri to renew that rivalry?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I think rivalries are a great thing for college athletics and college football particularly, especially regional rivalries. This one goes back a long ways. The origins of our football name, the Tigers, is based off the militia that was formed to protect Columbia from people from Kansas, the Kansas area.

This is something that goes back a long way. It's very deep. It's something that our team is very keenly aware of. We understand the implications, the importance to our state. Look forward to playing that game, especially having it at home.

Q. I wanted to talk about one of your transfer portal additions. You talked about production. Early in his career, especially at Arkansas, one of the best safeties in the country. Talk about adding Jalen Catalon. What does he bring? What kind of impact could he make for you?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, Jalen Catalon is a guy that played against us in 2020 during COVID year. Didn't play in the first half because of a targeting penalty in May. He came on and was an elite player. Has been an elite player for a long time.

Coach Saban all summer, he calls and does scouting reports with all the head coaches. Not to get back into coaching, want to clear that up for Greg McElroy. Does that to make sure he has an edge on the competition. First person he asked about was Jalen Catalon. He said, Man, that guy has played a lot of really good football. You could see that in the spring, the instinctual...



He's got great instincts. He understands, diagnoses what offenses are trying to do. He's got a knack for finding the football in the air. He's really good at blitzing.

We play a lot of single high defense, use that safety to insert, which is something that Jalen can really do. We're very excited about what he brings to that room.

We lost a lot of career starts with Joseph Charleston. We needed somebody in that back end. Communication is so vital in that position. Very, very proud and excited about JC, what he's going to bring to our football team. He's been awesome.

Got a chance, there were several days I got to work specifically with him in Harmons. Man, that guy is a workhorse. Just set the tone all day. One of the days we had to make concrete. The toughest job is you're in the house. You have to bucket water up there and throw it in.

He's in there stirring it, stirring it. Most of the time people do that for 30 minutes and they have to tap out. He did it for six straight hours.

He's incredibly tough and we're proud of him.

Q. You mentioned during your opening about coaches whining up here. Is that about transfer portal, caps or what?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: No, it's not. It wasn't here. It's just in general.

I just go back to, like, again, what a privilege it is to be exhausted by a challenge you choose for yourself. We all choose to coach here. We all choose.

Q. What topics, though?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: They are what they are. Since I've been in college football, we've had COVID, NIL, transfer portal, eight- or nine-game schedule. We've been debating that for five years. It is what it is.

Q. The SEC in 15 years won a bunch of national titles. Everybody in the league seemed to benefit from that. Big Ten won two in a row. How important is it for the SEC to get back to the top?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: The top? The top as in number of draft picks in the NFL? Top as in most viewership? Overall top, deepest conference in college football?

Yeah, we haven't been. I heard that last night: Well, they

haven't won the national championship in the last two years.

I don't know, what was it, the previous 10, 14? I mean, so...

Look, the more teams you add to the tournament, there's greater variance to it. So I don't necessarily think that we're that far off. I don't think that there's any more pressure.

You got 16 of the toughest competitors in the world who are head coaches in this league. We're all driven to achieve the best, whether that's internally or externally. We feel pressure to achieve that.

But there's no pressure because we got to do it for the SEC. We want to do it for our team, our players, our fans, so...

Q. Can you tell me a little bit about the quarterback battle going on this off-season between Pribula and Sam Horn.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: We got three quarterbacks, all a little bit different, all with some very good strengths.

Obviously Sam Horn is a guy who has been in our system for a long time. Dual-threat player, plays baseball at a high level. Coming back from Tommy John's surgery. Had an outstanding bowl prep, really good spring. Has really excelled in his maturation.

One thing most people don't know about Sam, he's a type one diabetic. Since he's been in college, he's learned to adapt, train, develop, adjust. He's really done a lot of good things. Understands the system.

Beau came in with the right mindset. Nothing given, everything earned. Works extremely hard developing his craft. He's a guy who spends a lot of extra time up there. Has a chip on his shoulder, the right kind of chip. Does a good job leadership-wise. Worked with him a couple days at Harmons. Impressed with his ability to connect with our team.

Matt Zollers throws it as well as any quarterback I've ever seen. Coming back from an ankle surgery. You can tell he's adjusting to the speed of college football.

Very excited about that room and know whoever ends up emerging as the quarterback is going to be in a really good position because he doesn't have to do it all by himself. He's going to have a really good defense. He's got a great supporting cast around him.



Q. You've had a back finish in the top five in the conference in rushing yards in four of the last five years. What are the expectations and what is the ceiling for Ahmad Hardy this year? What is going to be the go-to flavor of CELSIUS the day of the rivalry game?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I'm kind of off CELSIUS right now. It will definitely be a Diet Mountain Dew, cup of coffee, then we'll see what the day brings.

