

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Monday July 15, 2019

## Greg Sankey SEC Commissioner



GREG SANKEY: Good morning. We are now

40 days away from the wonderful world of SEC football returning, and I know you're looking forward to it and I'm looking forward to that day in 40 days.

As always, it's good to be with you. We want this to be a productive week. And our staff is here, and they all have name badges on. You can tell who they are to try to assist you in any way needed.

That excludes me as I try to answer your questions, however. Sometimes I'm not always helpful. In addition to the opportunities you have this week to visit with our head football coaches, we have 42 student-athletes, nine of whom are quarterbacks. That includes starting quarterback from the Orange Bowl and College Football National Championship Game last year, the starting quarterback from the Peach Bowl, the Sugar Bowl, and Fiesta Bowl along with 33 of their colleagues.

We want to thank our coaches from our athletic programs for making sure we have with you today the young men with whom you want to speak and visit through the week. I know there's interest in where we conduct media days next year. So I'm pleased to announce that will be in Las Vegas. Ah, I'm kidding. That's where our new bowl game is. I just wanted to make sure people are paying attention. I think some of you may need massages after I watched your neck snaps up.

We are happy to have the Las Vegas Bowl in our inventory beginning in 2020. Next year after the success of Atlanta last year, we will return to Atlanta for football media days. We will use the Chick-fil-A College Football Hall of Fame once again as our base.

Media days will stay on the move in 2021. And we will go to the Music City and enjoy the new Grand Hyatt Nashville for media days. We appreciate the hospitality here in Hoover and at the Wynfrey this week, and we look forward to the new opportunities in the future.

The season ahead includes a celebration of college football's 150th anniversary. The SEC willing be a part of that like everyone else as our football student-

athletes display commemorative patches upon their uniforms. The league will also, through its athletics, communications directors, celebrate 150 of the finest moments of SEC football. Those will not be selected by the Commissioner. So, if someone gets angry about whether or not a moment is part of their 150th best, it won't be me.

We will be, however, releasing those moments and announcing them through social media and over the SEC Network throughout the season. We made history back in 2014, as Disney's CEO, Bob Iger, said we launched the most successful channel in the history of cable television. So Joe DiMaggio-like standard, one that we expect will stand the test of time.

On August 14th, the SEC Network will celebrate the hard-to-believe fifth anniversary already. That's a tribute to the passion of our fans, the commitment and hard work of the personnel on our university campuses, their support, student-athletes that comprise our teams, and the hard work and dedication of the team at ESPN.

We look forward to continuing to innovate and serve sports fans uniquely through an authentic SEC experience, and we want to stand second to none among all of our peers.

On Tuesday, you're going to hear more about the SEC network, both our programming plans for 2019, and how we celebrate this fifth anniversary when Chris Turner, ESPN's vice president, for day-to-day operations for the network joins you in this room.

Tonight, there's a special program, something we call homecoming. It's our fourth episode hosted by Paul Finebaum. Tonight's feature at 7:00 eastern/6:00 central is on Titus O'Neil. If you're not familiar with Titus, that's his ring name in WWE. He was known as Thaddeus Bullard during his playing days at Florida.

All of the stories we've told on homecoming that Paul has been a part of helping us tell have been interesting stories. The story of Titus or Thaddeus is absolutely remarkable, and I encourage people to tune in at 7:00 tonight. As part of the effort to stand out from our peers, we've been working for over two years with the folks from ESPN Films, the SEC storied program. And

this year, on the SEC Network, we will debut Saturdays in the South, a history of SEC football.

For 90 minutes every Tuesday, beginning at 9:00 eastern, this eight-part series will first take us back to the late 1800s. You will hear stories of greased railroad tracks, an era before the SEC chant was ever heard, and weave tales through the decades of the modern area of success experienced now by the Southeastern Conference.

Tomorrow, in this room, we will have three of the SEC's legendary figures here to visit with you. Archie Manning, Herschel Walker and Steve Spurrier. Archie, Steve and Herschel will join us later Tuesday evening along with many of you downtown in the Lyric Theater for a special premiere of portions of Saturdays in the South.

