

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 21, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Josh Heupel

Press Conference

GREG SANKEY: Josh Heupel is the Steve Spurrier First Year Coach of the Year Award, only two-time winner of that award in its history, in 2018 and 2021.

As a head coach, Josh ranks in the top 10 among head coaches nationally in NFL Draft picks produced in the last two NFL Drafts combined.

As a college football player, he was runner-up for the Heisman Trophy in 2000, led the Oklahoma Sooners to an undefeated regular season, national championship, finishing with a victory over Florida State in the 2001 Orange Bowl.

We are in the College Football Hall of Fame, that's the Captain Obvious moment. Josh is on the ballot for this year's College Football Hall of Fame nominees from the National Football Foundation.

He's the son of a coach, his father, Ken. Joined him watching film when his father was head coach at Northern State University, and I think is ingrained in him football, as we were talking about some of the specifics of the game behind the curtain.

Native of Aberdeen, South Dakota, he led the Tennessee Volunteers last year in offense, scoring an offense jump 99 spots in FBS rankings.

University of Tennessee head coach, Josh Heupel.

JOSH HEUPEL: Great to see everybody here this summer. It's been fast and furious. I hope you guys have truly gotten a chance to enjoy your summer. You can hear the rain up top. I'm going to try to use my coaching voice.

Excited to be here with you. A year ago I talked about the traditions of being in the volunteer experience. All things good about Knoxville, the university, Vol Nation across the country.



Year two, have really gotten a chance to truly live in it, immerse in it, just soak it in. It's a great time to be a volunteer.

I reflect back on the last year, the success we've had a football program, where we're going, but also the success we've had throughout our entire athletic department. Fun to take our players, family, kids, to the games in Knoxville, Tennessee. That's men's and women's basketball, baseball, all of our Olympic sports. So many positive things happening on campus there.

For us on the football side of it, exciting about the renovations, the expansion of our current Anderson Training facility. Great players lounge, recovery area. Over \$100 million project in reinvigorating Neyland Stadium, which is one of the great venues in college sports. So much excitement that exists.

A great amount of that is due to our leadership: Danny White, our athletic director; Chancellor Plowman; and our president, Randy Boyd. Great leadership that has a vision of how we want to compete, giving our players all the resources they need, and they're going to go out and chase it every single day for us. It's been fun.

A year ago I talked about we were in a race to become as good as we could as fast as we can. I'm really proud of what we did in that first 12 months. But so excited about what's going to happen here in the future, too.

We took great strides in year one in our culture, the sense of accountability, standards within our program. How were we going to compete together and enjoy that process, how we were going to be connected and love one another.

As much as anything, we've improved in that area, not just from where we finished the season, but since we got back in January. Really excited about what's happening there.

Last year we broke eight school records on the offensive side of the football. We finished top 10 in the country for tackles for loss. I think we had five guys that were drafted, the most inside of our program since 2017. There's a ton of excitement. Everybody in Vol Nation recruits across the



country. Our fan base, you can feel and sense that energy every single day.

A lot of our success can be attributed to the three guys that we brought here today. Three really special players, but even better people in how they approach everyday life, how they live their life outside of the game.

Hendon Hooker, you guys know his story, a transfer that came into our program a year ago. Earned the starting job. Competed so consistently throughout the year. Grew throughout the year. Has taken great strides in off-season. A young man that had an opportunity to declare for the draft, came back to our program I believe because of the culture we have, the improvements he knew he could make in coming back in helping his career as he steps to that next level after the season is over.

Hendon is a pure winner. He is a great leader inside of our program. I think from year one to year two, that's one of the things that he's really been able to gravitate to and grab ahold of, is that leadership component. Everybody inside of our building feels his energy and focus every single day.

I know I'll get questions about NIL here at some point. Hendon is all things good about NIL. You look at the scriptures book that he co-wrote. His impact in our community, the youth inside of our community, I think that's exactly what NIL should be. So proud of what he's done.

Safety that's with us, Tre Flowers, a young man from Atlanta. So excited as we got on the plane today about coming home and being able to represent himself, his family, and our program.

Fifth-year player that's made great strides in the off-season, physically changing his body. The focus that he comes into the building every single day with. Another young man that's really grown on the leadership side of it.

Cedric Tillman, who a year ago nobody had really heard of. Now he's regarded as one of the best at his position at wide receiver in the entire country. His work habits a year ago parlayed into him playing the way that he did. Certainly, as we look forward, expect great things from him.

But I think it's a great story about college football. As we embark on this part of the year, the work that guys have put in since January, giving themselves a chance to make that next step as a player when we get on the football field this fall. Really excited about his future here this year and in the future.

