

SEC Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 15, 2015

Coach Mark Stoops

Kentucky



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by Kentucky Head Coach Mark Stoops. We'll ask Coach Stoops to make an opening comment, and then we'll take your comments.

COACH STOOPS: It's great to be back. My third year here at the SEC media days. Really glad the first two years trying to build this program didn't kill me, but the first two years really went extremely fast. I feel like we learned a lot of valuable lessons. The team learned a lot of lessons. I did. And as we move forward, we've worked extremely hard to make Kentucky relevant in the SEC East. As we move into this third year, we really feel like we put ourselves in a position to do just that. A year ago, I talked about the excitement with the approval and the funding to move forward with some renovations. Happy to tell you that we're full steam ahead with those renovations. Commonwealth Stadium is in full gear. People are working 24/7 to get that stadium done. We're excited to open September 5th against Louisiana Lafayette. Our players, fans, coaches, everybody's excited and anxious to take that field in basically a brand new stadium. Also, our football facility, there's steel going up each and every day. We're moving forward with that. The completion for that should be set sometime next summer. Those are some very key pieces for us as we move forward. Clearly, there's progress being made at Kentucky, both in facilities and with our football team. We need to continue to work hard. I'm proud of our staff. They've worked hard at recruiting quality players and very good people. We need to continue to do that, and we need to continue to develop the players that we have on our campus. Three of those guys are here with me today. You'll get an opportunity to spend some time with those guys. Very proud of these very individuals. Jordan Swindle, A.J. Stamps, and Melvin Lewis, three quality young men. Our coaching staff, very pleased with our coaching staff. We've been able to keep the nucleus of our coaches intact. We had one change offensively and one change defensively. Offensively, Shannon Dawson has come in to be the offensive coordinator. Previously, the offensive coordinator at West Virginia. Very excited about him. I feel like we made great progress in 15 practices in the spring. I really love his mentality, the way he coaches offense, I think, very creative and have a tough mentality and try to be balanced and run the football and also get the ball down the field. I also like the way our players respond

to him. They like playing for him, and they're very excited about what we're going to do. Defensively, we had one change with the addition of Andy Buh. I was very thorough and took a long time. I needed the right fit for that position. As you know, in the SEC and throughout college football, offenses are getting more and more difficult to defend. So I really changed some things up, split up our secondary, hired another guy up front, and also needed a big-picture guy just to help with that process. Talking about the defense, really looking forward to this year and this group. We have some key players to replace, but overall, our unit, I feel very good about. Very appreciative of the work D.J. Eliot has done, our defensive coordinator, and all of our defensive coaches, of really working hard, making this transition that we've done over the past couple of years. We've always been a 4-3 team. I've always had a 4-3 background. And really just with the players we had and the versatility and all of the different offenses, really wanted to make that transition to a 3-4 and I think D.J.'s done a great job of working through that with myself and the rest of the defensive coaches. And really feel like we have a good, strong identity on both sides of the ball offensively and defensively of who we want to be and where we want to go. So, again, optimistic, excited. Year three, we should be better. We are better. I think one of the big things that stands out to me is just the unity of our football team. They're all in together. They've worked hard throughout winter conditioning. They've worked hard this summer. They're anxious and more confident. The more work you put in, the more talent you have, the more confident you can be. We know we still have a long way to go. That's why we have a bunch of practices to go. We have some newcomers coming in and feel very good about the progress of our football team.

Q. I was just wondering, what sort of explanations have you gotten for Kentucky's specific cost of attendance stipend? Just where the numbers come from and what do you think -- or I guess how well do you think coaches around the league understand where those numbers are coming from as well?

COACH STOOPS: Not real clear on where the numbers come from other than I know they don't come from the athletic department. So it's an administrative decision. It is what it is. We'll play under the rules that they give us. Again, I'm glad, like most coaches will tell

you, that we're giving them something.

Q. Coach, which players or group of players' character and demeanor, both on and off the field, have stood out for you from spring going into fall?

COACH STOOPS: There's a lot of guys. I think one guy up front, Jordan Swindle, is going to be here today, talk to you a little bit. He's been a great leader for us. Jon Toth is a guy that's not been talked about much, our center, that we really expect a big season out of him. He's been an extremely hard worker. He's really set the tone in the weight room and off-season workouts. He's really done well. Defensively, inside at the linebacker position, I think we really have improved. Josh Forrest and Ryan Flannigan are two guys that have a little bit of experience underneath them. They're really getting physical. I really like the way they played in the spring.

