

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Monday July 11, 2016

Greg Sankey

SEC Commissioner



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning. I'll let you in on a behind-the-scenes fact. Duct tape solves everything, so there's now duct tape holding the microphones in place. When we practiced yesterday, it wasn't here.

Welcome to 2016 SEC Media Days. I think you know that after my remarks, we have time for questions. We will do that again this year. Also, I want you to understand the original draft of my remarks had a variety of policy conversations, those that you would probably expect. I have deleted those. I'll talk about issues of importance to the Southeastern Conference, but I have not included for conversation changes that we've made in the area of men's basketball, football officiating, football recruiting. You may want to ask me those questions later on after my remarks.

During my remarks, I want to talk about issues that, in addition to those, are critically important to the Southeastern Conference, so a lot of time talking about our student-athletes and how they describe the reality and what they achieve.

Tomorrow, Steve Shaw will explain all there is to know about collaborative replay, so I'll not jump into that. He will also talk about other football officiating matters. Also, tomorrow at 12:45 Rosalyn Durant from the SEC ESPN Network will be here to talk about what we view as an incredibly successful year two, and I'll cite two statistics related to that one. The SEC Network televised over 1,600 live events. That's up from right around 1,000 the first year, and that's a tribute to the work done on our campuses, which is the next statistic. We'll get lost. We have about 350 students, actually a little over, who are engaged in television production on our campuses. What that means is a by-product of the SEC Network as young people, before they graduate from college and move into their chosen field, have great experience opportunities through the network. That's an important piece that I want to make sure is known.

I want to talk about important issues this morning. Last Monday, we, as a nation, celebrated Independence Day. Parades, field days and fireworks provided gatherings that are special that bring people together in America. One week seems like a long time ago. The

sadness from the past few days remains on all of our minds, and it's appropriate to make that observation up front as it remains in our hearts as well. When tragedies occur for me personally, there's a passage in the book of Ecclesiastes, the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, that Pete Seeger wrote into song lyrics, became a 1965 number one hit, the musical group call The Byrds. Begins: To everything there's a season, a time to laugh, a time to weep, a time to dance, a time to mourn.

This is one of those times in our nation where we weep, we mourn, for those families and cities who have experienced loss. Those song lyrics include another side of things: A time to love, a time for peace, a time to embrace.

I'll just share, now is the time for those three things to occur. There's a speech I found from Nelson Mandela in 2000. Actually has a quote about how sports unite people. Sports, he said, has the power to change the world. That's the quote. He went on to talk and illustrate how that's true.

If you read through those remarks that were made at an awards dinner, at the end he says something even more important, I think: Peace is the greatest weapon mankind has to resolve even the most intractable difficulties. But to be an effective agent for peace, you have to seek not only the change the community and the world, but it's more difficult to change yourself before you seek to change others. Only those who have the courage to change themselves and know, in all communities, without exception, there are good men and good women who want to serve those communities. It's a wise man.

It's also a time to remember one of college sports iconic figures, because on Thursday of this week, there will be a celebration of the life of Pat Summitt in Knoxville, Tennessee. Pat was a pillar of the Southeastern Conference. She's on par with many of the great names, may have set the standard for all of the great names that are a part of this conference. Her impact is felt every day in the lives of the young people she mentored. Their ongoing success is living proof of Pat's influence and truly positive impact of intercollegiate athletics.

In the days since her passing, there's been any number of quotes from the University of Tennessee women's basketball players talking about their mentor and their coach. Today I'll share one from Kara Lawson who said: Personally, she was a life-changer for me. You come in as a young woman, and you're rough around the edges in a lot of ways, and she, little by little, she smoothed those out and made you into something where you feel invincible as a player and you feel invincible when you graduate, with the confidence you have to attack whatever it is you choose to do.

It's football Media Days, but it's appropriate to remember Pat, because, while there's a measure of her impact in the record books, we can't lose sight of the fact that she had 100 percent of her players who completed their eligibility under her leadership, graduate from the University of Tennessee.

