

CFP Semifinal at the Capital One Orange Bowl: Georgia vs Michigan

Monday, December 27, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Michigan Wolverines Coach Josh Gattis

Press Conference



PLAYOFF
SEMIFINAL



When you've got a guy with his ability, his talent, his vision, his physicality, it makes him pretty complete. I wish we had him around here for another four or five years, but we're really, really proud of what he's accomplished and everything he's done to this point.

Q. How is Blake's foot? How has Blake's foot been, because against Ohio State and Iowa he had some pretty key runs, but you appeared to spot him. Where is he with that right now?

JOSH GATTIS: Blake is healthy. We're a healthy team, and that's where we're fortunate. Being able to take the last few weeks and get ourselves back to 100 percent, because as everyone noticed the last few weeks of the season, we were playing some really tough teams, but we had some bumps and bruises along the way, certain players being out. But the good thing for us is the next man stepped up and was always ready.

We're excited now that we're finally back to full speed and healthy. Just having great depth has allowed us to be in this position. Other than the few weeks where we had to put a lot on Hassan's plate, we've been able to have great depth and have different guys step up, whether it's Blake, whether it's Donovan, and so we're excited to finally get a chance to see a full-speed Blake Corum.

I think a little bit of what people saw about him in the Big Ten Championship Game was him catching himself back up to full strength, and he's ready to go, he's excited, and we're glad to have him back to 100 percent.

Q. You choked up a little bit during your speech earlier this month when you were talking about Jim Harbaugh and the relationship you had with him. Could you elaborate on that and the confidence he's shown in you as offensive coordinator and play caller, especially after the way things went last year?

JOSH GATTIS: Yeah, Coach Harbaugh has just been a tremendous supporter of me. First of all, allowing me to come to this prestigious place. Michigan is a special place. It's always been a job of mine that I've always admired

Q. JOSH GATTIS: First of all, I'd like to say happy holidays to everyone on this call. I hope everyone is well. We're excited to be here at the Orange Bowl. Our team is in great spirits right now. We've had great practices. We're healthy, and we're excited about a tremendous challenge being in the playoffs.

Obviously going against a very talented Georgia team and Georgia defense, we're excited for the challenge. We know what's ahead of us, and we know the opportunities we have, and most importantly we believe and we have tremendous confidence in ourselves.

We've had a great experience so far. The Orange Bowl is a special place. This is my third Orange Bowl. I've been fortunate to be a part of one as a player, so it brings back tremendous memories for me throughout all of my visits here being a part of the Orange Bowl, and I can't tell you how excited we are to be here.

Q. Josh, of all of Hassan's runs this year I wonder if you've got a favorite highlight or two that sums up his ability and what he's meant to this offense.

JOSH GATTIS: Yeah, great question. Hassan is everything to us. We absolutely love him. I don't know if you can actually list out one specific play because he creates so many wild plays, whether it's hurdling guys or it's extra effort, short-yardage plays where he's running over defenders in a hole. He's a guy that when you talk about a physical back and how you want to build your backs, he's the exact prototype of what you want to build your running back room around. He's done a tremendous job carrying the load for us, and really he had some tough tasks to go along at the midpoint of the season when Blake was down and Donovan was down. We really put the load on his back and he carried us there for about three games, just being the solo back.



along the way having coached in this conference and gone against Michigan for so many years, the respect I had for this program.

When I was afforded the opportunity to come here as a coordinator, I'm very thankful for Coach Harbaugh for believing in me and giving me that opportunity. But then along the way we've experienced everything. We've experienced the good times, the hard times and the bad times, and obviously 2020 was challenging in so many different ways, to our team, to our offense.

For him, that was important for me because the most important piece was when your head coach doesn't lose confidence in you, the players don't lose confidence in you, and our players never once lost confidence in me. I never lost confidence in them. We've persevered through everything.

We did gain some valuable lessons along the way in 2020, but I think it's built this team to be the team that we are today.

Q. I hate to use the word "blueprint" here, but Alabama finally had success, somebody had success against Georgia. That hadn't been done all year. Is it helpful when you try to scheme against a team or maybe just from a confidence standpoint to actually see somebody have success against them? Are there things you can take from that, anything that helps when you see what Alabama did to Georgia's defense?

JOSH GATTIS: Well, you know, it's hard to say blueprint because if it only happens one game in a year, it obviously didn't work too well for too many other people. But it does give you a little bit of confidence.

