

Sankey embellishes bold claims about SEC schedule



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True to his form, SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey boasted July 14 that nobody outside of his conference would trade its own league schedule in favor of an eight-game SEC schedule.

Sankey’s biased, but is he wrong? Well, he’s exaggerating – a bit, at least.

“I don’t believe there’s anyone looking to swap their conference schedule and its opponents with the opponents played by SEC conference teams in our conference schedule,” Sankey claimed in televised remarks on the first day of his conference’s media days.

Wisconsin might like a word. So, too, might Rutgers. Each received a brutal nine-game Big Ten draw.

Upon close examination of conference schedules, I don’t buy that no one would trade its conference schedule in favor of an SEC schedule.

Sankey is entitled to tout the SEC’s overall strength and that of its conference schedule. SEC teams consistently produce lofty strength-of-schedule metrics. The conference remains collectively stout, even as the Big Team’s cream became as sweet or sweeter as any league’s top end the past couple of seasons.

Sankey neglected to mention, though, that the SEC’s eight-game conference schedule – the Big Ten and Big 12 play nine conference games – allows its members to play more cupcake opponents than any other conference. He also overstated the number of SEC teams playing 10 games against Power Four competition.

And, he’s exaggerating when he says nobody would trade its conference schedule in favor of an SEC schedule. Most teams wouldn’t trade. A few likely would trade schedules this season.

Let’s review some of Sankey’s claims in his state of the conference address:

Sankey: “In the SEC, we play eight conference games while some others play nine conference games. Never been a secret.”

Fact-check: This is accurate. The



SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey speaks to the media during SEC Media Days at Omni Atlanta Hotel on July 14. JORDAN GODFREE/IMAGN IMAGES

SEC and ACC play eight conference games and require their members to play a power conference opponent in the non-conference schedule. Notre Dame and the two remaining Pac-12 teams count toward that non-conference requirement.

The Big Ten and Big 12 play nine conference games. Their members are not required to play a non-conference opponent from a power conference.

Most, but not all, Big Ten and Big 12 teams play at least one non-conference game against a Power Four non-conference opponent.

Sankey: “We’re going to continue to evaluate whether increasing the number of conference football games is appropriate for us. As I’ve said repeatedly, understanding how the (College Football Playoff) will evaluate strength of schedule and even strength of record is critically important in our decision-making.”

Fact-check: This is accurate. Sankey would prefer that the SEC add a ninth conference game, but his membership has resisted that so far. The SEC has not decided on its conference schedule for 2026 and beyond, so the possibility of increasing to nine games remains an option.

It’s fair to say the undecided nature of the College Football Playoff format for 2026 affects the SEC’s schedule debate.

Sankey: “Last season, all 16 members of the Southeastern Conference played at least nine games against what you would label power opponents. We had several that played 10 of their 12 games against power opponents. Some conferences have that, some don’t. The same will be true this year.”

Fact check: Let’s unpack Sankey’s claim that “several” SEC teams played 10 power opponents last season and will do so again this year. In fact, only three SEC teams played at least 10 Power Four

opponents during the 2024 regular season. Florida played 11 Power Four opponents. Georgia and LSU played 10.

This season, Alabama, Florida and South Carolina are the only SEC teams that will play 10 Power Four opponents. The rest will play nine Power Four opponents, except for Ole Miss, which plays eight SEC opponents, plus Washington State from the Pac-12.

Most teams from the ACC, Big Ten and Big 12 will play at least 10 games against Power Four competition. A handful of ACC, Big Ten and Big 12 teams only play nine Power Four opponents. Baylor and TCU from the Big 12 will play 11 games against Power Four competition.

Sankey: “I don’t believe there’s anyone looking to swap their conference schedule and its opponents with the opponents played by SEC Conference teams in our conference schedule, be it eight or nine” conference games.

Fact-check: This opinion seems exaggerated. Wisconsin will play seven of its nine Big Ten games against teams that finished 8-5 or better last season. In October, the Badgers will play Michigan (road), Iowa, Ohio State and Oregon (road) in successive weeks.

Including a non-conference game at Alabama, Wisconsin will play at least five, and maybe six, teams expected to be ranked in the US LBM preseason Top 25 Coaches Poll. The Badgers will play three games against teams that made the playoff last season within a gantlet that ranks among the nation’s toughest schedules.

Comparatively, Missouri’s eight-game SEC schedule includes only three teams that won at least eight games last season and no teams that made the Playoff. Tennessee and Auburn also drew favorable conference schedules, as compared to Wisconsin’s.

Rutgers’ Big Ten schedule includes a home game against Oregon and road games against Illinois, Ohio State and Penn State, all of which are expected to be preseason top-15 teams. The Scarlet Knights could be better off trading for an SEC schedule.

A small queue of power conference teams likely would trade their conference schedule in favor of an eight-game SEC draw, with Wisconsin standing at the head of the line.

McElroy, Kiffin think Saban will return to sidelines

Austin Curtright
USA TODAY NETWORK

ESPN analyst and former Alabama football quarterback Greg McElroy dropped quite the bombshell involving Nick Saban at SEC Media Days July 14.

McElroy, during his radio show on the morning of July 14, said he was told by someone “very much in the know” that Saban, the seven-time national championship winner, would return to coaching at some point. McElroy added his source was “adamant” about the prediction.

McElroy wasn’t the only person to predict Saban returning to football, either, as Ole Miss coach Lane Kiffin later echoed the prediction regarding his former boss at Alabama.

“I don’t think he’s done,” Kiffin told reporters in a breakout session in Atlanta, per the The Clarion Ledger, part of the USA TODAY Network. “... Whether it’s college or NFL, I think he’ll be back.”

Saban, who retired after the 2023-24 season, is currently an ESPN analyst

and key member of “College GameDay.” His last game came in an overtime loss to eventual national champion Michigan at the Rose Bowl in the 2024 College Football Playoff.

“A very much in the know person that I have a lot of respect for and have spent a lot of time around, and just really, really admire – they seem to think Nick Saban is not done coaching,” McElroy said on the “McElroy & Cubelic in the Morning” show on WJOX radio in Birmingham, Alabama. “He’s pretty adamant that he thinks Nick Saban will be coaching again.”

McElroy then added: “If it wasn’t someone notable, I would never say a word.”

ESPN personality Paul Finebaum responded to McElroy by shooting down what McElroy shared, stating he doesn’t think Saban is coming back.

“You know Nick Saban better than I do, but I ran into somebody the other day who spends time with Saban in Florida – you can imagine where – and



Ex-Alabama coach Nick Saban takes part in the Golden Bear Pro-Am on May 28. MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

said that he is literally having the time of his life,” Finebaum said. “Why wouldn’t he? I’m much closer to Nick Saban’s age than you are and I can assure when you have everything you want and start playing golf at the best golf clubs in America, and you start making friends who belong to even better golf clubs, and you make a lot of money for doing very

little work on TV, the interest in doing what he walked away from is not very high.

“He had a better situation at Alabama the day he left than he’ll have anywhere he goes, let’s say next year. I don’t know if it’s college or pros. Could he be talked into something in the NFL? I don’t know how, because I don’t think that itch burns anymore either.

“But my opinion is Nick Saban is done in coaching.”

If Saban were to return to college football, he’d be the oldest active head coach, as he’s one year older than North Carolina’s Bill Belichick. He’d be the second-oldest coach in the NFL, as he’s a few months younger than Las Vegas Raiders coach Pete Carroll.

The 11-time SEC champion, considered the best coach in college football history, seemed like a long shot to return to the sidelines. That scenario may not be quite as far-fetched as it was once thought, at least according to two prominent SEC figures.

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