

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday July 13, 2016

Mark Stoops

Kentucky coach

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good afternoon. Next, is Mark Stoops from the University of Kentucky.

COACH STOOPS: Thank you, Greg. It's a great time of year. We are certainly extremely excited at Kentucky to open the football season.

I want to thank all of you for what you do for us, what you do for the league, and what you do to promote the great game that we play.

A year ago I talked about all of the building that was going on on our campus. Greg just touched on it. We were proud to just finished playing our first season in a beautifully renovated Commonwealth Stadium. We thoroughly enjoyed that. Our fans did. It was a great experience. We are just days away from moving into the football training center. That will be a game-changer for us. It will help us continue to develop the players that we have.

Our players work extremely hard. They're great kids. We're building that program, and they deserve the very best to continue in their efforts and their development. It will also help us on the recruiting front. We need to continue to recruit at a high level and attract great players from throughout the country.

The biggest change I'm excited about is the culture change within our program. I think it's very easy to change a climate within a program and very difficult to change the culture, and I'm very proud of the administration, our coaching staff, our players, to continue to push for that winning culture.

An area that we've touched on and worked extremely hard this past season, and past year, is the capacity. And quite simply, our players need to do more. Whether it's in the classroom, to have that attention to detail in the meetings, in the football meetings, to pay attention longer, to have attention to detail longer within our meetings, longer training sessions, harder workouts, harder weight room workouts, train harder this summer.

We had longer spring practices. We need to have a tougher two-a-days, a tougher camp and continue to expand our capacity to handle more to endure what it



takes mentally and physically to compete and to win in this league. In particular, to close the gap on the close games. We've been very close. We're tired of being close. And our players are doing what it takes in expanding that capacity, expanding everything we're doing to give us a larger margin to not have to play a perfect game all of the time.

Our staff. Someone once said the only constant in life is change. We've dealt with some change in the coaching staff. I feel very, very confident in who we have and what we have in place right now with our staff.

If you look at the offensive side of the ball, I brought in Eddie Gran to be the offensive coordinator. I had the pleasure of working with Eddie. I've been with Eddie. We were both on the ground floor with Jimbo Fisher in the first days to help build that program at Florida State, and I know up front and personal what type of man he is, what type of leader he is, the attention to detail that he does things with. And I couldn't be more happy to have Eddie with me. He comes from Cincinnati where he had very prolific offenses and did a heck of a job.

We bring with him pull Darin Hinshaw who will come in as the co-offensive coordinator and coach quarterbacks. He was also with Eddie at Cincinnati. The last change is bringing in Lamar Thomas to coach our wide receivers. I've known Lamar back from my days coaching at the University of Miami. He brings that attitude, that swagger, that winning attitude that you need, and been very pleased with Lamar and what he's doing.

If you look at us on offense, we returned nine starters. We returned four starters up front on the offensive line. I feel very good about what we have on the interior of our offensive line. And, again, we have four starters back there.

I feel like we're getting the depth that we need in the interior. We need to continue to develop the depth at tackle. One of our interior offensive lineman and three of the guys responsible for that culture change that I was talking about earlier are with me here today. That's Jon Toth, senior center; Jojo Kemp, a senior running back; and Courtney Love, a junior linebacker.

All terrific leaders, very inspirational players, great students and stand for all of the things right, and I hope you get an opportunity to visit with them because they're incredible kids.

Offensively, we talked about the O-line, and then you get into the skill positions. We return a bunch of players that have had great experience. If you look at the running backs, our wide receivers and our tight ends, those guys have been around for a while. They have great experience. They have great play-making ability. We need to be more consistent, but I'm very excited about that group.

The quarterback. At any level you have got to have great play at quarterback. I feel very good with Drew Barker. Drew Barker started the last two games of the season, went into his red-shirt sophomore year, very highly recruited player. I'm really impressed with the growth he's made, he's made on the field and off. I'm excited about Drew. He'll get the keys to the car, and I'm excited to watch him go because I know this is his time. He's ready to play.

Defense. We will return eight starters that have started a minimum of four games. We do lose some experience on the defensive line in the linebacking group, but I feel very good about the players that have had to step in. We have some guys that have played a lot of football, maybe not had as many starts, but are good quality players and ready to step into those roles.

I feel very confident in our secondary. I know it's by far the best group since I've been there at Kentucky. It's a group that has great length, great play-making ability, and I believe they are future stars in this league. Three of them started last year as a freshman. They will be sophomores this year and, again, have the length that you're looking for, play-making ability, and now they have some experience. And the great news is they'll be around for a while.

