

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Arkansas Razorbacks Coach Sam Pittman

Press Conference

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Sam Pittman is entering his second year but appearing at SEC Media Days for the first time. Sam is a graduate of Pittsburgh State, inducted into their Hall of Fame in 1998. I had an opportunity to spend time in Fayetteville in late February. Enjoyed a dinner with Sam and his wife, Hunter and Eric, Dave Van Horn and their spouses and. Just a nice time to visit.

I did learn about his affection for music. He has an actual jukebox in his office and plays the piano and guitar. He was a house roofer in his younger life. In the hallway, we were talking about his social media post of swimming with the pigs and almost swimming with the sharks, I guess quite literally.

With that, it's my privilege to introduce the head football coach for the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, Sam Pittman.

SAM PITTMAN: Good morning, everybody. I'm so honored to be here and be the head football coach of the University of Arkansas.

I want to thank Greg Sankey for all he did. I know a lot of coaches have, and every one of us, I guarantee, it wasn't because somebody started it, it's because they felt it and they meant it. I have colleagues that are head football coaches in other conferences, and in our weekly meetings, Commissioner Sankey, and sometimes biweekly meetings, we were so informed of everything that was going on in the realm of college football. I felt like we were certainly always ahead on our knowledge of what we had, and I want to thank you for that.

I also want to thank Hunter Yurachek, our athletic director. He's a rock star. I think, you ask any head coach at Arkansas and they'll say the same thing about him. He's my boss, obviously. I consider him and his wife, Jennifer, our friends, and I'm very thankful, especially because he hired me.



I brought Grant Morgan and Myron Cunningham with me today. If it was up to me, I'd have brought the whole damn team. We have an outstanding football team that works extremely hard, and they bought in to what we're selling. I'm so appreciative of all of them, including our coaching staff.

Grant Morgan has his Masters degree completed. He was a finalist for the Burlsworth Award. He also was first-team all SEC player, and he'll be one of our 11 super seniors coming back. I'm excited for you guys to talk to him because he's really, really a great young man.

Myron Cunningham is also a super senior that we have, our left tackle. Turned down several hundreds of thousands of dollars, in my opinion. We have a process, and it looked like he was going to go high in the middle rounds of the NFL Draft last year. He elected to come back. That tells you something about our coaching staff. Not myself, about our assistant coaching staff.

11 super seniors, 12 what I'm going to call regular seniors coming back, which would be a total of 23. I'm proud of our coaching staff. I think a lot of those guys coming back, as I've said before, it's because of our coaching staff. When I hired our coaches it was about communication, about the most powerful thing coming from your body is your mouth, and we wanted people who understood how to teach. We wanted people who understood how to talk to kids when they had times of need.

If you communicate with somebody on a regular basis, it's not so hard to say something that might come off as something they don't want to hear. If you wait a while, it's very difficult to have that conversation.

I learned a lot of things as a head coach and continuing to learn. One of them is, as soon as your bowl game is over, or what was supposed to be our bowl game last year, people start coming after your coaches if they're any good. I'm very proud that we were able to keep our three coordinators and our strength coach.

We were able to keep Barry Odom, who has been very valuable to me. Obviously, he was the head coach at

Missouri in this league. I bounce things off of him frequently. He and I -- believe it or not, he and I walk quite a bit. Now, he looks like he does and I look like I'm on his back, but I'm really walking. We go out there and we walk and we talk and we discuss the team. It's a great 45 minutes so I can learn a little bit more about being a head coach.

I love Kendall Briles. He's our offensive coordinator. I like his swagger. I like his confidence. I like his offense. There's so many decisions that you have to make as a quarterback, and you have to make them fast, and he's a great teacher of that. I'm awful happy we were able to keep him.

Scott Fountain came over with me from Georgia. He was actually my neighbor there, and by golly, he's my neighbor over there in Fayetteville now. But he elected to come with us from Georgia. I'll tell you about him, he's loyal. He's a good recruiter. He's a hard worker. Our special teams will get better. I think last year, especially through the COVID and not knowing exactly who you have each and every week and sometimes you lose a few players on Friday, Scott did an outstanding job.