There's no way around it, this is a very, very talented Georgia defense. Dan Lanning has done a tremendous job leading this defense, creating its own identity, and I think he's also put his own additional flavor to this defense. It's not the same defense of during the Nick Saban days of Alabama or you've seen Coach Smart really evolve and grow this defense.

And so they've done a tremendous job. They've got tremendous talent on the defensive front and even in the back seven, and so we've got a tremendous challenge on our hands and obviously we're a really talented offense. This is going to be a heavyweight match-up, two heavyweight teams offensively and defensively going against each other on Friday night.

Q. Along those lines, it feels like this may be a match-up of strength versus strength with the way you

are physical and able to run the ball and how strong they are up front. What is it going to take for you all to be able to win those match-ups against Georgia and be the more physically dominant team?

JOSH GATTIS: Yeah, that's a great question. I think it's going to just take withstanding the momentum swings in the games. Obviously there's going to be things that are positive that happen early on in the game, then you have to battle through adversity, whether things don't go your way. But it's going to take all four quarters, it's going to take 60 minutes. Just talking about a heavyweight match-up, it's about wearing down the opponent necessarily, not necessarily going out and striking a knockout because both teams are going to respond early on in the game, and so for us it's about sustaining success, taking positive plays, obviously creating explosive plays, but even if we don't take or create explosive plays, just taking positive plays is going to be the key.

It's going to be a train wreck inside. I mean, it's two smashmouth teams kind of going against each other and endurance is going to play a big piece in that, who's able to win the fourth quarter, who's able to win the line of scrimmage late in the game is going to be the key to who wins the game.

Q. Josh, two quick quarterback questions. I was just wondering how you think J.J. McCarthy has evolved this year, and also in terms of Cade, was there one game or is there a place you can pinpoint where you saw his confidence really sort of mentally appear?

JOSH GATTIS: Yeah, let's start with the J.J. question. I think once J.J. started to play calm and relaxed. I think there was a part early in the year where he felt like he needed to go in and he had to create the wild play and he had to create the exciting play, but that's not necessarily the case. But getting him to play within the system, getting him to play calm and relaxed, and he's really grown as a quarterback. He's such a phenomenal athlete and phenomenal thrower, but he doesn't have to go in and just throw the deep ball or create a play, but understanding that he can rely on the play calls and the players around him to create those plays, and he's done a tremendous job developing himself.

I think for him, he can't have a better role model to look up to than Cade McNamara because you see Cade, who's a complete quarterback. Cade has done a tremendous job leading our team. He's very smart in how he approaches everything and his preparation. His leadership skills are phenomenal, and he's a guy that really makes everyone around him better because they have tremendous support and faith and belief in him, and so Cade has done a

tremendous job bringing J.J. along, and I think it's so important that I must acknowledge, when you have two players like Cade and J.J., just the unselfishness of those two guys has allowed us to be where we are today, because when you're going through a situation where you're playing multiple quarterbacks, that can either make or break your team. It can either take one guy and inflate him with confidence and obviously deflate another guy of their confidence, so those two guys have done a tremendous job just handling everything that we've done, that we've put on their plate and leading our team.

But Cade specifically, that's really kind of his DNA. He's the old-school junkyard dog. He's going to scrap for everything. He's going to outwork anybody and everyone he possibly can and prepare himself at a very high level to lead this team. So we're very, very fortunate that we have the type of quarterback room that we have there, and I think Coach Weiss has done a tremendous job managing that room and creating an atmosphere in that room that's togetherness.

I think that's really been the key to our success offensively is how cohesive everyone plays. As a coordinator I don't have to deal with the issues of someone coming in asking for the ball or asking for playing time because we've got tremendous leadership on our offense. We've got tremendous players, and they've done a great job accepting everyone's role.

Q. You have the unique perspective of having played in this game, as well, of course, and the Orange Bowl always wants to make this a very fun experience for the kids. It's a business trip for you guys, and we're in the throes of a pandemic still. Where is the balance this week between making sure the kids enjoy themselves, obviously the work comes first, but also you've got to be safe. How does that kind of fit together this week?

JOSH GATTIS: Well, I think the balance kind of gets a little bit thrown off when you hit the College Football Playoffs. The Orange Bowl of my days aren't quite exactly the Orange Bowl of today, because it means just a little bit more when you're in the playoffs.

