

Wisconsin Football Media Conference

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Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Coach Luke Fickell

Postgame Press Conference



Wisconsin 35, Georgia Southern 14

LUKE FICKELL: Well, we wanted to make it exciting, so you guys can thank me later. We did our best to make it as exciting as we possibly could. I'm not sure that's exactly what the plan was.

But another opportunity for us to challenge ourselves to find out how we handle some adversity. I thought the first half was adversity enough, and I feel like we were going to come out in the second half and get things going, and we didn't, so we tried to create a little bit more adversity. We were going to go for it on 4th down in our own territory, and obviously we misaligned a little bit and punt the ball, and in three plays they score.

Felt like, okay, we're going to give ourselves as much as we possibly can and see how we can handle it.

I don't know. I don't know if there was something that clicked at that point, but it did seem like there was a little bit of a different fire.

We talk about passion; we talk about passion comes from the heart and soul, and it's not the hootin' and hollerin'. It's not a speech of some sort. You just never know when that passion kind of rears its head. I'm not sure that the passion didn't rear its head after about four minutes gone in the third quarter.

It felt different -- I know when things go well it feels different, but we had had turnovers in the first half and didn't capitalize on things like that, but it just felt different after about four minutes into the second half.

If anything, I'm proud of our guys for that. Now we've just got to find ways to pull that out and that be who we are from the get-go.

If we had that formula, we'd have something different. Everybody would.

But nonetheless, we have to keep answering the challenges. These guys have answered the challenges, and that's what I'm happy about.

Q. Luke, you've said that you have to find ways to create energy through the ground game. It looked like Braelon gave you guys that in the second half as part of that spark, as part of that turnaround. I know you want to also use him as a receiver, but is getting him going earlier part of the solution?

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah, that was part of the game plan. It just didn't -- sometimes you've got to adapt and adjust. In the first half we couldn't and didn't, for whatever reason.

We'll go and take a good hard look at it and see why. Give them some credit. They've got some 340-pounders inside there and it's not the easiest thing in the world I guess early on.

But nonetheless, guys don't recognize and realize -- everybody around here does because they've seen it for such a long time, but even a four- and five-yard run -- the two-yard runs, it's hard to gain any energy from that. Even though they're body blows and they wear people down, but the five and the six ones are the ones that you can just see a spark. That's what it was in the second half. It wasn't an 89-yard run or whatever it was the last time. It was a six-yard run, it was an eight-yard run, and it was physical and it was close to being broken.

That's where I think you started to feel some things that were a bit different.

Q. Luke, you've dominated the third quarter in scoring I think 48-7. What's been the key out of halftime to get those numbers so lopsided?

LUKE FICKELL: Coaching. (Chuckling.) No, I'm glad you found a positive statistic for us.

No, I think we've had some adversity. We've been put in situations where you have no choice, right, it's one or the other. You come out the second half and you lay down or you come out the second half and dig deep and find out where that passion is coming from. Hopefully it has



something to do with the way these guys have trained, that when their backs are against the wall, that there's something that comes out of them.

That's not the way you want to go about it. You'd much rather be able to find ways to start faster and things like that.

But if I look at everything, even in three weeks, what's the greatest thing you've seen so far, it's just some of those challenges. There's no lay-down, there's no even pointing fingers, because that can happen at times.

We've got to find a way whatever that spark is, whatever that is, whatever that third quarter momentum is or formula is, just try to find it for the first half.

Q. Going back to Braelon, you used the word "multiplier" to talk about Tanner in the quarterback position earlier this week. Can Braelon give you that --

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah, there's no -- that's why I said, the quarterback makes everybody around him better. Just the nature of who he is and distributing the ball and just confidence. But the multiplier is being able to be physical.

You've seen it around here for I don't know how -- 20-some years and probably longer, 25 years. That is a big deal.

Whether it's Braelon, whether it's Chez, whether it's that offensive line, it is a multiplier. It is an energy giver. We have to find and create some more ways to do that a little bit earlier.

But understand that there's things that take a toll, whether it's -- maybe it was the first half, maybe it was us trying to but not establishing the ability to run the football well enough to create some energy, but maybe those body blows made a difference.

Q. Luke, through two weeks you were sitting at negative 5 in the turnover differential. Five picks and a fumble later, you're back in the positive. How was your defense able to get so many turnovers today?

LUKE FICKELL: They made the plays when they were thrown their way. People laugh, oh, they were thrown right to a couple of them. They were, but they've also been thrown to us before and the ball hasn't bounced.

When the plays were there, they had an opportunity to make them. Coach Brady said that with about two minutes and 13 seconds to go, hey, we're in the positive in the turnover. I said, don't you dare jinx this thing; who knows what can happen in two minutes and 15 seconds.

But we talked about it, right; wasn't going to overemphasize -- I thought, yes, we got turnovers, but I still think the better of what we did was we tackled better. We leveraged things.

When you get some turnovers, I think you by nature just see yourself being a little bit more aggressive. Some of them were pressure throws to us, and some of them were really, really good plays. Hunter Wohler one down in the end zone was a phenomenal play.

Q. I have a question about pass defense, as well. Seemed like in that first half, they were using some of those man-beater type of concepts to make some of those big plays happen. Are you concerned after three games about the man coverage ability of your secondary right now?

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah, we've got to figure out what to allow others to do, and I think that's what we're seeing, that they're a little bit, I think in some ways, lenient in what they would consider a rub and a pick. We've got to do a better job of it.

