

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Commissioner Greg Sankey

Commissioner Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: I'm going to do something for which I have no permission, which makes everybody feel awkward. It's not permission from my staff that matters. I'm really proud to stand up here and tell you that last Tuesday, my wife Cathy and I became grandparents for the first time.

So in addition to boring all of you, our new granddaughter and her parents are watching me drone on and on this morning. So we'll set expectations for that relationship.

It is good to be here with you today in Music City. Good to be looking towards football season. It's actually the perfect year for us to be here, not because of the construction, but because the season for us begins in Nashville just up the road on Vanderbilt's campus on August 26th when Hawai'i visits Vanderbilt.

Then the next week, we're back down Broadway across the river, 11:00 a.m., for Virginia and Tennessee, and then later that night, Vanderbilt plays game 2, hosting Alabama A&M. So really a good intersection of football for us in Nashville.

We do something unique in the Southeastern Conference. Actually we do a lot unique, one of which is we have started to move media days to new locations. If you take away the two years of COVID, we've now been Birmingham, Atlanta, and Nashville, and there are many thanks and a great deal of work.

Thanks first to our staff who spends an entire year planning to make these four days productive for you. Our hosts here at the Grand Hyatt Nashville, the general manager Marc Sternagel and the director of events Maxine Matheson, the Nashville Convention and Visitors' Corporation, the recently retired CEO, Butch Spyridon and the new president and CEO, Deana Ivey.

The Titans provide us a home this beginning at the beginning of the season as I referenced, and always at the



end of the season as we compete in a bowl game with our Big Ten colleagues. Appreciate the Titans president, Burke Nihill.

We're here to talk about football, but back on Broadway down the street towards lower Broadway, Bridgestone Arena is our home for basketball each March. We appreciate their ownership group, their CEO, Sean Henry, their newly named president, who's been a longtime friend back to our days at Vanderbilt, Michelle Kennedy, the Predators' leadership team and the Bridgestone team for the great hospitality they provide.

Both of those local professional franchises will provide you with hospitality this week as they will be hosting evening receptions for the media.

Also to the Nashville Sports Council and the Transperfect Music City Bowl and their executive director, Scott Ramsey. That's been a longtime relationship for us and we appreciate all of that work.

We are excited that tonight -- actually today they're building a stage. On one side of Broadway you have the realization -- I've been driving over steel girders every time I visited Nashville for the last few decades that are being replaced.

On lower Broadway there's a stage being built. We'll host SEC Nation, The Kickoff on Broadway, followed by a concert with the band Midland.

Thank you to Regions Bank and to the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corporation for making that concert possible. It's a huge stage and one of those vision points we're excited to realize.

I usually don't recognize road crews, but I appreciate the fact that progress comes with a little bit of pain. Tennessee Department of Transportation actually was really helpful, along with the locals, in coordinating the construction schedule.

Progress needs to happen. It has to happen. But we appreciate TDOT in working with us and with the Hyatt and with the Convention and Visitors Corporation to ease the



level of disruption that we're experiencing.

You're going to hear from our coaches. I want to just point out on your schedule a few things. John McDaid, our coordinator of officials, will start your day tomorrow. You get to see the excitement that I see every morning during football season, so don't stay out on Broadway too late.

On Wednesday afternoon, Dr. Katie O'Neill, the SEC's chief medical advisor, will be here at 3:00 p.m. to talk about her work with the Southeastern Conference. She started in that role a year ago. It's a unique role, and she'll have much to share. I encourage your attendance Wednesday at 3:00 p.m.

And Thursday morning our friends from the National Football Foundation will be here to talk about the Foundation's work, talk about the College Football Hall of Fame. And we're really excited about this year's class of Hall of Fame inductees, including Tennessee's Eric Berry, Missouri's Jeremy Maclin, Florida's Tim Tebow, and a name that's special to all of us in the SEC office, Roy Kramer.

Roy will be entering the College Football Hall of Fame based upon his accomplishments at Central Michigan, but his impact on the Southeastern Conference and on all of college football is worthy of Hall of Fame recognition.

In fact Wednesday evening on the SEC Network we will be premiering a program focused on Roy, which I know makes him enormously uncomfortable. It's entitled Roy Kramer, A Vision For the SEC. I encourage you to tune in Wednesday night at 7:00 p.m. on the SEC Network.

