

# TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Duke vs Ole Miss

Wednesday, January 1, 2025

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

## Coach Lane Kiffin

Ole Miss Rebels

## Coach Manny Diaz

Duke Blue Devils

Coaches Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Hi, everybody. Happy new year. Good to see everybody. My name is Dan Hicken. It's a great time, great new year. Driving in, I cursed at somebody, some road rage, and I ate a doughnut this morning. So I'm 0 for 2 on the resolutions. Off to a good start, right?

It's good to be here. Welcome to our fireside chat and press conference here at the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. Good to have all of you here, and a great audience. Great to see a lot of folks, a lot of green jackets, our corporate partners and our friends and Duke and Ole Miss, want to welcome them as well to our city in Jacksonville.

Want to let you guys know our event today is sponsored by Memory Lane. Memory Lane digitized our historic Gator Bowl footage in preparation for tomorrow's special 80th anniversary game. You'll be seeing that on the Jumbotron throughout the game tomorrow.

This is the first-ever meeting between Duke and Ole Miss. Let's start with Coach Manny Diaz, also Coach Lane Kiffin from Ole Miss.

Let's have a seat, talk some ball, talk some stuff. A lot of people may not know, Coach Kiffin, that you have a history with Jacksonville. In 2000 you were here with the Jacksonville Jaguars. Talk about that memory.

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I was. It was interesting coming over the bridge today. First time I've ever been back. I was here as a young quality control coach with Tom Coughlin. Dom Capers was the defensive coordinator that I worked for.

It was a really neat year here, and great place to be back to.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Diaz, we were talking just a moment ago, college football is so chock-full of -- the rules change every day it seems. I think about you guys and I think as football coaches, there must be such a great moment where you can finally just go on the grass and be with your teams and coach football, which is really what you guys want to do.

But the way the landscape is changing, every day, every month, every year, just talk a little bit about that and talk about the part that you guys love the most, which is coaching ball.

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, on the side of our door, it does say football coach, and that's probably the thing we get to do the least.

Being a head coach and then not being a head coach for two years and then becoming a head coach again, it was amazing how in just 24 months the job description completely flipped on its head with all the things going on, but you have to adapt or you will be left behind.

But to get around our guys, to be able to coach the team game day, I think as competitors, I think that's what we all love.

I do have to add one funny story to Lane in Jacksonville. In 2000, I'm at NC State, and our offensive coordinator is Norm Chow, and Norm gets the offensive coordinator job at USC for Pete Carroll, and he's going to bring me, potentially, as his tight end coach.

I'm a defensive GA, and you're just trying to get a break. You don't know if you're ever going to get hired in this profession. Norm tells me he's talked to Pete and he thinks he's got Pete convinced to hire me, but there's one last guy he wants to check with. There's a quality control coach at Jacksonville, but he thinks he wants to stay in the NFL, and if he stays in the NFL then I will be an offensive coach at Southern Cal at that time.

We've been connected from afar. I don't think I've ever told you that story, but it's pretty damn funny.



LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I never knew that story. Crazy how things work. I had a little advantage. My dad and Pete went a long ways back. Kind of a trump card there on you.

THE MODERATOR: Coaching is such a fraternity. You guys all know each other and know if you don't know the person, then you know someone who knows somebody.

You've done both professional and college, obviously you love the college game. Talk a little bit about that, and kind of talk about what Coach Diaz was talking about in terms of the coaching part versus the constant, constant rule changes going on in our game.

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, it's changed, like Manny talked about. Just a few years ago to now has completely changed. Now I have a roster as they come out in the morning for breakfast, okay, making sure he's not in the portal, he's not in the portal, he's not opted out. I'm just happy if they're out there now every day. It's totally changed. The schedule has changed. It is what it is.

On Coach Diaz, have great respect. Even though we've never worked together, always have looked at his defense as very aggressive. He's been able to go in wherever he has and immediately change their defense statistically and how hard they play, and now he's got a whole team doing it as a head coach.

THE MODERATOR: The game within the game, we're excited about watching your defense versus Coach Kiffin's offense, to see the two chess masters go at it. Talk about the football game itself.

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, he mentioned our defense, and one of our hallmarks is creating negative plays. So that's something we tracked year to year. And I think Lane is turning into a defensive genius himself. His defense -- Pete does a great job, but his defense and what they've done this year are almost historical numbers in terms of disruption of tackle for losses and sacks.

It's hard to put on the bowl banner come for the TFLs, stay for the warm weather. That's kind of what we have here. Offensively, of course, I've always had a lot of respect for Lane, very creative. I think what we want to be defensively is what he is offensively, which is always in attack mode, always trying to get other teams out of their comfort zone.

And I think that's one of the more difficult things about the game, is when you have two teams that are trying to attack, who's really dictating the terms.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, you've got a special

relationship with your quarterback, and you have had a great quarterback room while you've been at Ole Miss. Talk about Jaxson and what he's meant to your program as you have had two great years in a row with him.

