

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Missouri Tigers

Coach Eliah Drinkwitz

Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: Pleased to present, introduce, Eliah Drinkwitz. Eliah is entering his third year University of Missouri. First two years positioned the Tigers for bowl eligibility. That's only the second coach in program history to do so, first time in '78/'79.

Eliah is the owner of the largest Jordan shoe collection of any FBS head coach. We may have network programming around that. He's done well with today's pair, if you look particularly at the heel decoration.

Two things he appreciates besides football and family -- family first, then football -- country music and cinnamon rolls. In the back we were debating the difference between cinnamon rolls and cinnamon buns. And we asked him not to wear his hoodie today.

With that, introduce the head football coach of Missouri, Eliah Drinkwitz.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: What a loud applause I received right there (smiling).

Great to be here in the College Football Hall of Fame. What a great venue to celebrate what's great about our sport. Just walking around, seeing all the wonderful things that make the memories of college football so special.

It's such an incredible game that we have that's built on the pride of university communities and passed through generations through storytelling, like this Hall of Fame, through great moments, through tailgates, through bitter rivalry defeats, through incredible rivalry wins. It's what makes college football so awesome.

The passion for college athletics is special. My hope is that we don't lose sight of that moving forward with college football and college athletics.

I know that the college football world and college athletics is changing. For any of you Simpson fans, I'm not the old



man yelling at the clouds that we want to go back to the way it was.

But I do worry and I do question what are the guiding principles for college football and athletics moving forward.

I sure hope it's not, as Pat Forde wrote, about the almighty dollar. I hope it's bigger than TV deals being the college football guiding principles because every action we take moving forward, we lose sight of what we love about this game.

We're entering, and rightfully, into a new era of college athletics with student-athlete rights, the ability to transfer through the transfer portal, generating of earnings through NIL, all things that were much needed and need to continue to be embraced.

But it's also time for college athletics to set a course and a vision for the future. Let's make sure that the core principles and guiding principles that we have reflect the values that we want it to be moving forward.

Let's not hide behind what the Supreme Court struck down last year, which was amateurism. It's not amateurism anymore. But what is it moving forward? That's the question. That's what the leaders of college athletics need to decide.

I know what the core principles for our program are at the University of Missouri. The guiding principles for us is for our players to chase two dreams: a life with football and a life outside of the game. We want them to become the very best version of themselves as they play this game of football. We want to surround them with great schemes, position coaches, student-athlete experience. We want to make sure that they achieve the best version of themselves with this game of football.

If that means a great NFL career, awesome. But we also understand, unless they're Tom Brady, college football is going to end for everybody at some time. We want to make sure they're prepared for life outside of the game. We want to make sure that they have a student-athlete experience that they can be a positive contributor to



society.

So for me, I guess I've heard so much and get so many questions about NIL, conference expansion, all that stuff. That's not really the question. The question is: What do we want college football to look like moving forward? Let's start moving that direction, then we can answer those other questions.

As far as the University of Missouri, I am so excited about entering year three at the University of Missouri. Although we've had changes in both staff and players, there is a continuity to our program. There's a foundation to the program that we have and instilled. There is a "This is how we do it around here." There's an understanding of what it's going to take to have and train with Coach Russell. There's an understanding of what we expect on the offensive and defensive side of the ball. There's an understanding of what it's going to be like to excel in our academics and what are our requirements.

We've added 19 transfers to our program to balance our roster from people that have left, but also to increase the competition. We signed the highest-ranked recruiting class in school history for the last two seasons, and we looked for that increased talent to increase the style of play that we're going to have.

I'll start with defense where we return nine players that have six or more starts in their career. We added transfer at every position on the defensive side of the ball to create competition and depth.

In February we hired Blake Baker to be our defensive coordinator along with Coach D.J. Smith. It was really an easy decision for me. Blake is an outstanding person, a man of high character, but a great defensive mind, a guy who has designed and called defense in big-time games. Excited about what he's going to do with our defense.

D.J. knows the expectations that I have. He's been with me since I've been a head coach. Excited about those guys and their collaborative experience both with Coach Peoples, Coach Pogue and Coach Davis. We will be improved on defense. People have been asking me what is it going to look like for us to have a successful season? Number one, we have to improve open the defensive side of the football. We are going to.

On offense we return seven players with multiple starts. Obviously our offensive line is the most experienced, and extremely proud of what Coach Johnson has developed there. We have got depth at that position, and we've got experience. We will have a battle for the center position, but excited about that group leading the offense.