If there's anything that our dedicated staff or our group of volunteers can do for you to make this a productive four days, please let us know.

Nashville, just based on my description and our reality, is one of the homes for the Southeastern Conference with our basketball tournament being held here annually now, Vanderbilt University being located in Nashville and its impact on this community. The capital of the volunteer state is located here in Nashville, and it's a state that hosts two of our member universities.

The reality is Music City is a home to many, many students, alums, parents, family members, and fans of a particular university or SEC team. It is because of those relationships that we feel sorrow in moments of tragedy.

We mourned with Nashville as we watched in horror on our television screens in March, a mass shooting at the Covenant School that will cause us not to forget the loss of

six innocent lives, both children and adults, today's leaders and tomorrow's leaders senselessly killed in one individual's act of violence.

We know that day, March 27th, could have been worse were it not for the quick and heroic action by members of the Nashville Metropolitan Police Department.

With us today with four of the five team members who responded immediately and rapidly to the urgent call for help, and I'm going to call them up here on stage one by one.

First Detective Ryan Cagle. I'm going to have you stand here. Sergeant Jeff Mathes, Detective Zachary Plese, and Detective Michael Collazo. Not able to attend today is the fifth member of that quick-response team from March 27th, Officer Rex Englebert.

There were hundreds of emergency personnel who ended up present at the Covenant School that day, but these five were those engaged with the assailant who ended the threat. I know it's not typical, and we broke protocol a moment ago. I'm going to ask you to break protocol again and join me in recognizing these gentlemen for their service to this community.

(Applause).

At the end of the week, they've shared with me their fan preferences, so we're not going to have just one coach sign football helmets. They've receive SEC football helmets autographed by all 14 coaches, and then we're going to invite them and a guest to share in a relaxed way in the 2024 SEC men's basketball tournament at Bridgestone Arena as our guests.

Words and gestures are one thing, but they really don't express our appreciation for the service, the leadership, and the commitment by dedicated individuals serving to help, support and respond in times of emergency to our communities.

Thank you, gentlemen.

(Applause).

Since we gathered last year in Atlanta, we've experienced our own loss on our campuses. We've lost student-athletes. We've lost head coaches, assistant coaches, athletics department staff members, along with retired leaders, coaches and contributors, and we mourn each of those passing.

Last year in Atlanta, one of my backstage conversations



was about the uselessness of neckties. It was a conversation that went much longer than I anticipated and ended in the rhetorical question of why neckties survived but powder wigs went away.

That conversation was with Mike Leach, and today I'm without a tie just to honor Mike's memory. You know we lost Mike in December, a person important not simply to the South Eastern Conference -- we only had him for a few seasons -- but to all of college football. He was fascinating and impacted the lives of thousands of people across the college football spectrum and across his life.

He provided wedding advice, evaluated Halloween candy, and if you ended up in a phone call talking about history, you had better have scheduled a great deal of time as he recited his historical knowledge.

He also observed the world from a perspective that made you think and often made you laugh, and sometimes made you just perplexed.

It's important that we remember people who have contributed, be it for the short-term or the long-term to this wonderful conference. And we're going to miss Mike, but he's not going to be forgotten.

Over those 12 months since our gathering in Atlanta, we've enjoyed a remarkable year. I don't have to tell you the Southeastern Conference is the only conference to have at least one team represented in each of the College Football Playoff events since its inception.

As a conference we've won four straight College Football Playoff National Championships earned by three different teams, and over the past 17 years we've had five programs win 13 national college football titles.

For the young people who want to go pro in sports, it appears the Southeastern Conference is the place to prepare yourself for those opportunities, since in the last year former SEC student-athletes earned the No. 1 pick in the NFL Draft, were drafted 1 and 2 in the Major League Baseball Draft, No. 1 in the WNBA Draft, and were the two highest drafted collegians in this year's NBA Draft.

For the 17th consecutive year the SEC had the most football players drafted by the NFL, that number being 62. For an everything conference in the NBA playoffs, we had the most former players competing, 56. Nine players selected in the WNBA Draft were the most, and since the creation of the WNBA Draft the Southeastern Conference has provided the most No. 1 picks totaling eight.

In the 2023 Major League Baseball's list of opening day

rosters, we had 88 former SEC players, at least three from every university, and 79 more players selected in this year's Major League Baseball Draft.

