

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday July 17, 2019

## Joe Moorhead

Mississippi State Bulldogs



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good afternoon. Joe Moorhead enters his second season as the head football coach of Mississippi State University following an inaugural season where he became only the second coach in Mississippi State history to win eight games in his inaugural season as head coach, and also an appearance in the Outback Bowl. That eight-game mark was the first time it happened since 1939.

Joe's a Pittsburgh native and has been following the Pirates this season. In fact, on Saturday he'll be at a Pittsburgh Pirates game celebrating the 40th anniversary of the 1979 World Series and just quoted the Pirates starting lineup from that 1979 season. So, he's done it, trust me. Don't put pressure on him to do it again up front.

He's a graduate, an alum of Pittsburgh Central Catholic High School. Played quarterback there, making him the second-most famous quarterback to come out of Central Catholic, first being Dan Marino.

Mississippi State University head football coach, Joe Moorhead.

JOE MOORHEAD: Marc Bulger may disagree with that second best quarterback out of Pittsburgh Central, so we'll have to check those rankings.

Certainly want to thank Commissioner Sankey for the tremendous leadership he provides for our conference. Thank you for everything you do there. Certainly honored and privileged to represent Mississippi State in the best conference in the country at this tremendous event. I want to thank you the assembled media. We certainly appreciate the hard work and effort put forth to provide coverage and content for Mississippi State, for the SEC, and for the incredibly passionate fan bases of our Bulldogs and for our conference as well.

Commissioner Sankey mentioned Dan Marino and I did play quarterback at the same high school, in Pittsburgh Central Catholic, and believe it or not I did play quarterback. And part of the reason for the diet and losing some weight, I was tired of all the recruits on the trail asking me if I played right or left tackle rather than how many yards I passed for in college. So that was

part of it.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, certainly I idolized Dan Marino. Fancied myself a strong-armed pocket passer. Room covered with posters. I wore No. 13 from the fifth grade when I started playing ball in St. Bartholomew Elementary all of the way up to my junior year in high school. Central Catholic decided my senior year in high school is when they wanted to retire Dan's jersey. I wasn't even a starter at that point. So they brought him back. They had a ceremony. They retired the jersey. I still wore 13 for the JV team that year, but my senior year I had to switch to No. 12. That went pretty well. Got an opportunity to go to Fordham and played quarterback there. Wore No. 12 the whole time there. And then for my one glorious season with the Munich Cowboys at European Federation of American Football I switched back to finish my career with No. 13.

Obviously I remember Dan's career at Pitt, kind of highlighted by that Sugar Bowl win over Georgia, the fourth-down touchdown pass to John Brown and his record-setting career with the Dolphins and ended in the Hall of Fame.

I kind of figured I would be able to use this opportunity -- since Dan, he forced me out of my number in my senior year in high school, and I am one of his biggest fans. When my Fordham staff kind of strong-armed me to start Twitter a bunch of years ago, you obviously start following recruits and then you follow accounts you find humorous, your childhood idols. I actually got Dwight Gooden to follow me back recently. I figured that the least Dan could do was hit me with a follow back. And I've tried the follow/unfollow trick about 50 times to no avail. He played for Jackie, and I've tried to use that card. Terrell Buckley was a teammate of his on the Dolphins and nothing. So if Dan's out there and he's an SEC fan, if he's listening, I sure would appreciate a follow back, @BallCoachJoeMo. If I do get that follow back, I would like to invite you to a game in Starkville. And as Pittsburgh people will know, I'll have a cold case of Iron City on ice waiting for him. So there's that.

Certainly with the season about 50 days away, it's the time of year for reflection and projection, to look a bit in the rearview mirror to see what's behind us and also

through the front windshield to see most importantly what's in front of us. And certainly for the 2018 season, I'm very proud of what we accomplished. I think we set a solid foundation for this fall and also one for our program as well.

