

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 20, 2021

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Stoops

Press Conference



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We begin our afternoon with University of Kentucky head football coach, Mark Stoops, who enters his ninth season leading the Wildcats program. Kentucky has played in five consecutive Bowl games, including three straight Bowl victories, the last two particularly exciting, close games at the end of those Bowl games.

He's the first coach in school history to lead his team to five consecutive Bowl games. 2018 SEC Coach of the Year after the Wildcats' ten-win season. Mark's a fan of country music and a friend of Toby Keith, and he and I share an early foundational element of our careers, which is house painting, he during his high school time, me early in college, and then I was motivated to perform well academically.

University of Kentucky head football coach Mark Stoops.

MARK STOOPS: Thank you, Greg. Appreciate that. I had no idea that you were a painter like I am. We always have something to fall back on.

Can't thank you enough, Commissioner, for not only the past 16 months with COVID, but just with the changing landscape in college football. You and your staff, the leadership you provide us is amazing. Also, I'd like to recognize Mitch Barnhart, UK administration, for what they do for us. Obviously, very trying times. So been great support to us.

A year ago, very difficult on the University of Kentucky. So grateful to be here. Not having these Media Days, like Greg said, feels very different. Nine years being here, very changing, difficult times, but a year ago for the University of Kentucky was very, very tough.

Several players, we had some injuries, Chris Oats, something that he's still fighting for each and every day, the loss of Coach John Schlarman, you know, it's something that really shook our program. So really grateful to our

players, our administration, the SEC for just helping us through that difficult time.

Needless to say, getting back here, getting back on schedule, grateful to be here, grateful to be in this league for nine seasons. You see so many people come and go, so many coaches come and go. Obviously, very, very difficult, very challenging. Again, grateful is the word that comes to mind.

Thank you to the media. As I just mentioned, there's quite a few stories for Kentucky to cover a year ago. A couple of those young men that are with us today, first young man is Josh Paschal. You will get a chance to visit with him. He's a guy that has his own story overcoming cancer. He's battled through many things. Terrific football player, terrific young man, great leader in our program, and had his own individual struggles that he is continuing to fight and continuing to beat.

The other one is Darian Kinnard, terrific player, decided to forego his opportunity to go play in the NFL, come back and play with University of Kentucky one more year, and we're grateful for Darian. So two special young men that you'll get an opportunity to visit with.

As I talk about you, the media, and some of the things you covered, I remember a year ago one of the last interviews Coach Schlarman did, he was fighting through so much. It was really inspirational just to watch John go about his business every day and go to meetings, go to practice.

One of the side effects from his treatment, his cancer treatments, were blisters. He could barely walk, and he was just really struggling. One of you in the media asked him and did a story and just said, why are you doing this? Why are you continuing to go out there and coach this football team? And he just simply said very matter of fact: For the team. Just for the team.

Obviously, that's a mantra that stuck with me and stuck with our football team that we will carry forward, and it's also a reminder during these times, during these turbulent times of college football and college athletics in general, it is still about the team and doing things right.



For me, you guys have heard me for years sit here and just pound it about the program, the program, the program, and building the program, and all the different things we do each and every year. That's still the foundation, build, select, develop. Constantly talk about that, build a winning culture, hit our players over the head with a sledgehammer about a positive culture, selecting the right players. Our coaches always seem to do a great job to recruit the right players and select the right players for Kentucky.

And then develop, intentionally develop. That's what we do. We have to. We develop players from the moment they walk on our campus. We, again, hit them over the head, hit them over the head, and work with them each and every day to develop them in all areas of their life, and that's always our foundation.

But there's always that point, to John's point, it is about the team. In these changing times, you can kind of cherry pick some players, and it's a different time, it's a different age, as I just mentioned, nine years me standing here very different, this year's very different. With the transfer portal, all of us coaches that have come through here, we don't have all the answers to the portal, we don't have all the answers to name, image, and likeness, but we'll continue to do the best we can for the young people in our program.

