

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 19, 2023

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Arkansas Razorbacks

Sam Pittman

Press Conference

SAM PITTMAN: Good afternoon, everybody.

So my dad, I won that state championship in shot put, and my dad had a way of saying, "Hey, son why don't you stay down and watch the 6-8 throw and I did, I wouldn't have made the finals, you know what I mean. Parents sometimes have a way to -- being nice, congratulations, but you're still not very good, you know, that type of thing.

Greg, thank you so much for the introduction. The best of the best, William King, when they added David Cutcliffe to this group, enormous benefit for us coaches. Dave's been through all that, and a very, very great hire.

Very proud to be part of the State of Arkansas, University of Arkansas. Third consecutive Top 15 finish in the Director's Cup, a couple of indoor national championships with Bucky, Lance; the basketball team went to Sweet 16. Dave's team had a share of the SEC Basketball Championship.

Today, we brought KJ Jefferson, our quarterback, who is on the verge of setting, oh, at least, six, seven records. Great leader for us. Wonderful kid. Very proud of him. He is our leader. He's our leader both on the offense and the defense. Obviously on one side of the ball, a lot of times you'll have leaders that are on that side of the ball. KJ is our team leader and we are awful happy that he is.

We brought Rocket Sanders, our running back, rushed for over 1,400 yards last year. The one thing I'll say about Rocket is he's never been in trouble, class-wise, all his tutors, all the teachers love him. We do, too. Gained another ten pounds. Is running faster than he ever has and has had a great off-season.

And Landon Jackson, you'll see him. He went from 236 at the end of last year to 280 running over 20 miles per hour. By the way, a nugget there, him and Grace, his girlfriend, fiancée, just got engaged a week or two ago.



Last year we were invited to our third consecutive postseason Bowl. Obviously my first year, we weren't able to play the Texas Bowl because TCU had COVID problems. We won two straight in a row. Last year's game against Kansas, it changed a lot for our program.

At the end of the season last year, we had a lot of guys in the portal. We had coaches that left. And for us to go to the Liberty Bowl, which is a great venue and win that game with a lot of starters out and it showed a lot of -- people were concerned about what's going on with the team: What's the Liberty Bowl; and we've got nine guys that are out and we win the game against a very good opponent.

We had to get some things fixed. We had a very good off-season. We lost four games last year by nine points. Ended up winning seven games. We have a lot of situational football to get fixed. We've worked on it. I've worked on myself. I won't go for it on fourth down very often. So I have to work on and see if we can get a little bit more in practice; at the same time we are helping the defense, analytics certainly has changed football. I have to get into it a little bit more than what I have in the past.

But we have situational football. But over program is built on toughness, physicality, the ability to be coached, the ability to be loyal to each other and I feel like our team is that way.

We have two new coordinators now. I'm proud -- I said it last year. We are one of eight schools that had both coordinators back last year. We lost Barry Odom, great friend of mine. Got the head coaching job at UNLV. Will do an outstanding job there.

We lost Kendal Briles. Kendal Briles, we just came off a season of 6,000-plus yards, one of only three times that's ever happened in the University of Arkansas history to TCU. Very grateful, very thankful to those two guys at what they did for us.

However, they left. And now we need to replace which we have. I want to talk to you about Dan Enos, our offensive coordinator. We were together in 2015. One of those three 6,000-plus season was when he was with us, at



Arkansas then.

Travis Williams, we went to UCF to get him as our new defensive coordinator. I interviewed four or five guys when I got done with him. And called Hunter Yurachek and told him, "This is our guy." In the portal world, coaching world, he's very aggressive, and I knew in the portal world, if we lost somebody, we could dang sure replace them.

Travis, he's a great man, very positive guy, really good coach. We went to Florida State and got Marcus Woodson as our defensive backfield coach, co-defensive coordinator. Darren Wilson was an analyst at Florida, coaching our corners. And Morgan Turner has had eight to nine guys play in the NFL when he was a tight end coach as Stanford and we were able to get him from Stanford.

