

University of Kentucky Football Media Conference

Saturday, November 20, 2021

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Head Coach Mark Stoops

Press Conference



Kentucky 56, New Mexico State 16

MARK STOOPS: Kind of sucks the life right out of the stadium when you put the ball on the ground and give up seven points early. And that obviously can't happen against better opponents. And it just kind of puts you in a pissed off mood right from the start.

But really pleased that we were in, you know, control for the entire game offensively. I thought we really moved the ball well.

Again, the turnovers. With Will, I think there was a bit of a missed communication on that. I think the ball came on for him a little quicker than he was anticipating with the communication with him and Luke. And so turned into a fumble and a pick -- or scoop and score. And so that was a rough way to start. But really pleased with the way the team bounced back and had a dominant half.

Again, we had an opportunity to really put it away and put the ball on the ground on the 2. That can't happen and hasn't happened much lately. And we've got to get back to the basics on working on that.

I challenged the team at half time because I wanted to see some younger players in the game. I wanted to see players that had been around here for a long time that may be playing their last game in this stadium. And they deserved the opportunity to get some reps. And that's fun and that's joyous for all of us to watch those guys play that work so hard that don't get an opportunity to play. So it was important to take charge and be dominant in the second half, and they did that defensively.

I think that's what always aggravates me. It wasn't like they were scoring a lot. But the drives, the possession in the first half. And I want to say three drives led to three field goals. You know, kept the ball away from us a little bit.

So in the second half, we got off the field especially early on some third downs and created the separation that we

had.

So happy for the seniors. Happy for the guys that played that don't normally get to play and really happy that our team finished really strong.

So we have a big game coming up this next week. And that's our concentration.

Q. About that game, Mark. It seems like for fans maybe that game is going to define how that season is perceived. (Question regarding pressure.)

MARK STOOPS: I mean, if we're affected by that pressure, we have problems. We have a little bit of pressure all year, don't we? I mean, every game. I mean, we live in that world. I thought I heard that every day for the, you know, first five years. Every game was so -- you know, so -- every game is important. We live there all the time. It's about our preparation.

I really appreciate the way our team's been practicing. We weren't always perfect out there today. But, as I mentioned, our prep has been really good. And I feel like the guys are really getting focused, really dialed in and really committed to becoming a better football team down the stretch and finishing strong. And we need to have that same week this week.

Q. The last couple -- going into this week, you had a big -- you get this big win, get some young guys out there, get some reps and get some rest for the guys too.

MARK STOOPS: (No sound.) ...plays a part in it. You know, it's nice. We've had some late games, as I've mentioned in the press conference. And when you're on the road or at home, the late games can beat you up as the year goes on.

But it's nice to get done early, you know, let our guys try to get a little bit of rest and feel good. I challenged them to get that rest that they need so we start our prep on Monday.

Q. Today was senior day. I know on senior day a lot

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of seniors made big plays. What is it like for them to have some success coming in there. Josh, DeAndre.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, Josh Ali and Josh Paschal both had big games. Josh started the game with a big tackle for loss. And Josh had a big game, Josh Ali had a big game. All those guys. Luke, Darian, you name it. They've done an awful lot for our program. They've won a lot of games. And we appreciate them. So it's important to send them off this way.

Q. How much attention have you been able to pay to Louisville? The last few weeks, they seem to have hit their stride after a difficult season.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah. I caught some of that game the other night and looked very good obviously just on the TV, catching them putting up a lot of points.

So, you know, they'll have my full attention as soon as we get done with this press conference.

Q. (Question about Wan'Dale)

MARK STOOPS: How many does he need?

Q. Six to tie, six to break even. And close to, you know -- within kind of range receiving yards record. He's been what I think you thought he would be, but what does he bring to the table every week?

MARK STOOPS: Well, as I mentioned, I think the biggest thing that you notice with Wan'Dale that -- if he has an opportunity to do that, that would be great, but that's not his focus or ours. I mean, he's a very unselfish player.

He plays better than you think away from the ball when he's not getting the ball. He plays hard. He's selfless and he's a good teammate and practices hard and plays hard. So I think that's the biggest takeaway. He's created explosive plays.

And, you know, Josh really stepped up tonight. And I thought Josh really played a big game, being strong. They were bringing all kind of pressure, you know, getting the ball out and Josh making some -- making some people miss, creating some first downs, making some good attaches catches. He bounced back. He had the one drop early, and then he responded and played really good the rest of the second half.

Q. Having both of those guys out there, what has it done recruiting-wise?

MARK STOOPS: It's going to help us. It's definitely going

to help us. I mean, obviously, having Will is going to help us and throwing the football -- what did he throw for today? I don't know.

Q. 419.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah. I mean, throwing the ball like that is going to help us recruit receivers. We needed to. And with that, there's some give and take. That's -- as I mentioned early on, I mean, I was committed to moving the program forward. And there's going to be some ups and downs with that. And we're seeing some of that with some turnovers and, you know, interceptions and things.

But Will just bounces back. He's very confident. Guys just go right back on the field and they're creating big plays. So we're definitely getting better.