Q. In the room earlier, Melvin Lewis said that Matt Elam is a guy he's seen off running on his own outside this summer, that he can see a hunger in him that he's ready to make that step. What have you seen from that? Also, he said a lot of guys have been doing that, working without guidance from the coaches this summer.

COACH STOOPS: I think that's a big part of it. I don't know if Melvin touched on this or not, he was probably being humble, but I think Melvin has been a guy that has really tried to lead and help Matt in that area and give him that extra motivation and be the guy, and that's what it takes for all of our team. We need more and more leaders. We worked extremely hard developing leadership in our program. Melvin has been a good leader, but I see that dedication. I see the hunger of our team. And more importantly, I see us all working together for a common goal, and that's always a great sign for a coaching staff.

Q. Speaking of cost of attendance again, there's been a lot of talk about it, but with some of the things that are in place for student-athletes in terms of the unlimited meals and access to tutors, things like that, do you feel like student-athletes have a better quality of life than the average student at Kentucky?

COACH STOOPS: Prior to the cost of attendance or after?

Q. After.

COACH STOOPS: After, it only helps. These guys work extremely hard for their universities, for their families, and for everybody. It's not all equal. People come from different backgrounds and different situations, and things are very difficult. I believe, like every coach here in the SEC, we can't do enough for these guys. What they do for us, what we ask of them,

the amount of work that they put in, they deserve it. So I do think it helps. We appreciate any and all help that the NCAA gives us to help their quality of life better. And, yes, I think it is better.

Q. The growing expectations in Lexington, what's the atmosphere like as far as the fan base? Basketball is obviously king, but you guys have definitely made improvements since you came over in 2012. How do you match those expectations as they continue to grow?

COACH STOOPS: We embrace the expectations. I think most of our fan base knows where we had to come from. They expect to see a blue collar, hard working, fun football team out there. That's what we intend to deliver. As I said earlier, I think confidence grows with the work that you put in and the players that you become. But our fan base is terrific. Basketball does nothing but help us. That atmosphere they set, Coach Cal, what he does to help me and help our program, the recruiting, just the environment of that arena. We may bring a prospect in for the first time and bring them to a game, and they see our fan base. Believe me, our fan base goes well beyond the basketball team. They support all of our programs, and they are very supportive of our football team. It's our job to continue to build this program to put a quality team on the field and to compete at a high level, and that's what we intend to do.

Q. Mark, I think you could play as many as six former junior college defensive guys on the roster this fall. How have those guys been helpful in building the program? And as those guys move into year two, what kind of jump do you expect from year one to year two?

COACH STOOPS: I think it's very important to get that experience. You get knowledge and experience, and now you can move towards understanding, maybe understanding what it takes to do a little extra to win some games and to make a difference. I think that's the big key for us, more experience. Even on the offensive side of the ball with a whole boatload of our guys are going to be first or second year guys in the program. Most of them are second-year guys. That's a big thing for us. A year ago, they were first-year guys. Now they have a bunch of experience under their belt. They're still young, but they have that experience. And on the defensive side of the ball, like I said, we lose some key guys, in particular, Bud and Za'Darius, but I think overall what we've done and how we've tried to evolve as a defense and just with the experience of those guys, I think we'll be better off.

Q. Coach, I know it's a little ways down the schedule, but you obviously got Auburn on a Thursday night. How do you feel about that game?

COACH STOOPS: You always ask me about Auburn, don't you? Last year -- you asked me about Damian last year. It will be a real challenge. I haven't had the opportunity to play Auburn since I've been in the league. It will be a great challenge for us. I have a ton of respect for them and what they do on both sides of the ball. With Will going there defensively and certainly with Gus and the challenges that they present offensively is very difficult. They recruit at an extremely high level. So we'll have our hands full. But I am excited about it. A national TV game on a Thursday night, and we'll be excited. That's down the road, but I have looked at it, and with all the coach speaking here, we're worried about tomorrow, but that will be a fun opportunity.

Q. You guys got off to a great start last year, just one win away from getting to a Bowl but you couldn't quite get there. I think all those six losses at the end were to Bowl teams. How frustrating was that to start out 5-1 and then not go to a Bowl game. What do you have to do to get over that hump?

