

# Valero Alamo Bowl: Oklahoma vs Arizona

Thursday, December 7, 2023

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

**Jedd Fisch**

Arizona Wildcats

**Brent Venables**

Oklahoma Sooners

**Derrick Fox**

**Gary Simmons**

**Randy Smith**

Head Coaches Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Welcome to today's press conference here in San Antonio, sunny and 72 degrees. Today is the kickoff of our December events with the Security Service Insurance Golf Classic where all the proceeds benefit the Valero Alamo Bowl scholarship programs.

We have with us Valero Alamo Bowl president and CEO Derrick Fox, our Valero Alamo Bowl chair, Randy Smith. With Valero, executive vice president, chief operating officer Gary Simmons.

Representing our two participating universities, from our visiting team, Jedd Fisch, head coach from the University of Arizona. This year's home team, Brent Venables, head coach of the University of Oklahoma.

We will begin with opening remarks from Valero Alamo Bowl chair Randy Smith.

RANDY SMITH: Good morning. Thank you for joining us here today at the Security Service Insurance Golf Classic. We kick off a very exciting month of bowl activities, culminating on December 28th at the Alamodome where the No. 14 Arizona Wildcats will take on the No. 12 Sooners of Oklahoma.

We knew this was going to be special when we announced it on Sunday, and that has been validated by the last several days. Tremendous amount of media attention and fan interest. We've been ranked as the top bowl outside of



the New Year's Six. We believe this bowl will deliver on that yet again.

Our ability to bring such outstanding programs to San Antonio and to our community is a real testament to the community support that the bowl has received in its 30 plus years in San Antonio.

Valero was one of our original sponsors in 1993. 14 years later in 2007 stepped up to become our title sponsor and has been with us ever since. Just a ton of gratitude is always how I like to open these remarks, Gary, to you and Valero, all your teammates, for what happens for our community.

We'll so proud, you'll never hear me stop saying this, we are the No. 1 bowl in scholarship giving, period. That is something that would never happen without you, whether it's the Valero Alamo Bowl or the Valero Texas Open, Valero exemplifies the servant's part of San Antonio's community. We're very grateful.

With that I'll turn it over to you, Gary.

GARY SIMMONS: Thanks, Randy.

The Valero Alamo Bowl has been a game changer for the city of San Antonio. We're proud to be a part of that growth. We're certainly excited about the matchup between No. 14 Arizona, No. 12 Oklahoma, another top-15 matchup at the Valero Alamo Bowl.

We applaud the teams and their coaches and families for the exceptional effort during the year, all culminating in the memorable moment on December the 28th.

Many people will tune into ESPN Gameday to watch these two teams compete. It's equally rewarding to see the city of San Antonio become more alive with the teams and their fans here creating a very festive atmosphere for everyone.

Many thanks to the Valero Alamo Bowl team for all they do every year to make this event such a success.

I'll hand it to Derrick to introduce our coaches.



DERRICK FOX: Thank you for your support as always. It's fantastic. Without your support, we couldn't reach such highly ranked teams that excites the fan bases coming to San Antonio and turns on TV sets. Coaches, you've promised me backstage for an exciting game. Right, coaches (smiling)?

The Valero Alamo Bowl is certainly San Antonio's holiday tradition. When you have two outstanding programs and coaches like we do for this year's game, it's going to be another special night on December 28th.

On behalf of the Valero Alamo Bowl I'd like to welcome Coach Fisch and Coach Venables to San Antonio. Congratulations to both of you on the success. We appreciate you bringing your teams here for what is going to be a great bowl week.

First I'd like to introduce our University of Arizona head coach, Jedd Fisch. This is Coach Fisch's third season at the helm of the Wildcats. Over the past two seasons, Arizona has had one of the most explosive offenses in college football, finishing tied for 14th in the regular season with 72 plays of 20 yards plus in 2023, and finishing ninth in college football with 84 plays of 20 yards plus in 2022.