Last year I introduced the idea of scholars, champions and leaders as a vision for this conference, talking about graduating every student-athlete, winning every championship and changing the world. Pat may be the best example of having graduated every student-athlete, having sought and tried and competed to win every championship, and using the intercollegiate athletics platform to change the world. Her legacy demonstrates that academics and athletics are not just compatible, but essentially linked within the context of what we do in intercollegiate athletics.

From all of us, I mean all of us, I simply want to say thank you, Pat. I spent the weekend, two days, Friday and Saturday, with 28 student-athletes from across the Southeastern Conference. And I think you're all aware that last Thursday the five conferences known as autonomy conferences issued a joint press release talking about continued pursuit of time-balance outcomes that might be different from where we've been the last 25-plus years. And we expect to have those ideas, those concepts in front of us legislatively as we move to the NCAA convention in January.

But the opportunity this week was to build into the lives of the young people in Birmingham but also to engage them in conversation. And I'll tell you, and I mean this, the best parts of my last 13 months was the times I had to spend in conversation with student-athletes, be it in groups or individually are some incredible young people all across this conference, literally thousands, a lengthy discussion about issues related to time balance in their lives.

What follows are the raw quotes from our student-athletes, and they gave me permission to share their thoughts with you this morning. Quote from one: It's a four-year commitment. We came in knowing that. Some said it's five. We have to be here competing at

the highest level. We signed up for this because we want to compete and train with the best. End of that quote.

Another said, quote: There are thousands of other people who would love to have our opportunities, end quote. Next quote: Our goals are set high outside of the competition arena, because we want to achieve great things and we know what it takes to get there. End of that quote.

And one more, quote: If you want to be your best, you have to put in the work for it. We wouldn't trade these experiences and opportunities for anything. We of living out what we want to do. We only get this in the SEC, end of quote.

That is what our student-athletes say about their experience. Our student-athletes are forward-looking people, and throughout this year one thing that has been consistently said to me is continue and expand the support as we transition from our educational time into our career opportunities outside of sports. They've said that. They've talked about what's already done and asked for even additional support.

And that's a message that I committed to them. I'll carry forward through our meetings this year to see how we, in the SEC office and how on our campuses, we can do even more to support our young people and their transition from adolescence to adulthood and into a career.

From my dialogue with our student-athletes, what is abundantly clear is our 14 universities provide each student-athlete with enormous support to meet the challenges present in their educational and competitive commitments. You'll meet a young man today. He's an economics major at Vanderbilt University, Oren Burks. Oren shared this during our conversation. Quote: My scholarship isn't just money to play sports. It's an investment in myself. We are the future leaders of America. And there's no one else in our shoes. The skills that we're using, we need to apply them to society. We have to make a difference and pay it forward. End of his quote.

In the context of my introduction, that is a leader who is not waiting years. That's a leader who's leading now. The expectations placed upon our student-athletes are enormous at this level. They embrace those. And that's why we support, provide -- the support we provide is so important, and, in fact, every one of us, leaders on campus in the Southeastern Conference, leaders of our athletics programs, our coaches and student-athletes, all face real pressures, demands and expectations. We also enjoy greater attention, greater support, and in many ways greater fulfillment as we

meet the expectations placed upon us.

Those expectations now go far beyond winning and losing, beyond ticket sales, TV ratings and trophies. The last few months remind every one of us in college athletics that we are entrusted with the public, with leadership for what is at its heart an educational endeavor that's important in our culture. It spills out on to the fields of competition. And it does, like many year areas of life, present us ethical challenges and opportunities. We're continually attentive to the higher expectations placed upon us, for integrity and in other components of our roles. And we know, when we have issues, those issues are public and highly visible.

But the reality is our successes far outweigh the shortcomings that may be identified. For example, if you go back to 2005 academically, when the NCAA's APR program for academic progress was first introduced, 47 SEC teams, over 20 percent of the teams in the Southeastern Conference, were either below or very near the penalty line for the NCAA's academic performance program. Today, not one of the SEC's teams is below the NCAA's NPR cut line. And, in fact, none of our teams are even within ten points of that potential penalty line.