Our wide receiver room is deep and talented. Our running backs, we added two transfers to really compete for the starting job.

But obviously all of y'all know that the biggest question for us revolves around the quarterback. We've got a great group of men who are competing for that job every single day. I'm excited for them to reveal to their teammates which one's going to be the starter.

We know that whoever wins that job is going to be prepared to be the starting quarterback in the SEC.

Our specialty group is a strength of ours. Open competition at punter, but return both long snappers. We are very good at the place kicker position.

From that standpoint, I'm very excited about the football team moving forward.

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

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Your guys' trip to Auburn this year will be a reunion of sorts for you, where you started your college football career. Wanted to ask you about just what that time on the plains meant for you, and then also Bryan Harsin, whose staff you were on, what you learned working for him?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I mean, obviously it's not really going to be a time of reflection for me. We've got a job to do. We had a great experience at Auburn. Once you're a part of Auburn, you're always a part of Auburn. Obviously the experience to win a national championship, I thought college football was relatively easy when that happened.

Some of the most formidable years I had. I think about some of the lessons that Coach Chizik, Coach Malzahn taught me, some of the experiences I had with great coaches. Curtis Luper is on my staff, Erik Link is on my staff, Ryan Russell, Brett Whiteside is on our staff, guys that I met while I was at Auburn.

I think about that place, the sacrifice, really the risk that my wife and I took to jump into college football.

I think I'll think mostly about her and the courage that she gave me in order to make that challenge. She worked a job and took care of our daughter while I was making very little money with no insurance. It was a good experience.

As far as going against Coach Harsin, obviously I know



that his team is going to be tough, well-prepared. They're going to be physical. He's going to do a great job as the play-caller with a variety of schemes. Defensively I know he's got Jeff Schmedding calling the defense. They're going to be multiple, aggressive. It will be a real test for us.

Q. You obviously brought Barrett here today. I think this is his sixth year. He's been twice as long as you have. What do you think about his career and why you decided to bring him to an event like this and what you expect this season?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Barrett obviously has been a great example, all the guys that I brought are a great example, of what it means to be a Missouri Tiger and develop and play a key role not only on the field but in the locker room. Barrett has been a guy that's dependable, hard working.

One of the things we challenged him in his leadership, it's not just enough for you to do all the right things, you need to bring other people with you. I think Barrett has been able to do that, become a vocal leader where he challenges other guys to buy into the vision we have moving forward.

That was why it was an easy ask.

Plus, he's getting married this weekend, so this is kind of like his bachelor party here (smiling). Got a laugh in the back. That's good.

Q. Your program is a developmental program. You've done a great job in your two years developing a young man from the state of Alabama, Kris Abrams-Draine. You started him out on offense, he's become a big part of your defense you're going to build around. Talk about your expectations for him. And then your wide receiver room, you talked about the depth. How big was it for your program to get a guy like Luther Burden III and out-recruiting Alabama, Georgia, and Oklahoma for a student-athlete like that?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, K.A.D., Kris Abrams-Draine. Just a great young man, a model representation of what we have to do in recruiting. We were able to utilize relationships to get him out of Spanish Fort, a guy who played quarterback in high school. When we signed him, we signed him as an athlete. Probably could have easily kept him at wide receiver, but felt like we had a need on the defensive side of the ball.

He's a guy who has grown. He has worked extremely hard, developed his technique, bought into how we do things. I can't say enough positive things about him.

Look forward to him. Last year he played nickel slot. This year he's going to play more corner. Didn't play in the spring because of injury, but has really battled himself back, is in the best shape of his life. Look forward to him being a guy for us on the defensive side of the ball.

As far as getting the chance to sign, when I took this job, one of the things that attracts me to this job was the ability to recruit elite SEC players in our own state. In order to do that, you got to keep your best players at home. We were able to do that with Luther Burden. Now it's up for us to deliver, deliver with his ability to contribute in a positive way.

I think the biggest thing for me and for our staff is we've got to ignore the noise. We can't put too many unrealistic expectations on Luther. He doesn't have to be anybody but the best version of himself moving forward, and we're going to ask him to do that.

Q. How would you evaluate the strength and depth of the SEC East, how it's improved in your short time at Missouri?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Well, we have the defending national champion in our side. So that's a plus. You got Kentucky, Florida, obviously Tennessee is a program on the rise. Coach Beamer is doing an excellent job at South Carolina. I think Coach Lee is a tremendous football coach and has a direction for the program that he wants.

Obviously I think it's a strong league. I mean, every time you turn on the tape you're facing a guy that's going to play in the NFL and probably get drafted in the first two rounds.

