

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

Tuesday, December 28, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Michigan Wolverines

Mike Macdonald

Press Conference

MIKE MACDONALD: It's great to see everybody, even under these circumstances. We're really excited to be here, obviously, and really proud of our team and how they've approached every day since we've gotten down here. We've put in two pretty dang good practices getting after it, and then as the game approaches here, we'll taper it down and then get ready to roll on Friday. Look forward, and happy to answer any questions you guys have.

Q. I've got to ask you about those days in Athens. You were the guy running I believe it was the defensive scout team back in the day, kind of what you remember about those times.

MIKE MACDONALD: Sure, we were doing everything. We were setting up tables for dinner, you name it. Back then we didn't have iPads, so we had the play books, and I remember just having a really rough relationship with the printer. But yeah, those were great days, man. Just learning from Coach Richt and Coach Grantham and Coach Bobo and really just what makes an organization tick, how does it go, just being in on the ground floor, doing anything you can to help the team win was really valuable. They're great people in that building, and it was great, great experience for us.

Q. On that vein, when your Georgia days were over, can you talk about briefly -- I guess you were thinking about getting out of the business but then you kind of got the right connection, and how important that was to put you where you are now?

MIKE MACDONALD: Wow, that was -- shoot, it was the spring of 2013. I had signed a contract with KPMG and I was fortunate enough, I think Coach Rodney Garner actually recommended me to one of the Ravens' scouts, and that kind of worked up the food chain there, and was just really fortunate that John Harbaugh was looking to



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start an intern program, and I was able to kind of go through that process and really fortunate enough that actually Jay Harbaugh, our coach here was one of the guys that kind of helped set the whole thing up.

Just extremely fortunate. Talk about just luck of the draw. Man, am I blessed that that happened, so otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here.

Q. What was your parents' reaction, your mom and dad's reaction, when you said you wanted to go into coaching instead of the business world?

MIKE MACDONALD: Man, my parents have been awesome. I mean, really with both my siblings. Once you kind of tell them what you want to do, they want to see you go after it. They were more interested in how I was going to do it rather than what I was going to do. But they've just been there every step of the way. Both of them are going to be here at the game, so they'll be making the trip down to Miami, so I'll be looking forward to seeing them. But they were awesome.

Q. When you look at JT Daniels and Stetson Bennett, what are some of the similarities and differences you see between them?

MIKE MACDONALD: Oh, shoot. They both have great command of the offense and how the offense is set up. They're very similar to our football team. They play complementary football. They know where to go with the ball. The system is really complementary. They really make you defend the entire width of the field, and then with their play action on 1st and 2nd down game, they can get the ball to their guys who don't lack speed at any position and get it to them really any part of the field.

They both do a great job. Stetson is probably a little bit more willing to take off when the play breaks down, but other than that, they're both really good players.

Q. With the way that David and Aidan have played for you guys this year, it feels like they have a special chemistry, and I'm wondering how you were able to see that develop either through the off-season or

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through the course of this season.

MIKE MACDONALD: Yeah, that's a great question. You know, Aidan has had the same approach since really probably since he's been here, definitely the year that I've seen him, and then to see David's growth over the year since I've known him has been really impressive, and it's a tribute to him.

I think what happened was he saw how Aidan approached everything and the success that he was having and he realized what it took to be great. He's going to be really good. He's a talented guy. But his approach really working with Aidan on a daily basis and the rest of our coaches, they've really taken on to the coaches, and then in terms of what it takes, weight room, practice habits, film preparation, all those things, he really upped his game, and like you said the chemistry is real out there, and I'm very proud of where David is at.

Q. Take me back to coaching the Cedar Shoals ninth-grade team. How did that develop you into the football coach you are now, and do you remember any details of that season?

MIKE MACDONALD: Oh, absolutely. That was a great year. That was probably the most fun I've had coaching probably up to this year. I mean, that was a blast. We would have -- shoot, I remember Wednesday night mop nights. You would know what guys would show up to practice sometimes. But talk about great people in that building. Coach Xarvia Smith really taught me a lot just about -- really more about life and how to be a man and how to grow up and how to mentor people. I had some great relationships with some of those players still to this day. Obviously Coach Smith is a mentor of mine. We were just texting actually probably a day or two ago. That was a great memory, man. We'd have our games Thursday nights and then go see the friends and let them know how we did. I think five of the six games we had shutouts, so I'm still pretty proud of that.

Q. I get that it's Michigan and it's defensive coordinator position, but why was this a better career move now coming off a 2-4 season and everything else than being a position coach in the NFL for a pretty successful franchise?

MIKE MACDONALD: Yeah, that's a great question. I didn't really think about all the extra 2-4 thing, hot seat. Quite frankly I didn't really know about it. I knew Coach Jim Harbaugh, and like you said, Michigan and the reputation that this university has. I mean, it was honestly pretty simple. And then just my personal goals, I always wanted to be a defensive coordinator at any level, and this

is big-time football. It doesn't get any bigger than this.