We also have experienced great news about our fans. For the 24th consecutive year, the SEC led the nation in average college football attendance. And notably, five of our programs, Arkansas, Ole Miss, Missouri, Tennessee, and Vanderbilt, experienced double-digit percentage increases in their attendance this season.

The SEC football championship game hosted its 27th consecutive sellout, and we are in the process of working with Mercedes-Benz Stadium to extend our agreement, Mercedes-Benz Stadium continue as our championship venue for the SEC Football Championship.

The SEC led the nation in average attendance in baseball for the 27th consecutive year. We also led the nation in average attendance in softball, women's basketball, and women's gymnastics, and at our soccer tournament had the three most highly attended sessions in our history that actually resulted people in turning away from attending the championship game.

We are proud of our accomplishments, and we're proud to have finished a year in which teams from our campuses won eight different National Championships with an All-SEC Baseball College World Series final between LSU and Florida, the fifth time there's been an All-SEC College World Series final in baseball, and the 19th time across all of our sports that the National Championship match has been between two SEC programs.

We're also pleased to welcome a new NCAA president this spring. Actually for us here in Nashville, Charlie Baker attended the SEC presidents and chancellors meeting. He stayed around to watch some basketball, and I look forward to working with, collaborating, communicating with Charlie to resolve some of our current challenges, explore new opportunities, and set the course for the future of college athletics.

But even with all of that good news and a time of change, we're not done. As we look forward to the season ahead and the year ahead, it will be our final as a 14-team conference. We're going to grow to 16 July 1, 2024. That's not news. It does take away the question you've been asking me for the last few years about when.

I'm also pleased to announce that July 15th through the 18th in 2024, this event, SEC Football Media Days, will be hosted in downtown Dallas, Texas, at the Omni Hotel, where the SEC will light up the Dallas skyline with the colors of the Southeastern Conference.



The '23 season will lead to another sold-out Mercedes-Benz Stadium where fans and our teams will travel to Atlanta to celebrate all of the pageantry that makes college football unique.

We're going to honor our CBS friends as the decades-long SEC on CBS relationship enters its final season, while we look forward to expanding our relationship and our broadcast television opportunities with ABC and ESPN.

We also have the expectation that it will be the final season for the four-team College Football Playoff, and because I have wonderful vision in my late 50s, I can see Bill Hancock to my right who is going to be embarrassed by what I'm about to say, because all of us in college football owe Bill our thanks and appreciation for his work to guide the BCS and the College Football Playoff.

He has a lot of work to do that's still on his desk and probably some papers that are underneath the table where he is seated, but the June announcement of coming transition provides us the opportunity and really creates the need and a reminder of how much Bill means to college football. I want to say in front of all and on the SEC Network, thank you, Bill, for your work. There's more to do, but thank you for all of your work and leadership over the years.

(Applause).

He's buying drinks later on Broadway, he said. Only one person laughed at that.

As excited as I am about our future, the expansion to 16, welcoming Oklahoma and Texas, the changes around our schedules, not only in football but in other sports, seeing different teams in different places competing at the highest level for National Championships, we have important work ahead that requires a new level of collaboration to ensure the opportunities currently presented in our athletic programs be made available for decades to come.

It's been two years since the first state laws brought to us the active concept of student-athletes receiving economic benefit from their use of their name, image, and likeness. I'm going to be as clear as I can. Our activities in Congress or discussions with states and even discussions of conference policies are not about taking away. Not about taking away these new name, image, and likeness opportunities. In many ways, it's been a net positive for young people.

But we all know there are stories -- some stories told and others not told -- of promises made but not fulfilled, of

inducements offered but not provided, of empty commitments of NIL agreements that created more questions than provided answers, and other behaviors in this space that rightly cause concern.

The reality is our student-athletes deserve something better than a patchwork of state laws that support their name, image, and likeness activities, if support is the right word.

Our student-athletes deserve something better than a race to the bottom at the state legislature level. As the efforts are made to create what are perceived as a competitive edge through state laws that are not overseen.

Future student-athletes, those who right now might be 15 or 16 or 17 years old, they deserve something better than to need to sort through a fully unregulated marketplace, being approached by individuals who present themselves as something that they may not be, where anyone can purchase card stock and run it through a printer and call themselves an agent on a business card, and then engage in making offers to young people that are neither transparent, that do not include protections that many of us would expect to be normal.