The Wildcats from 1-11 in 2022 to 9-3 in 2023, marking an eight-win improvement from 2021 to 2023, which is the largest win improvement in the span of two seasons in program history. If my math is right, 13. No pressure for you next year, coach.

Seriously, Coach Fisch and Arizona are building something special in Arizona. We certainly welcome them to San Antonio in this year's Valero Alamo Bowl, their first bowl trip since 2017. Looking to finish the season with 10 wins and a top 10 finish.

With that, Coach Fisch, on behalf of the Valero Alamo Bowl, we're excited to welcome you and the Wildcats back to the Valero Alamo Bowl for their second visit and the first time since 2010.

JEDD FISCH: Thank you, Derrick. Appreciate it very much. Thank you, Randy, and obviously Gary for putting this game on.

The Valero Alamo Bowl as we all know is one of the best bowl games in all of the bowl season. To be a part of it this year is a fantastic opportunity. To play a blue-blood program like Oklahoma, what Coach Venables has done there in a short period of time. We know we have our work cut out for us. 10-win team in 2023, another team that went up four wins from a year ago till today. We know both

of our teams are hopefully on the rise and continuing to build what we want to build, which is something special and sustainable.

I told our team we have a chance to play a team like Oklahoma in this bowl game, and that's a very, very special opportunity for our team.

We can't wait to get here a couple weeks away, three weeks away from kickoff. We're going to do everything we can to prepare our team and prepare our kids and hopefully give an incredible game to San Antonio.

DERRICK FOX: Now let's talk to the University of Oklahoma head coach Brent Venables. In Coach Venables' second year leading this program, OU finished with a 10-2 regular season record, a No. 12 ranking, has displayed a potent offensive attack that has the Sooners ranked third nationally in points per game and fifth in yards per game. On defense, OU ranks first among Power Five teams with 19 interceptions.

This is the second bowl game as head coach, but the 34th bowl game in his coaching career, including three national championship victories.

This is the second bowl game appearance in San Antonio having coached in the 1998 Valero Alamo Bowl for Kansas State with legendary coach Coach Bill Snyder.

Coach Venables, on behalf of the Valero Alamo Bowl, we are thrilled to welcome the Sooners back to San Antonio since 2021 in the victory over Oregon. I'll turn it over to you for your opening statement.

BRENT VENABLES: Thank you, Derrick and Gary and Randy. As well, I would like to reiterate what Coach Fisch said, what an amazing venue this is, a fantastic bowl game experience, as good as there is in college football.

I've been to San Antonio several times throughout the last 25 years. Obviously it was here back in 1998 with the Wildcats, firsthand experience as a young coach, the quality of a bowl game experience that y'all have put on.

The San Antonio community is a community that's passionate and connected, supportive in every way. Been here to several events throughout the years. Certainly we came and competed in a Big 12 championship here against the University of Missouri back in 2007, as well. Then two years ago, seemed like it was last week, to watch Oklahoma and Oregon compete.

The atmosphere, the intensity, the passion, the support was again, having been to several bowl games throughout



the years, as good as I've been around.

I'd like to congratulate again Coach Fisch and his staff, his football team. There's nobody in college football right now that's playing better football the last half of the season than the University of Arizona. Six-game win streak. That's hard to do. They've done it against really quality opponents, a lot of people we've got great respect for, whether it's UCLA, their crosstown rival, or certainly what they were able to do to Utah just a few weeks ago, led by Fifita, redshirt freshman quarterback that was Player of the Year in the conference.

Receivers, you have one over 700 yards, one 1,300 yards. Running backs averaging seven yards a carry. Defensively top 25 in scoring defense. They've just done an amazing job efficiency-wise and building the team the right way.

Our players recognize that. They have a good sneak peek at Arizona. Again in one of the best conferences in college football this season. They placed third and had an opportunity, was a really miracle they didn't win another game or two that came right down to the last play of the game. We got great respect, admiration.

