

Rutgers University Football Media Conference

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Greg Schiano

Press Conference

GREG SCHIANO: Thanks for coming out, guys. Appreciate it.

Saturday is the last home game, Senior Day, and I think that's special. It's also Future Student Day, which I hope we get a lot of future Rutgers students that come out to the game.

I think the big thing, it's an opportunity to win a Big Ten football game against a very good team. This senior class that will be honored, we're going to do it a little differently this year. We're going to honor them at the Scarlet Walk, which I think is going to be a cool thing for them and their families.

This group is a special group. If you think back to when they decided to come to Rutgers, they had a huge leap of faith, arguably -- let's call it what it was; we were probably the worst Power 5 football program in America at the time. Guys like Tyreem Powell, who decommitted from Virginia Tech to come to Rutgers and now look at what he's done for our program. You can go down the list. Just a group of guys that forever will be the COVID crew, right? Some of these kids came to Rutgers sight unseen.

Just a group that we owe a ton to, and I hope that our fans are going to be able to come and honor them the way they should be because this group has done a lot for Rutgers University and for the state of New Jersey.

Now, that's the sentimental stuff, but the reality is we have a really good Illinois team that is coming to town. Two of their three losses were to top-5 teams, so here we go. I can talk a lot about them offensively. Their quarterback, Altmyer, he's had an incredible year, incredibly accurate, runs their offense to a T, very impressed with him.

Again, it seems like we've had receiver corps after receiver corps. With Bryant and Franklin, those two guys are about -- like I said last week, we played an NFL receiver room. We're playing another NFL receiver room. They do running back by committee. They lost their lead dog, and now they're doing it by committee and they're being



effective the way they're doing it.

I think that all goes back to their offensive line. They have got a legitimate offensive line and it allows them to run the football.

Defensively I think they get after the quarterback very well. We're going to have to protect well. 17, I forgot his name -- I'll probably mispronounce it, but Jacas, he has like eight sacks, 10 TFLs, three forced fumbles. You're talking about a guy that's very productive. Their secondary takes the ball away. Linebackers don't misfit their gaps.

You can see it's a really, really well-coached football team. Coach Bielema has done a great job not only recruiting people to the University of Illinois, but then developing they've done a really good job. My hat's off to him. He's an excellent coach and he's put together a really good staff. You can see their fingerprints all over this team.

Got our hands full. Great opportunity for our program, and 12:00 Saturday we get to see where the chips fall.

Questions?

Q. You mentioned the other night about how every day in practice you've seen Athan get better and better. Where do you feel like he's taken the biggest strides recently that have allowed him to play at the high level he's done?

GREG SCHIANO: I think it's a combination of them making strides, our receiving corps making strides, our offensive line making strides. I think he's really learned how to protect the football, and he still has momentary lapses, but I think he understands the significance -- I think everybody from a mental standpoint can understand it if you're alive, but to actually do it under pressure -- we call it the 80 feet. To do it under the 80 feet is hard, and I think he's getting better at that, and he's gaining confidence in his receivers because they're getting better.

I think it all goes together.

Q. Rutgers hasn't won three Big Ten games in a row but you guys have the opportunity to do that Saturday.



What would that mean for this program?

GREG SCHIANO: Yeah, I'm sure -- those are all good stats. The other one is we haven't beat a ranked team. All that stuff I've heard already. None of that matters to me. What matters to me is what we're doing right now, game planning for Illinois, then tomorrow practicing for Illinois, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. That's all I think about.

Those things are neat stuff, I guess, and it's a valid question, but to me if that were to be the case, that meant we were 1-0 at the end of the Illinois season, that's what would make me really, really happy.

Again, things -- we just have to keep it -- that's the way we do well here. We operate in the moment. If we let the future steal or the past steal from the moment, the present, that's where we get in trouble. I don't know if anybody can handle that, but we certainly can't. We're a developing program. We're on the rise.

But that can go like that if you let yourself get off the chop, and that's why it's so important to us that we stay on it.

Q. Looking back at the film, how do you think the offensive line did with having to move things around with Tyler coming out, and what kind of challenge does that Illinois defensive front present to them? Seems like they get a lot of sacks.

GREG SCHIANO: Yeah, two answers. I thought they did well. I thought Kaj over to tackle, Dantae in at guard, I thought they performed well.

What challenges do they present? A lot. Different challenges than Maryland did. Maryland was a challenge for sure. Illinois presents some different challenges, and again, as I said, Maryland did a lot of stuff. Illinois doesn't have quite as much, although they do have an extensive 3rd down package, but they're really sound and they do what they're supposed to do. They do what they're coached to do.

You're going to have to beat them with technique, execution, toughness, want-to, finish, all those things.

Q. When Athan became available in the portal, what stood out when you talked with him, those first impressions and meetings, and did you see the development of someone who could not only lead the offense but also help lead the locker room?

GREG SCHIANO: Well, I'd like to say I gradually worked through it and figured it out, but we had an advantage. Kirk had recruited him, Kirk had coached him, so it literally was

a reliance on Kirk's past with him. I wouldn't have been able to figure all that out if it wasn't for Coach Ciarrocca.