It makes it difficult for young people to both understand and navigate this free for all as they're trying to make life-guarding and life-changing decisions.

To our knowledge, no state has taken action to enforce its own state laws around name, image, and likeness activity.

At the same time, we've seen in a number of states laws enacted that bar associations, the NCAA, or conferences, including the Southeastern Conference, from enforcing what at our level, at the conference level, are still to be adopted, if ever, NIL policies.

In other words, the states haven't been active in enforcing laws, and now states are preventing the NCAA, our conferences, from adopting and enforcing reasonable name, image, and likeness standards.

If states will not enforce the laws, and states are going to prohibit the NCAA or conferences from enforcing these reasonable policies, Congressional action is then the only way to provide a national uniform standard for name, image, and likeness activity and to draw the lines around the boundaries that do not become simply pay for play.

These realities I've described are in contrast to what we hear from our student-athlete leaders who gathered with us in late June. Our student-athletes continue to ask for uniformity in name, image, and likeness policies across the

country.

Our student-athletes want to know their competitors on the opposite line of scrimmage are subject and governed by the same rules and policies by which they are governed.

Uniformity will ensure a high school student and his or her family do not have to investigate potentially dozens of different state laws or university policies to figure out how they can be active in this name, image, and likeness world.

Student-athletes ask for our help in guiding them through these challenges. We are used to providing support, and they want protections for themselves and their teammates and they want opportunities for their international teammates that are consistent across the country under this name, image, and likeness heading. They want the same for their competitors.

I think you know there's also been an ongoing effort to deem student-athletes employees of institutions or conferences or the NCAA. I have yet to have a conversation with an engaged participating student-athlete who says they want to be deemed an employee of their institution or the conference.

Efforts like those that have happened in California mandating revenue create new threats around the support of Olympic and women's sports. The bill that was introduced that has been delayed failed to adequately recognize the existing requirements of Title IX, and we were pleased to see the engagement and the efforts of the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee share their concerns along with the women's sports foundations.

Efforts to simply upend the collegiate model place in jeopardy the opportunities for thousands of student-athletes for decades to come. Our current student-athletes are accustomed to attending college thanks to athletic scholarships.

They benefit from unlimited nutritional support. We're accustomed to providing mental wellness. They have post-eligibility medical care. They have academic support so that they can achieve their academic goals. And our primary objective is to continue these broad-based, widespread opportunities through experiences, friendships, learning opportunities, competitive opportunities that are inherent in the higher education setting in a continuing focus for those of us in college athletics.

The reality is only Congress can fully address the challenges facing college athletics. The NCAA cannot fix all of these issues. The courts cannot resolve all of these issues. The states cannot resolve all of these issues, nor

can the conferences.

Whether Congressional action is achievable is a matter of debate, much debate. But educational opportunity, supporting equitable opportunities for men and for women, ensuring the United States' continued success in the Olympic Games, providing medical care, nutritional support, academic support, mental wellness counseling, these are non-partisan issues that deserve a non-partisan solution.

Regardless of my opinion or your opinion about the ability for Congress to act in our current environment, we have a responsibility to educate, communicate, and to try to seek a Congressional resolution, because only Congress can adequately resolve these issues.

That's why I traveled along with representatives of 14 of our universities to D.C. in early June, where we had the opportunity to communicate with dozens of members of Congress about the urgent need to enact a national standard that ensures everyone is playing by the same set of rules. We're accustomed to that in college athletics.

We seek the empowerment of college athletes while also protecting them from bad actors. We want to continue and we want to be certain that we in college sports at the highest level provide a broad array of sports offerings, and we want to provide certainty that college athletes can continue to be students first.

Despite the cynicism, despite the criticisms and the acknowledgment that we're certainly not perfect, remarkable things happen in intercollegiate athletics for young people. NIL has provided new opportunities, and the reality is that those opportunities have to be embraced.

But let's not kid ourselves into believing that this is the best we can do for our young people. Congress should not allow states under the false pretense of progress to upend a system that provides opportunities for all college athletes, men and women, universities and colleges of all different sizes, football players, divers, track and field competitors, and baseball and softball players and gymnasts. This is a system that funds our Olympic support and our Olympic development opportunities.