We're going to have to be well-prepared. This is a team that's going to be hungry, going to be focused. Again, as coach said, they're looking forward to having an opportunity to match up against us and vice versa.

This is, again, one that for us in building our program the right way, everything matters. This is another opportunity for us to improve. We'll have an opportunity to play several guys maybe making their first starts of the season in this game to show our competitive depth. Great opportunity for us not only to finish the season the right way against another quality opponent by moving and with transitions into the SEC, an opportunity for us to continue to prepare and build our program.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

**Q. Coach Fisch, how big of an advantage is it for you to be playing in front of a San Antonio audience?**

JEDD FISCH: In our transition from the Pac-12 to the Big 12, it's really important for us to start making more of a presence in Texas. If you look at our team, we have five players on our roster from Texas. We know that as the years progress, starting next year when we'll be playing in the Big 12, we're going to have to add more players from Texas into our program. We'll have more of a recruiting opportunity because of the fact that we'll be playing in the state against TCU and Baylor and Houston and Texas

Tech.

It will probably be a kickoff for us into the Big 12, this game, and really being able to see and show our players and let the state of Texas see the type of energy that our players play with, and hopefully the high school coaches in the state will be excited about sending their players to us.

**Q. Brent, Dillon Gabriel, what can you tell us about his plans, what can you tell us about your conversations with him? Is he going to be able to participate in the Valero Alamo Bowl or is that strictly Jackson Arnold at this point?**

BRENT VENABLES: That hasn't been finalized yet. I'll comment on that when it's the appropriate time.

Dillon has been amazing. He's obviously played his best football this year. We wouldn't have put ourselves in this position and had the kind of success we did, certainly the turnaround we did from year one to year two, without Dillon, his leadership, his commitment. He made everybody around him better.

Really, really thankful and proud of Dillon. He's going to have, whatever is next for him, I promise you, he's going to have his hands all over it. It's going to be a really successful transition for him.

**Q. Coach Venables, for Arizona, one of their biggest turnarounds is on the defensive side of the ball. As a defensive coach, what stands out to you about what they're able to do there?**

BRENT VENABLES: They play with incredible passion and energy. I think No. 5 leads the Pac-12 in tackles. He's just disruptive, always around the football. They play with great confidence. They know what they're doing. They're very well-coached, fundamentally sound. You're going to have to earn everything that you get.

**Q. Brent, I wanted to ask about the challenge of player exemption this time of year with all the guys who either enter the portal or make decisions about their NFL future. Does that make things difficult in terms of picking up where you left off from the gains you made defensively this year especially?**

BRENT VENABLES: I don't know if it makes things difficult. I think it gives guys opportunity. This is college football. You can't keep guys forever.

Sometimes people on the outside look at change as a bad thing. I look at it just as opportunity. I think we've talked about since the Big 12 Media Day back in August, we've



promoted the competitive depth that we have, that we've improved from where we were again a year ago at this time.

This is an opportunity for that to show and give guys an opportunity going into the 2024 season experience and confidence and all of those things that they'll gain through three weeks of practices and an opportunity to compete again in a game.

**Q. Brent, what conversations have you maybe had with Danny? I know it's been reported that he let you guys know he's headed to the NFL. Have you had those conversations? What was that like?**

BRENT VENABLES: Yeah, everything has its time. Whenever Danny is prepared to let everybody know what his future is going to look like, out of respect for him, I'll reserve comment for that moment in time.

But all that being said, Danny had an amazing year, as good of a leader as we have on our team, as good of a leader as I've been around. His passion, love, his respect that he has for his teammates and his teammates have for him.

Leadership, I've never looked at it as a position. I think it's about action. He's represented everything that you would want from a leader. He's made everybody around him better. There's not a player in our locker room that loves the University of Oklahoma and respects his opportunity and what this has meant for him and his life more than Danny Stutsman.

I have great thankfulness and appreciation for everything that Danny represents and what he's done to help us the last two years.

