

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Texas A&M Aggies**

**Coach Mike Elko**

Press Conference



MIKE ELKO: Excited to be back out here for SEC Media Days year two. Just really excited to go into year two of our program.

I want to start with something Commissioner Sankey said about my summer, maybe give a lot of kudos to my wife. When I took the job at Texas A&M, my wife stayed back with our younger son who was still finishing high school and my daughter. After recruiting in June, we went back and moved and packed the house.

I heard all the coaches before me come up and talk about the great summers they had. Mine got to spend the summer packing. To my wife, another apology and I owe her a huge vacation next summer. She's the rock of our family.

I want to acknowledge the recent tragedy that affected the Hill Country of Texas. The devastation from the floods and the damage and loss of life was heartbreaking. The thoughts and prayers of the entire Texas A&M football community are with everybody impacted in that region, both Texans and Aggies alike. Devastating and heartbreaking to see all of that.

I want to recognize Commissioner Sankey for his continued leadership through what is a very challenging time in college athletics. I talked about this last year, how important leadership was in this day and age. I think even 12 months later, it's probably more important.

To Greg and his staff, I think they not only do a great job of leading this conference, but I think providing the coaches with the information and insight that they need to lead our programs and continue to have the SEC at the forefront of college athletics I think is a kudos to him and everybody that works in the SEC office and really all of our sports.

I want to say thank you to Trev Alberts. I see him out somewhere. Really appreciate our partnership. I appreciate all the support that he's given me as we work

together to try to drive this Texas A&M football program ultimately to fulfill its potential and become what we all believe it's capable of becoming.

Finally I want to recognize our recently retired SID, Alan Cannon. He's a true legend in this industry. A lot of you know him very well. He dedicated 44 years of his life to Texas A&M University. He was inducted into the College Sports Communications Hall of Fame back in 2014 and served another 11 years beyond that ushering Texas A&M into the SEC.

His mentorship, his friendship will be missed. But I'm really excited for him to continue to be around the program in a limited capacity as he kind of enjoys the next stage of his life. He certainly has earned it.

As we turn our attention to our football program, I kind of want to start with the three players we brought here today.

Starting with linebacker Taurean York. Taurean is a two-time captain for us. He started every single game at middle linebacker since he arrived on campus. He truly embodies what a linebacker is. The leadership, his play making ability, his ability to read and diagnose, communicate. He really is an exceptional linebacker in every aspect of the game. He's a tremendous leader. He sets a great example for our young players. He goes above and beyond with his ability to lead our program. We're really excited for him. He's going to be one of those kids that will go down as one of the great leaders in the history of Texas A&M football. He's originally from Temple, Texas, right down the road. Really great reconnecting with him.

Ar'Maj Reed-Adams. He joined us last year as a transfer. Offensive line, decorated off-season lineman. He's got an unbelievable personality. When you transfer into a new program, sometimes it's hard to find your way. He really let his voice stand out last year. I think he brings a lot of energy to that group, a lot of energy to what we're trying to do on the offensive line. I think that's one of the reasons why he was voted a captain for the 2025 season. He runs a local podcast partnering with Texas Ags and is really involved in a lot of things inside of our community. He's



actually finishing up his last class right now, so he'll graduate here in a couple weeks with a business degree, then he'll start grad classes this fall as he finishes his career with us.

Then Will Lee, our starting corner, one of the biggest recruiting battles we had last year, first getting to decide to come back and finish his development with us, then getting him to do that at Texas A&M. He's our best cover guy. I think what he does for us, locking down one side of the field, really gives us an advantage on defense. Getting him back and seeing him grow this off-season to kind of develop into an even better version of who he was last year. Will is graduating this fall with a degree in leadership. He's going to provide a lot of leadership to our program and to our defense this year.

As we turn our attention to the 2025 Texas A&M football season, I just want to start with the program that we're building. I think when I got hired, we talked an awful lot about building a program that would help our young people develop into the best version of who they are both on and off the field.

I think people sometimes get so lost in the X's and O's and the play calling that they lose sight of what that culture can really do to impact and affect our program.

I think as we continued into this off-season, the challenge for us has been to elevate that culture to a championship-level culture, so that we are acting in our lives every step along the way as champions.

I said this to a lot of people when I got hired, this off-season, it's going to be our commitment to doing that every day that is ultimately going to get Texas A&M football where it wants to be. We are trying to speed that process up as much as we possibly can, but we've laid a really strong foundation for who we are as a program, who we want to be, and where we want this thing to be going forward. I think that was so critical.