Witness that right now on 12 U.S. national teams, there are over 120 current or former SEC athletes training in the effort to realize their dream of being an Olympian in Paris. This includes 53 track and field athletes, 31 swimming and diving, and 9 participating with USA basketball.

At the Tokyo Games, 80 of our athletes were competitors participating under the Team USA heading, and every one

of our current 14 members had at least one participant in Team USA.

On behalf of our currently just over 7,000 athletes and the future generations of athletes who seek to go pro in sports, to be future Olympians, many who will use their athletics experience to become teachers and doctors and lawyers and bankers and researchers and community leaders, the very pillars of our community, I urge Congress to ask now to support a healthy collegiate sports system in this nation.

One final policy note relates to legalized sports gambling. This spring our conference was touched by an apparent element of conduct that calls into question the integrity of competition or the individuals involved in that competition, and we're not alone as participants from other conferences, some faced accountability for involvement in sports wagering activity.

There are now 38 states with some form of legalized sports gambling. States now realize directly into their treasury the proceeds, either from licensing fees or taxation of that legalized gambling activity. In some states it's relatively low, a few million or a few tens of millions relative to the state budgets.

One state realized over a billion dollars in licensing and tax revenue paid to the State Treasury from legalized sports gambling.

But here's the reality for us. We continue to hear more and more from our coaches and student-athletes about the increased level of abusive and threatening behavior online, often directed at them after someone involved in gambling activity ends up on the wrong side of a score or a game's outcome.

In fact, there are members of the media in this room who have reported on some of those realities. The problem can be even worse for game officials, who sometimes are tracked down at their place of business and their voicemail or email filled with abusive or threatening messages.

The race for revenue is understandable, but states in the gambling industry have a responsibility to protect our participants from threats and from abuse. While some states have enacted laws protecting participants, all states, every state with legalized sports gambling, must act to ensure enforcement of gaming regulations and put in place clearly stated laws that protect participants from hostile behavior, particularly barring individuals who engage in that behavior from any further involvement in sports gambling.

Now, I finished on difficult topics, but I'm going to rewind

the tape and remind you of all the good that's happening in the Southeastern Conference. Not only the good from the past year but the opportunities that lie ahead.

We acknowledge that we're going to have to change. We're going to have to collaborate, as I said, in new ways to find solutions to some of the longstanding challenges and observations.

But I remain optimistic about our future. I have the privilege of spending time with the SEC's leaders, our campus leaders, our athletics department leaders, and our student-athletes who are leaders now and will be leaders in the future, and because of that, through all of this, I remain convinced that the best days of the Southeastern Conference still remain ahead.

Thank you, and now as is our tradition, Kevin is going to manage the Q & A portion of our program.

Q. I heard earlier you stated about extending the agreement in Atlanta, but with the new stadium, dome stadium going up here in four years, are there any thoughts of bringing the championship or an annual game on the football field to Nashville outside of the bowl game?

GREG SANKEY: We are going to focus our football game on what is really the envy of the college football championship world, and that's what we do in Atlanta. So that's where our focus, is for that particular championship.

We obviously have what is and will be a longstanding relationship with Bridgestone Arena in basketball. One of my favorite books is titled The Art of Possibility, and what Nashville is doing is opens up the art of possibility here, around football opportunities, basketball opportunities on a national scale. Those are very much on my mind.

In fact, I've communicated that locally on repeated occasions.

Q. Just curious with the rule changes coming in college football, particularly clock no longer stopping after first downs, what's been the feedback from coaches, and how different do you think the game will look and feel?

GREG SANKEY: There was research done on kind of the look and the feel, so there will be some adjustments as things move along rapidly. The reality in the game of college football is you have a variety of offensive approaches. In some games, I don't think you'll even notice it because things happen so rapidly now.



I think people need to study. When I talked about spending time with John McDaid tomorrow in this room, that's about learning and making sure one understands how the new rules will operate.

Part of the learning experience is you do reduce the number of plays in a game. It is an incremental step, though, to keep the game moving along at an interesting pace. I'll use that phrase. That's my invention, not the rules committee.

We're going to have to be mindful of the outcomes and mindful perhaps there are other adjustments that can be made.

It's interesting to read the history of the college football, so I just finished a book that goes back to the late 1800s, early 1900s, Jim Thorpe's biography was the most recent, and realized the passing game was inserted 100 years ago to college football, yet we still have elements of the rules from 100 years ago that guide our thinking around college football, and I think it's an appropriate update.

