

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Commissioner Greg Sankey

Commissioner Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: At this time I would like to introduce the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference, Mr. Greg Sankey.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you. Welcome to Atlanta. It's good to see everyone.

I'm going to try to be efficient in my remarks. I'm reminded of the great American philosopher Vincent Spicoli who once observed that: You're here and I'm here, so it's really our time. Talk about that which is on my mind and try to save you some time as well.

We should never take for granted that we're able to gather together after what we've experienced the last two years. We want to make sure this is a valuable time, so we have staff and volunteers to support your effort. Please reach out if they may be of assistance.

Good to be in Atlanta, a city of history for the Southeastern Conference. It was here in 1933 that the conference conducted its first annual meeting. It wasn't annual at that point, it became annual. It's also the site of the conference's first-ever men's basketball tournament, that also happening in 1933. It's happened here 12 times since, including one interrupted by a tornado.

It's been the home of our football championship game since 1994. We moved Media Days, which doesn't happen a lot in conferences, moved it in 2018 and planned to be back in 2020, until COVID hit, and it's great to be back here today.

We're excited for the start of the season. You're going to hear that 14 more times from this podium, I expect, right? Part of the excitement being here is on September 3rd, Oregon and Georgia will play in Mercedes-Benz Stadium. As you look to the end of the season, the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl will host one of the College Football Playoff finals on December 31st.



When we wrapped up in Indianapolis, Georgia's football team on the third consecutive national championship in football, by an SEC team. Just because it's fun to remember, LSU in 2019, Alabama in 2020, and Georgia in 2021. At least those seasons. I thought that was great.

That would be my talking point about how excited we are about the quality of competition. Then I was reminded that members of this conference from 2007 to 2010 had four different teams win four consecutive national championships: LSU, Florida, Alabama and Auburn.

If you look at the BCS CFP era, you add in Tennessee in 1998, we've had six different football programs earn national championships, which communicates the depth of our conference competitively. I'll let you make the comparisons between us and our colleagues as it relates to national championship success in football.

As we watch the college football world change around us, we are absolutely proud of the competitive team and individual achievements earned through the Southeastern Conference, be that on the football field, women's basketball court, baseball field, the world championships in track and field showcase young people who have had an experience in this conference, and every other one of our 21 championship sports.

The reality, though, is away from the games and the playing fields and the courts and the tracks and the courses, it's been quite a summer. Actually quite a year for those of us who write about, those of you who write about, those of us who work in college athletics.

Go back to June of 2021, a Supreme Court decision in Alston versus the NCAA. The onset of name, image and likeness took place on July 1st through the onset of different state laws and the alternation of potential plans of NCAA governance in the aftermath of the Alston decision.

Later in July we as a conference issued membership invitations, the University of Oklahoma, and the University of Texas, to join the Southeastern Conference effective July 1st, 2025.

We saw creation of the NCAA's Constitution Committee. We watched more membership transition among conferences in Division I. The NCAA Transformation Committee was announced in December. We had another uptick in COVID, which introduced disruption and felt eerily similar to what we experienced through the 2021 year.

We had, as you know, consideration of expansion to the College Football Playoff format that ultimately was not adopted under the College Football Playoff governance structure.

This spring, the NCAA announced the transition of its president, NCAA President Mark Emmert, and the commencement of a search to fill that role.

And then on July 30, right after I got to the lake to relax, the announcement came that the Big Ten would expand its membership to include USC and UCLA, which created a few busy weeks for you and me as we tried to separate truth from fiction. You tried to figure out what your competitors knew or didn't know, what they were reporting. Tried to figure out the different agendas. You worked to post stories quickly.

So much for our summer vacation.

That brings us here to begin the talking season ahead of college football. In preparation for my comments, I went back to my first Media Days remarks in 2015. I had been to any number of those as a member of the SEC staff, but I started reading through each year's comments. 2015, again here in 2018, a couple times since, I started not with Mr. Spicoli's quote but with a reference to Bob Dylan's: The times they are a-changin'.

I never lost sight of that reality. I'm not sure we all understand what is intended by those lyrics or conveyed by the phrases that the wheel's still in spin, but times are changing more rapidly than ever.

