

Division I Football Championship: Montana vs South Dakota State

Sunday, January 7, 2024

Frisco, Texas, USA

Montana Grizzlies

Toyota Stadium

Coach Bobby Hauck

AJ Forbes

Braxton Hill

Press Conference



Turnovers, turnovers, turnovers will cost you games, and that was a big factor today.

Q. Braxton, can you just talk about -- the defense held up pretty well. Just want to know how you felt about it and maybe talk a little bit about Gronowski, the quarterback. I felt he made a difference in a couple ways today.

BRAXTON HILL: For sure. We just gave up too many explosives, too many big plays. Defense didn't play good enough to win.

At times we played well, but like I said, too many explosives and too many third downs. Yeah, they have a heck of a leader back there, and he makes them go for sure.

Q. Bobby, can you talk a little bit about -- I just was so impressed with their defense. I think sometimes some of us overlook that part of it with the Jackrabbits, their defense. It seemed like they were speedy on the edge and stout inside and difficult to run against.

BOBBY HAUCK: Yeah, they pinch everything off, bounce it, and then they have guys that pack a whole lot in the back end. I thought the fourth down stop was a big play in the game and in the goal line area in the first half.

They're a big, physical, senior-oriented team, and they do a nice job.

Q. Coach, it was 7-3 at half. You mentioned the goal line stand, but you also had the interception and the fumble, only had three points out of opportunities where you could have capitalized more. How much of it was maybe not being able to capitalize on those?

BOBBY HAUCK: Yeah, and we were driving to start the second half, had a good drive and fumbled it away. Those three things, I think are huge factors in the game, maybe the difference.

Then you have to start going for it and doing some things that put you in jeopardy, yeah. If you make those plays

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JIM POWERS: Okay, everybody. We're going to go ahead and get started. We'll open up with a few comments from Montana Head Coach Bobby Hauck, and we actually have joining us Braxton Hill and AJ Forbes.

Coach, terrific season. I know you had a chance to visit with your guys. Talk a little bit about the game and these incredible young men that came down this year.

BOBBY HAUCK: First, congrats to South Dakota State on the win and the championship. They're a senior-dominated team, and they played like it today. They went out and took that game and did a great job.

In terms of our team, everybody in our operation loves winning, hates losing. We have a very competitive group. They compete every time we take the field. I'm proud of them. It's an honor to coach them.

What a great season for our team. We hope to continue on and have a chance to be back here at some point.

In terms of the game, I think that's -- you know, when you look at each team had 17 first downs, that's two pretty good defenses. I think, in terms of evaluating how they won the game and we didn't, it's the critical things that are critical in every football game. I don't think it's -- when you have good teams on each sideline, you can't turn the ball over, you can't get behind the chains and take negative plays. You've got to run the ball better than we did, and you can't turn it over.

and you don't turn it over, capitalize on the field position, probably better certainly.

You know, when they're scoring it -- well, I'll have to go back and watch it, but the short fields help them with the point total. Shame on us.

Q. Bobby, I'm curious about your opinion on how big of a difference their punter made today in kind of not giving Junior opportunities and being able to pin you guys inside the 10 a couple times.

BOBBY HAUCK: It was really because we had to keep the base defense in most of the time. When they pinned us, our base defense was in because it was short yardage around midfield, so we were playing punt safe.

Those were obviously good punts. When you've got to go 95 against the top defense in the country, it's harder certainly.

Yeah, we didn't really -- didn't get much for return balls. Thought we'd kind of have some action, but in order for that to happen, you've got to get return balls, and he did a nice job of not allowing us to get out.

Q. For Braxton and AJ, how can you describe how special this season has been for you guys and what this run has meant to you?

BRAXTON HILL: It's meant everything to me. Just being a Montana kid, this is my dream school. Just you develop so many relationships along the way with these coaches and the guys you play out there with. It was a special senior year for sure.

Yeah, just going to miss being a Montana Grizzly, and I'm excited to see what these guys do next year.

AJ FORBES: Yeah, this place is really special to me. I get emotional talking about it because this place gave me the opportunity that I knew that I wanted, and I'm so grateful for Coach Hauck and the rest of the coaches and my teammates for letting me live out my dream. I'm forever grateful for that.

Q. The first drive, you seemed to have them off balance --

BOBBY HAUCK: What's The Athletic?

Q. The publication, The Athletic.

BOBBY HAUCK: Is it like a magazine or something?

Q. Online magazine.

BOBBY HAUCK: Sorry to interrupt you.