Q. Commissioner, you mentioned the patchwork of state legislature governing the NIL rules recently, one of the most recent being the Texas law. You referenced some of the provisions passed in that game, provisions which I know Texas and Texas A&M worked with legislators in the crafting of that bill. Did you discuss that legislation with the officials at Texas or Texas A&M while that legislation was being drafted to let your opinions be known?

GREG SANKEY: So let's back up. The most recent of these bills I think was in the state of New York, actually, a week and a half or so ago. In that circumstance it was acknowledged that there were universities in the state of New York that were involved in that activity.

The same has been true, I think, in any state where legislation has been adopted.

What seems to have happened is there's been overly broad language. When we were here with our presidents in March we identified potential strategies for conference regulation of name, image, and likeness.

If you go back a year ago in Destin, we did the same thing conceptually. We're all going to be confronted, whether at the national level or the conference level, how do we want this to be overseen. You've heard me state the concerns, and I've shared those since legislation has been adopted.

I was not in the middle of any of the drafting processes, but also understand that the original set of name, image, and

likeness laws caused concerns about what was facilitated there back to 2019.

So this is an ongoing problem that we identified as the exact wrong way to go about permitting student-athletes to engage in name, image, and likeness activity.

It is a current circumstance, and you heard me observe that it speaks to the need for a national standard.

Q. With all the major changes in college athletics in recent memory, with regards to decision making, where is that balance between ensuring stability while entertaining future growth, and what are the pains for that progress?

GREG SANKEY: Well, we see the pain of progress right outside the Hyatt as the road is being deconstructed so it can be rebuilt. That's a pretty good metaphor for some of the things that are happening.

And whether it's concerns about state laws, understanding the realities of new opportunities, and trying to really dig in to see what's happening, that's pain and that's progress.

I spoke of the need for collaboration in the previous question about laws that have emanated from our states that do involve universities. We're going to have to think differently about how we make decisions.

Just to combine both questions, one of the unique aspects of the conference is people want to be a part of this conference. We gather together, our athletics directors discuss and debate, our presidents and chancellors make decisions and our rules, and I'm one who thinks we should be able to administer our own rules based on how those are decided.

Is there pain in that? Sure. But that's part of progress, again, just as we see on Broadway just outside the Hyatt.

Q. In May you guys said you were hoping to have a field storming policy before the season started. I was wondering if you have any update on that or anything been formalized yet?

GREG SANKEY: We did. In fact, we adopted updated policies around fines, so fines were increased. The revenue flows directly to the visiting institution.

We also set some standards, and you'll just forgive for not reciting them by memory, but Pat at our office can get to you, expectations for communication on campuses for policies around protecting the visiting team when those circumstances arise.

Q. For the uniform standard that everybody is seeking for NIL, are there specific elements to that? I assume a salary cap is unconstitutional. Would you make athletes be on campus for a certain period of time? What would be some of the elements to that?

GREG SANKEY: Well, I'm not going to go into the minutiae of legislative strategies. One of these efforts is -- I'll give you an example. The NCAA, Charlie Baker, communicated four points. One is some level of registration of agents around of this business. The second is a level of transparency in communication. A third is financial support.

Those seem to deal with some of the issues. How you define what actual name, image, and likeness is is part of the nouns and verbs that will have to be finalized, and we've provided drafts over time.

So sure, there's language to describe the activity. There has to be agreement on the language to describe the activity.

Q. Commissioner, what was the internal discussion like around the discussion to eliminate divisions, and how did you guys come to the conclusion that that would be the best format to continue SEC Championships?

GREG SANKEY: That discussion in football goes back to 2018, 2019, so the discussion of is our current divisional approach in football the most competitively equitable. So the words "fair and balanced" came up a lot. You had to define what do you mean by fair and what do you mean by balanced in the schedule.

We were here in March of '20. You'll remember that activity with a report to our presidents and chancellors, as a 14-team league on here's the possibilities of how we might adjust.

We stopped everything, including that discussion, in 2020. Fast forward a year, the expansion was announced. When we began discussing a 16-team football schedule in August of '21, the first set of conversations were, again, taking the words "fair" and the word "balance" and defining them.

