

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Monday July 10, 2017

Bret Bielema

Arkansas

MODERATOR: Okay. Our first coach with the University of Arkansas, Bret Bielema, going into his fifth year career coaching record of 93 wins and 50 losses, has taken Arkansas to three consecutive bowl games, top 20 ranking each of the two seasons. Three days ago became a dad, most importantly.

I arrived home Saturday. I had texted congratulations to Bret. All of a sudden my phone said he was FaceTiming me. That's never happened. I never FaceTimed with a head football coach in the SEC. The decision should you answer or not; I decided to answer the phone.

He said, Why are you calling me? I said, Why are you calling me? I thought he was going to share this moment with his wife and his daughter with the conference commissioner. He said, I was just leaving Chipotle. I didn't mean to call you. It was a mistake.

Bret Bielema

COACH BIELEMA: That's an introduction like no other, all right, from the commissioner. It was kind of funny, because I had received a lot of different phone calls, texts, during the course of the day from some of my SEC brothers and some my head coaches and different people from the SEC office, and I did get the text from the commissioner. I said, wow, that's kind of nice. I didn't respond to everybody. Don't take it personally if I hadn't responded to you yet. I had about 500 messages.

I did text him. That's pretty cool, I was thinking to myself. My wife wanted a double veggie bowl from Chipotle -- trying to get an endorsement right there -- I was walking down, and I recognized the FaceTime, pulled it out and I see Greg Sankey's name. I said: This is pretty cool, the commissioner is FaceTiming me. That's pretty neat. He said, Why were you calling me? I said, I apologize, I must have butt-dialed you. That was a unique experience.

But excited to get here, excited to get the three guys here that are representing us today, are very, very special, unique to me, now going into my fifth year as head coach. These guys are guys that I recruited or decided to make a scholarship offer to. One was a



former walk-on, Frank Ragnow, is by far one of the most talented players I ever coached, on and off the field. Tremendous person. Excited to see him come back and return for his senior season.

Austin Allen, standing in front of you, going to have a SEC graduate patch -- pin on his lapel. We're very proud of. He graduated already. He started masters classes. Will get about two-thirds of the way through his masters before he is ever finished playing college football for us. Very, very talented player that's going into year two as our starter.

Kevin Richardson is a former walk-on. Again, just really embodies everything I believe in. He's a little undersized, underrecruited, underdeveloped coming out of high school. We presented an opportunity for him to walk on. Really in the first two weeks I knew we had something. Probably one of the most intelligent football IQ players I've ever been around. Plays all five DB positions. And is a great leader off the field.

Really blessed to have those guys with us. I feel really good about where we're at. Obviously, the end of last season was a unique situation for me. In fact, even when we went 3-9, which I've never had a losing season in my career, other than the first year at Arkansas, I felt at the end of the year we were getting better at moving in the right direction. And last year, our last two games were not highlights, especially the way they both ended.

I knew we had to take a new look at things. We took an internal look at us coaching-wise. What we were asking them to do, how we were asking them to do it. Took an even stronger look at our personnel, which made us drive the decision to change to a three-four, bottom line what we were going to do moving forward in January.

Our kids have been great. They've owned and embraced what we didn't do well at the end of the year. Focused on what we can do well. We're going to focus on winning games in the second half, not losing them, putting our best personnel on the field, no matter how that comes about, and then really trying to play and understand what it means to be at Arkansas and have that come through.

Have had a lot of former players, players that were before my time as well as players that have been there with us, that had success come in and talk to the guys about what it means to be a Razorback. That's a huge, huge thing.

Very excited where we're at and where we're going. We start camp a little bit earlier than everybody else because we play a Thursday night game in Little Rock, which should be a really neat experience for us, gives an extra day of preparation as we go into an opportunity to play TCU, another crossover game in our league. It should be a lot of fun.

We had a bye week before we go play A&M in Jerry's World at Cowboy Stadium, and the rest of our schedule lays out in a pretty good fashion. Last year we had two or three teams that had bye weeks before they play us. Nobody has a bye week before they play us this year. I think that's a nice stroke for us with regards to scheduling.

With that, I open up for questions.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. If you have a question, please raise your hand. Give your name and affiliation.