For us, looking ahead as we have prepared since January

in each quarter of our off-season, one of the things we've been stressing is the ability to finish. That comes from a lot of different things. It comes from how you live your daily life, your ability to finish a rep inside your strength and conditioning programming, it comes in how you finish a semester academically. I'm really proud of what we're doing.

A year ago we had four or five games that we had an opportunity to win in the fourth quarter, we didn't end up on the right side of that. Finishing the right way I think is something we've taken a great stride in during our off-season. It's been purposeful in who we are every single day.

Our work habits had to greatly increase from a year ago. We talked about as a football team, teams that hope, teams that believe and then teams that expect. Teams that expect, they expect to win, they find a way to win because of the work they've put in during the off-season. That's been one of our focuses.

I'm really proud of the strides that our team has taken since last January. Excited about getting on the football field with them here in a week or so as we embark on training camp. Can't wait for fall to kick off. We get a chance to open up on Thursday night in front of the entire country. Looking forward to Vol Walk and running out the T and getting ready to compete inside Neyland Stadium.

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

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. You enjoyed tremendous success as a player, finishing as the runner-up for the Heisman Trophy. How has your success as a player helped you in your coaching career?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, for myself embarking on the challenge that we did 18 months ago at Tennessee, rebuilding an iconic, historic program, I was able to look back at my playing career, a program that hadn't been to a bowl game for five straight years before we got there. Obviously a great amount of success in my first two years there.

What were the footprints, the strongholds that you had to have inside of your program to grow? I certainly look back on my playing career from a global view inside of the program, but also personally in the route that I took to get there, the work habits that I had to have to become the player that I became.

One of the things for our players that I talk about, and



certainly like Cedric and Hendon this year, great numbers a year ago. As they put the challenge in front of themselves for year two, it's never going to be about the numbers. Numbers in year two as a player weren't near the numbers I had in year one.

It's going to be about winning football games. Those are things that I talk about inside the quarterback room, I talk about with our staff, but also things that I share with our entire program on a time-to-time basis.

Q. Obviously it's about the team offensively. Now with some of the guys you lost at wide receiver a year ago, what kind of extra attention do you expect Cedric Tillman to get from defenses this year? What's been your experience counteracting a guy that's a prime target at wide receiver?

JOSH HEUPEL: A year ago who thought Ced was going to have the year he had or Velus was going to become a high draft pick like he became, or JaVonta was going to have the impact he had inside of our offense.

That's the great thing about college football, a quarter of your roster is turning over every year. A lot of great players leave. But with that there is great opportunity. Certainly Ced is going to get a ton of attention. It's our role as offensive staff to put him in a position to create isolations, one on one, find a way to get him the football.

It's imperative for us offensively that the other guys step up and play at a championship level, too.

Very proud of Jalin Hyatt and the steps he's made. I think there's great competition inside of our program at the slot position. On the outside, this training camp there will be great competition as well. We're going to need somebody to step forward, multiple guys to step forward, at all those positions.

Q. You mentioned the improvements to Neyland Stadium. How important are those home SEC recruiting weekends, the ability to show off facilities on campus?

JOSH HEUPEL: Absolutely imperative that you use those opportunities. That's true of official visits, but it's true of unofficial visits, as well.

When we get recruits up to Knoxville, Tennessee, they see the river, they see Vol Walk, they see the game day environment with over 100,000 people there. It gives them a great perspective on this being college football as good as it gets.

Then it's up to the culture piece to find out if it's the right fit for them. Those are great weekends for us. We got a bunch of home games here against really good opponents inside of this league that will be great recruiting weekends for us.

Q. Cedric, how much have you seen that maturation process with him? How different is he in where he's at, just understanding the offense, compared to last year?

JOSH HEUPEL: Last year this time, a good grasp for having only had 15 days on the practice field. He's a great example for everybody inside of our program that if you go about your business the right way every day and you compete, you're going to grow.

A year ago I talked about him, the first third of spring ball, second third of spring ball, last third of spring ball, how dramatically different of a player he was. Great work habits during the summer.

For him in year two, compared to some of the great guys I've had, maybe a Gabe Davis that's had a huge impact in the NFL with Buffalo, his ability to really sit back, watch cut-ups, digest what we're doing offensively, but get into the intricacies of what he's doing, I think it's going to allow him to play faster, to be more decisive and create more opportunities and bigger windows for himself. Ultimately that should lead to us being successful offensively.

