

Wisconsin Football Media Conference

Saturday, November 5, 2022

Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Head Coach Jim Leonhard

Postgame Press Conference



Wisconsin Badgers 23, Maryland Terrapins 10

THE MODERATOR: Start with some opening comments from Coach Leonhard and then we can take questions.

JIM LEONHARD: First of all, just very proud of the way our guys handled the bye week and the prep needed to win this game and to come out and play strong early and not get affected by the weather and push through that and really thrive in those situations early in the game. Just really proud of the way they handled a lot of adversity today.

Q. I think you mentioned earlier in the week trying to get them to snap back in quickly. Do you think that was an important factor in getting the jump on Maryland today?

JIM LEONHARD: I do. I mean, you have to handle the bye week the right way to get all the benefits. The physical side is one thing, getting more healthy. If you come out flat, sometimes you negate the benefits there.

So I think our players did a great job of handling the week, the prep that we gave them last week, getting ahead of it, taking care of their bodies. I think we saw the results of both.

Started out strong. You see guys like Hunter, Nick Herbig, Isaac Guerendo, those players, Braelon, and a number of guys that were banged up. The offensive line kind of mixing the rotation again.

We took advantage of the week in a lot of ways, and to get the results is always huge.

Q. Obviously weather was a factor there. Especially stopping the passing game from Maryland. Overall you secondary seemed like they were sticking with the receivers and pressure getting to Taulia. What was the biggest factor in your mind besides the weather of stopping that passing game?

JIM LEONHARD: Number one, it's containing the quarterback. You saw late in the last drive how dynamic he can be when he gets out of the pocket.

I thought we did a really good job early in the game of getting him on the ground, forcing him into the boundary, getting him to throw the ball away because what happened late in the game is normally what he is doing for four quarters. So we did a great job of containing him and forcing him to make throws and make some tough decisions.

You had to stop the run first today. You had to control the line of scrimmage and affect the quarterback in the pocket, and we were able to get that done.

Q. It felt like there were multiple safeties, multiple linebackers making plays throughout the game. Was this week what you have envisioned a depth of defense of what you guys can do coming into the year?

JIM LEONHARD: Absolutely. You lose a guy like Hunter Wohler and the versatility he has. We were able to put him in a lot of different positions today. Really playing some of our outside backer roles, to the field in certain packages.

Just continuing to learn our players, what they can handle from adjustments, different packages, what fits their skill set. We were able to get a big piece back.

It's always fun to see them making plays and watching their teammates respond. They know how hard he has worked to get back and how frustrated he was having to sit out as many weeks as he did. It's a lot of fun when you see those guys reap the rewards of all the hard work.

Q. Isaac Guerendo has been through a lot during his career here. Do you get a sense of satisfaction seeing him do what he did today?

JIM LEONHARD: Absolutely. Adversity is a huge part of the game, unfortunately. To see a guy who has struggled through it and he has had his ups and he has had his downs, and it felt like every time he was going to break



through, something happened.

To see him have the day he did today, it's just awesome. I had a great view of him going down the sideline. I'm glad they kept that one inbounds.

Just to see guys push through any adversity that comes up and get some rewards out of it, that's huge for those players and building confidence going forward.

Q. I hate to talk about just one series in a game, but it was a field position game early. Maryland got the short field after the punt, and your defense I think got a four and out, if I remember correctly. How do you measure how important that was early in the game on a day where you knew the conditions were not going to be conducive to a lot of offense?

JIM LEONHARD: Field position is everything early in the game. They did a great job of flipping it the first series. We get a stop, and they kind of flipped it.

But you know you're going to be fighting those tough decisions on going for it on fourth down, kicking field goals, punts. The tighter that game is, the harder those decisions get to be.

You saw both teams going for it on fourth down. Every field goal makes you a little bit nervous, but it was fun to watch our guys make some big plays and eliminate some of the tough decisions and obviously getting ahead. I thought the kick to get us up 17 was huge to get that three-score game.

After that you weighed a lot of factors. Is seven bigger? The 20 points wasn't that big to me if we could get a first down and keep the clock rolling or get a touchdown and go up big with some tough decisions there.

And it was awesome to see Nate go in there and make and big kicks today in some really brutal weather.

Q. Jim, going back to Hunter. What do you tell him or any player that comes out of injury, but maybe Hunter specifically, just emotions dealing with that and trying to get to see game action? Is there anything that you said to him during the week?

JIM LEONHARD: He is so steady. From the mental side, his preparation when he was out, his emotions. He is just one of those guys who goes about his business every day.

So some guys you really get concerned on the emotions. And they've been out, and they try to press and do a little bit too much, but never felt like I had to even bring it up

with him just because of his approach. That's rare out of a young guy to see that maturity and to see him go in there. It's just fun to see the look in his eyes.

He is physical. He plays fast. He is aggressive, and he tracks the ball well. It's such a huge skill set that's going to be a lot of fun the last couple of weeks to just find ways to make him more and more dynamic in this defense.

Q. Wisconsin's offense this season has passed for more yards than they've had rushing yards, but this is a game where you needed the ground game to come up big, and it did. Why do you think the group was so effective today, and what does that show you about what's possible with the rushing attack?

JIM LEONHARD: I think this is probably the healthiest that group has been in a long time. The combination of guys we had, we felt like it was the five that was playing the best at the time and healthiest.

And thought you add the tight end group to that as well that's been banged up, you get Rucci back, and you are able to do just more things up front, and they played with a lot of confidence.

