

# SEC Football Media Days

Monday, July 13, 2015

## Commissioner Greg Sankey



KEVIN TRAINOR: Welcome to the 2015 SEC Football Media Days. At this time, it is my pleasure to introduce the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference, Mr. Greg Sankey.

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Thanks, Kevin. Good morning. As you can imagine, this is a bit of a moment for me. I've typically stood in the back right for me and watched Mike Slive up here today. It's an honor to be here. My wife and I were in the back, and I'll just take a moment to say I was recalling having packed up 26 years ago a Budget rental truck with everything we owned, driving from Utica, New York, to our new life at the time in Natchitoches, Louisiana. The first SEC city we encountered was Knoxville, Tennessee. We spent the evening at one of the not-so-finer establishments here in Birmingham, never thinking it would bring me and us to this moment. We drove through Tuscaloosa, encountered a weigh station where I didn't know what to do and was encouraged to go through the weigh station with my rental truck by a Mississippi state trooper in very direct terms, and on into Louisiana. We have lived our entire adult lives since that moment in July of 1989 in the footprint of the Southeastern Conference. And so it's with great pride that I'm here today welcoming you to Hoover. Good morning. Mondays are not always exciting days or days to which we look forward. Today, however, I think there are smiles on faces everywhere because there's an opportunity to have a conversation about the great sport of college football. 122 days ago I stood behind a podium in front of a microphone and many of you at the press conference in Nashville, where I was officially named to be the eighth commissioner of the Southeastern Conference. As I said that day, many times since, including this morning, it's an honor to be in this role, a true honor. Seventeen days ago there were 500 people gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, for an evening to honor Mike and Liz Slive for the great leadership provided over the last 13 years to the Southeastern Conference. As a tribute to Mike and his battle with cancer, this fall each of our football teams will designate a prostate cancer awareness game during the month of September. Mike and Liz are special people to me, and I think literally to us. I want you to think, though, about this reality. It's the first time

since 1990 that the person standing behind this podium on the first day of Media Days is not named Mike Slive or Roy Cramer. In fact, both Mike and Roy, along with the commissioners who came before, Harvey Schiller, Boyd McWhorter, Tonto Coleman, Bernie Moore, and Martin Conner, each contributed a great deal to this remarkable conference, to the stability enjoyed by our universities and the great support enjoyed by the young people who over the decades have passed through the SEC. The further reality is that no SEC commissioner -- not Mike Slive, not Roy Cramer, not even Tonto Coleman -- had a Twitter account. I, however, do have a Twitter account. And what started as a rather fun way for me to anonymously follow many of you has become a bit more popular. So we have updated my Twitter presence away from the old @gscantweet, which was nothing terribly secretive other than my first and last name initials, a verb, and a noun, I think a noun, to @GregSankey. That's the new Twitter handle. You can see it is accompanied by a new Avatar, not only lifting the tractor tire -- which I think is the most famous tractor tire lifting picture in history now -- but also lifting the SEC logo. It is correct to assume that I use the same branding agency Bill Hancock used to name the College Football Playoff and his dog. That's why we went with the Greg Sankey. Whoever wrote that got that joke. For the SEC commissioner to have a Twitter account is a small representation of the changes occurring all around us. In 1963, there was no Twitter, and incidentally, it was the year before I was born. So there was no me at that moment. But that year Bob Dylan wrote a song called "The Times, They Are A-Changin'." This morning, there's a few phrases from those lyrics that I think might be helpful for you and especially meaningful to you in the room. Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen and keep your eyes wide open, the chance won't come again. I am entirely confident that I will be here again with a chance to visit with you, but it is absolutely true that the times are changing rapidly and all around us. I read the NCAA's strategic plan that was approved in 2004 as part of my preparation for the interview process, and it had this line right at the beginning. It said, "The complexity of intercollegiate athletics has increased enormously over the past decade." That's the end of the quote. Meaning, from the year 1994 through 2004, the complexity increased enormously. Well, think about what's happened nationally over the