Q. Obviously you just had a bit of a tough end to last season. I was wondering whether the Missouri loss in particular ended it all for the guys in the offseason, and do you think games like that, obviously not the outcome you want, but does it help stoke that rivalry a little bit?

COACH BIELEMA: I think the Missouri rivalry, both Barry and I said, even going back to Coach Pinkel, anything we can do to flame that fire is a good thing for anybody. I even had conversations with our high school All-Star Game being a crossover game to play high school team from Missouri.

So that's kind of building on its own. It's hard to create a bunch of history overnight, but that's happening. If losing in the second half helped stoked that fire, God bless them. All for it. But we didn't do it for that reason obviously.

But I think that the way that not only Missouri game but the second half of Virginia Tech. We played really well in those first halves, we played extremely well, and didn't play well in the second half. To examine that, why it happened, we had to look internally first as coaches and carry it over a little bit with discussion with our players. I think they had great input and ideas as well.

And just kind of move forward from there. I'm excited.

I think the SEC and TV people, to honor us with that Friday afternoon spot with Missouri, I think it's pretty cool at 1:00 again, and hopefully continue to build that thing up.

Q. Coach, Jared Cornelius had big game last year for the Crimson Tide. I think he had five catches for 146 yards. Who are some guys after them that are really starting to grow in your mind?

COACH BIELEMA: Jared is a tremendously talented player. I think we did a postseason study that showed he was one of the most productive slot receivers in all of college football last year with the number of receptions he had and the number of snaps he took, a very, very confident young man. I think he'll have his best year going into the senior year.

At wide receiver, we signed two junior college players I feel really have adopted the game well that we brought in, have made a nice impact on us, as well as a couple younger players in our program -- Deon Stewart, La'Michael Pettway, some guys that I think can step up into a role that's pretty significant, and they've been working really hard. I know Ben Herbert in the weight room felt pretty good about what they're doing, and we're excited to get them out there.

Q. Coach, two years ago here you described a win over Texas as being borderline erotic. I was wondering, if you are able to beat A&M with the way things have gone in your series with them, how do you think you'd describe that?

COACH BIELEMA: I know you guys are all looking for quotes. I don't think I can go much further than that one. That was in a small-group session and that was before I had a child, so I'll just leave it at there.

But I think, A, the respect for the program, and I think A&M, what they did when they came into the league, the way Kevin was able to do certain things and obviously to play that game in Cowboys Stadium, it's actually the year Jerry Jones is going in the National Football League Hall of Fame, that is tremendously cool for us to be there with them in that fashion.

We've been so close, had a couple overtime games, things that we felt were going in the right way to have a change to get a victory over A&M. I think our first SEC game would be a step in the right direction.

One of the things we do in our program, whether it's right, wrong, or indifferent, we take it one game at a time. And I know we're in the kickoff meetings, we've got to talk about all of those games, but we have to worry about FAMU, we're going to get on TCU, and then A&M opportunity comes, and we'll be ready to play.

Q. Coach, last year you mentioned that you would be in favor of a rule that would allow undrafted underclassmen to come back to school. Wondering if you've been able to gather any momentum on that at all? As a part two to the question, how do you feel about this new agreement between the NFL and AFCA that started this past spring where some underclassmen get to go through drills with scouts so scouts can get some more information?

COACH BIELEMA: Again, I think it's a step in the right direction, positive. I give Commissioner Sankey a lot of credit. I think one of the things that's evolved since I've come in this league is just that each year there's a whole new set of issues that come up, and to be proactive to all of them is a step in the right direction.

I know as a group of coaches, we came to the commission last year and to the SEC and asked for us to change some legislation maybe or put forth some legislation that allows our guys to have a better showing for the NFL that's more real, you know. So, for instance, I allowed several guys that I felt were juniors that if they play the way they can be, they might be NFL eligible at the end of next year. I let them take heights, weights, measurements, academic profiles, some limited testing that allows them to get a better feel. Is he truly 6'2" or is he really six-one and a half or six-foot and a half.

I think it's a step in the right direction. It's a baby step. We had more discussions this past spring about what we could do to progressively make this better, if they do declare themselves and move back that declaration date. I know Nick and several other coaches in our league had proposed moving that date back a little bit to allow our guys to have a better understanding. I think there's times where we have a bowl game, maybe in January, and a kid is feeling pressure or hears from outside sources that he needs to make a decision sooner than later; that he makes a decision maybe before the bowl game takes place. Which tells me, A, he's not focused on priorities and, B, he's getting information from people that shouldn't be gathering and giving information, and that leads to an uninformed decision.