**Q. Coach Fisch, in all your stops, have you ever coached in the Alamodome or against Coach Venables?**

JEDD FISCH: I have coached in the Alamodome, it was a pre-season game of the Houston Texans versus the Dallas Cowboys I think in 2003. That was the last time I've been in the Alamodome.

Have not had an opportunity to coach against Coach Venables, but I've certainly admired him from afar and admired the defense that he's always put out there. You always know you're going to get an opportunistic defense. They lead the country in interceptions. You're going to get a defense that is going to be very hard to figure out their blitz patterns and their schemes.

I have a ton of respect for him, for Oklahoma. Oklahoma has won 10 games or more 19 of the last 23 years. We've won 10 games three times in a hundred years. So Oklahoma football, something I look up to.

I do know Coach Stoops. He introduced me to my wife in 2000 at the AFCA coaches convention. That's about the extent of my real experiences with Oklahoma. But I certainly have a ton of respect for them.

**Q. Brent, you're on the road this time of year, there's recruiting, portal, player retention. How much more of a challenge is bowl season now in knowing who you're going to be bringing with you?**

BRENT VENABLES: It's all hard. I say this all the time, but it's all good, it does present many challenges. But whatever challenges it presents Oklahoma, it presents the same thing for everybody else in college football. So I love a challenge.

I'm a competitive person by nature. We're all for the most part, some people would probably beg to differ, but we play by the same rules. In some ways right now there are no rules (smiling). I say that tongue-in-cheek.

It's a very hectic time, but I rely on our staff. We have a wonderful support staff, really connected full-time staff. Again, there's several things going on right now with our current roster, just like everybody else's rosters. Many things you've planned on.

We've had a handful of players that are 'in the portal'. We look at them as seniors, as graduates, as guys that weren't going to be part of our program after this season. The only thing you don't know is whether or not they're going to try to go to the NFL or they're going to try to decide to use that additional year of eligibility somewhere else. You do have to make adjustments, if you will, when it comes to your depth. That's a real thing.

But other than that, I love putting puzzles, the pieces of the puzzle, together. I've always really enjoyed that. Try to find great people. That's exciting to me. I've got amazing appreciation, thankfulness and respect for what it means to be the head football coach at the University of Oklahoma and the excellence it's represented for over a hundred years.

Every decision I make, when it comes to our current roster, potentially a new player that we're going to bring into our program, I know everybody's counting on me to make a right decision.

I love that. I love relationships. I love finding great people



that also align in the values and the respect and appreciation for all the great things that Oklahoma has to offer.

For the next month, it's kind of like Christmas every day. It really is. I say that. There's a lot of work that goes into it, as Coach Fisch can attest to, as well.

But it's a little less work than we had a year ago at this time. Not much. We'll probably end up signing, give or take, around 35 to 37 new scholarship players. A year ago we signed 42 scholarship players we brought in in January. Close to another transformation. Similar. Quite a bit less when it comes to the transfer portal.

We'll look to sign, give or take, around 27 high school players. I think 20 of them will be midyear. That's really exciting for me. We'll have, give or take, 28, 29 midyear players when we start in January.

**Q. Coach Fisch, you come in on a hot streak, wins over four ranked teams, a win over another school in Tempe. How does it feel coming into this bowl game with everything clicking? Also, how do you let the guys have a little fun while they're here in San Antonio?**

JEDD FISCH: They can have fun on the 29th (smiling). No, I always tell them... That was a Coach Belichick line. Thanksgiving, Christmas, that happens in the spring (laughter).

We'll do our best to make it an incredible experience. We only have eight players on our roster that have ever played in a bowl game. That's out of 110 players. All eight of them are transfers. This is a brand-new experience for a majority of our team. It's a brand new experience for our players.

We want to make sure that our players understand it is a privilege to play in a bowl game. It is a celebration of a job well done. To be able to be at this bowl game, the Valero Alamo Bowl, this is a wonderful opportunity for our guys to experience San Antonio, to experience some of the great joys of being here, the history of the Alamo, to be able to learn a little bit about a new area. We're going to try to do our best to really show them the culture here the best we can.