This will become, I am certain, because it's a high quality production, appointment viewing every week on Tuesday evenings, not only for SEC football fans, but for college football fans.

We leave now history behind because we're mindful of the changes happening around college athletics every day. Those changes often affect the Southeastern Conference given our position, and legalized sports gambling and its accessibility is one of those changes confronting us all.

The SEC presidents and chancellors have expressed strong support for NCAA national office efforts to seek federal legislation that will regulate sports gambling. Ideally, there would be uniformed practices applicable across states throughout the country governing gambling on college sports, particularly eliminating specific in-game betting and proposition bets on college sports.

As I stated last year, it may be ideal for us not to experience any expansion in sports gambling. What is needed now is for our state and federal legislative leaders to enact policies, oversight and to fund enforcement of those policies and laws to make sure we are protecting the integrity of our games and supporting properly our student-athletes and the students on our campus.

With those observations in mind, let me just identify emerging reality between sports gambling and mental health. A reward for participating in college sports is to challenge one's self on campus athletically and academically and to deal with the pressures present in the competitive environment.

We're seeing trends in the mental health area that should cause us all to pause before these ideas around

specific event betting within college sports are allowed to take place. And I'm talking about, for example, whether a field goal is made or missed, whether a three-point try is successful. Is a pitched ball a strike or a ball. That pause should happen before any of these types of activities take place because if you were part of a student-athlete advisory committee meeting in the SEC ten years ago, you would have commonly discussed campus parking issues, and answering the question, why do I have to return my text books at the end of the semester.

Now, at every meeting, our student-athletes themselves ask to discuss issues around mental health. They share their stories, the stories of their colleagues, both those on their team, those within the conference, and those outside the conference.

The perspectives on mental health represent not a ripple of change, but a wave of new reality, which faces all of us in intercollegiate athletics and higher education. NBA commissioner, Adam Silver, identified it in an even higher competitive level when he spoke at MIT's Sloan Analytics Conference this spring. He observed that in sports we're seeing something that's really part of a larger societal issue.

His quote was this, I don't think it's unique to these players. I don't think it's something that is just going on around superstar athletes. I think it's a generational issue, end of quote.

San Diego State University psychology professor, Jean Twenge, is one of the world's leading experts on generational differences in American youth said this, quote, it's not an exaggeration to describe iGen or Generation Z as being on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades. That's the end of her quote.

Those remarks are sobering, not just for student-athletes, but for young people as they go from adolescents to adulthood. In January, five autonomy conferences adopted new minimum requirements for a provision of mental health counseling for student-athletes.

I'm pleased to say for the south eastern conference, we meet or exceed those requirements. But at the end of June this year, we asked our student-athletes for leadership forum. Student athletes from every one of our sports, we asked them for their input on campus mental wellness support, what is working, what programs overall are offered and what ideas they have on how the southeast conference office can better support them and their teammates.

Moving forward, just as we support academic counselors through collaboration, through

communication, and through sharing recommendations, the same with our sports medicine directors, our mental health counselors will be brought in as part of the conversation within the conference to determine how best moving forward we support the student-athletes of the Southeastern Conference.

Student-athlete leadership groups as you can imagine also engage in dialogue about issues related to name, image and likeness. But more specifically, compensation issues, and the financial support provided to student-athletes. They noticed, in May when the NCAA announced a working group to look at federal and state legislative initiatives happening around this NIL concept.

If you've studied any of these, you know the NCAA's time line is quick for an issue that's been percolating for years. We operate in a world that changes frequently. In fact, probably all of us have observed the world is changing more frequently now than ever before, but the reality is that change is a constant.

What's also a constant is the need to identify informed relevant principles to guide decision-making. As is everyone in intercollegiate athletics, we're interested in contributing to, and hearing from the NCAA's working group, to monitor the governmental activity at the state and federal level, and to properly represent our position in existing litigation.

As relates to change and attention, the sport officiating environment may be at the top of that list. We know there's an ongoing need for self-examination. And so last September, in the SEC office, we began an intentional effort to look closely as how we best support our officiating programs, particularly in the sport of football.

