

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Ohio State Buckeyes

Kerry Coombs

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF

Q. Kerry, I know that you've touched on this a number of times throughout the year, just about the difficulty of going through day-to-day with testing and the way this year has worked out. From a coaching perspective, has this made this the most challenging year where every week it seems like you have to adjust the personnel and you don't always know which guys you're going to have by a Friday night or next Monday night?

KERRY COOMBS: Sure, you know what I would say? I would say it made it the most rewarding year because of the commitment on the part of the players and how eager and willing they have been to adapt, adjust, overcome, play different spots, whatever it takes.

You know, rather than focus on how hard it's been, honestly I've just been really gratified to be around a group of kids like this and their eagerness to just -- whatever it takes, Coach. They've been fantastic.

Q. Could you just kind of speak to the challenge that Alabama's offense presents? You know you were going against a good offense last week against Clemson, but it seems like Alabama is at a different level. What do you have to do to try to slow them down? And specifically your defensive line is going against a very, very good offensive line.

KERRY COOMBS: Yeah, this is a great offense. It is a complete offense. There are now five All-Americans on the offensive side of the ball and a Heisman Trophy winner and the runner-up. They have great players, but they also have a great scheme and they understand how to attack defenses. People have tried numerous different things against them, and they always have an answer.

I think their kids play hard. I think they play physical. They run the ball well. They throw the ball obviously extremely well. They have great skill.

For us, this is the biggest offensive line that we've faced, but they're also very gifted, very athletic, they can run, and they do a great job. It's going to be really, really important for us to we're fitting the right gaps, that we have inside hands with great pad level and that we -- because if you misfit a gap or you get high in your pads or your hands are outside, they're going to take advantage of it.

And then obviously we're going to have to do a great job in coverage with the skill of the receivers and the quality of the quarterback.

Q. Kerry, what have you seen from Latham Ransom here late in the season that's led to him having a bigger role?

KERRY COOMBS: Yeah, he's just continued to improve every day. I think those are the kids that probably suffer the most from the structure of the way summer went and a shorter season and all those kind of things, because Latham was -- he was in COVID protocols and all those kind of things and really short-handed on some of his time and preparation.

And then not having the opportunity to get those kids in games early in the year to help them develop, actually ended up -- I think we all felt like he was doing a really good job in practice. But as you know, that's different than the game.

So he showed up and played big when we needed him to, and he continues to improve and develop, and we're excited for his future.

Q. I wanted to ask you a little bit about Ryan. You've been around Ohio State football and Ohio football for all your life. Why was Ryan -- two parts: Why was Ryan a good fit, and what was the evolution of the offense that he brought in to Ohio State? And maybe why was his personality a good fit to replace Urban?

KERRY COOMBS: I would say this: I would say, first of all, the offense, when he showed up and we started doing seven-on-sevens and things like that in spring ball and training camp, there was a completely different feel to the passing game. He brought elements of the passing game



that were really, really challenging.

It was like cold water in your face. You'd go out there and practice, and he's very, very creative with what he was doing in the passing game. That was the very first year, the very first day, you could feel it.

So it's just gotten better and better. I watched him last year when I wasn't here and watched what they were doing offensively, and it's an incredible thing.

So I think he's a brilliant offensive mind.

But I also would tell you that I think he's a very, very gifted leader of young men. I think that he has managed to bring us through this situation as well as anybody could possibly have done, from leading me as an assistant coach and our staff to every support person in the building, and then obviously what he's done with our players and their families and the communication with them.

He's a players' coach. He feels the players. He talks to the players all the time. I think that that's one of his greatest gifts. He has a really good understanding of this type of young person in this environment.

He will frequently give us suggestions on things to read or watch that don't have anything to do with football but have everything to do with young people, and it's really helpful. I think in part because he's younger, and I think in part because he just has that great sense of people, he is really -- I'm really enjoying watching him lead this team.

Q. Obviously you were around in 2014 when Ohio State and Alabama played in the semifinals. From your perspective, how has their offense changed or evolved from 2014 the last time you guys faced them?

KERRY COOMBS: Well, they've always had great players. They had Omari Cooper then, so that's the Alabama way. They've always been physical. That's the Nick Saban way. Those things don't change.

But the evolution of the passing game and the passing attack and the variety of things that they do offensively is exceptional. You know, Coach Sarkisian has done a great job of challenging the defense on every single play.

I certainly think that they have really evolved from 2014. Great players, great coaches, great effort, play hard. But also now a lot more wrinkles to the offensive package.

Q. This game obviously, you've been in these big games before as a coach here and in the NFL, but as a defensive coordinator, how does that change your

approach, anything on game day? How does that change, especially in a game when you're going up against, as you just talked about, an Alabama offense that is as good as this one is?

KERRY COOMBS: Yeah, I don't think any of it has to do with me. I do think your preparation, when you have to get two or four or five or six guys ready for a game is different than when you're trying to get an entire defense.

But here our position coaches, they are phenomenal, and Larry and Greg and Al and Matt do a great job of coaching their guys, getting their guys ready to play, and helping reformulate the game plan together.

