

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Ohio State Buckeyes

Justin Hilliard

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF

Q. As you guys get ready to go against Najee Harris, how important is it to spend that little split second from a read standpoint, trust your eyes, et cetera, and how well do they use him in that regard of getting the defense to hesitate maybe just a little split second that can sometimes spring open those wide receivers?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, I think it's obviously not a secret that Najee Harris is one of the most dynamic running backs in college football, and it's something we haven't taken lightly. I think the biggest thing this week is just discipline and focus. We need guys staying in their gaps. We need guys running to the ball. And like I said last week, if we get 11 guys running to the ball every play, I think we'll be all right.

Q. How much more special is the opportunity to play in the National Championship game at this stage in your career kind of at the end of this long Ohio State tenure for you as opposed to if you would have had the chance to play in the National Championship game even last year or in your first couple years?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, I think this year especially it just means so much more. It kind of came full circle for me. When I first was being recruited by Ohio State in 2014, they were coming off a National Championship win, and then six years later in my last year here, we're right back here.

In that regard it is special, just for me playing in my last game, this being my last week of preparation. A lot of these seniors and a lot of the other guys are well aware that this is our last game and we're pouring everything we have into it.

Q. You mentioned Harris at the beginning there. It almost feels like he's kind of somewhat underrated because of all the talent they have. What do you think of him as a player watching film and just how dynamic he is?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: I mean, I'd be surprised to say he's underrated. I think he's one of the most respected running backs in college football. I mean, he puts that on film. He's done it -- he can make guys miss, he can run with power, he can catch out of the backfield, and obviously we haven't taken that lightly this week in our preparation.

Q. As athletes when guys get hurt, as you unfortunately well know, your teammates feel sorry for each other, but you also know that that guy just physically can't get out there on the field. I'm curious from a mental standpoint this year when you guys have encountered these COVID absences, is that a different kind of mental grind on a team, kind of the sympathy you feel for each other knowing a guy could physically get out there and play but isn't allowed to because of the circumstances?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, I think with this year especially it's a lot different because of the COVID stuff. Guys feel like they're able to play but they can't play just because they have COVID, so it's real tough.

I think the biggest toll it has on a team is getting guys to focus and getting guys to know they have to step up. I think that is something that we've done a great job of this year is our leadership, and our younger guys know that when someone goes down it's next man up, and they have to be at that level or even better when they come in.

Q. You chose to stay closer to home and go to Ohio State. I was wondering what it would mean to you to bring home a National Championship.

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, so much. When I was getting recruited, I think that was the main thing that went into my decision is that I wanted to stay in Ohio. I wanted to be near my family. I wanted to be near my friends. Yeah, that's one of the main motivators on how I stayed here so long and how I pushed through, is the family, the friends, the teammates I have here in Ohio, and I think it would be so special to bring one back again.

Q. You've said it a couple times that this would be the last game on Monday night. Is there no part of you

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that's intrigued by year seven?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: I'm so surprised I'm getting a lot of these questions. Even some of my family asked me recently if I'm staying for a seventh. I mean, at this point I'm completely have the intentions on this being my last game. It's been an incredible journey, but I just don't know how much more I can give to Ohio State.

Q. Reflecting on your time at Ohio State, what's your biggest takeaway as a student-athlete leading up to this moment?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Biggest takeaway? I would say the things that I've learned here is just perseverance, leaning on others. I think when I got here I was kind of all to myself and refused help sometimes. Honestly, I don't think a lot of people would be in this situation where they are here if it wasn't for coaches, for teammates, players, family to push them through. I have so many people to thank after this year is over with.

Yeah, I've learned so much. I can honestly say I think a lot of us that are leaving here are not the same man now that they were when they came in.

Q. I'm not sure how much you played in the first quarter of the Clemson game or not, but seems like you got in there in the second quarter and made an immediate impact, hit Rodgers on the slant pass, and that was a key point in the game for you guys. You got some stops, didn't allow them to score, and the team went from down 7 to up 21 at halftime. Do you feel like you created a spark for the defense and helped kind of turned the tide in that game? That was the critical part of the game where you guys took the lead and you had stops in the second and third quarter that stopped drives for them. What's your thought about what you brought in that critical part of the game where your defense played its best ball?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, I'm not going to sit here and say that I was the main reason for that spark in our defense, but every time I get in the game my mindset is to make an impact, make an impact wherever I can. I'm glad to say that I have teammates like Shaun, I have teammates like Haskell, I have teammates like Zach, I have teammates like Pete, Tuf, who are also out there playing as hard as hell and running to the ball and making our jobs a lot easier.

Q. As a veteran you've been through the coaching change and you've spend a lot of time with Urban, with Coach Meyer, and a lot of time with Coach Day. Why do you think Coach Day was a good change of pace, a

good replacement, for Coach Meyer? What was different about his leadership style that maybe was a good complement or built off of what Coach Meyer laid?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, Coach Meyer and Coach Day are two elite, elite coaches. They're not the same. They have their own approach, and I think that's what makes them such strong coaches. Coach Meyer in a lot of ways laid the foundation for the culture we have now, and a lot of those things, a lot of his sayings and teachings still are here today, like the 4680 been getting guys -- so first when they come on campus, the first emphasis is getting guys to go hard, and that's still in our culture here today.

Then I think Coach Day even more so brought an atmosphere of love, an atmosphere of brotherhood I think to Ohio State that's special right now, and I think that only enhanced our culture in the last couple years.

Q. You talked about the possibility of bringing a national title home to Ohio. Obviously when you're sitting there going through some of those injuries you went through, how often did the thought cross your mind of, okay, maybe this isn't for me; maybe I won't get these type of opportunities? And how glad are you that you stuck with it, persevered, and got to this point where you're a key contributor heading into this game?

JUSTIN HILLIARD: Yeah, my journey here has been, I guess, so interesting. I've had so many times where, like you said, I didn't know if I was going to be able to push through.

I think the first three years here at Ohio State were probably the toughest, because year after year I had a biceps tear on my right and then biceps tear on my left again. After that, after injuries started stacking up, I had those thoughts in my mind was I going to keep playing. I think a lot of times when you hear like three- or four-, six-month season-ending injuries, a lot of people usually call it quits.

Yeah, I thought about that, but I'm so thankful for the teammates I have here, for the coaches, Coach Meyer especially. I think in that time I was going through a lot of those injuries he was pushing me through. All my position coaches, D-coordinators in the past, I'm so lucky to have them, because honestly, if it wasn't for some of those conversations I had with them and with my family and teammates, I honestly probably wouldn't still be playing.

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