

Wisconsin Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Luke Fickell

Postgame Press Conference



Nebraska - 17, Wisconsin - 24

LUKE FICKELL: Winning is a whole different feeling. So we can maybe crack a joke or two here tonight and have a little fun with it. But I wasn't kidding -- I mean, you guys have seen me the last couple weeks, the Monday press conferences, it's been a stretch. I mean, not just the last three weeks. It's just been a stretch on all of us, I think, every kid in that locker room, every coach in our program.

And to get a win tonight, it's to -- I mean, it's deep. It's deep. And I know that we did this for the seniors and that's the most important thing. But we did this for everybody in that locker room. Because we all needed it. And I -- and it's been -- you know, again, whether it's been expectations, you know, ups and downs, whether it's been injuries, it's been such a roller coaster of emotions for those guys in the locker room.

And I wasn't kidding when I said they come out every day, they don't complain, they don't moan. They just go about their business. We just haven't been good enough.

And tonight, we started off not good enough. And we did the exact opposite of what I said the No. 1 thing we had to do. We had to come out, we had to start fast. I didn't mean we had to go up 14-0. But I just said we had to make sure we were in a good place and do some good things in the first quarter. And we did the exact opposite.

And they -- I don't want to say amazed me. But they showed me that there was something deeper down inside that we've seen at times, but not on a consistent basis. And they had to dig a little deeper tonight. We all had to dig a lot deeper just with the way we started and the last few weeks, the way they've gone. But I'm extremely proud and happy, especially for the seniors.

Q. I was going to kind of ask about that. But I'm guessing you would have been happy to see your team come out fast and then you're down 14 to nothing. Does that make it a little more satisfying knowing that,

you know, most teams or a lot of players could say, Screw it, we're down 14-0, we're going to lose again?

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah, I mean, there's no doubt. I mean, we had reminiscence of the week before when, you know, we were in a really bad place and position. And, you know, I thought that was the most important thing we had to do tonight, come out and get a stop, do this. Just make sure that we're controlling our emotions of things.

And you give up two giant plays defensively and it -- I think that's what makes this feel that much greater, is just the position we were in, the way we battled back to have to go to overtime. And a lot of decisions and situations, even in the overtime that, you know, we kind of had to put our shoulders. And for all those things to kind of come out -- and to come out on top tonight, you know, it is really special.

Q. When you look at some of the plays Tanner made, especially on third down, the second half and overtime, is that the kind of guy you expected when you brought him in here as a transfer?

LUKE FICKELL: I didn't know exactly what to expect. It's what I thought. Because of what I had seen and what I played against. And then when he got here, that's exactly what he showed me he could do. And we saw it a little bit earlier in the year.

And he's been hurt and dinged and things like that. But there's no doubt to the best -- one of the best leaders as I've been around and one of the more competitive guys I've ever been around. And he showed that tonight.

I mean, there were plays made. And it's not just him. Vin Anthony made some catches, Will Pauling made some catches. But because of who Tanner is and because of his leadership, it's why we probably didn't fold when it was 14-0 or didn't, you know, panic, I should say not fold, but panic when it was 14 to nothing. Because of his leadership and the other guys that stepped up and followed around him.

Q. Hey, Luke. After that start you referred to, especially when the defense, the quick 14, but then



essentially going three, three and a half quarters without giving up anything, other than the three, what stood out to you most about their response and stepping up in those late moments?

LUKE FICKELL: I think it's kind of reigning themselves in, recognizing the situations, recognizing things we had done poorly, and then correcting it. And I think that's where -- you know, that's where they've done a good job throughout the year. But we've gotten to the position where we all started to panic a little bit when we've given up plays. And it's cost us.

And they didn't. They found a way, they recognized the things we were doing. Not that we didn't prepare for it, but the quarter back goes 50 yards or 55 yards on a blitz where you got a guy free at him. And then, you know, you got second and 20 and they run four verticals on zone coverage and the guy goes 65 yards.

I mean, like, there was a panic at some point in time and you thought it was going to happen. But they didn't. And so, maybe some of the stuff they had been through, but they found a way to adjust, adapt, and played really, really good football the rest of the game.

Q. Luke, you have seen Braelon in a lot of different ways so far this season, whether splitting carries with Chez or carrying it 29 times. But this was kind of a different version of him. What did you think of what he gave you, given --

LUKE FICKELL: To be honest, I'm proud of him. I didn't expect him to play. Not that he didn't do some stuff this week or things like that. But I just kind of said, Hey, let's just assume he's not. And if by chance he can, then, you know, he's going to have to kind of tap us on the shoulder and really push us to say, Hey, I want to be in there.

And that's what he did. And, you know, I mean, he prepares mentally and he does the things that he needs to do. He just hasn't been healthy. And I think it's been a hard -- it's been hard on us.

Because I think some of our guys, you know, get emotionally tied to all of sudden he's in there and then he's not. So I just thought we can't have that tonight. And so, to assume he's not going to be there, and let's just move forward.