One of the key cogs to us was getting Ben Sowders from Louisville. Ben is our new strength coach. He's done an outstanding job with the kids. Holds them accountable. You'll see the three that we brought. We've got a whole bunch of guys that look like that, and that's a credit to Ben Sowders and his staff.

We obviously have a challenging schedule. I think last year, somebody told me we played seven teams in the Top-25. Well, that's the SEC. We are excited about that. This year, we go to Florida. I don't believe we've ever won at Florida. We have Missouri at home and then we have a non-conference schedule. We are excited to get BYU again. Kalani Sitake is an outstanding coach, and we are excited to get BYU playing here as we played them down there last year.

14 returning starters: Four on offense, seven on defense and three our specialists. Brady Latham and Beau Limmer are both catalysts to our offensive line. We are going to need them. We moved Beau Limmer to center to help us in that aspect. Eric Gregory, McGlothorn, Hudson Clark, those guys have this played a lot of ball for us on defense. And, of course, Eli Stein and Max Fletcher and Cam Little at the specialist.

Roster additions, we had 21 high school scholarship additions. 21; 12 of that 21 came in in January, 9 of them came in this late May.

19 additions from the portal. We addressed every problem that we felt like we had, whether that be starting or whether that be depth-wise, except the only position that we did not replace in the portal was running back.

We are expecting all those guys to contribute to us. I'm looking forward to the year 2023 being the head coach of University of Arkansas. I'm looking forward to my fourth

year being the head coach at Arkansas.

Congratulations to the media. It's your day. Congratulations. I want to thank you all nationally for the kind things you've done for our program. This is what it's for, for you guys to sell our -- and help us sell our story. We appreciate you so much. I'm really indebted to the guys from Arkansas and all the things that you do for me and for the university and for the football program.

With that, I'll take questions.

Q. You just mentioned the number of players you got out of the portal, a lot of them on defense. And Brian Kelly was here saying, when you get that many guys from the portal, you really don't know what you got. What gives you confidence that the guys you brought in are going to work and that the defense will be better this season?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I think first of all, the guys that we have on our team I think are better. You know, they have improved. They have improved their strength and their speed and those things.

Some of those times, we have seen in spring ball, I think nine of them are not, you know -- they are new-new. Those, I don't know, I'm not speaking for Coach, but I'm assuming that's what he's talking about a little bit more, the brand new ones that came in in June and those things. You really don't know. You don't have a clue. But for that part of it, you're looking for some depth. And man, if somebody will come in and able to start from that group, boy, you've really hit the jackpot.

So I agree with Coach on that. How we are going to be better on defense, you know, I think we are going to be better on the D-Line. I think we'll be able to play a four-man front. I think we'll be a little more aggressive. We've always tried to get man-to-man cover corners. And I think between Snags (ph) and Noodle (ph) and Day-Day (ph) and Braxton and some of those guys, I think we are going to have an opportunity to play a little bit more man which will allow us to be a little more aggressive and move that front.

Moving the front helps you in the run game as much as it does in the pass game, and I think, well, we've got to do that a little bit more than what we have in the past.

Q. Kind of similar question about the portal. When you look back at when you were hired, the 2020 class, you had such a quick turnaround and today there's only two players left from that class, guys who should be redshirt juniors and seniors. 2021, you were not

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

able to face-to-face recruit and had some miss evaluations there. Have you ever thought about how much trouble you might be in now if not for the transfer portal and how thankful are you that it came along when it did?

SAM PITTMAN: Absolutely. And to be honest with you, though, I think part of the transfer portal is the guys -- we have to, ask that's because some guys left.

I tell you what I learned my lesson a couple years ago, because we were talking about who could we afford to lose if we lost some guys and we need some scholarships, all that kind of stuff. Not running them out of the program. We talked about who could -- I learned my lesson.

