

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Stoops

Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: Mark Stoops is entering his 10th season as the head coach of the University of Kentucky. Kentucky has now played in six consecutive bowl games under Mark's leadership, surpassing the previous school record of five.

In addition to an overly exciting fourth quarter comeback win against Iowa, his alma mater, in the Citrus Bowl, that win gave Kentucky a school record four straight bowl wins.

In 2020 Kentucky was one of our unranked teams in a 10-game conference schedule COVID season who went into bowl games and defeated ranked teams from other conferences.

They finished at Kentucky, the 2022 season, with a 10-3 record. In keeping with the tradition of Kentucky, Mark Stoops is a majority owner of a bourbon distillery. The facility makes William Tarr bourbon. There are no samplings, so I heard the disappointment and the groans in the room when it was mentioned. Big sales this spring when it produced a special edition commemorating Kentucky's Citrus Bowl championship.

And while it's been a while since Mark's college days, I understand he can still show some athletic ability between playing golf, most importantly showing a smooth and effective basketball jump shot during summer outings either with or against his football players.

If you understand the competitive spirit, I'm sure it's against because that's competition.

I'm proud to introduce the University of Kentucky head football Coach Mark Stoops.

MARK STOOPS: Thank you, Greg. I always appreciate you, your staff, for the support you give us this year, each and every year. Really appreciate you giving me a plug to the bourbon. I'll make sure I send a case to the commissioner's office for all you fellas to sip on, preferably



on a Sunday if we get a bad call and we have a few choice words.

Seriously, appreciate Greg, his staff. First-class event. Everything they do in the SEC is always first class. Really appreciate him and what he does for us.

Also like to recognize my administration at Kentucky. Dr. Capilouto, our president; Mitch Barnhart, our athletic director. They provide great leadership and support. It's really fortunate for myself and very rare. We've worked together for 10 years. You don't see that a lot, with that kind of stability, and it really helps. Appreciate them.

Thank you to you guys. I know you sit here, and I listened to about a half hour of it yesterday, I don't know how you do it. You put up with that for three, four days. But we do thank you for what you do, the time you spend promoting our sport. Really what's really important is the time you spend promoting and helping our student-athletes, getting their stories out there.

With that being said, we have three individuals today, and they have three really unique stories. They're great individuals. I can't wait for you to spend a little time with them today and get to know them.

DeAndre Square, a linebacker, sixth-year senior, a guy that has been a mainstay for us. A little quick tidbit on him. Last year in the bowl game, we were fortunate to come away with a victory. We were down, COVID, guys were injured, all that. Nobody cares. But DeAndre was ruled out. Bottom line is he knew he had to go in. Went in the game, limping around, gets the game-sealing interception that preserves the victory for us. That tells a little bit about him and the leadership that he has.

Kenneth Horsey, another unique story. A guy that was named -- again, thanks to some of your stories -- College Football Comeback Player of the Year. He had a very serious heart surgery when he was in a senior in high school and overcame that. Kenneth is here with us, an offensive lineman from Florida.

Then, of course, Will Levis, his story. The transfer coming



in from Penn State, but having such a big impact in our program. Led us to 10 victories a year ago. Came back. So excited about Will, not only a great player and super talented, but unbelievable leader, as the other two gentlemen are as well.

Look forward to you guys spending some time with them.

I don't know if there's ever been a more volatile, uncertain and ever-changing period within college athletics. In much of this we have very little or no control over as a head coach.

You can imagine that leads to some interesting times for us. However, when everything is swirling and changing in the outside world, outside of our building, I think it's more important, more than ever, to have that stability within our program.

As I mentioned, going into year 10, I feel very fortunate to be here and be at these media days for the 10th time, to have the support of our administration.

Those roots that we planted, that we've grown, the stability that we've had for these past nine years, going on ten, has to help us during these turbulent times.

Just like anything, we will always grow, adapt and overcome to any situation. With the support of the administration and the support we have within this league, Kentucky will get through it, and of course all the SEC will.

You've heard me talk about it, and how we're going to do that, but each and every year I talk about it, build, select and develop. That's what we are. We may change the narrative, change how we do it, different tactics each year. But bottom line is continue to build that attitude, continue to build the culture that we're looking for at Kentucky. Extremely important in this day and age.