In the end, we're here to play a football game. We're here to play a football game against a team that has historically won seven national championships. We understand and recognize this great challenge. We're going to try to balance the challenge of competition with the balance of joy.

During that time, hopefully we can get them both done.

**Q. Brent, can you help me sort of understand the Dillon departure? This appears to be a decision that was made even before the season started, decision to move ahead with Jackson going forward. It's sort of a unique situation. Can you shed some light on that?**

BRENT VENABLES: The only thing I would say, it didn't have anything to do with Jackson. I think Dillon had every intention to go to the NFL. In his mind, this was going to be his last season. He's going to have a great year, put himself in a position to go chase his dreams in the NFL. He's the best person to testify in regards to how he came to the decision to play another year collegiately.

But quite frankly, we did plan, again going into the '24 season, without Dillon Gabriel. Dillon, I think one of the things that he'll comment about is he went through something similar at UCF with a quarterback there. He knows the uniqueness of the situation.

Dillon knows certainly he was more than welcome to stay, continue to compete, be the quarterback at the University of Oklahoma. But that's just what decision he came to.

Like I said, he would be the best person to really go into more depth and detail about what all went into that.

**Q. What is your most vivid early memory from your childhood of a bowl game that made you fall in love with this time of year in college football?**

JEDD FISCH: I would say it was actually funny, we were talking about it last night at dinner, that the Penn State-Miami bowl game of the Orange Bowl in 1987, or Fiesta Bowl, excuse me, the national championship game.

I remember being at my grandmas and grandpas house in Florida. I was 10 years old. I remember watching that game on TV. They lived in south Florida, so there was a big Miami contingency. That was a bunch of interceptions, Vinny Testaverde. I think it was 14-10, something to that effect. Miami had a chance to win the game all the way at the end. Penn State won the national championship that year.

But I think I fell in love with the game and the idea of one day dreaming to be able to coach in one of those games, I think it was that bowl game right there.

BRENT VENABLES: I'm going to fast forward to my first bowl game experience, first time I was away from home for Christmas 1993. It was in the Aloha Bowl at Kansas State.

I was a student assistant, Boston College, coach Tom Coughlin, Mike Mamula, future first-rounder for Boston College, our team at Kansas State.

I just remember as the first bowl game being away from home for the first time at Christmas, calling on a pay phone - we didn't have cell phones - wanting to know what's going on back home.

But the enrichment that you get out of every bowl game, I've been fortunate to be in a bowl game every year since. All the memories that you have from a player standpoint. Nothing means more or nothing lasts longer, makes more of an imprint than winning the game. That's probably what you value the most in all those bowl games.

But then now you fast forward, we're coaches and we're dads. It's funny to hear that fans have an interest in which bowl game we're going to go to, the players already have an incredibly vested interest in the bowl game. The coaches' kids have a vested interest in the play parks, the hotel, the pool, the weather, do we have a beach. Is it Orlando, San Antonio, River Walk? You get the thumbs up, the official approval from the coaches' kids.

Derrick, we'll close the press conference.

DERRICK FOX: Just want to thank both these coaches, done a tremendous job with both these programs, definitely trending in the right direction. You look at what they've both accomplished this year, harken back to last year, springboard not only into spring ball, but also next season is really important.

I was actually texting with Coach Devore and Coach Sark. A year ago you were here, now they're in the semifinals. Just give you an advanced premonition of what you're looking forward to next year. Can't guarantee you'll match up against each other...

Coaches, you've done a tremendous job. Great leaders of young men which is so important on and off the field. We appreciate you taking the time. As you've heard today, their time is so valuable, they have so many things going on. To be here today is really important to us. We thank you for doing that. We can't thank you enough for bringing your teams to the Valero Alamo Bowl. We guarantee we're going to make sure your student-athletes have a great experience, will be talking about this for the rest of their lives.

Special thanks to Gary and Valero making this possible. Without you, we're nothing.

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