As Commissioner Sankey mentioned, eight regular season wins tied for the most for any coach in school history. Beat two top 25 teams at home and then No. 6, Auburn, and

No. 19, Texas A&M, finished college football playoff ranking 18th, which is the second highest in the school history. Final poll ranking of 25. Qualified for a New Year's Day bowl. Won a game very important to our players and to our state and to our university. Won the Egg Bowl 35-33, 6 at 1 at home. Undefeated nonconference record. Five draft picks, three in the first round. And had high semester GPA for the fall and for the spring in program history and put 27 guys on the SEC academic honor roll. That was something we were very proud of in our first season here at Mississippi State.

Followed that up with the recruiting standpoint, we finished with another top 25 class. I think that's a tribute to our staff and plan and belief in our program, our parents, players and coaches and our footprint in our state and nationally.

I think from a recruiting standpoint, I think we need to be unique in our approach. I think Mississippi State lacks a little bit of the immediate and long-term championship tradition that some of the teams in our conference do and some of the bells and whistles from a facility standpoint.

We've gotten tremendous support from Dr. Keenum and Mr. Cohen and our administration. We have new locker rooms in our stadium, in our facility. We have new recruiting lounge, new player meeting rooms, and we're doing everything we can to upgrade those things because I know that's important to kids and our families and to our players. If you have an opportunity to see Dudy Noble Field, the new baseball stadium, they refer to it as Carnegie Hall of baseball stadiums. It shows Mississippi State is willing to make that commitment to have the best things possible to give us a chance to be successful on the field and recruiting.

I think with recruiting, we have to do a great job identifying, evaluating and developing relationships. I think when you look at past year's class, I think we had a bunch of in-state highly recruited prospects. Those are players who wanted to stay home that could have gone really anywhere in the country, Jarrion Jones, Nathan Pickering, De'Monte Russell, Brandon Cunningham. I think we did a great job of our footprint

and nationally on players who were highly ranked or highly recruited. Garrett Shrader, our quarterback, could have gone just about anywhere. Martin Emerson, as a guy out of Florida, was a guy who had a lot of choices, and he decided to come to Mississippi State.

Most importantly, when you look at the starters and look at the rankings and the number of offers, I think Mississippi State is in a unique position where we're located geographically that there are guys that fly under the radars a little bit. I think when you look at two guys in our class, J.P. Purvis from Pelahatchie who played exclusively quarterback in high school, and we are going to play him at safety. And Lee Witherspoon from right here in Alabama didn't play tailback until his senior year in high school. Won 19 yards per carry and state record for 60 touchdowns. Those are guys we have to continue to identify and develop. I think we are going to have to continue to bring in players who are talented, who are hungry, who it is important to them to get a degree, and they're passionate about Mississippi State and our vision and what we have to offer.

Moving forward in this season, we lost a lot of personality and production on both sides of the ball that we need to replace. Offensively, we're going to have a great quarterback battle between K.T. and Tommy Stevens. We have great youth at that position, a lot of talent. Kylin Hill I think at running back is posed for a breakout season. He was in the several hundred yard range last year, missed a few games for injury, but I think he is ready to go and have a great season. Backed up on Nick Gibson there, Osirus Mitchell and Stephen Guidry, both who had 400 yards. A lot of production at the slot comes back. We have augmented that with Isaiah Zuber, a graduate transfer from Kansas State, as well as JaVonta Payton. And Farrod Green, the tight end is our leader in the clubhouse. I believe tight end may be as deep as any position we have. I have a bunch of talent and youth there as well. Darryl Williams spearheads our offensive line. I think with any great team, the mentality of championship-level team is dictated by the offensive and defensive line. I feel very good about our depth and our talent on that line.

On the defensive side of the ball, certainly the performance of that side of the ball, being the number one defense in the SEC in the country last year led by Bob Shoop, he did an unbelievable job with his staff. I think the defensive line is where we have to find the most answers the quickest. We lost all four starters, Montez and Gary, both defensive ends in the draft as well as Jeffery Simmons inside, and Braxton Hoyett signed a contract as well. And we also lost our three primary interior guys to graduation as well.