I have a case in point where I had a young man two years ago, left early in the draft, didn't get drafted, and he has the ability to possibly start in the NFL now in year two. For him to be an undrafted free agent, the money that he lost is never going to be regained. I knew he had that ability, but we're all in a hurry. We're in a microwave world. Everybody wants everything done in 20 seconds.

Sometimes it needs cooked for two hours. We got to figure that out and try to help our kids.

Q. How has the continuity on the offensive line improved throughout the spring, and how have you continued to build on that with Frank?

COACH BIELEMA: Great point. One of the things we do even in our spring game, we go ones against the world. I think in offensive line play, you have five guys that are attached in everything that they do. You see the lineman, they all go eat together. They go watch a movie together. They do everything together. We breed that in our program. For that left tackle, he's playing next to left guard, but he needs to understand what the center is yelling and doing, what the right guard is going to do on a kickoff play. There's a continuity that has to develop.

We have six guys that started SEC football games for us now on the offensive line. That's so much of an improvement from a year ago. Coach Anderson had another year with this group. We had a better addition. One of the major issues with us last year in protection and taking care of our quarterback and being able to run a football is we did not have enough of SEC quality offensive linemen in our program. I myself had not done what I needed to do to give us the numbers early on in those classes to get us there. Or some guys left a little early because they played well.

I feel really, really good about where that group is. I like the fact that they've taken some shots and they've survived, and I really think they're in a mode to really prove some things this fall.

Q. Bret, can you give us an update on the status of Montaric Brown and Melvin Johnson? I noticed Melvin wasn't in the media guide.

COACH BIELEMA: Absolutely. When we recruit players, we try to sign guys or put guys in a position that we feel that they're going to project to make it and qualify by the standards that the NCAA has. Melvin is a little bit unique in the fact that he was a guy that was at a junior college that we were trying to progress where he could end up in a projection to get here a little bit earlier than maybe he anticipated. So he will not make it by qualification standards, but he has a possibility of possibly joining us in December, depending on what he does and where he's at.

Buster is currently doing everything he has to do to get where he needs to be, to get here by the time fall camp. He is so close that if that doesn't happen here in the next couple weeks, I do foresee him being able to join us by the time school starts and at the worst maybe a January enrollment. But he'll be with us sooner than later.

Q. Kind of an unusual situation last season with Austin replacing his brother as a quarterback. Can you speak to how he handled that and the progress you've seen since then going into this spring?

COACH BIELEMA: Well, Austin's a smart dude, man. He's -- one of the things that I grabbed when B.A. became the starter and Austin was coming in, I said, hey, here's three things you can do. You can sit and watch your brother play, that's kind of cool. You can also learn through your brother's failures, which isn't going to be a lot of fun, but still watch it happen. And the third this thing is you can enjoy the success and understand why it happened.

I think he did that. He was there on every trial and tribulation. He survived it. He lived it. He also saw how he had to handle. To be a starting quarterback in the SEC is not an easy task on the field or off the field. You got a lot of things coming at you.

For him to survive and learn and to go through it a year ago gets me very excited. I think he's got a big chip on his shoulder. He's a guy that got some decoration and some awards. But because you play at Arkansas, maybe because he didn't have five stars coming in or four stars or however many stars he had and maybe he's not tremendously pushed by us, you know, on a sectionist factor, all this, all that. We at Arkansas try to prove what we are by numbers, by doing things we actually can put own down on paper and believe them. Not a lot of hype or a lot of hubba-hubba. It's just what have you done.

Austin has done some pretty good things. There's some things he has to do better. We had conversations about that. I wouldn't do anything but truly sit back and watch a guy that's going to be able to go to some heights that people never thought he would be able to do. In the end he'll probably be the one smiling.

Q. Bret, it's kind of a loaded question, but you guys always talk about your father figures to 100-plus kids every year. Now that you are an actual father, do you see that perspective affected at all, or how does it affect your perspective of anything being a dad?

COACH BIELEMA: I'm 48 hours into this baby. I can't say I'm well versed. I think it changes your perspective. I knew it always would. If my girl ends up playing football, we probably got a lot of problems. I'll encourage her to do whatever, but playing football ain't one of them.

