

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Tuesday, July 22, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

SMU Mustangs

Coach Rhett Lashlee

Kevin Jennings

Isaiah Nwokobia

Logan Parr

Press Conference



We've got some incredible student-athletes with us here today. We've got Kevin Jennings, Logan Parr, Isaiah Nwokobia and even Alex Kilgore representing our team. Man, they're fun to coach. The character they have. They're always giving back to our community. They're always thinking of others. They make it a lot of fun to coach. It's a great time to be at SMU. We're excited about that.

When it comes to the ACC, there's no question our league has separated itself as one of the top three leagues in America. The data speaks for itself, whether it's the revenue generation that we did this past year. I know the commissioner spoke to three leagues how to network. Our network five years in is thriving and does a great job covering us. Three leagues had multiple CFP participants this year. We were one of them.

I think sometimes -- you know, I was fortunate to win a National Championship in 2010 when I was at Auburn, and since then, over the last 14 seasons, one league's won eight championships and two other leagues, us and the Big Ten, have won three National Championships, and another league hasn't won any. I think that just shows you where our league has been on the national stage and where we think we'll continue to be and where we belong.

On top of it, I know it's been talked about here, we have the toughest nonconference strength of schedule in all of college football. We're going to partake in that this year as we play two really good teams from the Big 12 in Baylor and TCU that are both nine-win teams a year ago.

When you start talking about the state of college football, I know there's a lot of questions that will probably come on that, a lot of change, a lot of transition. I do think the CSC and the revenue sharing situation has a chance to be a step in the right direction. It's obviously new. I think the key will be is there accountability and is it enforced? If it's strictly adhered to, I think it creates good consistency for college football, for coaches, for players, for administration, and everyone. But that's the key, it's going to have to be held accountable.

We still need massive congressional help in a lot of areas,

RHETT LASHLEE: Always good to be with you. Just want to thank our conference's great commissioner, Jim Phillips, for his leadership and everything he does for us. On behalf of SMU, it's great to represent our school and our program.

Our new president, Jay Hartzell, our Athletics Director, Damon Evans, David Miller our Board Chair and our entire board of trustees. Just excited to be here and represent them.

First, just talking about SMU and our program, there's never been a better time to come to SMU. Back-to-back 11-win seasons, making the College Football Playoff. Season tickets last year was a school record, and we had a bunch of sellouts, the most in school history, and a record of attendance. Here we are middle of July, and we've already surpassed by several thousand last year's season ticket sales. So just the excitement is great.

The city of Dallas is embracing our program at an all time high, and we're embracing them back. The alignment in the leadership, from our president, our board, our alumni, all the way on down is just as good as it's ever been, and that's what's exciting about where we can go in the future.

Recruiting is at an all-time high. This past spring we had a 2.95 team GPA, which was a team and school record for football. Keyana Smith and her team that work with our student-athletes deserve a ton of credit for that.

Really the most exciting part about SMU and where we are is our players and our staff. We have an incredible staff. We have a lot of continuity, a lot of low ego, high output guys and girls on our staff that just deserve all the credit for the success we've had.



... when all is said, we're done.®

from codifying that a little bit, but also most importantly, protecting our players from bad actors in the agency world.

There's good agents out there, but all the agents need to be registered. We need to put a cap -- I know it's being proposed -- on the agency commission so families and players aren't taken advantage of. We need standardized contracts and a lot of things that we need congressional help on so it's equal across all states.

I think we need to reimagine the College Football Playoff. It's at a time where I know that's being discussed. The players and the fans come first. That's what we're supposed to be about. I think more is always better. I know it's out there. I think 16 teams would be great, more access for more teams, more players, more conferences.

The committee has a really hard decision. We were up close and personal with that a year ago, and I respect what they have to do, but honestly it's a situation that's set up for failure because there's human bias and there's always going to be. I think, if we could remove the committee from the situation, it would help because there's no other major professional sport or major sport in America or the world that uses a committee to select their tournament participants. You look at America, it's the NFL, and it's college football. I think we need to re-look at that.