last 11 years and just among the SEC over the last five years. In 2010, we experienced the first tremors of conference realignment, which largely left the SEC untouched, but in 2011 we welcomed and announced Texas A&M and Missouri as the SEC's 13th and 14th members, welcoming them as full members in 2002. In 2013 came the announcement of the broadcast rights extension with ESPN and the announced formation of the SEC Network. We also announced that our men's basketball tournament would have Nashville as a primary site and the opportunity for our women's basketball tournament to also be played in Nashville's Bridgestone Arena. In August of 2014, that network, the SEC Network, became a reality, and we've now experienced transition in the commissioner's role. And last week we saw change in Columbia, South Carolina, as the state government acted to remove the confederate battle flag from the State capitol grounds. On that point, I am particularly proud of the leadership demonstrated on our campuses in the states at the center of this debate. South Carolina President Harris Pastides; University of Mississippi interim chancellor Morris Stocks; and Mississippi State University's President Mark Keenum, along with their athletics directors and coaches, have all stated their desire for change. The times, they are changing, and the times will continue to change as we move forward. There were five months between the announced retirement of Mike Slive and the announcement that I would follow him as the SEC's commissioner. It was an incredible opportunity to think, plan, and evaluate our past, our present, and our future. And I was actually on a plane flying home after the College Football Playoff semifinal game in the Sugar Bowl, a tough night for us, when I turned my attention to the future and three simple words that really define my focus: scholars, champions, and leaders. Each of those words was literally written initially on a Southwest Airlines napkin and then put in what I call my idea book, this notebook that traveled everywhere with me for five months. Part of the fun of the last week is to see what I was thinking back in the fall and winter. But I then in that book defined scholars, champions, and leaders for purposes of me as the SEC commissioner and for the entire Southeastern Conference. Each has a vision statement attached. For the word scholars, we want to graduate every student-athlete. For champions, we want to win every championship. But you may have assumed that already. And for leaders, we seek literally to influence the world. Many of you may react by saying that's simply not possible. But keep this in mind, there is no great achievement that was ever produced by an attempt to be average, and we seek to be excellent. We also seek to graduate every student-athlete by developing a college going culture in our states, throughout our region and across this country. And rather than focus on the conversation related to freshmen and eligibility, let's talk about how we, in

intercollegiate athletics and as universities, lead by focusing even greater attention on making sure young people are prepared for their college opportunity, promoting a college going culture and by expecting them to make academic progress each year of their high school academic career so that, when they show up on our campuses, they're fully prepared to engage in the academic culture which they encounter. In the conference office, we'll add a new staff position, a director of student-athlete engagement, focused on fostering collaboration among our existing conference programs on our campuses and developing new strategies to meet the unique demands faced by our student-athletes. And we will focus on enhancing the lifelong link that's established between our student-athletes and our universities. And there are a multitude of meaningful illustrations about how we can achieve our goals, sometimes in new ways, of graduating every student-athlete. I want to just share a few stories with you this morning that illustrate the point and the great work being done on our campuses already. Texas A&M's Dante Hall finished his playing career and entered the NFL in 2000, and he earned his degree in August of 2014, and he had this to say, "My mom has been my biggest supporter my entire life. When I left Texas A&M to play in the NFL, I made my mom a promise that I would finish my degree, and today I fulfilled that promise." It's Earl Bennett, a two-time All-SEC receiver, who left early to enter the NFL draft and this year earned his degree in education from Vanderbilt University. It's Georgia's Thomas Davis, a first round NFL draft selection, who returned to Georgia to become the first in his family to earn a college degree. And it's Cam Newton, who continually returned to Auburn University, earning his undergraduate degree this spring. The story of Tony Nathan from Alabama, who at the forever young age of 58, earned his degree this May, fulfilling a promise he made to his head football coach, Coach Bear Bryant, in 1979. It's Kentucky's Randall Cobb and Avery Williamson, current NFL players who continually return to pursue their academic degrees. Beyond football, it is David Eckstein, who played baseball at Florida, left Gainesville, won two World Series rings, and finished his degree in 2012. And Mississippi State's Chris Stratton, our 2012 Pitcher of the Year drafted in the first round by the San Francisco Giants, earning his degree in 2014. The remarkable story of Lee Mayberry, who played in the Final Four in 1990, then in the NBA, and spent the past year earning his degree from the University of Arkansas. The story of Shaquille O'Neal, which was actually featured on SEC story this spring, along with his Coach Dale Brown, earning his bachelor's degree from LSU in 2000. And it's the story of Missouri's Christian Cantwell, a 2008 silver medalist in the shot put, still training, still pursuing his Olympic dream for 2016, continuing to pursue also his degree through Mizzou's Total Person program. And it's the

