

# SEC Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 14, 2015

## Dan Mullen

Mississippi State



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by Mississippi State head coach Dan Mullen.

COACH MULLEN: Thank you all. Ready for some football. So happy to be back up here. One, I guess I'm happy to be back up here because it's hard to stay up here as a head coach in the SEC sometimes, but happy to be back up here because you know football season is right around the corner. And this is what we love to do. We work hard all year long, try to help develop young men to be successful in life. And our reward for all of that is we get to go play 12 games this fall. If you're fortunate, you get a 13th, 14th, and now possibly even a 15th game, and there's really nothing like that. Those opportunities to work, play, and experience game day in the Southeastern Conference is something that is just second to none. I'm really excited about this year's team. When you look at what we have, we had a historic year really for Mississippi State last year, spent five weeks at No. 1. I think we were ranked No. 1 in the country as much as any team was all of last season. I think it was a great experience for our young men, a first-time experience for our young men to get there, to get that opportunity. We had that opportunity to go play a game in Tuscaloosa, which ended up deciding the SEC West champion, to go play that game. It was a tough game on the road. We came up a little bit short, but I think that experience certainly helps us moving forward. When we look at our guys, how we've gone to work this off-season, the focus that our guys have going through this off-season, you know that they want to get back to that spot. They want to get back to playing for a championship level game at the end of the season. I think now we have a lot of guys that have played in those games that have that experience that now know what to expect. We lost a bunch of guys last year, but we -- you look at a lot of different positions across the board that are coming back for us. We have 14 players returning that have started a game in their career. We have 52 guys on our roster that we've charted have significant experience, game experience at critical moments in games. So even though I know a lot of people think we're going to be a young football team, I like that people think that, but the fact that we rotate, we play a lot of guys in the course of games, guys have experience. They've been on the stage. They've been in the moments. And they're going to be ready for this season as we move forward. It certainly helps having a

fifth year senior quarterback to lead the way, a guy especially during the summer months that can help the team grow, help the team develop, really teach the young guys what the standard is within the program. And we have a great leader in Dak Prescott to come back and lead the team this year for us. I am excited about everything that's going to happen for us and the type of team that we're going to be able to go put on the field. Defensively, we have Manny Diaz returning as our defensive coordinator, which it's really good. He and I have spent a lot of time, it's kind of at a unique situation. A lot of guys don't get a second opportunity, I guess, to be a D coordinator with a head coach. But you know what's really unique about that is the understandings. I think we've both grown a lot over the last couple years that we've been apart, have both grown as coaches and both grown as men and as people. But I think it's a great thing that we understand the expectations from each other. We've worked together before. Manny knows what my expectations are going to be of him and of our defense. And he knows what type of defense I want to see, and I know what I'm going to get out of a coach like Manny Diaz. So real excited to have him back on defense. We have our whole offensive staff back on the offensive side of the ball and a lot of guys who have worked together for a lot of years. I think we had a great statistic year on offense last year, but we're looking to do even more, be more efficient scoring, especially in the red zone, especially at key moments of games. You look really at the games that we lost last season, a lot of it had to do with red zone scoring on offense. And we've got to just make sure we're not just playing, putting up big numbers that we're scoring touchdowns when we need to in the red zone. That's going to be a huge part for us coming into this season. I'm excited for the challenge of the year. I think SEC West will be as competitive as ever and still really the best division in all of college football and the most competitive division of all of college football. But that's what we love, and those are the challenges we love. As a competitor, that's the league you want to be in every single day, every single week. On Saturdays, you roll out on that field knowing you're playing one of the best teams in the country every single Saturday is a great thing to be a part of. Thank you.

**Q. You talked about the Alabama game last year. What are your specific memories of that, and what**

**can you specifically learn from that game?**

COACH MULLEN: Really, one of the things we talked about as a team is we came in, obviously, it's a tough atmosphere to go play in. You're playing a game with two teams ranked in, I think, the top five in the nation at the time. And I think we started slow in that atmosphere. The biggest memory for me is falling behind 19-0, and our guys -- all of a sudden the guys kind of getting together, and we came back and scored before the half. But then talking at halftime that we weren't playing our style of game, we weren't doing what we've done. We came out and kind of controlled the second half. They put together that one great drive in the fourth quarter to get a score. But it was that atmosphere of falling behind, not being in that situation before, falling behind 19-0 before we really started to play what we felt was our style of game. I think from that point on we outscored them 20-6. I think our guys really understood we needed to play and learn how to play in those big games at that high level right from the opening kickoff.

