

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Mississippi State Bulldogs Coach Mike Leach

Press Conference



GREG SANKEY: First coach of the afternoon is Mike Leach, the head football coach of Mississippi State. He's a two-time National Coach of the Year, a three-time Power Five conference Coach of the Year. Just to be clear, Coach of the Year in a conference setting on three different occasions, two different conferences. Mastermind behind the NCAA record-setting air raid offense. He instructed me that the line that says he walks on water is now incorrect, he actually jogs on water.

He's compiled 150 wins, guided his teams to 18 bowl games, produced seven seasons of at least nine victories, won two conference division titles, the winningest coach at Texas Tech, and record for bowl appearances at both Texas Tech and Washington State. He has three degrees: one from BYU, an undergraduate degree; a juris doctorate degree from Pepperdine, great location to go to law school; and a master's degree from the United States Sports Academy.

Was the head coach of a football team in Finland in the European football league. When he was at Washington State, he taught a five-week course on insurgent warfare and football strategies. This past spring he had several hundred Mississippi State students gather for a special guest lecture on the same topics.

He's an author of two books. Provides, I've been told, outstanding Netflix recommendations, although he's never shared those with me. He's an expert on the best barbecue in town. And also is a world traveler. So this year Colombia and Panama, last year an African safari.

Head football coach of Mississippi State, Mike Leach.

MIKE LEACH: I appreciate that.

Any questions?

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started right away with questions.

Q. I asked Coach Lane about the personalities in Mississippi. He corrected me saying there were three, including yourself. What possibilities you, Lane Kiffin have in playing Jackson State and being in-state competition for each other? Is there a possibility that you'll ever see or your team will play HBCU in Jackson State?

MIKE LEACH: I'm not sure. It's possible. We don't have anything scheduled that I'm aware of. On my staff, Tony Hughes used to coach at Jackson State. I know those guys on the staff. They do a really good job. Coach Sanders is a blast, if you know him. Just talking to him is fun.

I mean, I wouldn't rule it out. We don't have anything scheduled.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your offense. It's the air raid. You've been known for production since your days at Texas Tech. What is the area you think that needs to be improved the most? What do you like about your offense heading into year three?

MIKE LEACH: Well, we've got some starts. We're still I guess on paper kind of a medium young team. We do have a lot of starts. I think that's helpful. So we do have experience to draw on.

I think we need to sharpen up at receivers. I think we need to kind of polish up our receiver play. We have good guys that work hard. I have a sense of urgency, that type of thing.

I just think we need to be sharper. We have a mixture of really young and old there. I do think we're getting better. I thought we had a good spring. But I think we can sharpen up there.

Q. Sankey said you have some Netflix recommendations. Would you be willing to share those with us?

MIKE LEACH: Yeah, I wish I'd watched more Netflix lately.



And I haven't. Somebody said I need to watch "The Terminal List," which I haven't watched it yet.

I guess the hidden gem, which I think I said it last year, "Operation Odessa," that documentary, you need to watch that about these international criminals that try to buy a submarine for Pablo Escobar. That's worth watching.

I wish I could tell you I watched more Netflix. I haven't watched a lot lately. During the season, it's good to watch to kind of get your head straight. I'm up to date on "Better Call Saul," I'm up to date on "Yellowstone."

Yeah, I'll tell you, that's part of it. The kids got me into "Stranger Things." I'm certainly not ready for this season, I'm about halfway through. I don't know.

If you guys have any good recommendations, I could probably use 'em. So I guess I'll defer to the numbers here.

Q. "Severance," about mind control. You might check it out.

MIKE LEACH: Don't try any funny stuff.

Q. I know you miss Texas and Oklahoma desperately. Your reaction when you found out they were going to the conference? How long do you think it will take them to get acclimated for this league?

MIKE LEACH: I think they're kind of already acclimated from the standpoint good teams play as hard as they can and try to improve their skills along the way. So I think they're certainly ready to do that.