It goes with the next point: selecting the right players, recruiting. Again, never more important.

Turbulent times, different times right now, with maybe -- I didn't want to get into all that, but money grabs or recruiting or relationships. But selection is extremely important.

Then the last piece, and always will be extremely prominent at Kentucky as long as I'm the head coach, is the development piece. We are super active and motivated to develop these young men in all areas of their life. We've been very successful at that. We need to continue to do that. That's who we are.

The staff, I'm very excited about our staff. Made a change

a year ago. Really had great success. Liam Coen came in. Coen came in, was an offensive coordinator. Changed us from a ground-and-pound physical running style, creating some shots down the field. Happy for Liam as he moved on and became a coordinator in the NFL, with the Super Bowl champs.

With his success, with Will Levis, the success we had with him, we were able to attract a guy like Rich Scangarello, from the 49ers. Could not be more thrilled to add Rich to our staff. Two fronts: it keeps the continuity, even though it's a different coordinator, understands the terminology, the scheme, can keep a lot of the things we did well a year ago, keep that consistency, keep that continuity as well as anybody I could have hired.

The second front is a guy that is a true quarterback guy, that has been an offensive play-caller in the NFL, quarterback coach in the NFL, highly regarded quarterback coach to help a young man like Will take it to the next level.

Certainly when you look at a guy like Will, could have certainly come out a year ago, but like any player that wants to be the very best, is highly motivated to take his game to the next level. We're blessed to have a guy like Rich to work with him.

On the defensive side of the ball, the coordinator, Brad White, coming back. Highly sought after. Always seems to have offers, but he's been very loyal. I like keeping the consistency with what we're doing defensively. Along with the assistants on both sides of the ball.

Third coordinator, the recruiting coordinator, Vince Marrow, he's been with me since day one. Really helps on the recruiting front. He and I have had the same vision since day one. Keeping those three guys is extremely important, and greatly appreciate our staff.

As I mentioned, I touched on Will a little bit. Offensively, just excited. Excited about where we can go. We're always going to be a team that's going to be physical, that can pound the football. But where we are falling short, a couple years ago we got better a year ago, I want to continue to build on that, is with the success of the running game is pushing the ball down the field. When you have a quarterback like this, there's not a throw he can't make. Very excited to build on that and continue to grow.

Our kicking game, we'll be very solid. We have all guys back. We're actually two deep at kicker and punter, long snapper. Feel good in that area.

Players have worked hard. Had a great summer. Been relatively quiet. Excited about that. The guys are hard at

work. We are eager to get rolling.

So with that I will open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. (No microphone.)

MARK STOOPS: Bob is making me feel old, telling me I'm the first coach at Kentucky history to make it 10 years. Then he asked about how you felt about tying Bear Bryant's record with the first victory of the year, breaking it with the second.

I really don't spend much time thinking about that. The 10 years in Lexington is something that I am proud of because I know how difficult it is. I know how difficult it is to walk into this league with the great coaching, with the recruiting, and starting like six feet below 14, then trying to climb that ladder as high as we can.

I am proud of that, and I appreciate the work. However, we're not satisfied. We want to continue to grow. We want to continue to push it. Obviously some teams at the top of the food chain in the East and the West are doing some really special things. So you have to continue to elevate your game.

However, I have no control over anybody else, just what we can do at Kentucky. That's my focus, my energy, to continue to grow in that area.

With the record and all that, I appreciate you bringing it up, but it's not a time to really reflect on that too much. I do honestly just personally think about my mother, because I want her to be there. For her to have two sons that have the all-time wins at Power Five programs, with Bob at Oklahoma, myself as Kentucky, that's really the only focus I have, is on my mother to be able to be there and share in that moment.

Q. You have been doing a good job on the recruiting trail. It seems like you all are keeping some Kentucky kids in state lines. I wanted to hear your thoughts on that.

MARK STOOPS: Always a primary focus, staying within a six-hour radius. Kentucky is home base for us. Obviously some of southern Ohio, we've had great success in.

As we get better, as we win more and our brand expands a little bit, we're able to branch out a little more than we have been in the past. But that's always a focus for us.

Q. A couple of newcomers to your program. One

young man I was able to personally watch and interview that you signed was from Nashville, Barion Brown. I also wanted to ask about a transfer portal addition, he was a late-bloomer in football, only played two years, but Dee Beckwith from Tennessee, what do you envision from him as a jumbo athlete?