It's hard for me to actually quantify that question, but I think it's definitely a strong league.

Q. With the way offenses are more exotic these days, is it harder to trick teams with trick plays?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, trick plays are all about when you call 'em and how you utilize 'em. I think that's the biggest importance with that style of offense.

For us it's something we always do. It's something that Coach Malzahn instilled in me as a play-caller, something we like to utilize to keep a defense off balance.

I think you got to realize just because that play doesn't work, it has an effect on the defense if they're continually having to worry about that style of play always coming.

Q. I was curious how Jack Abraham is developing at Missouri, whether it be health-wise, and how has he

developed because of the competition to take the field for you guys?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, you know, Jack has been there since the start of summer. He's benefited from the opportunity for us to have individual skill development, which was passed by the NCAA this summer, so we've been able to watch him and coach him on timing of routes, execution of handoffs and things like that.

He appears healthy. Looks to be healthy, ready to go for fall camp. Excited about the competition that's going to transpire between him, Sam, Brady and Tyler.

Q. Can you just elaborate upon what Abraham brings to the table from an intangibles and tangibles perspective? Where would you like to see him improve moving forward?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I think that's kind of hard for me to know just yet, having not spent a lot of time with him and seeing him against the defense.

I do know that he's got a lot of wisdom. He's had a lot of experience playing college football. He understands the process of being in a quarterback battle. This is not new for him. I don't think a whole lot of things are taking him by surprise. Those are the intangibles, those are the things that when he decided to ultimately choose the University of Missouri, we knew those were known quantities coming in.

We haven't thrown interceptions yet. You can't go against the defense in individual skill development. We'll see how those things transpire, what the mental toughness looks like, if you're not getting the reps you want, or somebody else is excelling that day.

Q. That game against Kentucky the last couple years has really turned into a rock fight. What is it about that matchup that lends to that?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Well, first off, Coach Stoops does a tremendous job. Obviously knows exactly what the blueprint of his program is and how he wants to develop it.

He's had the benefit of some really strong defensive schemes and defensive players. Their defensive line is as impressive as anybody we play against, save for Georgia.

So I think that's part of it.

I think offensively last year we were able to have -- Tyler Badie really came on the scene, we had the ball in our hand, opportunity to go try to tie the game up, didn't get it done on a fourth down right there.

I have a lot of respect for Mark and that program, what he's been able to do. It's going to be another good game. We get 'em later in the year, this year, which has been the first time that we've done that. I think we've played 'em either week three or last year was week two.

It will be interesting to see where our teams are at at that point in the season.

Q. Right in the shadows, you're the second greatest baseball city in America, St. Louis. Growing up in Memphis, the Cardinal reach is far. Do you have to fight to get the Missouri fans away from Busch Stadium, or do you do a lot of work with them? Here in Atlanta the marriage between the Braves and the Southeastern footprint is second to none that I've ever seen. I've been around Missouri, I think the two of 'em together, y'all could add on to the stadium if you get that kind of enthusiasm for the Tigers like they have for the Cardinals.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Who is the first best city?

Q. New York, just by numbers.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, hey, I actually tried to go to the Cardinals baseball game yesterday, got rained out. Got a tremendous love for the Cardinals and what championship baseball is. St. Louis is used to winning championships.

It's interesting because there's a lot of people who align with the Cardinals who may not live in the state of Missouri or from St. Louis. I don't necessarily know we can get all of those fans.

I definitely think we have to align with that championship standard and vision. I made this comment a couple of times. You can be a Cardinals fan, a Blues fan, a Chiefs fan, a Royals fan, but we all need to be Mizzou Tiger fans because we all live in the state and represent 6.5 million, and we are the window to the university of our state.

Every major sporting program or organization in that state has won a championship, whether it's the Chiefs, the Cardinals, the Royals or the Blues, they've all won a championship. It's Mizzou's time to embrace that same standard and get to that level.

It's not going to happen overnight. It's not going to happen because I say it. We've got to work towards that.

Q. Missouri was one of the programs to face Georgia when Darnell Washington was healthy. Now they've added Arik Gilbert. You have some experiences in



different offenses. How dynamic can a three-tight end offense be?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: They can probably win a national championship. I mean, I don't know. I don't know what those guys are. I've seen them on tape.

They're really good. They got a great quarterback who can distribute the ball. They have a long offensive line. They run the ball. Coach Monken does an excellent job getting them into the right schemes, the right plays. Probably the perfect play-caller for that group of guys.

