

CFP First Round: Ohio State vs Tennessee

Saturday, December 21, 2024

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Ohio Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Josh Heupel

Postgame Press Conference

Ohio State 42, Tennessee 17

JOSH HEUPEL: First, just want to thank our fans. I don't know what the actual number was that showed up, but there was a bunch of orange that decided to make the trip. Appreciate them. Disappointed for them. Disappointed for our team and everything that we have put into it since last January, that we didn't coach and play better in this one early.

There wasn't a phase of the football game where we operated the way we needed to early in the game, and came back and made a couple plays at the end of the second quarter to tighten it up, and just didn't function well enough the beginning of the third quarter, either.

That's a credit to them. But just didn't do what you have to do on the road in a game against a really good football team.

Disappointed on all those accords.

Talked to the players in the locker room, and everybody was disappointed, obviously. But there's a lot of guys that played the last game in a Tennessee uniform that we're really proud of, too. A lot of those guys have been with us since we started this journey, when I first got hired. Great leaders, great people, great players, and meant a lot to what we've built.

I'll open it up.

Q. Josh, when you look defensively in that first quarter, what was going wrong? Also, on the injury front, what did that do for you guys game plan-wise?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, defensively first series we got a chance to get off the field; end up with a playing penalty. Some of that's going to happen during the course of a game. Had a couple of busts in coverage, and they made some plays, too. That's going to happen against a good



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team.

But what we didn't do is come back and find a way to get on the right side of it, and that's defensively, offensively; it's everybody.

Going into it there were guys that had been out for a couple weeks that we felt like were going to be able to play in this one, were probably going to be a little bit limited. The injuries just kind of started piling up on us early in the game.

Q. From a wide receiver standpoint, it didn't seem like you guys could get open tonight down the field. What were they doing to limit you guys, and where do you go from there at that position?

JOSH HEUPEL: It's never just one thing. We struggled in protection early in the football game. I thought Nico did a good job with his feet throughout the course of it making some plays. We didn't separate at times, and it was a combination of a lot of different things.

Early the first couple series we just got behind the chains and weren't able to pick up a 3rd down, and then compile that with what was going on on the other side of the ball, and the scoreboard kind of spread a little bit and they were able to pin their ears back.

For us, we lose a couple good players out there. What Bru has done in his career, who he is; Don't'e, what he's done throughout this season. Really proud of his growth. We've got to find some guys that are going to step up and make plays, and we will.

Q. When you look at the growth of the program since you got there, what do you feel like it's going to take to take that next step when you get to this point in the season?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, we've got to play better. We've got to coach better. Ohio State is a good football team. Tonight wasn't one of our best performances this year, and so at the end of the day we've got to continue to grow. We'll start again and start retooling, rebuilding, and grow as a football team.



Two years ago, I don't know, we finished sixth in the country. There's a standard inside of our building, and we're going to continue to grow.

Q. Was Dylan's hamstring, was it an issue you knew about before the game?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, end of the Vandy game, got dinged up, and it was soft tissue, and had been out the first couple weeks and got back with us. Started building him through the week. Felt like he was in a good spot. Anticipated him not having the same type of load that he normally would have.

Just early in the game kind of retweaked it and wasn't available there for a while.

Q. As you've built this program and seen the passion of the fans grow as you saw out there tonight --

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, pretty special what our fans have done.

Q. Does that make it even harder for you guys and your team to see the outcome here?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, a ton of disappointment in our locker room for everybody that's invested. There's so much work that goes into it. But absolutely disappointed in the performance tonight for our fans. The amount of people that traveled. But it's every week. It's 365 days out of the year. Disappointed for them, absolutely.

Q. Sort of looking ahead, when you think of the pieces that are missing right now for this team to take the next step, do you think you know what those pieces are right now, and how attainable are those pieces?

JOSH HEUPEL: Man, we'll go back and watch this one here on the flight. People that have watched us, it wasn't our best football tonight. When you're playing a good football team, margins are thin, you're not on the right side of it.

It doesn't have to look like it did tonight, but it won't look good. Ultimately we're capable of playing better than we did tonight, and that's not taking anything away from Ohio State.

Q. You mentioned needing to grow as a program going forward. What lessons do you feel like y'all can learn from tonight that can help you grow moving forward?

JOSH HEUPEL: There will be a bunch of little things, just in the play and the detail of our assignments. But no matter when your season ends, every year is new. You start rebuilding.

When I say that, you can't skip any of the steps, so when we get our guys back, we'll start that process.

Q. It was in the low 20s pretty much the whole game. You had some injuries. Was that a factor tonight?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, the injuries were a factor for sure. But listen, the season in college football, it's long, and you've got to have the next guy step up.

At the end of the day, whether it was a starter that was out there, a backup, we didn't perform the way that we needed to.

Q. Can you speak to the play of Nico (indiscernible)?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, kid is going to lay it on the line and compete with everything that he's got, and he did that tonight. There's some things that he'd want back, and that could be a read, a throw, but continued to play and fight.

There were a lot of moving parts within our personnel around him, and when you're playing that position you need to have the guys around you playing at a high level, too.

I said at the beginning, we just didn't coach well, play well enough collectively as a group to do the things you have to in this one.

Q. (Indiscernible).

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I think everybody that follows the sport understands that it's a unique time of year. I'm not in charge of that. Do I think they need to find a way to go through all the processes that they have right now or things that are in the game but find a better calendar for it? Yeah, I think that would be best for the game for sure.

But at the end of the day, I'm not using any of that for tonight. We just didn't play well enough, didn't coach well enough.

Q. Over and above your team, what it did or didn't do, as you scouted these guys and watched tape and looked at things leading up to this game and now you've seen them live, I wonder where their roster ranks with anybody you've played this year or the last couple years.

JOSH HEUPEL: They played really well. Coming into it, I thought their skill on both sides of the ball were as good as you'll see. Defensively they led the country or were Top 5 in pretty much every category. They did a good job tonight.

We weren't efficient in the run game early and got to the quarterback early, and you combine those two things and you're struggling offensively.

Q. What jumps out at you for why you feel like your team didn't perform as well as you would have liked tonight, and what was your message to the team?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I don't know. Like the preparation going into it, guys that were out there with us for the two weeks of this preparation, I thought they did a really good job, and the performance tonight doesn't change my viewpoint of what they did on the practice field and in their preparation.

Didn't execute some things tonight. Got beat in some one-on-one situations out on the perimeter, also at the line of scrimmage. At the end of the day, a couple of busts and they create big plays and they got -- they're on the right side of the scoreboard and create some separation, changes the way the game is played a little bit. You combine all those things...

Q. What was your message to the team?

JOSH HEUPEL: You know, I think at the end of the season, even after a really disappointing performance tonight, at the end of it, recognized what the team had done throughout the course of the season. I think that's important.

The guys that have been a part of building this program, I'm talking about inside the locker room, the seniors that you're losing, what they've meant to this program. But I started it out by recognizing how disappointing this was. I think everybody -- you'd better let that soak in, and it's got to propel you for whatever is next, and that's for the guys that are coming back. It's the guys that are leaving, too. You've got to grow and use this to propel you, too.

Q. Some of the struggles on the line of scrimmage tonight, were those things that were surprising, or when you watched film was that something that you thought was possible in this game?

JOSH HEUPEL: I thought we would handle some of those things better than we did tonight.

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