You saw some of that play out this spring. At our Destin meetings, we started with a small meeting of our head football coaches. I went in with a very clear focus on a message, probably not the message that you thought I would communicate, maybe not the message they thought they'd hear, but one that was clear and direct.

As I walked into the room, I learned that someone had tweeted our head football coach seating chart, and the trending topic on Twitter became not the Destin spring meetings but look at this football coaches' seating chart.

As we refocus, here is what I told our coaches. It is never going to be the same, but it doesn't have to be the way that

it is. We're dealing with complex problems that won't be solved by complaints, by accusations, by finger pointing, or by offering simple solutions.

What is needed now is collaboration, deep thinking about real world solutions, and everyone participating in the conversation.

The outcome, and I shared this in real time, was we had some of the most in-depth conversations with full participation through our spring meetings that I've ever experienced. That includes not only our football coach, but our women's basketball coaches, men's basketball coach, our Student-Athlete Leadership Council representatives, faculty representatives, senior administrators and ultimately our presidents and chancellors that week.

Each group recognizes that it's never going to be the way that it was, but it doesn't have to be the way that it is.

In that conversation, we recognized that all too often what sounds like an easy solution to these complexities fails to consider the impacts that those easy answers have on many other matters.

Frankly, in college athletics, we're here because we've either pushed aside some of those conversations and decisions or we've dealt with the easy solutions rather than the complexities that account for the full breadth of outcomes and consequences.

In this environment, I'm proud to say in my view, I think in the view of our entire membership, the Southeastern Conference is stronger now than at any other time in our history.

We're poised to grow to 16 members on July 1st, 2025. This expansion keeps the SEC in contiguous states which supports reasonable geography among like-minded universities and keeps us confident that fan interest will continue to grow in our communities, in our region, in this country and literally across the globe.

There's no sense of urgency in our league, no panic and reaction to others' decisions. We know who we are. We are confident in our collective strength, and we are uniquely positioned to continue to provide remarkable experiences, educationally and athletically, along with world-class support to student-athletes.

It is a compliment that people from all across the country and all across the globe want to be a part of the Southeastern Conference. We understand our fan base and our region. We have an outstanding relationship with our media partners effective in the fall of '24, Disney, ABC,



and ESPN, with a focus on how we continue to strengthen the SEC Network.

I appreciate the talent, those of you behind cameras, those working in production that we never see, directing and coordinating to make what we do this week the best TV of the summertime.

As you know, when we go through this change, we are considering how to schedule. So some of those decisions were made in Destin, but our football scheduling model is still under consideration.

We had deep and productive conversations in Destin. Those conversations actually began back at our meetings in August. When we concluded our discussion in Destin, we had a focus placed on a single division model, with the ability to accommodate either an eight-game or nine-game conference schedule. I'll wink and say we could even accommodate a 10-game conference schedule. I see all of you look up. I just wanted to see if you were paying attention (smiling). That's actually not our focus.

We ended with the understanding that more questions needed to be answered including the general timeline and the issues that need to be addressed as we think forward now about the College Football Playoff. We have to dig through a tie-breaking procedure. We have over a quarter century in divisions and we understand all the nuances about how to break ties. We have to dig a bit deeper there with the single division concept in front of us. We want to understand the impact through the use of analytics on bowl eligibility for our teams who are growing their programs, and College Football Playoff access dependent on the number of teams that might be included. There are a range of possibilities being considered.

We have time to make a decision. As you've seen before with us, particularly in the last few years, as we dealt with some difficult issues, we're going to use that time to inform our decision-making and not be subject to an arbitrary deadline.

The national issues, though, go beyond the Southeastern Conference, beyond the College Football Playoff, beyond conference membership changes, and include important conversations about the future of the NCAA and its ability to be effective at leading the overall collegiate athletics enterprise.

How we effectively support young people who choose on their own to engage in name, image and likeness activity.

Last July, on that list of issues we've seen over the last year, the NCAA's Board of Governors issued a press

release that included these words, quoting: The special constitutional convention is intended to propose dramatic changes to the NCAA Constitution and to reimagine aspects of college sports so the association can more effectively meet the needs of current and future college athletes.

