

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

Sunday, January 8, 2023

Frisco, Texas, USA

**South Dakota State Jackrabbits**

**Coach John Stiegelmeier**

**Mark Gronowski**

**Amar Johnson**

**Jason Freeman**

Postgame Press Conference

South Dakota State - 45, North Dakota State - 21

THE MODERATOR: Since Coach is here, we'll go ahead and get started with Coach. We'll shuffle the players in when they get here.

As we said a few moments ago, first National Championship in Division I for the Jackrabbits, and also their first National Championship in the entire athletic department since making the Division I jump.

Joining us is their head coach John Stiegelmeier. John, I know you've got your fan club here, but give us an opening statement about the game, and congratulations on your very first National Championship.

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: Thank you. It's fun to be the first, right? Really proud of our program. I want to compliment North Dakota State for their program and their tradition down here and their expectations. It was a fun game for the Jackrabbits.

We're really honored to come away with the National Championship. I love our football team. I thank God for them every day. And I mean that seriously. They're an unbelievable group of young men.

Then finally, our fan support was beyond our imagination. So that was so, so fun to see them show up. We made a memory.

These are our grandkids, Oliver, Henry, Elsie, and Theodore. I promised them, when we won a National



Championship, they got to be part of it. So they'll answer any questions too that you might have.

**Q. Coach, prior to the game, you said you'd think about it ten seconds and forget it, but it seems like you might be thinking about it longer. What does the first National Championship, just the emotion, what comes to mind for you first?**

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: I get my emotions and my fulfillment through our players. So, honestly, I feel really happy for our program. Maybe it's because they've been doing this so long that you kind of temper the feeling a little bit, but I'm really proud of our program and really happy for our players.

And I'm happy for the guys that went before these guys because they're part of this championship.

**Q. Mark, just your emotions, 20 months ago we know what happened on the field. To go from that to holding these trophies, what does it mean?**

MARK GRONOWSKI: It means the world to me. I've got to thank every single person that's helped me along this journey and the guys that played an awesome game today. I'm so proud of them. I've got to thank my parents. I've got to thank Charlie, our athletic trainer, for getting me back to where I am right now. There's no better feeling in the world.

**Q. Mark, a lot of your former teammates were here this weekend, a lot of players that came before you. Stieg kind of alluded to it. Some great, great players have come through this program and not been able to win a National Championship.**

When you hug Chris Oladokun, when you see some of those other guys like that, what does it mean to do it for your yourself and your team now, but also the guys that came before you?

MARK GRONOWSKI: Coach makes a great effort making the Jackrabbit family feel like a family. When we win, everyone wins. It was so awesome to see even at practice



yesterday all those smiling faces, see all of JFPA, and how much they support us, and it's really just a special feeling for us.

We're glad to do it for them, we're glad to do it for our seniors, for our coaches, our fans, and especially my teammates too.

**Q. Surely, John, there must be a little extra juice to this game because it came against North Dakota State. They're your rival. Obviously you want to beat them every time you play them, but to beat them in Frisco has to be a little special meaning for you.**

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: Without a doubt. I told Coach Entz that they've had this feeling. It's fun to have the feeling against them. I complimented them on their program.

He was very complimentary to us. It's a great competition, rivalry, and I continue to think back to 2004 and wondering how it was going to work out. Well, this is pretty sweet how it's worked out.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us, one of our great student-athletes Jason Freeman. We'll open it up for him, questions as well.

**Q. Coach, congratulations. You sat here a couple days ago and you talked about South Dakota State and North Dakota State coming together on that line when you both decided it was time to make that jump and that you've now closed the gap. Is this mission accomplished as far as bringing your program to the level of what North Dakota State has been able to accomplish? Or do you still think this is only the beginning for what you guys can do in the future?**

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: It's got to be the beginning, right? I've always said this. Now I can say it and it's real. We're going to watch the film and realize we can play a lot better. So it's the beginning of the National Championship, but it's also a step in becoming the best football program we can be.

And I'll say it again because it warrants it. We have unbelievable leadership, unbelievable student-athletes, and this is for these guys.

**Q. Mark, I think when you beat NDSU during the regular season, it was three regular season wins in a row, and I think you said something to the effect of, that's great, we've got to finish the job. What does it mean to kind of finish the job, I guess?**

MARK GRONOWSKI: It feels awesome. It's funny that you bring that up again because I still remember that. It's really a storybook ending for us to win our first National Championship against the North Dakota State team.

They're a great team, and they fought hard. It's always a fun game when we play against them, but it was really a storybook ending for us and happy to win a National Championship.

**Q. Coach and for Mark, talk about the way the offensive line played today. Nearly 300 rushing yards, over 500 total yards. Just the way the offensive line played today.**

MARK GRONOWSKI: The 605 hogs -- that's what we call them -- they bring a different attitude every single day they come to practice, come to games. There's no other guys that I'd want blocking for me up front. They just give it their all every single time and really go by coach's saying and last play.

They play hard every time they're out there. They just want to bury guys, which is fun for me, and they always give me time to let our skill guys look good.

They don't always get all the limelight, but man, those guys are good.

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: I would add that those guys have played 98 percent of our reps this year. They're warriors. They take pride in taking care of our offensive skill, taking care of Mark, and it's one of the closest groups I've ever been around.

So credit to Coach Olson and the intensity and the family approach he takes. I know they enjoyed the day.