I feel like with that, we really did benefit our program this year. I felt like we added some players, we added some personnel that can help us, that can help continue to push our program forward.

I really like the changes that I made in the coaching staff. I needed to. Offensive coordinator Liam Coen coming in from the Rams and hopefully continuing to push us forward and to give us the balance that I'm searching for.

Defensively, Brad White, Jon Sumrall continue to do a great job defensively. I love our staff. I feel like we have a really good football team, a team that's worked exceptionally hard. Again, it's very nice for us to go back to doing the things that we do and spending time with each other during the summer.

A year ago, all those things were taken away. This year that's a big piece of our culture, is to spend time with each other. We do that every Wednesday. We have a speaker come in and educate our players on life, some form of their life, and we go out back and have a cookout and spend time with each other.

So it's been good. We're excited about the season. Ready to get going.

With that, I guess I'll open it up for questions.

Q. Coach, what do you think Jacques Jones brings to your team defensively?

MARK STOOPS: Well, he brings an experienced player. It's definitely an area where we got caught a little bit short, as I mentioned in the opening statement about having the opportunity to fill some holes. With Chris Oats having the injury and being unable to play again this year and with the early departure of Jamin Davis left us a little bit thin.

Then we had an injury in the spring, season-ending injury in the spring of another inside linebacker. So with that, he brings a player with a lot of experience and leadership, and we needed that at that position. So we're excited to have him.

Q. Just wondering, how did you approach the conversation with the team in terms of vaccinations and getting to that threshold?

MARK STOOPS: We're just going to continue to educate our players and try to reach that threshold. We have a ways to go, but I believe it's attainable. We want them to make the right decision for themselves. I'll let the experts come in and continue to educate them and talk to them about the benefits of it and possibly some of the negatives and let them make their -- each one make their own decision.

Q. Was there a moment last year when you realized that your offense needed a change?

MARK STOOPS: That's a fair question, an honest assessment. As we go through the season, you certainly look at all the things you're doing good, and you want to continue to build on that and improve in the areas that you need to improve. The areas where you're falling short, you have to address them.

So, yes, I can't tell you the exact time or date, but there was certainly a time throughout the year that I know we needed to make some improvement in that area.

Q. There's always talk about maybe expanding the SEC season to maybe nine conference games. If they ever went to that, what would you think of it?

MARK STOOPS: I wondered if people watched last year. The league, there was quite a few people that struggled, if anybody took notice of that. So that's how I feel.

Q. You got a new OF COURSE in Liam Coen, who formerly was assistant QB coach with the Rams. What



kind of conversation have you guys been talking about as far as expanding the passing game and trying to boost that passing attack this season?

MARK STOOPS: That's a big reason why I hired Liam. It took me some time to clearly look at what I wanted our team to look like and what I felt like we can do. So I spent quite a bit of time researching people and systems and ultimately came down to Liam.

So I have full confidence and trust in him, and that is part of his system, part of the offense to be able to play action pass and get the ball down the field.

I felt like this spring we got the ball down the field better than we have in years, so I feel very good about it.

Q. I wanted to ask you a two-part question, first about the transfer portal addition of Dare Rosenthal along your offensive line and the impact he can make, and then second, I've asked you about him before, but how have you seen Huntsville native Jon Sumrall grow as a coach? I know you're a defensive guy yourself, but talk about his rise in the ranks and the kind of recruiter he is as well because I know he has a lot to do with Jacquez Jones choosing your school.

MARK STOOPS: Adding Dare greatly helps our football team. As I mentioned, he has SEC experience. He played at one of the premier programs in our league, very talented, and I'm excited to have him. We've had good offensive linemen. We're going to continue to build on that, and he's been a great addition.

As far as Jon Sumrall, he's a fantastic football coach, he really is. I look at him as a coordinator, he has a title of co-defensive coordinator, and that's well deserved. If Brad White were here, he'd tell you how much he leans on them.

You have to -- in this day and age, you have to have coordinators. You have to have people in your room that are more than capable, not just one, of calling defenses, setting it up on both sides of the ball.

