

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Ohio State Buckeyes

Coach Ryan Day

CFP Media Conference

RYAN DAY: Really, really excited about this opportunity to have our team go down to Miami, play against an unbelievable opponent with such great history. So much respect for them, what they've been able to do. Coach Saban, his staff.

Our team is very, very excited to have this opportunity. This is something that we talked about really early on, and then when the season was canceled we talked about the opportunity to get back or an opportunity to play in this very game, and here we are.

Already started with a great week of preparation and continue that preparation this week as we head down to Miami.

Q. You guys are still on target to play Monday, correct?

RYAN DAY: Correct.

Q. When Urban first brought you in, what was he looking for as far as changes in the offense, and what did you envision the changes that you could bring to this offense?

RYAN DAY: You know, we didn't really get into specifics on what was looking to be changed. I think he just felt like there needed to be a change.

We spent a lot of time talking about what really the offense was and where he saw it going.

You know, so many things that were in the offense already and just how could we use those things.

We really kept it the same. We really didn't change much in terms of the terminology, the formations, anything like that. We just spent most of our time trying to figure out how to best utilize the players we had and continue to recruit at a high level.



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So between he, Kevin Wilson, myself, Coach Stud, we just all sat down and tried to figure out what was right for the next season when we had J.T., and then it changed and we had Dwayne, and now Justin. Each year it's changed, tweaked here and there, but at the end of the day I think the basis of it has pretty much stayed the same.

Q. Obviously you guys have been dealing with the COVID issues pretty constantly for the last six weeks as far as having to miss guys. But coming off a big win like the Sugar Bowl and having to deal with new cases this week, how is that sort of not like a mental gut punch for the program, or is it something that players and coaches are kind of just steeled to at this point and better able to deal with?

RYAN DAY: Well, any time you deal with that and you lose people, it is a gut punch. But it's not something that we're not used to. We've played games with the majority of our offensive line out. We played the Big Ten Championship game without our top receivers, or some of our top receivers. We've had starters all over the place down at different times, and we've found ways to work through it. It's just been the way it is.

And you can feel sorry for yourself or you can just continue to work on and push through it. The hard thing is at the end of the day most people don't really care. They just watch the game and the result is the result.

But for us, that's why the story about this season is just so amazing to me, is that we just continued to push through despite all those difficult challenges along the way.

And no different this week. We've got a new set of challenges this week. We're going to have to figure it out, go down to Miami and play.

Q. Wanted to see if you had an update for us on the status of Justin Fields, and kind of as a follow-up to that, even if he is healthy enough to play, would you consider tailoring the offense, perhaps limiting designed quarterback runs to account for where Justin is at?



RYAN DAY: Yeah, no real update. Don't really give out injury updates.

And then we'll do what we think is best in the game based on our opponent, based on our personnel and where we're at during the game. That's kind of what we've done for every game that we've been in.

So we'll continue to do that this week.

Q. Yesterday Kerry was talking about how actually rewarding this season has been. I was asking about the uncertainty of a roster every week and working new guys in and having to really burn through different solutions. Is rewarding the word you would use as the head coach, or what has this been like dealing with these challenges every week?

RYAN DAY: I think this is just the way that this has gone. The minute you want to feel good and take a deep breath and count your blessings, and like you said, feel the reward of what we've done, something new comes at you and you've just got to handle it.

I know this: The finish line is coming on Monday, and we've got to finish this thing strong. No matter what's come our way we've handled it, and we've got to continue to do that. That's really what it is.

To say it's easy? No. To sit back and say that we can pat ourselves on the back or feel good about what's gone on? No. We've got to finish this thing off on Monday, and then when the season is over we'll go back and think about all the great things that have happened this year because there's a lot of them.

Q. I know you've been an advocate for mental health even before the pandemic started, and you guys have been very open about how stressful this season has been. Just curious how much have you had to kind of check in with guys just from a mental standpoint along the way, whether it was the season being postponed, reinstated, COVID, playing this week, not playing this week, that process for such a long period of time for this group of guys given their age?

RYAN DAY: It's something we talk about a lot. Our position coaches really keep a close eye on it. When we communicate with our parents we're constantly talking about it. It hasn't been easy. I think the hardest part was probably going through the holidays, not being around their families. And then the constant change, like you're saying. Lack of routine, change of course here and there, and then the uncertainty.