I think the defensive end position between Marquiss Spencer, Kobe, Fletcher, and Chauncey Rivers, we have some talent there. Those guys played snaps last year. On the inside, Kendell Jones, Lee Autry, Fabien Lovett, Jaden Crumedy, Devon Robinson, we have guys that are talented. We just need a bunch of reps for them. I think our linebacking core is as talented as anyone in the conference in the country read by lead by Erroll, one of our captains, Willie Gay, Leo Lewis, and Tim Washington and certainly have some young guys there.

Defensive back, we return two of the five, Brian Cole, Cam Dantzler. Have to replace both safeties in Bobby, Jamal Peters, but I think we have some talent there. We're certainly excited there. At the kicking position, Jace Christmann, Jordan Lawless. Punter, Tucker Day and Corliss Waitman in the battle, and certainly the long snaps and returning jobs are the ones that are up for grabs.

I'm excited for a mix of returning players and influx of young talent, and I think any time you have that number of positions open, it breeds competition and forces everyone to improve and get better. I think that's where we are heading into the season.

I think our offseason program has done phenomenally led by Corey Bichey and his staff. We lost Anthony Piroli to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. We promoted Corey, and he's done a phenomenal job. A message to our guys this summer was they're not doing anything unique. I think you look at every team in the SEC and every team in the country, they're lifting, they are running, throwing seven on seven and doing drills on their own. It's not about what we're doing, but how are we doing it. Are we focusing on little things, do we have extra. Are we not making excuses and investing our time rather than spending it.

And the thing I like most from our team from the offseason program, you hear a lot of coaches use the word culture. That's very important lead by Darryl Williams, Erroll Thompson, both selected captain by our team at the end of spring, and Farrod Green is with us as well. I think the leadership, the accountability and most important, the chemistry are headed in the right direction right now in year two. I think it's not as much about the leadership aspect of it as the receptiveness to the leadership where if a guy is getting on someone for not touching a line or being on time or effort, it is not worry about you, I got this. It's guys understanding this, and accepting the leadership as important as ability to lead.

Heading into this season, obviously our program goals, there's another change for us. Number one, first and foremost, is to graduate 100 percent of our Mississippi

State players with a meaningful degree and prepare them with the tools to become productive and responsible citizens.

Every player wants to go to the NFL, but not every player is going to have opportunity. The average career length in the NFL is roughly 3.5 years because you get your pension at four. We want to make sure our guys leave Starkville, they have that piece of paper in a frame that they hang up on the wall that no one can take from them. The game of football can be taken, but education can't. We want to make sure we understand that success on the field and success in the classroom, they are not mutually exclusive. They can and will co-exist here.

Our football goals, as always, we want to have a winning nonconference record. We want to have a winning conference record. You do those things, and that puts you in position to be in the hunt for the SEC Championship. We want to retain the Egg Bowl. Our floor for success is bowl eligibility. Our ceiling for success is winning the SEC and compete for the national championship.

Lastly, we want to make sure we impact Starkville and Mississippi State University and the state of Mississippi in a positive manner. Our kids are in a fortunate position as am I to be in charge of a SEC program, that we want them to have a great understanding, great perspective, you have a bad practice, a bad day, you fail a test kind of pales in comparison to some of the things people in our state are going through. We took a bunch of guys up to Batson's Children's Hospital in Jackson yesterday and spent time with them. I think it's critically important for our guys as much as they receive, we do a great job giving back.

