

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 17, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Kentucky Wildcats**

**Coach Mark Stoops**

Press Conference



The rest is history.

He's had a great career. We actually recruited him as a cornerback. Grew into a safety, then became a hybrid. Last year moved to inside linebacker. Just picked it up in a big way. Is a great leader and person for us.

Next is Josh Kattus. Josh is another senior, tight end from Cincinnati, Ohio. Just a remarkable person. One tidbit on Josh, he doesn't do this to get the recognition, but he's a guy that each and every week for the last three years discreetly goes to the UK Children's Hospital and spends time with young people. Just truly an amazing person and a great leader.

The third one is Jordan Lovett, a senior safety from Kentucky. He is already a graduate in education. Someday will be a remarkable educator.

Just love the three of them and what they do for our program.

For us, we have to take the mindset into this year the same way we attack the off-season. As football coaches, we use this term a lot, but for us it was like a fourth-and-one mentality, that moment in a fourth-and-one situation demands urgency, unity and execution. We obviously needed to have a strong off-season.

Every rep, every lift, every team meeting, no matter what we're doing, we have to embrace that challenge. I greatly appreciate the focus and the relentless commitment that these players have had to each other.

After last season, obviously not a very good year for us, we had to take a good look at that. For myself, we had eight straight bowl appearances. One of only three teams in the SEC to do that. It's not easy. So we had a really good stretch and had been really consistent. We know the great teams that are in this league. There's many of us that had a year off here and there.

When you do that and have a bad year like that, I had to take a good step back, analyze each and every thing in our program, in our staff and our players. There's a lot of work

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the head football coach from the University of Kentucky, Mark Stoops.

MARK STOOPS: First of all, I know why Coach Drink has a reason to not talk about certain things. So I'll keep that between myself and him and a few colleagues. Got to keep on eye on old Drink there.

Greatly appreciate Commissioner Sankey, what you do, the leadership you provide, along with your staff, each and every year.

I'd also like to the acknowledge the leadership on campus, Dr. Eli Capilouto, athletic director, Mitch Barnhart. We are about to embark on the 13th season together. Very rare to that have kind of continuity. I greatly appreciate the steadfast support they've given me and each and every coach and every athlete on campus. It's been some trying times, to say the least. I just appreciate the work that they've done.

I'd also like to acknowledge and thank you the media for what you do to continue to elevate this beautiful game we play, been involved with for so long. Not only elevating our game, but the stories that you tell with our amazing players.

Like many of the coaches here, I want to take this moment and discuss the three guys that are with me here today, three amazing young men. All of them have been in our program for four years, all of them are going to be seniors. One of them has already got his degree. Another one will get it in December, and the other next May.

Alex Afari, a senior linebacker from Cincinnati, Ohio. Interesting story about Alex is he moved to the United States from Ghana. While he was in middle school, he went and sign up, saw a sign-up sheet for football. He went and started the first practice. He didn't understand what the heck was going on. He was trying to sign up for soccer, but that's how he became introduced to football.

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to be done.

We didn't want to just move past it. We wanted to make sure we made the adjustments necessary. Any weakness we had, we wanted to try to make a strength. Just attack it each and every day. There's a lot of good from us as a coaching staff to be able to do that.

But we looked at everything, from our culture, our schemes, the way we teach, the way we connect, the way we lead. All of it needed to be analyzed to make the necessary adjustments.

For us, we will continue to anchor with the core values of our program: that's attitude, toughness, discipline and pride. We need to do that with the consistency that's necessary to make sure that you're going to get the growth that's needed.

During a difficult year, those attributes don't just go away. They're something that we have to lean back into and make sure we're doing a lot of things well, but make sure we do those things at a very high level.

There's a lot of new change on our campus. We have 50 new players that are coming in. That's the most we've ever had in the transfer era obviously. 26 transfers that come in. 13 of those transfers have been starters, and eight of them have been starters at the Power Five conference. We feel like we're bringing in a lot of fresh faces there. I think that's something that's important for us.

After coming off the year that we had, I think all of our players know we've been very consistent, we've done things right. We feel like we got a lot of systems and processes in place to be successful. But we needed to change. I think the roster turnover for this year was important for us. We needed that.

