

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Friday, July 17, 2026

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

SMU Mustangs

Coach Rhett Lashlee

Brandon Booker

Kevin Jennings

PJ Williams

Press Conference

RHETT LASHLEE: All right. Good to be with everyone. Excited to be here for our third ACC media days and kickoff.

I think for me, just genuinely filled with a lot of gratitude and thankful to be the head coach at SMU, work with an incredible staff, phenomenal players. We got three great players representing our team today. Thankful to be where I am, get to do what I do. Grateful to represent the ACC. Humbled to represent our university.

We have an incredible president in Jay Hartzell; our provost, Rachel Mersey; our athletics director, Damon Evans; our board chair, Rich Templeton. And all our many donors and all our university partners are just so fantastic.

For me and our players to get to come represent SMU is great. We have great alignment at SMU. You hear that word a lot. I think the way college football is going more and more now, people can't fake it. You either have it or you don't, and it shows. We clearly have it. I'm thankful for that, to get to represent them.

Secondly, I want to congratulate Manny Diaz and Duke on winning the conference championship. A lot of good friends there in Jonathan Patke, Jonathan Brewer, David Feeley. What they did last year winning the league was incredible, in a very competitive league.

I think we all know they should have easily been in the Playoffs. When you win the ACC, the way they did and who they beat, they should have been in instead of a team from the Sun Belt. But hopefully things get learned and that doesn't happen again. We should have been a two-bid league. But congratulations to Duke on what they



did. Really, really incredible.

For me, the summer was fun. We got a chance to work hard through June. Our guys have been working really hard. We get a couple weeks off for coaches before this, which signals our season.

For me and my family, it was kind of low-key summer. We just hung out at the lake a little bit. We did get to go to Montana for a week. I'm going through some challenges right now. I have two sets of twins. My girls are 10, getting older. Hi, Rowyn and Scarlet, watching right now. Hudson and Thomas are turning 16 in September. I bought two vehicles yesterday. Now I'm in the process of getting them insured. A lot going on there (smiling).

Fortunately my father-in-law was an insurance agent so he can help me out knowing how bad it's going to be.

My wife, Lauren, is fantastic. Missing them right now.

We had a good summer, now we're geared up and ready for the season.

When you start looking at where we are as an ACC, I think our league has never been better or healthier. The commissioner outlined those things the other day.

In a time where for whatever reason recency bias seems to be the thing that carries the day until it doesn't, I think we have to be honest with ourselves. Nothing that happened last year and the past has any effect on this year, for league, our team, college football. Everything is a blank slate. That's what's exciting about the game.

This league is the best league because of what they did in the past. Let's look at the past and be honest with ourselves. Last year we went 8-6 against the SEC.

And it's funny. I ruffled some feathers last year here, unintentionally, when I said since 1963, the same six schools have won a certain conference every year. And ironically, it held through last year.

I think what our league has done, 8-6 against the SEC last



year, 7-4 in the post-season against Power Four opponents, then you look at what we're continuing to do. Our league is continuing to tout how many non-conference games we play.

Everybody is playing 10 Power Four games, some 11. We play more big non-conference games than any other league; yet at some point these FPIs and all these algorithms you think will catch up to that reality. Whenever some of y'all figure out how we can have pre-season strength of schedules and power rankings before anybody has played a game, y'all let me know.

Two years ago we got two teams into the first 12-team Playoff. This past year we should have had two, as I said. And one of our teams played for the national title. So I think we've continued to solidify ourselves as a national title contender. We've won three in the last 15 years. Only three leagues can say that.

So our league is in great place. I think it's arguably as good as it's been this year. There's probably eight to ten teams at least that could easily be justified as winning our league this year. It's going to be a lot of fun to compete.

When you start thinking about SMU, we're not a blue blood, but we are a new blood. When you start thinking about it along those lines, new blood is what we're currently doing. We're present. Blue blood means it's what you've done in the past. We're not resting on what we've done in the past. We're living in what we're doing now.