It's such an iconic bowl and legendary bowl, the hospitality here is by far amazing. It's first class. So the events our kids were able to go on a cruise last night. We as coaches had a coaching staff reception where the food was amazing. But we've got to constantly remind ourselves we're here for a reason. This is purely a business trip. We're afforded the luxury of being in Miami in such a great hotel and have all the hospitality around us, but it doesn't matter if we're playing this game in Ann Arbor, Athens or

Miami, we're here for a reason, and the College Football Playoffs is that reason. We've got to remain focused because once you hit the playoffs you're playing the best of the best. As we know we've got a tremendous challenge. We're excited and we are accepting of it, and we're looking forward to going out and displaying everything that we have on Friday night.

Q. I believe you guys lead the nation in plays of 50 yards or more this season. What do you think has been the key to the number of explosive plays you've been able to generate?

JOSH GATTIS: Explosive players, number one, by far. When you look at how we're creating those explosive plays, it's getting the ball in the hands of explosive players. So when you've got guys like A.J. Henning, Blake Corum, Roman Wilson, Donovan Edwards, those guys are going to create explosive plays, and that was an area where we really emphasized increasing our team speed. We were dynamic within our skill positions, whether it's tight ends, receivers, running backs. We've got some of the most dynamic players in all of the country.

It doesn't take coaching at that point, it takes players, and our players have done a tremendous job executing assignments. They've done a tremendous job being explosive players, and they're playing together. That's the one thing that as a coach where we take tremendous pride is watching these guys going out there playing for each other, whether it's Mike Sainristil out in front of a Blake Corum touchdown with him and J.J. McCarthy leading the way. When you have that type of selflessness by a team, you can accomplish and do many things, and so we're very proud of the effort, the togetherness our offense has played with and overall as a team, and we're looking forward to continuing that on.

Q. Josh, I just wonder, the tight ends obviously have been more involved, but in addition to the pass catching, could you talk about Eric All's blocking ability and what that's meant for this offense?

JOSH GATTIS: Yeah, specifically Eric but I'll talk specifically for the group, too, because they're the unsung heroes of their offense. You talk about what's the most important position in this offensive system, it's the tight ends. They allow us to do everything that we want to do. They allow us to be the physical, downhill run game team. We ask those guys to go out and catch passes but also protect for passes. They're really the Swiss army knife to get us going, and really that group is led by Eric All and Luke Schoonmaker. Those guys are talented players and you see Joel Honigford get out there and Carter Selzer in the mix. But when you ask about Eric, he's a guy that --



tremendous talent. He's so athletic. He has tremendous ball skills and catch radius, and he's got one of the hardest heads on the team. He'll go in there and knock you out. He'll throw everything he has in there to get a block. When you've got a guy that plays with that type of physicality at the H-back position and that type of precision and route running and he's able to create separation with his speed, he's really a dynamic threat to opposing defenses because how do you guard him? Do you put a nickelback on him or do you play base defense? When you have the type of tight end room that we have, it makes you complete as an offense.

I think coach Jay Harbaugh has done a tremendous job developing that room, as well, because even early on in the season when they weren't getting all the attention of the catches, those guys were playing selfless football. They were going out, we were asking those guys to make some tough blocking assignments in the run game, and never once did they complain about getting the ball.

It's really been pleasing to see them have success later in the year in the passing game because they deserve it. Those guys are tremendous assets to our team and to our offense, and we couldn't be who we are without them.

Q. Josh, there's been a lot of talk about momentum and things of that nature about trying to keep momentum and having this layoff, but Cade McNamara said when you guys arrived that he's really liked what he's seen in practice to this point. What have you seen from the team in the kind of lead-up, and then obviously you had a practice yesterday. How do you feel that your offense has performed so far?

JOSH GATTIS: Yeah, I think the challenge was after we won the Big Ten Championship Game, if we could just ball ourselves up and then ship ourselves to Miami and just play the next day, and we were ready to go. Leading up to our bowl practices, we had phenomenal practices back at campus, and then the next challenge came, okay, would we be able to carry that over with all the excitement, with all the different distractions that can potentially come with bowl preparations down in Miami.

I'll tell you what, I was blown away yesterday. The type of urgency, the effort, seeing how fast our guys fly around, it's different for us because we're coming south, so when you put us out here in warm weather and we're able to run around nice and fast, we look different. We're used to practicing in 30-degree, 20-degree weather right now wrapped up in clothes.

So just having the great weather, having a great surface, the practice facility at the DNR Stadium was unbelievable,

or International Miami stadium, I think called -- I can't remember the exact name, but it was unbelievable. Just was a fast surface, allowed our guys to fly around and execute, playing with tremendous confidence.

I think the maturity of our team and the leadership of our team obviously led us to have a great season, but it's also prepared us to have a great night on Friday. We couldn't be more pleased with the effort that our guys are playing with and the attention to detail.

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