I shared at our spring meetings, we had spent much of the spring working with Deloitte Consulting's advisory practice when they were engaged in conducting an external review of our football officiating program.

It's not triggered by a game or a play or a series of issues. What I told our coaches in February, is just like them, I never want us to be complacent. I'm interested continually in how we improve. So, we asked Deloitte, as part of their external review, to conduct three specific tasks. One to conduct interview stakeholders. Stakeholder interviews, strike that, reverse it for those who are Willy Wonka fans, stakeholder interviews, conduct stakeholder interviews. They did so with the 14 head football coaches, our 14 athletics directors, a group of football officials and a group of former student-athletes and former SEC head football coaches.

The second thing we asked was for them to perform data analytics using game reports and our officiating performance reviews. And the third part was to compare our policies against those of other sporting entities, both domestic and international. Here's what we've learned so far: When our policies and procedures were compared with others, we compared favorably. You'll hear in a moment about some adjustments we learned may be helpful.

The feedback from those interviewed indicates SEC officials are perceived to better manage the game when compared to their peers. Third, our coaches, athletics directors and our officials express trust and confidential that the leadership of the SEC office is committed to supporting the highest quality officiating program.

Next, there's an open line of communication between the SEC's coordinator of football official, Steve Shaw, and our head coaches, something for which our head coaches are appreciative, and they respect Steve's responsiveness. Steve's approach, and his scheduling of -- schedule of providing weekly officiating evaluation feedback is helpful to and trusted by our head football coaches.

The collaborative replay process speeds up decision making and produces more correct outcomes in which our membership has expressed confidence. In fact, our replay process operates on each play ten seconds faster than the national average and produces more correct outcomes than the old in-stadium process.

We also learned something interesting, and that is both our head coaches and our officials want to improve the working relationship. As a result of the feedback, one of the first adjustments we made was to invite the group of referees, our white hats, to Destin to spend time in a facilitated conversation with the head football coaches to hear each side's view of challenges and the realities before, during and after football games.

We will do the same thing in a different format with those groups next spring. We are adding to our collaborative replay process a sideline monitor that will allow the on-field football officials to view the play and communicate with the in-stadium replay booth and the replay officials in the conferences video center. One of the benefits, in addition to the extra voice in the process will be the ability to better explain replay decisions from the official to our head coaches on the field.

In August, our officiating crews will travel across the conference for a two-day camp during preseason practice, involving each of our teams. We're obviously sending different officiating groups to different



campuses. During those two days, they'll participate in position meetings, engage in on-field practices, discuss rules and techniques with coaches and student-athletes to improve the understanding of football rules and officiating mechanics and foster that communication.

We've also added to the number of outside officiating evaluators. During the year, behind the scenes, 20,000 football plays every play of the season, are reviewed by film graders. There are 20. Some of whom are specialists at each position filled by an official. Those inform our grading system. Each of those evaluators have officiated at the highest level of college football and many have NFL officiating experience including playoff experience.

For years, the Southeastern Conference has maintained a clear policy governing potential conflicts of interest involving game officials. We are finalizing updates to this policy, which will be made available and communicated publicly in August. We also learned how much data is compiled around officiating. Because of that, we need to do more in the area of analysis, particularly, if you will, segmented analysis and not just in football officiating. And we'll be adding to our staff in using outside resources for what is commonly known as the analytics area.

In the area of communicating with and through the media, there is a new reality put upon us, and that is, we have officiating experts who now have been invited into the broadcast booth to share their opinions. During game broadcast, commentary will from time to time focus extensively on officiating decisions and communicate opinions, whether those opinions are right or wrong, and social media provides a platform for often ill-informed judgements around officiating.

Some of our new communication strategies have already been apparent. For example, we've invited members of the media, some of you in this room, to participate as officials in spring football games to understand the realities of officiating the game of football.