I think there's a great balance for us with the new faces, the fresh faces, the energy, the juice that these players are bringing, and the experience that they have. But I also love the continuity we have with our staff. This is the first time in a long time that the offensive coordinator is returning for the second season. It's been uncommon to have the turnover that we've had at offensive coordinator. Obviously, caught up to us.

This season bringing Bush Hamdan back for a second year is something I'm excited about. We need to build, and I'm confident we'll do that.

Brad White is returning for his seventh season, so we've had great stability and continuity on the defensive side of the ball.

Jay Boulware does a remarkable job. He's back for his third year with special teams.

I think there's a good mixture with new people, new faces, fresh energy, guys that are not tied up with the negative season we had last year. That's gone. The 50 players that are here and new, they really don't care about what happened last year. We acknowledge it, they understand it, but they're really concerned about what we're doing now and how we're going to move the program forward. That's been a fresh change.

I'm excited about this group. I really love the way they're working. I know everybody says that. I wouldn't be any different. I can promise you we analyzed a lot of things and we're intentional about the development of this team, trying to expediate that process, force feed the relationships, making sure they've bought in. They're fun. They've got experience. We've got to fit the pieces together, we know that. We have a lot of work to do. But again, I'm very excited about the staff and how hard they've worked. Good to get rolling.

I appreciate your time. I know it's been a long week. You have a couple more coaches here to wrap it up. But at this point I'll open it up for questions. Thank you.

#### **Q. Mark, how motivated would you say you are?**

MARK STOOPS: I think that's a point that, Nick, you're pretty dialed into. It's interesting. As I talk a lot in the off-season, I love how people grab certain aspects of things that I say. It's no different than I've ever been. Zero change.

I think one thing that has been a pleasant change for me is being consumed with certain aspects of this work that we have to do for the years leading up to this. In particular I think all of us have touched on it, I want to move past it. But the fundraising aspect of our job, that's something that consumes us. I want to get back to the coaching. That makes me very happy.

But motivated is something that I'm quite sure I've mentioned each and every year I've ever been a head football coach, and will continue to always do that.

I like to use the word 'grateful'. I'm very grateful to be here and happy. I know I had a hell of a year. I had to get an ankle replacement surgery. Last year was a bear on me physically. I got that fixed. I feel great. That pain is gone when I'm on the field. I'm very grateful and looking forward to this 13th year.

But it's business as usual for us. It's business as usual for myself. I think I'll play along and let the media have their fun, take their shots. That's cool with me. I'm ready to just move forward.

**Q. You've done a great job recruiting the state during your tenure. You have Khalil Collins who is going to play a big part of your defense line. Talk about his development. Another coach on your staff has been with you a long time. Did a great job in our state at Auburn. What does Eddie Gran mean to the program at Kentucky?**

MARK STOOPS: Khalil, so pleased with him. Just to see him mature, the way he's grown. Each and every year he's gotten better. In particular this last year, you really see him making a big move to not only be a good football player but to be a very good leader. I'm very proud of Khalil. I love the work he's doing. I'm going to challenge him to be consistent through the year.

Eddie Gran has meant an awful lot to our program in many different ways. Any way we ask Eddie to help, he is right there front and center to do that. Could not have any more respect for Eddie Gran.

I think you ask every single person in our building, every player in our building, they have the utmost respect for Eddie.

**Q. You mentioned you have 50 new players coming into the campus this year. How do you build that community off the field to build that chemistry on the field?**

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, that's a great question. There's a lot to that. There's a lot of things that we do. I think that's one of the things I mentioned in the opening dialogue, being intentional about forcing that relationship. What I mean by that is just making sure we're putting things in front of them.

One of the things we do is simply getting to know people. When you have 50 new people, quite a few at the midterm, guys that come in. Coach Dean Hood does quite a bit with our player development.

Something that we do each and every day in our building, we put four individuals on there with their name, information, where they came from, first name, background. We quiz our players. That's one of the things we do where we make sure everybody knows everybody. Sounds like a simple thing, but when you have that much turnover and change, it's something we have to do.