In the past 12 months we've made a tremendous amount of strides in that area. You heard Commissioner Sankey mention we had a 3.07 GPA last year. I strongly believe that correlates to success in life and on the football field.

We have established our Mission 12 program, which is our player development program, to help continue to grow and educate these young people in what is a changing time. Financial literacy, understanding NIL agents, what all that is about, reading contracts, understanding this new evolution of third-party NIL, a program that will provide for our student-athletes all of the resources they need to go out and be successful.

We talk a lot as coaches about how hard it is for us to navigate this landscape. It's also can be challenging for our 19-year-olds to navigate this landscape. We want to make sure that they're provided with all of the resources they need to be successful.

On the field, we're really excited to get into year two. I don't think you can quantify how challenging year one truly is. When you have to go into a place and build everything, build culture, a program, build scheme, build practice habits, build practice tempo, design, everything. There's so much that's on the table in year one.

I think both I and our staff are really excited about the growth that will happen between year one and year two in our program.

On offense we return seven starters. I think that is a big cry for excitement. I think we bring back our top seven offensive linemen. We bring back all of our ball carriers. That's a really strong starting point.

But I think what I'm most excited about is the fact we have quarterback Marcel Reed taking a huge jump for us this year. He's had a phenomenal off-season. I think he's put on some necessary strength and mass to kind of hold to the rigors of SEC football.

I think he understands now what it takes to be an SEC quarterback week in and week out. Really excited for him to go out and become the difference maker that we know he's capable of being this year.

We added and developed some weapons at the wide receiver and tight end position to help him. I think we're primed to develop on what was a really strong offensive year for us last year. In SEC play we led the SEC in points per game. As we move into year two of Collin Klein's system, that will take a bigger jump.

Defensively we include eight starters, our entire back seven. The value of that is hard to put into words. Those kids last year were put into a really challenging situation, having to bring in so many new starters from so many different programs who had never really played together, never had played in our system.

I think at times we got it right, at times we didn't. But those kids coming back I think have a chip on their shoulder to bring Texas A&M defense back to where it belongs.

We've got a very proud tradition of Texas A&M going all the way back to The Wrecking Crew of what defense should look like. We look forward to seeing that manifest



itself this year on the field in Kyle Field.

We also brought back all four of our specialists. I think that's unique. Both our kicker, punters, long snapper and kickoff specialist all return. So we feel as though we've got a very veteran group with a lot of experience primed to go out this year and finish what we started last year.

I want to close by saying this. Texas A&M is an amazing place. I'm blessed and honored to be the head football coach at Texas A&M. The support we have for our program at times is overwhelming. Last year we averaged just under 103,000 people at our home games. That's 101% attendance in Kyle Field for an average. Our average home attendance was larger than any stadium capacity in the SEC.

The support we get from our university is second to none. Our university continues to grow. We have clearly established ourselves as one of the premier state universities in the country through the leadership of President Mark Welsh. Our program continues to grow in every aspect of its academic excellence. Our alumni network continues to pour in and show that Aggies will always take care of Aggies.

It's an exciting time to be the leader of this program. It's an exciting time to be at this university. I think all arrows are trending in a very positive direction for where this program is headed.

So we look forward to this year. We look forward to this season. Thank you for all you do covering SEC football and Texas A&M.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

**Q. What lessons did your team learn last season being so closest to the SEC Championship game?**

MIKE ELKO: I think you have to go through some of that sometimes. As painful as it is, as it was for us and our fans and everyone involved, we had never been in that position before. We had never been the hunted team. We had never been in November competing for an opportunity to get into Atlanta with our destiny in our own hands.

I think you learn how you have to elevate your game in those matchups when you become that team. Going on the road in back-to-back weeks, we didn't play the football that we needed to play to finish it. It's been our mantra the entire off-season. Mantras don't turn into wins. But I do believe our kids have a really strong chip on their shoulders to change that story and finish this thing the right way.

**Q. You brought up Marcel Reed in your opening statement. The players talked about his leadership development. From a player standpoint that's one thing, but as a coach, what have you seen from him that has given you encouragement?**

MIKE ELKO: I think Marcel is in a unique spot, right? He went through it last year as a first-time starter. He didn't go into the year as a starter. That makes it challenging to step into the huddle as a leader.