I think Maryland does some things similar to us. I think there's a lot of carryover, a lot of confidence when it looks like what you see on a daily basis. Just fun to watch the aggression those guys played with up front. The backs just pounded it in there.

It's not always going to be pretty. You know you're going to run into some heavy boxes, but just everyone grinding it out and getting the ball in the perimeter and making some big ones. Really making them pay with some long runs. You have to do that. You have to flip the field and put them on their heels a little bit.

Q. Our perspective is skewed a little bit from being inside the press box, but each team had 77 yards passing. Just with the conditions the way they were today, just how difficult was it, if you can give us some insight, to throw the ball to anybody?

JIM LEONHARD: If you were going to try to throw it much over 10 yards, the ball was going to be affected in a pretty big way. We saw that in the couple of ones we threw vertical. They didn't throw many down the field, so it kind of shows you the respect they had for the conditions.

There was really a pretty good stretch early, and then late got really bad because then all of a sudden it felt like it dropped about 20 degrees. There was only one kind of window in the game where you felt like both teams in the

passing game had an opportunity to be a little bit more aggressive, but outside of that it was a huge factor in how you had to call the game.

Q. You mentioned Van Zelst, the job he did today. He hasn't had a lot of attempts, but do you know what you have in him because he has been pretty consistent when called upon?

JIM LEONHARD: He really has been consistent kicking the ball in competitive situations in practice the majority of the year. So just kind of learning what his range is, where he likes the ball, putting him in some tough situations in practice just to see how he responds, but he has been solid.

Even though the numbers haven't been there as far as the amount of kicks, haven't felt like we've needed to protect him, and that's a credit to him. He is showing the consistency, and then we know we've got Lahm, who has a huge leg if we need a long one. Really hasn't been put in that situation yet, but we know we have the ability to do it if the situation comes up.

Q. You mentioned how important stopping the run was. Can you quantify how impactful a guy like Keanu Benton is today. Especially early on it seemed like he was just dominating.

JIM LEONHARD: A guy like Keanu changes the math inside. He can dominate his matchups consistently, and he forces teams to put a lot of attention on him, which helps your linebackers run.

If you can keep your linebackers clean with guys like that up front, you are going to have a lot of success. They're not going to bust many explosive runs.

Having him in the middle is really priceless. We were beat up with that group for a number of weeks as well, so we just played little bit more physical. We were able to get to some rotations late. But you just saw a little bit more of a fresh group. Just loved the approach that they had and made some plays.

Q. You had a lot of free safety looks today. How impactful was that specific look. And, also, kind of with Hunter not playing for a while, did you think that there was anything off at all between them three playing in cohesion with each other, and do you think that's going to be an integral part of your defense going forward?

JIM LEONHARD: Well, first of all, we thought we could get to a specific package based on their personnel and be able

to hold up in the run game and have a little bit better chance in the pass game. Obviously you eliminated some of the issues in the pass game, but from a run standpoint, to be able to play small ball a little bit and stop the run effectively was huge for us today.

Hunter is so locked in with those guys and the work that he puts in. I didn't really feel like there was any lack of communication or just rust with different combinations of players on the field.

I think it's going to be a big thing going forward. Just finding ways to be versatile and kind of view some stuff that the team is not practicing.

Q. A few weeks ago you mentioned the guys are 3-for-3 in terms of effort going into the bye week. Just curious how you thought they came out this weekend and just their continued response to you as head coach?

JIM LEONHARD: They're playing hard. It's clear. It's easy to see, I think, how hard they're playing. Still have to eliminate some dumb mistakes that we're making with penalties and mental errors, but that's football. We're going to push to really just attack the last three weeks here of the regular season.

I like the approach. These guys are holding each other accountable. They're putting in the work day in and day out. That's going to give them a chance to win on Saturdays, and as a coach, that's all you can ask.

As it gets closer to game day, just pick those emotions up and bring the passion to it. So I love the way they've responded over the last month or so and looking forward for more going forward.

Q. Nick had two more sacks today. He has eight on the year. Where have you seen him add or improve, take another step this year as a pass rusher?

JIM LEONHARD: Just adding more tools. I think he is feeling things within the flow of the game faster. That's huge for a pass rusher.

We're not a team that he is just going to rush the passer over and over and over. So when you see a guy get hot, it's up to me to put them in positions to rush. He has to learn very quickly within the game kind of how he wants to attack and what problems, which goes into his prep.

He studies as much as anybody on our team. It's really fun to see the confidence he plays with. You feel him on the sideline, and he has a certain look in his eyes. You know

you've got to let him go at times.

Any time you get a player playing with that confidence, you have a chance to do some good things on defense.

Q. Earlier in the year you mentioned that, and a couple of players did too, that the team wasn't handling momentum swings as well as it needed to. Do you think the team overall has made strides in that particular area?

JIM LEONHARD: I do. I think that becomes a comfort level sometimes when you change some big pieces and you are looking at new faces. Sometimes they're good, and you don't know it.

You start trying to do too much as a play-caller, like what settles a team down. It's the experience that I have gained over the year, it helps a ton.

Then there's the ownership side of playing better. Not panicking, staying calm, and being able to communicate when you're on your heels a little bit.

I think there's a lot of factors that go into it, but you're seeing it on all sides of the ball. The comfort level, I think sometimes they know what's coming. They know what to expect after you give up a big play or you give up a negative play on offense. What's going to calm us down?

As a coordinator with me, with Bobby, you are learning throughout the whole course of the year how your players are going to respond, so you should get better as the season goes on.

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