When you look at special teams, we really need to improve in that area. We have a new special teams coordinator in Matt House. Matt has great experience in the NFL and in college. He brings great passion, great energy, and I'm pleased with what we've done in the special teams.

Austin MacGinnis will be a big key for us in the special teams. He's a guy that battled injuries last year. It really hurt us. It was frustrating for him and frustrating for us. He knew he was not at full strength. He's back at full strength right now. I believe he's one of the best kickers in the country when he's healthy. So, excited about that.

The schedule is what it is. We know that every year as

I stand here and take in the role as head coach at Kentucky. You know what you're getting into when you play this league. Again, with the areas that I touched on earlier, with changing that culture, with expanding our capacity to do things better for longer periods of time, to create the positive habits to when situations happen, our positive habits and good habits rise to surface to help us win close games.

We're doing the things necessary to take the next step. I've never been one to -- I'm not a pessimist, but I'm not going to sit up here and boast a team if we're not quite ready. We've done the work. We have the pieces in place. We will take the next step. I've been proud of the progression we've done. Certainly you want more wins along the line, but I know we've done the right things and we have a great plan in place to continue to push this program, and the players are doing the things necessary to take it to the next step. So we're excited about that and ready to move forward.

Q. Coach, you reference that you had some near misses last couple of years. Obviously that's frustrating. When you review those four quarters, if you will, what seems to be the commonality, what keeps happening that you are coming up short in those situations?

COACH STOOPS: Part of it is play-making ability. When the play is on the line, you have the ability to make plays. There's several games. You look at Auburn game last year where we throw a ball down to the three-yard line and came up fractions off from catching it. We need to make that play. We need to do the things I've talked about in the offseason. Pay the price to put yourself in those positions, whether it's training. We need to finish the season better. Again, that goes to training and training our players to be able to handle more in all situations.

I think it comes with depth and, you know, there's been, you know, just a few of those games where we really outplayed an opponent and lost. You know, maybe one that stands out in my mind. The rest of the time they've been some very even games, some very good competition, could have gone either way. We have to find those inches, those yards and those plays to make the difference.

Q. Those collapses, do you think it was all basically physical or talent, or do you think it got to be psychological also?

COACH STOOPS: I think you used the word "collapse." I don't think I would ever use that word because they weren't. I just said they were very competitive games. Very good games that could have gone either way. Certainly we have to do a good job as coaching staff and with me to put them in a position

make those plays, to do the things in the offseason, to do those things.

Again, to think you're going to take this program in three years and everything is going to be steady and pretty and nothing but a steady climb, it's not going to happen. You're going to go through some ups and downs. There's a game or two and one in particular that jumps out at me that really bugs you because you felt like you outplayed the opponent and lost.

So I would never use the word "collapse." I would think it's very stiff competition from a bunch of teams that have been doing things right for a long time, recruiting great players and doing a lot of things. As a lot of coaches mentioned, there's a lot of close games in here. Certainly we have to do our part to do what it takes to make those plays.

Q. Now that you've gotten through a year of these satellite camps, do you get much out of them, and what will you do differently in regard to that next year?

COACH STOOPS: No. We have not gotten a lot out of them. We want to see players on our campus. The most results we get -- satellite camps are recruiting. Let's not call them anything else. You want to evaluate and recruit. So we want those players on our campus.

Q. Coach, you worked for Coach Fisher, Coach Fisher worked for Coach Saban. One of the things Coach Fisher said that he learned from Coach Saban was you have to have a really strong support staff. Coach Saban has a strong support staff. That something you're working on?

COACH STOOPS: Absolutely. 100 percent. I was fortunate to spend three years with Coach Fisher. As you work with great people you respect, and certainly you listen to people like Coach Saban like you respect that's absolutely the best in our business, and I had the great fortune of working with Jimbo Fisher. And a lot of the messaging and a lot of the structure of the program, certainly what I do recruiting, you know, is a big piece of Jimbo Fisher and the structure that he had within the structure of our practice plans comes from Jimbo Fisher.

It's funny. As you look at it, I had a guy on my staff that was with Coach Saban and went back to Coach Saban. You look at practice plans and structure and all of the things necessary, there is a lot of similarities. That's a great compliment.

You have to do what is best for you and your program. A very wise coach told me some time ago that you have to have a great plan, but you also have to have a great gut and great instincts. So you have to tailor

things to your program and your university. But it's extremely important. Getting to the support piece, extremely important.

I learned a great deal from Coach Saban to put great people in all areas -- did I say Coach Saban? -- Coach Fisher from putting great people in place to help you and to help educate our players and to put them in a position to try to offset some of the problems that we see in society today. Certainly, academically, weight strength, sports psychologists, any number of people that you could put in front of our players to help them.