Beyond just the minimums, we have 36 teams in this conference that have perfect four-year APR scores of 1,000. In the area of rules compliance, last August, for the first time since 1984, we reached a point where no SEC university is currently on probation with the NCAA.

You know there are two athletic programs that have received a notice of allegations from the NCAA. Those notices are related to what are now known as Level I or Level II violations. But as we have, over more than the last decade, our institutions are expected and will continue to handle these matters with integrity. We hope both of the current matters are completed in a timely manner. We understand there are issues that arise. That's why the expectation for integrity is so high. And as we move forward together, we can't have any more of those issues arise.

The central thought must be, must be, we never have a team return a championship trophy, never vacate any wins, and never have one of our teams precluded from postseason competition because we either can't follow the NCAA's rules or can't meet the expectations for academic success. We have made enormous progress.

And I have appointed a working group that's been working over the last few months, lead by the University of Georgia president, Jerry Moorehead, considering how we continue to collectively meet the

NCAA's expectations and how our athletics teams continue to succeed at the highest levels while avoiding integrity compromises that challenge our entire mission.

This past spring, you heard in Destin that we enacted a policy that, based on a transfer of student-athlete's prior conduct, may inhibit their opportunity to receive an athletic scholarship or participate in intercollegiate athletics within the Southeastern Conference. This conference has taken a national leadership position on this issue. But we still see headlines, and we recognize those headlines when young people fail to live up to their legal or moral expectations. That means we still have work to do. The same is true on every campus around this country.

That means everyone in this conference, everyone, must understand the high expectations for their conduct, and the high level of scrutiny their conduct brings. Young people need to understand the serious consequences associated with their behaviors, and our leaders need to make certain the laws and expectations of society are unquestionably followed. As leaders, we have to hold ourselves to high standards so that we are the example for our student-athletes.

Now, our working group was diligent in its review and updates of our priorities and processes, and these conversations across our conference are far from over. We're committed to getting it right, because there's so much good happening in the SEC on our 14 campuses. We can't allow the actions of a very few to overshadow the great work and the great achievements being realized.

There's no better example of the positive impact happening on our campuses than Dr. Isiah Warner. Dr. Warner, earlier this year, was named the 2016 SEC Professor of the Year. He's a professor at LSU and professor of chemistry. Consider before Dr. Warner arrived in Baton Rouge, LSU had graduated only six African-American students with Ph.D.s in chemistry. During its entire history. Today, due largely to his influence on campus, and his interest in his students and the commitment of the university, that number has grown to 80, making LSU the nation's leader in graduating African-Americans with a Ph.D. in chemistry.

And he's not alone. Over the last five years, we've honored 70 members of our faculty, one per school each year, in five different Professors of the Year, because as universities, we have a great legacy, a legacy of excellence, positive and powerful impact on our region, and we must continually meet the high expectations for education, for research, and for

service. And there are thousands who have contributed to what we've built today and the legacy that's been established.

One of those, Jeremy Foley, called me a few weeks ago, early on a Monday morning, to say: I'm going to announce my retirement. He's one of the many that's made those contributions, as I noted. During his tenure at the University of Florida, earned 27 national championships in a variety of sports, including three in football. Jeremy has passionately lead the Florida athletics program. He has set an example by having high expectations that people around him do things the right way, and he has enthusiastically supported student-athletes in every sport.

I want to say, Jeremy, thank you. Thank you for your leadership, for your great work. You got plenty to do in your future, but most of all, Jeremy, thank you for your friendship.

One of those Florida championships, during his tenure, was earned by who you knew -- who you know as the head ball coach of 1996, Steve Spurrier. We will miss Steve's unique football genius, and you will miss the entertaining quotes he offered annually at SEC Football Media Days. To honor Steve and fill some of your sludge space, I spent much of the last week searching for one of his quotes that I, as commissioner, could share here today.