You'll hear from Steve Shaw twice this week. Tomorrow afternoon, he will talk about rules changes and points of emphasis. We've added a session on Wednesday where Steve will talk about our football officials are recruited, trained, evaluated, and the conference's accountability process for its officiating program, along with the you make the call, an accountability built in for each of you participating.

In conjunction with the SEC Network, we expect and are exploring strategies to inform viewers about officiating decisions and to educate throughout the day,

game day, through this platform. We're launching a Website today, [secsports.com/officiating](http://secsports.com/officiating). It's lightly populated at the moment.

But we will add educational videos, rules information and some of the policies that I just referenced that are being updated. We'll do that across the board for our sports. We're also exploring opportunities to be more engaged and active on social media. That does not mean we will spend all day Saturday tweeting about our people's officials, nor about ours, but we do recognize there are opportunities to engage and explain in ways we haven't previously explored.

I have great confidence in the SEC membership through our process as expressed great confidence in the leadership of Steve Shaw who is respected nationally, which is why Steve was named the NCAA's football rules secretary editor, but the reality is football is an incredibly dynamic game played at high rates of speed, which demands instant decision making.

We have honorable people filling the SEC's officiating roster, people who approach their work with the highest degree of integrity and the highest commitment to fully officiate each and every game. You have officials just like coaches and players are human, and our illusive goal of perfection will remain illusive. Yet, we're not going to become complacent, and we'll continue to seek this effort, this expectation of perfection through constant improvement.

Changes and change fill our days. There's a lot going on. I know you're ready to ask me questions. There are a few more points I want to share, a few more thoughts, some of them about the continuing success we achieve and enjoy in this great conference.

In 2018-19, the Southeastern Conference graduated 71,000 students from our campuses. That's an enormous impact on our region, the nation, and the world. We had 61 teams earn public recognition awards from the NCAA for their academic progress rate, and 57 teams have perfect APR scores of 1,000. That's continuing progress academically.

We celebrated George's Keturah Orgi, who was named NCAA's woman of the year. We lead the nation in football attendance for the 21st consecutive year. We had half of the most highly viewed televised football games and again had the most highly viewed conference championship game filling completely Mercedes-Benz stadium in Atlanta.

We won five national championships this past year and finished second in national championship competition on five other occasions. We also had over 2 million fans attend SEC baseball games, more than double

the next highest conference. Having SEC team finish like Vanderbilt did as national champions is a nice way to move into summer, summer being defined as the 18 days between game 3 of the college world series and today.

But it also reminds us of the opportunity to better support baseball, softball, and other sports in two key areas. As you know, the SEC submitted a legislative proposal to the NCAA to facilitate transition of the baseball volunteer coach role to one of a full-time coach. No one who opposed the SEC's proposed legislation observed that four coaches in baseball or softball, a head coach, two assistants and a volunteer, no one observed that that's too many coaches. In fact, if the number of coaches is correct, why do we maintain the structure like this?

It's time for change to this rule. And in another area, that of equivalency scholarships, our athletics director and senior rule administrators a rule that affects baseball, softball, track and field and any number of sports started a deep exploration as to the whys and the history and what new options may be available for us in the future in providing scholarships to student-athletes. We expect to provide information and a perspective to the NCAA during the next academic year.

Through all of that and all of the other activity that occurs through the year, I am confident still the best days of this conference, the Southeastern Conference are ahead. And as is our tradition, I'm going to ask Kevin to come to the stage, and he's going to manage our question-and-answer session.

**Q. Greg, can you tell me a little bit about where you are with Mizzou and Ole Miss AD's relative to the fighting in the Egg Bowl? Have you met, how many times and where?**

GREG SANKEY: Actually it wasn't defined as fighting. It was flagrant personal fouls just to be technical on the rule. And there is a difference. Yes, Ross, John and I had a really healthy conversation in early May. At an meeting of athletics directors, we took some time at the end of one day, both shared their perspectives both concerns and ideas for how we can move through football games without that type of negative activity.

We've obviously had a change in the athletics Director Ole Miss, Keith and I talked. I think we've had what I would describe as healthy conversations with the focus always being to move through these contests without those types of conflicts.