Just imagine -- I know our commissioner has been outspoken about this before as options of what we could do, not only in the championship game, but maybe in a 2 versus 3, 3 versus 6, 4 versus 5 kind of scenario. Imagine if Championship Saturday every year right after Thanksgiving was your four Power 4 conference championship games, and you have a 3 versus 6 and a 4 versus 5 in every conference playing to try to get in a 16-team playoff. It would be like March Madness Thursday and Friday. It would be the best Saturday that college football could ever manufacture. We need to reimagine and think outside the box a little bit instead of going down the same path we've gone down before. We've got a great opportunity to do that, so I hope leadership will do that.

Last thing I'll hit with, we've got a good group here from SMU. Craig James is actually in the building with us. Craig James, Eric Dickerson, arguably one of the best duos in tandem all time in college football, and they're bringing back -- they started last year bringing back the Pony Express Award, and it's an award those two started to give to the best tandem, the best duo in college football. Last year Shedeur and Travis Hunter at Colorado won it. He's here to talk more about that throughout the day and try to help spread the word about it.

I think it's a great award because it recognizes a duo, teamwork. It's an award by the players, for the players, to

be voted on by players, and the second year bringing it back. I wanted to shed some light and exposure on that.

Then I'll just say this: I'm incredibly humbled to get to be the head coach at SMU. It's the dream of a lifetime. My wife, the real head coach, Lauren Lashlee, is here. My four kiddos, two sets of twins at home, Hudson and Thomas, Rowyn and Scarlet, are probably watching right now critiquing everything I do and don't do. So they'll have a full post-game report when I get home tonight.

Then just to coach these guys and represent our university is really cool. With that, I'm from Arkansas, I live in Texas. Whatever y'all want to do, let's do it.

Q. To speak on the expansion of the College Football Playoff, being it expanding to 12 or staying at 14 or 16, why do you believe the ACC should be a multi-bid? We got to see that with you and Clemson. Why should it continue to be a multi-bid conference?

RHETT LASHLEE: I don't think it's up for discussion, it should be 16. More is better -- I don't think you've got to go crazy over that because it is football. We saw last year what the Playoff can do. On campus games, fantastic, everything it does for our game. More exposure, more access, creates more fan bases and more people involved in the season throughout the year and more conferences.

When it comes to our league, it should be easy. I just shed some light. There's only three leagues to win a National Championship that have teams in their league since 1990. All the teams that have won a National Championship since 1990 are SEC, ACC, or Big Ten. Since I mentioned in the last 15 years, we're tied for the second most championships with three with the Big Ten. I don't know why that's not talked about more. We have national brands. We've won championships. The revenue is almost double who's fourth. We have our own network, the competition, the investment. I just think it speaks for itself.

Most people want to see things decided on the field, so let's let it happen that way. I don't think there's any question that if it stayed at 12, we're every year a multi-bid league. Miami should have been last year at 10-2. There's no question they were one of the top 12 teams in America. But it does get tough, especially when you have a human committee making decisions. It's a hard job. It's set up for failure. They're great people. They do the best they can. The NFL doesn't do that. The NBA doesn't do that. High school football, FIFA World Cup. Let's take that out of that and let it be decided on the field with a different process, in my opinion.

When it comes to the ACC, I think the experience and the



results speak for itself.

Q. You were talking about tandems, and of course you guys had two transfers come in in Chris Johnson Jr. and TJ Harden. What is the road that you see these guys taking next year on the field and the carries that they'll be splitting up?

RHETT LASHLEE: That's a great question. Obviously we lost Brashard Smith to the Kansas City Chiefs, had almost 2,000 yards, set the school record for all-purpose last year. He was a big part of our success.

Competition, healthy competition is a big part of what we do in our program, and that will play out over the next four to six weeks, really. We feel like we have four really talented players at running back. Derrick McFall returns for his true sophomore year, similar style player to what Brashard is. He can catch the ball, run between the tackles, he's explosive. A year of experience, I think he's poised to have a good season for us.

You mentioned Chris Johnson, similar style player, fast, explosive, can catch the ball, good in space. So those guys give you that versatility.

TJ's coming over from UCLA, where he led the school in rushing. He's a big back, physical, he can run and has speed.