So, I think the support piece is extremely helpful. I think some people have greater resources than others. But I think we are working and striving to get the pieces in place that we can do that can help us move our program to the next level.

Q. What has Jojo Kemp meant to this offense?

COACH STOOPS: Yeah. Jojo, what he's meant is, number one, inspiration. He's a tough guy. He's very inspirational. And he's really grown. And that's the biggest thing and the greatest message he can show to our team as he's here and he becomes a leader on this team.

He has great competition at his position but he is extremely important to us, and I think inspirationally, and it just shows you how, if you stay with it and stay with the support system and do the things necessary and continue to grow, then he can be very inspirational. And the maturity that he could help our team with is immeasurable.

Q. Coach, you just talked about having Drew Barker get the keys to the car, but flipping this to the wide receiver position, Ryan Timmons was somebody in 2014 that was leading this team and receiving yards and touchdowns. What has he done to get back to that full, full potential?

COACH STOOPS: That's a great question. Ryan, I still have extremely high expectations for him. I believe he's going to have a great year. I said that a year ago, and he didn't maybe have as good of a year as he wanted to or we wanted him to, but I really believe he's going to come out and have a strong senior year.

He's a kid that really works hard, does the right things. He's one of our big targets, big recruits out of Kentucky my first year there. And I really, again, believe and have a lot of confidence that he's going to have a solid year. He's very good with the ball in his hands. He's worked hard each and every year to become a great wide receiver and do the things necessary when he's away from the football to get open and do all those things. And I believe if he stays on course and

continues to have a great summer, then he'll have a big year.

Q. I was wondering if you can kind of elaborate on Barker, what you like about him, what you think would make him a good SEC quarterback?

COACH STOOPS: What I liked about him right from the very beginning is how competitive he is. He has that moxie on the field. He's a big guy. Physically, he's a strong guy. He can run when necessary. And he has that ability to create plays. He's a playmaker. He's a gamer. But obviously you can't do those things until you have a great and complete understanding of your offense and what you're trying to do and distribute the football where he needs to go.

And I think what also I love about him is he's really grown. He's really taken a giant step away from the field. And on the field. I believe he has that ability right now to be a leader without having to go out there and bang his chest every day and be an rah-rah guy. By doing the things right, by having command of the offense, by having command of the receivers, doing extra work when necessary, but doing it in a good, positive way.

I thought you were going to ask me a question about Bret.

Q. I'll make this a two-partner. First thing, I think out of your first five games three were conference games, and two of them at Alabama, at Florida. How big of a challenge is that coming out of the game? I know you and Bret are pretty good friends. What do you think about Bret and his style here?

COACH STOOPS: Well, let me answer, it's always important to get off to a good start. We've been able to do that the last two years. As you know, it's a problem in the second half of the season. We need to finish stronger. There's no doubt about that. But coming out of the block strong is always important.

I have been pleased with the way we left camp and the preparation of our team, and that is shown on the field. We have to sustain that for the second half of the year. But it's always a challenge. Going on the road in SEC games is a challenge everywhere you go. So, we'll be ready and the team will be prepared and excited and ready to go. But it's something you can't avoid and you have to embrace and embrace that and run to it.

As far as Bret, he's a beauty. I think he was in here entertaining you guys earlier, right? But I tell you a story about Bret. I just said it out there to some of the guys. I better be careful. Don't get in a pissing contest with a skunk. Right? So he's gone. He can't say

nothing about me right now.

You got Bret, big, big, strong guy. His teams are extremely physical, well prepared. Great coach. Does the whole deal. Two years in a row we split a room up there where we kind of settled in and they were coming in and we were getting out of there, and two years in a row -- I didn't mention this last year, but I got to bust him this year -- big Bret, big guy, the whole deal, he's got dogs this big in there yapping at your ankles in there. So you have to bust his chops about his tiny dogs.

There's a lot of other stories I can get into, but I won't. We all know how he'll come back.

Q. How did your offense gel with the loss of Coach Neal Brown and him heading to Troy, and what are your thoughts on Coach Brown?

COACH STOOPS: Yeah. That was a couple years ago. I hated losing him at the time because I really have great respect for Neil. He's a very good coach. I think he'll do a really great job at Troy. The other great thing that helped me in year one was he had a great feel for Kentucky. He really knew the coaches. He knew the people and gave me the opportunity to get settled in and meet the right people. So we miss him. That's a couple years. Neal will do a great job, great offensive mind, and we wish him nothing but the best.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Okay. Coach, we appreciate your time.

COACH STOOPS: Thank you. Okay. Thank you.