COACH STOOPS: I think any time you lose games and certainly any time you lose a stretch of games, it's very frustrating. Because I see the work our players are putting in to put themselves into a position to win. As we go through that, that's truly the approach. Any coach will tell you. Win or lose, as we go in to address our team, whether it's on Sunday or Monday, it's about that week. But it does mount on you. But I was pleased with the preparation. I didn't feel very good about the way we played in some of those games down the stretch. We had a bye real late in the season and refreshed a little bit and really went out and played a tough, hard-fought game at the end for Louisville and put ourselves in a position to win that game. That's our job as a coaching staff and as a program, as players, to find those ways and to develop that mentality to make the plays that we're able to make to win that game. And that's what we have to do. I think we're constantly in a learning environment at Kentucky in all areas. We're constantly looking to improve in all ways, and we certainly have to look at a way -- I was pleased with the way we came out and started the season last year. As opposed to the year before, I felt like if there's anything I learned between year two and year one, I felt like we came out of camp, and our team wasn't able to handle the work that I gave them, and I just don't think we played very good. We could have played better early my first year. We still were not a very good football team, but it felt like we certainly -- it's our job to play better. So very confident and really like the way we came out of camp last year and really liked the way we played in the first six games. We have to learn now to be able to sustain that. We have to change some things in our development in the second part of the

season, the way we train them, the way we practice, and we have to continue to breed that confidence, and we need to continue to build depth. I think depth is a big thing. We were in the middle of a tough stretch in the SEC, and physically and mentally we did not handle it. We have to continue to grow. But I would also like to really point out that I look at the season as a whole. I talked about progress. I talked about improvement. And I don't want anybody to take away from our team's improvement from a year ago. We have a long way to go. I knew what I was doing when I took this job, and I'm very optimistic about where we're at and where we're going.

Q. Question about some of your offensive linemen, particularly some of the younger guys, Ramsey Meyers and Kyle Meadows, and how they're progressing.

COACH STOOPS: We really need a lot out of those guys. Ramsey had an opportunity to play quite a bit a year ago. He's worked hard. He's doing good, and he's progressing. Kyle is a guy that we really need to count on. He needs to play well for us. He's working hard, doing good things. The summer is going well for him. I think one guy, if there's a true freshman I could talk about because he was here in the spring, is George Asafo-Adjei is another tackle I feel really good about. Surprisingly for a true freshman, he's a physically imposing player, very big and very strong, and mentally he's handled things, and he's really, believe it or not, walked in and been a good leader. So George is another guy that I think we may have to get in the mix a little bit.

Q. Mark, how big was that South Carolina game last year in terms of the kind of effort and results you're looking for out of your program? And how big is that South Carolina game this year given I'm sure you want to get off to the right foot in league play?

COACH STOOPS: Each year it's different, as you know, but it was a big game for us. It was teed up. We had been playing some pretty good football. It was a night game. Our fans were excited, and you do feel that you need to deliver. You have to win. They're a quality football team that's extremely well-coached, and I was very proud of the effort, certainly the way the game went. It was such drastic swings both ways. To be able to hang in there and to make the plays, and that's kind of what I was talking about earlier. We need to continue to do that, to make plays when the game's on the line, to make the difference between winning and losing. We have a very small margin of error. We need to play extremely well and play extremely clean to compete with some of these teams in this league and proud of that game. Look forward to all the games this year. I've known Coach Spurrier for a long time and

have great respect for him. I know the competitor he is, and we'll have our hands full this year.

Q. Kentucky's recruited Ohio before, but since you've been there, I think the last three years you've brought in like 30 guys from that state. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the importance of the proximity of that state and playing in the SEC and of course your background there. Now that you've got those players, just how important it is to build your program with that state.

COACH STOOPS: Well, it's very important for us, for several reasons, just proximity alone. Our recruiting approach is we attack Kentucky. We need to handle our state first, and I've been very proud of the efforts our staff has done in recruiting the top Kentucky talent, and we need to continue to do that first and foremost. But you look right over to southern Ohio, and we treat that almost as in state as well. It's just so close. It just makes sense. The quality of football that is in Ohio, it makes sense. So southern Ohio is a no-brainer. As you move to central and northern Ohio, it just makes sense. That's where I grew up. I still have quite a few contacts, and, again, I believe in the football there. It's very tough. We all know and respect and know the talent that is in the SEC footprint and in the South. It's also extremely difficult to recruit in these areas. We will do that. We'll continue to do that and try to grab players from the South. We have a good mixture of that, but Ohio is very important to us for all those reasons.

Q. Coach, do you go into preseason camp with two quarterbacks with Patrick and Drew, or does Reese have a chance to get back in it after his Achilles injury earlier this year?

COACH STOOPS: We'll see where Reese is at. I saw him in the training room yesterday. He feels very good. He's out there. He's throwing. He's doing some drops on his own. He's not quite 100 percent. He is behind the other two guys. He missed an awful lot of snaps in the spring with the new offensive coordinator. But absolutely, he'll have an opportunity. Every player on our team has an opportunity. We will do a boatload of snaps certainly early in camp for a couple of week. So he'll have his opportunity if he's 100 percent. The other two guys certainly have a leg up just from the reps, and Patrick with his experience a year ago. So we'll see.

