

CFP First Round: Texas vs Clemson

Saturday, December 21, 2024

Austin, Texas, USA

DKR-Texas Memorial Stadium

Texas Longhorns

Coach Steve Sarkisian

Postgame Press Conference

Texas 38, Clemson 24

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think first of all, what an environment for college football this was, from the moment we pulled up on the buses, our Bevo Walk, you could feel the energy. The crowd was tremendous. It was a great atmosphere.

I think college football got this one right. As much as we critique some of the things that are happening in our game right now, this idea of a home playoff game with this 12-team format, this was pretty special and one that we were humbled and honored to be part of here at DKR.

I hope everybody enjoyed that because we surely did.

The story of the game I think obviously is us finding the run game offensively. To have two 100-yard rushers in the game and establishing ourselves on the ground to create balance offensively I thought was critical to the game, and then to get some really key stops defensively, especially there in the fourth quarter. The goal-line stand, and then obviously the stop there at the end on 4th down was big.

Just proud of our guys. You get into playoff mode, it's not really about what did it look like, it's do you have one more point than they have to come out on top so you can continue to play. We get to continue to play here in a couple weeks in Atlanta, and we're obviously very excited about that.

A couple things from an injury standpoint. Tre Wisner kind of banged his knee. He was available to come back in. We made a decision to go with Blue and Gibson. Jake Majors on that interception kind of took that blindside shot. He also was available to come back in. We decided to make that decision to hold him. Then Cam Williams injured his knee there. Tried to go. We'll get an MRI here this evening and see where he's at. Those were the three ones there.



PLAYOFF FIRST ROUND

But more than anything else, I'm proud of our guys. We talked a lot about responding to adversity around here, and whether it's individual adversity or team adversity. I'm really proud of this group because nobody hung their head coming out of Atlanta. It was, okay, let's go on to the next mission, let's go win four more games. You can't win four unless you're able to win the first one and we shall be able to do that. Now we've got to win three more. We can't win three more if we don't win the next one.

We'll handle it accordingly with some time for the players over Christmas break and game plan with the coaches and make sure that we're ready to go come January 1st.

Q. We talked a lot about Jaydon and the season he's had. He had the ankle, had ball security stuff. From a head coach standpoint how satisfying is it to see him play as well as he did on this college?

STEVE SARKISIAN: That's just what I told him in the locker room. I gave him a big hug and told him how proud I was of him. As I touched on the team adversity coming out of Atlanta, we talked about individual adversity last night, as well, and to think about that young man fighting through the ankle injury earlier in the season, having some fumble issues, but continuing to practice well, continuing to be a really good teammate, the intent over the last few weeks and month of the way he's been practicing, for him to have the night like he had tonight or today, just really proud of him.

In this day and age, especially in social media, our guys can get on there and they're going to read the worst things ever that people want to say about them. I'm sure there was plenty of stuff that people wanted to say to him about not holding on to the ball.

But the fact that between Coach Choice, myself, our staff, his teammates believed in him and he was able to continue to work and improve his game, and then to have a game like this in the playoff, just really proud of him.

But I think that is kind of symbolic of everybody on our team. Everybody has been dealing with stuff. We've been dealing with injuries and all sorts of things.



But if I know one thing about our team, that we respond. When times get tough, we respond. Jaydon was a great example of that.

Q. What was the message to your running backs and your offensive line?

STEVE SARKISIAN: You know, I always put up what it takes to win each game, and I cover it from a special teams standpoint, an offensive standpoint, a defensive standpoint and then a team standpoint. One of the first bullet points I put up in this room was run to win, that we needed to run the football to win this game, and we're going to need to run the football to advance in these playoffs, and that's what playoff football is about. We really challenged them on the run game.

From the opening meeting, getting ready to the ballgame and the intent with which we practiced, I thought we had a good plan. I thought Quinn did a great job. On both Jaydon Blue's touchdowns, those were audibles by Quinn to that run. One, him handling the run game, and then two, that mechanism at the line of scrimmage of getting that check and then blocking it really well to spring him on those two runs.