**Q. Coach, talk to me more about Will Redmond, the cornerback returning. I know Mississippi State graduated Jamerson. But Will Redmond, a hard hitting guy. Talk about how much he's progressed as that coverage corner.**

COACH MULLEN: Really a lot. Will is a guy who's constantly working on his skills. You show up Saturday morning to work, and there's a guy out there in the field working back pedals and change of direction on his own is Will Redmond. He's just always trying to put in more and more to become the great player he is, that talent. If you look back to last season, I know he's a guy, I guess, who is not considered a returning starter for us even though he with the game-winning interception in the LSU game, he had the game-winning interception in the last play of the game against Arkansas. When you look at the key moments of the season, he was right in the middle of all of those. So he certainly has the experience to me of a guy who, as a starter, I would view him as a starter coming back, and we expect him to have a huge season for us.

**Q. Can you just talk about the fact there are seven new defensive coordinators in the league, maybe eight if you count Derek Mason taking over, and whether that presents a challenge for you as an offensive guy.**

COACH MULLEN: Well, I still have a file on some guys -- you try to keep files on it. I remember, I think it was the 2000 season as a grad assistant at Notre Dame, having to play chief at Tennessee. So I've got the file that goes all the way back to 2000. Actually, '99 when I was at Syracuse as a GA, he was there too. So that file is pretty thick. A lot of these are guys are experienced coaches that have been around a long

time. One of the things is you go back, you have your file, so you have a lot of experience in facing these coaches. You have the book or the bible that we keep on these coaches and what they've done in the past. Really game week gets into what's new? What are they using out of their big package, or the bible that we have to study off of them? How are they utilizing the personnel they have at their new school or with this year's team? I think the fact that a lot of them have been in the league before, for guys that we're going to have to face, you kind of know what you're going to see.

**Q. In terms of how the team finished last year, losing the last three out of the four, how much do you think is that fueling your spring and your summer and getting ready for this season?**

COACH MULLEN: I think, when they look at it, I think the one -- the big one, the Alabama loss, because I think that really was the one that set it off for us. Obviously, losing a Bowl game always hurts to me because that's the last game of the season. You've got nine months before you can recover from that one. But I think the one -- the Alabama game is the one that's the big fueling. Not just -- it was the stage that that game was on, that we want to be back on that stage, that we want another shot at a game on that big a stage and find a way to go win it. So I think it's really helped our guys in the off-season that they've experienced playing in those type of games, in the big games, and they certainly want to make sure we get back to those big games.

**Q. Dan, has home field advantage in the Egg Bowl become more important than in recent seasons earlier in the rivalry?**

COACH MULLEN: It seems to. Over the last couple years, it's been that way. I think it's four in a row now the home team's won since I've been there. I do. I think it helps. One of the things -- I mean, we have to look at last year. I don't think we've played -- the last two times we've gone to Oxford. I don't think we've played exceptionally well when you watch us, when you watch our film. So one of the things always as a coach, you have to analyze what we're doing. Is it the atmosphere? Is it the tough playing on the road? Which everywhere you play in this league, it's hard to win on the road in the Southeastern Conference. But I think you always look at that and try to find ways of what we can do better in those situations. But I know it is important for us this year to protect that home field advantage in that game because it means so much to the people of Mississippi.

**Q. Coach Mullen, notice you're supporting the Adidas Easy Boost 350 today. Just want to know, was that your idea? Was it an Adidas idea? Maybe**

### **one of your players?**

COACH MULLEN: I try to be swagged up in footwear. I've got a little sock game going today too. You know what, I was talking to the guys at Adidas, like, hey, this is the hottest shoe. I'm like, well, I'd like to wear kind of cool shoes, I think, when I go somewhere. I don't go too overboard with the suits sometimes, little more conservative that way, but with the sock game and the shoe wear, I try to have some swag on any time I do that stuff. So I was pretty excited. We got these in this morning just in time. I wasn't sure. I had a backup pair of shoes to wear. Everyone likes the Stark Vegas shoes I wear, but I had another custom set of Adidas shoes to wear for today just in case I didn't get these ones in. But when they got in, it was an easy decision.

### **Q. You mentioned the difficulty of the West. All seven schools right now are so financially invested, all the coaches making \$4 million a year. They expect ten-win seasons like now. I know it's always difficult in the West, but is it even crazier than usual, do you think right now, this season?**

COACH MULLEN: I think the one thing that does separate the division from a lot of other schools is all seven schools think they have a legitimate chance to win the conference title. I know as coach talk you come into every season saying, hey, we're going to find a way to win our division or our conference championship. But when you look at the West, I always feel I can look at every team as I'm scouting, as we're preparing for the season, as I'm evaluating them, and I can make a legitimate argument for all seven teams in the West of how they can win our side of the league. When you have that much competition, it certainly makes it challenging. You look, and even on a national stage, I read and hear and see all these different things. The best team in the Pac-12, the Big 12, the ACC, the Big Ten, their top team could compete with any team in the SEC, there's no question about it. But when you're looking at seven teams in the West that feel they have a legitimate chance to win that side of the league, the competition week in and week out, you have got to be on your A game every single week, because if you don't show up and play your absolute best against every team on our side of the league, you're not going to win. You can't play an okay game and find a way to squeak it out at the end. That's not going to happen in the SEC West. That's what makes the challenge in the league so tough.

