

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Hoover, Alabama, USA

Missouri Tigers

Coach Eliah Drinkwitz

Press Conference

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I hope you all had a peaceful afternoon and a restful evening. First, head football coach day 4 SEC Media Days is Eliah Drinkwitz, who is entering his second year at the University of Missouri. He'll be one of two head coaches entering their second year today.

Let me say that again. One of two head coaches today who will be entering their second year but their first year appearing at SEC Media Days, given what happened last year.

Led his team to a CFP top 25 ranking last year for the first time since 2018 and only the third time in the program's history.

Two nights ago, he was on the mound in St. Louis throwing out the first pitch for the St. Louis Cardinals. If you happen to watch the SEC Network, our promo spots for football through the season have music from country music star Luke Combs, who Eliah knows and is a huge fan of.

He also has a deep affection for Air Jordan shoes, and you should see the foot gear he has on today.

Looking back at his life, he graduated magna cum laude, which is tied with my graduation honors at a different university, and was student body president at Arkansas Tech, who are the Wonder Boys.

University of Missouri head football coach Eliah Drinkwitz.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Appreciate everybody being here today. You begin to appreciate the tough sportswriters who last to day 4. You can see empty seats here. Some guys aren't cut out for life on the road and don't have their pandemic legs underneath them.

A shout out to Paul Finebaum for his contract extension. Nobody steals a show quite like Paul and start out SEC Media Days by leaking that news, so congrats to Paul on that.



Hard hitting questions coming out of yesterday. I think one of them was whether or not the horns down is going to be 15-yard penalty in the SEC in the future. So I asked Commissioner Sankey in the hallway, and he gave me a strong rebuttal by saying no comment. So we'll see where that goes.

Excited about the opportunity to be here today and share with you about the energy of the Mizzou football program and what we're trying to build in the SEC moving forward. I really felt like last year we exceeded the expectations of many of the people in the room, but also many of the people within the state about what we could accomplish in such a challenging season.

Last year we were able to win five conference games. We were able to beat the defending National Champions. We were able to beat Kentucky for the first time in five years. Able to win both of our trophy games and avenge a loss versus Vanderbilt. We had five players drafted, so there was a lot of positive momentum to go into the off-season.

We did a nice job with recruiting and continued to develop this program, but we didn't meet the standard of what we want to be moving forward. So we are continually chasing that close-the-gap mentality. How do we close the gap amongst the upper echelon teams of the SEC? It's going to be a process. It's not something that just happens overnight. I've got to remind our fan base that Coach Smart and Coach Mullen have years of experience at their school, and we're trying to close that gap in a hurry, but we're not going to do it overnight.

But we need our fan base to continue to re-engage with us and be excited about our program. We're very fired up about the opportunity that lies ahead. We return eight starters on defense. We return eight starters on the offensive side of the ball and four specialists. We got an opportunity to have a really strong line of scrimmage, which is one thing that we learned last year was needed in order to be successful in this league, and really look forward to returning an all-SEC player at the defensive end position with Trajan Jeffcoat. We were able to bring guys back with the COVID year. So really the defensive line



should be a strength for us on the defensive side of the ball.

We added a new defensive coordinator in Steve Wilks, a guy with tremendous NFL pedigree and experience and also coaching in college football. A coach who is just a tremendous leader of men and a motivator of players, and excited about the scheme that he's going to bring and the energy he brings to the football field every day.

Obviously, we lost some players to the NFL and had some weaknesses there, so we went out and utilized the transfer portal to our advantage. We were able to add two quality transfer defensive backs in Caleb Evans and Allie Green. We lost a linebacker to the second round to the Chiefs, so we went out and added Blaze Alldredge from Rice, who was an all-conference performer there.

So we really felt like we put the pieces in place on the defensive side of the ball. That was obviously a weakness for us, especially towards the end of the season, so we're excited about the opportunity for us to improve. Obviously, the proof will be in the pudding, and we've got to get those guys going in fall camp.

On the offensive side of the ball, Commissioner Sankey said this was my second season but first year at SEC Media Days. We're trying to get Connor Bazelak a back-to-back SEC freshman of the year. I don't know if that's possible, but maybe with COVID exception it is.

We have a commodity at the quarterback position. We're excited about the growth he can show and earn. We've added playmakers around him. Obviously, Mookie Cooper is a guy we're excited about to go along with Keke Chism and Tauskie Dove.

And Tyler Evans at fullback, when he was featured in our games against Arkansas, LSU, Vanderbilt, South Carolina, he really did some nice things for us. He's got some explosive ability and really can do a lot of different things out of the backfield.

So a lot of things to be energized about for a fan base and for our program. So with that, we look forward to the 2021 football season and look forward to the challenges that lie ahead.

With that, I believe the next thing I'm supposed to do is open it up for questions.