After an extensive, lengthy, exhaustive search, I found exactly one of his quotes, not involving free shoes, astronomy, shiny cars or the Citrus Bowl which means I can use that one quote in front of you. Steve once said: I don't want to coach too far into my 60s. By that time I'll be playing golf four or five times a week.

Last week Steve and his wife, Jerri, celebrated their 50th anniversary, he coached until he was 70, and it is my hope he and Jerri enjoy all of the best and many, many rounds of golf.

In the season ahead we can say thank you and goodbye to our friend Verne Lundquist. Verne has been the voice of the SEC during some of the most exciting times in the history of our conference. We look forward to hearing him call the games through the coming season. It's fitting that Verne's final game on CBS as the voice of the SEC will be this December in the Georgia Dome, our final championship game in the Georgia Dome. In fact, it's our 25th SEC football championship game.

We'll relive some memories, we'll remember great games and great people, and then we'll look forward to transitioning to the Mercedes-Benz Stadium for our 2017 game.

As I said earlier, I want to talk about our student-athletes. We have incredible young people. I can't say that enough. Our current projection is that 125, or actually probably higher when we get the complete numbers in, either current or former student-athletes from SEC universities, will participate in the Summer Olympics in Rio. It's that pride that comes from their efforts.

For example, if you watched the USA track and field championships last night, the trials, you watch Kendell Williams competing in the heptathlon as she ran the 800 meters giving everything she had to earn the third spot in the Olympic team and pride from watching that.

It's the same pride that comes from seeing the joy shown by Arkansas pole vaulter Lexi Weeks when she cleared her personal best to make the team. She had not even landed back in the pad and she began celebrating her achievement. And then if you watch, you watched the pride and the emotion when she realized she would be part of the United States Olympic team.

Those moments are special, and they are examples of real stories that are in our football program. Our football programs present you people today like Oren Burks from Vanderbilt who I mentioned. He's a two-year starter, an All-SEC candidate, an honor roll student, president-elect of Vanderbilt Student Advisory Committee and co-founder of a program called REVAMP, Revitalizing and Empowering Vanderbilt's African-American Population. A young man not waiting to lead. He's leading now.

Georgia offensive lineman Brandon Kublanow is a first-generation American who is preparing for a career in commercial real estate. Probably the only notary on a Division I football roster. Another first-generation American, South Carolina offensive lineman Mason Zandi, whose father fled Iran during the revolution. Texas A&M defensive lineman Myles Garrett lives well beyond the game of football. He has an affinity like me for trying to read a book. His goal is one every two weeks. He writes poetry, which I do not. He left Twitter, which I did not, though I thought about it over the last year. Refrained from social media because he said this, quote: Getting better as a person, football player and leader is how I want to spend my time, end of quote.

Arkansas linebacker Brooks Ellis has a 3.8 GPA and is a pre-med student. Two months ago made a medical trip to Belize. Auburn offensive lineman Alex Kozan graduated in three years, plays this fall while earning his MBA. Ole Miss quarterback Chad Kelly has a 3.0 GPA. In the last three years during his spring break,

he's chosen to spend that time on mission trips in Haiti.

Tennessee quarterback Josh Dobbs, we talked about him before. He leads a football team, he's an aerospace engineering major. One of the things you find, he took time to write a young fifth grade girl, encouraging her as she deals with hair loss due to a medical condition known as alopecia.

Last August, kicker Austin MacGinnis, receiver Alexander Montgomery, safety Marcus McWilson travelled to Ethiopia with other Kentucky student-athletes serving for an up-close look at lives of the less unfortunate, serving in prisons, providing food and renovating homes.

And when I met with Kentucky student-athletes, I asked them what was your most memorable experience at the University of Kentucky. Those who made that trip said that was a life-changing experience for them. We have student-athletes overcoming obstacles that might stop any of us in our track.

Florida punter Jonathan Gould had to beat cancer before football became an opportunity. Mississippi State linebacker Richie Brown, he and his family were displaced by Hurricane Katrina. He completed his industrial technology degree this May with a 3.5 GPA, and he too will play this fall while pursuing his master's degree in business.