stories being produced and that will be produced by the University of South Carolina's Carolina Degree Completion Program and the University of Mississippi's Rebel Reconnect program and Tennessee's Renewing Academic Commitment program, which all build upon the expectation that we will graduate our student-athletes. These stories represent just a piece of what is being done to graduate every student-athlete and to foster the lifelong link to our universities, scholars first and champions second. As champions, we aspire to win every championship. That's okay. Some of you have noted that maybe not this year. I can assure you we haven't given up and our expectations are for great success. And I transition to the SEC commissioner's role officially June 1st. June 3rd, LSU's men's golf team and Florida's softball team each won National Championships at about 72 hours where I was right on the mark for my goal. But since that time, we've had five of the eight teams in the softball College World Series, four of the top five women's track and field programs in the NCAA championship, three of the top four men's track and field teams, and four of the eight baseball College World Series teams. While we may not win them all, we will aspire to achieve that goal, and we will do so with our heads held high. As with scholars, we have a set of expectations and a foundation from which we desire to launch to achieve those goals. The first under champions is a bit counterintuitive, but it's central to how we've been led over the last 13 years, and that is to never return a championship, never pull down a championship banner, never vacate any wins, and never have a team banned from postseason competition due to NCAA infractions or the lack of academic success under the NCAA's academic performance program. As a step in achieving this goal, I was pleased to announce that William King will soon become a part of the SEC staff. He will join our staff September 1st in the role of Associate Commissioner For Legal Affairs and Compliance and will join an outstanding group of people who work daily in a collaborative way on compliance efforts taking place on our campuses. To maximize the SEC's leadership position, we all last realize the collective loss associated with compliance problems. The problems will arise, and we understand that to be the case, but we must deal with each properly and seek to deal with those issues with integrity. As a Conference, we all, in our office, on our campuses, at our leadership levels, our coaches, our student-athletes, and our fans, need to understand that we have made great strides forward as a Conference, and we cannot accept even one step back. In addition, we will seek to ensure the ongoing engagement of our fans, and we have done so with an SEC working group on fan experience, which seeks, analyzes, and distributes information on the perspectives of our fans that our athletics department can use to adjust their practices. We greatly appreciate the contributions of

