

Big 12 Conference Football Championship Game: Texas vs Oklahoma State

Saturday, December 2, 2023

Arlington, Texas, USA

AT&T Stadium

Texas Longhorns
Coach Steve Sarkisian
T'Vondre Sweat
Quinn Ewers

Postgame Press Conference

Texas - 49, Oklahoma State - 21

THE MODERATOR: We've got Coach, Quinn and T'Vondre.

COACH SARKISIAN: I'd like to start by saying how happy and proud I am of these guys and our team and our players. This has been a heck of a journey that we've been on, and for Sweat for quite some time in the three years here with me, and then for Quinn, for two years. And it's been a journey all the way through.

And as much as we look at just this season, it's been a process, from day one. And I really commend these guys for believing in what we believed in and buying into what we believed in into the culture, to the competitiveness, to the love, to the togetherness, to the schemes, to the workouts.

All that stuff's really hard. Running in DKR at 4 o'clock in the afternoon in the middle of June is really hard, is it not? It's really hard.

But when they bought into that and that idea that that was going to develop the mental and physical toughness needed to achieve something like this, it continued to grow.

And these guys know, we've been talking about being champions since this summer. And we haven't backed off of it. And I've challenged them, I made it very known publicly that's what this season was about, and they never blinked. And they continue to respond every time adversity struck.



We had a lot of different things this season that challenged us from adversity, from depth issues and guys being out, to, in the end, we probably played our best football in the last two weeks. And we played two really good, complete games where, throughout the season, we've had to rely on different aspects of our team.

But in the end, today, we just played a fantastic game. I couldn't be more proud of these guys and more happy for them. And couldn't be happier for Longhorn Nation. I know it's been a long time coming. I know everybody's been starving for this championship. So to get it on our final game in the Big 12, I hope everybody enjoys this as much as we do. So that's all I've got.

Q. Steve, why do you think this team deserves a spot in the College Football Playoffs?

COACH SARKISIAN: I would say two things to that question. The first is, as I touched on with the team, I didn't want this win and I didn't want this championship to be about the College Football Playoff. This is an accomplishment in and of itself, us winning a championship. That's the first part.

I'm so happy for these guys that there should be, regardless of what happens, they should feel very proud that they were leaders on this team, two of our captains on the team, to get us to this point.

That's the first part. I want to be clear on that, we're here to celebrate this victory and this season and what we were able to accomplish this year.

But I think one thing we've shown, we're a very complete football team. We don't rely on one phase or one aspect of this team to win. We play great defense. That offense was averaging well over 400 yards a game. That was one of the top running backs in the country. We held them to 2.6 yards per carry. Just a fantastic effort, defensively.

Offensively when you go out and you have well over 600 yards, you're able to throw it, you're able to run it and you have almost three receivers over 100 and have another back go over 100 -- and special teams.

That's the thing I think about our team is unique. We are very, very versatile. We have extreme depth. And we can win at the line of scrimmage and we can win at the skill-position spots.

So this may be a little bullish of me saying, but we'll play anybody in the country. I'm not shying away from that part. Like I feel very comfortable, if we get into this tournament, we'll play anybody. We'll find out if we're good enough or not. But I feel like we have the team, the culture, the scheme and the versatility of this team to play against anybody.

Q. T'Vondre, how much lobbying did you have to do to get a pass thrown to you? And why do you deserve the Heisman?

T'VONDRE SWEAT: Well, I mean I was going to Coach Flood all the time and Coach Sark waiting on this opportunity to get this touchdown. They told me during the game, I was going to get the touchdown, and it happened.

And the Heisman, I mean, I'd love to go to New York.

COACH SARKISIAN: Nice pose, though. I like the pose.

T'VONDRE SWEAT: It was.

Q. Coach, you were standing right next to him -- it was hard for us to hear through the booing -- but it appeared that the commissioner said that your dominant performance showed that you all deserved to be in the College Football Playoff; is that what he said?

COACH SARKISIAN: Correct. Yes, sir.

Q. Steve, earlier this week I asked you how you've felt you've grown as a coach from the beginning of the year to now. You said you hadn't time to assess that yet. From 5-7 to now, Big 12 champs, what are the emotions and thoughts?

COACH SARKISIAN: The biggest thing I reflect on, even now just being in the locker room, greeting every player coming in is my connection with these guys. I think a lot of times you go through the process of being a coach, and you're a position coach and then you become a coordinator, and then you're a young head coach and you go through it.