Ahmad Hardy, what a great young man. I think one of the coolest things about him is I knew Brian Vincent. Brian and I have a relationship dating back to our time when I was at App State and he was at UAB learning the outside zone.

It was awesome to be able to call him and ask what are his strengths, weaknesses, feel for this scheme. What couldn't be any more complimentary of Ahmad Hardy?

He's an outstanding young man. A heck of a horseman. Dude loves horse, rides horses. Has gotten Kevin Coleman on the back of a couple of horses. He love to go fish. He and Santana Banner go fishing all the time. In fact, went fishing in the community pond in Bluff Creek. Had to apologize to my homeowners association about that. They caught a lot of fish.

Really excited about that young man. He has great burst, understands the scheme and how to run it. So very proud of him.

Q. Since it's only about five years of your time talking about eight versus nine, what do you think of a five plus 11 potential Playoff format?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Needed something to talk about, huh, Pat (smiling)?

I'll start with the 12, 14, 16 Playoff, whatever. This is not going to do me any favors with our commissioner.

When I think about college football right now and think about what do we need to do, I think it really comes down to two things: what is best for our players and what is best for our fans. The rest of us are really only important because of the players and the fans.

So when you think about whether it's 12, 14 or 16, to me, if we decided to go into this expansion of Playoffs, we're trying to follow an NFL model. The NFL takes 44% of their teams into the Playoffs to increase the passion or keep the fan base engaged. If we're talking about 12, that's 9%. If

we're talking about 14, that's 11%. If we're talking about 16, that's 12%. That's not really changing the math for the fan base.

I don't really understand what the big fight is about.

The other thing I don't really understand about this, we have a lot of complaints, whether we're talking about 68 teams in the NCAA basketball tournament, we're complaining about the committee. Last year we complained about the committee selections. We produced all kinds of stats and handed them out about why the SEC was so good.

The problem is we have a human committee that has no standard set of structure, of how they're going to select. They're all human beings. They all have implicit bias. Now we're going to go from seven to 11 and we think that's going to solve the problem.

Until we figure out what exactly the standards are, I don't think that's good. In my viewpoint of it, I think we should go back and try to find more ways to include teams. How do we get more people involved? 'Cause that's better for the players, that's better for the player experience to have more people involved in of the potential to play for a championship. It's better for the fan bases.

I think we all would agree that the four college football Playoff games at home campuses was a huge win for college football. We need to expand that opportunity, energy and excitement.

My math could be wrong here, but if we did the 12, you had four automatic qualifiers, everyone thinks it's limiting. It's not limiting if you take those four automatic qualifiers and you divide that up into eight opportunities, eight play-in game.

Now you're taking the SEC is playing in for eight, Big Ten is playing in for eight. Since we've expanded the bubble to 16, give three to the Big 12, three to the ACC, 1-1. Now you have 30 teams. 30 teams. Now we're talking about an opportunity for 30 teams, 30 fan bases to be excited and engaged, giving revenue. 30 teams with players who have access to compete for a championship.

So for me, I think that makes a lot more sense.

Again, when you're talking about the NFL Playoff system, not only is it 14 teams, you only have to be the best out of your four-team division, compete against four teams to make the Playoffs.

When you're at the University of Missouri, you say you just

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

have to finish in the top eight to have a chance to play in the Playoffs, that's a win every day. I'm all for that. I think that's awesome.

Eight versus nine? Honestly, I think I've been for the nine game. I think if it was about players and about fans, I think it's a nine-game schedule for the SEC. If it's about coach preservation, hey, man, I get it.

But if we're going to go to 11 humans deciding on a committee which are the 11 best teams, and we stay at eight, we ain't getting in.

There you go, Pat. There you go (smiling).

Q. I know Beau, recruiting him, had to be a really unique experience for you, how aggressive you had to be, his sample size is so unique. Four passes that were 20 yards downfield last year. Can you take us through the process of evaluating him as a passer? If you don't want to answer that, I'd love your take on Lee Harvey Oswald.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I don't even know much about the JFK deal. I was at breakfast yesterday, Rick Jones brought that up. I don't even know what you're talking about, Rick.

Beau, when we first talk about recruits, it's all about the right fit for us: focus, intangibles, talent and tough. When you talk about the quarterback position, there are five traits you're looking for. Beau had those traits.

As a program, as an offense, you have to design to a quarterback's strengths. I don't think when you watch the tape, there's not an inability for Beau to throw, he just didn't quite have the opportunities. I would say after this spring, I'm as confident as ever that Beau is a very talented passer. I don't really have any reservations about that.