Then the last coach I want to talk about is Jamil Walker, certainly slash Ed Ellis, but those two guys have done a great job with us. The weight room is for a lot of reasons. The biggest reason I know is for confidence. You're building strength. You're building weight. You're building getting them in shape, but you're also building that confidence, and that's something I felt like the University of Arkansas football team needed.

On our football schedule we are the defending National Champions of the hardest football schedule in college. I look towards next year, and I think we're going to three-peat in that area next year. However, we're the University of Arkansas, in the southwest conference west, exactly where we belong, and we're excited about those challenges.

We're going to renew some old southwest conference rivalries the first two weeks of the season in Donald W. Reynolds Stadium and Rice. Rice is very, very physical. Beat Marshall. I believe they were the first team to beat Marshall when Marshall was 7-0, ranked in the top 20 in the country. Very well-coached team. We're excited to renew that rivalry in our stadium.

The second week we play the University of Texas, and I'm not for sure if anybody's called a much better game than Coach Sarkisian did in the National Championship Game when he was offensive coordinator at Alabama. So we have high respect for both of those teams.

Obviously, the older folks in the state of Arkansas are revved up about the Texas game. I read something where at one point during that rivalry, if you had Arkansas tags and you cross into the Texas border on an away game, that you were not going to be sold any gas until you got back into Arkansas. Now, whether that's true or not I don't know, but if it is true, now that's a rivalry.

Crossover game this year is with Georgia. I was going to ask Commissioner Sankey if Georgia's moved over to the SEC West because we played them two years in a row. With Georgia, we're excited to go back there. Jamie and I have such outstanding friends there, certainly on the coaching staff.

And the reason I mention Georgia, one, it's our crossover game, but the other is because of the indebtedness that I feel towards Kirby Smart. Kirby was very good to me. I wouldn't be the head coach at University of Arkansas without him.

We're looking forward to going back there and seeing our friends and certainly trying to compete against one of the best football teams in America.

I'm proud of our state. I'm proud of our university, especially our players. If you all don't know much about Arkansas, it's a proud damn state. It's a beautiful state, hard working, loyal, honest people. Our university is graduating their students. 100 percent of our football team that were seniors that exhausted their eligibility graduated. 100 percent of all student-athletes in every sport last year who exhausted their senior eligibility graduated from the University of Arkansas. Eight of what I'm going to call our regular seniors have already graduated before the season begins.

We have the best city in the SEC voted by U.S. News and World Report for the sixth year in a row. 19 returning starter, 9 on offense. On offense we will return the entire offensive line, tight ends, running back position. Majority of our wideouts and certainly we lost our quarterback Feleipe Franks to free agency to the Atlanta Falcons.

On defense we have ten returning starters. The one that is not returning is John Marshall, who was a sixth-round draft pick to the New York Jets. We have our entire secondary coming back, our entire linebacker group, and all but John Marshall coming back on the D-line, along with we did enhance our football team, we believe, with some transfer portal kids there.

Our players are currently vaccinated at 89 percent. Our building is a little over 92 percent COVID vaccinated. Terry

Prentice we hired to build our flagship program in NIL. We are the first athletic department in the nation to hire a senior level administrator to specifically oversee student-athlete brand development. We feel he and his staff will be a great advantage for us.

Lastly, I want to tell you we love this football team. They believe in being blue collar, hard working, tough, physical group of men. We'll be better. I don't know what that means in wins and losses, but excited to get started and get back into Don W. Reynolds Stadium, full of fans calling the Hogs.

I'll take your questions.

Q. You got all these super seniors and regular seniors -- I think 23 was the number.

SAM PITTMAN: 23.

Q. Does that equate to a big jump? What has to happen to make a jump in this league?

SAM PITTMAN: I wish I knew that. We'd jump all over the place. Here's what I do know: It will be hard work. The weight room, the process of the program, the belief in the program. I mean, you can't beat anybody if you don't start out thinking you're going to or believing you're going to. I think that has changed over the last year.