One last mention, I'm excited for the season. I am very cautiously optimistic because of the holes we have to fill and fired up about the talent we have. We are going to have to take it a one-at-a-time mentality once fall camp starts, one rep, one drill, one period, one day, one practice and keep stacking those on top of each other. We get to the season and it's going to be back to the old Mississippi State, blue-collar-chip-on-the-shoulder mentality that we really have to earn everything we get this season. So, thank you all for your attention. Really appreciate your time and any questions.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about both your captains, Darryl Williams from Bessemer, Alabama, and Erroll Thompson from Florence. Talk about their development as players and what they could mean to your team this year on both sides of the ball.**

JOE MOORHEAD: They both did a phenomenal job last year with Darryl being able to play all the interior

positions, and now moving him over to center shows his flexibility. Erroll, great eyes, one of the top, go to PFF and some of those other things, great eyes, one of the top linebackers in the country.

To me the ability for a player to be successful is not as much about the tangible traits and production as it the intangibles. And for those two guys to be elected captain by their peers after spring ball, it says a lot about what they bring to the table, you know, outside of what happens between the white lines. And I think when you combine their intangible traits with their tangible traits, they are going to be two special players this year and have an opportunity to play to the next level as well.

**Q. Joe, what made Bob Shoop the right fit to run your defense last year, and how different is his challenge this season?**

JOE MOORHEAD: I think Bob, you look back at his track record as a coordinator at every level he's been, that it's been a top 15, top 10 statistically in scoring defense, in yardage. And I know there was some kind of scuttlebutt about it, question marks of what happened at Tennessee. But, you know, Bob grew up in the town next to me. I have known him for a very long time. To me one season or two never defines a coach's ability or what he's done over an extended period of time.

But Bob is incredibly intelligent. He takes input from his guys. In his only kind of unique Ivy League way, he does a great job communicating with the kids, putting the plan together, and he dials it up pretty well on game day.

So obviously very excited about what Bob did. And I think his challenge will just be our ability to reload rather than rebuild because we lost so many critical pieces, but I'm confident in he and his staff to put us in position entering the season.

**Q. What does Tommy Stevens bring to the table for you guys, and he could be one of five transfer -- graduate transfer quarterbacks, I guess, to start in the SEC. What do you think about that trend and have met many transfer quarterbacks in the league?**

JOE MOORHEAD: Yeah. Obviously I've been exposed to Tommy and coached him for two years at Penn State. I think he or any quarterback that we coach or bring into our system, we want the quarterback to be able to beat you with his brain, his arm and his legs.

And I think Tommy is a kid with a lot of physical tools. Strong arm. He can really run. He's accustomed to the system so he's going to understand it for the most

part coming in. And, you know, I think he brings a lot of talent to the position, and I think the competition is going to be an exciting one. It's going to make the position better, it's going to make our offense better, and it's going to make our team better.

The portal part? Yeah, I think that position is a little bit unique that for the most part only one can play. And recruiting in this conference and this level, it's not like receiver where you play three at a time or O-line where you play five or where you rotate carries between a tailback. There's one guy that plays, and they want to play. So certainly in the best interest of the student-athlete, changes were made and decisions were made to give them the opportunity to move on if they chose to do so. So, that's just part of the landscape of college football right now.

**Q. You brought up a point about the defense and how physical you got -- how physical you guys are, even with losing some pieces to the next level. Typically, when you guys play Alabama, it's a tough game, it's a physical game, it's a hard-nose game; but on the offensive side, what do you want to see from your guys in matching that physicality that Alabama has on offense?**

JOE MOORHEAD: Yeah. As you mentioned, I think probably -- I have the utmost respect for Coach Saban and his staff and his team. They've done it the best for the longest amount of time. I think every time they come to Starkville or we go to Tuscaloosa, it's going to be a battle and it's going to be a physical football game. Obviously our defense did a great job against Alabama throughout the season.

I think our biggest challenge for the offense this year will be our ability to balance out the run and the pass game. I think we were second in the SEC in rushing last year, averaged roughly 225 a game, and were able to run it successfully on most teams. But for us to be the type of offense we want to be and the team that we want to be to compete for a championship, we need to improve our efficiency and our explosiveness in the pass game.