But I think all in all, what we were seeing is in a lot of ways, whether it's man coverage or zone coverage, a couple of those ones are going to be some one-on-ones. I think what we're seeing is so far in the first three games, people have tried to spread us out more, tried to make us play in some more space, have challenged us, I think, linebacker-wise to have to play in space, and that's where regardless of who it is, that's where I think people have attacked, whether that's man coverage sometimes, but it's also some of the things that they're trying to make us do.

Q. Luke, I believe you mentioned on your radio show that you'd had a conversation with Braelon on Sunday just about touches or whatever it may be. Is it challenging to strike that balance for a player who thinks he should have the ball more with the number of weapons that you have and trying to figure that balance out during the game?

LUKE FICKELL: It is, but the great thing about Braelon is he is an unselfish kid. He is. He wants it more -- we all know that. I want more wins, right? We all have a selfish nature to us.

But the key is can we not let it override us with what's best for the team and recognize what's best for the team.

We all feel the same way. That's what's great about it. We can sit in a room with me and him; we can sit in a room with Phil and me and him; we can sit in a room with the

whole staff offensively, and we all feel the exact same way, but we've got to find greater ways to be able to do that, to get him involved, to get that energy, that multiplier.

But sometimes you have to be able to take what people will give you, and he's got a lot of attention, not just from the media, he's got a lot of attention from other people's defenses, and that makes it a little bit more difficult.

Q. In the first game against Buffalo your defense got off the field 13 out of 15 times on 3rd down. Overall through three games, how would you evaluate what your defense has been doing on 3rd down to get the ball back?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, that's what I didn't feel great about today, this afternoon. They did some things, created some space. That's why they had as many yards -- that's why we didn't have as many possessions in the first half. That's sometimes why we like to play a little bit more on-body coverage because, yes, you might give up some plays, but the idea is you're going to make them challenge everything and hopefully give your offense some more opportunities because they don't have as many of those drives and hold the ball as long.

I'm sure they wanted to make big plays, but I also am sure that they were trying to be smart with some things. They didn't go at a crazy tempo of any sorts because I'm sure that that was a bit of a philosophy.

It all kind of works together. There's some things we know we've got to do a better job of.

But we're going to play a lot of man coverage. We're going to play on bodies. What we're just not getting maybe is some of the zone stuff, integrity stuff, that people are challenging us with a little bit more down-field routes.

Q. I think you were asked about him earlier this week, but James Thompson, his presence in the middle today, how have you seen him, especially in this game but also maybe the past two weeks really step up on that line?

LUKE FICKELL: James is doing a great job. We move him around. We do some different things based on what we play when we're in three-down and four-down stuff, but he's very versatile. He could go in and play the nose position for us, as well.

I think that the sky's the limit. I think he had some injuries early on in his career, but trying to figure out where is his best fit, and fortunately and unfortunately he can do it all, but we've got to find more ways to even try to get into the

one-on-one sides and turn him free and give him a little bit more freedom to be aggressive because he's a disruptor.

Q. Luke, it seemed like there was more quarterback runs today. Tanner Mordecai's six runs, around 40 yards, the two touchdowns. Is that something you're trying to incorporate in your offense or is that an extra element that you have with 11-on-11 football?

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah, I think when it comes down to it, he's an aggressive guy. Sometimes we try to hold him back, but the reality is in order for him to be himself, in order for him to do and be the player that he is, he's got to have some freedom to be able to move around.

I don't know how many of those were legitimate called quarterback runs. Some of those are improvised quarterback runs. I don't know that the touchdown run, the first one, was exactly what we had envisioned; trying to run him up the middle on a quarterback iso, that probably was not the call.

But that just shows you what a guy can do when you improvise.

Some guys would have bobbed that thing and went down to the ground and said, I've got to get down before this turns into catastrophic, but that's not his mindset. We've got to keep him going; we've got to allow him to be aggressive but got to trust him that he'll be smart, too.

Q. You talked earlier about the way the team was able to turn it on in the third quarter after facing some adversity. What's your level of concern moving forward about starting faster, especially knowing you're starting Big Ten play in about six days?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, hopefully it's a little bit like turnovers. Everybody has been asking about what do you do about turnovers; you don't get them; are you panicked; are you going to change. And no, we said we weren't going to change; we were going to continue to do what we do, emphasize the tackling things.

I don't know that there's any one particular thing we can say. I stopped saying let's start fast.

11:00 game, I'm not blaming that by any means, everybody has got to play it, but it's something that we'll talk about just like we talked about the turnovers. It's something that we address, but I don't think it's something that we're going to change our routine of how we do things. We're just going to have to have a greater expectation for what we look like when it's early on.

Q. I think you said earlier this year you've got two starters at tailback in Braelon and Chez. Any particular reason that you decided to go with Chez today early, just a change of pace?

LUKE FICKELL: Change of pace a little bit. Braelon was dinged up a little bit. But that's what I'm as proud of anything; he didn't bat an eye at it, whether it was dinged up a little bit, or hey, this is the route we're going to go based on where you are physically.

He feels a lot better, and I'm not saying he was going to be a game-time decision, but he had got dinged up a little bit even in practice. I can honestly tell you I'm proud of him for the way he fought through, the way he handled even today, and it showed in the second half.

Q. This is the first time we've gotten to talk to you since Keontez Lewis announced he was going to leave for the transfer portal. What were the conversations with him like over the past week, if there were any?

LUKE FICKELL: We just won a football game. We're going to focus on the guys that are in that locker room. Those guys are the ones that did what they did. We're going to have the guys that are here, and the guys that aren't going to be here and don't want to be here, then they won't be here.

This has got to be an unselfish thing we do, so we're going to talk about -- if there's any more questions about the guys in that locker room and how they played, we'll talk about them, but anybody that's not a part of our program, we don't need to talk about at this point.

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