Mississippi State's athletics director Scott Stricklin and Georgia's athletics director Greg McGarity, both of whom serve on this group. And hidden, but equally important, the analytics work provided by Ole Miss senior athletics director Michael Thompson. In August, we will initiate a fresh with our athletics directors and senior women's administrators focusing on our championship events, and that they provide our student-athletes with a lifelong memory. We do that already. We think we can do better. We involve our fans in passionately supporting their teams in a positive way in our championship events and that we support a competitive experience that will launch into National Championship success. Tiffany Daniels, our associate commissioner and senior woman administrator, will lead this effort, which will include our staff in the championships area and our campus administrators, to make sure we do the best possible job. And we'll continue to work with our television partners: CBS, which extends its coverage to begin the first two weeks of the football season this year through our championship game, the ESPN family of networks and the SEC Network. It has been an incredible 11 months for the SEC Network, and it is, at least for me, hard to believe that it's not even a year old. It seems as if it's always been with us. We enjoyed a remarkable commitment from our athletics department in campuses in supporting this launch. They have created production facilities that are connected to the SEC Network's headquarters by over 23,000 miles of fiber cable. I told you about influencing the world. We have a subcategory of goals where we want to circle the world with fiber cable, and we're about 1,900 miles short right now but on good pace. We also importantly had had nearly 300 students participate in gaining educational and broadcast experience to working on network productions over the 11 months. The initial projection was that we would air 1,000 live events. I'm pleased to tell you that number was 1,500 that were made available through the Network to a national audience and also signals the commitment of our institutions. On the distribution side, the Network's launch you have heard described as the most successful launch of a network in cable television history. And even with the friends that are being talked about now, the Network's subscription base has increased to 70 million subscribers. It's also carried nationally by nine of the ten major cable providers. We appreciate Justin Connolly's leadership and wish him well as he transfers into ESPN's executive vice-president for sales and marketing distribution, and we welcome Rosalyn Durant, an SEC alum, to her new role as senior vice-president for college networks. We also appreciate greatly the leadership of Stephanie Druley, who is in a role for senior vice-president for college network production, and her team, who remarkably have presented this conference in a wonderful way. In fact, from day one, from that first five-



minute video which I watch repeatedly, the excellence of the production has shown through. There's a name you might not be familiar with, Chris Turner, who's played an important role interfacing with our campuses, between our campuses in Charlotte, and we appreciate him along with the many others who have played significant roles. We have some of the talent in the back of the room, actually occupying the exact place where I used to stand for the last 12 years. You're welcome for the space, by the way. But also those in production, public relations, programming, marketing, products, and, oh, yes, the other talent that might not be in the room or is hidden. You have done a great year of showing this conference to our fans, to fans of other conferences, and I congratulate you. It's time to get back to work and make it better for the year ahead. Tomorrow at 12:45, Ros and Steph will be in here giving you some more details about the Network's future. Educating scholars, supporting champions will provide us the platform from which we can develop leaders, literally to influence the world. To achieve our goals, we will continue to innovate and be attentive to the changes in trends for the purposes of providing our campuses with the financial resources to support their educational and athletic endeavors. We'll ensure the continuing focus on diversity, both among our head coach's role and within the Southeastern Conference office. We'll implement a professionally developed messaging campaign to tell the stories of the SEC, and we've already initiated a working group of campus leaders who work closely with Associate Commissioner Herb Vincent to evaluate and consider the most effective and best resources for how we communicate the message of the SEC. Last summer, the SECU Academic Initiative -- excuse me, later this summer, the SECU Academic Initiative will celebrate its tenth anniversary. Although not necessarily on your beat, you're welcome to join us in Atlanta September 20th through the 22nd for the SEC symposium. It will feature a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship. I probably just blew up Twitter with that announcement, but you're all invited. We also established a Conference a leadership role in my view. This May, when our membership acted to establish conduct, expectations for individuals seeking to transfer and compete in the SEC. Since that time in collaboration with Vanderbilt, Chancellor Nick Zeppos, who serves as the conference's chair for our presidents and chancellors, we are collaborating to appoint two working groups, which will occur later this summer. Consistent with my comments related to a continuing conversation on conduct issues, we will appoint a working group on conduct expectations that will engage in reviewing our student-athlete conduct issues and policies, particularly they will invest time to consider existing campus policies, national requirements and best practices in order to identify appropriate campus and conference expectations.