Q. Nice to be in the same room with you finally. You've got two kids on both sides of the ball from Fayetteville with in Byers and Banister. Wondering what you're expecting from them, and you've got Akial

here today. What went into that decision? That's a pretty big honor.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Those are two guys who do great in our program. Banister is a guy who always seems to raise his game against the Arkansas Razorbacks. I guess it means more to him being from the state and playing against those guys. He is a guy that does all the little things right. He's an extra gritty player. Works extremely hard at his craft to perform above his abilities on a day-to-day basis. He's the type of player that Mizzou football has always been about. He's the type of player that our fan base can really embrace because he's a blue collar mentality, works for everything that he's been given in life.

Akial Byers is a young man who's a leader on the defensive side of the ball. He has a lot of experience. Obviously, he's from Fayetteville. He has the potential and has really invested himself into this season and into our football team. It's a true honor for him to be here today. I was able to bring both an offensive and defensive lineman, again, just to emphasize to our team and to really our fan base that it's got to start at the lines of scrimmage for us to be successful.

Q. Since your popularity is surging right now, I was just wondering, when you sign an autograph, do you signe Eli or Eliah?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I sign E and a bunch of squiggly lines and see who can figure it out. I go with Eliah and then go from there. I don't know about the popularity of surging deal, but Twitter is not real, just so we're on the same page.

Q. You brought up wondering about horns down and if that was going to be a penalty if Texas were to come to the SEC. Besides that, what was your initial reaction about hearing the report of Texas and Oklahoma having that interest?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I've been trying to tell people everybody wants to play in the SEC, man. If you can attract a couple of really good schools to come play, that's great. I immediately called my athletic director in Jim and told him that if the commissioner changes and adds two games to our schedule, I think we all understand that Mark Womack is going to put both Texas and OU on Mizzou's schedule moving forward. So we're ready for any challenge that is thrown at us.

No, in all seriousness, control what you can control. That's all speculative. This is talking season, as a coach once phrased it, and speculative season, and gives you all a lot



of things to do. But what we're worried about is converting third downs and scoring touchdowns. They ain't on our schedule this year, and if the commissioner decides or our presidents decide that's what it will be in the future, then hopefully Missouri employs me long enough to see that.

Q. I want to ask what comes to mind when you think about the time you spent coaching with Bryan Harsin? What are your expectations as far as what his approach is going to be at Auburn?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I owe a tremendous amount of respect and debt to Coach Harsin and the opportunities he gave me, and really a lot of the things we do as a program are a direct result of the things that I learned from him and the way he implemented them at Arkansas State and Boise State.

He's got a tremendous plan. The thing about Coach Harsin is he always has a plan for everything he does. You're going to see that unfold at Auburn. I'm not up here to put undue expectations on anybody else. I think the Auburn fan base does that well enough by themselves. So I've got a job to do right here, and that's to coach and represent the University of Missouri. All the best to Bryan and his family.

Q. Pretty well documented last year, but you mentioned your friendship with Gus Malzahn, and was wondering if he had any advice for you about today, and how surprising was it to see what happened to Gus last year at Auburn?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I don't think anything in this business catches you by surprise much anymore. So I don't necessarily know that I was caught by surprise. Disappointed for a mentor and a friend.

His advice to me was to make sure I was really respectful to Bob, and he says hi. Then after that, don't pontificate. Then the last thing he said was don't pick a fight with Kirk Herbstreit. So go from there.

Q. Since joining the SEC, it doesn't seem like Mizzou really has a rivalry in the conference. If Oklahoma joins the SEC, would you be excited to kind of rekindle that rivalry?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I kind of like the rivalry we've got with Arkansas. I don't remember the last time they beat us, so I kind of like that one. And the battle line rivalry, it's pretty good for us. I think we'll just keep that one right now. That's a good one.

Respect Sam and everything he's doing with that program.

He's obviously doing a tremendous job. I'm from the state, so that makes it a little bit more special and a little added incentive.

So I'm not going to speculate about anything. Just because y'all don't think it's a rivalry doesn't mean it isn't a rivalry. I know it means a whole heck of a lot to my household, and it means a heck of a lot to Barrett Banister's household, and we like keeping that trophy at the end of the game, so I think we'll go along with the one the commissioner set for us.

Q. When you reflect back on year one, what would you say are the most critical steps you took as a first year head coach? What were some of those challenges and most important lessons you learned? Two, for the four first year head coaches in this league, what would you tell them is awaiting them in this league?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I think the critical steps we took forward, obviously, in order to have a chance to win the SEC, you've got to win your division first. They hadn't beat Kentucky in five years. For us to beat Kentucky, I think was a big step in the right direction. Then to turn around and avenge the loss to Vandy, who the previous year had beat them, was extremely important.

Hadn't won at South Carolina since, I think, '14, so to go on the road and win the Mayor's Cup -- again, to win the East is extremely important.