And I feel like we've gotten better the last two, three, four weeks. And it's because of the way they're preparing and the way they're practicing.

Q. You talked about you're okay with aggressive mistakes on defense and a PI here and there. Do you feel the same way about Will when he's trying to fit a ball into a tight window there?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah. It was a tight window. There was another throw earlier where maybe there was some separation, and he needed to put it on him. And so he carried that over. And he was trying to put that on him. And the DB undercut it and made a nice play.

So it's just constantly getting reps, and every play is different. It's hard to simulate where they're at all the time and how they're going to respond.

But, you know, I like the way he shakes it off and goes back out there and it continues to play.

Q. (No microphone.)

MARK STOOPS: I mentioned that to the team. That was part of the reason why I jumped them at half time because I wanted to see a dominant performance and I wanted to see some guys out there. And D'Eryk was a great example. Here is a guy that is coming back from a serious injury -- and we were joking about it, and I challenged them. And Jason brought this to my attention. It's the first time I've seen him smile in about seven to nine months. So the young man needed some reps. And that's why we have to take care of business so guys like that could get back in there, get the rust off and have some joy for what he's doing and how hard he's worked to get back on the field.

Q. Him and J.J., they looked pretty good for guys coming off of pretty rough injury. What is it you've got to do -- (question regarding conditioning.)

MARK STOOPS: Yeah. I think both our trainers, our doctors, our trainers do a great job and our strength and conditioning team. And the players have to work exceptionally hard.

When we played last week at Vandy, I mentioned that I'd spent some time with Bud Dupree. And Bud is coming off of the same injury J.J. has.

And I have to stay on J.J. because Bud is a professional. He's mature and he's on it. And he's still -- he was telling me the things that he does, how hard he works to continue to rehab and continue to strengthen.

And, obviously, J.J.'s done that as well. He's had a few little setbacks, nothing major, nothing structurally. But you've got to continue to strengthen that and continue to rehab it.

Q. Mark, only one player in program history has had more hundred yard games than Chris Rodriguez this season. But the fumble issue seems to be this cloud. How do you evaluate how he's played?

MARK STOOPS: I think -- obviously, it's unacceptable because he's a better player than that. You see that when he's locked in. And Chris has been practicing very good. He's dialed in. He's working hard.

It happened. He can't -- I don't want to over-think this one. There was definitely an issue early. It's not acceptable. It's not okay. Feel like interceptions are going to happen but there's no excuse for fumbles.

And I can't give him an excuse for this one. But I know he'll get it corrected. And he'll be dialed in. And he'll have a great week of practice. And I know him. That's the competitor in him.

But there's really no excuse. I can't give him one. There's no reason to fumble the ball at the 2 yard line.

Q. Their quarterback got loose on a few scrambles, the next quarterback ran all over the place. How do you coach your guys up no defending quarterback scrambles?

MARK STOOPS: It's true. The discipline of it tonight that -- there was a few early. And nothing that got crazy, but it did buy him some time and get some 7 to 8 to 10 yard

runs.

And, yeah, the next guy we're going to play, those 10 yard runs can turn into 20 or 30 in a hurry, extremely athletic on the things I've seen on the TV when I've seen him.

So we have to be very disciplined in our rush lanes. And we have to change some things up. There's times when you have to pressure. There's times when you have to make sure we're disciplined in our rush lanes.

And you've got to mix up how many you bring. Whether it's three, four, five, six -- seven if you have to. Bring them all. So, you know, there's -- you've got to mix it up because he's a very talented player. And we have to be very disciplined on our end.

Q. (No microphone.)

MARK STOOPS: It's not as easy as that, Lonnie. I know it's easy watching TV. Hey, spy, that guy. I don't know why we work so many hours. (Laughter.)

You know, what I'm saying? Just spy them. There's a lot of issues. Believe me. That is part of it. I mean, it is. It's part of it. But it's not just the end all be all.

Q. Getting those young guys in, which one of those really popped off?

MARK STOOPS: I can't tell. You know, I can't tell just from watching it. You know, D Jack, I figured his -- seeing him, the physicality of his -- a few of his tackles. I felt like he jumped out a little bit, which was good to see.

Q. (Question regarding young guys.)

MARK STOOPS: I think it's positive. It's always a confidence builder. And it's just good for young men to get reps. You know, as they get plays, as they get game reps, they get better. And experience matters and all that out there because we practice so much against each other. And, you know, some of the down-the-line guys, they don't get as much scout work either. So just seeing plays live, seeing different teams, you get better with the experience.

Q. I know you mentioned a lot of guys were happy to see people play. But there were a lot of smiles when Beau got that touchdown.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah. It was good. And he made a really nice throw early with -- I believe it was on a third down, may have been a second and long or third down. Anticipated, threw a back shoulder completion. And just to get him reps.

Once again, it's just important to get him out there. He's one play away from playing a bunch of snaps.

And it was nice to see Nick get some at the end. I didn't want to throw it -- you know, when Beau got in there, I had to get a few throws in there because -- just for what I was just talking about, just getting game reps and seeing him throw and catch.

But at that point, it was getting away from us and always want to respect the game and not abuse that situation.

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