

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 18, 2023

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Clark Lea

Press Conference

CLARK LEA: Good morning, and thank you, commissioner, for that introduction. On behalf of Vanderbilt University, our chancellor Daniel Diermeier, and our athletics director Candice Lee, I welcome you to our city and to my hometown.

Nashville has always been a vibrant part of the Vanderbilt experience. It's one of the great sports cities in America and a loyal partner to our program.

We're excited to share our home with the college football world this week and hope everyone enjoys their time here.

A year ago we were hard at work on the foundational identity of our program, while also searching for on-field progress. This led to inconsistent play and plenty of challenging moments.

The adversity we faced strengthened our resolve and helped to refine our process, giving way to an evolved team that was able to find flashes of success.

Though we can celebrate progress, we will never be satisfied with 5-7. Vanderbilt football pursues success at the highest level, and we will not back down from our mission to build the best college football program in the nation.

Just down the road for the past seven months, team 3 has been training with intention in an effort to form the most capable team to this point in my tenure.

As we stand now in front of a clean sheet, our goal is postseason play. The margins remain razor thin for our program, and the difference between achieving our goal and being left in the wake of disappointment likely comes down to a handful of snaps this season.

We understand that progress is seldom linear and certainly never a guarantee, and it's our shared responsibility now to capture these margins in our design and preparation.



To accomplish this, each program member must be willing to go beyond our limits, ever-evolving the internal expectations for what it means to invest in our process and strengthen our culture. We simply cannot miss any opportunity to take ground on our mission.

Two and a half years ago when I came home to Nashville, I wanted to prove to the world what I knew to be true about the potential of Vanderbilt football. As we've struggled through the challenges inherent in changing a culture and resuscitating a program, I realize I'm now motivated less by what I proved to those on the outside and more by what I share with those on the inside.

The chip on my shoulder is still there and it's still important, but what's more important to me is honor of collaborating with the first-class people that make up Vanderbilt football.

I love going to work every day with our players and staff, with our fans and our loyal alums, to build a prep program we can all be proud of.

I'm grateful to work arm in arm with our leadership, specifically Daniel Diermeier and Candice Lee, the best partners I could ever ask for. They're tough, competitive, compassionate leaders with great vision and a willingness always to show up and do the work.

The love I have for the work we're doing reminds me of just how unique our journey at Vanderbilt is.

As I look out my window daily, I now witness the physical transformation of our spaces, a reality that very few believed would ever be possible. Our buildings are changing, but our foundation never will.

What makes Vanderbilt football special is our people, fully devoted to each other and aligned on our team mission.

We forge the bonds of human connection the only way we know how and the only way that lasts: Finding our joy and purpose in shared suffering and sacrifice.

This coupled with our developmental approach ensures



that we maximize the experience of each individual in our program. We're playing the long game at Vanderbilt, and rather than have our program blowing in the wind, moved by the latest trends in the broader landscape of college football, we've chosen to set our foundation in deep and solid ground, and we're committed to seeing our mission through.

Our belief is simple: Devoted people, developmental approach, dominant program.

Thank you.

Q. I wanted to ask you about a way you build your roster, and it's one of the first hires you made. It was kind of an outside-the-box thing, and he had been so involved in recruiting. But talk about Barton Simmons and the role he plays and how he's helped you build your roster so far at Vanderbilt University.

CLARK LEA: Barton has been such a great partner, and the truth is that hire was made like back in the seventh grade, I think. He's been a best friend of mine for a really long time.

One of the cool things to me is obviously I've got a ton of respect for Barton as a professional, but respect him so much as a competitor, too. We built our bonds on the fields of high school football and competing together.

As we got into our respective professions we stayed obviously in close touch, and always had, I think, not always supported by our wives, but we'd have these long conversations about what development looked like, what players looked like in high school that became pros, and where some of the flaws are in the system for evaluation; what is valued maybe externally that we know sometimes can be misplaced internally.

Over the years, we kept having these conversations, and so I really wanted someone to reimagine what recruiting could be. We needed to be very specific and precise. We needed to be surgical with how we were building our roster here, and we can't afford to miss.

But we also understand that because we are developmentally based that those players that we bring in that get our full investment every day, their performance will amplify.

I've got a couple guys with me today that are examples of that. Will Sheppard and Ethan Barr. We didn't recruit them but they had very similar journeys out where Vanderbilt was their only Power Five offer.

Jaylen Mahoney who's here had some other options, but these are really good players and All-SEC level players that were grown and developed in those systems.

Again, his willingness to take that approach, and not even willingness, but the alignment that we have on the vision of what a developmental program can and should be, it's been a lot of fun. We continue to have fun and he continues to be such a valued part of our process.

The good news for me is he's a Nashvillian like I am, and I know Haley, his wife is not going anywhere so this partnership will go for a really long time.

Q. On defense the corners seem to be the biggest question mark for you guys heading into the season. How do you plan to balance playing the veterans and the young guys that you've still got that are developing?

CLARK LEA: Yeah, we have to find the best 11 on both sides. We do return some snaps at corner, but that doesn't mean that they haven't played a bunch. This is about finding the people that are capable in the moment.