When you look at the teams who have won the championships, whether it be the SEC or national championship, they've run the ball successfully, but they've also been able to throw the thing down the field to create explosive plays.

To answer your question, offensively, we want to continue to do what we're doing in the run game and improve upon that, but we've got to be way better throwing the ball and not be one dimensional.

**Q. Joe, last year at this time, you were getting**



**questions about Southern food and your introduction to the South and the SEC. Now that you've been here for a full year, how much more comfortable are you in leading an SEC team, and how much do you think comfort level is important in having success on the field?**

JOE MOORHEAD: That's a good question. I think, like anything, in a year's worth of time, you learn things. And you got to be really introspective, I think, as a leader and you got to look in the mirror, not out the window.

And people ask what was the thing you've learned the most, and probably outside of kind of learning about the team or Xs or Os or specific things that relate to game performance, you know, I look back at a year's time and really kind of when I took the job is, you know -- I am not saying I'm changing what our goals are, but the approach of coming off the plane gun's blazing, talking about ring sizes and Heisman Trophies -- and the expectation level of the team entering the season, prior to me even getting there, and I think what I did with that, without knowing kind of the history and the context of how difficult it is to win in this league, and specifically Mississippi State where there's two ten-win seasons in school history and two championship appearances, one in '98 and one before World War II, in '41, and I think what I may have done is elevated the expectation level to a point where nothing that we did short of a championship was going to make people happy.

And I wouldn't have changed the goals, but I probably would have kept it a little bit more in house. I think that was on me, and then people -- then it became, well, you're underachieving, you're not doing this, you're not doing that. Where we stood here last year and we were picked to finish third in the conference, and we finished fourth, and if Texas A&M hadn't beat LSU, we would have been third. We were picked to finish 18th in the AP Poll, and our College Football Playoff ranking was 16, and ESPN puts out the over/under stuff, and it was 8 1/2 and we had 8.

So I think me doing some of those things early on may not have been fair to the guys because anything we did may not have been good enough. That's one thing that I learned, that I probably should have researched a little more into our team who we were and what we're capable of doing from a historical context before I started talking about ring sizes and other things like that.

**Q. What are the biggest keys in program building for year two for you?**

JOE MOORHEAD: Could you repeat that?

**Q. What are the biggest keys in building your program in year two. You talked a little about it there. But maybe just more from the program sense of it?**

JOE MOORHEAD: Yeah. I think, you know, from an overall perspective, it's not about the whats but the hows and the whys. And all coaches use the term "culture" and all of those things, and I do, I want it for our fan base. I want them to be hungry for a championship, and I want them to be a little bit upset when we don't get it.

And the challenge of taking over a program where Coach Mullen had done an excellent job building it to a certain level, was taking the next step. Year two of all the places I've been, you've seen us take that next step and understanding it's as much about the little things, the attention to detail, the accountability on and off the field as much as it is the Xs and Os and how we perform.

I think in year two you want to see an increase in the understanding of the scheme. You want the players to have a better understanding and execution of it, but you also want to see your culture take over a little more and the kids understand what the coaches expect from them and in turn what they can expect from us.

**Q. Joe, I was -- I know football players win on the football field. But I was curious as to how you feel your home field stacks up as opposed to where you were at Penn State when you come to Mississippi State.**

JOE MOORHEAD: You said the atmosphere, how do they compare?

**Q. Yes, uh-huh. The home field.**

JOE MOORHEAD: I think having the opportunity to travel to a bunch of the places in the SEC and play football games there, I think Penn State probably provides a little bit of a unique set of circumstances where -- it feels like it's the most SEC environment that I've been at that's not in the SEC. You know, you have 110,000 fans.

If you're a bucket list person, the Whiteout Game there at night is unlike most things that I've been. You come to Davis Wade with the cowbells and it's deafening and it's a unique environment. Playing a night game at LSU was incredibly challenging, Alabama and so on down the line. I think Penn State provides that type of atmosphere and experience and fits right into anything we've done in the SEC.