It's something that has been difficult. I'll say this, though: I think, and I've said this before, I think going through this time has made our guys stronger mentally. They've been able to sustain through a lot of tough times and adversity, so that's been one of the silver linings here.

But it's something we really keep a close eye on and try to do everything we can to provide the resources that guys want.

Q. Pat Fitzgerald and Mike Hankwitz are so good; was that more about them going against your offense in that championship game, or was it more about the offense not functioning as well or a combination of both?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I think it's a combination of both. They do a great job. Always have. I think we were also really weren't clicking that day. It doesn't take much to be off. We say that all the time.

But I think it was a combination of things.

Q. You and Justin have, I think, a very strong relationship, and having talked to him, I know he's kind of very close with his dad, very much a small-town guy, and yet he committed to Ohio State without actually having gone to campus first. I'm wondering what has sort of made your relationship work with him so much. Do you consider it sort of a unique bond for yourself, as well, and how much do you think that has played into the level of effort and dedication that he's shown to the program throughout this really tumultuous year?

RYAN DAY: First off, it started off right from the get-go when Justin and I started our relationship and tried to be up front and honest with him. He was going to have to come in here and earn a spot. It was going to take hard work, what being the quarterback at Ohio State meant, and then we just went to work.

Mike Yuricich early on that first year spent a lot of time with him. I spent some time with him, especially on the field. And then in the off-season this year, I spent a ton of time with him and I've spent some time with him certainly this year, a lot of time this fall.

When you go through things together your relationship gets stronger, and we went through a lot of great times last year. You go through that Clemson game and you just learn about each other. Your relationship gets stronger when you go through tough times. You find out about each other.

And then the off-season and fighting for a season and speaking up and his leadership and all those things, and then as we got into the season, a lot of the stuff we worked on during the season, and Coach Dennis and he worked on. It all kind of worked together early on, and then we went through a couple tough games where it didn't really click the way we wanted to.

And to see him play the way he did and overcome a little adversity in this past game is what it's all about, and that's what life is all about.

I think he knows how much I care for him and I'm always there for him and try to help him the best I can, and that's part of it, too. It's one thing to care about somebody, and it's another thing to be able to help them, and I think that he knows that I'm here to help him and I can find ways to help him here and there. I think that there's a trust there, and there's obviously an unbelievable respect for what I have for him as a competitor and as a person.

Q. You're in the National Championship game in only your second year as coach. With all you've had to deal with this year I'm not that's really not in the forefront of your mind, but can you put into words what it's like for you to be at this point and what it would be like to win it, especially when you're going against somebody like Nick Saban?

RYAN DAY: I appreciate those words. I think you probably know me now. I'm probably not going to get into that right now just because we're in the moment, and all that really matters is preparing for this game. I think when you start to take a step back you get distracted. Every minute of the day I tell the players should be spent on Alabama. That's it.

If you're spending your time thinking about anything else, tickets, travel, family, this, that, what's going on after, what went on last week, it's a distraction towards focusing on this game because this is what matters.

Certainly very, very honored to be in this situation, don't get me wrong. And it's really about the players, the fact that these guys have an opportunity to now go play in this game and do something that would just be amazing.

That's really it. Just focusing on the game. I think hopefully after this game we're able to take a deep breath. I hope anyways. I feel like during these past two years and even a little bit more I just haven't been able to take a deep breath. I felt maybe after last year into March I was able to, and then the quarantine hit and then it just became chaos again.

Looking forward to finishing this thing the right way and then taking a deep breath and decompressing and trying to reflect on what just happened this year.

Q. Just wondering how many players do you guys have available for the game?

RYAN DAY: How many do we have available? I don't know the number on that. I'd have to check.

Q. But you're confident that you'll have the full number required to play in the game?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, we'll have plenty of players.

Q. Earlier this year Nick Saban had said that he doesn't believe that good defense beats good offense anymore as it relates to the way college football has gone. I'm curious what your sentiment is on that and how -- what good defense is now required to win a championship in this age of college football.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, no, it's a great question. I think it has changed. Fundamentally it hasn't changed, but just the way the game is being played has, and it's all about getting stops. I mean, it isn't really about how many yards you give up. I think controlling the game does matter, but at the end of the day it's about getting stops, forcing field goals, and getting turnovers.

You can let them drive the entire length of the field, but if they kick field goals or you get turnovers along the way, good things are going to happen.

I think that really is where it's at. It depends on how strong your offense is and I think both sides have to play off of each other. I think that's really, really important.

