

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach Zach Arnett

Press Conference



ZACH ARNETT: Thank you, Commissioner Sankey, for that introduction. Obviously good afternoon. Thank you all for being here.

Real quickly before I start out, I would like to acknowledge that I have seen the graphic listing the word count for every head coach's opening statement last year at this event, and Coach Leach's was seven. Seven words.

I've already said too much, and that combined with wearing a tie, I'm sure I've disappointed him a little bit here today.

In recognition of his tremendous impact and influence not only on the game of football but on myself, I'm going to do my best to keep this short and sweet.

Obviously for coaches, media days is kind of the unofficial kickoff to football season. You get back in this environment, clearly you look around, and you can see in the SEC it does just mean more. It's not a slogan.

This is kind of the unofficial kickoff of football season for football coaches, gets your competitive juices flowing, gets you excited and energized for the upcoming work ahead in August and training camp and then in the fall and throughout the season.

Starting off, first and foremost, I want to talk about the most important thing, most important part of any program: The players. I'm lucky enough to have three players here with me today who embody all that is good about college athletics, in particular Mississippi State football.

On offense we got a quarterback Will Rogers and a running back Woody Marks, and on defense, our defensive tackle Jaden Crumedy. Rather than stand up here and read off their stats and accolades, I'll just simply say this: If we polled our entire football program, players, coaches, everyone in the building, if we polled everyone involved in

the program and told them to name the most consistent guys in our program in terms of how they show up to work every day, with work ethic, the level of effort with which they play the game, these three seniors would be at the top of that list.

Simply put, they are football guys. They are Mississippi State guys. They embody the Bulldog mentality.

We are really fortunate as a coaching staff. We have at least a dozen more seniors back in Starkville right now just like these guys.

We have a core group of returning upperclassmen, a senior and junior class who have played a lot of football, and they know what it takes to compete and win and the level of strain that is required in this conference.

Hopefully under their leadership, by the end of August and by the end of training camp, hopefully those same two things will be said about our entire football team: That we show up to work and we play the game the way it's meant to be played, the way it's supposed to be played.

I'm humbled and proud to be the head football coach at Mississippi State University, a place where you can compete at the highest level in the best conference in all of college football, you can get a world class education, and your dreams can become a reality.

Just ask the likes of Dak Prescott, Chris Jones, Jeffery Simmons, Darius Slay, Charles Cross, Emmanuel Forbes, also Johni Cooks, right, who we just lost. May he rest in peace, and obviously our thoughts and prayers go out to his family.

But it's guys like the ones I just mentioned above, along with many others in our program, those who have come before past and present that have paved the way and led this program to one of its most successful periods in all its history.

Last year we won nine football games, fourth time in the last nine years; 13 consecutive bowl games; five first-round picks in the last five years.



Hey, simply put, our fan base has much to be proud of. This is a tremendous time in Mississippi State football history, and we thank them for their continuous support.

It is without doubt, and you all know that, it is without doubt that we have the most loyal fan base in all of college athletics, and those fans are a very big part of what makes Starkville, Mississippi, such a special place.

Mississippi State has forever changed my life and that of my family. For that, I am forever indebted to it. To Mike Leach, to all of Starkville, I could not ask for a better collection of people, players, coaches, support staff, to go to work with on a daily basis.

We keep it pretty simple and common sense in our football building. As we approach training camp, let's go to work, then let's line up, let's roll the ball out there and play a football game, and may the best team win.

With that I'll conclude, Hail State, and I'll open it up to questions.

Q. Kevin Barbay had some great running backs at Central Michigan, Appalachian State; what drew you to him as offensive coordinator?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, obviously we talked to a lot of different candidates in this offensive coordinator search, and the first question at every single one was, all right, tell me what your offense looks like. What's it going to look like? What is the identity out there?

Obviously you get a lot of different answers, and I think the most refreshing thing, talking to Coach Barbay, Kevin, was when I asked that question the response was, I can't tell you that until we figure out who the best 11 players are.

That was refreshing to hear that level of humility because that's how I was brought up in this business. The guys I learned from on the other side of the ball was, right, you don't determine what your scheme is on defense, who you line up there, until you figure out who your best players are.

Ultimately that's the job of a coach, get your best 11 players on the field. Then you got to have a two-deep, so you got to figure out who your top 22 are.

So to hear that from him, again, that was refreshing, that level of humility. Kevin has done a really good job everywhere he has been. Very efficient on the opposite side of the ball and yet very good at creating explosive plays.