But I think these guys would tell you, my connection to Sweat is the same as my connection to Quinn. To me, that's the thing I enjoy the most about what I get to do.

Yes, I love the Xs and Os and I love pushing these guys to be the best they can be. But the fact that I get to watch them grow as men, that's the most gratifying thing.

I don't know if I appreciated that as much as a younger head coach. And in this time over the last three years, getting that connection has been probably a little more difficult than I wanted because I wanted that connection with these guys from the beginning.

But as I tell them all the time, trust equals time plus consistency. And I needed to remain consistent over time for them to keep getting closer to me. And in the end, the thing I praised them for is they trusted me, they trusted me this year. They believed me when I told them how things would go. And luckily for me those things did occur.

And so in the end you just try to keep building trust to forge these relationships that last a lifetime because that's what this is about. We're building young men to go in society to do great things, hopefully for a long time on the field but beyond.

And I think our culture is one that is allowing them to grow that way but remain being themselves. And as they grow into leaders in our program. You can start to see some of the things I really truly believe in come out of them. That's the part I probably relish the most in.

Q. What are the qualities of this team that you feel like have gotten them to this point?

QUINN EWERS: I think today, like I said earlier, I think we showed that how well we play and how well we come together in the championship games like we did today.

And like Coach Sark was saying, how complete we are. We can win a game in any three phases, whether it's defense, special teams or the offense making plays. And today I think we came out here and showed that we're capable of doing all three and playing together as one.

Q. This game was broadcast at Times Square and in 140 countries throughout the world. Could you share with Texas Longhorn fans around the globe, what does it feel like to be champion playing football at the University of Texas?

QUINN EWERS: I'll start. There's no better feeling, honestly, especially for the guys who just dreamed of playing here and coming to their state. And accomplishing something to this magnitude has been just nothing but a blessing.

I didn't know that it was broadcast in all those places. So

to hear that, it's pretty cool, especially, I tell these guys come out here and play like no one's seen us play before and show them what Texas football is really about and what we believe in and all that stuff. But that's a pretty cool stat you said there.

T'VONDRE SWEAT: Yeah, I like that. (Laughter).

Q. Coach, tomorrow, do you have any plans for a watch party for the guys or anything like that? Or maybe you haven't thought that far. Secondly, regardless of what happens tomorrow, will you still categorize the season as a success?

COACH SARKISIAN: Without question. This season has been an amazing success. We're not done regardless. We're not done. We went into this season to be champions. And we are. These guys are wearing hats that say "champions" across the top. And that says a lot. So very, very proud of them of that.

We'll figure out what tomorrow looks like. I said to be ready to watch this thing around 11:00. And hopefully they haven't slept yet, so that's a good thing.

Q. On that final play, you had Jonathon Brooks out there. Obviously he had ended his season. What did he mean to you this season? And why did you give him the ball on that final play?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, this team is very close, and there's a great deal of love on our team. And Jonathon meant a great deal to us. We would not be here today without Jonathon Brooks and what he did for us in a good portion of this season.

And you hate when guys have season-ending injuries like that. And so ironically, on Thursday, at the end of practice, we took a knee. I had everybody on the sideline, and we took a knee. And I put Jonathon out there when we took the knee, and I think everyone is like, what's he doing?

When I was done, I said when we win Saturday, Jonathon's going out there to be part of this victory with us, and he's going to register a snap that he was part of a Big 12 Championship game. And the guys, they love that stuff. So we had to follow through.

So it was a great moment. He's earned it. He deserved it. These guys are so close with one another that I'm glad he was able to have that moment.

Q. I know you talked about what this meant to all the players, but your story's been pretty well documented. You weren't sure you were going to get this chance

again. Just were you able to reflect personally on what this championship meant to you?

COACH SARKISIAN: Yeah, I mean, I've never done anything in my life not to try to be the best at what you do. And so when President Hartzell and CDC and Kevin Eltife called about this opportunity to be the coach, like I told you before, I didn't take this job just to say I was the head coach of University of Texas.

I took this job with the mindset we're going to go here and win championships. I said that in the opening press conference. I said it to these guys in my very first meeting. I've said it to them in some nicer ways. I've said it to them in other ways, which Sweat can attest to.

But in the end, the journey is the journey, and our own personal journey is our personal journey, and my story is my story.