When you look at it from that standpoint, in the last three years we're a top 10 team. The reason I can say that is we have the eighth most wins in America in the last three years. We have the most wins in the ACC in the last three years. We have the most wins in the state of Texas. We have the most road wins in the state of Texas.

We're 17-2 at home in Ford Stadium, the best home record in the ACC. We have yet to lose an ACC game at home.

We've had a good start. We're so thankful to be here. Candidly, we've been good. But we're in pursuit of great. We haven't achieved it yet. We have a lot of work to do. That's what these guys and I are all focusing on, is how can we be great.

I want to talk about these guys. We have PJ Williams here, starting offensive tackle from Dickinson, Texas; Coach John Snelson, a legendary coach in our state. We have Brandon Booker, a linebacker for us from DeSoto; Coach Claude Mathis. We have Kevin Jennings, our quarterback; Jason Todd at South Oak Cliff. Three great young men from the state of Texas representing us.

We've been promoting Kevin this week a lot, and deservedly so. I think his stats speak for itself, when you start returning Power Four quarterbacks, nobody has a better winning percentage of guys that have started for at least two years. He's got the third most wins returning in the country, fifth in passing yards, fifth in total offense, fifth in touchdowns in returning Power Four quarterbacks.

In the ACC, he's first in returning passing yards, first in total yards, first in wins, first in winning percentage as a returning quarterback.

It's not just what we think, there's actually evidence in two years to back it up.

He's healthy now. So we're excited to push him. We know it's a team and a player. We have to win, play well all year. If we do, there's no question in our mind he's one of the best players in America.

With that being said, on behalf of our staff, I have a fantastic staff. We're just so happy to be here representing SMU. We're excited. I'm excited about our team. I like our team. I like the makeup of our team, not just physically and all those attributes, but the intangible attributes. We're excited to make the SMU family proud this year with what we do out on the field.

With that, questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. You bet on yourselves as an institution to leave the American, to come here to the Power Four. You played for an ACC championship. What that says about where SMU was and why betting on yourself and having that faith has paid off so far, why this is something that's not a fluke but what we can expect.

RHETT LASHLEE: Great question.

I mean, we bet on ourself. You have to go perform. Fortunately we were able to make a good first impression. Last year was important that we backed it up. I know we didn't win the league, but to go win nine games, go 6-2 in the league, play well, have some good moments.

I think backed up that it wasn't a fluke. We have a chance to have staying power, to be a great member of this league, to compete for this league year in, year out, to compete for the College Playoff year in, year out. That's our goal.

We have great supporters. We're able to bet on ourselves



because our university and supporters are fantastic.

Like I said, we've been good, but we're still in the pursuit of great. We haven't won anything special. We haven't done anything special. We know there's a lot of hard work ahead of us. I think it just validated to everyone else and to ourselves that we are where we're supposed to be.

We can achieve the things we want to achieve. That's what we're still working on.

Q. You have a lot of returning talent on the offensive line. Can you speak about the importance of returning an offensive line and how important it is to gain that continuity.

RHETT LASHLEE: Obviously PJ is here. PJ has been with us the last three years, just been an incredible level of consistency and talent for us. Now he's set, First Team All-American, should be a first-round draft pick if he stays healthy this year.

But it's not just him. I think Garin Justice and Reggie Bain, our offensive line coaches, have done a great job of recruiting, bringing guys in, developing, growing that room.

You've got PJ, Josh Bates at center, Addison Nichols returning at right guard. Andrew Chamblee played a ton of football for us. Four guys who have played a lot of football, four guys that were starting when we beat Miami last year. Returning guys. We have a lot of good, young players, too, competing at left guard, other spots on our line.

It's not just that we do have a veteran group coming back, it's the depth. As we all know, it's hard to play O line. You can ask PJ. Injuries happen. In big-time college football, it's not about starting your O and D line. It's what's behind them. What's the depth? When a guy gets nicked up, misses a game, what's coming in behind him?

Offensively we have to be able to run the ball to control the game, protect the quarterback. O-line is the engine. Nobody on that field can do anything without those five guys. It's huge for us to have a lot of veteran guys coming back this year.