But I think it's just building on what we have done and getting better and getting a few additions to help our football team. We've got enough players on our team to have a good football team as long as we buy in and we work hard and we execute.

Q. You mentioned that you have so many starters returning, but you also had mentioned that you expect some battles and some competition with me earlier. Particularly at offensive line, at the guard spots, Ty Clary, Beaux Limmer, Luke Jones, Brady Latham. How do you see those battles shaping up, and where can we see competition with returning starters?

SAM PITTMAN: I think there's going to be battles all the way up to the first game. Beaux right now currently is behind Tyler Clary, and on the other side, Brady Latham is behind Luke Jones. That's on paper depth chart. To me, they're 1, 1A, whatever it may be. Competition will make you better obviously, but I'm excited about that battle.

I think we've got to find out who No. 2 is at running back. I think that's a big spot there. KJ Jefferson is our quarterback. Now, does he have competition? You're dang right he's got competition, but he has proven that he

can play well in the Southeastern Conference in a game. He started one game, but he played well during that game.

In the secondary you have some battles at safety. Certainly some good battles there, and then there's battles everywhere on the D-line. I think we're pretty much figured out the linebacker spot with I think we'll play at least three of those guys on the regular with Henry, Bumper Pool and, of course, Grant Morgan.

We've got battles all over the place in punter, kickoff man, and field goal kicker. A lot of times you have battles that you might not be very good at that position. I think we're good there, I think we've just got to figure out who the starter is.

Q. You play on the road at Georgia, Alabama, Ole Miss, and LSU, and then you host Texas A&M. Can you kind of tell us about how -- or tell us the importance of this year's off-season with that brutal schedule coming up this year.

SAM PITTMAN: It's good to see you too, buddy. Well, you've just got to take them one week at a time. We have eight in a row, eight games in a row, very conscious about that. Then we have a bye, and then of course we finish with the Final Four.

For us to have a successful season we're going to have to stay healthy. Our depth is much better than it was a year ago, but it's certainly not where we want it to be. We've got to be very conscious of that eight-game stretch. Of course, you're right, we have three games right there in a row where we're on the road.

Certainly, we will tweak possibly what we do at practice depending on who we have available, and certainly the vibe, the feel of our football team physically.

Q. You talked about Barry Odom earlier, but I was just wondering what did he bring to the defense? What did he provide his first year as coordinator?

SAM PITTMAN: Just a lot of confidence. Our players believe in him. Whatever comes out of his mouth, that's what he's going to do. That's what he's planning on doing as well. We weren't as multiple on defense last year, and I'll be honest with you, we didn't have enough defensive linemen, to be honest with you, to put on the field at one time.

We feel like we've solved that problem where we can go back -- Barry is an old four-three guy along with a little bit of odd front and things of that nature, a little bit of under front. We weren't able to do much of that; therefore, we

didn't get anybody in second and long.

I think the biggest thing that we're trying to emphasize this year is that we can put people in second and eight, second and 12, second and whatever it may be, instead of second and four or five, and we didn't do a very good job of that last year. Part of it was schematics. Part of it was we didn't take as many chances on first down. I think we'll do more of that.

To answer your question specifically about Barry, our kids believe in him, and so do I.

Q. Sam, you spent part of your life in the Big 12 region of the country. I'm curious what your reaction was to hearing the report yesterday about Texas and Oklahoma reportedly reaching out to the SEC about joining the league?

SAM PITTMAN: I'll be honest with you. I really haven't thought about that much. I'm so nervous about the schedule we have coming up and all that, I haven't paid much attention about it.

I will say this: I know we're going to play Texas this year. We play them September 11th, and we're very excited for that. I apologize, I really haven't thought about it much.

Q. First, I wanted to ask you about Treyton Burks and how you've seen him grow as a player. He's obviously, I think, one of the most dangerous offensive players in the SEC. Then second part, I know you're one of the best recruiters in the country. How do you approach the transfer portal, and do you save scholarships on the back end of a class maybe to fill needs for your team each year?