I think the competition level raised. Then from my standpoint, and I get asked that especially from the Texas and the Oklahoma people, from their standpoint I think it's going to change things quite dramatically. From our standpoint, I mean, you guys have us as having the toughest schedule in the country. So that being the case, we can't play everybody. So knock two of those guys off and add OU and Texas, and I probably gained about half a step I would think.

I mean, the two most eastern teams in the West are the two Alabama schools, so send them east, and we have to play Texas and OU, and I probably gained a little on that.

Q. Whose side are you on in Jimbo versus Nick?

MIKE LEACH: I think they both kind of illustrate the frustration of how things are right now. It's not sustainable, so something's going to change.

Well, we haven't defined exactly what is an amateur, a student-athlete, as opposed to a professional. I think we need to do that. I think there is ways to do it.

I think some football players it may be in their best interest to remain a student-athlete, under that model, as opposed to professional and vice versa.

I think that's got to be defined. Currently college athletes have more privileges than anybody at any other professional level. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I don't think it stays the same because there's responsibilities that go along with being a professional.

I've said this before, you've probably already written it down, but those guys lock themselves in rooms and watch film all the time so you'll be able to get away with it.

Go up to your next favorite NFL guy, say, Hey, I heard in the NFL they're going to have unmitigated free agency, 365, 24/7. And, by the way, there's not going to be any salary cap or draft, you're just going to have bidding wars. Just watch the expression on their face. Don't look at anything else or write down any notes because the expression on their face will be well worth it.

I don't think the dust has settled. We're in a big transition period on a number of things in college football. We got sharp guys actively trying to sort it out. I hope that it will be.

But, yeah...

Q. Now that you have some experience as a head coach here in the SEC West, how have you adjusted your coaching strategies with such a tough schedule year in and year out?

MIKE LEACH: You just try to get better. There's not much to adjust. If you're determined to improve your team, the best way to improve the team is improve yourself, then after that everybody gets on that page. If you're constantly trying to improve yourself, trying to get better, trying to do the best you can, if you have full effort, eventually you can improve from that and set a new ceiling.

If you're doing that all the time, if you're truly doing that all the time, there's not much to save. It's funny because folks act like there's some kind of a reserve. There's a reserve they haven't used. Well, they're playing this type of team, so we're going to perfectly gauge how much effort we are saving.

If you save effort, you don't get to spend it on the next guy.

No, you do the best you can. You try to improve. Most importantly, it's important to do the best you can under all circumstances so that you are improving. That's what you do. You just play the very best you can.

There's not much to change. With regard to the SEC, it's the most talented conference, I don't think there's any question about that. I mean, as far as coaching your team and winning games, being the best you can with what you have, it's eerily similar to Iowa Wesleyan.

Q. Nick Saban's so-called blueprint has provided the template for a lot of coaches around the league with varying degrees of success. Being in the game as long as you have, kind of marching to your own beat, what do you notice some of the underpinnings of it and why it's so successful for him?

MIKE LEACH: I guess I don't fully understand the question.

Well, I mean, some of it's the resources of the program -- not to take anything away from Coach Saban, because he does a tremendous job -- and then also has a big tree of coaches.

But there's circumstances that can be beneficial, too. I mean, he's done things at Alabama that nobody thought was possible. But I would say he's a better coach at Alabama than he was at Michigan State, for example. So I think there's some circumstances that can contribute to success, too, that have to be accounted for.

But he does a tremendous job of getting the most out of his players.

One thing that I've always liked, he's not afraid to coach 'em hard. Doing that over and over again. He's a guy that we all admire. Then, of course, the magnitude and power of Alabama commands attention.

Q. I think it's a new ad, but "Countdown to Pearl Harbor" was compelling to me on Netflix.

MIKE LEACH: Oh, yeah, you hear that? "Countdown to Pearl Harbor," don't miss that one (smiling).

Q. Why no opening statement from you? Where do you think you're going to be better as a team this coming year? And then what Will Rogers needs to improve on this year, too?