Q. The first series, you really had them off balance. You were mixing it up on moving the ball really well. After that, they seemed to go more to just one or two plays, and they were turning over the entire defensive line. It almost seemed like every other play. Do you think that had something to do with the inability to keep those drives going after that?

BOBBY HAUCK: It's what a lot of people do, rotate the D-line. We tend to do that a lot as well. We'll do it any time there's a dead ball against up-tempo teams. Neither one of these teams were going fast today. We probably should have gone fast more often, frankly. Yeah, rolling guys on the D-line is a good concept. We do it a lot.

Q. Clifton McDowell getting banged up a little bit, how much did that affect the way you guys operated offensively today?

BOBBY HAUCK: I don't think he was really banged up. I think he was fine.

Q. South Dakota State, their defensive execution, their ability to run the ball, how much did that affect you guys offensively?

BOBBY HAUCK: They ran the ball in certain situations. There's a couple of quarterback runs that hurt us in particular on the first couple of drives. I thought that they did a nice job with some of the unbalanced stuff. It wasn't expected. It kind of dried up after a while, but they got us with that early.

It was a good performance by them. They probably ran it as well as anybody has all year long. Thought they had a nice -- I mean, they did what they do. Their run/play action, bootleg, RPO, they did what they did, and they're good at it; that's why they're undefeated.

Q. For Braxton and AJ, talk about the journey, talk about your teammates, and what this journey this year meant to both of you as student-athletes and players on this outstanding team.

BRAXTON HILL: I'll just echo what I said earlier. It's meant the world to me. Montana was my dream school. I love representing this state. I've made my best friends along the way. So many great relationships with these coaches, and Montana is just a special place.

We have special fans. They come out, and they support

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

us every single Saturday, as you saw today. Yeah, it's meant the world to me. I really wish I could be a Grizzly forever.

AJ FORBES: Yeah, when I came here, I didn't know what my future would look like as a college football player. Again, I'm just super grateful for Coach Hauck and the rest of the coaches, my teammates for bringing me in and treating me like I belonged. Super grateful for the community in Missoula and the entire state of Montana, frankly.

For a kid that didn't grow up in Montana, I felt like it was home, and it will forever be a home to me from now on.

Q. Coach, you said last year that Griz team was your favorite to coach, but this year what do you like most about this team that stood out to you and puts them towards the top as well?

BOBBY HAUCK: Well, we won more. That's good. But we have great guys on our team. I think that's pretty consistent year in, year out. As I mentioned, they're highly competitive, hate to lose, love to win. They're all hard working. There's a great deal of mental and physical toughness. And I think this team has that throughout its roster.

I think that the older guys bring that out of the younger guys, and I just really love the way we performed. I thought we had great belief and confidence throughout the season, starting in August, and there was no doubt in the guys in this team that we're a terrific football team, and they proved that on the field.

Q. Bobby, this was your first recruiting class that you brought in. For them to be seniors now, what can you say about the impact they made in turning around the Montana program from where it was to where it is now? Do you feel they leave the program in a state of where the Griz should be on a yearly basis?

BOBBY HAUCK: Yeah, I think we're where we should be, back to front on that question. I mentioned this in the locker room. In 2018, five seasons ago, we didn't look like we do now physically or in the ability to perform. This senior class and the guys we've added on, I mean, they won a lot of games, culminating with this appearance in the National Championship Game.

But we've won playoff games every year since that first year. We've been in the quarterfinals. Pushing our way into this game was terrific. They have an understanding that we expect to win, and I think they have passed that on to everybody in the locker room.

Q. Braxton, in all kind of the redshirt freshmen that got to travel on this trip, what would your message be to some of the younger classes in this program just moving forward and what you want to see them accomplish?

BRAXTON HILL: I'd say never be satisfied, work hard every day. Coach Hauck is going to demand that. That's why we're here today. Just never be satisfied. Work hard year round. And you're going to have the time of your life without even knowing it each and every day.

Enjoy being a Grizzly. I mean, people say it goes fast and you get caught up sometimes, and you think it doesn't go fast, but it truly does. So just embrace all the moments you get with your brothers, work hard for these coaches, be prideful, and represent Montana as best you can across your chest.

Q. To AJ too, what would you pass on to just the younger guys? And how close are you, and what do they need to do going forward?

AJ FORBES: The guys that we have in this locker room right now, they're a bunch of real stand-up dudes. They wouldn't be here if they weren't.

The message I would send to them is demand more from yourself than others do of you. If you continuously demand excellence from yourself, you're going to be fine.

JIM POWERS: Gentlemen, it's been outstanding watching you play this season. Once again, thank you.

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