I went this spring, and I said, "Hey, I don't want nobody to leave. I don't want nobody on the team to leave." If you think about it, your worst player might be friends with your best players and you're running his best friend out; you've not only lost the worst player on the team, you've lost the best player on the team.

So we are not trying to lose anybody off the team. But to answer your question, I think the portal has benefitted us, if that makes sense. I do think the window is way too long. I think we are trying to address that as coaches, as NCAA as an SEC group.

But I do think it has benefitted us and the only way things are going to benefit you is if you look at the situation and go, okay, this is the cards dealt. How can we have the best results out of these, and I think our coaching staff has done a nice job of replacing.

Q. Coach Briles has helped lead your offense to lead the cone frequency in explosive play rate each of the last two years. You have 40 more by volume than the next closest conference offense. I would not necessarily categorize Dan Enos's offenses at Maryland as "potent." Is this a sign you are trying to trade a little bit more potency for consistency, or are you still confident you can still be the SEC's best at capturing big plays?

SAM PITTMAN: Was that a question? (Laughter).

Well, I hired Dan Enos because I think he's a hell of a football coach, and I get what you're talking about. But Dan wasn't dealt the same players that we have on our team, either. That's yet to be seen.

I hired Dan Enos because I thought he was the best play-caller I've ever worked with, and I felt like that's what we need. But you're right. Explosive plays score points,

and so would that be a concern? Not necessarily a concern, but we are certainly thinking about that all the time.

Q. You mentioned the portal, having benefitted from it but being maybe a little too long. Are there other ways that maybe the transfer portal can be -- any other ideas to tighten it, fix it, make it more effective to everybody?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I believe that kids know if they want to transfer. I think they know. It's like a house, coming soon for sale.

Now on Twitter, it's: I'm getting ready to go in the transfer portal. Because rules say you can't talk to them, all this, so they are letting the world know they are getting ready to. I think they already know. I think a week is plenty of time.

It's going to be a lot better for roster management and it's going to be better for us that if a guy in the portal, it allows us to go back to high school and recruit. Right now it's very, very hard if you lose a guy in the portal, not to go replace him with a portal guy.

I think closing that window down somewhat; if I'm a grand transfer, and I've transferred once as a graduate transfer, to me, that's plenty. To me, you can't go transfer again.

Some of those things I think would help roster management. NIL -- part of NIL problem comes with the ability to transfer. And if we close that window down, maybe some of the financial things you're hearing in NIL might become more true than maybe just words.

Q. Curious what you're hearing from fans and boosters about the addition of Texas coming back to the SEC and renewing this rivalry?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I think, obviously, the State of Arkansas is ecstatic about, you know, having an opportunity to play Texas and for that matter, Oklahoma. Proximity is so good. It's so good for us.

You know, it's not going to be -- constantly on fans, because they can drive back-and-forth to Norman and to Austin. But I think they are relatively -- I think everybody is really excited about that. Obviously we are bringing two powerful, storied programs into the SEC. So we know they are going to be really great opponents.

Everybody's excited. I'm excited. You know, I'm from Oklahoma. Grew up a Sooner fan until I moved out to eastern Oklahoma and became a Hog fan. I think it will be a big deal for the SEC and specifically Texas because of the old Southwest Conference rivalry.

Q. How do you feel about your offensive line, specifically the tackle position, and then the depth now that you have in the quarterback room?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, at tackle, you know, we have very -- we have talented tackles. We have Devon Manuel and Patrick Kutas. We like those guys. We like Ty'Kieast Crawford. We like Andrew Chamblee. E'Marion Harris could go out there and play.

They are not guys that's proven on a Saturday afternoon yet. Are they talented? Yes. And you know, I've been an O-Line coach forever. I've got one of the best O-Line coaches out there in Cody Kennedy.

But those guys are really good players. I know they can play. They just haven't yet because we've had the luxury of having older guys on the team, and even six-year guys, super seniors that have kept them off the field.