Without knowing more than that, I'd say the ceiling is they need to win a national championship.

Q. What are your thoughts on Missouri renewing those old rivalries with Texas and Oklahoma when they join the league?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I'm all for it. I think I said up here earlier that I think the beauty of college football is the rivalries that we have. I think it's the shared traditions and pageantry of the game. I think we got to be careful that we don't miss that or lose that in search of better TV contracts or better TV exposure.

We're going to lose the basis of who we are.

I'm for playing consistent games. I'm for playing consistent opponents, building a consistent level of expectation that these are the teams that you need to beat, these are the teams that you need to be comparing yourself against.

When you have a constant rotation, I don't know how you're going to be able to do that. I don't know how you have a basis for comparison.

So that would be my response there. Yes, Mark, that means I'm for that schedule model (smiling).

Q. From a leadership standpoint, how hard is it to build leaders? Would you rather be a player-driven type of team or a coach-driven team? Since Commissioner Sankey went there, tell me about, considering your household, how many shoes are in your house?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I have no idea how many pairs of shoes I have. I would not like to be called out on the carpet on whether or not I have the largest collection. I know I don't. I know Tony Elliott probably does. I've seen his collection before.

I don't even know what the first question was.

Q. Leadership.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Leadership, yeah.

I think in the past when you established a program, it was consistent over the years, you built it through mat drills in winter conditioning. That's not the case anymore. You don't know who your team is going to be until May. Summer conditioning and fall camp is when you develop your leaders, you develop the identity of your program, the identity of your team.

I think it's a new challenge for college football. You do mat drills in February and March, and those guys transfer, new guys come in, haven't experienced it, you're going to have to go back to the drawing board to have that shared adversity, shared experience to develop the leadership that you need to to win games.

Q. As far as I can tell, Sam Horn hadn't been drafted yet. How good is that for you guys? What discussions have you had about him in pro baseball? Do you expect him to be on campus this fall?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Well, Sam is currently on campus right now. Just because he hasn't been drafted doesn't mean that he hasn't taken phone calls. The Major League draft is a lot different than any other sport's draft. They actually call you before and ask are you going to be willing to take this slot.

Sam and his representation, his parents, have had a plan the whole time. They know what their plan is, what their worth is. They're waiting to see if somebody wants to maybe meet that.

But currently right now, we expect him. He was at workouts this morning. He'll be at workouts tomorrow. But the draft is not over yet. Sam is a really talented player that's got a great opportunity to leave his mark on Mizzou football and Mizzou baseball. We're excited for him to come in and be the best version of himself.

Q. I haven't talked to Gus since he left Auburn. I assume you guys talk. If so, he looks a lot happier, more relaxed. Not saying there's not pressure at UCF. Maybe it's not like to Auburn. Does he seem happier, things are less crazy for him?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Bob, I screwed it up. He sent me a text earlier that said, Make sure you tell my man Bob hello.

Yeah, we talk quite a bit. He's a great mentor to me. I think he really enjoys his work environment, he really

enjoys working with Terry and his staff. I actually went down there and got to see him.

Gus is a dreamer and a builder. He's always been that way. He's dreaming about what he can build at UCF. He's got a great challenge in front of him, a great vision.

You're right. He's let his hair go gray so he doesn't let the stress get to him too much anymore. I guess Kristi doesn't care if it's gray.

Q. The transfer portal has become so prevalent. You added pieces offensively. When you're going into the portal and you're gauging whether a guy is going to be part of your program, what is the decision-making process like if you decide to add one?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: For us at the University of Missouri, it is all about the right fit, focused intangibles, talented and tough. We have a specific criteria of what we want to be: Do we have a need for that position? Can they compete? If they were at the previous school, were they a starter? What was their role? What is their reasoning for leaving? Are they going to be happy with the competition and the role that they have at the University of Missouri?

I think all of those things come together. You got to ask yourself some hard questions.

But at the end of the day you got to ask yourself, do they fit what you're trying to build. We had a lot of guys come. We had a lot of guys visit. Ultimately it's about finding the right fit.

I feel really good about the fit of our football team right now. There's a cohesiveness to our team. There's a brotherhood to our team that is exactly where it needs to be in this point of the season, in July.

I look forward to the challenges that we have. And there are many. Five true road games at really difficult places to play, at K-State, at Auburn, at Florida, at South Carolina, at Tennessee. That's a heck of a challenge. But we're working really hard, we're training with an elite edge to be able to meet that challenge head on.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time this afternoon.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: MIZ...

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