I think this year he goes into the often season clearly established as our starting quarterback. I think that allows him to really impact the team with his personality. He's an energetic personality. He's a guy that people want to play for and want to play with.

We had some success recruiting wide receivers in the transfer portal in large part because we encouraged them to come out to bowl practice and watch Marcel. They would come out and watch him, be like, I want to play with that guy.

I think he's a leader in his own way as he now steps into being the face of our program and the quarterback of our program.

**Q. You talk about the continuity and retention, not just with the players but the coaching staff. How does that compare throughout your coaching career? What benefit does that have for the team?**

MIKE ELKO: I think it's got a tremendous benefit. I think when you can keep familiarity within your program in the coaching world terminology, the way people coach, drill work, all of that I think helps. I think we were able to do that last year. That was really strong for us. We were able to add some staff in the off-season, which I think really has helped enhance what we're doing in our program, as well.

Obviously in order to become the program you want to become, we talked a lot about this, we had to stabilize it. We were able to put our entire roster together by the end of January last year. I think that's something that speaks volumes where our program is from a culture standpoint, how much belief and confidence I think people have where Texas A&M football is going.

**Q. You mentioned the experience of the team. Does it feel like an experienced team? What does that experience look like on the field?**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think it happens in two different ways. I think it feels like an experienced group in that they



go about their business, they know what the expectations are, they know what it takes to go out and be successful. So the work this off-season I think has been at a really high level because of that.

There's still another step, though. We have to take that experience and turn it into being really good football players, being technically sound, being fundamentally sound, going out and playing the game at the level that we can.

I think experience creates knowledge, but we've got to use that knowledge through the rest of the summer, through fall camp, then really every week in the season to go out and put the football product together that it needs.

Experience is a really good starting point, but if you don't utilize it the right way, it can be wasted.

**Q. Mario Craver, wide receiver that spent a year at Mississippi State, what did you see to add him to the roster? Also former Alabama tight end Amari Niblack?**

MIKE ELKO: I think with Mario, it was a kid who had exceptional speed. I think we saw that firsthand when we played them. You could feel his speed on the field. That was something that we really desperately wanted to go out and add.

I think he's done a really good job of going from a young, athletic freshman to maybe a more developed SEC receiver heading into year two. Excited for him.

Then Amari Niblack was an interesting one because he spent time with Coach Holmon Wiggins at Alabama. When he decided to enter the portal, there was some familiarity more so what he had done when he was at Alabama.

We feel like he's a hybrid kid that adds an awful lot of value in what he can do in the receiving game. He was a great addition for our program.

**Q. When you first took the job at Texas A&M, you referred to your program as the flagship program in the state of Texas. A lot of Texas fans took that as a slight. Were you considering the University of Texas when it comes to that title?**

MIKE ELKO: I don't think I was considering anything else. I wasn't comparing anything else. I was making a statement in regards to our role in impacting high school coaches in our state.

I think, like a lot of things, that maybe got misinterpreted.

**Q. Conference-wide question. SEC won 14 of 17 national titles for a stretch, built the brand into what it is. Two years in a row the Big Ten has won. How important is it to get that trophy back in the conference?**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think it's really important. I think we pride ourselves on being the premier league in college football. In order to do that, you have to be the last team standing at the end.

It's a gauntlet going into the SEC season. It's a gauntlet now getting through an expanded Playoff. I think our coaches now have a real good feel for what that is and what that takes.

I think that's something we have to really be focused on moving forward.

**Q. We talk about player growth from year one to year two. As you enter your second season, what are some areas that you're looking to refine yourself?**

MIKE ELKO: I think when you go into year two, you have such a better feel for the personalities of the team, how the team reacts to certain things. There's a lot of guesswork that goes into year one. You've never really been through it with those guys.

You may think they're responding a certain way, but you don't really know. You may be thinking this is the right way to message things, but you don't really know.

When you go into year two, you have such a better feel for the personalities of everybody in your building, coaches, players, everybody. I think there's a much better comfort from me in terms of how to lead not only the team but the program heading into year two.

**Q. Your opinion on the running back room. You have four guys all returning. Can you talk about the volume but also experience that they have and how each one provides a different element.**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think there's a lot of quality in that group. I think it starts with Le'Veon Moss, who is on his way to being the leading rusher in this conference, leading rushers in the nation last year. Big, powerful runner who probably has more track speed given the size and the way he runs the football.