SAM PITTMAN: Man, oh, man, those are two really good questions. Treyton Burks, what he needed to do to become a standout, an unbelievable player, is get in better shape, and we talked to him about that. Just going out there and hunting them Hogs wasn't really getting him in the greatest shape in the world, so he had to do more than just that.

He has done that. He's lost some weight. He looks good. He's more confident, things of that nature. He's got 5X hands. He's just a tremendous person, a south Arkansas, Warren, Arkansas kid.

The second part of your question was?

Q. Transfer portal.

SAM PITTMAN: Thank you. I made 18 on my ACT, so...

(Laughter).

Hey, I'm not bagging. I kind of am. The transfer portal -- I think the transfer portal just kind of happens. In other words, I don't have a set -- we're low on scholarships right now, so at this point we might be we're going to get this guy or this guy or we're just not going to take anybody else and hold him for the transfer portal, you know what I mean?

I know the transfer portal is going to be -- there's a shame there's a lot of kids in the transfer portal who don't have a scholarship. It's a shame. And part of it, you know, once you go to the transfer portal at the University of Arkansas, you sure ain't transferring back in. I'm pretty sure, if I asked Jamie, if I go to transfer for a week and figure it out would she let me come back, I'm sure the answer would be no. That's the way we feel about that too.

Unfortunately, the kids aren't doing their homework because they're basically unable to. But to answer your question, we probably will hold two or three a year, probably not many more than that.

Q. I know you've spoken often about your fondness for your time at Georgia, and I know you may have answered this question before, but just what did you I guess learned the most from Coach Smart's program, and what parts have you tried to apply to what you're doing in Arkansas?

SAM PITTMAN: A lot of it is about the program, the plans, the practice schedule. I'm not speaking for Coach Smart. I'm sure he took a lot of that from when he left Alabama with Nick Saban. I love the practice schedule like that.

The relentless pursuit of athletes is what Kirby Smart does. It's fourth and a half inch every day at the University of Georgia. Therefore, that's why he's done such a nice job of coaching and such a nice job of recruiting.

But I learned the importance of we're in the SEC. It's different. It just means more. If it's going to mean more, you'd better get players, and he taught me that as well.

I've always had a knack for recruiting, but it certainly -- what's the word -- wrenched up working there at the University of Georgia. By the way, the folks there in the state of Georgia were outstanding to Jamie and I.

Q. You've got a lot of defensive backs and had some six DB looks since spring. Is that a product of what your roster looks like right now or the trends in college football dictate that?



SAM PITTMAN: I think it depends on who you're playing obviously. You have to be ready for that. If you look at it, we're setting with three D-linemen, two linebackers, and six defensive backs. Basically might be a base depth chart for us. Certainly, that's not where we want to stay. We want to be able to play four down line, obviously. We feel like we're going to be able to do that.

To answer your question, yes, probably it was what we had when we walked in, and that's where our better players were. So Barry certainly did studies. He knew how to run a three-man front. He did studies through other colleges to see how they're running that program.

The bottom line is all of us want to get the best players we have on the team on the field at the same time.

Q. There's an old saying, I believe, that a team takes on the personality of its head coach. I always felt that way when I played. If that's true, what kind of personality is this Razorback team going to have this year?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, I hope they're very confident, talk with their pads. No reason to say a lot of things. I can't let my butt override my mouth. If you want to get something done, you've got to go physically do it. You've got to go take it. The only way you can win, the only way you have a chance to win is play hard. That's the only way you have a chance.

You have to be knowledgeable. You have to be unafraid. You have to be all those things. But I'd guess the most thing is that I believe I'm at the University of damn Arkansas and it's the best university in the country, and that's what I want them to believe. If they believe that, then they're going to go out there and play hard.

Q. I walk every day, and I'm not too svelte yet either. I'm glad you're out there doing it. I see you've been coaching for well over 30 years. The last year, year and a half, what's it like to stay relevant as a coach with all the changes? Have you ever seen more change in a short period of time as a coach, and how do you try to stay on top of your game, as it were?