There's a lot that goes into the run game. We always say the run game takes all 11, and all 11 did it tonight.

Q. Looking over the wildcat, this defensive special, the way they finished the game with the goal-line stand, killing the 4th down, what did that say?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, it's just who they are. Again, we weren't perfect, and we got a little loose in the back end. They made some plays. A credit to Clemson, credit to Cade. I thought Cade had a nice ballgame for them. He's a tough guy because there's the timing throws and then there's those off-schedule plays that he makes, but at the end of the day when our backs were against the wall, what a stand from our 1-yard line to get that stop.

I would have loved to have finished the game with the last seven and a half minutes with the ball in our hands. We kind of stub our toe there, and the defense to go out and get another stop, right, when you've got to have it. I think that's a sign of a great defense.

I don't know if this was our best game defensively, but when we had to have it, they made those plays, and to me that's the sign of a great defense.

Q. Going back to the offense for a second, can you talk about the ability to start fast? I know it's been a

bit of a deal this year, but that opening drive touchdown, talk about your ability to start fast.

STEVE SARKISIAN: I thought that was big tonight. We talked about that in the locker room as we were taking the field. We deferred the kickoff and they went down and got a touchdown, but then to go three straight drives to make it 21-7, I thought we really took the momentum of the game at that point.

It was about execution, and execution lies in the details, and I thought our guys were really detail oriented all week, and they were detail oriented the way they played tonight. I think that showed up on our 3rd down conversions.

Granted, we were pretty aggressive on 4th down, which we're always going to be, and we didn't hit that number the way we would have liked today, but I just thought the execution. There weren't even that many 3rd downs in the first half because we were executing at a really high level, and that's because our guys were really detail oriented.

Q. On the touchdown with Cade, what does he do to put pressure on a defense besides his mobility, and from a former quarterback's perspective, how would you change or how did your evaluation of him --

STEVE SARKISIAN: No, I thought the one thing that they do which makes it difficult is when they call the traditional plays, he's equipped enough to see your coverages and to throw it to the right people, and he's got the talent to make those throws.

Then they call the designed quarterback runs, whether it's quarterback draws or true quarterback runs that tax you when you're trying to deploy people to defend him, and then he has the ability to extend plays, and how many times did he get outside the pocket and make some really critical throws for them.

We knew it coming in, it was all three of those things were going to be the challenge of trying to defend him that way. I'm proud of Cade. I've known him for a long time, been recruiting him I feel like forever when he was in high school, and the fact that his career didn't start off maybe the way he would have liked at Clemson and there was a lot of expectations for him there, but to come out and have the season that he had this year for them, to get them to the playoffs, to be ACC champs, that's a credit to him. He's a very good football player.

Q. How much does moving forward this running game benefit you as far as people having to scheme for you, and speak to the cross training when you had to use that makeshift line today?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, the run game is really important for us on a lot of levels. One, our offense is better when we can run it because then the balance can really kick in for us, and to be able to run it, to throw it, to screen it, to RPO, and not all those things were there tonight. I thought we were aggressive, and Quinn was aggressive down the field. We got a couple pass interference calls. He hits Matt Golden for a big one. I didn't see the play with Wingo on another deep ball.

It kind of opens up a lot that we do, and I think naturally when we can run it effectively and teams have to prepare for a lot when they're getting ready to play us.

As far as the offensive line, what a credit to Trevor Goosby. A few weeks ago, Kelvin goes down, seven plays in, he goes in at left tackle against A&M and then starts against Georgia at left tackle. Today Cam Williams goes down, he goes in and plays right tackle. Jake Majors gets knocked out, Hayden Connor slides into center and Cole Hutson goes in and plays left guard, who had been playing right guard rotating with DJ Campbell.

I give a lot of credit to Kyle Flood on that because he's the master of cross training these guys and getting them to understand the why we cross train. We needed it tonight, and we've needed it here the last month or so of the season. But today more so than ever of guys being able to play multiple positions.