But he's done a great job all off-season. You talk about January, February before we got spring ball, he was in there watching film every single day on his own. He's got great command of what we're doing. That allows him to play within himself at a higher level.

Q. The Tennessee loss in the Swamp was pretty one-sided last year. Somehow you guys flipped the switch and went in a different direction. What changed with your program? Were you surprised after what you saw that day, what happened to Florida?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I just think in late third quarter there's some things we did, self-inflicted wounds, that changed the way that game was played in the fourth quarter.

As a program, a young program, you have an opportunity to learn from it, grow, and push forward and really climb, or it's something that can be devastating. It's one of the moments inside our staff and program that changed the trajectory of the program.

Sat in the team meeting room, were able to dissect and



show them not the entire game, but the key moments of things that we controlled that had nothing to do with anybody that was wearing a different colored jersey that impacted the game and the way it was played.

Through that I think they gained confidence in who they were, what we were doing. We were able to compete and grow throughout the course of the season.

Q. Curious if the head coach in you is ever in conflict with the play-caller in you? Maybe the head coach wants to call something more conservative, but the play-caller wants to do something a little more bold?

JOSH HEUPEL: I try to wear the head coach hat in all of those moments. I think you're always constantly balancing what's best for the football team in situational football.

Q. I was actually going to ask you something, a friend of mine from Oklahoma, John Hoover, your former quarterback at UCF, Dillon Gabriel, is at OU now, just wondered what you think about him as player, what he can do for OU, what they're getting in him?

JOSH HEUPEL: Great, great leader, great work habits. Going to be so consistent inside the building. Guy that is a true freshman, true sophomore, led the country in passing over those two years. They're getting a great quarterback, no doubt about it.

Q. The NIL question. How does your program go about managing that, especially when it comes to possibly interacting with any sort of collective?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, for us, I think there's great opportunity in it. I mentioned Hendon and what he's been able to do, have an impact on our community, on youth inside of our community in particular. It's an opportunity to educate and empower our student-athletes, which is what college football and the collegiate experience is all about.

I think it's dramatically changed the way that young people come into your program, how thoughtful they are about every situation that they're involved in, how they're portrayed in what's out there on social media, the decisions they're making every night of the week.

I think in those ways it's such an empowering tool for our student-athletes. I just go back to myself as a player. Certainly the most powerful thing that I had was my teammates and the logo that I was playing for.

At the same time, though, I think I was creating some value there, too. I would have liked to have had an opportunity to have been afforded to take part in NIL. Would have liked

to have worn my starting left tackle jersey or worn his shirt.

I look at my own kids, Jace and Hannah, that get a chance to run around the house or run with their friends and wear a Cedric Tillman and Hendon Hooker shirt or jersey. I think there's empowering opportunities through NIL.

Q. Lane has made a bunch of jokes about having to sign mustard bottles and golf balls after last year's game. Have you had a similar experience in?

JOSH HEUPEL: I didn't sign any mustard bottles or golf balls. Maybe wish I had had a golf ball that night, you know what I mean? I'm only kidding (smiling).

It was a great, competitive atmosphere, man. That's college sports as good as it gets. Just the energy and electricity inside of that stadium for 59 minutes, man, it was special.

Q. Hendon is one of the notable examples of transfers between the ACC and SEC this year. How important is that geographical footprint? Is it important to you as you examine potential transfers? Do you expect that to be a continuing thing in the future?

JOSH HEUPEL: You're talking about with Hendon?

Q. Yes.

JOSH HEUPEL: Him coming into year two -- the transfer portal obviously is a part for everybody as they manage their roster. Us at UT, our footprint is going to be extremely critical to us at all times.

I think that's one of the things that's unique about Knoxville, is being able to get east, west, north and south, touch so many great recruiting areas. At the same time we have a brand and logo that's going to allow us, with the style of play and the culture that we have, to reach coast to coast as well. Certainly inside of that footprint, that's going to be important for us.

Q. What specifically about your communication style has allowed you to find so much success with are players inside your program?

JOSH HEUPEL: I think being extremely real with them, being completely transparent. One of the things that I've learned sitting in this role is to do less talking and do a lot more listening. There's a lot of value in that. You gain things from your staff. But you gain them from your players, too.

From night one where I was introduced as the head coach,



being able to have a real conversation with our players, we were in there for over an hour and a half, I gained some insight into things that were right, things that were broken, how they felt about things.

I think being able to attack some of those things early in it, I think they gained confidence and trust in me. Then the ability to be very consistent in what the standards, expectations, who and what we're going to be about, how I communicate with them every single day, has been vitally important, too. They're going to see me, they're going to feel my energy. I'm going to be the first guy they see when they walk up the stairs every single day as we get ready to embark on the competitive journey for that day.