Hopefully what comes out of this is my story can inspire others to maybe make changes in their own personal lives for growth because we don't have to stay where we are. We can overcome things in life, and there's so much more out there for us to go do.

And, again, I'm grateful and thankful for the opportunity. Every day I'm humbled that I get to be the head coach here. So the fact that we're able to fulfill this dream of winning a Big 12 Championship is awesome. I wish I could say it in a better way or use a better word but, it's just frickin' awesome. I love it for these guys and it's great.

Q. Sark, I want to ask you about Quinn's performance, best of his career statistically. What did he mean to you today, and also over this four-game stretch since he came back from the injury?

COACH SARKISIAN: I thought Quinn was lights out today. And the biggest thing today was when the first read was there, he was throwing the ball really accurately and guys were making plays. But I thought the thing that showed up today was him getting to secondary reads and getting through progressions and still throwing the ball really accurately and giving guys chances to make plays.

Obviously A.D. Mitchell made some plays and J.T. Sanders with a great game, some contested catches. Xavier got us started with a really explosive play early on.

I think there's always that calming factor when your starting quarterback is in there. So to get him back for the last four was big. And, hey, we wouldn't be here if it weren't for Maalik Murphy in those two games. And people sometimes overlook us beating Kansas State. That is with

a backup quarterback and against a really good team.

So it all adds up to we got here and we were as healthy as we could be. And he played a fantastic game and played it confidently. So I'm proud of him because this has been a journey for him, too. None of us forget some of the tough days last season, but to get to this point to have this moment today, that's pretty special.

Q. Quinn, wanted to ask how it felt out there today? Did you think about the game against Oklahoma State last year and how far this team has come since then?

QUINN EWERS: 100 percent. It felt awesome to be out there, super confident in my teammates to make plays and confident my abilities to get the ball in my hands.

Sure I thought back during this week to what happened last year. I didn't play my best game. I threw three interceptions.

To come out here against the same group of characters was awesome to go out there and play what I believe is my true game.

Q. Coach, talk about the first part of the game. You guys all seemed like you were free wheeling. Was that the plan? I just came from Coach Gundy and he said you had things going your way. Quinn had 12 straight completions to start the game to eight different receivers. Was it just the confidence factor, and once you got up you built on it? What happened?

COACH SARKISIAN: We made a point Monday morning, when we started talking about how we were going to try to win this game, what it was going to take. One of the key points and what it was going to take we wanted to come out and start fast.

We really wanted to come out and throw our best punches that we had. This was not a game that we wanted to throw jabs and feel it out. We wanted to go for it. And I think the guys got a lot of confidence in the game plan of how we were going to try to do that. And they executed it.

As we touched on last night in our final meeting, especially with the offense, it's all set. Now let's just go execute. Let's have great poise, get great composure, great confidence and go play loose and go play the game.

And they did it and they gave me confidence. When they start playing like that that gives me as the play caller confidence to call some things knowing they're going to execute it in those moments.

Q. How fun was that for you as a play caller when you see Quinn dealing like that, did that take you back to the days of you dealing to (indiscernible) and Chad Lewis (phonetic) back in the day?

COACH SARKISIAN: No, I thought one of the keys today, too, where I got confidence was I thought we were protecting Quinn really well. And that's a good pass-rushing team. They've got a couple of guys that can rush.

And so I felt like he showed a lot of comfort in the pocket because the pass protection was good. And that allows you to keep spreading the field and getting the ball in your playmakers' hands and allows you to call some different things -- reverse passes and whatnot -- because you just feel comfortable. You start finding your rhythm.

And I think Quinn was definitely in a rhythm. And I'll say credit to him, it's never easy as a quarterback when you throw an interception. That's always tough. Especially when they get the short field and they score off of it.

But his response, like it's been all year, was tremendous. And I think we talk about growth on everybody, but what an area of growth for him to respond the way that he did and continue to play at a high level.

Q. I'm going to go back to the T. Sweat touchdown. My question for both T'Vondre and Coach Sark, what were you thinking when you knew that was the play and you saw the ball in the air? And, Sark, why was this the game to showcase that part of his game?

T'VONDRE SWEAT: Well, first we started, we did it Thursday. And Coach told me that that was going to be the first play we call when we get in goal line. He wasn't lying. He did it. It was amazing, though. It was amazing.

COACH SARKISIAN: Every game you get down there, you have a plan of what you're trying to do. And it just happened to be this was a good look for it. And ironically, they kind of played it exactly how we thought they would. And when did you bobble it? Was that yesterday or Thursday?

T'VONDRE SWEAT: Yesterday.

COACH SARKISIAN: He bobbles it yesterday in practice. I said, do not mess with me; you better catch it, and don't get a penalty get your behind to the sideline and celebrate to the sideline. So very cool moment.

Q. Obviously college football, sports, you're not guaranteed a spot to play in the national championship

and you've been part of multiple different types of championship selections, but to be a 12-1 team potentially looking at behind 13-0 teams, is that a frustration for you, or is that something that you just understand as part of the sport?

COACH SARKISIAN: It's not frustrating. I think that's the thing about college football that is unique. We don't all play common opponents. We have our own conference. We decide to schedule our nonconference games the way we do.

I credit our administration. We played three bowl-eligible teams in our nonconference schedule and whether it was Rice, Wyoming, obviously to go Tuscaloosa, Alabama and win that game, that's a tremendous feat for these guys to accomplish that.

Now, when you do that, sometimes that takes its toll on your team when you play the epic battles like that, when we play in Tuscaloosa. But to win that game by 10 points, I think, helped us as the season went on, and it helped us have some resolve, when we did lose a gut-wrenching game in early October, but we bounced back the way we did. And I think since that ball game that we lost, we've only trailed twice in the rest of the games on our schedule.

And so hopefully, when people kind of look at the totality of the body of work, it's not just about the record; it's about the quality of the team. And I think that's the intent of the College Football Playoff, is putting the four best teams in that playoff.

Do we think we're one of those four? Sure, we do. But this isn't a vote. We don't all get to go to the election booth and vote. So it's in their hands. All we can do is, like we told the players, control what we can control. Now let's play the best football we could, and I thought we did that today and hopefully put in their minds what would it look like if Texas was in a four-team playoff.

I think it would look pretty good. But again, we'll see what they think.

Q. Keilan you said last week was a conduit for everything you wanted to do. He scores the touchdown, but then comes right back on special teams and makes the tackle on the kickoff. What was the challenge in getting your guys to really buy into that part of, it's not just about the touchdown, it's about the little things on special teams?

COACH SARKISIAN: No, I'm glad you point that out. And these guys know -- and they'll tell you -- we take a lot of pride in the little things in the game. And I probably coach

more of those types of things. Like, these guys know on Monday morning I'll do a good, bad, ugly tape. And I'm coaching things away from the ball that they never show up until they show up, when you don't do those little things.

When you have a Keilan Robinson or Jordan Whittington doing those things around the ball and we can celebrate them, hopefully that inspires others to do it that way. And my job as a coach is I've got to find ways to reward them for doing that.

And Keilan, like I said, when I first got here and he transferred here, I think he was a big component to kind of show the way of how important special teams is, how important the little things are to developing kind of the mindset of our team.

And he hasn't changed. It's three years later and he's scoring a touchdown and then covering the kickoff. It's that's what we expect of our guys. That's the standard in which we play. Every play has a life of its own. And what you put on tape for that play is how you'll be judged.

And I think our guys really understand that now, that we don't look at the scoreboard. We don't worry about how much time is left in the game. We want to play that play to maximum ability, maximum effort.

Like I tell these guys, we critique effort first. And when you can see a guy do it like that coming off a touchdown play and then still have that effort, that should inspire other players to stay on the field.

Q. Quinn, Big 12 record in passing. You've talked about it. How have you improved as a quarterback since kind of early in the season? And Coach, quick, initial thoughts on Xavier, does it look like an ankle injury?

QUINN EWERS: Like Coach said earlier, just the way I'm able to keep a level head and stay poised even though maybe things aren't going our way, like that pick.

We harped on not giving these guys a short field and I end up giving them short field and not focusing on the negativity, but focusing on what we've been doing good and how can we attack this after putting one in.

COACH SARKISIAN: Positive news on Xavier. X-rays were negative. He's been dealing with ankle stuff for the past month or so. But the beauty of it is we've got plenty of time now to get him healthy and get a lot of the guys healthy.

We were not 100 percent health-wise coming into the

game. A lot of guys had to fight through. So this will be a good couple weeks for us to get ourselves back and get ourselves healthy again and figure out where we're going to play.

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