Everywhere he's been it's looked a little bit different because the players are different. Your job on offense is to get the ball in your most explosive players' hands, hopefully in as much space as possible so they can do what they do.

He recognizes that. He's been really good at doing it everywhere he's been. Obviously we got started on that job in spring practice and we're continuing that process, but we're going to figure out who the best 11 guys to have out there on the field to give us the best chance to move the ball and score points. If that's 10 personnel, we'll be in 10 personnel; if that's an 11 or 12, we'll be in that.

But simply put, right, players and coaches do not influence -- coaches and the scheme do not influence and affect the players. The players influence the scheme that you run. So we're going to figure out who our best players are and get them out there and in position to be the most successful so we can move the ball and score points.

Q. You've said before that you believe with the way that the program is headed that the Bulldogs can truly compete for a spot in the College Football Playoff next year as it expands. What are the values that you began implementing in the culture early on to make sure that that dream is a reality?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, you know, I don't particularly remember saying specifically putting a date on that or next year, but I simply say I look back at history. The College Football Playoff is going to expand to 12 teams moving forward, okay? You look back to the season, first College Football Playoff poll came out, Mississippi State was the No. 1 ranked team in the country in that poll.

You look back to some of the years they've had, without a doubt, right, when they had Dak Prescott, there's four nine-win seasons in the last nine years. You can look back to that special season with Dak Prescott, I believe it was 2014. It that's a 12-team playoff they're in the playoff. I mean, the proof is in the pudding.

There is data to look back on and go, yeah, if you can recruit and put a team on the field at that high of a level and have that level of success in this league, you're in the expanded playoff.

We're fortunate as coaches, we live in the most fertile recruiting ground there is for college football players, the state of Mississippi. And then you expand out from there, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, Georgia. If you can't find players in this footprint then you ain't going to be a coach very long.

The players are all around us. We've got to do a good job in the evaluation process, and then the recruiting process and showing them that they can achieve all their dreams, everything is there for them at Mississippi State.

Q. You didn't have any prior SEC experience until you came to Mississippi State, and if I read some stuff correctly you had some chances to leave. Why did you decide to stay? How did Mike Leach, working with him, prepare you for this, and are you still going to be your own coordinator and call the plays on defense?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, a couple questions in there. When I came to the SEC obviously I had not worked in this area of the country before. I've had a really charmed coaching existence. I've really worked at two places. I was at San Diego State for nine years and then had the opportunity to come here; been here the last three.

Obviously when you're a young coach you get a chance to be a defensive coordinator and the opportunity to rise coordinator defense in the SEC, particularly SEC West, you pack your bags and you'll walk there on your own for that opportunity. That's an opportunity of a lifetime.

So it was a no-brainer decision for me to come here.

Obviously I think I had the greatest job in all the country.

And defensive coaches I've talked to and guys who were my close friends and mentors and guys I reached out to for advice, when I tell them what it's like being the defensive coordinator for Mike Leach, the freedom and the autonomy you have and the confidence that he puts in his defensive coordinator to run it as he sees fit, I think that's the best defensive coordinator job in the country.

So I was really blessed the last three years.

You talk about whether my name was rumored for other jobs or not or whether I was in the mix. I had as good a situation -- I had a better situation in terms of being a defensive coordinator here at Mississippi State than anywhere in the country. I was happy here. Me and my family love it in Starkville.

You ask if I'm going to continue to be the defensive coordinator and the play caller, no, I'm not. I've got experience with that. Obviously as a head coach in the ballgame and leading up to that I did not think I could prepare as well as the other defensive coaches with all the other hats and responsibilities I was wearing, so I gave over playcalling duties in that bowl game to Matt Brock, who was our linebacker coach at the time, he's our defensive coordinator now, because I knew he'd do a

better job at preparing and calling the defense in that game.

Obviously he did just that. He called a heck of a game. We played really good defense. In my opinion it was a no-brainer.

Matt was a very successful special teams coordinator already in his career. He's been a Broyles Award finalist as a special teams coordinator. I think you talk with anyone who's ever worked with him or had experience with him, he's probably about the hardest working, most prepared guy on any staff he's ever been on.

I have complete trust, faith, and confidence in him leading our defense. We spend a lot of time together bouncing ideas off each other, and I know he's going to do great things with our defense.

Q. You return a pair of 100-plus tackle linebackers in Jett Johnson and Nathaniel Watson. Talk about what they mean to your middle and what you're hoping to accomplish this season?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, we've got a lot of returning guys on our football team. Obviously you talk about that defensive front. Like I said, we got our defensive tackle Jaden Crumedy here, along with others, but it's nice. When you got the two leading return tacklers in the SEC coming back you feel pretty good about your front six, front seven on defense.

