

Division I Football Championship: Montana vs South Dakota State

Friday, January 5, 2024

Frisco, Texas, USA

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

Toyota Stadium

Jimmy Rogers

Press Conference

JIM POWERS: We'll go ahead and get started, everyone. Welcome back to Frisco for the 2024 FCS Football Championship. My name is Jim Powers from the NCAA. I'll be moderating all the press conferences throughout the weekend.

We're going to kick things off with South Dakota State University and their head coach Jimmy Rogers. We'll let him have an opening statement. Then we'll ask for questions.

JIMMY ROGERS: Appreciate you having us. This is an unbelievable venue to do this at. This is our third time in four years being here. I would say this: This is really well ran, and it's really done first class in all areas. We're blessed to be here. Congratulations to Montana for being here as well.

14-0 this season. We played really well up to this point in all phases, and we're really excited for this moment. Our guys are locked in. We've had several weeks of prep on this, whether it be working on ourselves and then starting in on our prep for Montana.

Our guys are dialed in. This is a very mature football team we have. Blessed to be the head coach of South Dakota State and be able to coach the guys we have on this football team. There's a lot of talent, and they work extremely hard. Really excited for this moment.

Q. Last year the team showed up with that chip on its shoulder because so many of the guys were on the team in 2021 that had lost at the end of the game. What's the mindset of this year's group as defending champs?

JIMMY ROGERS: I don't think we've lost that chip at all. This team is just hungry to deliver their best and take



everything very personal. They beat narratives all season long, and whether they listen to them or not, I know they read it. We've done our job up to this point.

I think this team is a little bit different. If you're asking for what gets them going, they're winners, and that's enough.

Q. The truck that brought all your stuff down, we interviewed them during the newscast last night. That's pretty cool. Was that the first time you had a chance to see it? And what was your reaction?

JIMMY ROGERS: Yeah, I saw it a couple days prior to that, but Lance Trucking did a really cool job of putting that together. It's awesome. To be able to see that on the interstate driving, I think it's pretty sweet. So small victories, but it's pretty awesome.

Q. This senior group has had it unique, three National Championship appearances now, had to go through COVID, obviously one of the most winning groups. But what's so special about this group of seniors?

JIMMY ROGERS: I would say how they work and their connection to the team. A lot of these guys, they were never -- they weren't highly recruited. They were developed here, a lot of this group, especially the sixth years, several of them were walk-ons. 6 out of the 10 sixth year guys are walk-ons. It's really a credit to them and them buying into the system and them buying into the culture of South Dakota State and then pushing it farther than it's ever been.

I'm blessed just because to be around a driven individual day in and day out and do it as consistent as they've done it, it's pretty special. There's a lot of them on this football team, and they really pushed that, the culture piece, through to the younger guys on the team.

They've been huge in my first year honestly because they've been great just as far as delivering the message to the rest of the team as well.

Q. Just to piggy-back off that, Jadon and Jaxon, two specific ones from Madison right around the corner,



what have they brought in their multiple year success at the receiver position?

JIMMY ROGERS: I think they're really special. They're very similar but slightly different in their skill set and how we utilize them, but really dynamic playmakers for us.

I think, if we can get the ball to them in space, they're hard to take down. They're over 6'2" and 210 pounds. They're more built like a college linebacker than probably a wide receiver. Phenomenal workers. They've got great focus, and they can come out and deliver in big moments. That's what I would say. They don't shy away from the moment. They want the ball.

Obviously they play wide receiver, but they do a great job in the run game as far as blocking. That's one area that probably doesn't get pointed out enough of how good they are at blocking on the perimeter.

Q. Coach, if there is one aspect of the personality of this group that's different from last year, because it is a similar group, what is that different aspect of their personality that's different?

JIMMY ROGERS: This is a lot of the same team that was here. I don't know if there's a different personality. We compete constantly at practice, I would say that. We did that a little bit more this year, this fall camp and even throughout the season, going good-on-good versus each other, than we probably have done in the past.