And we've got a freshman in Reed, who was a recruited All-American. One of the highest recruited players to ever come to SMU. He's big, he's physical, he's explosive.

I think we've got four guys. I don't know if it will be a tandem, one guy will raise the bar, but I feel like we have four really good options that's all have different strengths that will help play within our offense.

Q. You talked about recruiting is at an all-time high. Currently you guys rank 31st nationally with five four-star recruits. That's also a school high. How are you leveraging the school's ACC and Texas location to attract top talent, and what's your vision for the roster going forward?

RHETT LASHLEE: One year in, it's a great partnership for us and the ACC. We hoped that would happen. Grateful to the commissioners and the others for allowing us to join the league. We felt we would bring value to the league, and we did that last year by making the College Football Playoff.

Also, the league has helped us. We're in the city of Dallas. It's arguably the best country in America -- I mean the best

city in America. Could be considered a country at times. It's the best city in America, but it deserves a big-time college football team, and Dallas loves winners, and our guys have given the city that the past couple years, and the city has embraced that.

Arguably year in and year out, the best high school talent comes out of the Metroplex. So for us to be positioned there as the only school within 30 miles of downtown Dallas is a huge advantage for us. A lot of those kids, some of them are sitting right up here, Kevin and Isaiah and Nwokobia can speak to that. They're from the city. Kids want to stay in Dallas, they want to stay and play in Texas, we just had to give them a reason. They want to play on the biggest stage, play in that championship game against a Clemson, play in the College Football Playoff. So being in the ACC has allowed us to do that and put our program back on the national stage where we feel like we belong. That, plus winning, has been huge for our recruiting efforts.

We're going to continue to recruit Dallas in the state of Texas at a high level. The ACC allows us to do that more like we want to. To your point of this recruiting class and the last recruiting class, that's our formula for sustained success. In Texas, the Texas high school football players are the best. They're the best coached, the best talented. All four of the players that we brought here to represent SMU are great college football players that played great high school football in Texas. That's going to continue to be our formula.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with Kevin Jennings.

Q. Kevin, you went from a backup, somewhat unheralded, to now leading a team to an ACC Championship game appearance, College Football Playoff, and now you're a Heisman dark horse. How do you stay levelheaded, humble, and hungry throughout that type of meteoric rise?

KEVIN JENNINGS: I just remember where I came from. At one point I was known as a nobody, just out there playing. Now I'm working my way up. It's honestly a blessing. I just try to stay levelheaded, just have my teammates check me if I ever get too cocky or whatever, have my family check me and all that stuff. I just try to stay levelheaded all the time.

Q. You obviously had a fantastic season last year, but struggled against Penn State on the road in CFP. What can you take away about handling that hostile environment, and how will you put that into action when you all go to Clemson this season?



KEVIN JENNINGS: I took a lot from that game. I tell myself all the time, honestly, I needed that game. I needed a bad game like that to bounce back and come back in and remind myself that I can play at this level, I can do all the things I'm capable of doing.

Just taking that game and going to the Clemson game, it's going to be kind of the same environment. Just looking forward to heading to Clemson.

Q. In the college football landscape that is constantly changing, you come back to SMU with a coaching staff that remains exactly the same. How much did that help you in this off-season just -- and will help you pick up where you left off?

KEVIN JENNINGS: It definitely helped me a lot, just coming in the building. I've got the same coach, same offense, just things like that, not me having to think too much of I've got to remember this, I've got to learn this, and all that type of stuff.

It's really a big help having a great coaching staff around me. They coach me each and every day to get better, and just trying to uplift that trust.

Q. Nick Saban called you one of the most underrated quarterbacks in the country last season. You guys made it into the ACC Championship the first year of y'all's entrance into the conference. Many people would consider that a successful season. What would you consider a successful season for this upcoming season?

KEVIN JENNINGS: Big shoutout to Nick Saban for mentioning that. I think we had a really good season last year. It didn't end how we wanted it to end, but I think this upcoming year, our end goal is to win it all, win the conference championship. That would be a good season for me.

Q. You had a very, very successful 2024 season. You were able to do a little bit of everything, in the air, on the ground, but heading into the 2025 season, what have you been the most focused on improving in your overall game as a leader, et cetera? What are you most excited to showcase in this upcoming season?