Obviously in a game now that is won and lost on the perimeter. We have to give our young players a chance to develop in fall camp. Obviously we have some second year players that are further along in their progress that we expect to have a role on our team.

We also have a true freshman that comes in with the chance to make an impact, too, and one of the great -- the way we start our season won't almost assuredly won't be the -- the patience to see that level of performance come to the surface.

If you remember a year ago, CJ Taylor started as kind of a fringe contributor on our defense and became really our most dynamic playmaker on that side of the ball. That'll happen at some level this year, too.

What our goal here is in fall camp is to get all those guys exposure, and they're going to be guarding some SEC-level receivers now. We have a good receiving corps, and it's not always going to look pretty.

But for us, it's to be patient enough to see that through, to keep coaching and developing them through both their wins and their losses and their reps, and to see how that group matures through camp and where we're ready to start the season.

At the point at which we put the ball down against Hawai'i, we don't stop evaluating at that point. We'll still look for the

highest level performance. That gives those young players time to build into an impact role.

Q. Big picture question: Next season Texas joins the SEC, and obviously they'll be traveling to your house. Your impressions on Texas, anything you can say about them? What kind of team can Texas expect to face once they see you guys in 2024?

CLARK LEA: Well, obviously you're talking to a football coach ahead of fall camp, so my scope is pretty narrow right now.

I'm excited about the way the league is expanding. I think obviously to add Texas and Oklahoma is a statement, and as a competitor, no matter where you are, if you're a real competitor, you're looking to measure yourself against the very best.

That's what our league allows us to do.

No matter who we play against this year or next year, the goal is that they play against a team that knows perfectly who they are, plays to an identity, and has weaponized that identity to puncture the shell of the opponent.

I want everyone we play against to leave the field having learned something about themselves because that Vanderbilt group is really tough and relentless and never stops and also has the weapons to be dangerous.

We're a work in progress that way. A year ago we were inconsistent with how we showed up. This year we'll be a little further along by the time Texas comes to town. Hopefully we'll be ready to play Vanderbilt football from the first snap to the last.

Q. You mentioned the facility improvements that are going on on campus right now. Specifically for your program, have you already seen them pay a benefit in recruiting? Anything else that you can promise for the future?

CLARK LEA: Yes. Obviously when I accepted the job all these plans were in place, and so you can, from that moment, start talking about what this future is going to look like.

I think the biggest statement that it makes is just support from the highest office on campus. I mean, Chancellor Diermeier has been such an advocate for our program. He's a football fan. I don't know how many people know that about him. But he sat for an hour and a half in my office with me and Barton just spitballing what college football recruiting is about. He's very interested.

I think when recruits and prospects see that level of interest at the highest office, it's something that is different for Vanderbilt, right? This is a moment for us. Not because of me. I'm a part of it, but what's a bigger part of it is the leadership of the university wants for this program to be successful.

What we're seeing now is that vision manifest in physical transformation.

Look, right now it's not pretty. There's a lot of shut-down roads and a lot of dirt and a lot of construction equipment, but it gives us a chance. It gives us the landscape to paint the picture of what the future will be, and in short order we'll be talking about Vanderbilt football with cutting-edge facilities and best-in-class resources. When has that ever been said?

These are all exciting things for us. You've got a top 15 school. We play in the SEC. We're in Nashville, Tennessee. Vanderbilt is one of one. You make no compromises. We're going to support you with the best facilities and the best resources. You're going to have coaches that are going to invest in you every day. We're not out there to swap pieces in and out every year. We're going to build and develop from the bottom up.

To me, that becomes a pretty enticing proposition.

Q. The defenses you called at Notre Dame and in your first season at Vanderbilt had about an 18-20 percent blitz rate. Last year, huge jump up to 28 percent blitz rate. Is Vanderbilt going to be more aggressive with blitz this year or come back to the fold of the earlier defenses?

CLARK LEA: Well, let me first say that Nick Howell is our defensive coordinator, and he'll be calling the defenses. Anytime you design -- first of all, I think Coach Howell's personality, he's an aggressive dude, and he's going to be an aggressive play caller. And I love that about him.

I think our balance is making sure we time those pressures up to put our kids, our players in the best position to be successful.

What we want to do is shorten a down with a four-man rush. We want to create pressure on the quarterback and disrupt the ball with our front four.

The more we can do that, the more we can add coverage. And like I said earlier, the game is won and lost on the perimeter. The more we can add help over there with another person in coverage, that is a benefit. But to do

that, you have to have an effective four-man rush.

So we've seen great progress in our defensive front. I thought we made progress last season. I thought it was the most improved unit in the winter and spring for us. That continued progress allows us to be a little more coverage based.

But in the end it's about shortening the down, so you do what you have to do, and if that means you need to send a fifth or a sixth, then you send a fifth or a sixth, and if it's Coach Howell, he may send a seventh or an eighth. That wasn't necessarily my formula, but, hey, to each his own.

But all of it has to be designed to make the offense play left-handed, and what we can't do is become aggressive for the sake of being aggressive. We have to make sure that we have a clear process and a design, and if the play call is right, that means our process was right. If the play call was wrong, then we've got to reexamine how we got to that call.