Q. You talk about value. How much value do you think having your quarterback and your receiver go to Times Square, get NIL education and all that stuff the last couple days provides the future for helping your current student-athletes? What have you noticed about the difference in recruiting when you first got here and a year and a half in?

JOSH HEUPEL: What a great opportunity, right? Isn't that what the collegiate experience is about, is exposing and giving kids opportunities way outside of the realm of what they would normally have to grow professionally and personally.

Over the last couple days, Hendon and Cedric had an opportunity to go up to New York City, take part in the Nasdaq, meet with local leaders of the great corporations and form and create relationships that should empower them whenever their playing days are done at UT, maybe currently while they're there.

That's a great opportunity. Exactly what the collegiate experience should be all about.

The landscape of recruiting for UT now, the Power T is so dramatically different. Uncertainty when we first got there. The steady ground that we're on. The trajectory that our program is currently at. The competitive nature. The energy. The connection that you can see in the way that our players play.

Now you're not talking about what you're going to do. Recruits have had an opportunity to see it. Now the greatest resource and tool that we have in recruiting is our current student-athletes. We're able to get recruits on campus. Those guys, having an opportunity to spend time and talk with them is the greatest tool that we have.

Q. We're still in this infancy of NIL. I'm curious what lessons you've learned in the early stages of dealing

with that?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I think it's extremely important that you have a great culture inside of your locker room, that you have strong leadership, that you're able to have an open dialogue, be transparent and be honest with them as you see things maybe that are coming up as an issue or things that they're struggling with, educating and empowering them, giving them an opportunity to have their voice heard, and to be real with them.

As long as you do that, I think you're going to have consistent and constant buy-in from your players, trust from them, which are some of the key ingredients inside your program.

Q. You've talked about how the biggest improvements come from year one to year two. Defensively, what have you seen that you guys are going to make those needed improvements, specifically on third down?

JOSH HEUPEL: It can be the greatest from game one to game two, year one to year two can be the greatest push of growth inside of your program. But it comes down to your work habits every single day. I am proud of what we've done up until this point. We have a long ways to go before we kick off on opening night.

For us defensively, there's a lot of things that we did extremely well. You look at our tackles for loss, getting people into third-and-long. We got to be better in third-and-long situations, which you're playing where you want to defensively when you're in that position. We got to get better in the red zone, too, forcing field goals and creating negatives there, not giving up seven points.

Part of that is being able to affect the quarterback not just with pressures but with a four-man rush. We got to have some competition on the defensive line. I think we've certainly gained in the depth that we have inside of our program.

A year ago we were with 69 scholarship players as we opened fall training camp. We were the thinnest football team in America, hands down, not even close. You look across America, many were playing with 90 to 95 because of COVID seniors.

We're deeper than we were. We're not as deep as we need to be. We'll still be under 85. But I think the depth, the competition, the year inside of our system, inside strength and conditioning, the ability to strain, finish, focus at the end of football games should allow us to take a step defensively for sure.



Q. With the success you had in year one, expectations are now higher. People want even more. How do you feel about being at a program where there's always a hunger to do better than last year?

JOSH HEUPEL: Man, I don't want to be anywhere where there isn't hunger to be better. The expectations are never going to be higher outside of the building than they are inside of the building.

Getting our kids to understand, not soak in the outside noise... They're going to hear it, they're going to see it, but it changes the way you strain, focus, go about your daily habits.

A year ago what was being said outside of our program had nothing to do with who and what we were as a program - when I came up here for Media Day a year ago - to who and what we were when we opened up the season last fall and how we competed every single week.

The outside noise will have nothing to do with who we are this fall either. We have to do a great job of continuing on this journey, competing, finishing our summer workouts here next week, then having a great training camp doing it one day at a time.

Q. Just in terms of your offense and the evolution of it, I know tempo is the key, but in terms of growing it into year two, how important is it to have a four-minute type of offense, be able to hold the ball?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, tempo is one of the tools that we use to apply pressure to a defense. There's a lot of things that we use. That's one of our best and greatest tools, for sure.

When we've been playing from ahead, that four-minute offense is something that we have used different places that I've been. We've been extremely successful in it. A lot of that stems from the fact that we're able to rush the football.

Guys get caught up in quarterback numbers and wide receivers numbers. At the end of the day it all starts for us in the ability to run the football, control the line of scrimmage.

We need to play from ahead, then be able to do those things that you're talking about.

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

JOSH HEUPEL: Appreciate it. Have a great afternoon.