But I think it's time that they will go out there and show what they are going to do, and I have no doubt we'll feel really good about that.

Q. Go back to Ben Sowders. You guys were at Georgia together for a few years. Was there anything during that time that kind of caught your eye with him? And you added Singletary. What do you think he'll bring this season?

SAM PITTMAN: Jaheim is a little bit like what we talked about because we haven't had an opportunity to see him as much. You know, we didn't have spring ball with him. So we'll see.

Obviously we took him because we thought he could be an outstanding player for us. What we've seen, his work ethic and all those things, is heading that -- certainly, that direction.

Ben Sowders; I loved him. I liked him as a man. I like his work ethic. I like what he's about. He's a Christian man. I like everything about him. When we had a turnover there, he was the first and only call that I made.

Q. We know there's alignment between Arkansas on the state house. You're one of the more advantageous state laws nationally. The Knoxville news reported that Tennessee actually had their AG step in and cite their NIL law to maybe prevent a bull ban. What is that like when the State House is supporting the school and there's that alignment legislatively?

SAM PITTMAN: Strong. Talk about the hog is strong --

must be -- talking about that state is strong. It's strong. You know, we can't say much of anything. We go one side and the other publically if we're political. We don't have a voice. We could get in trouble.

But I'm very happy with our university and how they tried to help us and certainly Congress and the state representatives and University of Arkansas -- or the State of Arkansas.

Q. Travis Williams had one of the most aggressive defenses and finished Top-10 in havoc down in Central Florida, sometimes bringing, six, seven, eight. Are we going to see a more aggressive Arkansas defense this year?

SAM PITTMAN: I imagine we'll see more aggressive but I don't want to be that aggressive. Man, they were Cover 0 a lot. I'm watching it and so when I interviewed him, I said, "Hey, man, I want to go after people but every now and then, can you leave a guy in the middle of the field back there, you know."

Those type things have turnovers that come. Sometimes you think about, well, what about if your corner gets beat and they go score. His corners -- well, what happens if we hit the quarterback and the ball goes up in the air and we get it and go score a touchdown, too. I like that. I have a lot of confidence in him and we will certainly be more aggressive. That's just his nature and his style.

Q. Can I ask you just your earliest Oklahoma football memory? And then these schools have only played three times since 1926. Do you sense a natural rivalry could develop? The proximity is there. Do you think that will happen now that they are joining the SEC?

SAM PITTMAN: My first memory of Tulsa World was in 1979, I made the Tulsa World all state team. That's true. There was nobody else to give it to. There was like three running backs in the state.

Did you say Tulsa World?

Q. Oklahoma football memory. You said you were an Oklahoma fans. What was your first Oklahoma memory?

SAM PITTMAN: Oh, I got a bunch of them. Brian Bosworth. You know, one of them, and I was a football fan, but one of them was when Arkansas in '78, OU has got to win the game. They won the 90 and Arkansas got them 31-6.

At that point, I wasn't an Arkansas fan. I was an OU fan.



You have Billy Simms. I mean, there's a lot of great memories. We couldn't really afford to go to the game or anything like that, but a lot of great memories, Oklahoma, Barry Switzer, of course, Stoops, now, was the next one.

Yeah, a lot of great memories. Powerful program. Great program.

Q. Two years ago, KJ Jefferson entered the season as one of the SEC's lower-tier quarterbacks and now he's arguably the top returning player at his position. What are your expectations for him now in his final year at Arkansas and how he's going to fit in this new Dan Enos offense?

SAM PITTMAN: I think he's going to fit great. Is I think he would have to answer that better than I can but I think he's going to fit great. His extra study off the field has gone through the roof.

I think he believes in Dan. I know Dan believes in him as well as I do. I think it's going to be best season he's had. Whether we run him quite as much as we have in the past, I don't know that. Maybe we throw the ball a little bit more than with him carrying it. We have to keep him healthy.