We've got a whole lot of guys who they could have put their name in the transfer portal and gone somewhere else, coming off great seasons, and they didn't. I think that speaks volumes about how they feel about our program, the direction it's headed.

You mentioned Jett and Bookie. Now we need them to take the next step in their game. They made a lot of plays for us last year and now we need them to elevate their game and bring the other guys along. Put their arm around those younger guys who are going to have to fill their shoes after this year and show them, lead them on a daily basis how it is you go about preparing and doing your work so you can have that success come Saturdays in the fall.

But there's a lot more that goes into that than just showing up on game day and playing. Those guys, we expect big things from them. We need them to have big years if we're going to be as good as we can be on defense, and then we need them to lead and show the other guys underneath them.

Q. You guys run a very unique defensive scheme, odd

front, multiple front, up front. Where does your defensive ideology come from? Who are some guys that you learned from? And how do you coach gap integrity when you do so much different stuff?

ZACH ARNETT: It's funny, you said stole from it, and I'm glad you said that, because that's constantly what coaches are doing. That's why you watch film, right, you're trying to steal ideas, make them into your own a little bit.

I think it's kind of fortuitous that I'm at Mississippi State. Everyone in our fan base knows about the impact and influence of Joe Lee Dunn and his defenses there in the past. I had the privilege -- grew up in Albuquerque, went to my local university, University of New Mexico. Head coach there at the time was Rocky Long. He'd been running this defense for a number of years already. He worked with Joe Lee Dunn in the past.

Then when he became a coordinator, I think it was at Oregon State at the time, he had spent more time visiting with Coach Dunn in Mississippi and learning more about the defense. Coach Long has been doing it a long time in this defense of 3-3-5 and he's kind of evolved it to fit the modern game.

Obviously I was lucky enough to play under him, work under him, but it's the only defense I've ever been in.

Now, again, at the end of the day it's worked where we've been because it's fit the players we've had, but it always starts with players. You've got to figure out who your best players are and you've got to get those guys on the field.

So we've been a 3-3-5 for the last three years. If we're deeper at the D-line and all we've got is them two inside linebackers who made all those tackles, then I guess we'll be a 4-2-5, right?

I mean, some of it the offense has some control over what you have on the field, because you've got to have a certain number of DBs to match their receivers, or vice versa, bigger guys for when they get in heavier sets.

But yeah, I've grown up in this defense, right? That's what the bond between me and Matt Brock kind of was instantaneous, because although we're not from the same trees or backgrounds, our philosophies and viewpoints on defense are almost identical.

So it's been fun because as he and the other defensive assistants, David Turner, Darcel McBath, Brett Dewhurst, those guys in the meeting room, you get different ideas from them, and that allows you to grow and evolve your defense.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Marcus Banks. I know he's transitioning from corner to safety. What kind of progress has he made and what kind of role do you envision him in Matt Brock's defense?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, Marcus, he goes by Speedy, he's done a heck of a job since he showed up. He's a worker. He's done everything we've asked of him. He played more in the corner room a year ago.

Now we see a really good role for him. It's in our safety room. Everyone calls it differently, but that's kind of your nickel, mostly plays the field, whether that's a safety in some people's defense or they call it the nickel corner sometimes in the NFL.

That route tree you've got to cover in the slot is pretty big, right, because they've got so much room to work. You're not as up close to the sideline. Now, you are closer to helping in the post safety, but Marcus has done a heck of a job.

He can hold up to the physicality so he can be a force in the run game, and then he's obviously got the skills to cover, or he wouldn't have been a corner in the first place. We're expecting big things from him, and for us to be as good as we can be on defense, we need him to step up and have a good year.

Q. You referenced the word "identity" earlier. As you step into this role full time, what is your vision for Mississippi State's football identity under you moving forward?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, I'm going to be honest with you, obviously got that question quite a bit over the last eight months. I hope it's a continuation of the identity that Mississippi State has always had as a football program: Tough, hard-nosed, disciplined.

It's been acknowledged for a long time in this league. When you line up against Mississippi State, you'd better pack your lunchbox and hardhat, because it's going to be a physical game. That's what Mike Leach wanted.

When I first interviewed with him and talked to him about what he thinks are the important things about developing a winning football program, it's not talking about scheme. It's all about the effort with which you play, the physicality and the tenacity.

