

Wisconsin Football Media Conference

Saturday, October 7, 2023

Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Luke Fickell

Postgame Press Conference



Wisconsin - 24, Rutgers - 13

LUKE FICKELL: Well, I thought a really complete game for us today. I had some concerns, obviously, coming off a bye week. It's just an 11:00 o'clock start. A lot of things going on with homecoming. Just a little distractions that change the routines and the things we have to do. Which I understand that. But, you know, for a coach, I kind of -- those are the things that ring in your head, We got to come out here, play well, start fast.

You know, you got a team that's coming in here that's played really well all year, manages the game. Was going to do some things that I thought were going to put us in a tough situation, limiting possessions and stuff like that.

But came out the first half, played really well. Defensively, played exceptional. You know, obviously, the pick-six right there before half, I think that's the difference in the ball game. They were playing right into their hands for what they wanted. You know, the last four minutes of the first half, first four minutes of the second half. A very well oiled program and team that knows what they can do. And they kind of had it in their mode right there. And then Rico comes up with not only a huge pick, great play, but then he takes it to the house with only four seconds left to go in the half. There's no doubt -- there was some things that happened in the second half, but there's no doubt that's the difference in the ball game.

Q. Luke, after the Purdue game, you joked you might have to work on Hallman's return skills. Do you like what you saw today?

LUKE FICKELL: Did I say that? I don't actually recall. I forgot to bring him up in front of the team. As big a play we've had all year. He showed the skills today. You know, that's not easy, obviously, going 95. Not only to make the play, when you're in that situation, sometimes you start think about running too soon. And the most important thing to do is make the play initially and then to be able to close it out and take it the distance is exceptional.

Q. Luke, one more for you on Ricardo. What has he shown you since he's got here that has allowed him to establish himself as someone --

LUKE FICKELL: Well, I think I said it after spring, and maybe even in the midst of fall camp if you asked me who the most consistent person I think on the team has been, I would say Rico. And I didn't know that I had seen some of those flash plays. Obviously, in the spring game, I think he had three picks.

But through spring ball and til' that day, I don't know if I saw a ton of big plays. Maybe picks and things. A lot of times, the field corner doesn't have as much action at times.

But then after the spring game, I started to recognize how consistent he does things. And when opportunities are there, obviously, he made them then. And, you know, same way in fall camp. And, you know, he is very consistent at what he does. He's a smart football player. And he's playing at a high level for us.

Q. Luke, when your offense has kind of choppy days, some good, some bad, how do you see a guy like Tanner Mordecai's poise come through? Because that's something you talked about with him a lot.

LUKE FICKELL: It's not only poise. It's passion, it's fire. I mean, there's no doubt. You know, you try to limit him from running the ball and putting himself in those situations. But when he does, you see the passion, the fire. You see what's -- I told the guys, you'll find out more each week about, you know, our team and each other, about the passion they have for the team and the way they play the game. And that's really from your effort and attitude.

Right? Not just making plays, but guy's effort and attitude when they watch him play, that's Tanner. I mean, he's a fiery guy. He's got great emotions. But, yet, he handles it in the best way possible.

Q. Luke, when we talked to your guys' defenders during the week, they said they were excited to face Rutgers because of the running game. Do you think



your front, whether its' the linebackers or linemen controlled the line of scrimmage, especially early when Rutgers wanted to set the tone?

LUKE FICKELL: I do think so. You know, you start with the week of being all -- you know, loading and loading and loading it. And, you know, after probably the first quarter and a half, you know, I don't know that we had to be all the way down on some of those things. Obviously, we gave up some throws.

But you knew -- had a good idea if we were going to win this football game, we had to control the line of scrimmage, we had to win the rushing battle more than anything else.

Q. Just what you saw from Braelon today and the way he responded after that fumble early on?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, I was looking for him. I wanted to make sure we had him right back in there. He knows we'll ride with him. And, obviously, he's not happy. He's disappointed, I'm sure, he put the ball on the ground. But he's still the guy we're going to ride with. And I wanted to get him right back in there as fast as we possibly can. He was over getting taped. We did get him back in.

But, you know, those kind of things happen. Again, we're not condoning it. We got to take care of it. But I think the confidence level that he has, he didn't bat an eye. Kind of like what we talked about with Tanner. It's easier to see with the quarterback because the spotlight is always on him. But I thought he bounced back really well and it did not linger one bit. Not just in the way he played, but you could tell on his face and emotions.

Q. Luke, how does Tanner's ability to escape some of that pressure, to gain positive yardage, change the map for you and the ability to do some different things on offense?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, it allows you to continue to drive. It really puts -- you know, I don't want to say fear. But it puts a different element defensively what you have to do. I think they got later in the game, especially in the second half, obviously, they had to become more aggressive.

So I think we gave up a couple sacks. You know, maybe a smaller, one yard or two yard where he's kind of pushing up in the pocket. I don't know that that's -- if they had their druthers that that's the way they would have played it. You know, they would have liked to probably be able to get there with four.

But his ability to not only extend plays, some quarterbacks, you know, extend plays to throw the football. Some

quarterbacks, their eyes go right down and they go to running. I think what Tanner does so well, he does it both. He keeps his eyes down the field, but then he feels space.

