

Wisconsin Football Media Conference

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Coach Luke Fickell

Postgame Press Conference



Wisconsin - 38, Buffalo - 17

COACH FICKELL: Obviously the number one objective is to win a ball game. And we won a ball game today. It wasn't exactly maybe the way we envisioned. I think the thing we stressed this entire week was about the ability to play clean, and I don't know that that's what we really did.

I think that there were some anxieties and things. We played fast. We played aggressive, which I think it cost us a little bit defensively. I think early on we didn't tackle very well.

But the greatest thing about it is you've got to be able to handle adversity. And I learned some things about our guys because at halftime it's 14-10. And we get momentum right back there in the end of the first half and then we kind of give it back to them by not playing as aggressive as we need to play defensively and give up a field goal right there.

But they came in at half. They didn't bat an eye. You could see it in their faces that they didn't love exactly where they were. But the idea was, hey, how do we handle some adversity? How do we bring ourselves out the second half and make sure we don't let those things affect us from the first half, make the adjustments, and get back to being who we need to be?

They asked me afterwards: What were your expectations? And sometimes I think maybe I have delusional expectations, but that's what's going to continue to drive us and motivate us. And we know there's a lot of ways that we're going to get better and we need to get better on both sides of the ball, all three phases of the game.

But that's the beauty of it, that afterwards those guys are excited. They're grateful for the opportunity, and I could see it in their eyes. They're hungry to find ways to continue to get better and make sure this journey is going to grow.

Q. Obviously there's been a lot of talk about Braelon

Allen in the offseason, understandably so. But what have you seen from Chez today, who has been banged up the last two years, hasn't unable to finish it off the way you would have liked?

COACH FICKELL: You say it's a 1-2 punch. I think it's a 1-1 punch. They're really good friends. They do things together. And sometimes you would think in an offense that might not be same as it has been that it would be unique to say how can you have two really, really talented backs and they be able to share the load.

And I think you saw it today. I saw it today. I didn't just see the energy that Chez brought on his big, long run. I saw the energy that Braelon had for Chez after the long run.

And I saw the excitement that Chez had for Braelon when he had his long drive and got things rolling and changed the tempo of the game. And, to me, that means a lot to the locker room, because there's all kinds of human elements that are throughout the entire locker room, especially when game time hits, whether a guy has the ball enough or made enough tackles or missed enough tackles.

But they're a great example of what momentum and energy can do and what healthy competition looks like.

Q. Do you think the way your team ran the ball today said something about the kind of identity it can have offensively, particularly for Haynes who may have been wondering, what's this look like with the running game?

COACH FICKELL: I do. If there's anything I knew going into game one I knew we could run the football. I knew that that could be a spark and an energy for us. And I'm not saying that just because of Braelon and Chez, because I think those are the two guys that are hardest to see in fall camp because you don't go live and let them break tackles -- but the combination of those two guys and the guys up front.

So whether we wanted to do some other things and have a great balance, we also can ID where our strengths are and where the energy and momentum can be created, because



every week there's going to be different ways to create energy and momentum.

This week I think it was with Chez and Braelon and their ability to pound the football and create some energy and some big plays in that way. And I think the rest of the group fed off of it -- not just the offense, I mean the defense as well.

Q. Monday you said your previous stops maybe you didn't take time to take it all in on your first game. Did you give yourself a chance to take it all in today?

COACH FICKELL: I took a couple of deep breaths there at the end of the third quarter as we got rolling in the fourth, but that would probably have been the only time.

But it was awesome. It was. I recognize that. To play in front of that crowd, and, to be honest with you, it's hard to hear. It really is. You're supposed to be at home. There's times when you're able to hear and make some things when your offense is out there and it's difficult.

So I recognize it. Didn't spend a whole lot of time because the sheer fact that things didn't go exactly, maybe, as you planned. But then again I don't know if I've had too many games that have gone exactly as I planned.

Q. Just one game and that quarterback at times got the ball out of his hands pretty quickly. But do you want to see more of your guys up front making him a little more uncomfortable -- in the future, I'm talking about?

COACH FICKELL: I thought they did a really good job. Give them credit. When they held the ball, they held the ball with some max protection stuff. When they were getting rid of the ball they were getting rid of the ball.

Being a former D lineman, there's nothing more frustrating that the guy catches and delivers the ball and you don't have a chance to get close. Or if you do make a move and you happen to get free and you get there and the ball's completely gone. Nowadays you can't even touch the guy.

It is frustrating up front, and that's kind of the thing I had for those guys up front at halftime -- don't get frustrated. At some point in time, if they're going to take their shots, they're going to have to buy a little bit of time and your opportunity is going to be there. But give them credit, I thought that was a really good plan on our part.

Q. How would you assess how Tanner played today? Had a couple of interceptions and big plays as well.

COACH FICKELL: I think -- we've got to go back and watch. I thought he had command. I thought he had control. There was never a sense of urgency that he felt like he had to have.

I didn't really see the first pick. I couldn't see -- we've got to give him -- I don't know if they want to replay the bad plays on the board. But the other one was -- I've got to give them credit -- it was a really good play on their part, obviously.

But those are things we've got to do better. That's the talk. That's the ability to play clean. And there's a balance between being really aggressive, which I think he was. The throws down the field, maybe there weren't as many, but I think he probably had a lot of poise in not throwing some of those ones when they were bailing out of there.