There is no prediction attached with the outcome other than we will do great work to make sure as a conference and on our campuses we're in the right place from the standpoint of oversight and policy. The second working group will be a working group on compliance and enforcement. It's been ten years, actually almost 11, since we examined these issues and developed collective support on particular points of how we would act as a conference. As we look forward, we have an opportunity to lead on national policy and continue to properly manage our compliance and enforcement issues in another rapidly changing landscape. In fact, it's an opportunity for us to consider in an administrative group over time, our coaches' encouragement for the development of nationally consistent policies. Our working groups will both be led by a president or chancellor and populated by other leaders from our campuses and our athletics departments. They'll provide regular reports through the year or potentially two years and recommendations, as appropriate, for consideration by the full SEC membership. We use terms like student-athletes, players, athletes, and kids. I learned from John Wooden, he never used the word "kid", but we're talking about young people and of our efforts to build into those lives of young people, those who are entrusted to us. And we do it through education, through competition, and through opportunity. We cannot fully lead unless we successfully educate. Frankly, we can across this country, and should, expect more of ourselves in intercollegiate athletics. As we educate and enhance our competitive success while fulfilling what is a full range of new expectations now upon us, we, the SEC, will occupy a key leadership position within this region, across our country, and throughout the world. And understand that magnifying our global influence is not simply about playing games in London or Asia or South America, although if it's deemed beneficial, our teams will certainly pursue those opportunities. I think it's bigger than that because the great strength of this conference is in our communities. It is in Athens and Auburn, in Baton Rouge, in College Station, in both Columbias, Columbia, Missouri, and Columbia, South Carolina. The SEC can influence the world because of the strength that is present in Fayetteville, Gainesville, Nashville, Knoxville, and Starkville, and in Lexington, Oxford, and Tuscaloosa. It will be through those communities that we educate and develop young people who will be our future leaders. Two weeks ago we announced that we would talk about our young people beyond the field, and it's my privilege to introduce to you a brief video featuring 14 of those young leaders who will be with us this week. These young people form the bigger story, the story of the Southeastern Conference. [ Video played ] You thought we went all "Finding Nemo" on there with you at the end, didn't you? I think this is the first time we've had

tropical fish shown on a video screen at the SEC Media Days. I'm the commissioner of the SEC, but they are the SEC. The times are changing. It is because of these stories and more that convince me the best days of the Southeastern Conference are still ahead. Thank you. I am going to be brave in this room and have some Q&A with you. We'll emphasize the Q, and we'll see whether the answers flow. I'm assisted by Kevin Trainor, who did a wonderful job introducing me. He's going to help moderate.

KEVIN TRAINOR: If you have a question, please raise your hand, and we will get a microphone to you.

**Q. Since you mentioned the working group on conduct, just curious, your take on how much responsibility should a coach have in the conduct of his players off the field, especially given the coach is the one who generally chooses which players come on the campus.**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I've not evaluated levels of responsibility, so I don't know that I'd give you green, yellow, red, or some rating of 1 to 10, but clearly coaches have a responsibility for the young people on their rosters. That's clear today, and I think that's been clear over time.

**Q. Greg, you mentioned the flag issue and that you're particularly proud of what's gone on at South Carolina, Ole Miss, and Mississippi State. Would you consider applying any official pressure to the State of Mississippi?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I've not. We have said previously that, when we look, for example, at championship events, we evaluate a full range of issues, and the cultural context is a piece of that evaluation, and that will continue. Last week I remarked, in response to a question, that the change in South Carolina certainly opens an opportunity, removes in that list of evaluative issues one particular point.

**Q. Mike Slive was famous for quoting Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower. You quoted Bob Dylan. What do you think that says about you and about him?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I'm better at Google. Yeah, we're different, but I learned a lot from Mike. Obviously, it is a different day. Times are changing, and that seemed an appropriate both song title and lyric, one that I've heard many a time, by the way. I think those quotes and observations are really about setting a tone, both for him and for me. I couldn't figure out the U2 lyric to fit in there either. So that was a better option.