KEVIN JENNINGS: The things I've been working on, just working on the little things, taking that very seriously. Being a better leader, being a more vocal leader at that, and also just decision-making. That kind of cost me a little bit last year. I think heading into this year, I think I'm doing way better decision-making and making the right reads and all that.

Just looking forward to seeing my team play this year, honestly. That's what I'm more excited about.

Q. I wanted to know, can you point to moments throughout this off-season where you and your teammates, you and your coach got closer and you felt it? Like, for the media, we don't get a chance to see all the time, those moments, but can you point those moments to us so we can have some tidbits?

KEVIN JENNINGS: I think it's everyday things, honestly. Just sharing the locker room with those guys, living together, running together and all that. It builds courage for our team. Everybody is going through the same struggle on the field. We're out there conditioning days, we're out there dying, killing us and all that, and we're able to lean on each other for help and all of that. I think that's able to make our brotherhood so tight.

Q. One of your big starts, one of your first times starting back two years ago in the Fenway Bowl, you played Boston College and since then have played them another time, and you're going to go back up to Boston to visit BC this year. Just tell me about kind of your take on the initial series history with BC and what it was like visiting Boston for the first time.

KEVIN JENNINGS: I got asked that question earlier about the rivalry of Boston College and SMU. I think it's a really good rivalry that's coming along in the ACC. I'm looking forward to head up there to Boston and play Boston College. It's a really good football team.

The first initial thought going up there to Boston, weather was kind of crazy. It was pretty cold, wet and all that. Yeah, they're a really good team. So I'm excited to head back up there and get that rivalry started.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to Isaiah now.

Q. This season you came back, you're leading a defensive backfield that's going to face 4,000-yard passer in Josh Hoover, Sawyer Robertson is getting a bunch of preseason love, Syracuse had a quarterback throw for 4,000 yards. They're probably going to be winging it. You've got Cade Klubnik. What went into you coming back and just sort of your mindset of this is a bunch of special quarterbacks we're going to be facing this year and you're kind of in charge of that unit?

ISAIAH NWOKOBIA: Obviously we had a great year as a team last year and we had a good season. Coming back, the challenges we can face, how much better we can get



as a team, that I know I can get as a player. Hearing all those quarterbacks you named who are highly recognized, I'm just ready to embrace that chance and go at them. I'm excited, man, for sure.

Q. I am a huge fan of your film. You were one of a handful of players last year in the nation that finished with 100 tackles and three or more interceptions. You talk about improving. How do you improve your game after coming off a season like that where you showed so much versatility to do almost everything you could ask of a safety, slash, linebacker, slash, rover, slash, whatever position you would call yourself.

ISAIAH NWOKOBIA: First, I appreciate the high praise. That means a lot. Thank you.

I think the biggest thing I've been trying to focus on this off-season is just film study and being able to apply that to the game on the field. I think the faster you can play, especially on defense, the ability you can have to not have to think so much, to be able to just react, be able to just go out there and play free. I think that comes from film study and just going out there and playing and having fun with the game.

I think me being able to just apply that and being able to play fast is the biggest thing I'll focus on this off-season.

Q. You spoke on all the success that you had last season as a team. How does this team excel and get better, in your opinion, through the spring, into the summer, and heading into the fall? What have you seen as those little elements that maybe people will not see that are going to push SMU even farther?

ISAIAH NWOKOBIA: I think us focusing on keeping the main thing the main thing. We show up every day to put in the work, ready to go 110 percent. We compete in everything we do, whether it be conditioning or speed work or the weight room, we make sure we compete. Healthy competition, I think, is extremely important.

What makes us really different is our brotherhood. With college football today, obviously every year is almost a new team with all the new transfers, but I think Coach Lashlee does a great job just focusing us, having that brotherhood, making sure we gel. Both on and off the field, we're doing stuff, paintball, things like that, just to make sure we stay together and build that chemistry, because we know that's what's going to take us far, more than anything else, that brotherhood.

Q. Can I ask, are you good at paintball?

ISAIAH NWOKOBIA: Don't ask. You can ask them, though. (Laughter).