But I do think -- someone asked a question earlier in the local media, that simply, you know, if someone's got

a high school-age son, is it worth them to allow them to play football, and I have a resounding yes. It -- I think there are definitely some times where maybe some people that aren't regulated the way they should be regulated on teaching, you know, the fundamentals of the game safely, we've got to make sure that's always -- in fact, I got to tell you, I've watched -- a couple times I've gone to a high school practice or had the opportunity to watch kids participate. I'm like, oh, that just doesn't look right. That's why I'm on the rules committee. The rules committee does not pay you a dime. It takes up a lot of my time and it eats up a week -- three or four days of my free time that I don't like but I do it because I want to change the game in the right way.

I think with the direction of the rules committee, Steve Shaw with the SEC and several other voices in the room, several years back we really went after the targeting rule. I know the commissioners all wanted to see our game become safer. You can ask every one of my players, and I bet you ask every player that comes here. We have changed the perspective of how kids play football. There's no doubt in my mind that there is still going to be some targeting, there's still going to be some launching and all of that. It's going to come with the game. And the fact that it's a game that happens so fast and played with a violent manner, that we have kids repeatedly on film that you see maybe five years ago would not make the same decision they're making now. They look to keep their eyes up. They look to not take blindside shots. They look to do things the way we're asking them to do because of the way we implemented rules.

So I think that's really cool. I think we constantly have to be on the forefront of protecting our players. I just lost a player that -- and there's no doubt in my mind he was an NFL player. He's a tremendous human being. I think as coaches we lose sight. We learn so much from our players. What I learned from Rawleigh Williams, you can't put in words. The things I witnessed when I was on the field just sitting with him and his family to the time when I went and saw him in the hospital to when I was reading a quote from him a day after he decided to leave the game where he said, you know, I always thought I had a great plan, but I got reminded once again that He has a better plan, referencing his faith. And it was a moment where I had to take a step back and realize where he was going and what he was talking about.

That is a moment as a head coach that is so precious, it's better than any game, anything you could ever learn, is when you know you truly have your players' safety at their heart, in your heart. That's a big deal.

Q. What's the timetable for Dre Greenlaw and for

camp? And part two, do you feel like you're going to be a better run defense this coming year, and why would that be?

COACH BIELEMA: Can I ask you a question? Where did you get that shirt? I like it, I like it.

I think, first, Dre Greenlaw, he looks great. He's come back. What we witnessed with Dre, he -- for two years, he hasn't been able to complete the season, once with a foot injury, and the year before as well. So, we constantly are monitoring and looking at what we can do for him to make sure. But he should be 100 percent go by fall camp.

And the other part was the three-four defense, right?

Q. Is that a run defense --

COACH BIELEMA: Last year -- two things that Coach Fry taught me a long time ago about running the football is if you want to win games, you got to run the football and stop the run. And last year offensively at times we weren't able to run the football effectively because of good defenses, and defense there were times where the game got away from us and stopping the run.

So there's two huge points of emphasis, they kind of fed off one another, so in the spring I could really emphasize on that and work off it. I think the three-four allows us. Just by pure math you got 11 guys on the field. Eight guys now will be on their two feet. You got eight guys on two feet being able to change and run. You naturally become more athletic with the three-four scheme with athletes on the field.

There will be a lot of same schemes, a lot of the same coverages, but coming at it with the ability to bring different pressure. More importantly, I think in today's world, too, the three-four aligns quicker and a little bit more simplistic to multiple offenses in a shorter amount of time, and that should help us.

Q. Brett, with so many quarterbacks back in the SEC this year, including yours, do you subscribe to the idea, or by the idea that this could be kind of the year of the quarterback in this conference?

COACH BIELEMA: You know, I'm a big believer of the year in the quarterback every year. Obviously we can only control who's back, who isn't back, who's new and who's not. All of my years in doing this, even before I became a coach, when I was a player, I think I always look back and I reflect on the teams that we had that were successful with teams that had great quarterbacks or quarterbacks that could lead, and then as a coach that's been reinforced a hundred times over.