Obviously when you're recruiting out of the portal, it does happen fast. If you have somebody on campus, you have to close 'em pretty quickly.

Beau, I will give a lot of credit to Beau and his maturity. He had a process that he wanted to go through. He wanted to see three different schools and then make a decision. We made an impression.

Quick story about Beau. We went and ate dinner that night. I drove him back to the hotel that night, dropped him off. We sat in the deal and talked for about 20 minutes. I looked, he walked in, he walked around. I dropped him off at the wrong hotel. So he had to come back out, got in the car, went to the other one in town. I'm not sure what he

thinks about my intelligence level, but it was good enough to get him to play for us.

Q. You have won 21 games over the last two years, but nationally it seems like you might not have the respect as other SEC teams. What goes into that? Could you talk about 'something to prove' mindset that you embraced in 2023.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I kind of addressed this earlier with SEC This Morning.

If you get caught up, Coach Saban calls it rat poison. I think it's rat poison either way. Praise and blame are both the same. You can't care about it either way.

We have a 'something to prove' mindset. Whether you're talking about our coaching staff, our players, we all have a little bit of a chip on our shoulder. At the end of the day, two-minute drive, fourth quarter, that's not what you're thinking about. You think about your trust and belief in each other, doing your job at a higher level.

You can think about it as temporary motivation, but in the key moments it's more about the belief in each other. That's really what drives us. It's our belief in our brotherhood, in our Elite Edge Program, our belief in our 'always compete' mentality, the development of trust and respect we have with each other. It's having fun while we're doing this that really drives us in our success.

Other people's opinions... Somebody asked me what the difference was in my five years being here. In the first couple years, I cared what y'all thought about me. Now I don't. I don't care. I'm here to represent my family, my wife and my four beautiful daughters. I'm here to represent the University of Missouri and make our football team proud. Outside of that, I really don't care what anybody else thinks.

Q. Do you have any conspiracy theories about Missouri football that you have debunked?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: What's that sign: There's no such thing as conspiracy theories, but there's also no such thing as coincidences. There you go (smiling).

Q. You guys have six games at home, you don't leave the state of Missouri until October 18th.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yep.

Q. So many new players and transfer portal additions, new starters. How important is it for you guys to have that time to build the chemistry at home before you



play at Auburn, in Norman, Fayetteville?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: We play at Nashville, too. With Diego Pavia, that ain't no joke. Let's make sure we give those guys the respect that Clark deserves and the program he has built.

But appreciate Mark Womack with the six games at home. Gives a new quarterback an opportunity to settle in in a new environment.

We've played pretty well at home. Our fans have done an incredible job since we've been there in developing that as a home-field advantage for us, their support, believing in us.

When you turn us on on TV, you're going to see a \$250 million north end zone complex that is being put up daily. Appreciate the work they have done there.

The challenge for us, I didn't feel like last year, I feel like I let our team down by being unprepared to go to Texas A&M on the road. We were not, with the adjustment of the transfer portal and players, I don't think they understood the routine and what it was going to be. We were a step slow in just about everything we did, starting with me in the decision-making processes in our players.

We're going to have to do a good job in fall camp of making sure we're ready when the opportunity does to go on the road, make sure our players understand what that routine is going to look like. We've built something into our fall camp training plans to replicate and simulate a road game for 48 hours.

We're going to do a really good job of embracing playing at home for the first six, but also making sure we're prepared for that opportunity when we go to Jordan Air.

Q. We're a Cardinals town. You have that Cardinals Nation. You're building tremendous facilities. Nobody has asked about that. Y'all put maybe close to \$200 million in.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: 250.

Q. That's a big deal. Talk about that. That's a serious commitment from Missouri. Says a lot about where your program is going.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, that's why I started by thanking the six million residents of the state of Missouri, thanking Todd Graves, Jeff Layman, Bob Blitz, Michael Williams. A lot of different people. President Choi. A lot of big-time boosters, Richard Miller, Mike Kampeter, Steve Trulaske.

You're talking about a lot of people who have committed a lot of resources to our university. The Brad Stephens family.

Since we've been there we've invested in a brand-new indoor facility, invested in a \$250 million north end zone project, a weight room reconstruction, new grass fields. They've done a lot to enhance the program and give us the ability to compete and attract talent. That's what we've really tried to do.

Now, again, I put the pressure on our coaching staff this year. It's really about coaching. We as a coaching staff need to take on the ownership of this year's team, about getting the best out of these guys because we have a lot of talent, we have a lot of depth, but we got to bring it together and we got to bring the most out of 'em.

Appreciate all y'all. Appreciate y'all late stragglers that got in here and filled up the room. Hope y'all finish strong today. M-I-Z.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

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