### **Q. I just got a followup on David's question. The West has won six straight SEC title games. You used to coach in the east of Florida. What do you think is going on with the way the West is kind of beating up on the East?**

COACH MULLEN: The East won some when I was over at Florida too. Unfortunately, I guess, it's following

me around with the competition aspect of things. I don't know. I just think sometimes the balance sways and the power sways. And what's gone on in the West right now, just I think the recruiting, the talent level of players is exceptionally high. Not that it's not in the East, because you look at the success the teams are having over there as well in the league make it tough. But I think you also, you're playing in the West, you've got to play all those other six teams, and you only get two crossover games. When you're beating each other up on that side of the league, a lot of times almost every team last year in the West was ranked at some point in the season. You've got to play big-time games every single week. I guess the sway goes -- I imagine one time -- through the years it will always sway back and forth, though. I'm sure you're going to have teams in the East, where the East is going to become stronger from the West or one or two teams emerge from the East that are just dominating teams that are going to find a way to win championships.

### **Q. You were just talking about how deep the West is, and Dak Prescott probably the biggest star in the SEC coming back this year. De'Runnya Wilson back. And I'm seeing things where people were picking you guys down towards the bottom of the SEC West. Just talk about how your team feels about that or if you guys have even thought anything of that.**

COACH MULLEN: This is my seventh year coming here, and I think all seven years they've pretty much picked us to finish last in the West. It's kind of like a tradition, I guess. We don't really worry much about that. I'm much more concerned with how we finish. The one benefit I look at out there, we look at guys coming back and the perception and reality. We have a returning fifth year senior quarterback. We have four different wide receivers that had 100-yard receiving games last year that are coming back, which that's a pretty big number. We have seven wide receivers that have touchdown passes in games coming back, seven different ones coming back. So I think offensively we have some skill position guys around. We will be a little young on the offensive line, but we do have guys that have played at that position coming back to come play for us. That have started games in the past. So when you look offensively, I think we feel pretty good that way. Defensively, we roll so many players that it's hard. When you look at guys like a Will Redmond, a Chris Jones, a Richie Brown who was an SEC defensive player of the week one week last year. They're not returning starters because they didn't play the first play of the game. I don't view that as a real negative, which I love that maybe people look past us, underestimate us, say they don't have much of a chance this year. We kind of like that role, that fits us, how to play with a little bit of a chip on your shoulder and go out there and

prove everybody wrong.

**Q. Dak Prescott, obviously, a dual threat, but you want to keep him healthy all season. Talk about your approach to that and how to, at the same time, exploit defenses with his running ability.**

COACH MULLEN: I think the first thing that you see that Dak's really improved on this off-season is getting rid of the football in his hand. Understanding where he wants to go with the ball in any situation, getting to the third or fourth read in a progression, knowing where his checkdown is, knowing when to hold the ball for a second and take a shot down the field, or just get it out of my hands quick and let's worry about playing the next play. With that experience with a guy like Dak is certainly going to help us. It's certainly going to help us continue to move the chains and hopefully keep him healthy where he's relying on being a quarterback more than being a great athlete to make things happen out there on the field.

**Q. Obviously, Dak blossomed last season. What was it like for you to see that as a coach first? And secondly, he could have went to the NFL. What was that decision-making process like for him? How much can he benefit with having one more year with you and your staff?**

COACH MULLEN: I think the great thing with a guy like Dak, he and I are very, very close. So it's easy to have conversations about his future. It is very well-based. He applied, got all of his NFL paperwork. We did some research and study of looking at quarterbacks that were coming out, where he might fall. Also, I think the one thing to look as a young football player, and especially at the quarterback position, he's got an opportunity to get over 1,000 game reps at Mississippi State next season. If he had gone and maybe mid-round draft pick that's going to sit the bench in the NFL, he'd have a chance to get zero game reps, and I think that experience in the long run will help his career of getting those live game reps. It might not be at the NFL speed or in that offense against those schemes, but he's out there making decisions, getting the reads, getting the progressions, getting the ball out of his hands, and when you look at that opportunity and that experience to grow and develop this year to help set him up for his career. I know he and I talked -- I know we'd both like to see him play for the next 15 years. So when you look at how this year is going to affect him in the big picture of football over the next 15 years, it's a great experience for him to come back and get all those reps. On a personal level, I love having him back. He's a great leader. He's a great young man. Love being around him. And I know he loves our university and really wants to leave his mark at Mississippi State University on what he's been able to accomplish, what he's been able to do, and I know he wants to come

back and try to finish his career off with a championship.