Rueben Owens, unfortunately we didn't have at all last year. He's a dynamic player, good at the backfield catching the football. A lot of home run potential. I think he's really excited to be able to get out there at 100% and



show the college world what he's capable of.

Amari Daniels has been a talented back for us, our leading rusher at times. Two years ago he was our leading rusher. Certainly a kid that is capable of being a number one back in a lot of systems. We got to find ways to utilize him.

EJ Smith is going to have a huge year for us. He was a kid who was really beat up at times last year in the off-season and never really got the training and the preparation that he needed. He's been really healthy this off-season. I think that's going to kind of allow him to take his game to the next level.

We're talented with four backs. You need 'em because in this conference they go fast.

**Q. Jacoby Mathews is back in the SEC Now with Auburn. What do you remember about him and what do you see in him as a player?**

MIKE ELKO: Know Jacoby more from recruiting. Was there as the defensive coordinator when we recruited him. Didn't have much interaction when I came back as head coach and was at Duke the years he was at Texas A&M.

Good kid, good family. Certainly wish him nothing but the best at Auburn.

**Q. The Lone Star Showdown, this game is a long ways away. Now you have to go down to Austin to face the Longhorns. You how are you going to prepare for that Longhorn fandom?**

MIKE ELKO: I think there's a lot between now and then. I'll just say what I've said about that game. I think it's great that that game's back. I think with the way those two programs are operating and executing right now, that game's going to mean something at the end of the year. I think that's awesome for college football. I think it's awesome for the state of Texas. I think it's awesome for those two universities.

It's a great game, a great rivalry. We certainly look forward to the challenge.

**Q. Noah Thomas was your leading receiver last year. He moved to Athens. What is Kirby Smart getting in Noah?**

MIKE ELKO: Noah is a great kid. Nothing but respect for him. He's a play-maker. Has the ability to win contested catches. Great work ethic.

Happy for Noah that he's found a place that he's

comfortable. Certainly hope he has a great year this year.

**Q. You said in March that your young play-maker Terry Bussey is going to focus on being a wideout only. What kind of jump can we expect from him?**

MIKE ELKO: I think Terry is primed to have a really breakout year. I think we didn't get him midyear last year, so he didn't show up until around Memorial Day. He was injured a little bit when he got there. We had to get him healthy.

He then started on defense. We switched him to offense midway through camp. That's not really the recipe to become the best wide receiver you're capable of becoming.

Being a wide receiver this year, start to finish in the off-season, I think some refinement in his route running, the ability to truly understand what he can do and how to get him the football. I think you're going to see him take a really, really big jump this year.

**Q. I wanted to ask if you could share if there was a moment this off-season where you saw Marcel take ownership of being the starting quarterback?**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, probably started right when we got back for the spring semester. I think his wanting and desire to, one, get the receivers together to start working on the timing in the passing game, then his ability to want to get in with our offensive staff and kind of start going back through the playbook, back through the details of what we're doing schematically, starting to really lock in on the finer points of the scheme.

I think from the second he got back from his winter break, I think he stepped into the building as the guy who's going to be the starting quarterback.

Again, I think you're going to see a massive jump from him.

**Q. Texas was added to the SEC. Did that alter the way A&M recruits? You seem to be doing well in Georgia. Is that a by-product of your two years as head coach of Duke?**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think it's a little bit unique. I think a couple of ties in the area maybe from when I was at Duke.

I don't know that the first part of your question that that impacts anything. I said this last year. Texas A&M and Texas have been recruiting against each other for years, regardless of conference. I don't know that conference affiliation will ever impact that.



Obviously we take a lot of pride in our ability to go out and recruit the best players we can to Texas A&M. That's something you honestly have to do in order to be successful.

**Q. What did you learn about yourself as a head coach after that tremendous start, 7-1 last season, then the struggles after that?**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think you're always learning and growing and reflecting. Again, I just think it comes back to understanding what it is to be in that situation. I think you have to understand how to elevate your game at the right moment and the right time.

I think going on the road back to back after that LSU win, we just didn't elevate the right way. So I think how you prepare, how you prepare the team, the things that you do to get them ready to maybe get off to a faster start in those types of moments, those types of games, I think it all matters.

I think anytime you experience that, and unfortunately sometimes even more so when you experience failure, if you do it the right way, you learn and you grow and you come back a better coach and a better team, more ready to handle those types of situations in the future.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time.

MIKE ELKO: Awesome. Thank you guys.

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