**Q. Two questions. You open up the season inside the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. How unique of an experience do you think that's going to be for you**

**and your program? And the second part, do you anticipate the Ragin' Cajuns being a more improved team than the one that you faced last year when you beat them 56-10?**

JOE MOORHEAD: Yeah, I was there's for Steelers/Saints when they knocked us out of the playoffs, and I was there for the Stones two nights ago. So I was kind of checking it out and seeing, but they had it set up a little differently. That guy can put on a show. 77 years old, two and a half hours.

But back to point, I think, like us, it will be year two in the program. I think the coach is going to have his guys, better understanding, getting guys that he's recruited in. And certainly at the level they performed last year in game one in a unique environment -- every game at it point is challenging. We'll anticipate a great game.

**Q. Can you talk about the dynamic of shared responsibility between quarterbacks and offensive linemen in terms of getting you in the proper pass protections, and are there times where quarterbacks are restricted in sliding protections and how that dynamic works typically for you?**

JOE MOORHEAD: Awesome, very specific question. I like it. We do not single in the protection to our quarterback when it's a dropback pass. So, what I learned from Walt Harris is when you do that, based on what the scheme or the play call is and what the formation is, they need to know how to set the protection.

So our quarterback has the license that, you know, he can turn the protection to where the pressure is, and he can make the change, and that communication goes through the offensive line. So certainly the quarterback in the O-line, particularly the center, have to be in concert with each other just in terms of identification of who the lines are responsible for, who the backs are responsible for; and if the protection does change based on where the pressure is coming, how maybe a big-on-big protection goes to a slide or vice versa. That's got to be -- we want our guys to overcommunicate and underassume, and certainly putting that onus on the quarterback to make a good protection call better is something that we count on the quarterback to do.

**Q. A fellow Pirates fan. I have good news. Top of the fifth inning at Busch Stadium, 4-2 Bucs.**

JOE MOORHEAD: #letsgobucs.

**Q. Chris Archer contributing with an RBI single in the 4th.**

JOE MOORHEAD: Josh Bell.

**Q. There you go. I want to get back to the schedule question again. Like our friend from Lafayette said, how that game came about to be played at the Superdome against the Ragin' Cajuns. That's a tricky game. They have all of these running backs and they run the football. You've got some rebuilding to do on your defense. Talk about the challenge of that game in the opener against the Cajuns.**

JOE MOORHEAD: I think, like anything, any opener where there's a change in coordinator on either side of the ball and the tape is limited, just not necessarily sure what you're going to see, whether it be from a new coach or a change of, like us, I'm sure they're doing offseason studies and kind of tweaking what they do on both sides of the ball.

Losing the personality and production that we did at all of our -- I find opening games to be -- every game's challenging, but opening games tend to be uniquely challenging just because of the uncertainty. We have 29 opportunities in fall camp, and we'll get into game prep for Lafayette.

Something we do prior to camp starting is spend the whole day on our first three opponents. Next Tuesday or Wednesday -- or, no, the following Tuesday or Wednesday we'll spend a day on Lafayette and try to get a better feel of it from there.

**Q. How has the NCAA transfer portal affected how you approach building talent on your roster, just adding to it and retaining it also?**

JOE MOORHEAD: I don't think it's had necessarily much of an effect in either instance. You know, probably like every team, we have a guy in our recruiting staff who monitors it to see who is available. And based on our positional need, we consider any opportunity to make our team better.

And we had a graduate transfer punter who we signed out of South Alabama, a graduate transfer receiver out of Kansas State and obviously Tommy. And we think all three of those opportunities allowed our team to become better. So, I think it's going to increase talent, going to increase the competition level.

It just really -- it affects your numbers in recruiting at the tail end of it just because it's a one-year guy and you know you're going to get your scholarship back in that same recruiting class.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Moorhead, thank you for your time today.

JOE MOORHEAD: Thank you, guys. Hail State! God bless you.