That same press release included statements like college sports must quickly adapt. This is not about tweaking the model we have. We cannot go on as we are.

At the end of that constitutional effort, what's really changed? You ask yourself that question. Did we need that effort to get at some of the Division I problems?

I would submit not. But someone is correct in that statement that we cannot go on as we are.

In October the NCAA announced formation of the Division I Transformation Committee. I'm proud to serve on that committee with co-chair Julie Cromer and 19 other individuals who have spent an enormous amount of time trying to sort through the difficult issues we have.

The press release announcing creation of the Transformation Committee referenced the complexity of issues in Division I. That observation was spot on. There is a complexity of issues that doesn't lend itself to the easy button and not necessarily to immediate resolution.

So those issues include the need for a meaningful membership process, dealing with enforcement and infractions issues where college athletes face uncertainty and penalties related to actions that may have taken place when they were in junior high or elementary school.

I have a rule book that simply grows and grows and grows. We have a governance process that has key committees and councils populated by participants who rarely, if ever, speak and who are being asked to make important national policy decisions when they may not have that same authority on their day-to-day work context on campus.

We have a bureaucratic process that leaves issues languishing for months or for years. Again, it's correct, we can't go on as we are.

We're making progress on those issues. In August the Division I board of directors will receive a report which won't solve every problem but will deal with the issues around enhancing the student-athlete experience, modernizing the transfer rules, dealing with that rule book, trying to reduce it, and refining that infractions process with a focus on bringing matters to conclusion in a timely manner.

As we look at the fall, we're going to have some difficult issues around membership. That issue was not created by the five conferences labeled the autonomy conferences or FBS. It was assigned to the Transformation Committee by the Division I board.

We're going to have to determine how to make effective decisions in Division I. There are incredible disparities around revenue, around expenses, around support and around expectations in this division. It makes it difficult to ensure the presence of shared values and common purpose around supporting athletics programs.

We also need to make sure we enhance the experience for student-athletes in NCAA championships. What's happened before can never happen again. I don't expect that will be easy, but it's important and will play out through the fall months.

I did not mention name, image and likeness because that's been reserved by the Division I board of directors. On May 9th, you saw a statement from the board that I think was helpful. The question is, what's happened as a result? We need clarity from the NCAA national office on what's happening and what will happen under the NCAA Division I board of directors' directive.

It's a difficult issue, subject to the onset of state laws that came into effect last July, and since that time some of those same states have pulled back from those laws because it's in the state's competitive interest to do so.

It's exactly what we warned about dating back to 2019; that a patchwork of state laws was the most ineffective way to approach name, image and likeness.

Here is our view. We need a clear, enforceable standard to support national championship-caliber competition, and national championships themselves, like the College World Series, the Final Four, the College Football Playoff national championship, and every other national championship, so there is a connection and a common basis for competition.

Our student-athletes, we just had a Student-Athlete Leadership Council meeting, they asked us for clarity and for uniformity and for institutional support of their name, image and likeness efforts.

A national standard would mean that high school juniors and seniors and their families don't have to sort through dozens of different state laws or institutional policies where state laws don't exist.

It's an unfair way to treat young people making a college

decision, and a common standard would allow them to have clarity around the rules and policies that govern their own decision-making and activity.

Our football coaches were unanimous and unequivocal in our spring meetings, when they discussed name, image and likeness, that booster activity should be completely removed from the recruiting aspect of their work.

Our young people deserve consumer protection to ensure commitments they make do not create long-term entanglements and points of exploitation that reduce or eliminate their future earning potential.

Lastly on this list for now, there's an absence of oversight for those described as agents -- these aren't agents as we've come to know them over time -- or NIL businesses that approach young people and families directly with offers with no transparency. That gap needs to be addressed and the unregulated marketplace calls for action.

The NCAA is limited in its ability to govern this space. To put state universities in conflict with their own state laws is an impossibility. Litigation limits the extent to which the NCAA can actually act. That's why the continuing identification of Congress is the opportunity to set a national standard remains important.

We did have conversations that if there's not a national standard, we need to explore if we can have common state laws among our 11 current states, eventually to be 12, to support healthy name, image and likeness activities.

