

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Ohio State Buckeyes

Coach Ryan Day

CFP Media Conference



COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF

RYAN DAY: This is quite an honor to be in the National Championship game. We're obviously very excited to be here. This is something that our guys fought so hard to have this opportunity, and now we're here.

Unbelievable opportunity to play a great program, so much respect for Coach Saban and his staff and the players and their tradition of winning there.

Really looking forward to a great week of preparation as we work our way down to Miami.

Q. After the game you said you didn't know the extent of Justin's injury after it happened, but then he said he didn't feel he had any chance but to return. I think what you meant is that Justin himself wanted to play so much that he thought he had no choice to return as opposed to pressure imposed on him by anyone else to get back on the field. Can you clarify that as well as what the medical protocol is for players who were hurt to be cleared to return? And of course how is Justin, and what's your level of confidence he can practice and play?

RYAN DAY: Sure. I think when you, first off, saw the way that Justin finished the game, it was remarkable. I thought that was one of the gutsiest performances I've ever seen in person.

It was like any other situation. It was certainly high profile to see it all go down, but I leave all that stuff up to our medical people who are the best in the country.

Justin is such a competitive guy. He wasn't going to come off the field, and that's just the way he's wired. You were going to have to pull him off the field.

It was a pretty amazing performance. It was good the next day he actually -- his comment to me was that he felt better waking up in the morning than he expected. You know, we'll keep working through the week and have a great

week of preparation, get ready to play Monday night.

Q. How do you explain Justin going from at least statistically his worst game of his career to his best? And then along with that, can you even share with us if the ribs are broken or anything? How bad are they?

RYAN DAY: So I think when you look at the Northwestern game, there was a lot at play there. First off, Northwestern is very, very good defensively and they made things hard for us, and we were just a little off in a certain area, and that's all it takes is to be a little off.

I think, too, it got us out of rhythm a little bit that Chris was out, Jackson was out, and that threw us a little bit off rhythm. So I think it's a combination of those things.

And then to turn around and play the way he did, I think that again shows his competitiveness. You started to hear some rumblings about the fact that he didn't play very well, and I know that bothered him. It took a couple days to recover from.

But that's part of being a quarterback, and I think that's part of learning as a quarterback is overcoming adversity, and the truth is he really hasn't had a lot of adversity. This is somebody who's had a lot of success throughout his career. He's very, very talented and very, very smart, and so when you look at the great quarterbacks, they all have to overcome that adversity.

As we talked after that game, this was just another step in his journey, and what really matters is how he returns and how he recovers. And I thought the way he played in the game was excellent, but it was more important, like you were saying, he played coming off of that game that he felt like he didn't play great in, and that's a sign of great growth as a quarterback, which was huge.

Q. Just as a follow-up, can you tell us the specific injury that Justin has and whether you expect him to play?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I definitely expect him to play, but, yeah, we don't get into specifics on injuries. We give our availability report at the end of the week, and that's always

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been our policy.

Q. As a follow-up on a different topic, with Trey Sermon and his emergence, I think you said after the game that it started around Michigan State that a light switch came on for him. Why do you think that was? You said early on maybe he wasn't making the type of impact that you all expected. Why was it then that something changed for him?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I think that's a great question for him. I don't know if he'll be able to give a great answer there, but I think there was a couple things at play. One, he didn't have the lead-up like a normal running back would have going into the season because of the lack of the preseason. Came in during the summer, didn't have that lead-up like he typically would, and then he was coming off of the injury.

Again, those are the two things I use. I don't know if he would say that or not, but I look to those two things.

And then also our run game is a little different than what he was used to. He was also splitting time with Master. So when he started to get more at bats, he started to get more runs, got into a rhythm of the game, and I think you're seeing the best version of Trey.

The best part about Trey is when all that was going on, he never came into my office, never complained, never said I need more carries, none of that stuff. Just kept his mouth shut and kept going to work. I think that is the best part of this whole story, is he just kept going every single day to work and never said anything about it, and how he's playing at a high, high level.

It's really remarkable what he's done. Over 500 yards in two of the biggest games of the year, and he has a chance to go down in Ohio State history as one of the best runs ever if he can have another performance in this game like he did the last two.

So hats off to him, but I think a lot of it has to do with our offensive line, our tight ends, and our running game, as well.

Q. Ryan, I wanted to ask you about clearly the passing game is exploding, and because of that, wide receivers become more important just because you're throwing more. But is there more to it that way? It seems like now you cannot have a great team without really great receivers. You see Devonta and then your guys, Olave and Wilson. How has that position sort of evolved to the point where it seems like it's become maybe the second or third most important position on the

offense?

RYAN DAY: I mean, it's very important. I think that the emergence of 7-on-7 has increased the skill level of a lot of receivers and quarterbacks, and they get the ball on the perimeter a lot faster than maybe they did 10 or 20 years ago, spreading the field horizontally and vertically. And we're always looking for ways to create explosives, and the easiest way to create an explosive is to throw the football.

So when you have that combination of run and pass, it really helps.

Now, if you don't have the ability to run the football, and I think if you look at both teams here, both of us have really explosive receivers. Both of us have really good running games. So because you can run the football, just do the math on it. Somebody extra is going to be in the box, which opens things up down the field. If you don't have that ability to run the ball, that extra guy is now deep and it's a two-high shell and it's not as explosive.