Q. To be tested like you were today against a great offense that gave your defense some problems, how will that benefit you over the next 10 days?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I mean, it's like the offense coming out of the Georgia game. We had to challenge them. We didn't run the ball very well, so then you challenge them and they can respond.

The same thing now can go for the defense. We obviously have some things to clean up.

But I think that's kind of the beauty of this team, and we haven't been faced with this a ton, but the versatility we have as a team, we can win games a lot of different ways. We can win low-scoring defensive tight games, but we can also score points when we have to and extend leads when we have to do that.

I thought tonight when they cut it to a one-score game, the response the offense had, Blue's long touchdown run to open it back up to a two-score game, that's what this team gives us the ability to do. We're just not one-dimensional. We're very versatile, and I think there's more there for us to

even improve upon and things that we didn't even have to use tonight that I think we could have if the game would have gone in even a different direction.

Q. Talk about your team's ability to respond to adversity. Clemson scores on their opening drive, you have the injuries (indiscernible).

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, that really was -- I always give the guys a talk the night before a game, and it's ironic when some of the things you talk about come true. Literally my talk to the team after some of the Xs and Os that were going to be needed in the game was all about adversity. Going back to the summer when we did our first culture Wednesday, we talked about one of our four H's that everybody wrote down was a hardship in your life that they had to overcome and how we overcome these things, and we talked about individual adversity this season. I talked about Cedric Baxter and Christian Clark and Derek Williams being out for the year. I talked about Kelvin having to miss a game. I talked about Quinn and the injuries he's had to endure this season. We talked a lot. We talked about ourselves, and responding to the first Georgia loss and how we were going to respond to this time around.

So that literally was the whole talk, and then we did a culture activity where each guy had to write down an adversity that they had endured this season and how they responded to it, and then they had to write a note to another guy in the room that they were proud of how they had responded to adversity this season.

So it's ironic that we got faced with the adversity we did tonight, and then the way we responded. They've proven to me time and time again that we do respond, and that's why I said a couple weeks ago, I have no pause that we won't respond. When we get knocked down, we get back up. Proud of them for that tonight.

Q. On the 3rd and 4th down stop, talk about what you saw specifically from the Klubnik run. What worked on that play?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, on the Klubnik run, I thought we did a really good job of setting the edge. They kind of got into a little bit of an unbalanced look. I'd be remiss -- I don't know exactly who was where on the play, but I know we set the edge really well, and that allowed our defenders inside out to make the stop when he turned up there on the 1.

Then on the last play, it just was kind of typical of who we are. We've got big people, and they know how to play a physical brand of football. When we get challenged like

that, it's kind of reminiscent of -- we talk a lot about we do team run good-on-good, and we're going to run it, and the defense knows we're going to run it.

I think that's part of our identity, that when we run it, can we go run it and get those 1st downs, and when the opponent is going to run it, can we make those critical stops.

I don't have a lot of pause. Now, sometimes we can get schemed and get blocked and they get us. But if it's one-on-one and we fit everything right, I always feel pretty good about us being able to make those stops in those critical moments.

Q. You mentioned how special this environment was, having a home playoff game on campus. Would you be in favor of adapting the NFL model in that you put playoff rounds on campus until maybe you get to the title game and put that on a neutral site?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I don't know. That's way smarter people than me or maybe they'll put me in a room with some smart people to figure some other stuff out because we've got a lot of things in college football, and this is kind of one that is kind of far down on the barometer that we're dealing with.

But I don't know, it was a great environment. I think we're going to learn a lot about this College Football Playoff, from seeding and home games and bowl games and recruiting calendars and school calendars. There's a lot. This is the first time out.

But I can speak to this, and I can speak to the games that I watched on TV. It's truly created a great environment here. But as a fan of college football, last night when we get done meeting, to watch that environment at Notre Dame or this morning when I'm up watching that environment at Penn State, gosh, it's great for college football.

I feel like the popularity of college football right now is at an all-time high, and people are intrigued by it. People are loving watching the competitiveness of the games, the parity that's going on right now in the game.