Q. Coach, it seemed like at the beginning of the season, you had kind of a running back by committee thing going. Toward the end, Boom Williams emerges the guy. What have you seen out of him, I guess this fall and off-season, I guess entering his sophomore season?

COACH STOOPS: Boom is a guy that has exceptional

talent. He has that game-breaking capability that you're looking for. You know, very excited about him. Boom, like all of our players, needs to grow in certain areas. There's a lot of different aspects that go into being a football player and being a teammate within the SEC. I'm happy with Boom, but he does need to continue to progress. So he won't be given anything, just like any of our players will. Very pleased with the energy and the effort of Jojo Kemp, and Mikel Horton is a very talented guy. As you know, you need quite a few running backs for this league. He knows that. But he is a key piece to us and our success, and I'm pleased with his growth in certain areas, and he needs to continue to grow in certain areas as well.

Q. Coach Stoops, talk to us a little bit more about A.J. Stamps in that secondary as a safety. Very hard hitter in the box. Could you talk more about his narrow to narrow quickness playing the ball.

COACH STOOPS: A.J. was a guy that came in a year ago and was able to make an impact right away. And that's what you expect when you recruit a junior college player. He came in, and he did not disappoint. He really had a good year. He's been very solid. He's been a very good leader for us, physical at times. But we expect more and more out of A.J. as he grows as well.

Q. Coach, the SEC West has won the last six championship games. I know you've only been here two years so far, but what have you seen from the West and how do you think the divisions stack up right now against each other?

COACH STOOPS: I don't think there's any denying the depth of the West, very good football teams. You see some new coaches go in, Bret and what he's done, and the improvement that they've made. We feel the same way in the East. Nobody in this league is going backwards. I think certainly I could just speak for Kentucky. I know we need to move forward. We're making steps to do that. Again, I talked about it, but the commitment from our administration and our fan base to renovate the stadium, to build a football complex, to help me hire quality coaches and create different jobs within our department to help support these young men, it's a commitment by a lot of people. I don't think there's any doubt that all the schools on the East are making that commitment to play at an extremely high level. Certainly, if you look at the top tier of the East, every year is different, and I expect the East to compete with the West, like we always do. But you have to give the West credit. Shoot, they're a bunch of good teams. They're a bunch of good coaches. They've got a commitment from a lot of people to do things right.

Q. The Auburn game got mentioned earlier, and I

believe it's the first Thursday night home game for Kentucky. I know you've had to go on the road with those kinds of games in the past, but how do you prepare for the home game? Do you use kind of the experience you had with the Thursday night home game with Arizona to kind of guide you and give you a blueprint to how to change things up?

COACH STOOPS: I don't know if there's anything I could bring from the Arizona experience. We certainly had some big moments and one big moment in particular that was a lot of fun. I think you see that. I think that's part of the joy of college football, is folks getting an opportunity to watch that game on Thursday night. Strange things happen. I think it's very different. It's not a lot of fun to go on the road for a Thursday game. It's just weird. You travel on a Wednesday, and you get to the hotel, and there's soap operas on or something instead of football. I don't know. It's just different traveling on a Wednesday. In particular, I think it's more difficult on the road. You see strange things happen sometimes, but you also see that every day when you're watching 50 college football games on a Saturday. You see strange things as well. But it will be a lot of fun, looking forward to it. Hopefully, we'll have a great game.

Q. After the administration has invested more in the program in recent years in Kentucky, is the expectation now to produce more than it has in recent years?

COACH STOOPS: Is there any other way? That's what it is. You all expect me to make progress every year, and certainly my bosses do.

Q. You just hired a new offensive coordinator in Shannon Dawson. What has he done so far to enhance your offense that you guys had last year?

COACH STOOPS: I think there's several things. I think he changed the communication. There were a lot of similarities to what Neal Brown did, and I really appreciate the progress that Neal made with our offense, and I really liked that style. Shannon really comes from that same tree, but all those guys have a little different touch on what they do. I've been very impressed with Shannon. Like I said, I like the creativity out of the run game, and I love the mentality that he has out of the run game. We all know, every coach will talk about that, certainly the defensive guys, but balance is a big thing. Being able to run the ball is a big thing. It helps your defense practicing against the run game. It helps the defense. So I think the nuances in the run game and getting the ball down the field are a few things that are different with Coach Dawson.