**Q. Could you speak to the value, and I guess the origin too, of the financial literacy training your players are going to receive. We know why it's happened, but how about the value of it?**

COACH MULLEN: I think it's huge because you look at a lot of these young guys -- I know I went to college a long time ago, but if I got a check from my parents for \$20, that was pretty fantastic. That would get me probably through two weeks of some pizza and a beverage on the weekend or two. When you look at now what's coming in with the opportunity of Pell Grant money and full cost of attendance for these young men, there's a much greater deal. You talk to guys, even walking out the door, they have the opportunity even to save some of this money hopefully, not just go spend it all, save some of it so that -- as they're graduating, if they have an opportunity to save \$1,500 a year, they're walking out the door with \$6,000 in a bank account to go get a job. One of the hard things we deal with with all these young men is every single one of them is under the impression that they're going to sign a \$50 million contract with the NFL. That is such a rarity. Most of them are looking to hopefully go get a job in the education, a job as a teacher, as a coach, a job in sales, a job in the local police force, a job in the media -- whatever career path they're going on is probably not going to include playing football. So the more they understand about creating budgets, learning how to live and save some money, learning how to put some things away when a situation comes when they need it, I think is going to be invaluable for these young men. That's why we worked on a program of having young men come in and just explain how to set up a bank account, how to set up a checking account, how to budget on a daily basis, how much you need. If you told me, hey, you're going to get \$200 a month while you were in college spending money for cost of attendance, I would have thought that was unbelievable. We're talking about more money than that, and if you say, hey, well, can you budget yourself on a certain way so that you can save some of this and help propel you for your future.

**Q. You said last year was a historic season for Mississippi State. What do you have to do with your program to get it where it can consistently win ten games a year and compete at the top of the SEC West?**

COACH MULLEN: Well, hopefully, we're getting to that point now where we can compete year in and year out. I think one of the challenges is the league itself. When you look at how tough that league is, I think you're going to be hard pressed for anybody to compete every single year for a championship. I think Nick and

Alabama's done a great job. He's built that program up through the years, great recruiting years and great players. They have a solid coaching staff where they seem to be in the discussion every year. But you'll see there will be the swoops down years that you have. One of the things you have to try to do for us is avoid a big swoop down. I don't know that you're going to stay up there at 12, 13 wins every year. I'd love to. I absolutely would love to. I plan on, if you ask what we expect, look at our schedule, I would think we'd go 15-0 this year because I don't ever this time of year say we're going to definitely lose that game. I don't think any coach is out there saying we're going to lose this one. I know that. But what you have to do is manage the season, manage the program as a whole, to maintain where, if you can win eight or nine games every single year, you have the chance to have those special years to get up to 12, 13, 14 wins. So if we can keep our program -- I think we're averaging eight wins a year over the last five years, a little more than that -- it's going to put you in a position to have those special years to make championship runs.

Statistically he had just about every catch on their team almost, it seems like. And every opportunity they had, they were trying to get him the ball. We played them, and he had two huge catches. Both times we knew they were going to do that, we had two guys on him and it still didn't make a difference. I think Lane does a great job with that. When he has a star player, he's going to highlight that guy and get him the ball, and you have to find a way to stop him, and that certainly makes it challenging.

**Q. Mississippi remains the only state on the NCAA's postseason ban because of the confederate flag waving in Jackson, Mississippi, on the state flag. It's been a debate raging within the state. What's your opinion on the current state flag that has the confederate flag within it?**

COACH MULLEN: That's a lot for people in Jackson and for the people in Mississippi. I know -- I don't see it very often. We don't have it on our campus up. I do know we're the most diverse campus in the Southeastern Conference. I know the university embraces that diversity as a whole. I certainly embrace that diversity. We're so diverse, they have a Yankee as the head football coach in the Southeastern Conference. I think it's something that on a national level is getting an awful lot of attention right now, that people are really looking into how we can make things better in the state of Mississippi. And I hope as a university we're out on the forefront trying to help make things better with the type of school that we have and the diversity we have in our school.

**Q. You've seen a few different coordinators, offensive coordinators at Alabama since you got to Mississippi State. What's different about Lane Kiffin? What are some of the different challenges that his offense presents compared to some of the previous guys that were there? What are some of the different guys you felt you had to prepare for with him there?**

COACH MULLEN: I think one of the things -- you see, Lane does an excellent job of trying to isolate players. Last year they had a go to guy in Amari Cooper. You look at last year how everything sways completely.