Where it goes from here, I don't exactly know. Do we expand it, do we not, what does it look like. But it surely has created a lot of buzz, and I think it's created a lot of buzz all season long because there were more teams involved with an opportunity to go win a championship.

Where it goes from here, I don't know, but it sure was kind of fun tonight. That was for sure.

Q. Michael Taaffe had the big hit on Cade on 3rd and 1

at the goal and then they get across the middle to end the game. Can you speak to what you think this meant to him?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Oh, I'm sure it meant a ton. I always like to say, sometimes you have your most fun competing against those that are closest to you, and I can say that. I had an opportunity to compete against Pete Carroll after I had been an assistant for him for almost eight years, and to compete against him -- I had an opportunity to compete against Nick Saban a couple different times who I respect so much.

The ones you respect and then you get a chance to compete against them and then kind of come out on top, I know that -- I'm sure it feels great for him because of the respect that he has for Cade and the great wins they had when they were together at Westlake.

I'm proud of Michael. I joked with him, I said, I think you dropped that interception on 3rd down just so you could make the play on 4th down.

But man, the guy just continues to play at a high level. I'm so glad that the media recognized him from an All-American standpoint. I know the coaches in the SEC didn't, and I think they missed the mark on that guy not being an All-SEC player. But you guys surely did, and I think he's more than deserving of the accolades that he gets.

Q. Last year you were so close to the championship. For this year, what is your message to those players that were on the team last year to keep that momentum going?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, we don't forget. I think that's the first thing. I think we've got a group of guys that were here with us a year ago that didn't forget that feeling in New Orleans last year.

To get as close as we were and not to have that opportunity to get into that game I think really fueled us, quite frankly, in the off-season, in winter conditioning, in spring ball, in those summer workouts when we're running in DKR at 4:00 in the afternoon and it's 115 degrees and why we put in the work that we put in.

We're far from that. We've got a couple more games to go to get there. But it sure serves as great motivation, when you can get close as we were.

Like I told them last night, the other thing, I said, we've got to be really proud of one thing. Last year was a four-team playoff. This year it got expanded to 12. But western the



only team of those four teams that made it back into the 12-team playoff. So it's not easy to get on this stage, and they earned it, and they played really good all year.

Then the focus was on one game. Let's just go win this game, and then we'll regroup and get ready for the next one. I thought they did a really good job of handling that. We all know what the end goal that we have and that we want, but that can't happen unless we focus on what's right in front of us, and I thought our guys did a really good job of that this week.

Q. I know earlier this week you mentioned trying to improve in the red area. What did you like about the way your team executed today and also your play calling?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I thought we did a nice job early in the game. I really did. I thought that the execution was there. I thought we were moving the line of scrimmage pretty good, and so the run game was helpful. I thought it was a heck of a touchdown pass and read by Quinn and Gunnar that was a little bit of an adjustment to Gunnar's route predicated on the coverage that we weren't quite anticipating. But that's two guys that trust one another.

You could feel Quinn's trust for Gunnar, so all that was great.

I was, quite frankly, kicking myself when we got stopped down there inside the 5 and settled for the field goal, and I was kind of kicking myself when we got the turnover and didn't come away with anything with points there on the 4th down.

But hey, I think we got better, but I do think we can continue to improve.

Q. I want to go back to the first touchdown. You mentioned Quinn checked it. Looked like you guys had a moment of excitement after that because of the decision he made there. Could you tell me as a three-year starter how often does he do things like that?

STEVE SARKISIAN: What was interesting about it, I think it was maybe two days before the game, we gave him that look, and we were anticipating it could be one or another call, and we gave him the look and we were giving it to him early, so he was checking it really early, and I said, they might not give it to you this early, and we had a motion on it. I said, you might have to check it after the motion and then check the play.

Sure enough, it happened tonight. He motioned on Davis and then he saw it and then he checked it and got to the run.

That's just time together, time on task, he and I, and him trusting when we tell him certain things like that that it might happen that way, him trusting it and then executing it.

Kind of a cool moment because that's having a three-year starter who's been in your system is very comfortable doing that type of stuff.

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