MARK STOOPS: Two different guys. Barion has all the tools. Super excited about him. Was talking with Will on the plane coming down here, discussing a little bit. Will mentioned it right away, how special Barion is with the ball in his hands. He can do some special things, has a lot of juice. We really got to get him caught up. He just got on campus a couple weeks ago. Need to get him plugged in, get the ball in his hands, because he's a total play-maker. We're very excited about that.

Then with Dee, he is a large athlete. He's a big boy. He's a guy that can confuse you at times because he can play so many different positions. That's the nice thing. That's what Rich really liked about him and we liked about him as a staff, was we could be very multiple with him. If you watched the 49ers in the past, some of the creativity, different things we could use with a big guy like that, could play wideout, H back, different things. So we'll move him around.

Q. Back to the 10-year thing, there's so many new coaches in the league, what do you think the key is to being able to sustain success this long in the SEC, if anything?

MARK STOOPS: I'm not sure I can answer for other programs. I really looked at what we did. That's continue to stay the course. Adapt and adjust when you can.

I think all of us, you're going to be accused of being hardheaded at times. You have to stay to your core beliefs is the only advice I can give anybody. Those two don't need my advice, they're doing very well. Just any coach, it's just be authentic. To me it's just being authentic, staying true to who I am, my core beliefs, what I know is right, but then also adjusting and adapting when you have to.

For the longevity, you have to. You have to adapt and overcome any situation.

Q. You talked about the turbulent nature of college athletics right now. Can you express some of the concerns you have around NIL and particular challenges you've had?

MARK STOOPS: Well, there's so much good. It's a complex issue. There's a lot of smart people that are trying

to work it out. I think there's a lot of good to it with the players that are here with me, that helped build the brand of Kentucky football, and benefiting from name, image and likeness. I think we all support that, want to be part of it.

I think there's also concern. I haven't listened to anybody's comments, but I've been in meetings, and I think everybody is concerned as a head coach in the SEC with pay-for-play, so to speak, collectives, paying players out of high school. I think we're all a little bit concerned about the sustainability of that, the future of that. I think that's where the concern comes in. What is pay-for-play and what is legal?

Q. You've got some new faces in the receiver room. Does the youth in the core cause any concern in relation to the passing game under Will?

MARK STOOPS: It does. We have some guys we have to push. We're fortunate, one of the young guys came in spring so we had the opportunity to watch him, in Dane Key. He's a special young man, definitely an impact player. You could see right away he has the mindset that he could pick things up.

Tayvion Robinson from Virginia Tech, had a lot of experience. We needed that as well. We feel like we have young guys, guys like Christian Lewis that were out there last year, DeMarcus Harris has been waiting for his role.

We feel as a group we're probably as talented as we have been in a long time. There's definitely some youth there that we've got a lot of work to do.

Q. Sankey said you have a hoops game. Do you model your game after anybody specific, maybe a former Kentucky player?

MARK STOOPS: No, no (laughter). He caught me one time, I had to promote it a little bit. I had to brag because we have a cookout on every Wednesday during the summer because I don't like to get too disconnected from the players.

What we do is the coaches, if they're on vacation, they're gone, fine, they take their time. If they're in town, we all get together on Wednesdays, get behind the grill, cook, don't cater it in. Then we play a bunch of backyard games and have some fun.

This day they took some snapshots of the Horse game. I happened to win. I bragged about it, then I quit playing. They tried to get me the next week, but I know better than that. I got fortunate one day and beat some talented guys. I'm going to retire that for the summer (smiling).

Q. You're from one of the iconic football towns in America, Youngstown. The 10 years you've been at Kentucky, the fans are getting as angry about losing a football game as they do in basketball. That's a big deal. Probably a lot more money coming into the program. It's changed a lot, two 10-win seasons the last four years. What's the limit?

MARK STOOPS: I don't think about the first part of your question. I really control the things that I can control. Very passionate about building a program that people want to come watch, both locally and nationally.

That's what my focus is.

What the next step is, is just again continue to build on the good things we're doing. Stay consistent with what the good is. Where we're falling short, address 'em and try to get better.