We face headwinds in college sports? Absolutely. It's actually not new. It's a decades-old problem. Those decades-old problems now rest firmly on our agendas.

The SEC will not be complacent, even with the knowledge that we're in a position of strength. Now is the opportunity and the time to continue to support our student-athletes, and to the extent we can do more, we actually do more.

We must take the step forward to make sure the experience that's present today is there tomorrow and for decades to come.

One of the great things I'm able to do is visit with leaders of today, our presidents and chancellors, athletic directors and other key campus leaders, and the leaders of tomorrow. Those are the young people on our teams, which is why, despite the difficulties, despite the challenges, knowing the successes that are present, I'm confident that the best days of the Southeastern Conference still remain ahead.



With that, Kevin, I'll turn it to you and we can entertain some questions, and we'll see how I do with the answers.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with taking questions.

Q. Do you anticipate maybe Texas and Oklahoma coming in the league early, ahead of time?

GREG SANKEY: That's not up to me. That's about the relationship between Oklahoma, Texas and the Big 12. We are focused on the addition being effective July 1st, 2025.

Q. With what's happened in the country the last few months, in addition to it being an election year, do you think that makes it even more difficult for Congress to do something to make a clear, enforceable NIL policy?

GREG SANKEY: Go back to March. I made a list in a meeting of matters present, war in Ukraine, the economy, Build Back Better which was introduced and not moved, the differences that exist in Congress. We have a midterm election coming up.

Things that have happened over recent weeks and months have just added to that.

The reality was, when I had that conversation in March, I wasn't looking necessarily to this Congress to be the solution just because of the timing. We've had conversations with leaders from both sides of the aisles, and we'll continue to do so because regardless of what's happened recently or what happens with the election, we need a bipartisan solution for this national concept to move forward.

If we don't, then we're going to be left not simply creating conference rules, we're going to have to deal with state laws that vary in our region. That was actually part of our conversation in Destin as well. But the focus will remain on a national solution, and Congress is the venue for that option.

Q. You mentioned one of the bigger issues with that single-division model was the tiebreakers, figuring out that stuff. What are some of the other issues when y'all are thinking about finalizing that single-division format?

GREG SANKEY: You didn't even have to introduce yourself because I was in Omaha and heard you ask a question in those press conferences leading up to the Ole Miss national championship, so welcome to Atlanta.

The list of issues, tiebreakers one, the number of games and what that means from a scheduling standpoint, the imbalance around nine games versus the comfort with eight games. What happens with non-conference schedules. We have a requirement that that ninth game right now be among an autonomy five-type opponent. How do we dispose of or maintain that particular policy.

The impact on bowl eligibility and College Football Playoff access I mentioned. When I go through six different teams having won national championships in the last 25 years or so, no one comes close to that number. So the level of competition here, while people want to be a part of it, we're attentive and sensitive to that.

Just to be clear, no one from TV is saying do this, do that. This is a conversation and decision to be made among our conference membership.

Q. Do you sense a lot of support for a model with three permanent rivals or are you anywhere close to the consensus on that? Is there any interest in expanding beyond 16 teams right now?

GREG SANKEY: The first question, it's under consideration. There are limits on the number of options available for three permanent opponents based on the number of games. Nine makes that more practical. If you remember, I had two points when we expanded that I wanted to be front and center. One is that we engage in blue sky thinking, let's look at the big picture. The second is that we rotate teams through campus as frequently as possible so we don't go 12 years between visits.

Those two have guided us. That last one relates to the number of games, permanent opponents and how many times you can move people that cleanly.

Embedded in my remarks is we're attentive, we're engaged in conversation. The great news for the Southeastern Conference is that people call and say, Hey, you're doing something really special. They kind of hint around the edges.

We know who we are. We're confident in our success. We're really looking forward to the expansion and being at 16 teams. Don't feel pressured to just operate at a number. But we'll watch what happens around us and be thoughtful but be nimble.

Q. You said you don't have the sense of urgency or panic in reaction to what others are doing. In looking at what others are doing, does it affect your receptiveness to those calls you say you're receiving from others? Do you see this heading toward a

conglomeration of superleagues? Do you have to be proactive to be at the front of that?

GREG SANKEY: Well, somebody will write, a smart aleck guy, we are a superleague. When I walk through the recitation, this is a superleague.