So I think it all goes hand in hand. But to go back to your original point, I do think that receivers in the last five to ten years, their skill level has increased overall nationally, and you're seeing some of the best in the country in this game.

Q. Wanted to kind of follow up on the situation with Justin. I know you're not going to get into specifics before the game, but how will you approach preparations for this game if he's not able to take as many reps as usual during the week leading up to the championship?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, we're just going to practice the way we normally practice. Nothing is going to change.

Q. With as much as you all put into beating Clemson all off-season and having that game on your list all year, is there any concern about maintaining that same level of intensity and focus going into this game?

RYAN DAY: Well, the goal was never just to beat Clemson. The goal was to win the National Championship. All these guys who -- we didn't have a season and they were fighting to get back to play for a National Championship.

While it was an emotional win, that wasn't the goal. The goal was to win this one. And so I'd be disappointed if we didn't play well in this game. This is everything on the line, everything we wanted, and so now all the focus goes on to Alabama. We've just got to prepare.

The most prepared team is going to win the game, and we

have to prepare like we did the week before. The good news is I think we have a little confidence going into the game that we've shown what we can do, and now we've got to go do it again.

You know, it's a good lead-up time. We get 10 days here and kind of rest up a little bit and then get to work and practicing. So I think we'll be refreshed and ready to roll. The virus still hasn't gone away, so we've got to make sure we're really vigilant in that area, which is still a struggle day in and day out. It's just hard. But the preparation is just going to continue to go on.

Again, we said it going into the last game, we're going to have to play our best game. Well, we're going to have to even play better than we did last week to beat Alabama.

Q. There was a lot of buzz last week about where Dabo Swinney put your team in the coaches' poll. How much attention do you pay to Nick Saban's ballot that had you at 5 behind Texas A&M at 4?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, that was -- until you just said that I wasn't aware. I really don't look at those things too much. I totally respect everybody's opinion. What matters is playing in the game.

Q. A lot of people have raved about Steve Sarkisian's play calling at Alabama. Is there anything that stands out to you about the way he goes about calling plays in the game?

RYAN DAY: He's got a great tradition of a lot of success on the offensive side of the ball. He's been around some unbelievable offenses, and he's got a great feel. I think when you look at the things he does and the plays he runs, he puts the defense in a lot of stress. He's very aggressive. He obviously really knows how to prepare an offense to create explosives, how to run the football. He's very, very talented.

And when it comes down to calling plays, sure, there's a knack for it, but so much of it is the preparation that you put in leading up to it. You know, it's always a good play when it works. That's what I always laugh about. Why did you call that one? Because it worked. If it doesn't work, it's not a good play and you're not a good play caller.

So I think the big thing there is I don't know him as well, met him a few times, got a lot of respect for him, but he clearly does a great job in preparation, putting the game plan together, and then preparing the guys to execute it based on what they're going to see.

Q. You're in rarefied air for a second-year head coach.

What's it like to match wits and put a game plan together against a guy who's won six national titles?

RYAN DAY: Again, nothing but the utmost respect for Coach Saban and his staff. Anytime you get to this level, you know you've got to be on your game. You're going against the best in the world, and certainly Alabama is. Coach Saban's career speaks for itself.

So yeah, watched them win a lot of National Championships, so again, nothing but the utmost respect.

When you get to this level, you know it's going to be hard no matter how you shake it. You've got to be on top of your game and you've got to do a great job getting the guys prepared, playing at a high level, and that's what we're going to focus on.

Q. Your offensive line has seemed to really grow here over the last couple games, which is kind of remarkable considering you've only played three in like 40 days, and in all three of those you had a different starting five. How have they been able to do that given all those challenges and circumstances?

RYAN DAY: I think it goes back to practice, and that's the thing that we spend a lot of time talking about, was that because we weren't playing in as many games we had to practice really hard. We had to practice against each other. The D-line had to go against the O-line, ones versus ones and that was the only way we were going to get better fundamentally.

It wasn't always so much of a schematic deal. It was more about getting a pads down, hands inside, running feet, all the things that come with that. And that's just the guys up front. I mean, linebackers, tight ends are the same way on the perimeter.

So that was the only way we could do it because we weren't playing in those games. So I attribute it to practice, which our guys did a great job of. You've got to give a lot of credit to the guys. Got to give a lot to credit to the position coaches for getting them ready.

Q. Justin was obviously very vocal at the beginning of the year about wanting to play, needing to play. How influential do you think he was and what did that tell you about his evolution as a leader?

RYAN DAY: I think that was a huge step in his what you're calling evolution as a leader. I think that that was big. When he first got here he had leadership skills. I think his ability on the field pulled some guys with him, and I think that as time went on, he became more and more of a

leader.

I thought what he did at the team up north game last year after coming back, after taking that shot in the knee and then coming out for one play and then going back in and then throwing that touchdown pass was amazing. Your teammates see that.

And then to see the way he worked in the off-season, and then to see him fight and speak up for his teammates, and then to see him come back and play the way he's played, the big play in the Michigan State game where he's running down and blocking for Trey Sermon on a run, the way he came back and played gutsy in this game Friday night, again, I think those were all steps in the evolution.

But I do think it was significant when he spoke up. I think that that was a big step for him. But this is something that's been growing over time, and it's great to watch and be a part of.

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