Alabama defensive lineman Dalvin Tomlinson had to overcome the loss of both parents and two knee surgeries. He's fulfilling a promise to his mother working on his master's degree and also plays the trumpet and saxophone.

Missouri tight end Shawn Culkin, the faith that's taken him on mission trips including running a children's camp in Nicaragua and sharing his faith to people in El Salvador.

And then there's LSU's Thorpe Award finalist, defensive back Tre'Davious White, who passed up on the NFL draft to pursue becoming the first member of his family to earn a college degree.

Examples of these young men, and the thousands of young men and young women in our athletics department, show you that they are making the most of the opportunity they have in the Southeastern Conference. They were the lifeblood of our conference, they are why we do what we do and they will continue to tell their stories as we keep striving to sustain the high standards of performance on the field and in the classroom and in the community.

And this year we'll be doing so using a phrase that just

means more. The phrase is a statement and will be part of a campaign created for us by the Richards Group, a Dallas-based agency focused on helping endear brands to people. In many ways we are endeared to millions. But the Richards Group goes further to determine what it is that makes our conference special, the people, traditions and special significance of our universities and towns, large and small. They have a great perspective on who we are. And the campaign will explain why in the SEC, it just means more.

Think about it for a second. To a community like Chubbtown, Georgia. A single touchdown by a certain running back means more. To be the very first college graduate from a proud family, it means more. In Appalachia, a joint research program that involves both the University of Kentucky and Texas A&M University is focused on developing sustainable housing for families. That research project means more. For all across Africa, a materials science network that spans the continent, thanks to our Professor of the Year, LSU's Dr. Isiah Warner. That means more. For Vanderbilt running back, study-abroad trip to Australia means more. To an entire state or region, where often our universities are at the very epicenter of life and culture. In fact, everywhere throughout the country, or across the globe, where our alumni or student-athletes call home, the colors, traditions, and the impact of a university education, it just means more.

I want us all to be proud of what we do together, and to continue to add to the legacy, the amazing legacy, of the Southeastern Conference. I want SEC teams to win every possible championship, and I expect us to be victorious the absolutely right way. All of us who call the SEC home, our administrators, our coaches, our fans, our players. We're all contributing to something that last, something that matters. Can't be measured on a score board. It can be measured through people's lives, through service trips to foreign lands and families who live better because of a college education, and in one changed life after another. It's realized through athletes from rural communities and the inner city who have leapt past their limitation and begin to see the world and begin to realize the responsibility that comes with their opportunity.

You know, when you write these things, these speeches, it's hard to figure out sometimes how to bring them to conclusion. So, this year I'm going to use the words, the young man named Nolan Gromacki. Nolan studies mechanical engineering at the University of Missouri. Happens to be a right-handed pitcher on the baseball team.

Here's what Nolan shared this weekend, from his perspective about being part of the SEC, quote: This

summer when I saw baseball players from around the country, I walked into the room wearing my "I am the SEC" T-shirt. That's something they all want. I compete in the greatest conference in the country. That's the end of Nolan's quote. What Nolan said is it just means more.

Thank you. Take a moment, grab a bottle of water. We've moved Kevin off to the left so we'll have an opportunity for questions. As I've told you before, we'll figure out if there's answers.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Commissioner. If you have a question, please raise your hand.

Q. If you could just elaborate on what you were discussing earlier with the recent events, and how that's impacted you?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, I sat in church yesterday, which is probably the only calm moment in my week anymore. I watched a young woman who looks different from me be baptized. I heard a conversation about the realities around us. And the question asked: Have you done enough or what have you done. Becomes a difficult question, because I interact with people of all races, backgrounds and colors, yet you're reminded that the answer is likely not. I would offer that.

I lived in Dallas for 11 years. And Thursday night, started watching television, particularly those events, places that I knew, knew well, and it becomes much different, much more personal. And then the reality of the strife, the concern is one to which I don't think any of us are inattentive. I observe, we provide opportunities for a lot of people on our campuses. Sports brings people together. I think our universities do as well, and we need to be mindful and attentive to that reality and the opportunities associated with that reality.