SAM PITTMAN: Well, that's difficult. Because I'm a big guy, I am who I am, but you have to stay relevant, and it's difficult. I don't have -- I've got an Instagram account, but I don't know how to get on it. Twitter, I'm pretty good at Twitter. I don't tweet much, but I'm pretty good at reading.

Our assistant coaches, our young guys, they kind of teach me some of that stuff a little bit more. But to stay relevant,

it's really just trying to find out from the kids what's important, and then if it's important to them, then it's damn sure important to me. That's when I learn the best.

Q. Going back to your time under Kirby at Georgia, Shane Beamer also spent some time with you there as well. How confident are you in his ability to lead the South Carolina football team back to a position of prominence in the SEC East division? And then two, have you spoken to him at all, and have you lent to him any advice as he enters his first year as the head coach?

SAM PITTMAN: Let's answer the first one. He's going to do a great job at South Carolina. He's prepared. He's ready for that job. He's going to do a great job. He's going to do a fine job over there.

We've spoken several different times. He doesn't really need my advice. We kicked a few things back and forth between the two of us, but he's going to do a good job. South Carolina is going to be happy they hired him.

Q. We talked to Missouri head coach Eliah Drinkwitz earlier today, and when he was asked about the Texas-Oklahoma news, he preferred to say he preferred the rivalry with you guys and focusing on the one he currently has. How do you evaluate the Missouri versus University of Arkansas rivalry, and how important is it to have that game every year?

SAM PITTMAN: I think it's a very good rivalry. Honestly, we haven't been on the winning side of that the last five years. I think the last time we beat Missouri was my last year at Arkansas as the offensive line coach. Certainly, when Barry was the head coach over there, they beat Arkansas four times in a row.

So it's probably any time -- it might be a little bit more of a rivalry for the people that are getting their butt kicked. I don't know. You'd have to ask Eli. But we've been getting ours done, and I love the fact that Missouri is close to us. Eli and I are good friends, but at the same time, we're very competitive as well. I'm glad we look at Arkansas-Missouri as our No. 1 rival.

Q. You mentioned some battles in the secondary, and we all know about Jalen Catalon and Montaric Brown, one of the more underrated players in the conference. I was wondering if you could go into detail more of where that competition is and who's involved, maybe a young guy or a dark horse might be emerging.

SAM PITTMAN: Brooks and Slusher, they're in there. Slusher is battling with other areas as well. Chavez is

definitely in a battle with Joe. Simeon Blair has got a battle going on as well with him. The two corners, you know, Clark and Day Day, they certainly are in a battle. And of course, Kyrei and Mo Brown. If you go one or two deep, that's probably the most talented position we have is the secondary. They're also very, very aggressive. In other words, they're great leaders. You don't have to worry about that group and their work ethic. Trent Gordon would also be a guy that certainly battling Blair and/or Foucha and/or Brooks. He's another guy that came in. So a lot of battles right there between those guys. Yeah.

Q. I know that you're one of the few head coaches in college football that has an offensive line background. Do you consider yourself the torch bearer for your offensive line brethren? And what can you do to help other offensive line coaches become head coaches?

SAM PITTMAN: Thank you for the question.

What you don't realize is, if you're an offensive line coach, you talk to 20 people every day. It's not like you have five guys in your room. So you are coordinating a team of basically half the offense. You have to understand secondary play because that helps you understand blitzes. You have to understand caps. You have to understand different fronts, what they mean. So you're very knowledgeable. All these offensive line coaches are.

I certainly don't want to be the torch bearer. I don't want that kind of pressure on me, but I would like to see, if they're qualified and they're ready to go -- I think a big part of me being a head coach at Arkansas was because I was there at Arkansas before, and I think Mr. Yurachek understood the passion I had. I had to be qualified, but I think a big part of mine was the passion I had for the University of Arkansas too. So I think it kind of worked hand in hand that way.

But I certainly want to do a good job for the state of Arkansas and for the university and certainly for offensive line coaches so they might have this wonderful opportunity in the future.

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