Q. Earlier this year, there was a lot of discussion between Coach Prime, Deion Sanders, and Asante Samuel regarding the T-step technique as opposed to the bicycle technique on close-outs. As a defensive back, do you have any preference on that?

ISAIAH NWOKOBIA: Me personally, I'm a T-step guy. It helps me get out of my break. I think it's served me pretty well, so I'm going to keep doing that.

THE MODERATOR: Now we'll spend a few minutes with an O-lineman, and we'll get through as much as we can with Logan.

Q. Logan, when people talk about the move up and any type of going from D-II to D-I or group of 5 to Power 4, people talk about the trenches being the difference and normally expecting that to be the weak point that lags behind. Instead it turned out to be the strength of the team, ushering in a 1,000-yard rusher, being the third least sacked team in the conference, and you personally finishing as an All-ACC guy. What does that say about who you are as a player and the offensive line as a whole?

LOGAN PARR: I think we had a chip on our shoulder going into it. A lot of us last year were bounce-back guys coming from Power 4 teams transferring into the AAC and then eventually the ACC, so getting that opportunity to go in and show we can do it on an elite level together and kind of push the guys behind us is something I was very thankful for.

Q. I want to know what the current state of the offensive line room is heading into 2025, part 1. Then how has your relationship grown with Coach Lashlee since when you got here?

LOGAN PARR: We got a couple transfers along with a lot of guys who have played a bunch of football. We do a good job outside of football building that culture, hanging out, all that kind of stuff that I think we're going to have a great unit moving forward.

Coach Lashlee, I'm just thankful that he gave me the opportunity to be at SMU. I kind of got ran out of my last school, and coming here and being the player that I am now here at Media Day is just unfathomable. So I'm really thankful for that.

Q. You spoke about your appreciation for Coach Lashlee giving you new life in college football. Just to



reflect on that a little bit deeper, what you learned from the adversity that you had and why SMU truly was the reimagining and the evolution of you as a player?

LOGAN PARR: I was a highly recruited kid out of high school, got a lot of offers, and eventually went to Texas. I didn't get the opportunity to show what I thought I had at that level as a player.

I'm just so thankful that this staff gave me the opportunity to come in, play in my fourth year, but come in, put some film together, and put some good film out there.

Q. I want to know, when you're going against elite ACC defensive line, what is your mindset?

LOGAN PARR: I've been in college a long time, and I've gone against a lot of guys. This is about to be my sixth year. I've gone against a lot of guys at Texas, a lot of guys at SMU that are in the pros where I got that level in practice where I was going against the best guy in the country.

In the ACC, I'm going against that same kind of talent. I'm just thankful every single day in practice I get that same kind of look.

Q. I know you started your collegiate career in the Big 12, but you also played in the American last year with SMU. Talking to coaches and players, they say the difference between the G-5 and P-4 level is in the trenches. Do you believe that to be true based on your experience?

LOGAN PARR: I think the talent level is at the same point level to level. It's the size. I wasn't going against 6'5", 330 guys when I was in the AAC, and you kind of see that reflected as you go on.

Q. You've just mentioned the number of years you've been in the game and your age. Do they call you Grandpa in the locker room? What's your role?

LOGAN PARR: My nickname is Professor. I've got three degrees. In three years, I got my corporate communication degree at Texas, I got my Masters in business management and my Masters in sports management. I've got a little bit of a degree wall going.

Q. What do you want to be when you grow up?

LOGAN PARR: Still figuring that out. I'm going to be a football player first, and then from there we'll figure it out.

Q. First of all, whose responsibility is it to get Isaiah

cowboy boots? Coach is going to take that. Secondly, as a graduate -- obviously congratulations on everything you've done academically.

LOGAN PARR: Appreciate it.

Q. How personal do you as an offensive line take it to protect Kevin each play? I know that sacks are something that offensive linemen hate. Is that something personal that your offensive line worries about to make sure to protect him?

LOGAN PARR: We love Kevin. Kevin is one of my best friends. I would hate to see anything happen to Kevin. Kevin can stand back there for 12 seconds and make eight guys miss if he wants to, but being there and protecting him is something that I take personally.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports