

Division I Football Championship: Montana vs South Dakota State

Sunday, January 7, 2024

Frisco, Texas, USA

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

Toyota Stadium

Coach Jimmy Rogers

Mark Gronowski

Adam Bock

Isaiah Stalbird

Press Conference

South Dakota State - 23, Montana - 3

JIM POWERS: Coach, back-to-back champions. Open it up and talk to us.

JIMMY ROGERS: I just want to start with first congratulated Montana on a great season. Those guys played tough today. We were able to come up on the winning side of it.

Couldn't be more proud of these guys and the whole team. Takes a whole team to get this much done, especially with the hype that surrounded this football program. We never paid much attention to it. We stayed consistent. We worked extremely hard week in and week out.

This is the result, 146 points scored to 15. This is the best defense in FCS history, and I'm proud of that, proud of this football team, proud to go back to back, proud to do it with these guys, and blessed to be the head coach of South Dakota State.

Q. Coach, when we talked last week, you talked about how developing your players is what made South Dakota State so good. Everyone's trying to do that, though. So what about your program, what's the formula for developing your players? What makes them able to grow so much in your system?

JIMMY ROGERS: I don't think it's just developing scheme or developing athletically, it's developing the full person. The mind controls your actions, how to respond from



adversity.

This team has been battle tested. A lot of this team has gone through a ton of heartache, and they've learned from it, and we've stayed consistent in our approach moving forward. Largely due to that is the leadership that's on this football team and guys like these two.

We're blessed to be a part of a team full of a bunch of guys like the individuals that we have. They're special people before they are football players. They're hungry to win and very consistent day in and day out, and they love each other.

Q. Coach, you just took an assessment of your defense, where you think it stands. Where do you think your overall team, the season, maybe this run, where do you think this team stands historically?

JIMMY ROGERS: I'm not overly concerned about where it stands. I think this is one of the best teams. I know this. This is the best team that South Dakota State football has ever had. That's what we concern ourselves about. Where it stands in history, I'm not sure. You guys make that decision.

Blessed to be around the guys, though. This is -- what I will miss most about the team is the people that make up the team: Garret Greenfield, Mason McCormick, Isaiah Davis, there's a handful, Jason Freeman. I coached a lot of these guys in the linebacker room, and we're going to be missing several of them.

That's probably the hardest thing for me is saying good-bye to people, and just glad we didn't let them down. We did what we said what we would do.

Q. Mark, can you talk about the challenges facing Montana's defense? It just seemed like it all came together after you hit your big tight end there in the third quarter.

MARK GRONOWSKI: Yeah, they make it difficult on us. They ended up running a 3-3 stack. They have three down linemen, and they have three linebackers. You know one



of them is coming every single time, but you don't always know which one. It sometimes makes it difficult on some of our run games, our run counts, and on the pass pickups.

The offensive line did a great job today picking up on all of that. They were trying to make some things up in the secondary that we kind of struggled with in the first half. But in the third quarter, we really started to open things up and really started to get things going offensively.

Q. Coach, you came into the season with sort of having to maintain the standard that you guys set last season. What were the challenges of doing that? How were you able to do that so successfully throughout the journey of the season?

JIMMY ROGERS: I think it's the leadership on this football team. The guys buying into the message of not listening to a bunch of hype. We really -- and then I've got to give a huge shout out to Kris Kracht. He's our mental strength coach. He does a great job of resetting the guys every week and keeping them focused.

This team is really close. When you're close and you're connected and you want the same thing, I don't want to say it's easy, because none of it is easy, but it makes it easier to have success when people love being around one another.

That's what this program is. We enjoy our time together, we enjoy the work that goes into it, and it came together this season week in and week out. It wasn't always easy, but we stayed consistent in our approach. And blessed to be around this team.

Q. Adam, Mark, both of you, I'd like to know how does winning a second one compare to winning a first one? Is it better? The same? What are the emotions like?

ADAM BOCK: It's pretty awesome, looking out there at a sea of blue, everybody on the field. That first one is going to be really special, just being the first one, but the emotions are great for both of them.

Just knowing you worked so hard and you accomplished what you set out to do.

MARK GRONOWSKI: I would say that first one was just really, really sweet just because it was that first one. We got to see the other team do it three years ago and be up on that stage when we weren't, so I think that's part of the thing that makes this whole thing so much sweeter and all the guys that have put in so much work.

As Coach was saying earlier, we've got so many sixth-year

guys that gave so much to this program, and to do it for them is probably the sweetest part of it.

Q. Mark, to hear your name on that list with Jensen and Wentz, what is your initial reaction to that? Seeing what they've gone on to achieve in the game, what do you think your ceiling is?

MARK GRONOWSKI: I didn't know. I was told that walking over here. It's a huge honor just being in the relationships with them. I don't know. The ceiling is just as high as we want it to be, as a team too, and we kind of just keep working, and the ceiling is the sky really. Keep it going.

Q. Jimmy, last year after you won it, it wasn't the day after, it was a couple months after, I think, you said: I woke up the next morning after we won a National Championship, and I didn't feel anything. You're not going to tell us that again, are you?

JIMMY ROGERS: That's who I am by nature, man. I'm going to enjoy this one tonight. My mind races to the next one pretty fast, though.

Q. Does it feel different that you're the head coach this time?

JIMMY ROGERS: I don't think so. I've wanted this for a long time as a player, as an assistant, as a head coach, and I'm just blessed to be in this position with this football team. More than anything else, that's what I care about.

I know it's somewhat sick, but this is who I am. I will reset really quick and be trying again. Football is what I know. It's what I think about. It's what I eat, sleep, and live for, honestly, and it's doing it with these guys. That's what matters to me is the next class walks out with their head high on that stage.

I'm not guaranteeing anything. I'm just proud of this football team. We're going to celebrate this and enjoy this tonight, enjoy it with my family, enjoy it with these guys, and move forward tomorrow.

Q. Mark, you guys seem to have something working with that slot screen -- I mean the slot fade. You went to it a few times. You caught it for a big gain that was called back, which they said he dropped the ball. You came back and hit the same play again. Was that something where you're like, I'm going to hit you on this? Don't worry about it. We got it.

MARK GRONOWSKI: Yeah, he came back to the huddle. He was hoping he caught it. He thought he'd win the

review on that. Jadon is just such a great player for us. We knew he was going to be in man coverage one-on-one, and we'll take our guys against anybody in the country.

I knew that he maybe dropped that one on that one, and we'll have a chance to come back to it. That's what's great about this team. Nobody puts their heads down if they make a bad play or have a dropped ball. They know we're going to come back to them and they'll have to make a play, and that's exactly what Jadon did.

Q. Adam, the fourth down stop you had on Montana's first drive, what did you see there? How much do you think that set the tone for the rest of the game?

ADAM BOCK: Jason did a good job just setting the edge there. I knew I had the next fit after that. I've been on too many of the wrong side of those. It was just huge to come up with that in a big time game. It felt awesome to get a little bit of momentum on our side when maybe things weren't going the way we wanted to and they were driving down the field. That was a big momentum shift for us, I feel like.

Q. Follow up to that, Adam, because he asked the first part of my question, but what allows you to be so effective stopping the run? Particularly in the second half. They got you a little bit in the first half, but the second half, they had some short fields, got down close to the goal line a couple times, and you were able to stop them. What allowed you to do that, and what was the feeling of being able to stop them when they got so close?

ADAM BOCK: I kind of feel like we did what we've been doing all season. Our D-line is a special group. They make everything clear for us at the linebacker position. We can just play off of them. When they make everything so clean. We just continued doing what we've done all playoffs. Like that stat said, we only gave up 15 points in the playoffs. We came into our own. It's the closest group of guys that I've ever been a part of.

Q. Just wanted to get your thoughts on Hunter Dustman today. He made like a double clutch field goal.

JIMMY ROGERS: I wish it wasn't a double clutch field goal.

Q. And then pinned them back inside the 10 a couple times. Also, just your team's ability to keep it away from Junior Bergen today.

JIMMY ROGERS: I thought Hunter was great. Andrew did

a great job of positioning the ball and keeping him in the corner. That's what we had worked all week, and it came to fruition.

He got one on us on the opening kickoff, but at the end of the day, it comes down to tackling and doing the basic things extremely well. But I was really proud of Hunter. Unfortunate we didn't get the PAT there.

Overall, team win. Special teams was a part of this. Really blessed to be around this team and, again, the guys, the coaches, the players. It means the world to us.

Q. Jimmy, were you disappointed at all with the first half? What kind of adjustments or conversations did you have at halftime to come out better in the second?

JIMMY ROGERS: No, not disappointed. We made some uncommon errors. You know, the punt that hits Matt Durrance and then J. Lee jumped on it. I didn't see it hit Matt Durrance. But J. Lee said it hit Matt. We were trying to get away from the football. When you're trying to finish a play, those things will happen. Do we want to have it happen? No. But we were able to respond.

He threw an interception and didn't see the guy fall off. We responded. He knows that.

So you can't hang your head on the mistakes, but overall if they can't score points, they can't beat you, and we stayed consistent with that. We knew, if we gave our offense enough opportunities, success will come, and we started getting going in the third quarter.

Q. Adam, last year when I talked to you during the player interviews, you were admittedly -- it was a rough year, you were feeling a little banged up. You talked about having to take on big bodies all the time. Number one, how are you feeling this year? And what came into your decision to say I'm already going to run it back before you even saw the results of this game?

ADAM BOCK: It was mostly based on the injury I had at the beginning of the year. I just want a chance to play a full season and show what I can do. That's what ultimately came into the decision to come back again.

I love this team. I love these guys. It made it an easy decision. So I'm just excited what the future holds, running it back again next year.

JIM POWERS: Joining us now real quick is Isaiah Stalbird, so if anyone has any questions for him.

Q. Mark, with that interception, what was your mindset



after that? It seemed like you bounced back really well. How did it feel to have a good second half?

MARK GRONOWSKI: On that interception, Jadon ended up running a really great route on it, and I kind of left it short for him. If I put it out there, it might have ended up being an 80-yard touchdown.

A little mistake there, but it's all about how you respond in the end of it. Even though we made a big mistake there, we came back out and made a couple of good plays offensively in the second quarter, but we didn't have a lot of plays after that just because of another turnover.

Third quarter, we really came out firing. We knew offensively, if we just get to our stuff and play our style of football, that we were going to end up kind of breaking out.

Q. Isaiah, I just wanted to ask you about the defensive game plan to contain Montana's quarterback. It seemed like he was a little banged up, so that might have changed a little bit. How do you think you guys got to him today? And just describe the game plan.

ISAIAH STALBIRD: I think we just ran some fronts. We were able to flush him out of the pocket and just have big pursuit on us. A big thing for us was playing our keys, keeping our leverage on dimes and whatnot. We've seen teams at times that haven't kept contain on him, and he pulls runs around him.

The first half was a little slow for us. We knew we didn't play our best ball. When we came out in the second half, we knew our players were going to hit and it was just a matter of time. The rest is history.

Q. Isaiah, I could be wrong, but when you got in here, Coach circled that lopsided stat for you, 146-15. What was your initial reaction to that, and what makes him such a good defensive coach and your defense so solid?

ISAIAH STALBIRD: Initial reaction is it's a no-name defense, you know. It's just a testament to the work he puts in and instills in us. It's on us to maintain that level as a whole defense, whether if you're 1, 2, or 3, he always pushes us to be our best. He never stops working as a head coach trying to understand different things.

Different defenses, he's always asking us what do you think about this or that? Even in practice or game, Hey, watch your steps here. You can expect this. What do you know, next play it happens. This man's a genius when it comes to defense.

I can't thank him enough for what he's done for this program, the standard he set for the program -- offense, defense. I'm going to miss this place.

JIMMY ROGERS: I want to make one point. Jesse Bobbit, the defensive coordinator, that staff that came together, they worked extremely hard for this. The credit goes to those guys. Those guys work day in and day out to make sure this thing not only stayed to the standard of what we expected, but they got better. This football team got better. This defense got better.

A lot goes to Jesse and Pete Menage and Mike Banks and Jalon and just the overall staff. Those guys work extremely hard. I'm proud of like the whole body of work throughout this season because we consistently got better.

JIM POWERS: Gentlemen, it's been a pleasure watching you play this year. Thank you for your time. Once again, congratulations to your back-to-back FCS football champion South Dakota State.

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