If you want to do it at the biggest stage and have an impact on an organization, then this is the place to do it. Very thankful that Coach gave me this opportunity, and you can see, it's kind of like you've got to pinch yourself. I'm looking down here at the microphone and it says Orange Bowl, and it's kind of hard to believe that we're here. But it's been a great, great experience, and just again, really thankful for taking a chance on a guy like me.

Q. You guys have faced some pretty good receivers. I don't know if you've faced a tight end like Brock Bowers. What makes him such a tough cover and where do you think this defense is in terms of being ready for a tight end like that?

MIKE MACDONALD: Yeah, Brock is a heck of a player, man. He's really dynamic. The thing that they do with him is he can play -- he really plays every position. He'll play the Z, the Y, the X, the move guy, the down guy. They'll give it to him on reverses, screens. It's pretty impressive. A tribute to their coaching staff for putting him in positions to affect the game.

The difference between a tight end and a receiver is that a receiver you can build some things to find him, where he's at, and try to get multiple guys on him. Tight end, it's a little bit more difficult. I guess it's just not the same, if that makes sense.

But he's a heck of a player. I think the first thing you have to have is an awareness on where he's at, and if he's out of place you have to understand that. And then just understand the things that he likes to do from certain positions so we can help try to slow him down as best we can.

They've got great skill guys all across the board, guys that can really hurt you at any point during the game. The stress points of our zones and when we play man-to-man, when we pressure, when we don't, that'll kind of be an interesting chess game throughout the game.

Q. How much of your defense's overall personality is shaped by Aidan, do you think, and how do you describe that personality on the field?

MIKE MACDONALD: Yeah, it's -- I'd say a lot. I don't want to take away from guys like Josh Ross, Brad Hawkins, Donovan Jeter, guys in the back end, Vince Gray. I think it's been a team collective effort on what type of team we want to be and kind of our reputation as a defense. People say you take the personality of your coach. I'm more subscribed to the theory that you take the personalities of

your leaders.

When everybody decides that they want to do it a certain way, that's a powerful thing, and then we have the right guys to kind of spearhead that charge.

How I'd describe it, we want to be 11 guys playing for one another. That's a powerful thing when you play for the guy next to you. We want to have shocking effort when you watch the tape. We want teams to watch tapes on Sunday mornings and know they're in for a 60-minute battle.

Just proud of Aidan, man. He's definitely the guy that spearheads that type of personality.

Q. Whether it was the speed with which you and the staff kind of connected with the guys this year or maybe some of the wins or the Big Ten Championship, what has surprised you most this year about the success you guys have been able to have?

MIKE MACDONALD: Yeah, that's a great question. Really it's gone by so fast, like you said. We were here, we were in spring ball, we were rolling, we were in summer work, we went to training camp, there's the crazy June recruiting month that seemed like it didn't even happen. Again, and I sound like a broken record, but you walk in the first day and you're wide eyed and there's a bunch of people everywhere, you don't know who's who, trying to remember names and stuff, and the one thing I remember from the first day is just the look on Josh Ross and Aidan's eyes, it was like, okay, like we've got two dudes that will literally do anything we ask them to do. Like these guys are ready to go. They're two guys on a mission.

From that point we were rolling. It was like, okay, how do we want to do this, this is what I see, what do you guys see, all right. It was pretty simple. Just needed to help us put it in motion.

Yeah, I'd say the speed of the year. I felt like it's almost a year ago this whole thing got started and we were on a plane to Ann Arbor in the snow and now we're down here in sunny Miami.

Q. Before the season we were asking a lot of the guys questions about your defense trying to sort of figure out what it would look like, what it wouldn't, and a lot of them said that what they liked about working with you is how they were able to help their football IQ expand. Three or four months from when we were asking those questions, what are some of the ways you've seen those heightened IQs on the field?

MIKE MACDONALD: Yeah, to your point, in order to build

a system, you have to have a foundation. If you build it just on a shallow foundation or a narrow foundation, there's no room to grow where you want it to go. So we spent a lot of time building the foundation of football, how we want it to look, how we want to play, certain principles within the defense that we wanted to install. Those carried weight throughout the season. So we were able to build on that, so you're not playing a different defense every week and you're not able to have any sort of accumulation throughout the year.

One thing is we were able to stack days, and we're always making progress. I think the way you see that kind of come into play is -- I've said this before, but if you can close your eyes and hear everything that's going on before, during and after the play, it's like -- and you can visualize what happened and how we rotated and how we alerted things and post-alerted things, when you hear it and you hear a loud defense, you know they understand what's going on. When there's not a lot of noise out there and there's not a lot of communication, to me that's a signal of a confused defense that ultimately won't play as fast or violently as you need them to. I think if you came to one of our practices, you'd be impressed with the communication going on.

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