**Q. Jason, a year ago you were playing in the NAIA. Now you're a National Champion. How does it feel?**

JASON FREEMAN: Never in a million years did I think I'd be on this stage. I just want to thank Coach for giving me the opportunity to showcase my talents. I want to thank Coach Rogers for recruiting me and getting me adjusted to the defense because I had a really small window to get that down.

I'm just really appreciative for the brotherhood we have here, the linebacker group, everybody. I really appreciate them.

**Q. Mark, what was the atmosphere or the vibe kind of like on the sideline in the second quarter, scoring 21 points in that quarter, take it from 7-7 to 28-14, 21-7.**

**You're running wild. You have a sea of blue behind you. It was very loud in here. What were the feelings on the sideline with you guys at that time?**

AMAR JOHNSON: The feelings were great. I think at the end of the day, we feed off each other. When the defense makes plays, then the offense makes plays. Having Jacks Nation right behind us, making all that noise for us, making it harder for NDSU to hear the snaps and all of that, it makes us a better team at the end of the day. Shout-out to Jacks Nation for coming out.

**Q. Did you feel coming out -- not that the game was over when it was 28-14 or anything like that, but, hey, we keep doing what we're doing, we're going to be national champs?**

AMAR JOHNSON: Yeah, I think that run helped everybody. It made everybody comfortable in it. When we play comfortable as a team, no one can stop us. We're the best team in the nation, and we proved it today.

**Q. Jason, tied or close early, you guys created the turnover, and the offense scores it. How pivotal do you think it was forcing that fumble and turning it into points at that point?**

JASON FREEMAN: When you're playing a really good opponent, the turnover battle matters the most. We were able to force three turnovers, I believe. So all those were detrimental to their offense getting success.

Like Amar said, we feed off each other. The defense gets a stop, gets a turnover, we know the offense is going to execute. So we just play off of each other.

**Q. Amar, a lot of the talk coming in was about your running mate, obviously, and all of the great work that he did here the first time he came in and that was the opportunity to come back. Then you got out there and got that first little crease. When you got tackled, you popped up almost like, oh, they think this is sweet. It felt like you had the juice, and they continued to ride you as you got carries. Did you feel like it was a different -- like a different feel when you touched the ball and you hit that first crease?**

AMAR JOHNSON: Yeah, I always tell my roommate Angel, like when I get in there and get comfortable, it's going to be a long day for the other team. I also told my boy Chris that at the end of the day, it's going to be a part 2 for NDSU what I did to them the first time.

I think at the same time, me and Zay feed off of each other. We compete at practice every day. At the end of the day,

he makes me better as a running back, somebody to chase, and I make him better as a running back too.

**Q. Mark, two specific plays I want to ask you about, the third and one when it looked like you might be running and you stopped and threw it to wide open for the 44 yard. Then the touchdown run early in the second half, what that play was, and how big a difference do you think that made for this team?**

MARK GRONOWSKI: Those were huge differences in this game. Mike Morgan really stepped up. He wasn't really practicing that play all week, and he ended up stepping up, making a big play. Having a guy like that on the team that everyone just feeds off of, it was really awesome to see him score a touchdown in this game. It brings juice to every single player on the team, whether that's offense or defense.

Also, that other touchdown to start off the second half, we knew that NDSU is going to fight till the end of the game. We knew that we had to come down in the second half and just start fast, score early, and that's what we did there on that play.

**Q. Mark, you guys were 7 of 8 on third down in the first half, something like that. You finished 9 of 14 or something. They couldn't get you off the field is the point. It was third and ten where you had a big pass. What does that do for you as an offense? Third and ten is a huge conversion. What do you feel when that happens?**

MARK GRONOWSKI: I've got to give it up to our coaches for making a great game plan this week. They scouted this North Dakota State team really well.

We had a lot of great plays to run on these third downs. It's all about belief, and our team always believed that no matter what the down was, we were going to get a big play. We were going to score first. We were going to get a first down. We were going to score touchdowns.

Just continuing to do that throughout the entire day just kind of has an avalanche effect. That belief just causes us to win games and score touchdowns on offense, and that also feeds the defense as well. The defense had an awesome game today.

**Q. I know this one just got over with, but considering what you had coming back next year, is this the start of a Jackrabbit dynasty like the other guys had for a while?**

MARK GRONOWSKI: That's what I hope for with all the



... when all is said, we're done.®

guys coming back this coming year. They played an awesome game today, and I can't wait to see what they do next year as well.

**Q. Mark, when I spoke to you earlier this week and we discussed unfinished business, and you were being a little bit coy about it because obviously coaches say you've got to try to keep this in the moment. But there were eight guys starting on the offense that started or majorly contribute to the offense in 2020 when you guys stood out there at the end of the game and watched the confetti fly. How does it feel to finish the job?**

MARK GRONOWSKI: It feels so awesome to be on the other side of this. I mean, watching that from the last time, it fueled us. We didn't want to have that feeling again today and that vengeance, so to say, came out today. We really just put it to them.

We were just going to play our best and execute, and that's what we did today. It was such an awesome feeling to be on the other side of it.

**Q. What does it mean for the state of South Dakota for all you guys? I know you're representing the state. What does it mean for you individually?**

JOHN STIEGELMEIER: There's a lot of pride in both our states and a lot of competition. So I think I can answer it with the way our fans showed up today and their energy and stuff, it means a ton to our state.

Hopefully, like Mark said, it's the start of not necessarily a bunch of them, but competing for a bunch of them. It's been a good experience down here, and we made a memory.

For me, I live through our players and always will, always have. So my joy is great today because their joy is great. I love these guys, and I'll leave it at that.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, players, congratulations. You're the national champions. Great season.

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