Balance was rotating teams through with greater frequency, so I think plenty of people have written about a team may not see a team certainly for six years or may not go someplace for 12 years if they're in another division.

So that was balanced.

Fair was narrowing the competitive equity band, which is what we achieved, even with our eight-game schedule we announced a few weeks ago in June.

Hopefully that responds to your question. That was the conversation. The eight- or nine-game schedule debate, the number of games played within the conference will start be part of our discussion as we move forward and look to 2025.

But the effort to try to be both fair and then balanced within that scheduling approach was the motivation around eliminating divisions.

Q. Did the non-game schedule get tabled because schools realized that there wasn't going to be any more additional TV revenue forthcoming?

GREG SANKEY: No, there were a lot of issues. When you think about what we're going to see next year, we have expansion, we add two historically prominent football programs in Oklahoma and Texas. And not only prominent, but successful.

We have the College Football Playoff changes, lingering questions about what that may or may not mean.

Discussions about non-conference scheduling. When I was asked in Destin about timing for the '25 decision, we could go out to Destin next year. The earlier we do that, the less pain we cause for the discontinuation of non-conference games.

One of the bigger elements was that non-conference game issue. Now, part of the motivation, I think, going forward is I really think our eight-game schedule is pretty remarkable. Like when we were going through the final filtering you'd say, wow, schedule A is tough, and then you'd be at schedule G and you're like, that school has got a tough schedule and all the way through. There are 16 really challenging schedules.

But there are some important, we'll call them rivalry games, and we're going to have to have a decision about do we play those every year or do we play some of them every other year?

The eight-game format we can protect one on an annual basis and the other seven rotate.

In the nine-game format we know we can protect up to three, rotate the other six and achieve both that fairness and that balance issue.

That'll be right in front of us again.

Q. Heading into the day in D.C. last month, I understand that one of the talking points was concern about day-to-day administration of departments almost seeding, maybe to collectives boosters. Given that some collectives would now form an association among them, what do you see as the future of collectives in the NIL landscape?

GREG SANKEY: Let me be specific about the concerns. One of the concerns that I've been public about this is transferring control at an institutional level of rosters, who's on a roster, pressure on playing time from coaches, and then up the chain of command to athletics directors and presidents or chancellors to an outside entity.

People have opined about booster influence, but with collective activity about which we've read, I think it magnifies that concern, who's really in charge.

So that informs the talking point. I have read with interest on this formation of a collective association or a collective, I guess, a collection of collectives. And William King, our associate commissioner for legal affairs, has reached out to some just to have a conversation to learn more. We have to be in a constant learning mode. We want to exercise care. We want to do that in collaboration with our campuses.

So there was a contract extension announced for me. I work for our presidents and chancellors by agreement. We're going to make sure that our presidents and chancellors' influence and decision making is inherent in whatever conversation, including that with the collection of collectives.

Q. You mentioned that people want to be a part of this conference. It feels like the musical chairs with realignment are still kind of swirling. Is there still the potential for growth in this conference, or are ties creating super conferences on the landscape?

GREG SANKEY: I'll go back to my standard observations: I think we are a super conference. That's why it took a part of your life that you'll never get back to go through what we achieved last year.

Not that you didn't know any and all of that information.

My reference to people want to be a part of it really reflects back on the outreach from Oklahoma and Texas. That was a question I received yesterday.

I've been careful. When I was here in Atlanta last year, I

was clear that we're focused on our growth to 16. I've watched others message about we're not done yet. I referenced this, we're going to go to this particular region. I just don't think that's healthy.

People can criticize me to say, wow, you really sprung it on people in '21, which we did, and maybe there's no clean and perfect way to deal with conference membership.

It's not been a topic in the Southeastern Conference other than providing updates, so we're very attentive to what's happening around us, whether those are from all of your fine investigative writing or maybe opinions, and then focusing on our growth to 16 because it's an enormous task.

So that's my view.

Do I think it's done? People will say, well, I get to decide that. Right now it appears others are going to decide that before we have to make any decisions.

My view is we know who we are. We're comfortable as a league. We're focused on our growth to 16. We've restored rivalries. We're geographically contiguous with the right kind of philosophical alignment, and we can stay at that level of super conference. When you go bigger, there are a whole other set of factors that have to be considered, and I'm not sure I've seen those teased out other than in my mind late at night.

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