And when he does take off, he can scoot. And he's got that aggressive nature. So I think he's the toughest kind to defend. Believe me, I know. Because we played against him the last couple years.

Q. You mentioned Braelon. And this is the first extended duty for Jackson Acker. Did you get what you had hoped to on him for a starting point for the rest of the year?

LUKE FICKELL: I think we got what I would have expected. And I don't know, I said that walking in the door here. I mean, when we walked in the door, we tried to figure out what position he was going to be, right? Was he going to be a fullback? Is he going to be a tight-end? Is he going to be a tailback?

And, you know, he's done nothing but continue to grow and impress us. And I kind of was hoping and believing at some point in time his opportunities were going to come up, not that we wanted to have them the way they've happened. But I think that -- I think all of us had a lot of confidence in his ability to not just, you know, be a backup guy or be a sub guy, but to be a guy that could go in there and carry the load.

Q. Luke, you mentioned Rico's play. You've watched so much film. I'm curious: Had Rutgers done something like that before? Is that preparation, reaction, or a little bit of both?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, it's both. It is a little bit of preparation. Obviously, I think last week they scored a touchdown on probably a very similar route. I think it was fourth and four. I think it was maybe the first touchdown of the game for them.

But it's also a really, really good play. Meaning that these guys are reading some of that and their ability to be able to pass some things off down there. And, you know, sometimes it happens and sometimes a guy's just there and the ball gets batted down. And there's sometimes when you have an opportunity to put your hands on it and secure it. And he did.

He, obviously, closed the deal. And that's big. Because I think later in the game -- I think we had a couple times when we had our hands on balls, touches, tips, and we didn't come down with them. But it seems ever since maybe the second game, I think Rico has been -- the ball has been somewhere around his hand, he's come down

with it.

Q. Luke, with Will Pauling, I know he came over from Cincinnati, too. Just how he's catching the ball and becoming kind of the go-to type of receiver in this offense, have you seen him emerge how you thought he would when he decided to come to --

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah, I thought Will was a perfect fit at everything here, just the type of kid he is, you know, his work ethic. And, obviously, his ability. But I think that even is probably one of three that I thought this was, you know, a great and perfect fit.

Now, how guys progress, how guys become, you know, what they become as the offense evolves, you know, you're never exactly sure. But he's done nothing but continuing to impress everybody, work his butt off. I mean, you saw him more out there on special teams today, as well. And almost had a blocked punt. And he's just a guy that continues to come to us and say he wants to do more.

So they roll time on offense, him and Skyler a lot. And he just wants other ways to get on the field and to help us win football games. So we actually used him a bit more. We used him on the punt more today and we used him on block punt today. He's a guy that's a ball player.

Q. Coach, curious about our running back, Kyle Monangai. I think he was top three in the Big Ten in yards, but he only had 16 today, two yards per carry.

LUKE FICKELL: Who's that?

Q. The running back for Rutgers. I just wonder what the key was to stopping him?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, it just starts upfront. It was a focus for us. So it wasn't, like, you know, it was just something that happened. You know, we knew coming in here that if we didn't win the rushing battle, it was not going to be a great thing for us.

So the whole emphasis was winning the rushing battle. And that means different things sometimes. It doesn't just mean yards. But it means the ability to, you know, take the people out what they want to do. It didn't mean that we had to hand the ball off 50 times and make sure we were ahead of them in the rushing game. It had a lot to do with our ability to stop the run, establish the line of scrimmage. And I know the guys upfront did a great job from the opening snap to the end.

Obviously, the second half, I think they had to change a little bit being down. Probably threw the ball a little bit

more than they wanted to. But, nonetheless, it was because the guys upfront.

Q. Luke, earlier in the week you said you thought Jake Renfro might be ready. Was there any consideration getting him a little bit of work? And I asked this in part, because Tanner talked about his snaps and he said that he knows he has to be much better than that.

LUKE FICKELL: I don't know if there was a lot of talk there at the end. You know, had we, you know, not maybe turned the ball over, there would have been a greater opportunity to, you know, maybe get some of those guys -- you know, some more reps.

But, no, Jake is getting much closer. You know, we play six linemen, obviously with Trey and those guys rolling in there. We don't do that at the center position now. This would have been the first week that Jake we would have said he has legitimately practiced all week and ready to roll. And I think we'll continue to have him as a very viable option as we move forward.

Q. We saw Riley Nowakowski get in towards the end of the game. Obviously, he's a guy that's been banged up to. What do you think he adds to the offense that gives that tight end group something you were missing before?

LUKE FICKELL: It's some depth. I think some versatility. I think he's a guy that's a true hybrid. He's a little bit more natural out in space. But he's a tough guy that can play out in the box. And it was great to see him.

He was back this week, in particular. But we weren't really, you know, probably saying he was going to be a guy that we were going to throw in there for a bunch of snaps. But if we would have needed him, obviously, he was ready to go. And he practiced most of the week.

But I think just continuing next week and the following -- I mean, he's going to be a guy that's going to see a lot more action. We were fortunate to not have to use him much today. But from here on out, he'll see a lot more.