

Division I Football Championship: North Dakota State vs South Dakota State

Friday, January 6, 2023

Frisco, Texas, USA

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

John Stiegelmeier

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: All right, everybody. Good morning and welcome to Toyota Stadium in Frisco, Texas, for the 2023 FCS Championship, pre-championship game press conferences. My name is Jim Powers from the NCAA staff, and it's great to be here once again with everybody.

Starting us off this morning is the head coach for South Dakota State, Mr. John Stiegelmeier. Coach, we'll let you start off with opening comments, and then we'll open it up for questions.

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: We're honored to be here representing South Dakota State University and our athletic department. Really proud of our football team this year. Looking forward to a unique championship with our rival, North Dakota State.

We've got a ton of respect for North Dakota State, their football program, and looking forward to a great contest on Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll open it up for questions.

Q. You mentioned a unique championship against your rival. Where does the line go from it's not the rival to a championship game? You talk about the uniqueness. How do you talk to your players about that?

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: It's not the rivalry game. It's not the Dakota Marker game, which has a life of its own. Obviously in Frisco, Texas, you're playing for the prize.

What I meant there is it's against our rival, and I think that's a neat story line, I think for both our programs, both our universities, and for the Missouri Valley Football Conference. I know they're excited.

Q. You were here not even two years ago. I know that you have a lot of players that are back from that team. Has that been something that's been talked about a lot in the circles as you've gotten ready for this?

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: It has not. It was a totally different scenario in the spring. And the things that have been brought up, one by our players and one by me, specifically are this.

There's one player, it was his last game. His name is Preston Tetzlaff. He was scheduled to go to law school. So that locker room for him -- and our guys remember that emotion. That locker room for him was to the next level of disappointment and appreciation of the program.

The other thing that I brought up is what did we take from the game? We stayed on the field and watched the trophy presentation. I don't know if other teams do that, but our players chose to do that. I don't know what their motivation was, but it was a cool moment after shaking Sam Houston's hands, to stand out there, stay out there, kneel out there in tears, many of them, and to watch the trophy presentation.

I think in the end it got to their heart that I want to be part of that someday, and here we got a chance to do it.

Q. You've had the regular season success against NDSU the last three times, but the postseason success is probably next on the checklist. Is that important, or how do you use that heading into this game?

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: Our mental performance coach hit that hard and challenged our guys. The playoff stuff has been in Fargo, so a different environment. You know that's a tough environment for the visiting team.

Ideally this will be an environment where there's truly two home teams that will impact either side of the ball or either team. But our mental performance coach, Kris Kracht, talked about their record and our record, and it kind of challenged our guys.

Q. Tucker Kraft, I know you mentioned him turning

down some NIL money. Just speak to that again and just the value of having a pro prospect like that at tight end.

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: I think in Tucker's situation there's a lot of lessons, a lot of stories there that will be shared. Tucker's small town South Dakota, Timberlake, South Dakota, and has had a great career at South Dakota State and had an opportunity to go on and, whether I like to see it or not, make a lot of money in NIL at other schools, and he chose to be loyal. He chose to stay committed to South Dakota State football.

So when those things come up in the future, I know we'll point to Tucker and say, look what he did, and he still had an opportunity in the NFL. Tucker is a great teammate and has a bright future in football.

Q. Similar to what was just asked, head to head against the Bison, during their dynasty, you're the one program that has broken through head to head with the results. Why is that, and what's working right for you?

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: It goes back to 2004. Prior to 2004, look at the record. It wasn't like that. In 2004, both our programs drew a line in the sand, stepped over it, and said, let's go Division I, let's go Division I together.

I'm sure you've heard the stories of us meeting on the border and looking at a true border marker that was planted in the ground to separate South Dakota and North Dakota.

For a brief second, I think, we looked at each other and honestly said we need each other. I don't think that's the case now, but that started it.

Our guys have responded, and they've been, as we know, Division II, Division I. I don't know about a dynasty, but they've had a great program and a great run. I think the vicinity, the same conference, all those things surely raised our level of our program. It's been a great, great run.

Q. Mark Gronowski, we all know what happened in the game a year and a half ago. Just talk about his comeback, how he's embracing this moment, what he's done as a leader, especially losing not only -- missing not only that game, but the whole of last season.

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: Mark's comeback and his contribution to our football team is far greater than what you see on the field or in the stats. He's our best leader. He was our best leader as a true freshman, the year he got

hurt in the championship.

In the fall when we were stumbling around practicing, figuring out how to do it, we all were, I had players coming into my office saying, Mark's got to be our starting quarterback. Here's a true freshman that's been on campus a month and a half.

Specifically this year, he learned from Chris Oladokun, having to watch. Chris was a seasoned guy in terms of age but not a lot of playing time. Chris is with the Kansas City Chiefs now. So he had a great mentor in terms of film watching and preparation.

This is the honest to God truth, in a two-hour practice, Mark does not miss a rep, meaning when the twos are going, he is standing beside that taking the rep. I don't know of another player in my tenure at South Dakota State that's ever done that at any position, and he does it, whether it's two-minute or inside or whatever.

He is -- we use the term leave nothing to chance. He's a picture of that, and he's a great teammate.

Q. I coach, and I know after a season two, three, four years in, I feel exhausted. You've been at this thing longer than some people in here have been alive. How have you been able to maintain the level of juice and change with the times that have allowed you to bring your team to this level?

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: You should maybe ask our players if I have been able to do that, right? You know what, I am certain God made me to be a coach. So there's some accountability to that assignment in life.

I stumbled into this thing being a student coach, didn't play college football, and have had unbelievable mentors along the way that I didn't know I needed. When I look back, which is the way life always is, I did need. 26 years ago, 35, I got to South Dakota State -- 26 when I became the head coach -- I felt a responsibility to do what I felt called to do. So it's easy to jump out of bed and feel you're living a calling.

Surely, based on the color of my hair, things have passed me by. They tell me I'm drippy, and I'm not sure what that means. I think it's droopy. They said I look good in my clothes. What a motivation that is to be around young men like that.

The type of guy both of us have in our program, it just is motivating, it really is. That's a really interesting question. Thanks.

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Q. Obviously the first meeting, the second half, was very good for you. How much do you look at film, and how much different do you think NDSU looks? Do you see them a little differently? Is there a December playoff mode that's going on here?

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: I think Luepke, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing his name correctly, but without him they're a different team. They've always had a guy like that, and to me he is the best at doing all those things they used him at, whether it's tight end, fullback, tailback.

So they're without him personnel-wise. They're still going to run power. They're still going to run quarterback run. They're still going to run the wrap, ISO-type play inside, G-ISO what we call. Defensively, you can't outnumber them. They're unbelievably well coached. So you've got to beat them. You can't outsmart them. And they don't give you the same look.

Other than the few guys they're missing, I don't think they're any different. They are the best coached team we faced, and the Missouri Valley's got great coaches. We're looking forward to the challenge.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you so much. Good luck on Sunday afternoon.

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