We've addressed some issues. We're gaining in certain areas, and we're going to continue to do that.

Q. In the East obviously Georgia has enjoyed a lot of success. Kentucky seemingly built similar. How do you out-Georgia Georgia to pass the Dawgs in the East? How important was the 22-play 75-yard touchdown drive?

MARK STOOPS: That part of it, I'm going to address that first. It definitely was just playing the game. Everybody knew if you played Georgia last year what they were all about, how good they were.

At that point maybe the game was over as far as who was going to win and who was going to lose. However, our players need to continue to fight, they need to compete. We're into no moral victories, but we're into getting better. When you're playing, what, the very best, probably the best defense in the nation last year, you're competing and you're moving the football, you're trying to get better, you're trying to improve, you're trying to learn what it's like to play the very best in the country.

That's what we did in that particular drive. But that was one drive. After that, I really hadn't put much thought into it until you just asked.

How do you gain on Georgia? I can't answer that. I just saw Kirby up there, I could maybe try to whack his knees out or something, knock him out for a minute (laughter).

He's done a great job. I have a lot of respect for Kirby, the way they coach, recruit, the things they do in the program,

they're doing things right. I have to worry about us, how do I make us better.

We had an opportunity a few years ago to play him for whoever won that game, essentially one shot in the East. They took care of business. Hopefully next time when we're in that situation, we're more prepared.

That's the way I've always approached it with us. When we started at 14, worked our way up. Last year we were fortunate enough to finish second in the East. However, we all know there was a large gap between Georgia and No. 2. We're all trying to close that gap.

Q. Your brother is working on your staff now. I guess that's flipped from Arizona. Wonder what that dynamic was like. With Will, has he been even better than maybe you imagined when he transferred? What's he brought to the program? What makes him a real good quarterback?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, the first part of that, you are correct. I worked with Mike and learned an awful lot of football. I was at Miami, the Hurricanes at the time. We were winning a bunch of football games at Miami. I went with Mike to be his defensive coordinator at Arizona.

Very proud of the work. I saw Mike take a program that was similar to what I inherited. That's why I say I very clearly knew what I was getting into when I stepped on campus in Kentucky. Mike took over a very similar situation.

I was very proud of the work we did there. The last year I played there or coached there, we were one play away from playing in the Rose Bowl. They've never played in the Rose Bowl in history. Mike did some really good things there.

We lost in double overtime to Oregon. I was just talking about that up on one of the media or radio shows. They were chuckling how you don't ever forget those plays. I'll never forget it. We had two fourth down stops to beat Oregon and we're playing in the Rose Bowl.

Yeah, I worked with Mike, really learned a lot about football, learned a lot about building a program, was very proud of the work we did at Arizona.

Now he's working with me. I needed a guy with great experience. Brad White does a tremendous job. I have great assistants on my staff. But I always look for great big-picture guys as well. You need more than one. You need coordinator mind, multiple coordinator minds on both sides of the ball.

With Will, you asked me if he exceeded expectations. I think that can be fair. I knew what he was capable of. I'm not going to lie, when I watch him at times, I mean, it does kind of blow you away. You just watch him maybe on a windy day, there's gusts coming at you, and the way he rips the football, the way he throws it, the way he works. He's exceptional. He's exceptional.

I don't worry about him, talking about him like that, because he's very self-driven. He's worried about getting better. He works his tail off every day. All you have to do is watch the way he plays the game. If you put on a film, watch the way he plays the game, you have to respect that. Because he cares. He cares about winning. He cares about competing. He'll do whatever is necessary to put the team on his back and carry them to victory.

Guys can respond to people like that. His talent kind of speaks for itself. But he has all the intangibles to be a franchise guy at the next level. I know he is with us. He's a special player.

Q. What is the biggest question mark you have about this team heading into fall drills?

MARK STOOPS: That's a great question.

I think it was brought up, we have to have some play-makers step up at the wide receiver position because we have a beast of a quarterback. We have to get some play-makers to step up and compete. We're going to have to depend on a few younger guys there. The older guys need to continue to step up.

Then just consistency. Anything that we've done well in the past doesn't mean it automatically carries over. We have to go out and prove it. We have to earn it, we have to stay hungry, work our tail off to take it to another level.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time today.

MARK STOOPS: Thank you. Appreciate you.

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