Q. With three co-coordinators on offense and two on defense, how have the responsibilities and workflow divided itself? Why did you choose to label the staff that way?

RHETT LASHLEE: I'm just not good at making decisions (smiling).

No, so a couple things. It's a great question. We've been

blessed for four years haven't had to change coordinators. That's been pretty cool. It helps a first-time head coach his first four years to have Scott Symons, Casey Woods.

Casey is going to be a fantastic head coach at Missouri State. I can't believe we have to play them week four.

And then Scott, getting to be the linebacker coach for the Dallas Cowboys, not even having to move, where he grew up.

Both those guys did so much for our program. But you also look at the health of a program and as a staff and go, when that happens, we got a chance with, again, our A.D. and our resources to go out and hire the best in the country.

And we're able to look inward and find the best. So to have someone like Maurice Crum and Rickey Hunley Jr. sitting there -- Rickey Hunley has been with Scott Symons for 10 years. Incredible success together defensively and obviously at SMU. They've changed the culture of defense at SMU. He's been a huge part of that.

Maurice Crum, who has been with us the last three years, was a two-time captain linebacker at Notre Dame, been a coordinator at other places.

Those guys, they get what the identity of our SMU defense is. I think those guys have done a fantastic job taking what we've done, carrying it on, and then how do we get better? Kind of put their own personality on it.

Then you go to offense, Rob Likens has been with me since my two years at Miami. He's incredible. He already had a co-OC tag, kept that. He obviously is doing some other things. Not obviously, he's doing some other things for me from a chief of staff role and other things as an associate head coach that is really vital to me.

It allowed us to take Garin Justice, who has been fantastic. He had a co-offensive title already. And then D'Eriq King, a fantastic young coach. You can ask Kevin about D'Eriq. He's a rock star.

So now to have our quarterback coach and O-line coach in lockstep and our receiver coach, who also is doing a bunch of other things, and Rob and Garin and I have been together for now -- we're going on our seventh year. D'Eriq played in our system.

There's a lot of continuity. Rarely can you say we changed our coordinators and feel like it was a smooth transition. For me I didn't feel like we had new coordinators this spring.



Casey Horny is running our special teams. Has been with us the last few years. He's fantastic. Got over 25 years of experience. He was our assistant coordinator. Kyle Cooper was running it well. With the transitions on offense, we moved Kyle to full-time offense because he's going to be a coordinator someday.

So Kyle is just another part of that offensive team that's helping us on offense and allows Casey to kind of take over the special teams.

That's kind of how it worked. It's not always going to work that way. When you can look inward and find the best options, it's going to be great.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, you and Brandon can switch spots. Our first question...

Q. Brandon, you're from DeSoto, Texas, a town that has produced several talents. What does it mean for you to build a legacy and continue it with SMU in the state of Texas?

BRANDON BOOKER: Well, it means a lot to me, man, seeing the greatness come from that school. Trying to be another part of that legacy is something like no other school can just give you, especially coming out of high school.

Seeing dudes like Byron Murphy, Von Miller, it's just special. Now it's my turn that I'm at SMU. One more step until I hit the league. Man, legacy and history will be set.

Q. We've heard a lot about Kevin Jennings. What is it like going up against him in practice? What do opponents see on the other side?

BRANDON BOOKER: Going against Kev at practice is literally having a game at practice. He knows you, he practices against us every day. He knows the defense, our tendencies.

Going against Kev has really made me better as far as my pass coverage, learning how to read offenses, learning how to adapt to different quarterbacks because there's no other Kevin out there. He's one of a kind.

Q. First big game of the season is down in Tallahassee at Florida State. What are some of your early thoughts about the offense and their new quarterback Ashton Daniels?

BRANDON BOOKER: There really is no new thoughts. We're just going to prepare how we prepare and then we're

going to go down there and play.

Q. You showed up the biggest when the moments mattered the most this last season. You had your season-high eight tackles against your rivals Baylor, and TCU. When the championship game was on the line, against Louisville and Cal... what allows you to show up most in those moments in a big game?