I believe, if you have the best defense in the country and they're getting challenged by one of the best offenses in the country, the defense will only get better. And I would say, vice versa, the same on the other side of the ball. We challenge ourselves, but we also know the ultimate goal. We take care of each other.

It's a really close group too. You get one more year with one another, and it's been great to see how our senior leadership and our oldest guys still connect with the freshmen, still take pride in teaching those guys how to get better and really the ways of how the program operates and the culture that's here and why it's important to do the little things.

They've been great for me hammering that message through because, again, these guys have been developed here. I'm blessed that they came back because they didn't need to come back.

Q. Looking back, a year ago when you were here, was there any indication to you that Coach would be retiring and you might be in this position right now? I

know since then you talked about your reality becoming your dream. Just talk about how looking back, from the minute you got to South Dakota State to now, where you're at right now.

JIMMY ROGERS: Yeah, there was indication because there was always conversation about when Coach Stieg would retire, we'd want to hire from within. I had conversations with the administration long before last year. When that happened was really up to Coach Stieg.

As far as my time at South Dakota State, I never dreamt to play at South Dakota State. I'm from Chandler, Arizona, never heard of South Dakota State. When I signed a commit at South Dakota State, I remember vividly -- because I played at a really good high school, and there was probably about a handful of guys going FBS. That was the biggest thing. I didn't have those opportunities.

South Dakota State gave me an opportunity, and I bought into the opportunity. I came here. My reality becoming a dream means I wanted to do it at the highest level, and we've taken South Dakota State to the highest level. And to be the head coach of it, I never envisioned that 18 years ago, I can say that, but I did envision winning National Championships here.

I came from a program in high school where we never lost. When I got to South Dakota State, we needed to learn how to win or work to win, and I think through my longevity of being here, the program has continued to develop a certain level of work ethic to be able to say that that is sustainable and that is doable.

We're at that point now as the No. 1 team in the country, and we need to continue to be that way and not take for granted all the work that went into this. I will assure you that we won't.

Q. Jimmy, huge turnout last year when you came here from your fans. I know you got a big sendoff on the way out of town yesterday. There's expecting to be a huge turnout again, the tailgate, all that stuff. I know you've got a football game to focus on, but just what it's been like for you guys to observe the way Jacks fans have got on board with these trips to Frisco and the support you've had over the last couple seasons.

JIMMY ROGERS: The fans have grown significantly over the years of having success and winning, and I think the fans have been phenomenal this season. To have as many sell outs as we have was just awesome to see, and the kids are really deserving of it. I'm just glad that people are starting to take notice and continuing to support us and continuing to make these trips.

This is a special moment for the players, and to have all their family and friends and fans here, it's really cool for them, and it's really appreciated.

Q. Eight years ago I was down here with the Augustana basketball team in Frisco playing for the National Championship. They won. But they were the No. 1 team, people expected them to win. I remember the reaction of Tom Billeter when the game got over and they won was more of relief than the kind of joy I would have thought. How much fun has this season been for you guys as defending champions and with some of the guys back, the expectations of being No. 1?

JIMMY ROGERS: It's been a blast. I get the most joy going to practice and working with the players than I do what maybe most people would. But, yeah, this has been a blast.

Expectations, this is what I expected. So to say that I'm nervous about the moment, I'm not nervous about the moment. I came to South Dakota State expecting to win National Championships, and we got to that point. We got over the hump last year.

But this is what I expected as a player, this is what I expected as a position coach, this is what I expected as a coordinator, and I just happen to be the head coach now. I'm not overly worried about the outside world and the noise because that's going to come regardless if we win by a lot, win by a little, or don't win.

So I can't get caught up in that, nor do our players. We're going to give it our best and show respect to our opponent and give it a full 60 minutes Sunday night, or Sunday afternoon.

Q. You talked a little bit about the reality of becoming the head coach here, but is comparing the process to a year ago, being the DC for a championship team to now being the head coach for a team competing for a championship, how much of the process changes for you? What are the adjustments that maybe you have to make personally to be in a different role than you were when you were in the exact same position a year ago?