Sure, I'm glad he's here, and I think he's only going to get better. I don't think we've seen scratched the surface how good he can be. But yeah, that wasn't a me deal; that was being fortunate that Kirk had that relationship.

Q. Talk about the player that Hollin Pierce has developed into and the player he's become. Has any of that surprised you given the way he arrived and kind of the start of his story here and what he's become now?

GREG SCHIANO: That's a really good question. Hollin pierce is a great story. As you go through it, as you get to know him, it doesn't surprise you because he works so darned hard, but certainly when you start at the beginning, surprise, the guy got out of the car in the parking lot during COVID and said he wanted to walk on. I didn't know him from anyone.

Yeah, ultimately it's a tremendous surprise, tremendous gift to our program, and I hope that we gave a lot back to him because he's an NFL lineman now, and we need him to play a few more games for us, and then he's going to go play in the National Football League and I think play for a long time. He's that kind of guy. He's focused, tough, he works at it, committed to the game, loves the game. We've been blessed with him for sure.

Q. Something that you've mentioned is something a lot of the players have mentioned during the turnaround the last few weeks has been playing for each other. In the bye week that kind of turned around. Was there a particular moment when you got a sense of that all coming together, to turn things back around?

GREG SCHIANO: No, I think by the nature of our program, family. Forget about me; I love you. We think the definition of love is sacrifice. So forget about me; I sacrifice for you.

I think sometimes you get going in things and there's distractions, there's things that take away from -- I think what it really was was refocusing on what's most important, and that's the guys in these seats where you're sitting now. Usually the team is sitting there. That to me is what it's all about. That's what galvanizes our team.

I think it was really just getting back to what we know is the most important but maybe had drifted just a little bit from because of all the different things that went on. This has been a crazy year. There's no -- you haven't heard me talk

about the injuries because it doesn't matter. People get hurt, they get hurt, and it's sad that you have to lose players because this is what they love to do, but there was a lot of things, a lot of moving parts, and I think maybe I didn't do a good enough job of keeping everybody focused on what's always the most important thing, and that's each other.

Q. Art Sitkowski is going to be on the opposite sideline as a coach. Brett Bielema has called him a "rising star" in the coaching profession. When he was your quarterback for a year here, did you get a sense that he could eventually enter the coaching ranks and become a guy who could climb up the ladder?

GREG SCHIANO: I did. You know, he had talked about maybe he would do that. You'd always sense that he was a guy that loved being around football, whether it was in the locker room, coaches, meetings, so I'm happy for Art. He's a bright guy.

Q. Seemed like the secondary played pretty well against Maryland's passing offense, which came in pretty highly ranked. Obviously you're talking about Illinois being a pretty good passing offense, Altmyer doing a good job. What did you see on film from that Maryland game that gives you some encouragement that your secondary is ready for another big test?

GREG SCHIANO: Well, I don't think it's just that game. I think we're getting some guys back that are feeling better, so they'll be able to run better again. We're not all the way back, that's for sure. Guys are really gutting through some things. You saw guys leave the field, went into the tent, came back. That's just the way it's going to be this year.

As I told you, a lot of the issues we have are going to take six to eight weeks to really get healed up. I just think that what's happened is we've developed some depth, whether it was by choice or necessity, it doesn't matter, but I think our guys, they believe in each other. They're playing for each other, and they believe in their coaches, and they just need to keep one play at a time. One play at a time, that's all we can do. This is the league we play in. There's going to be good players. It just happens to be two weeks in a row, elite receivers, really three weeks when you look at No. 5 from Minnesota. I thought he was an elite receiver, too.

That's what you find in the Big Ten. That's what I love about it. There's elite players on every team, and you have to figure a plan and then the guys got to go execute that plan. That's going to be the challenge for sure.

Q. Dantae Chin, someone who's still kind of new to

football, relatively new. What have you seen from him, and do you remember watching him in high school and kind of seeing that rawness?

GREG SCHIANO: Yeah, Dantae, you could see in his high school tape he was a very good athlete, but you're right, there wasn't a lot of football experience there. Dantae was a basketball player. But what I've seen here is he's grown immensely. He's a very big dude when you look at him now, strong as can be. And he's committed. Coach Flats has done an awesome job developing him, he and his staff, and Dantae is just scratching the surface.

Again, he's a guy that I think will just get better and better and better as he gets more reps. But certainly need him. We are cutting it close now. Cutting it close. But hey, that's how it goes.

But again, I just encourage our fans, our students to come out and recognize this group of seniors at Senior Day. It's a special group. It's a group that got us going in the right direction. We still have a long way to go and a lot of things to accomplish, but these are the guys, this group that will be playing their last time in SHI Stadium that got this thing started. I hope we can send them out the right way, and I hope that we can as a staff and the rest of their teammates send them out with a victory, but that's quite a big challenge against a very good Illinois team. We'll find out on Saturday.

Thanks, guys.

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