MIKE LEACH: Opening statements? Well, I hate opening statements. I really don't see the point of it. So as opposed to me sit there and think of some flowery opening

statement, which I've done before, and then at the end of the opening statement a number of people ask questions that have already been addressed in my opening statement, I decided we'd just sort of cut out the middleman. You go ahead and ask the questions, and I'll go ahead and answer 'em.

I think Will Rogers is going to improve. I think he needs to incrementally improve. I think offensively everybody working together. I think we took a step in spring. We have to keep doing it during camp.

Q. You've talked in the past about your air raid being a strategy you have that, when you go face a team, it's the only time they face an offense like yours. How do you adjust to that when you're facing teams now in the SEC like Alabama or Ole Miss that have faced your offense two or three times now?

MIKE LEACH: So many people are adopting air raid concepts. Maybe it's not exactly what we do. Like basically spread control passing games. That's all around the league now, with rare exception, the whole NFL. You see it a lot.

It's not all of a sudden they haven't seen it because they saw it in a number of teams they've played, at least some variation.

But football has always been a game of execution. There's not a lot of Roadrunner/Wiley Coyote, who you ambush, fool the other guy, then you walk away laughing like Muttley after the rock fell on the guy or something like that.

It's always been a game of execution. It doesn't matter what you do schematically, you have to execute well. I think some schemes are better than others. The most important thing is execution.

We spend more time thinking about practice and how to teach what we want to execute. And the more sharply refined you can teach it and focus on it, the better you're going to be.

Q. What do you have to say to the Texas and Oklahoma fans about coming to the SEC?

MIKE LEACH: Well, I look forward to seeing 'em. I thought they were outstanding when I was in Texas. Of course, we played 'em both every year. Look forward to seeing 'em.

From my standpoint, it's good to have them back, you know? Then, of course, you guys can debate where everybody is best off.



No, I like forward to seeing 'em. I know a lot of Longhorns and I know a lot of Sooners and coached at Oklahoma. I've been a Sooner sympathizer for a while. Look forward to having 'em back.

Q. How have you seen the evolution of calling trick plays? Has it become more difficult with the offenses getting more exotic, harder to trick people?

MIKE LEACH: I'll tell you, you bring up something that I've kind of thought about a little bit. I wish I had a good resolution to it.

No, there's still trick plays. They still do trick plays. Trick plays need to be executed well. Trick plays have a value of the opponent seeing 'em just from the standpoint now they have to adjust and they have to deal with something.

The other thing, their imagination of course could go wild on what else may be coming. So it does create a certain amount of psychological damage whether it works or not.

I mean, there's all kinds of trick plays. I can think of all kinds of them. The rules have somewhat aggressively tried to prevent trick plays, which I don't care for that approach. I mean, there's been one rule after the next that over the years you can't have trick plays, you can't have a certain type of play, which essentially was a trick play, which was probably a good idea.

People squawked enough that they legislated against it. I actually wish we still have drop kicks. I had the perfect guy to do it, too, at Washington State. Logan Tago. He would drop kick it about 50 yards out.

Anyway, yeah, I don't like to homogenize and make football kind of a cubicle game. I think some of these rules eliminating trick plays do just that. I think that, of course, is ridiculous.

I also think this: You have to pick your type of trick play. There's more three-man fronts, nickel and dime packages as the result of people throwing it a lot more. So this notion of getting behind 'em is more difficult because teams are playing looser.

That doesn't mean there's other trick plays you can't do underneath that are pretty good. You'll see some every year.

I do think there's a little less, though. Like, for example, take the RPO crowd, for example. I think the RPO guy has two or three reads a play. It's not really a trick play; he's just going to try to put the ball where the defense isn't.

I think with those reads and things, that replaces some trick plays.

Q. You've obviously coached a lot of great quarterbacks. What do you really like about Will's game? What makes him so good? What do you think his ceiling is? I know you have a couple transfer kickers. How are those guys doing? What are you expecting from them? Do you feel like you'll have a good kicker?

MIKE LEACH: Well, I think, first of all, Will stepped in and had great leadership qualities, wasn't afraid to talk to the locker room as a freshman, which I think is one of the more impressive, courageous things that he did. It allowed him to excel early. It allowed him to focus in on playing because he didn't have some of that stage fright that initial freshmen do. I think it allowed him to progress quicker.