And you know what, I think he didn't play in the first maybe series or two. And I think he was really chomping at the bit there to push us and get him in the ball game. And that makes me proud of what he did. And we know he didn't feel perfect, but he's one of those other guys that showed

me a lot tonight that I think he was much better when we got down. And that's something we needed.

Q. Luke, with Hunter, any updates on what transpired? And also, how did the defense change after he was out of the game?

LUKE FICKELL: That was a bit worrisome. He's a rock and he's the guy that makes a lot of things go. And he's done a lot of different things for us and when they came back at half time and said he wasn't going to be able to go, we had to throw it on guys' shoulders. There's another one of those reasons why I think this is so special, to see a guy like Travian Blaylock that started in game one and then, really, hadn't see the field a lot. And his ability to have the ups and the downs but keep working, keep working, keep working and knowing at some point in time he's going to be put in a situation where we needed to win a football game.

And he had to go back in there, who's been out, had to go back in there and play a role that maybe he wasn't, you know, deemed ready to play. But that's when you see those guys have to step up because of a situation like that.

Q. Luke, are you relieved? Is that a good word to describe how you're feeling?

LUKE FICKELL: There is. There is a relief -- and it's not -- everyone thinks it's always about winning. And this game's about winning. But I'm relieved and I'm happy because of the way we played. We didn't start off well and we did the exact same thing I said we couldn't do. But, yet, we found a way to fight and scratch and continue to claw and we found a way to win a game at the end. We found a way to finish.

And I know you can say we beat Illinois. But that's not something that we've done a good job of. And the way everything kind of went tonight and the way it finished the way it did, fortunately, I think there's a relief to it. But I think there's much more joy than relief.

Q. Luke, what did you see on the last play, the interception? And what was going through your head right there knowing it was down and distance?

LUKE FICKELL: It didn't matter. I just wanted the ball to hit the ground. I don't know that we had to pick it off, but it worries me when a ball goes up in the air and it's tipped. I wasn't worried about us coming down with it, I was just worried about them not coming down with it. We already had one over there on the sideline I think on second down where I couldn't tell we had our hands on it. So maybe somebody could tell me.

Q. (No microphone.)

LUKE FICKELL: Okay. All right. I was hoping that it wasn't us that tipped it. Because usually those lead to something not good when you don't make the play that you have an opportunity to, kind of like, you know, has happened to us a few too many times this year.

But who was it that picked it off? Was it Zach that picked it off? Great. I'm glad he did. I don't care. As long as he knocked it to the ground and it wasn't them. I don't know, it kind of got blurry after that, so I wasn't sure.

Q. Luke, I know you're not usually a big picture person, at least here with us. But how important is it for the team to get bowl eligibility?

LUKE FICKELL: I mean, they asked about that and someone asked about that and talked about it this week. And I don't want to downplay it. There's a streak and all these things. But it wasn't a focus of mine. It wasn't a focus. I didn't say one thing about it to the team.

I think it was far greater and far bigger about how we were going to play and our ability to react, respond, rally back from where we've been the last few weeks. Yes, we know there's some things on the line based on, you know, bowl eligibility. But it was far bigger to me than being able to go to a bowl game. It's to find a way to get ourselves back playing football and gives yourself a chance to win. That's what we did tonight, played complementary football that gave us a chance to win.

Q. I know it's hard to pick out one play in an overtime game. But it's 14-0, you're down, they're driving for, it looks like, at least the field goal when they had that fourth and one where you guys stopped them, I don't know if you could feel it, could you sense the momentum change a little bit?

LUKE FICKELL: Yeah. Well, what we talked about is we had to have something good happen early. And that's -- you know, whether it was us scoring a touchdown first, being up, whether it was a big play, an interception, you know, whatever. I just felt like we've been a fragile team and we needed something big to happen early.

Well, it didn't. But after that big fourth down stop, there was a definite change in momentum on our sideline, within our team, but also within the stadium. And I think that was a big deal for us. We needed that tonight. We needed that stadium. We needed that energy. We needed that student section.

All those things, you know, sometimes get left behind and

they're not talked about when you're a team that's looking and pulling at everything you got to try to get you back into this winning mode. You need everything. And we needed everything tonight. We needed the play, we needed a lot of other plays and we needed the crowd.

Q. Luke, on both your touchdown drives, you guys mixed up tempo even more than usual. What do you think makes Tanner so comfortable in those situations? Is it just experience, having done it before?

LUKE FICKELL: No, I think when he can just play and be a little bit more free, I think it gives him opportunities to, you know, be aggressive. And, you know, when people don't have their cleats in the ground -- and that's just something we've not been able to do as much because we haven't had consistency offensively.

And now that Tanner's feeling much better -- and I think that's where we were getting to about Purdue week when I think we were getting into that mix of things and then hiccups here or there, whether it's the running game, the backs, injuries and then Tanner. It just hasn't allowed us to play at a speed where we can create more things and make the advantage for our offense. And I thought he was able to do that tonight.