I have so much respect in this league because really within all of our league, especially in the west, every scheme is unique and different. A&M is running a tempo spread offense but their offense is totally different than Auburn. Auburn is different than Mississippi State. Mississippi State is different than Ole Miss. Alabama is a little different now. We'll see where they go. LSU is a little bit pro style. Matt and I worked together. I saw a little bit of the his background. That's what is unique in the SEC West. The quarterback play is very, very important, but also very unique to each team. Some put emphasis on what that quarterback can do not only at the line of scrimmage but what he can do pre snap and how he handles pressure both mentally and physically.

It's always going to be a league of the quarterback. That's why those guys get a lot of money at the next level. At our level, they get more attention. Mine aren't getting any money, I don't know about anybody else's. That part is important, I think, but very important is that quarterback position is essential to success, and that's not going to change no matter who is there and who isn't there.

Q. Could you take us through how David Williams ended up at Arkansas and what you do you foresee as his role in that position?

COACH BIELEMA: Great question. Back when I was as Wisco, I had a 50-year transfer quarterback by the name of Russell Wilson come into my hands. He was in that position. Really I went after him because, A, he was a grad transfer, and B, we had extreme bad luck at quarterback. I had three -- really, my three most experienced quarterbacks were questionable to be in fall camp. Two of them ended up not playing that year. One of them was coming off his second -- or actually his third ACL repair. It was just an extreme situation of need, and Russell came up on the screen.

This one kind of developed in somewhat the same way. I actually had known David. He actually had come to visit me when I was at Wisconsin. When I made the transition to Arkansas, I was on -- recruiting or thinking about recruiting David, but he went in a different direction and committed to South Carolina in the SEC. I made note of that. I knew where he's at. And then, you know, come full circle with Rawleigh's situation, and then Juan Day is another player that probably would have been our fourth string tailback. I knew this was coming. He had been through two ACLs. So I lost two of my top four backs. I know we are going to be fine. Devwah Whaley is really good. I recruited two freshmen. I have had this a lot in my career where we lose a running back that's really good and everybody is always worried. We had another guy coming through.

I knew I wanted somebody with little bit more maturity

the room. That presented an opportunity to talk to David. I reached out to the SEC office, asked the questions I needed to ask to have him transfer in, got great information from the SEC office. Really then just started the appeal process, went through that.

I give a lot of credit to Will in South Carolina. They were very cooperative, didn't try to put a block on him or what not. I think this young man was recruited by Coach Spurrier, brought in, and things didn't go his way. He graduated on time and deserved an opportunity. Again, I give the Commissioner a lot of credit for forward thinking. There's some things coming into our game that never happened before. This rule, I'm sure people are going to like it or don't like it.

As coaches, I'm a little bit torn. I seem to be very successful. I actually -- on the flip side of it, I had a running back who was the third string running back for me. He was behind Montee Ball and James White. I knew he was a good player. He transferred to Pitt. He ended up starting for Pitt and had a chance to play in the NFL. I facilitated the whole thing. I knew he was going to get buried in our depth chart.

It's something -- I think we have to have a radar up about what's going on in our league. You don't want kids to have the ability to freely do these things or transfer without some restrictions, but again I give a lot of credit to the SEC in allowing this to happen because he truly is a kid that's done everything right. He never had issues academically or off the field. We had a prior relationship and to bring him into a position of need, and his grad degree is going to be something that he's interested in which was a little unique to us as well that allows him to get into some real estate and different things. It's really a marriage made in heaven and a great addition to campus.

Q. Coach, going back to the conversation about SEC quarterbacks, your team beat Mississippi State last year, but their quarterback Nick Fitzgerald accumulated a lot of yards both on the ground and in the air. I am curious, what made him so hard to limit, and there's a lot of talk about him becoming a better passer. I am curious what your thoughts of him as a passer as well?

COACH BIELEMA: Two things, first, a tremendously talented young man. He has size, speed and agility, throws the ball very well. Second thing, Dan Mullen, I think Dan Mullen has proven obviously what he can do at the quarterback position in his development and the system that he has looking at Dak Prescott and what he's able to do at the highest level, so I got a lot of respect and admiration for that.

We started to see firsthand how he kind of grew, and I

knew he got even better after we played him. So it is going to be a tremendous task in front of us, but seems to be a guy that has got all of the things that you need to have position, especially in that type of offense. Unfortunately for us, it will be another tough task for us.

MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.