The next step we do after they get to know everybody, we have them sit there and break bread and eat dinner or lunch with somebody they didn't know, communicate some things that maybe the team doesn't know, maybe the coaches don't know. Getting in front of people and pour that back.

That's just some of the things we do to specifically answer your question on trying to get the camaraderie.

**Q. The 13 years in an SEC cool is a long run. How have you been able to sustain that? What can you do going forward to have as long of a runway as you want?**

MARK STOOPS: I appreciate that.

It's a real challenge. When I got to Kentucky, as I mentioned...

Listen, I might as well just stay away from that. I was going to say something. I say things tongue in cheek and it gets taken way out of control. When you lose, you got to watch what you say.

Truthfully, when we got there, there was so much work to be done. I'm proud of that run. Maybe one other one with Bear Bryant, going back to the '50s. There's an eight-year run there where we've been as consistent as anybody in the history of our school. Our local media was asking me this morning. Each coach that stands up here, we go back a little bit, but we're really concentrating on this year, what's ahead of us.

When you have a down year, you have to stand up here, own it, face it, talk about the things you're doing to address it, then move on.

I've stood up here after two 10-win seasons. That has only happened two times in the history of our school. I don't want to talk about that year, I want to talk about this year. There's a fine balance there.

For me it's just exciting. As I mentioned to your colleague there to your right, I'm really just excited about the opportunity, really diving into the challenge that lies ahead of us and embracing that and having fun with it.

This shit's hard. You might as well go enjoy it, dive into it. There's a lot of people that can't do it and didn't do it for 12 years, didn't do it for 13 years, not at Kentucky. You look at the history of what we've done, there's a lot of great ones that didn't make it very long.

I'm proud of the run that we have. I want to use last year



for us to learn from and to grow from and to get better and to get back to who we want to be. That's something that our program deserves. That's something our fan base deserves. The great people in Kentucky, the administration. We're all in and we're excited about this next season.

**Q. You talk about 50-plus players coming in new. It takes a while to build a culture. Have you ever thought about adopting a mantra of 13 weeks? In 13 weeks you can take kids from all over and turn them into Marines. Kids, they don't want to be coached hard. You're a Stoops from Youngstown, Ohio. It's in your blood. How are you dealing with that? Your personality seems to me to be a 110% competitor.**

MARK STOOPS: I appreciate that. That's what I try to be. I can promise you that. I don't know any different.

As I just mentioned to our players coming in here today, I said, Be you. All you want to do is see authenticity. Be who you are. I can't stand up here and try to be somebody different. I have respect.

I watched the great Nick Saban so many years, listened to him, all that. I can't be him. I can only be me and be authentic. I think players see that and understand that.

I do think players want to be coached. I think a lot has been talked about and a lot has changed. I hope were on the other side of that. I feel it right now even in this recruiting class that we're going through right now, I feel the shift going forward.

If we can keep this thing in the guardrails and keep this House settlement the way it is, they deserve to be paid. Pay 'em what it is and then coach 'em hard and let us do our job. That's developing young men into great people. Better people make better players. Each and every year, that's our job. We're committed to that.

I love it, man. You're right, remind me of who I am. I'm going to go out there and we're going to swing. You know what I mean? We got a lot of work to do. We have an incredibly challenging schedule, but bring it on. Let's embrace it, have fun with it and attack each and every day. That's all we can do.

**Q. What attracted you guys to Zach Calzada in the portal? How much do you think his previous SEC experience might help?**

MARK STOOPS: That certainly played into it for me. I think the fact that we had a local young quarterback on campus that we certainly feel is the future. When that time

is, I'm not sure. Whether it's next week, two weeks, three weeks, next season, next year, I'm not sure.

With Zach, it definitely played a factor. He won big games in the SEC. Has a ton of experience under his belt. Has a chip on his shoulder. Wants to come back and prove that.

I'm excited about Zach.

**Q. Given your experience, especially your tenure in the SEC, I'm wondering if you'll see rule changes, the NIL, transfer portal, having impacted and making it more advantageous for kids to stick around?**

MARK STOOPS: I hope I'm interpreting that question the right way.

I think any coach that comes in here and talks about it, we're all into developing our program, developing players, bringing them along. Sometimes that's in one year, sometimes it's in two and three.