But never is it about emotion and just trying to send as many people as we can. We have to make sure that we have a clear process and its design, and if the play call is right, that means our process was right. If the play call was wrong, we have to examine how we got to that call. But never is it about emotion and just trying to send as many people as we can.

Q. On the construction front, how much patience is there going to have to be this year for you, fans, to work around what is a big construction zone right now?

CLARK LEA: Well, I mean, there's going to be some hurdles there. I think I've asked them to clear the path to the press elevator, though, and I think we've done some other things up there. We'll make sure it's as comfortable as possible for everyone, honestly.

It's the pains of progress, and what we can't do is say, hey, it's been 30 years. Like we can't look at it and say, this is unfortunate. This is a celebration.

If we have to walk a little further to get in, if the team has to take a little different path -- we don't have a tunnel right now. We'll figure out a different way to take the field. All that stuff to me is a celebration.

To me, too, as a fan, this is a great moment. There will never be another year for Vanderbilt where we'll have this level of construction going on on our football stadium. Let's embrace it for what it is, and it's a launching point for us into our future, and let's have fun with it.

A year from now, two years from now, we'll have a really tough place to come and play for an opponent.

This year will present some different challenges for different reasons, but listen, when the jackhammer was going on outside my office it wasn't always convenient, but by God it was progress, so we're going to celebrate that.

Q. On a completely different topic, in the wake of the Northwestern situation, you're a former player, do you readdress with your team the topic of hazing or what might be seen as team bonding to make sure that it doesn't cross over into that area that it could be seen as hazing?

CLARK LEA: Yeah, I mean, the situation is really sad. It's unfortunate on so many levels, and short of commenting on Northwestern's program, because I'm not a part of Northwestern's program, yeah, I believe that the day that this -- in every area, the day that this becomes anything other than a value add for the student-athlete, and sometimes value add is about inconvenience and it's about sacrifice, and I've talked about shared suffering. Those things to me are important points of growth.

But on the whole, when the experience doesn't become a value add, then we've lost our way as coaches. It's our responsibility to steward an experience that gives people a launching point into their future. That's important.

As far as internally, we don't readdress things. Like we live out our identity and our values every single day. That does not mean that we're perfect.

What we want to do is create a culture where when things aren't quite right -- sometimes these behaviors start very small and we need to have great boundaries, and we need to have a know as a program.

I think a lot of the issues -- and again, this isn't speaking specifically about Northwestern -- but a lot of the problems we're facing now in the broader culture of our sport have to do with a lack of boundaries and a lack of know. I don't think anything functions.

You can't create the synergy needed without great boundaries.

For us to create a culture where we have those boundaries, where people can speak up and say, hey, this isn't quite what I like or this isn't what I wanted and give us a chance to make adjustments and shifts, before you get anything that's big that blows up on you. That's kind of the goal.

The other thing, too, is we have covenants in our program. There are five of them. The first one is true brotherhood.

There's no brotherhood that I know that starts with a level of abuse in the locker room. We've got great leadership within our players and those guys do a great job.

It's a partnership, and this is co-creation and collaboration. It's not just about my message. It's about how the staff executes my message. It's about how the team takes my message and actualizes it in their habits and behaviors every day.

We're very intentional about that. Now, what we will do is we'll continue to go deeper into this broader narrative around creating a culture where people are comfortable speaking up when things feel off.

And again, to me, a lot of times those big things actually show up in small things early.

We need to have a program and an environment where we address those when they're small so they never get to the point where they're big.

Q. Last year on the defensive side of the ball, you had Elijah McAllister, a team captain for you; appeared in all 12 games. He has since transferred to Auburn. He will be here with Hugh Freeze at SEC media days. What is Auburn getting in Elijah McAllister on and off the field?

CLARK LEA: Elijah is a first-class person. He's got length, plays hard. A guy I think the world of. He's a Vanderbilt graduate. I stay in touch with him, support him. Glad that he's here, because the college football world needs him to have a platform.

I'm proud of him and appreciate him for what he contributed to our program.

Q. You lose Ray Davis to the transfer portal. How much more pressure does that put on your quarterback AJ Swan to carry the offensive attack, and how do you replace the production that Davis gave you last season?

CLARK LEA: Well, again, we appreciate everything Ray contributed to our program. He ran behind five offensive linemen that are back and do a great job. In fact, there are more than five that started games for us last year. We believe in our offensive front.

We return Chase Gillespie and Patrick Smith, and both are

capable runners. We added talented freshmen to that mix, too.

AJ doesn't need to shoulder any more of the burden. We need AJ to focus on his development and his ability to facilitate the offense, make pre-snap and post-snap decisions, get the ball into space.

I think his growth from year one to year two has less to do with putting the offense on his back and more to do with consistency and execution.

At that point, too, we're leaning on a talented receiver corps to be able to create explosive plays for us.

But we're not going to change who we are. We feel like we'll be able to not skip a beat in that run game and keep pushing forward as an offense.

We're excited for those guys to come together over the next month in fall camp.

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