

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Grapevine, Texas, USA

Ohio State Buckeyes

Pete Werner

CFP Media Conference

Q. What's it been like to play alongside Justin Hilliard the last couple weeks? You've known him a long time and everything he's been through. How much does he mean to your unit?

PETE WERNER: Yeah, when you talk about Justin, he's a guy that kind of welcomed me into the university. He's a guy that we've had really fun times together. To see his improvements throughout the season and the way he's playing and operating on the football field is crazy to think.

You talk about all the injuries, everything through adversity he's gone through. To see the level of play he's going with right now, it's crazy to think about.

But credit the kid and his hard work and how much he loves this team. It's just great playing alongside with that.

Q. I'm wondering what you guys have seen from Miyon Williams in the back half of the season. I think people might have been surprised to see him get some huge carries in the Sugar Bowl and the Big Ten Championship game, to jump a couple guys on the depth chart. What have you seen from him and how his game has evolved?

PETE WERNER: Yeah, he's a guy that's been working really hard in practice, and we've kind of seen it through him getting reps here and there and excel against our defense. When you run the ball like he does in practice you've got to put him in game situations. The times he has been in the game he's done very well.

If he continues to keep practicing as well as he has been and being that contributor for the offense, to be a backup, a really big backup spot, then he's going to keep excelling in the game.

Q. You guys are obviously coming off of a performance where you contained Travis Etienne pretty well. Curious, any similarities or differences in



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the challenge you see now going against Najee Harris?

PETE WERNER: Yeah, so they compare pretty close. They're two of the top backs in the country. The thing to look more about Najee Harris is he's more of a physical guy, but then we have certain things to prep for that.

The guys are a little bit different, but as long as we do what we did for Etienne, then I think we'll be very good at stopping him.

Q. Throughout the year this linebacking crew has gotten a lot of praise, but I think it's really increased the last few weeks. The Alabama guys we talked about earlier were talking about you guys' athleticism and whatnot. What do you think has been the main reason behind kind of the evolution and the continued development of you guys' group throughout the season?

PETE WERNER: I just think that we are a group of guys that love the game of football. Our knowledge for the game increases every single day, and our communication has increased so much to this point where you can put a lot of things on the linebackers and we're willing to get everything done.

Our communication, knowledge of the game, everything like that, if you look at the first game and then now, this game, we've improved so much because we've taken that coaching and we've gone with it.

We put more things on the table -- the coaches put things on the linebackers' table, and a lot more towards the end of the season because they know that we're capable of doing it. I just credit our coaches and the other linebackers on the field because we're really capable of doing many things, and I think it's helped us show the country that the linebackers -- our linebackers are a strength.

Q. When you look at the year that Harris had, it seems like he's almost underrated because of all the talent they have. You mentioned similarities to Etienne, but what really stands out about him and why he's been so successful?

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PETE WERNER: I think that they have a great game plan on offense to get him the ball in a variety of ways. Their offensive line, I credit them a lot. But he's very patient. He's a very patient back and he finds the holes.

It might look cloudy at some times, but then you see him get six, seven, eight yards when he should have gotten zero. He's a very good back. He's good at making you miss, and they just do a very good job utilizing him in the run and pass game to make him a real threat from a defensive perspective.

Q. Probably a pretty rare occasion where you have two high school teammates going against each other with you and Emil out there in the National Championship on Monday. What are your memories of going against Emil in practices and what makes him such a special player?

PETE WERNER: Yeah, so I remember Emil, his dad was our defensive coordinator. He was a D-line coach, so I'm really close friends with that family and Emil.

He's a guy -- he's a good kid and he works really hard. You think he's big, this big guy, and then he can move super well. It's going to be fun playing against him because I never envisioned playing him.

But I'm excited and I'm ready to get after him. We've already -- we've talked a little bit, so we're ready to get after each other.

Q. How crazy is it, as you sit here in January, this is the game you guys wanted to get to way back in February of a year ago, and all you've been through and stuff. I know you've still got more one more game, but to get to this game, your parents fought for it, et cetera, I know you've reflected a little bit on maybe how this has come to fruition, 1 versus 2, Alabama, Ohio State, just like a lot of people thought it would be in the first place.

PETE WERNER: Yeah, you just think of everything we've gone through to get to this point. Coach has continued to talk about it day by day throughout the weeks of practice, but going back to Zoom meetings, telling us that our season is canceled, to all the practices that we've put in as a team, the fact that we've stayed together and united together as a group so well and the brotherhood that it's shown, I credit the guys.

We're just thankful to be in the position that we are in right now, but a lot of reflecting in positive ways going back to many things to get us to in point now. You've just got to credit so many different people and the guys staying

together to really have one goal in mind, which is this.

We've just got to keep focusing, keep grinding together as a unit, and we'll be ready for Monday.

Q. Alabama's offensive line just won the Joe Moore Award for being the best offensive line in the country, so what's it like preparing to go up against an offensive line like that?

PETE WERNER: You know, it's not anything different. We've seen it every single day in practice. We like to compare our offensive line to their offensive line, so it's going to be very similar. We butt heads with our offensive line, and I'm sure it was neck and neck with our offensive line and their offensive line.

I'd like to agree that they're very similar. But that being said, we've got to keep going against our guys. We've seen it. We know what it's like, so we're ready to get after them.

But I credit them. Very good offensive line, very disciplined, and very aggressive getting off the ball.

Q. It seems like Alabama's offense gives teams a lot to look at in terms of motions and formation. What's the key when you're playing against a team that is going to have that sort of late motion at the snap, guys sort of flying toward the sideline, and stuff like that? Have you seen a team that does that yet this year, and what's the challenge of playing against it?

PETE WERNER: Yeah, so they do a good job of trying to get the defense out of place. We've just got to do a great job. Simply, we've got to do a great job of tracking the ball. We've got to be good tacklers and we've got to have our feet in the ground when they're trying to not get our feet in the ground with all the shifts and everything that they do.

We've got to get through it, got to keep practicing hard, and then we'll be ready.

Q. Pete, I know you deal more with Al Washington than you do with Larry Johnson, but Larry has his fingerprints on the defense just in general. What makes him different, if anything, unique as a teacher, unique as a communicator?

PETE WERNER: He's very close with all of his guys on the defensive line. I know that from experience. I wasn't very close with him my freshman and sophomore year but I have gotten very close with him because of the 3rd down situations and things like that.

But he's a guy that really gets close to his players. You've got to build up trust with him. He's not a guy that he's just going to love you right when you get here. He's going to be a guy that takes a lot of trust to get him to like you, to know you, so you can go out and execute.

And that's what you've got to do, is you've got to execute to get on his good side. He's just a great coach, and as you can see, he's produced a lot of guys at the next level. He's a really good coach to have. His knowledge of the game has translated to me personally, to help me be a better player.

But yeah, he's an excellent coach, just a great guy to be around, although I'm not around him as much as Al Washington.

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