I'm not like a gray hair up here that has a lot of wisdom to be throwing out. I've got a tough enough job keeping myself aligned. I would just tell those new coaches to be who they are, and there's going to be a lot of new challenges facing forward. Ignore the voices, stick to the plan, and whatever will be will be.

There's eight new head coaches in the last two years. It's not for the faint of heart. Be careful what you wish for.

Q. Just elaborate on Kentucky, that kind of matchup a little more. You mentioned chasing Florida and Georgia. Mark Stoops and them are doing the same thing. For them the last few years before you got there, a big part of that was beating Missouri on a consistent basis. Just how important is that kind of matchup with Kentucky yearly, and especially with being Game 2 for both of you all and the SEC opener?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Whole lot of respect for Coach Stoops and the job that he's done at Kentucky. Probably the most consistent coach in our league outside of Coach Saban. Just have a lot of respect for who he is and how he runs his program.

Absolutely going to be a tremendous challenge on the road. First time going to face that kind of crowd, week 2 of the season, going to be a lot of unknowns. Obviously, they have a new offensive coordinator, so you're not going to have a whole lot of tape on what they're going to do. Going to be breaking in a new quarterback.

Like any game in this league, it's going to be a tremendous challenge. I think what you have to do is focus on who you are and what you want to become and play to your strengths. That's obviously what we're going to do.

As far as Kentucky, I think we're all chasing to win the East. I don't know a team outside of Missouri that's played in the East besides Georgia and Florida since we've joined the league, so we're all working to get there.

Those programs have had a little bit of an advantage on us from a stability standpoint as far as Mizzou, and so has Kentucky, so we're working really hard to recruit at a level that gives us the ability to compete with those guys, working on a player development way to compete with those guys, and look forward to a good matchup.

Q. I ran into Case on the elevator last night and I asked him if he was ready for today, and his response was, Hell, yeah, we're going to bring that juice. I'm just kind of wondering if that's this newfound confidence that's running through the Missouri football program right now.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: No, that's just Case Cook, man. The dude sported a mullet half his life, so he's got extreme confidence in who he is. But I don't think there's any trepidation or fear in who we are at Mizzou. We have a lot of confidence in the preparation that we've put in. We have an edge about who we are, and we're going to have an energy. We're detailed. We've got grit and emotional consistency. So I think that's what you're going to see to who we are on a day-to-day basis.

I love Case Cook. He's played a lot of football at a high level in this league, so he earns the right to tell you he's ready. And he looks ready.

Q. How did you think Connor played last year? What are you looking for him from this season with the experience he's got, first spring with you and all that? And then Bryan, I mean, Auburn's got a lot going for it, big stage here, a lot of money, but Bryan, he was winning big at his hometown school. Were you surprised at all that he left Boise?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: First off, Connor Bazalak, I thought

last year he really played within himself. He's a maverick. He went out there and went into really difficult situations and gave him an opportunity to play the game. Obviously, there's areas he needs to improve on, deep ball accuracy, red zone completion percentage, and touchdowns.

Those are a direct coordination with me as the play caller and quarterbacks coach. I've got to give him more opportunities in the red zone to make plays. I've got to put more trust into him. He's got to put more trust into his players, into his teammates, and I think you'll see that growth.

He spent a lot of time in the film room, at the Manning Passing Academy this past week. He's anxious to continue to improve. I think one of his strengths is his quest for a constant learner.

The next question, I think, was a surprise. Like I said earlier, I'm not really surprised by much in college football anymore. If you'd have told me flying down here that OU and Texas were thinking about joining the SEC, I just went whatever. I mean, come on, nothing really surprises you anymore.

If that's what he chose to do based off his dreams and goals and visions, that's up to him, and we wish him all the best moving forward. There you go.

Q. We spoke with Deuce McAllister this week, and he gave us praise for his old teammate, your new offensive line coach, Marcus Johnson. What has Marcus Johnson brought to the team so far?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Marcus Johnson, a tremendous offensive line coach, a guy that played four years at Ole Miss, was a captain, drafted, played six years in the NFL, was promoted to assistant head coach this year just because I think that much of him. He's responsible for our leadership committee and the offensive line.

When we went into last season didn't know what we would have as far as an offensive line, an area that appeared to be a weakness for us. Instead, it was a place of reliability. We knew what we were going to get each week. Marcus gets the absolute best out of his players. There is really no gray area when you walk into his room. He's about business. He's about making sure that he's developing these young men on and off the football field. He loves his guys big, and he coaches them hard. He's the quintessential offensive line coach in college football.

Man, we're fortunate to have him at the University of Missouri, and sure glad that him and his wife Veullana and girls, London and Meraki (phonetic) are here. He's going



to be having another baby coming up this year, so we need to have a good season so I can get him a raise.

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