Grateful to have Jon. He's a terrific recruiter. He's got an unbelievable personality. Even though he was from Alabama, he played at Kentucky, and we're grateful to have him.

Q. I'm curious how you've seen the series against Missouri play out in your seasons at Kentucky. It seems like whichever team wins that game finishes higher in the East. I think you've got the upper hand in the series, but the overall score is tied. There have been some very close games. This is the earliest you'll

play Missouri in week two. How have you seen that series kind of become an indicator for how both seasons are going to go for both teams?

MARK STOOPS: I think you're correct there, I don't want to get ahead of myself. That is game two. We're worried about the opener. It is important, there's no denying that. I think, as you look at all the teams in the East and you look at the teams trying to move up the ladder and continue to grow and to climb, us and Missouri have had some terrific games. I'm sure it will be another very good game this year. So it's important.

Q. You've alluded a couple times, going into your ninth year, the league's got eight coaches who are just going into their first or second year. The league kind of chews guys up a lot of times. You're second in tenure to Nick Saban. How do you feel about that? And what's been the key to sustaining success in a program that historically has not been able to do that?

MARK STOOPS: First of all, as I mentioned again in my opening statement, it's great to be back here. It's really good to see you, I missed you. I enjoy listening to your questions each and every day to every coach, though. I always catch you on TV getting that air time, so that's good.

Like I said, I think grateful. You really don't think about it until you start preparing these statements for something of that nature. Talking about being here nine years. I can remember Greg -- I've known Greg for such a long time. I didn't know he was a painter, but I was a very good painter growing up. I was on that ladder. I was working.

You know, a true story, Greg. My first job I worked at University of South Florida. That was my first full-time coaching job. I worked construction, and I did the painting at night to pay the bills. So that's a true story. Eric Wolford, who's my offensive line coach right now, he and I worked construction at night, so that painting paid off for me.

The nine years, I go back to when Greg was the assistant commissioner and working directly with football, and just being in those meetings and just all the different turnovers since then, I don't know, you don't really think about it until you get here and start thinking about everybody. I want to put my head down at Kentucky and continue to work so I'm here next year. But also I really want to continue to grow this program.

I said it when I got to Kentucky that we were going to recruit, we were going to develop, we were going to compete, and I wanted to take this program to national



prominence, and people laughed at me. We're not there yet, but we're on our way. I'm going to continue to work. I feel good about where we're at.

I think we have a very good team, and we have some things in place, and we're constantly learning, constantly growing, and we're getting better.

Q. We're kind of interested in Joey Gatewood -- he's from our neck of the woods -- and the quarterback situation with him and Levis right now.

MARK STOOPS: Joey has been a terrific teammate. He's come in and worked hard, gotten better each and every day. He had a really good spring. Of course, Will was not there in the spring, so he and Beau Allen were battling for the starting position. And Joey really had a good spring. Now you add Will to the mix, and we have a lot to look at. It's nice to have options. I feel very good about those three and others in our program.

So we'll see where it goes, but he did have a really good spring. Again, one of the things that I was most impressed with him was he's a big, strong guy, but he was very accurate down the field. He got the ball down the field and was accurate down the field, something we needed to improve on.

Q. I'm just curious, what do you kind of remember about when you faced Mississippi State last season, and what do you think about the Bulldogs heading into this year?

MARK STOOPS: You know Mike's going to be successful. He's been successful everywhere he's been. He's a tremendous talent, and I'm sure they'll be much improved in year two. That's what you expect. You expect a great challenge. It's never easy for us to go down there. We have to go on the road and play, so I'm sure it will be a hostile environment, and it will be a much improved football team.

Mike's been around, again, for a long time. I've known Mike a long time, and I'm sure he'll be very successful. We have a lot of games before that, so --

Q. There's a famous Dr. Seuss quote: When something bad happens, it can either destroy you, define you, or strengthen you. With all the tragedy and adversity that your team has gone through, what can you gain from that and take into this next season?