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, Jaxson has been an amazing leader to come in over the three years, set a bunch of school records, I think most wins and most yards and those things.

But his impact and his legacy that he leaves in the younger players is amazing, and the younger quarterbacks.

He's been great. I think a lot of these games, non-playoff games, we see so many players opt out of playing that are going to be draft picks, and I think for him to come out right away and saying he's playing impacted a lot of our other players. I think a lot of times nowadays would have opted out to prepare for the draft.

He's amazing.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Diaz, you guys started great, had a tough loss with SMU, lost the next one but got them rolling again. How did you accomplish that?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, my first go-around at Duke, you realize these are not normal guys. I've been blessed to coach at some really, really awesome programs and schools. The kids that Duke attracts are just -- they're just unique. You can't get into Duke without having the ideal of hard work, discipline, sacrifice. You had to have that -- and as coaches, a lot of times we're the first person ever to instill that in the people we get to coach, and that's one of the fun parts of our job.

At Duke you don't have to worry about that. Our guys are extraordinarily resilient. They're very mentally tough. We had a great record this year in one-score games and coming from behind. They don't flinch, they just come in every day. It sounds almost like a cliché thing a coach would say, but our guys don't have bad days. They want to be coached. They want to get after it. It's been one of my most rewarding years as a coach because of who we are every day.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to open it up to some media. Anybody who has any questions for Coach Diaz or Coach Kiffin?

**Q. To both coaches and whoever wants to jump in first, the climate of college football with the portal, with opting out, it's been termed sometimes by people like me as a Wild, Wild West situation. Do you think that -- to solidify things, do you think that college football**



**needs a commissioner of sorts, some overseeing power that maybe can bring a little stability to this? One of the names I've seen floated for this is Nick Saban. What's your feelings on that?**

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, there needs to be something, as you mentioned. Wild, Wild West, it's just kind of all over the place, and the schedule, and for coaches to deal with players going in the portal.

I mentioned it before, like Manny's situation, here goes your quarterback in the portal. We're still playing. You would never create a system in professional sports that has things figured out that would have free agency right at the end of the regular season before the postseason.

With all the tampering that's been talked about and stuff and all that, it puts in the kids' heads during the season that they're going other places.

There's a lot of problems, a lot of issues. You mentioned Coach Saban. I can't imagine there being a better person that genuinely has the best interest for the game and the kids. He always has. He's always been old school that way. There couldn't be a better person than him to do it.

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, I agree. I think we're pretending we're still a one-semester sport. Today is January 1st. This is usually when the last day of the football season took place, and movement at mid-year was because people want to be there for the spring semester.

I've been an advocate that we need to go to an NFL calendar, we need to get rid of spring football and move into early summer OTAs and mini-camps. We don't have to invent this. The league has already figured it out.

It's ludicrous, like Lane said, to have player movement while the season is going on. And the only reason that is the case is because kids want to be at the spring semester at their next stop. And why do they want to be there for the spring? They want to be there for spring practice.

So if we can take away the incentive to move mid-term, we can finish the season.

Penn State played last night. They have played three games since we played our final regular season game. And if all things go well for them, they will play two more games, all the way to January 20th. We're a spring sport now. We need to just act like that.

The last thing I'll say on the commissioner, I agree, I think Coach Saban would be phenomenal as commissioner. But it doesn't matter who the commissioner is, you have to give

the guy power. And right now the power is with the leagues. And if everybody wants to get in the sandbox and play nice and let someone be in charge of it, that would be best thing. Right now no one is showing that they're willing to let somebody create consensus, and I think that's what's hurting our game.

THE MODERATOR: You have so many different people governing your game right now, commissioners, conferences --

MANNY DIAZ: Which means no one is.

**Q. You brought up how active Coach is on Twitter. Do you actually tweet your tweets or does somebody else do it? What's the inspiration behind it? Is it what's keeping you young?**

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I think just on Twitter, I've always just kind of thought of myself as a normal person. Maybe I shouldn't have, and I just kind of tweet like normal people do, not like a head coach. I know that's not ideal sometimes.

Usually our fan base loves it. Our university loves it and everyone else hates it. Kind of is what it is. But I think it's actually fun to watch the interaction of fans and going back and forth.

Yeah, I do those most of the time. A lot of times people just send -- friends of mine or people send me something and they know I'm going to re-tweet it. It is what it is. It's kind of fun, and I think it's taken too serious a lot of times.

**Q. I'd just like to give Coach Diaz a chance -- when we had the opening teleconference a couple days after selection day, you talked at length about Kendy Charles, and I wanted to give you another chance to brag on the local kid from Orange Park High School. He told me that he had four good years at Liberty, got his degree, but he was looking for a fit for his skills, and he said he scouted the teams he might go to, and when he saw that you were going to Duke, he kind of was gravitating towards that situation. Why do you think Kendy has been a fit for Duke and why Duke was a good fit for Kendy?**

MANNY DIAZ: Well, what we saw on film when he was at Liberty was that he was very active in our defense, very similar, again, to the numbers that Ole Miss has put up this year. We value change of direction, movement skills, and guys that can finish plays in the backfield. You can't be where we are in tackles for losses unless you get your feet across the line of scrimmage.