Listen, we all love our players, whether they're one year in our program, six months, or four years. The three players I brought here today have been in our program four years. They understand the culture. Like I said, they've been around when we won a bunch of big games. They'll stick with us as we fight through what we went through last year. Those are the guys I want to have by my side.

**Q. Derek Shay already was part of your program before you promoted him. What has that been like with him taking a more active role?**

MARK STOOPS: Very smooth. Very, very quick adjustment. Very smooth. Josh Kattus is here today. You can ask him about it. It was a very easy transition, very smooth.

He's a guy that Coach Hamdan and he work side by side anyway. Big picture scheme, a guy that Bush relied on, the communication that's already been done. He's already coached tight ends at a high level in a Power Five school.

I love what I'm seeing there. He immediately, within a day or two of being promoted, at least verbally by me, hit the ground running, did amazing in recruiting. He's done a wonderful job in the classroom, as well.

Very excited about Derek.

**Q. During the spring meetings, it really felt like there was a lot of different opinions coming out from different coaches. Could you take me in the room and just maybe give me a highlight or two of talking to**





**other coaches about all of these different elements that are now in your world.**

MARK STOOPS: Well, I'm not disagreeing with you maybe how that's communicated or how that comes out sometimes. Some of us may be a little more guarded in what we're communicating until we make sure we get everything on the same page.

I think one thing about that meeting is there's a lot going on. There's a lot happening, as you know. There's so much transition. We have to talk about many different things. I don't think any of us want to stay any more days. It seems like we could sit in there for a week and hammer out these things.

I will say this. I feel actually the opposite. I feel like there's a lot of coaches in there that really we want the same thing. How we get there, there may be some different opinions. There's a lot of guys in there that are very unified, that really want to continue to make this great game great and continue that.

I mean, everybody is always going to have a personal agenda here or there that we have to look out for our own institution, what's right for us. But I truly believe there's a bunch of men in there that are in it for the good of the game. We really want to make it better.

I think we want to get unified and on the same page with some of the other Power Four head coaches.

**Q. I don't know how closely you follow the discussion over the Playoff model moving ahead. Do you favor a situation like the Big Ten with four automatic qualifiers or do you prefer the five 11 format?**

MARK STOOPS: To answer the front part of your question, not that closely right now. If you haven't noticed, I have a lot of work to do. I say it with a grain of salt, but I have a lot of work to do.

I think expansion is good. I think there's a lot of people that are looking at it, analyzing it. They gave us different options in our meeting. Whatever it is it is. It's just like our schedule or anything else. Whether we play eight, nine, who we play, put it in front of us and let's get going.

No, I haven't analyzed it too close.

**Q. Your relationship with your president may be 13 years. Bob had the same thing with 18 at Norman. What's the key with getting along with each other? It doesn't happen very often.**

MARK STOOPS: No, it really doesn't. Sometimes you have to put your personal agenda to the side. That's difficult because I have a job to do, they have a job to do. I think understanding that is difficult.

Sometimes there's some give-and-take in the situation. But they've been just absolutely amazing people to work for, much like Bob's situation at Oklahoma. I've been very blessed that way.

I think first and foremost, they are great people. They care about Kentucky football, but they also care about the other student-athletes and the other coaches that are on our campus. There's a balance there.

I think each of us at every institution, there's some things that are to your advantage and may be to a disadvantage. You got to overcome 'em the best you can and make the most of any situation.

I couldn't be more pleased with the people that I work with.

**Q. Who have been your favorite players to watch work out this season, the way they go about their routine?**

MARK STOOPS: It's hard to single out. It might say two or three guys and the other ones are going to get a little bent.

I really love the attitude of the whole group. That's what it takes. Let's be honest. I think that's an area that we've talked about, the culture of your program. That's unity and being together and unified in everything that we do, holding each other accountable. They're doing that.

I love the way they're attacking it, the way they're working. They understand what's at stake, the importance of it. They embrace that. I respect the way they're working. I'm excited to get on the grass full-time with them.

Thank y'all very much. Got two more and I'm sure you're ready to get out of here. Appreciate what you do.

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