As I visited with our presidents and chancellors and ADs, understand the timing is this news broke June 30. I did not gather that group till the next Wednesday. I wanted to make sure I was learning what was actually happening. But also I didn't want a story like on Friday, the day after, the SEC presidents are gathering, and you have this ripple effect of they're going to do something. We wanted to be patient and communicate.

Again, we're comfortable at 16. There's no sense of urgency, no sense of panic. We're not just shooting for a number of affiliations that make us better. Could they be out there? I would never say they're not. I would never say that we will.

We're going to be evaluating the landscape. I'm not going to speculate. I actually am watching a lot of this activity operating around us, more so than impacting us directly.

Q. Kind of a multi-part question. What lake was it where you were on vacation? Did you get to take any vacation? Did you have any inkling what the Big Ten was doing? Do you think Texas and OU trump USC and UCLA when it comes to adding teams to a conference?

GREG SANKEY: I'll start at the end. Yes. I'm not sure we want to use the word 'trumped' all the time these days. Got to be careful about that (smiling).

Yeah, we're in contiguous states, southeast quadrant. I do have a few letters about what 'southeast' means. We are in the southeast quadrant of the United States. Those two additions actually restore rivalries. The Texas-Arkansas game last year was pretty special, but that goes back a long way. Obviously Texas and Texas A&M rivalry will be like our in-state rivalries across the league. You have Missouri and Oklahoma that are a quarter of the Big Eight that are now part of the Southeastern Conference and the opportunity for Arkansas and Oklahoma to play regularly.

I think that's right. That's who we are. Those fan bases get it. One of the very first calls it had, Hey, we watch how you've made decisions in the Southeastern Conference and how you want to achieve as universities and athletically, and we want to be a part of that. Absolutely, it's right.

Did I have an inkling? I'll be honest with you, about 18 months ago I said, Here's some projections of what could happen, and those two schools were part of it nationally, but I didn't know this was about to happen on June 30. No, not at all.

As I look and try to project what takes place and guess, that type of movement was somewhere in my thinking but not at that moment.

And it's where I grew up, in Skaneateles, New York. S-k-a-n-e-a-t-e-l-e-s. So I've lived in two places that are tough to spell: Skaneateles, New York, and Natchitoches, Louisiana. You'll have to get Natchitoches on your own.

Q. I wanted to ask you about how your thoughts on access to a College Football Playoff might be evolving. I know before this latest wave of realignment with USC and UCLA moving, you had been adamant on an 18-model with five automatic bids.

GREG SANKEY: No, I'm going to come back to that. I'm against that.

Q. Against that?

GREG SANKEY: Not supportive of that.

Q. You had strong opinions about that.

GREG SANKEY: Herb will get on me for interrupting you.

Q. That's okay. I am curious how your views of what a potential model, when the Playoffs would expand, might look like, given that we are in this current state of flux where maybe the conferences are changing and maybe automatic bids might not be given equal weight given where conferences are heading.

GREG SANKEY: Just to be clear, I apologize for my rudeness. Somebody is live tweeting, and I'll be credited with that thought.

I walked into one of the first meetings when we were looking at the format and said, If we want to expand to eight teams for the Playoff with no automatic bids, I'll have that conversation. But moving to an eight-team Playoff and granting what were going to be six automatic bids, reducing at-large access, is unwise.

If you look 2014, you would have replaced the 8th best team in the country with the 20th best team in the country. I don't think we can survive that from a credibility standpoint.

But the pressure was there to have conference access with some guarantee. So the 12-team, six at-large, which increases the at-large access, and six conference qualifiers, not automatic qualifiers, but the guarantee that the six best conference champions was a really good balancing outcome.

But things have changed. I was clear back in January when we walked away from the conversation that we as a conference weren't unanimous in our support. I had as commissioner moved people forward to the point we were supportive as a league. If we're going to go back to square one, we're going to take a step back from the model introduced and rethink the approach, number of teams, whether there should be any guarantee for conference champions at all. Just earn your way in. There's something that's healthy competitively about that and creates expectations and support around programs.