MARK STOOPS: I think our team, I just credit our team with perseverance and strength to continue to fight through that. There's no denying, it was very difficult. It was

difficult on everybody. Everybody in here, every team, everybody had adversity and things to deal with. We were no different. But I greatly appreciate our football team.

As I mentioned, when somebody asked me the question about nine SEC games, well, there was ten last year, and again take a good, hard look at what it did to half our league. It could have been easy for our team to fold the tent, and they didn't do that. So I have great respect for them and the coaches in our program. So I think we learned to persevere and continue to fight through.

Q. To air the super senior, but on your defense you have a lot of them. Talk about three senior safeties. Josh Paschal has been a playmaker in this league. DeAndre Square has played a lot. How much flexibility does it give you all in the defensive room? Maybe you'll have wiggle room to do more complex stuff. And do you feel like that's a unit that's being slept on because recently you've been in the top half of the league when it comes to pretty much any statistical measure you're looking at?

MARK STOOPS: I appreciate you pointing that out. We've been very good, very sound defensively. I do feel like there's some things we can do to play with some smaller personnel with the experience that we have. We tried to play to our strengths, and this year some of that strength may be to play smaller, to play with five defensive backs, more than we have in the past, to give us some more versatility.

So we will see. That's something that we definitely did experiment quite a bit with in the spring. We'll see where that goes here through camp.

Q. Given the number of super seniors everywhere, and seniors, how much do you expect the level of play to increase across the board? And as a coach, how do you expect to handle that?

MARK STOOPS: I think that's a great point. We have six guys that -- I've never used that term, but it's a great term, super seniors, the guys that decided to come back, and we greatly appreciate having that experience. There's six guys that bring a wealth of experience. They've won a lot of football games. They've been to a lot of bowl games and had some success. Hopefully, they'll help us take it to another level and provide the leadership that we need.

I feel like it's also a good time for us. It gives us great balance. Roster management is such a big deal now, with what's going on, again, with the portal and all the transfers and different things. I feel like we have good balance within our six classes now, which is very different, but that



will change each year.

Q. Five of the first six games are at home, and over the past two seasons at home, you've compiled a 9-5 record. How important is it to get off to a fast start in these home games?

MARK STOOPS: I think it's always important. To be quite honest, I really don't even look that far ahead as far as who's at home, who's away, and all that. We're just really concentrating on our opponents and getting ready for each game.

As I mentioned earlier, every game is so important. We're only guaranteed 12, so we've got to make the most of it. I think we all understand the fine line in this conference with the close games and the difference between winning one and losing one is very important.

Q. I'm interested in the dynamics of re-recruiting players a second time around with the portal, Wan'Dale here specifically.

MARK STOOPS: It was good to have a good relationship with Wan'Dale. We recruited him extremely hard and tried to do all the right things and make it very difficult for him to say no to us, and that's our job. It didn't work out that way the first go-round, but it came back the second time, and very grateful to have him in our program.

He's a difference maker. He's a guy that was electric this spring, and you could feel his presence on the field. Very excited to have him on our team.

Q. I wanted to ask you really about the offense a little bit. I know we didn't get a chance to see any of it, but you added a piece like Wan'Dale Robinson, but you also have Rodriguez at running back who's a very good player. What is it that you want to philosophically see out of your offense without giving away your plan, the changes that you've made?

MARK STOOPS: Sure. I think, obviously, balance. That's the simple answer that everybody understands, that we need to have more balance. We ran the football extremely well for years, and we want to continue to do that. But we want to take advantage of that as well and be able to be efficient in the play action pass and getting the ball down the field. I feel like we certainly improved in that area.

Also, there's some versatility in the run game that we can continue to add to. So I feel good about it. It's going to be different, but I always want to have a strong physical presence and want to be able to run the football.

Me being a defensive guy for years and years, you always feel that threat, it's always very aggravating when teams can run the ball on you. So we want to have a strong physical presence but, again, get the ball down the field and create explosive plays.

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