**Q. What is Steve Shaw's title and exactly what does he do?**

GREG SANKEY: Steve Shaw's title is coordinator of football officials. He's also the secretary editor of NCAA Football Rules. And you'll learn from Steve on Wednesday the activity in which he spends his time.

I will note that if you go to the website I just shared, I think we're posting what is our in-season weekly work structure and our out-of-the-season annual work structure. But he's incredibly active, as you can imagine. From this time until after bowl games, it's essentially a seven day a week job, and that is around education, development, instruction, oversight, communication, all aspects. And he has the responsibility for overseeing the entirety of our football officiating program and does it very well.

**Q. Have there been any more discussions on conference realignment?**

GREG SANKEY: Not unless I'm asked in a press conference. My answer was, there was a time where we said it was on the back burner. Earlier in June, I said it's up in the cupboard some place in the kitchen.

**Q. Commissioner, can you -- Florida, Miami opened up the season in Orlando. Can you just address the exposure that's going to be on that game as we begin the 150th year of college football?**

GREG SANKEY: Mike, you identified it was part of the effort to increase the focus around the 150th anniversary celebration. In the state of Florida, there will be great focus on those two great universities. I also have a rooting interest. I look forward to being in Florida.

You know, what's interesting, I think it's great, from the standpoint of the being able to feature, almost a stand-alone Saturday. I think there are a handful of other games, a great match-up, an in-state matchup like Florida and University of Miami.

We did go through this process and looking at starting earlier, we looked at a working group at the NCAA level, looked at that, and suggest on not starting out with what is known as week zero. I think it's unique, but I think we can attribute it to the game we're talking about and the opportunity to begin with a future matchup, the 150th anniversary, 150th season of college football.

**Q. Curious if you're providing any assistance to the Mizzou in their appeals process of NCAA sanctions? And, two, what kind of precedent do you think it sets if these sanctions are allowed to stand?**

GREG SANKEY: The first question, whenever any of our universities athletics programs are involved in an NCAA infraction process, we serve in an advisory role.

We are not investigators. That is now a 15-year approach by our conference. And William King, our associate commissioner, myself, even have been in communication throughout the infractions process and even the appeals preparation process with Missouri and its representatives, and that's common among any of our institutions when they have those problems.

I'm always reserved and comment about decisions, but the infractions appeals committee certainly has an opportunity it appears. And I'll leave it at that.

**Q. I was just curious your thoughts on targeting calls and players having to miss entire halves sometimes when it appears they're just trying to make good, clean hits? The Devin White call last year was obviously very controversial. Just your thoughts on where that's heading.**

GREG SANKEY: I hadn't heard about that controversy. When targeting was initiated as a rule, it was about protecting the players in the game. That's still the case. The reality of targeting, it is a well-intended rule that is difficult to officiate and controversial even when applied correctly, which we communicated on that play. It was in fact, by rule, applied correctly. That doesn't mean it's not controversial. I'm encouraged by the willingness to update the rule this year. Because we had one of these conflicts, it seemed, where the charge to the official on the field is, when in doubt, you put the flag down. The responsibility of a video review official is you have to have a clear evidence to overturn it, it wasn't something or that it was.

We have this gray area, and Steve will talk more about this tomorrow, you have this reality where it stood or it may have been confirmed even in some occasions. Now we go to video review in the coming season to say, all three parts under the new approach, the new rule, all three parts are targeting must be present for the rule to be applied. And that rule produced outcomes different from past years. It will still be controversial, but fundamentally, we have to understand, this is about protecting the participants in the game.

You asked about the penalty. If we could change behaviors without penalties, I'm sure we would. But we have different types of penalties for all kinds of behaviors, and that's a particularly dangerous play which merits that severe accountability.

Kevin tells me I'm done, right?

THE MODERATOR: Yes, sir.

GREG SANKEY: He has the clock. So there's a lot to communicate. There are probably still a lot of the

remaining questions. I will be around throughout the day today, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and look forward to the conversations and whatever questions you may have that I may be able to answer or more successfully deflect to someone else. Hope it's a great week and thank you for being with us.