JIMMY ROGERS: Yeah, it's quite a bit different. It's quite a bit different in organization, the meticulous little steps you have to do to make sure everyone is on the same page. A lot of my time is spent not just in football, it's making sure the whole setup of this flows right. That part has been different. Obviously this part is different.

As far as my connection to the players and what we do, that's not different. So there's been adapting along the way. I feel somewhat comfortable in this, doing this type of thing now, but that would be the biggest change for sure.

Q. Coach, you were on the field in '09 when SDSU had its first playoff game. I was there. You were there. Looked like the game was in hand. You talk about the journey getting to this point. How much does that game stick with you, if at all?

JIMMY ROGERS: Oh, it sticks with me. That was the last game I ever played. Montana was my first Division I game I played, and we went back there four years later, from a freshman to a senior, and we should have won that football game, and we lost it.

I think you can learn something from every loss that you have. To say one means more than the other when they end your season and you care enough, they matter. If you don't learn from them, you waste the opportunity to absorb a lot of information and a lot of ways in which you could have handled it better to have success.

That moment, I'll never forget honestly.

Q. To follow up, if you want to talk a little bit about Montana, on the offensive side, is it the quarterback that concerns you? Is it the receiver crew? Is it the O-line? You can speak generally or specifically.

JIMMY ROGERS: I think they do a really good job skill set-wise. They've got great skill on the perimeter and a couple of really talented running backs. They play with a little bit wider splits than we're used to seeing. We've seen it a little bit throughout the season.

But I think everything starts with the quarterback. The guy that touches the ball is dynamic. He can extend plays and kill you with his arm. So we've got to do a good job of trying to manage that as much as possible. The wide receivers are an elite talent, and the running backs can make you pay with their speed and physicality.

Overall, I think they're a really well coached football team. I think they play extremely hard, and that shows up on film. I know that it's going to need our best here Sunday.

Q. Adam Bock started the season with an injury. He came back for the conference, first conference game, but then he missed the next couple and then came back and he's played the rest of the way. Obviously because of that, his stats aren't necessarily where they'd normally be, but how would you describe his

impact and his role in getting you guys back here?

JIMMY ROGERS: Adam Bock is a special talent but also a special leader. He manages our defense, just from setting the front to changing support calls to blitzing in a different direction at the last second. When you're very confident in what you do, everybody feeds off of that, and that he is.

He's really confident in who he is. He's really confident in what he knows, and because of that, we have success as a defense.

I'm excited for him because we weren't sure we were going to get him back this season. He's turned a corner. I can't say he's 100 percent, but he's good enough to play in this game.

Q. In the previous media availability, Mason McCormick mentioned this team defensively does a lot similar to what Villanova did when you guys played them in terms of throwing you guys different looks on defense. What kind of challenge does that present to you offensively when they're throwing different looks so often?

JIMMY ROGERS: I think it starts up front with the communication of the O-line being able to handle blitzes and twists and late movement and stemming. All it takes is one guy up front to mess it up, that they didn't hear the communication that's had from one end to the next end. So all that is extremely important, and we've got to be on the same page.

We are well aware that Montana is going to get some plays on us, and we've got to respond. It's how we respond that makes the difference in the game.

What he was referring to is a lot of the blitzing that Villanova had done. That's kind of the system of defense. It's very similar to Montana's in that sense. The exact blitzing and the exact scheme, it's not the same, but very similar in that sense for sure.

Q. In recent years, the Missouri Valley and Big Sky Conferences have really separated themselves from the rest of the FCS. Perhaps it's JMU moving up, leaving the CAA. Great for both conferences, but how -- is there importance to you to see other conferences get to the level of the Big Sky and Missouri Valley Conferences?

JIMMY ROGERS: Yeah, I think it's good for everybody, the better FCS football just gets and becomes well rounded. But two great conferences, two great conferences, and they're on display here.