Q. Can you kind of explain to me the difference between, and why it's different, for a player not to be able to transfer in with something on his record in terms of domestic violence, but the schools themselves can accept freshman to come in if they have an issue like that?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, I think, first, I'm always cautious to people to be careful of judging one's character on ten seconds of video. Our working group spent a lot of time teal dealing with that. A couple of concerns that were consistently identified, which is what can you know? What can you learn if there's something particularly in one's juvenile past, and can you access information in a consistent way.

When someone enrolls in college, they are generally

an adult. You expect that you'll have access to more consistent information on which to base decisions. And so we as a group said let's go further on the transfer issue. They have been adults on the university campus, and that misbehavior is viewed as rising to a higher level of attention.

Q. Commissioner, can you address how some schools have handled sexual assaults among their athletes? Do you think -- have you addressed that with your coaches and administrators, and also do you think colleges should do a better job of vetting the recruits that they bring on campus?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, to the end I think we've raised attention certainly to the transfer issue. I do look and observe that individual's act, and it is difficult to sometimes predict the actions of individuals. Part of our basis for the transfer policy is when there are certain behaviors that may indicate a potential for future behavior, certainly around interpersonal violence. That's a stopping point here.

We have talked as a conference about expectations, reality, around how legal expectations play out. And we'll continue to do that. I don't -- I think if you heard the activities the last month remind us that we even need to be more attentive and with the settlement that was announced and some of the commentary about changes at the University of Tennessee, there's a communication opportunity there to help educate on those changes. You saw a program that LSU introduced last week. University of Kentucky, two, three, years ago went through an exhaustive search across campus survey process to understand and educate how they proceed. But I would caution that we not assume that people don't do the right things most, if not all of the time.

Q. Greg, following up with Mike and Pat, the five autonomous conferences got together to put out a statement on time demands. Would you support the five autonomous conferences coming together and making some sort of a conduct statement for those incoming recruits? Define serious misconduct any way you want, but those schools will not take kids that are engaged in whatever sort of conduct that's defined as?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: That's a complex question. So let's lay that out first. I know that we will have continuing conversations around those issues. I won't predict outcomes. And we'll see if that leads to a statement, first from this conference, and if we collectively should say things. I think that might be the next step.

Q. Greg, this line of question makes me wonder, do you feel like the SEC has an image problem right

now? Is this something that you guys are sitting around and actively addressing? There's some high-profile cases around, and you alluded to the two ongoing investigations, is this something you're actively trying to get your arms around and fix? And if so, how?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, the fact that there are headlines round the Southeastern Conference isn't new. The fact that we come to Media Days, and there are maybe more extreme headlines is not new. I was reciting over time, while you observe about athletic departments Friday news dumps, there's an annual occurrence, as we head into Media Days, with a focus. I just talked about dozens of young people achieving great things, and if we really evaluate what is at the center of some of the recent articles, we're talking about some issues that probably occurred in 2012 and 2013 that are just being adjudicated. We may be talking about one or two or three individuals, and their misbehavior.

I don't think that attaches properly to the entire conference. The body of work of this conference far outweighs those problems, yet we are attentive to those realities. We understand when the issues arise, we need to even be more attentive, be that on campus or as a collective group.

Q. Commissioner, I know about your affinity for hypotheticals, but we've seen at the professional level when major issues arise, professional athletes protest from the "I Can't Breathe" t-shirts in the NBA to the St. Louis Rams taking the field with their hands up following Ferguson. If SEC athletes were to display a similar such protest or similar display on an athletic playing field regarding the recent incidents, can you assess your degree of comfort for athletes who expressed their reaction on social media publicly, if they were to do it again, how would you feel about it?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: No. We have young people that are leaders. They are engaged with conversation with campus leadership. Let's not go running down a road predicting particular outcomes.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Commissioner Sankey, who will be around this week if you have further questions. Appreciate your time.