Obviously we have Jacolby Criswell and Cade Fortin behind him, but he's one (No. 1) for a reason. I think he's going to be very active but he's probably going to throw the ball a little bit more than what he has in the past.

Q. You famously said coming off the field after a big Razorback win one time, how you going to celebrate, "I think I'm going to go home and have me a cold beer." Would that ever include a Hamm's beer? And we are all proud of Christian Bothers High School alumni Patrick Kutas. How important is the City of Memphis and west Tennessee to raising Razorback football fortunes? And thank you for being here.

SAM PITTMAN: Go Hogs. I like an old Hamm beer, but you burp a lot afterwards. You seem like you got a good job, man. Step it up a little bit.

West Memphis, Memphis area, we're going there every year. The more we get, the better off those kids do, the more we'll be able to be welcome back in there. But certainly you can see even at the Liberty Bowl the following that we have from that area of the country, and it's not home, per se, but it's home for a lot of Memphis, Tennessee people to be Razorbacks.

Q. With the sad passing of Mike Leach, should we assume you've taken over the title of the college football's most colorful and entertaining personality?

SAM PITTMAN: Man, I couldn't be -- I couldn't come close to him. We miss him, don't we? We do. A lot of fun, and honest as the day is long. And he's thought about a lot of his answers and some he didn't.

I'll say this: Somebody asked me, "Well, did you know him?"

I said, "Well, no."

And they said, "Well, are you going to the funeral?"

And I said, "I am because he would be at mine." That's just what kind of guy he was. Always calm all the time. A lot of respect for him and we go to the Liberty Bowl and the people at the Liberty Bowl can't quit talk about all the things that Mike Leach said about me because they are Arkansas fans the year before. Incredible man and let's be honest, we miss him. The game will miss him as well.

But I want to say this: Mississippi State got it right. When that happened, they hired Coach Arnett. He's the right hire for them. He's a good coach. We talk a lot about the other part of it, but I think Zach Arnett is going to do a heck of a job with Mississippi State.

Q. A couple years ago, 2021, you said that you were the defending national champions with the toughest schedule in the country, looking ahead to 2022, looked like you were going to 3-peat. You might have a little bit more argument on that in 2023. But that four-game stretch where you start out SEC play: Baton Rouge, and Texas A&M in Arlington; Oxford, Mississippi and Alabama to wrap it up. Probably not another team to have a tougher stretch in the country. Curious on your thoughts on how you manage that? I know you take it one game at a time, but that's a lot right there.

SAM PITTMAN: I think it's a gift that keeps on giving. You know, it seems like every year, we've got a stretch in there, especially on this year. In other words, two years ago, when we were 9-4, we had a five-game stretch, three of them were at home. Well, not really. One was in Little Rock, one was at Dallas, you know what I mean. Similar situation a little bit for us now. Don't get me wrong, I like the games in Little Rock. We are going to open the season there this year.

But yeah, I think you just have to manage each game separately. But the heat has something to do with it. The length that you practice, what are they going to wear, pads or spiders, all these type of things come into; travel and weather.

Yeah, it's a tough stretch. We have got to get after that stretch but we have noticed it on the schedule as well.

Q. On the spur of the moment, Rocket Sanders and the running back room, why was Rocket able to go from being a high school kind of receiver to being a standout running back, and could you talk about him and the room, the depth you have?

SAM PITTMAN: I think because of who Rocket Sanders is. I mean, he's a hard-working guy that you want to bring home to every meal. Great guy. So I think that has something to do with it. Work ethic, who he is, incredible guy. And he's fast, 240 pounds. That helps, too.

Now, the room, you look at AJ Green, really good player. Good player. You look at Rashod. And Dom Johnson, Dominique, he started the Outback Bowl for us, but he just never had the confidence to play much last year. He's healthy. He'll be back.

So I think those four guys will take -- I think we'll have a good running back room again but the leader of that room is Rocket with AJ being right there with him.

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