One good thing about being so involved in the offense is that you kind of understand as the head coach that it takes both sides in all three phases to mesh together for it to work. You can't work in three different silos. I think that's a big part of it, as well.

When you tie the two sides in together with special teams, then I think you can put together a good plan. But to answer your question, I think nowadays it's not about how many yards you give up. It's just literally how many stops you can get, whether by turnovers, or forcing field goals.

Q. Part of this feels a little similar to the 2014 season Ohio State had where in that year getting to the semifinal and playing Alabama seemed like such a target and then they accomplished it and sort of had to recalibrate to play the national title game. I think on

some level Clemson was a target for you guys. But to have such an emotional win against a team that you had been thinking about a lot and turning around and having to play this, is there any difficulty in ratcheting up the same kind of emotion again?

RYAN DAY: I mean, any time you play somebody like Alabama for a National Championship, it's going to be a challenge. You know, it was an emotional game, it was an emotional win, but nobody said they wanted to come back to just play in this game, they came back to win it.

I think our guys have the eyes on the prize, and it's a slow build towards the game. But I think we're going to come out with our hair on fire and play as hard as we possibly can and go from there.

And I think the thing we've got to -- we've just got to take it one play at a time. You can't go on and try to do too much against a great team like this. You have to just play one play at a time. On defense you get one stop at a time, on offense you get one 1st down at a time. You just focus on that, you look up in the fourth quarter, you see where you're at.

But I know our guys are going to play really, really hard.

Q. I was at the game in Columbus in '17. That was sort of Trey Sermon's coming out party. You're on the other side of the ball in terms of preparation. Do you remember much about his game against the Buckeyes in '17, and did you know how good he was until you actually got him on campus?

RYAN DAY: I remember some of them and then I watched a little bit of that game, and certainly when he had an opportunity to transfer and had a great conversation with Coach Riley, and he had nothing but great things to say about Trey and it just seemed like the right fit here.

The thing that, again, I just go back to is it didn't all come at once for Trey. He worked really hard early on but didn't have the preseason and the lead-up and the non-conference games, and so -- and he was kind of splitting time with Master.

But he never came into my office, never said a word, just kept working, and then when his opportunity came to be the guy, he took it and ran.

What an amazing story, a special young man. We'll see what happens. But no, to say I knew he'd be doing this right now, no, this has been a pleasant surprise. But couldn't happen to a better guy. He's done a great job in a short period of time. The players on his team really

appreciate who he is, and I'm happy for him.

Q. When Justin got hurt against Clemson and there's the decision of whether to put him back into the game and the injection or two that he seems to have gotten, what are the discussions that take place, the coaches, the medical people about, I guess, whether he can -- when he goes back into the game how well he can protect himself, what are the questions of possible further injury, and because this is somebody who seemingly has a pretty lucrative future in front of him, I guess how are those things kind of balanced and played out?

RYAN DAY: I mean, Justin isn't treated any differently than any other student-athlete. Our medical people are the best in the country at what they do. They identify what's going on. They communicate with the player. They diagnose what happened and then make the decision on whether he's able to go back in the game. That's what happened here.

Obviously they use the feedback of the player, too. What an unbelievable competitor Justin is. Just never forget that night. He's just tough.

People forget that what happened in the team up north game when he took that shot in the knee, one play came out, he went back in one play later and threw a touchdown pass scrambling to his left to Garrett Wilson in the end zone. It was like, Whoa. And then this was another one.

So then to see him come back after that hit and throw four touchdown passes, throw the ball 65 yards down the field, I mean, unbelievable.

Q. Are there things that you look at, though, with just making a determination of whether he can protect himself? I don't think anybody questions his competitiveness and interest in being out there, but just as far as whether he can protect himself, the way he can move around, et cetera.

RYAN DAY: I mean, yeah, that's up to our medical people, and it's the same thing we do for every game.

Q. Back on Trey, he was a guy who transferred in here at a time when he didn't necessarily transfer like Justin did where he kind of had an off season to really get to know a lot of these guys and do the stuff you would do if we weren't in the middle of a pandemic. Saying that, when did you see him start to get comfortable around his teammates, and how did that maybe translate on to the field?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, probably the Michigan State game and then into the -- but he popped a few runs there, okay, that was good. But then the Big Ten Championship game was when he really took off. As early as that. I mean, it was probably the second half is when I really realized what was going on. He was running hard, but then it just kind of went to a second level, and then he played great last week.

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