I think any of those conferences, you look at the Missouri Valley, anybody can beat you week in and week out. Obviously we haven't played in the Big Sky, but looking at it over the years and seeing crossover film, I would say it's very similar.

Everybody made a big stink about Montana losing to Northern Arizona, how does that happen? Northern Arizona, just look at some of their scores. Maybe they didn't play the best, but maybe they were very capable and things get out of hand at certain times.

We're talking about 18 to 22-year-olds. Anything can happen with their emotions and how they check in or out. I think that's the hardest part of managing a football team is you adhere to their emotions, but you've got to stay focused, and you've got to have great leadership to get to this point regardless of how much talent you have.

I think the leagues are great, and I think it's important to continue the other conferences to have success as well.

Q. You talk about kind of the work ethic of your team, some of the unheralded players that initially that now are big time in the program. I think Montana would say something similar. Just your thoughts on this being a Dakota-Montana, kind of blue blood and blue collar type of a matchup.

JIMMY ROGERS: This is an opinion, but I think the best football is played in the Dakotas and the Montanas. You look at FCS football, the couple states -- well, we don't have professional sports. We are the professional sport in a sense. That, I think is cool. And both recruit their home state very hard.

You take a kid that maybe is not as recruited as he would be had he lived in -- I'm from Arizona. A lot of our team wouldn't have come here had they lived in Arizona just because the recruiting is quite a bit different. I think that's really cool.

I think it's cool to have a bunch of guys that take pride in playing for their home state. You can see it with the passion on both sides and how we both play. There's a physicality to it. There's an effort to it. It's bigger than just playing college football. It's representing something that they take pride in, and I think that you could see it.

Q. Can you speak to Mark and the standard that you hold him to and the standard that he holds himself to as a signal caller just playing into his success?

JIMMY ROGERS: I think Mark is an extremely focused



individual. To take any credit on that, we won't, I won't. Mark came in as a very mature young man.

To lead a team to a National Championship as a true freshman, COVID or not, it's really hard to do. To win over an entire football team as an incoming true freshman, it's really hard to do. He's been able to do it.

He hasn't changed at all, how he treats people in the locker room and his seriousness with which he approaches the game with day in and day out, it is rare.

His confidence bleeds into the full football team. It bleeds into the young guys. It's truly helped the depth of that quarterback room truly feel like they can grow into themselves as well. Largely due to that, Mark is the biggest factor in that.

Q. The Grizzlies have been on an upward trajectory since the end of September with ten straight victories. I'm curious if you've noticed anything about the way they've been playing during that time to kind of peak and play their best football as the season's gone on.

JIMMY ROGERS: No, I think they've been solid. I think the game of football is fickle, and the outside world sees the result rather than seeing how you got to that point. It could be a player here or there that changes the outcome of the game or what looks like the outcome of the game when a team plays hard.

I think the more you play with anybody, the more continuity there is and comfortableness there is, which if you do it the right way, which obviously they're doing it, you can see an upward trajectory of playing your best football towards the end because every week you take very seriously and you can learn off of every week.

Q. You've been on both sides of winning and losing this game. I'm wondering if you can compare the two feelings, just the thrill of winning it and the what the other side is like.

JIMMY ROGERS: Yeah, I probably remember the loss just as good as I remember the win. Those are hard. You do everything you can not to feel that way. It's not so much winning, it's not letting people down.

So that COVID season, we graduated Preston Tetzlaff. I coached Preston, and he was a non-scholarship player, and he was the only guy graduating that semester. That was hard for me. A lot of the guys had an opportunity to come back. He didn't, just because he was going into law school. We wanted to end on the right note for him.

And I felt that way when we lost to Montana in '16 with T.J. Lally and that being his last game. A lot of the players I've had the opportunity to coach, that's what maybe fuels me more than the hype of a championship. It's making sure everybody gets the most out of their God given ability to be at their best and end on the right note.

This senior group means the world to me, the world. We've done everything up to this point right, and we have one more game to do it. We've been really focused on trying to make that happen. We're going to give it our best, and however it shakes, it shakes.

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