**Q. Greg, this is the first year that the so-called**

**Champions Bowl will come into play with the Sugar Bowl. If your champion goes there, that means they miss out on the playoff. If it's not the champion, it means it's the team that came up short of the championship. Is there any concern about trying to generate fan interest and excitement to be in that game?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I look at it in a different way. I don't use the words "but" or "not." I use the words that relate to opportunity. There's a historical tie to the Sugar Bowl that I think every program in this conference, including Texas A&M and Missouri, who are obviously new, share and understand the value of being a participant in the Sugar Bowl. Now, when I talk about champions and winning championships, we have an aspiration, really the expectation, that we're going to have at least one team in the playoffs. And I think that there's a mental preparation that exists that there's still good opportunities in the Sugar Bowl.

**Q. Commissioner, what are the intended consequences to share cost of attendance figures and promote transparency among all the schools in the Southeastern Conference?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: The intended consequences?

**Q. Yes, sir.**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I think it's just an effort to make sure people understand the methodology. Obviously, we've understood cost of attendance awards can vary, and the methods used to calculate and arrive at those amounts can vary. It really is simply, from an intended standpoint, the ability for an institution to understand what goes into those numbers.

**Q. There's been some talk about you wanting a pathway back for underclassmen who declare for the draft and giving them more information about the NFL process. How has that been received nationally, and what obstacles do you foresee in that becoming a reality in college football?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, let's back up a bit. The trigger for that observation was the proposal that the NCAA Council has seen on the NBA draft and more flexibility built around that. My comment that day is that's not necessarily something that's portable at this moment to other sports. So I'm going to end with a period there. And then I'm going to observe that we have talked repeatedly, even in this room, about thinking through a way to foster transition, career transition, for someone who wants to participate in professional athletics, football. I think the reality is, if times are changing, that there's some openness maybe to how we have a dialogue. But I'll tell you, when I go back -- and I had a conversation last November with Roy Cramer just to understand what's

happened. I said, Roy, tell me, because you were on communities, and it's almost like a clock face, where you start at the top with really good intentions and you go around through the evaluation process and draft ideas, and you get back up almost to a new midnight to start over, and you end up almost in the same place. So we should never think that, given our focus on education, that it's an easy solution, but I think it's still one that's worth discussing and pursuing. I don't want to get it tied up exactly with what's happened in basketball at this point.

knew that there would be a reality upon us, and here it is. Let me just make a couple of other comments. The issue of medical observers in football, Steve Shaw, our coordinator of football officiating, is going to be here Thursday morning and talk through that. I was supposed to have mentioned that earlier. So that will be a topic for your conversation with him. Thank you. I'm going to go figure out what music to listen to on the way home this evening, and I wish you all a great day and a great week.

**Q. Commissioner, the off-season is the most common time period for disciplinary actions from players, it seems. How can the SEC allow more coaching involvement in the off-season to kind of help eliminate some of these infractions?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, you've reduced the solution to one element, which is coaching involvement, and the idea behind a working group is to foster a conversation about how we might encounter the concern on conduct in a more global way. There's a balance between the time demands placed on young people, the free time that can create problems, and their ability to mature and make their own decisions. And I think that's part of why it's healthy for us to have the exact conversation I anticipate occurring over the next 12 to 24 months.

**Q. Commissioner, do you think college football programs have a responsibility to the student body where they are participating as to what type of recruits they bring on campus or transfers, whether it be their criminal background or their character background?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I go back to my earlier answer, that there's responsibility that comes with the work in which our programs engage.

**Q. Going back to cost of attendance for just a second, how well do you think that the methodology has been relayed to the athletic leaders at campuses, and how well do you think they're kind of grasping that these aren't numbers people are just making up and coming out of nowhere?**

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Cost of attendance is not a new concept or idea. It has existed on our campuses for years, and I can't tell you the exact date the idea began. The fact that some may now just become aware, I think that's just reality, and I don't think that's unique to any aspect of life. I was probably surprised by something that happened in my household yesterday. We have actually taken steps in communication, starting last fall before the legislation was adopted, to foster some conversation in the compliance world and the administrative world. But we