BRANDON BOOKER: Just the trust in my preparation and teammates and coaches. Without any of them, I wouldn't be successful, I wouldn't be up here. Especially, we wouldn't be in any type of good predicament without all of those.

Q. Can you speak to how your relationship with Alex Kilgore has grown and developed over the years.

BRANDON BOOKER: My relationship with Kilgore has become inseparable. We know each other on and off the field. If I see him down, I'm going to come over and ask what's wrong. He might not open up at first, but let him chill a little bit and then he'll start to open up.

That's something that we learn about each other. We learning each other every single day. Trying to force a relationship upon each other. That's what makes our bond so good.

Q. Describe your leadership style.

BRANDON BOOKER: My leadership style? I would say I'm laid back, but I'm very - how should I say this - I have authority when it needs to be. I say that because I'm not the person that's going to yell and do all the rah-rah. I'll come to you man to man and tell you what you need to do. Even if I have some flaws, I let it be known and take accountability.

THE MODERATOR: Brandon, you and Kevin can switch positions. A lot of hands, so we'll get to as many questions as we can.

Q. Kevin, you are one of the more decorated quarterbacks in not just the ACC but all of the nation. With all the success you had, how do you prevent your chin from going soft from success, keep that edge? How do you personally take that challenge on?

KEVIN JENNINGS: I think it's remembering where I come from, honestly. At first it wasn't all of this coming into college. I didn't have all the offers. SMU believed in me. Staying honest to my roots, having my teammates check me anytime I get out of place. I'm working as hard as possible. That's the main thing, for sure, just having great



people around me.

Q. We met you onstage for the first time two years ago when you were competing with Preston for the job. You've quickly become one of the most prestigious quarterbacks in the ACC. Where have you grown from that time as a player and young man?

KEVIN JENNINGS: Honestly, I think just confidence-wise. Confidence takes you a long way. You're nothing without the confidence. I think that's what makes a quarterback, honestly.

If you're confident on the field, confident around your teammates, it's going to allow you to play better and communicate better with your teammates.

I think that's the main thing for sure, my confidence elevated extremely.

Q. This is going to be another one of your years here at SMU as the starter. How much freedom has your coach given you with the offense and the rest of your team at the line of scrimmage?

KEVIN JENNINGS: A lot of freedom. I think that's the main thing for the quarterback and a head coach, coordinator, the more freedom they have in me, the more confidence I have to go out there and play up to my level.

I like to go out there and just play free. Mistakes are going to happen on the field. Play free. Mistakes are going to happen, erase that, just continue to go.

Q. In a world where quarterbacks are changing every year, transfer portal, you've stayed committed to SMU. What is it about loyalty that you've learned from coach and the staff and why continue to represent the Mustangs in a world where this doesn't happen often?

KEVIN JENNINGS: Loyalty means a lot to me, honestly. Like I mentioned, coming into high school, SMU was pretty much my only offer. They believed in me, showed the loyalty in me. It's my job to reciprocate back, show the loyalty back.

I'm also from Dallas. Why would I want to leave and go play anywhere else? I am trying to put it all for the city Dallas and bring some great things to Dallas.

Q. Having Coach Lashlee actively support you as one of the top quarterbacks in the nation, what does that do for your confidence?

KEVIN JENNINGS: Yeah, it definitely boosts it a lot. All

the things he said on this stage, I appreciate him for that. Shows for me a lot, the confidence he has in me. Helps me have confidence in myself. Knowing my head coach have confidence in me like that, takes it a long way, honestly.

Q. You announced the Kevin Jennings Recovery Center. Talk about what that is, why it's important to you.

KEVIN JENNINGS: I'm extremely blessed to have that. It's an opportunity for me to leave my legacy at SMU. The support staff around SMU truly means a lot. They put me in a situation, helped me out a lot.

It's also a thing for our players. Our players can get better recovery. We have different things like cold plunges, saunas, sleep pods. It's going to be a great thing for our teammates. I'm grateful to have this at SMU.

Q. Behind-the-back pass against Stanford became one of the highlights of the season. What was the coaching staff's reaction to pitching that?