So I would say from afar, no, we don't like the two interceptions. But I do believe he threw the things when he was supposed to throw them, and he didn't really kind of force some balls into places where he shouldn't have.

Q. Can you describe Chimere's will to get into that end zone and how big that touchdown was at that time?

COACH FICKELL: It was huge. The first half in particular, we moved the ball and then we stall a little bit. And we're always trying to figure out all of who we are and how we do things. And we knew that.

But you're finding, to get the ball in some guy's hands and give him a chance to make some plays. And finally we got the ball into Chim's hands with a little bit of space, because there's times when those guys get the ball and there's no space and they have to fall forward and get us 4 yards, 3, 4, 5 yards when we can.

But when we can get those guys in space we have to make plays. I'll get on Will Pauling for having an opportunity that maybe he didn't make the play in space. But we'll tell him to check out the old man, Chim, and how he does it when he gets himself into space.

Q. I don't know what happened late in the game but Jordan Turner's targeting penalty, did you agree with the call or how would you assess?

COACH FICKELL: Trying to get me in trouble, eh?

I'll be honest, I said it two years ago when I a kid got kicked out of the game when we were playing Indiana, I don't believe we should throw kids out of games.

If it's a blatant, complete shot where we have to make a

point, then obviously we've got to be able to do things. But this is not the right thing to do. The NFL, we can't fine them. But we've got to have some other ways.

They're not blatant. They're kind of bang, bang things. We've got to do a better job coaching and teaching, and we will. So there's other adversity we have to overcome, but it's a part of the game that we've got the rules we've got. I don't have to like them.

But we'll look at it in a way that we gotta get better and make sure we make an emphasis to our players about what that shoulder-led tackling is supposed to look like.

Q. In the second quarter, on that fourth-and-3, it seemed like there was some hesitation before choosing to punt in opposing territory. What led to that decision? And was there any hesitation on your part?

COACH FICKELL: I don't remember which one it was. By nature we're going to be aggressive. But there's a feel for a game and the situations we had.

I don't remember that one. I can't recall exactly the time on it. I know this; I'm not sure we would have kicked a field goal every time when we did, but I thought it was an opportunity for us to get our field goal kicker out there on the field and get him into some rhythm too, as well, because we know we're going to need him as well.

That might be an area where I'll look back and say if we're going to be an aggressive team, if we're going to take our shots at things, those are the areas where, when it's fourth-and-3 inside that 25-yard line, we're going to have to be aggressive. I just felt like at that time it was the right thing to do to give Vakos a chance to kick.

Q. Does it feel like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders? We've been talking about September 2nd a long time, since you've been hired. Is it good to finally have it over and have it with a win?

COACH FICKELL: Yes. There's mixed emotions right now. But on my walk in here, my wife probably tried to remind me to enjoy what you do and winning. And I said that to the guys but then I walk out and I bite my lip.

No, it is. In some ways I want to make sure that the focus isn't on me or the "new" or the offense. It's about this team. It's about our ability to grow.

And sometimes you have to get through that first game to make sure that everybody kind of gets themselves centered back into the things that they're supposed to do

and need to do and get our minds focused on what's going to give us a chance to continue to grow and be successful and play our best ball at the end of the year.

Q. Correct me if I'm wrong, I don't think we saw Darian Verner get in the game. Is he still coming back from injury?

COACH FICKELL: I couldn't exactly tell you. I didn't get the play list yet. He's ready to go. He's one of the seven or so guys that we want to make sure that has an opportunity to roll in there.

He has missed a lot. But everybody that deserves to play will play, and we know we need to have at least eight guys to be able to play up front. Maybe this first one is a situation maybe he didn't get some opportunities based on where the game was.

Q. You guys talked in camp about Tucker Ashcraft being a little more advanced for the standard freshman. I know it's just one game, but what do you think he learned about himself and showed you guys today in the opener?

COACH FICKELL: That he can come down with the ball and still turn run some because he said I thought I was going to get blasted so I just curled up as he caught that big ball on the sideline. Tucker is going to be a really good football player.

By week four he's not going to be a freshman anymore. That's what we need. We saw it early on. We obviously had some situations in that position, in particular, where he had to be thrust into some more opportunities and grow up a little bit faster maybe than everybody would have expected. But he's done it, and everything we've asked him to do he's continued to do.

He played a lot today. He made some plays today as well. He had some more targets because Tanner, because the offense, because those guys are confident in him. He's not going to be a young freshman about three, four games.

Q. There's a lot made last year when you took over about Braelon and is he going to stick around and you guys sold him on a version. Did you do anything similar with Chez, did you and Phil sit down with him and say this is what we see for you?

COACH FICKELL: It's crazy because he came to me, reiterated this is where he wanted to be. I know his high school coach. His high school coach reached out to me and said this is where he wants to be.

He told me more about him, how unselfish, humble, tough of a kid he is. And I feel bad that I probably didn't spend as much time with him, but it was pretty simple when he came to me and said this is where I want to be and what I want to do and I want to help you do it. I will always remember that. I respect that. He showed me a lot today and in some different things. I don't mean just by running the football, I mean about his ability to be an example in that locker room, what healthy competition looks like and not ever complaining about anything.

I held him out of camp maybe two, three extra days just for the sheer fact that I know how tough he is and sometimes you've got to protect certain guys from themselves. And I don't think he was liking me at the time, but I hope he knows it's all out of respect.

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