

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Monday, July 22, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

SMU Mustangs

Coach Rhett Lashlee

Press Conference

RHETT LASHLEE: On behalf of our president, R. Gerald Turner, David Miller, our board chair, and our many great Board of Trustees members. Our athletics director, Rick Hart. I can say on behalf of all of us we're excited to be here at ACC media days, a part of the league.

I want to thank Jim Phillips and the team here for believing in our program, welcome us into the league. It's been fantastic.

We start 48 hours from now practicing, week zero game. We're back and forth. Our whole staff is at the THSCA convention in San Antonio. As y'all probably know, high school football in the state of Texas is as good as it is anywhere. We were there yesterday and heading back for tomorrow from some speaking engagements with over 18,000 high school coaches, and then our season is off and running.

Just an exciting time at SMU. We have so much momentum behind our program. We feel like we belong at this level. We're excited and humbled to be here back on the national stage where our program has been before.

I like our team. I feel like we have a team that's going to compete very, very well. We're excited to get out there and really just see where we stand.

Got four great guys with me here today. Love their character, their competitive character. Preston Stone, quarterback, won numerous state titles in high school.

Kevin Jennings, our quarterback, won (audio interference)state title of an DISD school in over 60 years. Won the conference championship game for us last year as the starting quarterback.

R.J. Maryland, freshman All-American tight end for us. Was All-Conference last year. Excited about him going into his junior year.



And then Elijah Roberts, knew him for a while back in the days at Miami. Columbus High School, had a big-time year for us last year. We're excited those four guys are here.

Answer any questions y'all have.

Q. What do you feel like it means to your program? Last year had you a great year; now you're in a Power Four conference. What does that mean to you and this program?

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, it's hard to put into words. It means a lot to our program. It means a whole lot to our school.

Like I said, I've said this a bunch lately, I feel like the fan base, the SMU family, so many people that have supported our program for years, maybe we have a different level of gratitude and appreciation for this moment. We were on this stage many years in the southwest conference, won over 11 conference championships, three national titles, had a rich history and tradition.

To have had that and lost it, now to have it back. I don't think there's any question our school, and we believe our program right in the heart of Dallas belongs on the national stage. We're humbled and grateful for the opportunity to be back.

It means a lot for our team, our players, to do it in a way we did. In the last five years nobody has won more games in the state of Texas than SMU football, won a conference championship, finished ranked last season. So we feel like we're coming in on a high note.

Like I said, we're going to gain a lot from being in this conference, and I also think we're going to add a lot of value to the conference, as well.

Q. You have two quarterbacks who shined last year. How do you plan on utilizing them for you're best success, in order for their talents to shine through?

RHETT LASHLEE: That's a great question.



There's a reason both Preston and Kevin are here today. They both earned the right to be here. I think what Preston did as a first-year starter, 11-2 as a starter, was playing his best football when he got injured late in the season.

Kevin stepped in, his first career start, wins a conference championship game for us on the road in a fairly convincing fashion.

Both guys have some different strengths, but they have a skill set that fits our offense well. We had to have both of those guys to win a conference championship last year. There's no question in my mind for us to be successful, we got to have both of them this year. Just thankful they're both here.

Q. With Elijah back, you added so many new faces from the power ranks to the defensive line room, what does that room look like for Coach Thibodeaux? How is the rotation going to go throughout the course of a season?

RHETT LASHLEE: The great thing about it is, our program, we try to build on healthy competition. It's one of our core values. We talk a lot about competing with each other, not against each other.

Just like having both Preston and Kevin here, it makes everybody better. It is the same thing on the defensive line. We know making this transition, the O-line and D-line are going to be critical for how well and how fast we transition.

I think 13 of our 20 transfers were O- and D-linemen. You look at the D-line specifically, obviously Elijah had that year last year, but we're arguably six deep, three on each side, that are guys that we feel can compete and play at a starter competition level.

I think the competition is only going to make those guys better and gives you depth to be fresh throughout the season. Same thing in defensive tackles, where we lost the most out of last year's roster. Iron sharpens iron. We don't hide from competition in our program. We embrace it because we know we make each other better.

Q. You mentioned how you feel like you deserve to be in the power four. Is there a sense of straddling the line of we deserve to be here but also not forgetting what got you guys to this point in terms of on-the-field success?

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, I mean, I think if I'm understanding your question correctly, we do feel like we

earned our way to this opportunity. We understand it's a different opportunity. We're moving up in weight class. To play 10 straight power games, we haven't done that in almost 30 years at our program. There's going to be some changes there.

Like I said earlier, I feel confident we have a team that's going to compete. What does that look like? I don't know. We're excited to get out and see where we stand. Nothing better than the first two games, two teams that played for the championship last year, Florida State and Louisville.

I do think there's also a level to understanding what got us here and understanding our identity. You're always evolving. We have a veteran team coming back. We have a lot of guys who were on the team that know what it takes to win a championship and to win a lot of close games and to win at the level we were last year. I think that will serve us really well in this transition.

Q. What does 'accomplish greatness' mean to you?

RHETT LASHLEE: I think 'accomplish greatness' to me means putting yourself on that national stage to compete for the championship. That's it. I think that's the beauty of being in this conference, is it gives us a chance to week in, week out play on a national stage. If you win our league or make the conference championship game in our league, you're more than likely going to be in that 12-team playoff. That gives you a chance to accomplish that kind of greatness, which most time in our sport is measured by championships.

Q. I talked to Kevin and also Elijah. They talked about trust and transparency. Being the new kid on the block is not the easiest thing. With this newness, what would you say is your program's pillars and coaching pillars so we can be familiar with them?

RHETT LASHLEE: Thanks for the question.

That's awesome to hear that's what those guys said. I mean, that's what I believe in. I was taught a long time ago Pat Sullivan you always tell the truth, even if you tell somebody something they don't want to hear. We don't have a lot of sayings and slogans in our place because I would forget them, not emphasize them enough, and then they don't mean anything.

But we do have a few, and it starts with family. That means relationships. It's not just a buzz word. We try to live it.

With a hundred-something guys, that looks different to everybody, but I do think the majority of our guys know we

care about them first. If they don't know we care about them, it's going to limit what we can accomplish and their goals.

I mentioned earlier competitive excellence is number two. We believe you're always competing and competition brings out the best in everybody if it's done in a healthy way. We stress that.

We believe in hard work and discipline. That's the third one. And then the fourth one is we believe in finishing. I think finishing is a quality that's important for everyone. When I came back, that was one of the things we wanted our program to be known for.

We were 7-1 the last two years. I'd like to think it's because the guys have bought into having a finishing mindset and those kind of things.

That's the long and short of it. When it comes to playing, we want to play fast and physical, aggressive. We're going to have fun, be fun to watch. Hopefully that means we win a lot of games.

I'll say this, I challenged Mike Norvell to a game of college football. I don't know if he's going to do it. That would be great TV, right? Maybe that decides who wins the toss or something September 28th.

THE MODERATOR: It is officially out there now. Thank you for that.

RHETT LASHLEE: You're on the spot, Mike (laughter).

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