Also, I think it allowed the team to draw from him and kind of unify things. I think that was very impressive. I think Will's going to get better and better. The better he synchronizes with the other offensive players, the better everybody is.

Then sometimes I think it's difficult to define what's Will, what's the receivers, what's the running backs, what's the O-line. But that's the thing, football is a team game. Everybody together is the most important part of it.

Yeah, something else?

Q. Transfer kickers.

MIKE LEACH: Yeah, I had good luck with kickers through my whole career, including the time a guy walked out of the stands that we went ahead and had kick for us the next week. We definitely hit a drought last year. Well, that was unfortunate.

But we have several guys that are kicking. The ones that were here in spring looked very promising and did a good job. Then we have some others on campus that really have pretty good profiles.

Yeah, I'm optimistic we'll have a kicker.

Q. What are your thoughts on USC and UCLA going to the Big Ten? What do you think is going to happen to your old Pac-12 Conference?

MIKE LEACH: I don't know exactly. A guy asked me something like that before. The biggest surprise in college football would be if there's no surprises.

But I would say that's a pretty big one. This is just one guy talking. I mean, I don't know. These are questions I have. The question I have is, one, if the Pac-12 does manage to stick together, how much does it or does it help Cal and Utah get more recruits in Southern California? Then the other is, I've been on long trips like that, UCLA and USC have to take five a year, across two or three time zones. I don't think they're going to play all those games at noon, say. I bet you they play a bunch of them at night. They have to do it five times a year. The rest of the Big Ten has to do it less than one time every other year.

I'm kind of curious how it will unfold. I'll be here to watch it. Maybe it's such a great idea, everybody will do it.

Q. As a master of the air raid and doing it for so long, is there a correlation to time off, bye weeks or before bowl games getting the air raid out of sync, or is it just an anomaly? Does it ever start slow?

MIKE LEACH: I've seen it go both ways. I've seen bye weeks pretty much go both ways with everybody.

I mean, I've had bye weeks where we were just ridiculously explosive, and I've had other ones where it was tough to get out of the chute.

Yeah, I think you just have to maintain the focus, just maintain the focus. Everybody has control over there to a point. But I think it needs to be a team-unified deal.

I've seen it go both ways. I do think it can make things a little more extreme.

Q. You were talking about the Pac-12 a little bit. Are you excited to get back, week two, playing at Arizona? How do you prepare for playing -- I think it's a 10 p.m. kickoff in Starkville while you guys are in Arizona.

MIKE LEACH: You don't prepare for it at all. You go there, win the game, get on the plane, sleep the best you can, have later meetings on Sunday, then put it in and do it again.

Q. Talking about the air raid, how much has your particular version of air raid changed, if at all, since you and Hal were together in Lexington?

MIKE LEACH: It has. It's hard for me to gauge because some of these changes are gradual over the years. Some I forgot we changed. Some I forgot when we changed it. Some I can kind of tell you clearly.

But, like, if we adopt a new play, I've always tried to cut

one that we have so we can control the package, practice and execute it, because execution is the most important. Better having too small of a package than too big of one.

Often it's techniques, a tag, adjustment that maybe changed, perhaps the way you practice it. It's something you try to grow and build on all the time, whether it's watching film, everything from high school through to the NFL. We used to call it the whole find a better way to build the mousetrap.

Q. With all of the conferences growing, 16 teams, maybe bigger, are you optimistic for your 64-team playoff to ever get here?

MIKE LEACH: That may be a conference championship you're referring to (laughter).

I don't know. At some point, I mean, I'm beginning to lose track of what's a league and what's a conference, what's a division, you know?

The more the merrier, I guess. I'm not against any of it. As far as playoffs, there's a lot of models. My thoughts on the playoffs are well-documented.

We have a great committee thinking about it, considering it. I do think it's steadily improved, so...

THE MODERATOR: Coach Leach, thank you for your time this afternoon.

MIKE LEACH: All right. Thank you very much.

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