By the time we get to game day, we all have a pretty good idea of how we want to try to approach the game. And then I think those guys have done a great job this year of suggesting and making adjustments in-game that have helped us have the opportunity to play well.

I think that my hats off to those guys. They've done a great job. I'm just a part of that group on game day and really every day of the week.

Q. That 2014 game, or I guess it was 2015 technically against Alabama in the Sugar Bowl, I know you won the title afterward, but that win in particular seemed like such a watershed moment for the program. What do you remember about that win and what do you think it's done for the program since then?

KERRY COOMBS: Yeah, I think that stretch of those three games when you're an underdog in all three of them, the way the whole -- I would say that even though I had been here for a few years, you really felt Buckeye Nation at that point in time, and I think that Urban, who's obviously one of the great recruiters of all time and had been establishing Ohio State as a national recruiting program and bringing in some really, really good talent, I think that that really helped solidify that and helped us take off to be able to recruit with the best in the country year in and year out and bring in some really, really quality -- top-quality players.

So I think it was that three-week stretch, at least for me, that was a true game changer for our future here.

Q. Jaylen Waddle returned to practice yesterday, and there's kind of uncertainty if he's going to play or not play. What would them getting him back do for their offense? And do you guys now have to prepare like he's going to play?

KERRY COOMBS: I think you absolutely have to prepare like he's going to play, and I would promise you that he's

an extraordinary athlete, extraordinary receiver.

He played five games, and you watch the tape and he's a special player. My hats off to him. If he's been able to recover and rehab and all those kind of things, I think those stories are great for college football.

But he's a great player, and you're going to have to account for him on the field. There's no question about that.

They just have so many really, really gifted players and receivers on offense. That's another one. So we'll have to prepare and be ready for him.

Q. They already have DeVonta Smith; he won the Heisman Trophy. They have Harris. Adding Waddle, is it almost scary to think about how dynamic their offense is?

KERRY COOMBS: I mean, we're going to go play. I don't think you can play a game scared. I think that would be probably the worst thing you could do.

But you have to also acknowledge when you're playing teams that are really, really good at what they do. And they are and we acknowledge that, so we understand the challenge that's ahead of us and we're preparing to play.

Q. I don't know how often you guys go good-on-good, but you've seen Justin Fields this year, the whole time he's been there. What's the difference between him maybe last year and this year, particularly from Northwestern when he played arguably his worst game to playing his best game against Clemson?

KERRY COOMBS: Yeah, I've been able to watch him. I wasn't here last year to watch what he did in practice, but I can tell you that what I've seen of Justin Fields is that he is one of the best quarterbacks I have ever seen.

He makes throws in practice, and obviously in games. I don't get to watch him play in the games very much, but he makes throws in practice that are fantastic. He's got command of the offense. He understands where we want to distribute the ball, and he is going -- he's one of the best quarterbacks I've ever seen and ever been around.

We've been around some really good ones here. He's truly gifted.

Q. This might be a difficult question to answer, but when you're teaching a cornerback to maybe defend the deep ball, is it more of a technique thing? Is it a talent thing? How do you maybe teach that to a

corner?

KERRY COOMBS: Well, I guess it depends on the deep ball, if it's an outside deep ball or an inside deep ball.

The hardest thing is the amount of reps you can get that don't blow your legs out in the course of a week and in the course of a season. It's an art to play the deep ball, and you have to play it to do it. At the same time, you've got to maximize how many times you can do that in a day.

Really it's one of those skill sets that only get better by doing it, and the best way to do that is to do it in practice, and obviously the more practice -- when you don't get spring and you don't get summer and you've got to get out there -- we've talked about that a million times, but it makes it harder.

It's one of those things that you can only get two or three of those a day.

Now, you can do the finish of them. You can do the last 10 yards and all those things. But to run full speed down the field 40 or 50 yards and see the ball coming out of the sky and make a play on it against a gifted athlete is one of the hardest things in sport.

It's something that you coach and you teach and you try to maximize the reps that you can in practice.

Q. Is there a way maybe you prepare for a guy when you know he might be a deep ball threat versus a guy that may be more of a short pass type of threat, I guess?

KERRY COOMBS: Sure. Every week you're spending a good bit of your time studying your opponent and knowing what it is that they do best, and then trying to work on those things. So you try to match -- you try to do the best you can to handle their strengths, because if you don't, it's going to show up on Saturday, or Monday.

Q. When you're going up against a guy like DeVonta Smith who just won the Heisman, what are the different things that you see as a challenge for your DBs to be prepared to cover him?

KERRY COOMBS: Yeah, he's just really, really gifted as a route runner. He's got extraordinary physical ability, which everybody understands, but it's way more than just being a guy who can run fast.

He runs great routes. He catches the ball. He high points the ball, catches it in his hands. You know, he catches short balls and makes some big plays. He catches

obviously the deep balls as well as anybody that we've gone against.

He's a blocker. He's a team guy. You know, he's involved in every phase of our offense. I appreciate good players. He's a great player. I enjoy watching great players in college football because that's what this is about. I get to watch a bunch of them out there every day when I'm here, and I like -- I appreciate that.

Now, I don't particularly get excited about defending them all the time because he's really special, but they've got a bunch of special ones. We're going to go out there and do the very best we can with them.

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