Simply put, being the most excited, passionate team who lines up on the field excited to play the game. That's kind of been Mississippi State's identity forever. That's who we

are at Mississippi State. I hope it's a continuation of that identity, because if we can ensure those things as we get through training camp, if we can have a football team who lines up excited to play with a physicality and a determination and a disciplined football team, you've got a chance in every game. Regardless of scheme.

I've been asked a lot of questions about scheme. If you don't have the characteristics of a winning football team, all those things I've mentioned, how you play the game, the effort level, the toughness, discipline. If you don't have those things, it don't matter what scheme you employ on either side of the ball, you ain't got a chance.

If you have all those characteristics and you've got good players and you're not sabotaging them as coaches with a bad game plan, it doesn't matter what scheme you run, you've got a chance in every game. Those are the fundamental core principles to winning football. Scheme is just what it flows through.

Q. Quick question about Mike Wright. I thought he was one of the most underrated players in the league last year at Vanderbilt. They won several games with him at quarterback. They don't beat Kentucky and they don't beat Florida without him. He was dynamite. I'm wondering how you think you might use him. Do you mix him with Will at quarterback, and how he might fit in to help you guys this year?

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, Mike is obviously a really talented guy. Like you mentioned, there ain't a lot of quarterbacks on the transfer portal market who got SEC victories on their resume. He's one of them. He's incredibly athletic, talented. He can hurt you both with his arm and with his feet.

Make no mistake about it, Will Rogers is our starter, and his resume speaks for itself, but Mike, there's a lot of things Mike can do and wrinkles that we can add in the game plan that could make -- allow us to be really dynamic on offense, and there are situations within a game, certain areas of the field down and distances where he can create some opportunities for explosive plays for you on offense.

We had a need at the quarterback position. We lost a couple kids to the transfer portal. They decided that a better location would be a better fit for them, and we were able to go out and get a, like you said, a proven guy who's got SEC experience, starts under his belt, who's won games in this conference.

To have him come in and provide depth and then give us avenues to create more packages within the offensive game plan and generate more explosive plays, that's going

to be a real asset to our offense.

Q. Following up on what aspects of Mike Leach as a head coach that you might incorporate in what you do, and also you spoke to the media as a defensive coordinator, and I wonder how maybe that helped you in what you're doing today and what you've done as a head coach so far.

ZACH ARNETT: Yeah, I guess I'll start with that one. Obviously I did have the privilege. Coach Leach did not have a gag order on me or the other coaches in terms of talking to the press. I haven't even thought about it up until you asked that question, but yeah, obviously I've had some experience having to get behind the podium and address questions from the press.

That is experience that hopefully will serve me well as I transition into this new role.

There's obviously a lot of wisdom, nuggets of wisdom that I received from Coach Leach over the last three years. Simply put, I look at it as a blessing. I got to spend three years under, in my opinion is a unanimous first ballot Hall of Famer. I mean, his fingerprints and impact on the game of football are evident throughout particularly offensive play in modern football.

Talking to our quarterback earlier he goes, you tell me an offense in college football who does not run Y-cross or 95 as it's known in the air-raid world. Every team you play every week runs that play. That's a Coach Leach and Coach Mumme idea that has taken over the game of football.

But again, there are a lot of things. There's a lot of slogans and words said in our building over the last three years: Don't listen to the noise, play the next play, all things that were kind of the DNA of Mike Leach's program that we still say to this day.

They're said in every other football building across the country. Maybe not in those exact words, but in other ways. Control the controllables; worry about the things you can control. All of those things. Those aren't just buzz words or slogans or catchphrases that coaches say because they're good to have in a building.

They're actually critical to winning football and developing a winning football team. A lot of the same things that were being preached over the last three years, well, my beliefs are the exact same as Coach Leach about what it is that goes into a winning football team.

We repeat a lot of the same things, and on certain walls

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

maybe some words are different or pictures change or whatever, but there is a lot that I have taken from Mike Leach and will continue to be an influence on our program moving forward.

Q. You and athletic director Zac Selmon are in an interesting situation. You're both younger, both got your jobs around the same time. What's it been like working with him these last few months both taking on new roles and tackling a goal at the same time?

ZACH ARNETT: I mean, obviously the simple answer has been very good. We have the privilege and luxury -- we happen to work for a university president who is about the most well-respected, well-regarded man in all of college athletics in Dr. Mark Keenum.

His leadership, along with that of our athletic director Zac Selmon, it is evident to anyone who sees it that we have the right people at the top of the organization guiding our athletic department.

It's been fun to work with him on a daily basis. He's with me here today actually, and it's going to be fun going forward.

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