Where we go? We'll see. We've had one initial conversation in late June. I walked into that meeting not very optimistic about the ability to talk through issues. I walked out much more positive about the path forward than when I walked in.

There's a lot of work to do. We have time and we'll use it. It's the same type of issues that you've heard, AQ, no AQ, how many teams, what's the relationship to the bowls, when do we play these games on a calendar. We really need to look at that more deeply than we did in the previous iteration. We'll see how it goes, but those are the realities.

I'd be fine with no AQs, whether it's four like we have now, a model that's worked, eight, 12. But the inclusion of conference champion access was I thought an effective compromise to the 12-team Playoff.

Q. I'm curious about the NIL. Can you talk about how that has helped us acquire the title of superconference and how you see that progressing in the SEC?

GREG SANKEY: I think we, the Southeastern Conference, were a superconference before name, image and likeness. In fact, I provided that clever answer a few times over the last seven or eight years.

There are any number of good stories. I was up the road here an hour in Athens, Georgia, when Auburn gymnastics competed, and Suni Lee was cheered by everyone in Stegeman Coliseum. You don't get that much between rivals when they're cheering for an individual student-athlete.

Kearis Jackson talked about a Bojangles deal when he

was in Destin with our leadership group, 45 steps to making a Bojangles biscuit that he engaged in on social media.

Olivia Dunne is a good story at LSU. Very prepared, very ready for that. Those are the activities we thought would be present and should be present, allow young people to build the brand.

I think there are many more stories just beyond what you read in recruiting that are positive. But one of the concerns up front was that we not do this state by state. We need uniformity. That feeds into our ability to have national competition during the regular season and support national championships.

The notion of some oversight, transparency, regulation of the market I think is exactly what helps everyone.

I'm convinced, regulated or unregulated, we can do well. I think the unregulated markets creates a set of problems for the people involved, whether it's young people and their families trying to make decisions, the potential for long-term life entanglements in deals that are not understand and evaluated, the lack of support, the taxation that comes. We've also allowed it to enter into the recruiting space in a really weird way, and I think that needs to be made healthier than it is now.

Q. Given some of the public comments from coaches about the effect of NIL on recruiting and the classes, is there a feeling from the conference office that member institutions are abiding the spirit of NIL rules? How is the conference office supporting education departments on best practices?

GREG SANKEY: The issue is are they abiding by their state laws? Whether it's spirit or not spirit, the issue that goes back when we're in consultation is are you following the laws of your state, or in the past one circumstance an executive order in our footprint?

It is uncomfortable. It is a new dynamic. We're going to have to manage through that discomfort. I don't believe everything I read. You're great writers, great at what you do, but I don't believe everything I read has the depth of information or the depth of analysis.

What I've not read is the points of concern where young people have lost opportunities or promises and commitments haven't been fulfilled. I look forward to reading those types of analyses.

But the focus on the conference office is providing guidance back to the states that have to provide the



information. We provide educational information. It's tough when that changes routinely through states, and our footprint, there are 11 different state laws. You have questions coming in about the laws or lack of laws in effect in every other state as well.

Q. In Destin you mentioned there was at least a hope to get the scheduling model resolved by the end of the year. Is that still kind of a realistic timeline? You also mentioned Texas and Oklahoma had been involved in those discussions when it comes to realignment. How much are they able to be involved in those discussions?

GREG SANKEY: We invited both the athletic directors and presidents and chancellors into our conference call a week and a half ago, because this is a long-term issue that has impacts beyond just the here and now, so they could hear my analysis and ask any questions of us and hear questions asked by our campus leaders.

When we moved into August last year, we had an athletic directors meeting that happens each August. We invited both to attend by video, so Zoom, since we're really good at Zooming now, so they could hear the introduction of how we consider information around scheduling. When we've had important updates or conversation, they've been a part of that.

We did not invite either university to Destin this year. It becomes its own story and distraction. You may recall, we had enough story lines heading into Destin already.

Provided actually updates to them through the week. They've been great emerging partners in this process talking about their interests and priorities, just as our other 14 do.

THE MODERATOR: Commissioner, thank you for your time this morning.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you for being here. Look forward to the interaction that we'll have in the coming days. I'll see you back here in just a moment for my first head coach introduction. Thank you.

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