KEVIN JENNINGS: All right, so it was Monday walk-through when we started at first. It was supposed to be like a little float. Me and Coach King was talking, Let's spice it up a little bit. We told Lashlee.

He was, You do five in a row, we're running it in the game. Did five in a row right there. I'm surprised he actually called it, but (smiling). It worked out, though. I'm glad he called it, for sure.

Q. As you look at the big game with Florida State coming up, as you've been studying the defense, what challenges have you seen they present for you guys?

KEVIN JENNINGS: We know they're going to cause a lot of challenges. They're a great team. Open up with them week one, it's not an easy task going to Tallahassee, a very traditional school. Going to play in front of, what, 90,000 people.

Just a blessing to get the opportunity to play an ACC opponent in week one. They're going to come out fast, ready to play to beat us. We believe in our team. We know what we're going to do.

THE MODERATOR: Kevin, thank you. You and PJ can switch spots.

Q. Your story and Kevin's juxtapose each other because as he was a very unheralded guy, you were an All-American. People saw potential in you early on.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Now you developed into being a guy... How do you stay grounded and humble?

PJ WILLIAMS: Just staying confident, having the confidence is key. Staying down and staying humble, respecting your peers, everyone around you. Take all the wisdom, taking all the knowledge. That just goes a long way, listening to people around you.

Q. The path for you since you got to SMU, evolving into this player that's projected to be one of the top draft picks, what's the process, work ethic been like for you in growing into that?

PJ WILLIAMS: Staying focused. Again, trust with a lot of players on the team. Believing in my coaches. From day one that I got there, Coach Lashlee, Coach Justice told me this was to go make me one of the first first-rounders, great picks out of SMU. I done trusted every word they said.

I stayed down, I listened. Those guys, I don't know if there's any other better leaders out there than Coach Lashlee and Coach Justice. They're tremendous guys. They have a lot to do with my success.

Q. Tell me about the relationship you have with K.J.

PJ WILLIAMS: K.J. was one of the first guys that I got introduced with when I started the SMU team, him and a guy named Isaiah Smith. They were two great guys, always been there. They was in there when I needed them the most.

K.J. is a guy I respect the most, one of the guys I respect the most on the team. He's a great guy, great family, great background.

Kevin, I treat him like I would treat my sister (laughter). If someone is messing with Kevin, I got his back regardless. Anyone touch Kevin, Kevin's on the ground. I'm like, Kevin, who touched you? Where it come from (laughter)?

I want to protect him at all costs. He's the value of our team. He's a great guy, man. Everyone needs a Kevin on a team.

Q. You're a team that has two centers, talk about the depth of SMU.

PJ WILLIAMS: We have tremendous depth, tremendous guys all over in every position. Those two guys, they probably one of the most harder workers on the team. They have great push, they push me every day, push all the younger guys. They push the skill guys that come to our workouts. They're very big competitors.

That's what SMU all about, competing. Finding more guys that want to compete at big levels, have the confidence that we bring.

Q. I see the cross there on your neck. Obviously faith in each other on this team is important. What faith means to you, how you see it trickle through the team.

PJ WILLIAMS: Faith means to me just staying down, being loyal, and putting all your trust in God. To our team, it's very important that we trust in each other. Trust is the biggest thing.

We have a leadership meeting every Wednesday. Trust has been one of the big topics we talking about. Trust is big for offensive linemen. We need five guys that we can trust at all times. The guys next to you, you need to trust them the most. If all five guys are doing the right thing, then we have a pretty good offensive line. That's what trust and faith goes a long way with us.

Q. Throughout your career you've been able to play left and right tackle. Does your mindset change regardless if you're playing right or left side?

PJ WILLIAMS: My mindset is just dominate, find your opponent and dominate him. That's the main key, staying focused. It's the little things when you do change sides, stance, feet work, certain things. You're better at certain things on one side than the other.

It's repetition. You do something a lot of times, get more comfortable, comfortable. You work on your weaknesses. I have certain weaknesses on my left side that I don't have on my right side. I have certain weaknesses on my right side that I don't have on my left side.

It's finding the best situation for you.

THE MODERATOR: SMU, good luck.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports