

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 19, 2023

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Stoops

Press Conference



MARK STOOPS: Thank you, Commissioner. Appreciate you. Had an opportunity to sit back and visit with Greg when I first got into town this morning and visiting with he and his staff. And I know you guys get tired of hearing about it, but remarkable man, great leadership. Love visiting with him and his staff. First class and everything they do.

Without being too redundant, I always acknowledge because I truly mean it, and I care about the media, and I wanted to just tell you how much I appreciate you, what you do over all these years, 11th season at the University of Kentucky. I get to know quite a few of you, and seeing the way you work and seeing you around the country and covering all different sports, and just greatly appreciate you. And so many great stories about our players through the years and great coverage, not only within the SEC footprint but, really, nationally.

And you look at the national media, Kirk Herbstreit and what he's going through with his son, Zak and just want to give a shoutout to Zak and the Herbstreit family and let them know our prayers are with them.

So thank you to the media.

The three players that are here, that I have with me here this year are all from Kentucky. And that really wasn't by design. As you look at our roster and trying to choose from so many good choices, came up with these three, and they all happen to be from Kentucky and great young men: J.J. Weaver from the Louisville area, Octavious Oxendine, he's from the Fort Knox area, and Eli Cox, and Eli happens to be the chairman of the Leadership Council of SAC. And that's what we look for, three tremendous leaders, great people, great players, and certainly Eli and the leadership that he's providing throughout the SEC.

Like most coaches, excited about getting back to this and getting back to some form of sanity, and for us, and I think for myself, the sanity will be getting back out on that

practice field and getting with our players and dealing with the chaos that goes on with practice.

But that's a good thing. That's a comfort level for myself and for the coaches that are here, just getting out there and getting around to the X's and O's and getting around the players and getting in meetings and spending time with them.

We talked a lot, I talked last year, and we have talked a lot about the changing times and it is what it is. At this point, I think it's all, for myself, is you better adapt, you better conform to the rules that we have in front of us until things change, and embrace it.

And as the General said: If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less. For me, it's embracing those challenges and having our team embrace that as well.

There's a lot of turnover in this day and age, new players, new faces. And that's part of the game. For us, it's the way we think, what's our mindset like and how we are embracing that, how we prepare, and how we go to work every day.

I feel very good about the program. I feel good about the new additions in the players that we brought in to help us with the current roster, the nucleus that we have. I love the coaching staff. I think obviously the first thing that I get asked a lot about is bringing back Liam Coen. And believe me, very excited about that.

But I'd like to start on the defensive side of the ball with coach Brad White and the defensive coaches and the consistency that we have played with on the defensive side of the ball and the continuity that we have there. That puts a big smile on my face, obviously being a defensive coach and defensive-minded person. I just greatly appreciate that, the defensive coaches and our players, the way they do things and the way they work and the consistency that they do have.

Certainly we want to be better in certain games, certain areas, and we will work hard to do that. The other area



that I had to address was special teams. We needed to improve. We brought in Jay Boulware. Jay was a guy I tried to hire, wanted to hire for years. I have great respect for Jay. He goes back to years ago working for my brother at Oklahoma, working at Texas. Been a lot of good places, and just really like the approach that Jay has and the work ethic that he has.

And then on the offensive side of the ball, bringing Liam back, a very big deal for us. You go back a couple years ago and you see the immediate impact that he had with our offense and the energy and the juice that he had within our building, but he was still at that point relatively unproven.

He had been a tremendous coach but had not called plays in the SEC or in the Power Five, but came in and did that and did a heck of a job. And that catapulted him to being named offensive coordinator of the defending world champions in L.A. Then it worked out to be able to bring him back this past year. Very excited about that.

I think we both have a lot of trust and belief in each other and confidence in each other, but that doesn't make it any easier. There's still a lot of work to be done, but there is some familiarity with each of us, and I think that helps.

So overall, just very excited about our staff and what we have going on. You know, I think before I take a question, I think it's pretty obvious that we have to get back to being who we are at Kentucky. And we've always been a physical football team, and it started up front and playing physical on the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball.

I feel like we fell short of that a year ago. Obviously we have to improve. We have to protect the quarterback. We have to be physical and have some balance. Went out and hit the transfer portal with some players that will help us on the offensive side of the ball and protect the quarterback.

Another obvious one is the quarterback, Devin Leary. Getting him out of the transfer portal from NC State, a proven player, a guy when healthy played and participated at the highest level and had great consistency. And so very excited about Devin.

Another one was special teams. Went out and, as I mentioned, with the leadership of Jay Boulware, but needed to be more consistent, just with everything, whether it be snap and hold and punting, kicking, whatever. The routine, we need to be routine, and that didn't always happen a year ago.

So we are addressing those areas as well. Again, I feel very good about the year. Excited to get going. With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. You made one of the biggest additions in the transfer portal in Devin Leary. Tell me about your new quarterback and what you expect from him this season and what you've seen from him so far?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, Devin, I saw in the spring, a guy that competes, competes at a high level. I love the way he goes to work. He has a lot of confidence. He has a chip on his shoulder, which I like. You know, obviously for him, getting his season cut short a year ago with injury didn't sit well with him. So he's very anxious to get out there and lead.

I feel like just the mindset that he has, a tough kid and a Jersey kid, and the way he grew up, he fits right in with our culture. And he's been extremely accurate. He's one of those guys that maybe a year ago at times would completely wow you with his arm ability and the strength that he has.

Devin is the type of guy that can make all the throws, but he'll also put it in some spots or throw it and layer it in some spots that will wow you.

Been impressed, and excited to see him continue to grow.

Q. Two-part question. You've done a great job identifying young defensive coaches. Matt House was great for you, Jon Sumrall from my community, and now Brad White. What do you look for when you are evaluating a young coach and that you're looking for defensively? And second part, I know you work very well with Mitch Barnhart, your athletic director. Is there any chance we might see Jon Sumrall play against Kentucky?

MARK STOOPS: With the hiring of the coaches, each of the guys you mentioned, Jon never had the opportunity to move up, but he would have had we had change.

Each of those guys, I brought in Matt House with the understanding he had NFL experience and college experience, and I always knew he had the ability to be the next coordinator, and he did.

With Brad White, the same thing. When I hired him out of the NFL, we had some fantastic, young offensive or outside linebackers, and I wanted them developed at the highest level.

Josh Allen went on to be the Defensive Player of the Year, and Brad had the ability to do that, but he also had the ability big picture to slide in and be the next coordinator.

That's what I'm looking for on the defensive side of the ball, in particular. You would like it on all sides, but in particular on defense because you see so many varieties of offenses in college football that you have to have at least two, maybe three guys that are capable of being a coordinator and have big-picture ideas.

Certainly Jon Sumrall had the leadership and knowledge and everything and the full package to not only be a coordinator but a great head coach like he is right now. As far as that goes, I don't know, we'll see. Troy is playing pretty good football. We have a tough enough schedule. So we'll see where it goes.

Q. Kentucky has been a real winner in the transfer portal, and obviously there are some guys that you lost, but the large minority, it's been more talent coming in than leaving. What do you attribute that to? Anything specific?

MARK STOOPS: I hope it has to do with the culture of our team. As transfer players hit the market and they go looking at teams, I think the ones that will fit our program are the ones that will want to come in and contribute and fit into the culture that we have.

You know, name, image, likeness plays a part at some schools. I haven't found it to be the deciding factor at Kentucky. You know, I like the guys that we have and the fit and the people that they are, and you know, we need them to come in and contribute, certainly, this year.

Q. What's your relationship like with Brent Venables, and what do you think of Oklahoma joining the SEC?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, when I first heard about Oklahoma and Texas, my immediate reaction was, wow, already a great conference, going to get better. And excited about that opportunity. You know, it will just make it that much more of a challenge with two great programs and the history of both of those programs.

I've known Coach Venables for a long time, back to his days at Kansas State where he started coaching with Mike and Bob at K-State, and then of course at Oklahoma. Known Brent for a long time. Think the world of him as a person and as a coach, and you know, excited for him because I know he'll do great things there, and I think he's a great fit and certainly, very close to my family.

Q. Davis, obviously a guy you're familiar with, having gone against him. What do you think he brings to the table? He rushed for like 130 yards against y'all last year.

MARK STOOPS: Thanks. (Laughter.)

Q. As far as Liam goes, how has he changed since he was there the first time? Even though he had a tough year with the Rams, do you feel like maybe he grew from that?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, great point. That is exactly why we recruited him because he did run -- Ray Davis ran for 130 against us. I thought it was just over a hundred but thanks a lot. 129, okay.

No, very, very good player. Great respect for Ray. When he got in the portal and we had an opportunity to visit with him, it didn't take you five, ten minutes to spend with a young man like that that you knew he was the type of player you wanted on your team, both as a football player and with the character and being a graduate of Vanderbilt and just a great young man and very talented player. And very tough. I felt like he fit our mold.

With Liam, I think there is great familiarity with the two of us. You know, I think with him coming back, he knew what to expect from me. I knew what to expect from him. I think the difference is there's a confidence level.

Again, that doesn't mean it's just going to happen or it's going to be easy, but Liam is much more proven at this point than he was when he came in the first time. I mean, that's the difference, so I think the confidence level is there.

Again, that doesn't mean it's just going to happen. And our players need to understand that, and certainly our coaches. And we have a lot of work to do. And the game changes. Things change, you know, for us, quickly, and you have to stay on top of it.

But I think he definitely grew from going to the NFL and going through the obstacles that L.A. faced, and that happens at our level as well. So you learn to deal with things when they are going well and how to handle things when they are not going well and how to adapt and find solutions, so I have a lot of confidence in him and excited about that.

Q. You touched on the physicality, and people talk about how physical Kentucky is and that it's one of the physical teams they have played. How important is that physicality to Kentucky, and how important is it that you know other teams respect that physicality in turn?

MARK STOOPS: I think definitely the last part of your question, it's important to a degree, because without that, you're not going to win at the highest level. And we want to

do that, and we know we have a long way to go.

But, you know, I think that's part of why our players work so hard and the way they train and put themselves in a position, because to be consistent, you have to be physical on the line of scrimmage on both sides.

And it goes beyond that. You look at the great teams in this league, you look at Georgia, how physical they are, how talented, but also you have to give them credit for how well-coached they are and how physical they are even at the perimeter, even at the skill positions.

So it takes a lot of things to put it together at the highest level, but to me, we can control the physical part of it, so we have to at least be that, and at times last year, it felt like we weren't successful enough at being who we are.

Now we have to put the other pieces together as well.

Q. What was the dynamic like having Mike on your staff this year? And the second part of the question is, Drake Stoops, what's it like watching his career from afar at Oklahoma?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it's really great having my brother, Mike, on the staff. Really, the biggest thing is big-picture ideas and the experience that he has.

As I mentioned earlier to the previous question about staff, defensive hires, whether it was Matt House and Brad White and Jon Sumrall and all those guys, but Mike, with all the experience that he has and a lot of knowledge. And he likes the role that he's in. He wants to support. He wants to support Brad. He wants to help where needed and have big-picture ideas but also be a great soldier, if you will, and do his part.

And then watching Drake, I can't tell you the sense of pride that our whole family has watching him play. Just the way he plays the game is a way that we certainly respect in how hard he plays and the way he sacrifices for his teammates, the way he competes at Oklahoma, and the legacy playing under his dad and playing under Bob with the tradition Bob had at Oklahoma; but Drake carrying that so well and handling it with such ease.

And I'm sure it has not been easy for him. He's had some ups and downs, like any player, but the way he's dealt with that, he gets a lot of respect from our family, that's for sure. No offense, but that's all that matters (laughing).

Q. You are returning your Top-5 pass catchers, led by Dane Key and Barion Brown. Talk about where this group ranks among better wide receiver units you've

had at Lexington.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it definitely is one of the most skilled units we have had. Certainly you can go back to a guy like Wan'Dale a couple years ago when Liam was there, and we found a way to get him the ball 105, 106 times, and I think we have that type of receiving core now that we could spread that out and have more consistency at other positions.

You know, those guys, with Dane and Barion, both performed at a high level last year as true freshmen, so it will be very exciting to see them grow and continue to improve and get better, along with some other very talented players. So we feel good about that unit.

Q. 2021, you said you were not surprised one bit that Tennessee was caught cheating. Now that the details of that situation have been made public, what's your reaction?

MARK STOOPS: I'm sorry, I lost you -- oh, there you are.

You know, really, at this point, I have no reaction. That was two years ago, and I've moved way beyond that. So no disrespect, but I just don't have anything. I don't know, you know, much about it, and worried about my own backyard. And so it is what it is. I have no control over that.

Q. Asking about Will Levis, as someone who experienced that had draft night wait with him, how surprised were you by that, and how do you think it impacted Will, still might, as he starts his career here?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it was obviously a very difficult situation to sit through and be with him and just try to support him. And really just wanted him to know that we were there for him and support him. He has an absolutely tremendous family that he's very close to that was right there with him. We were just part of that support system, and it was tough to go through.

But Will, he'll come out of the other side. That was just a little blip on the radar. Went to a great organization with a great head coach that I have a lot of respect for right here in this city, and I think it fits the mentality that Will is comfortable with.

I think he will do very well and have a long NFL career and look back on that and say, it was a blip on the radar. Not fun. Not fun for anybody to go through that, but he went to a good team early in the second round, and he will be a very successful quarterback.

There's a pretty good one by the name of Jalen Hurts. He maybe didn't have to sit there through the Draft, but he went in later rounds, second or third, if I'm not mistaken, and look at the great career he's had so far and will continue to have.

For Will, he just has to stay the course and stay away from proving, you know, all that and just play ball because he's a heck of a player. He's very competitive, and he wants to win for his organization. And if he sticks to that, he'll be successful.

Q. Was there a moment that you realized you want to get Liam back and a moment that you realized that that was realistic?

MARK STOOPS: Yes and yes. That's one thing that's hard with the NFL guys, their season is over so late. It was just like the year before put us in a bad position because he was not able to be hired by L.A. until a couple weeks after the Super Bowl, and we all know how late the Super Bowl is played right now.

So that part of it can be challenging, but I'd rather not get into the timelines out of respect that everybody is involved because, you know, that was later in the process. I mean, I had to work through everything I was dealing with at Kentucky, and then certainly open it up for all options. And that's what I did, and talked to some really talented people. Ultimately, circled back to Liam, and fortunate to have him back.

Q. You talked a little bit about the three players from Kentucky. Has your recruiting strategy, for lack of a better word, evolved during your time at Lexington? Over the years, has it changed? And what's your thought on Kentucky football and where it's going?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it's always -- even if you go back to ten years ago, I've always stressed the importance of Kentucky. We have to handle our own backyard. You know, for us, then, dipping into southern Ohio or central Ohio at the time, it was just so close and the proximity, it just made sense, and the number of players that we have in Kentucky.

But the evolution of high school football in Kentucky has grown. Hopefully we had a small part in that. But I think the coaching that's going on at the high school level in Kentucky; the players that are there, there may not be as many in number year to year, but there's very talented players.

We have been able to do a very good job and recruit at a high rate from the guys that we're really targeting in

Kentucky, and hopefully we'll continue to do that because it's very important.

Q. Your match-up against Georgia, you guys have done a great job of limiting them, at least your defense has done a great job of limiting them from scoring points the last the years. What is it about that match-up that they are scoring points against everybody but that you guys seem to slow them down?

MARK STOOPS: I don't know, let's not talk about them. We don't need to aggravate them. They are the type of team, you challenge them, they are going to make you look bad.

I don't know. I don't know if -- you can't put your finger on any one thing. We know they are capable of going off against anybody and scoring and making good plays.

All you have to do is watch the Championship Game and playoffs and watch them against some really good football teams. They are capable of that with their coaching and with their players.

I do give a lot of credit to Brad White, our defensive coordinator, and staff and our players. They played really hard.

But close isn't good enough. I am proud of the way they competed on that side. Now we need to put it all together and bottom line is try to win the game. But again, I give them a lot of credit because I think they are -- I don't think it's talked about enough. They recruit at a high level, and they are talented, but they are very well-coached.

Q. Obviously Texas and Oklahoma joined the league. Are you finding that it's impacting anything on the recruiting trail in this class, being able to come further into the SEC footprint, and vice versa, you able to go further into Texas and Oklahoma because of them joining the league?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I think that's fair, fair question, and if you look into it and research it, I'm sure that's probably the case in some circumstances. For us, we have not deviated too far from what we have done or where we recruit, but you never know. Some of it is based upon relationships and where they are at and things of that nature. You never know, but I think it will impact it to some extent, yes.

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