I think that system fits Kendy very well. There's a very particular guy we look for with our defensive tackle play, but it's wild because I think about it, it was almost a year to the day when we really were going hard after Kendy, and in this crazy world of portal, it's like speed dating. So to assess how people are going to be a perfect fit when you're really recruiting maybe over a 72-hour period is about how it went.

But I'll say Kendy on our team has really bonded with our guys. I think as great as he's been for Duke, I think Duke has been great for him, as well. He's got the respect of everybody in our locker room.

THE MODERATOR: What's it like for you guys when the season ends? You have to re-recruit your players; you're recruiting high school players; you're paying attention to the portal. You talked about the NFL model, and it seems like that's where we're headed. Do you think that, as well? Do you think that's the way to go, Lane?

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I do. There's so many problems within that, as you talk about. You're basically a lot of times renegotiating with your own players as the season is going on at the end because you're trying to get them locked down before the portal starts, and then you've got other players coming in, and they're visiting places. And you're still playing.

We've even had kids go in that we've still let play in the game because they're still part of the game. First off, it's not the kids' fault. It's the system's fault. Sometimes you can get upset with the kids. It's not their fault at all.

We've actually had kids that play in the game that miss practice to go visit other schools and come back to practice, come back to the game. If you think of it that way, what a broke system it is, or broke schedule. We're just all trying to manage through it, but it's really -- it definitely needs to be fixed.

**Q. Do y'all go over the playbook every practice, or do you all just go over it one day a week?**

MANNY DIAZ: That's an awesome question. I don't know how you operate, I don't like playbooks. I'm not even a big believer in playbooks. I think they're kind of archaic. Chase, your generation learns from a lot of other places other than books. We do a lot of teaching through video and PowerPoints and things like this.

I would hope, I would imagine for his bunch, as well, by the time any good team -- you do things repetitively again and again, you don't have to look at your playbook. It's like reading music. You know how to play the songs. And we

get to have a show tomorrow and we just get to play our music together.

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think a lot of people think the playbook still exists like that. Like Coach Diaz says, a lot of stuff is now just on their iPads. A lot of different walk-through. Kids learn now differently, I think, than they used to. They struggle to pay attention very long. We end up going outside a lot and just going on the grass.

THE MODERATOR: True story, Coach Kiffin, you may not know this, and I assume you do this all the time, but when you were at Alabama and you were the OC, were at the SEC Championship game. You played Florida one year, I think. And Coach Kiffin oftentimes, when he sees a play unfold in front of him and he knows it works, he'll celebrate, like he's got hand in the air or whatever, throw the -- but you always left your binder -- not a binder, but it's like laminated, like four or five pages of plays or whatever, and I was out there doing live shots after the game and I looked at it and I said, oh, this is Coach Kiffin's. I took it. It's a nice souvenir in my house, so I appreciate that. Thank you.

LANE KIFFIN: By the way, I put my hands up a lot back then, and then they just would catch when it would work. A lot of times we'd throw an interception and they just wouldn't show it. So I'd do that like 20 times a game just hoping that maybe it'll work.

**Q. Coach Diaz, with this being your first bowl appearance as Duke's head coach, what does this opportunity mean for you and your team?**

MANNY DIAZ: Well, it's a big deal for Duke, our first time at the Gator Bowl, playing in a New Year's Day or a January 2nd game in Florida. We became bowl eligible midway through the season. I told the guys, the more you win, the warmer the destination, and the better team you're going to play. I didn't think they were listening to me, but fortunately they were. We got to a much better destination and an outstanding opponent.

I think it's what we need for our program, though, is to -- I'm sure, like everybody, our goal is to be in the College Football Playoff. We saw how close we were against one of our opponents that made the playoff, so we're telling our guys, if that's where we're headed for next year, if you show up, guess who you're going to find. You're going to find a team just like the one we're going to play tomorrow.

It's a great challenge to see how we would be on that stage, and it's in a great setting to be here. The week, the hospitality of the bowl has been first class, and our players

have really noticed a difference of what it means to come to the Gator Bowl and what happens when you win enough big-time games, you go to a big-time location, and they've felt that all week.

**Q. First meeting between Duke and Ole Miss, but Coach Diaz, this isn't your first time going against Ole Miss, having spent some time in Starkville. How does it feel for you to reignite your personal rivalry against Ole Miss?**

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, there's no egg up here, I noticed.

Yeah, had two crazy games in the Egg Bowl. The visiting team won both. I'm aware of how football is in that state, and also even more respect for what Lane has built, building, and to win consistently in that state. Certainly know the fan base as being passionate, and we expect that to be in full force tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Great stuff. Appreciate it. Ole Miss and Duke coming up tomorrow. Nice round of applause for these two men. Busy days ahead. Congratulations to both, and good luck tomorrow.

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