

Rose Bowl Game presented by Capital One Venture X: Ohio State vs Utah

Saturday, January 1, 2022
Pasadena, California, USA

Ohio State Buckeyes

Ryan Day

C.J. Stroud

Jaxon Smith-Njigba

Press Conference

Ohio State - 48, Utah - 45

THE MODERATOR: We're going to get started with the Ohio State and ask Coach Day to give an opening remark.

Coach Day, can you give a general remark about today's game.

RYAN DAY: I'm just very proud of the coaching staff, the players, and the leaders of this team for playing the way we did, especially in the second half, and winning this game.

We were shorthanded, and there were some guys who weren't here today. For us to respond the way we did at halftime and to come out and play in the second half says a lot about the character of this team to win this game. That Utah team is a very, very good team. They're well coached, very good players, tremendous amount of respect for them. They played their tails off tonight in an unbelievable game.

But couldn't be prouder of our guys. For our seniors, some of the guys who played in this game, I can't say enough about what they've left for a legacy behind, especially winning this game the way we did. Then for our younger guys, a couple of them sitting right here, the momentum that we have right now moving forward is tremendous.

We have a lot of work to do in the off-season, but we found out a little bit about our team in the second half here.

Q. Ryan, I know you said that you were telling Jaxon don't try to do too much --



RYAN DAY: He didn't listen.

Q. He kind of did. Did you see that he did rise to the occasion in terms of the other guys being gone? And did he feel like he needed to do that?

RYAN DAY: I think Jaxon's done what he's done all year, and that's just play within himself. Certainly some of the plays he made tonight was tremendous. We leaned on him a lot. At one point I asked him, are you tired? On the play there where Clark caught him, he looked at me like what are you asking me for? Are you crazy? I'm going back out there. And played one of the best games probably in the history of the Rose Bowl.

I also thought C.J. and he just have a great connection. They have a great feel, and I think there's a lot of trust there that's been built over the year. I think it happened a little bit in that Nebraska game. Who knows? You have to ask them. Maybe it happened last year, I don't know. But they read each other really well, and they've got a special connection.

The throw on the touchdown pass, the inside slot fade, the throw and the catch there is probably as good as I've ever seen in a big time spot.

Q. Jaxon, how about you, did you feel like you had to fill in the blanks, so to speak, with Chris being gone and Garrett?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Honestly, I just trust the process, trust that Coach is going to put me in the right opportunity, that C.J. is going to put me in the right opportunity. Just taking advantage of every opportunity that I get. That's the only thing I can do really. It worked out.

Q. Ryan, you guys came in depleted. You'd come off the loss. You get down 14-0. Are you worried at this point that this could be just not a good game, a loss, but what it means for the off-season, and how important was it to respond the way you did?



RYAN DAY: I think it's huge. Worried, I don't know. But I knew what an unbelievable opportunity. Like you said, down a bunch of guys, down some numbers in this spot.

I kind of took a step back. Obviously, I was driving hard, but I also at halftime, there was a bunch of guys in that locker room that stepped up in a big way. We talked about how that 2019 Big Ten Championship game against Wisconsin, a bunch of guys did that. That same thing happened at halftime in this game.

When you have that type of leadership from within, that's when you can do whatever you want. I think, as we springboard into this off-season, that's the part that we're really going to go back upon in this game is the leadership that drove us in the second half that we weren't going to be denied, and two of them are sitting right here. If we want to get to where we want to be next year -- it's a long way away from now, but I'm already thinking about that first game and what that means is the leadership from these two guys has got to really springboard, especially the way they played in the second half of this game, but really the entire game, and it's really going to build some momentum.

Q. For C.J., that word springboard, you were playing today with Jaxon, but also new receivers, Marvin catches three three touchdown passes. Can you describe the chemistry you have with him, how important he was to this game, and what this game can mean for next year?

C.J. STROUD: First of all, I want to give all glory to God. We built that connection probably all the way back -- we came in as freshman together, came in early. We were throwing at the line the first day. Scout team last year, we really built it. This doesn't surprise me at all. When I heard the numbers, I didn't really notice because he does this all the time.

I'm just blessed to be around guys like this. Me or him doesn't have a good game without our O-linemen. Our O-line played their butts off. I don't think I got sacked once. Our running backs ran the ball well. Tight ends played very well. And the young guys, Marvin and Julian, played really well as well. When you put all those things together, I feel like we need to keep going.

Q. Your connection with Marvin, three touchdown passes. Fourth and one, you go for the pass to him, just the connection you have with Marvin?

C.J. STROUD: Yeah, I call Marv Route Man Marv. His routes are amazing, especially against a good corner like No. 8. I know No. 2, he had a decent game as well, filling in that spot. I have respect for their defense, but when my

guys are rolling, I think we're pretty much unstoppable.

We've got to go out there and prove it, you know what I'm saying? Marv had a great game. He showed you all a little glimpse. He has way more in his bag. Julian, I know he popped his little shoulder out, but he has way more in his bag as well. I know they'll hit their peak next year.

Q. My question is for C.J. and Jaxon. What did you guys learn throughout your season that prepared you for that second half for you guys to gut it out and be able to get that win? What are some of the intangibles you guys learned along the way?

C.J. STROUD: I'll start. Every game, I mean, you always have ups and downs. We open up the season like that. Took a hard loss in that second game. These are all learning experiences. Then we lose again, and we have a tough game in Nebraska. It's all a learning experience.

I think when you're young, this is our first year starting. So I mean, when you have games like that under your belt, you know how to kind of finish those games off in a sense. You know not to panic, how to stay calm, and I think that's what we did.

I'm really proud of my guys for staying calm and not really panicking, not pointing fingers or anything like that. We all kind of stayed even keel and made sure we were going to win this game.

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Our team is built on fighting. It doesn't matter if we're up, down. We were down the first half, but we just had to stay level headed and keep fighting.

Q. Coach, I know we're talking a lot of offense and for good reason, but the defense in the second half looked like an entirely different unit than what you had in the first 30 minutes, particularly Tommy Eichenberg. Can you tell us what you were impressed about how he played tonight?

RYAN DAY: Like you said, I thought in the second half they made up their mind on defense, that they were going to play different. It happened in the locker room. I heard it, and I got out of the way.

Then they played with a different toughness, and we talked about playing fast and violent. I thought they played that way in the second half. When you make up your mind you're going to do something like that, then you can impose your will. I felt like that's what happened.

It's a team game. You have to believe the guy next to you is going to do their job. If you do your job and you count on

11 guys to do that, I think we did that in the second half. I thought Tommy played really well. He had a chip on his shoulder. I thought Cade Stover stepping in at linebacker, he had a chip on his shoulder.

Then the D-line at one point really imposed their will. If we can start becoming more consistent in that area and having that mentality and building into the off-season here, we have a chance to have a really good defense next year. But those are the things that we really have to hammer home over the next few months and into the spring ball and preseason.

Q. Not just for you personally, but as a team, how difficult is it to keep your focus for several weeks when you didn't play a game for over a month, and there's all this hype and all this anticipation about a game that for a while probably seems a long way off. Then once it gets here, you've got all the pomp and circumstance around the game, is it difficult to prep for a game like this and to stay focused, let alone perform like you did?

C.J. STROUD: I think what motivated us wasn't just this game, but the previous game. I know that was my motivation, just getting that bad taste out of our team's mouth and ending the season the right way and sending our seniors off the right way. That was probably the most important thing for me.

Then on top of that, this is the Rose Bowl, man. This is where the legendary games are being played. If you aren't motivated to play, I question your love of the game. Every game I go out there, I try to do my best and make sure I prepare the right way and do the right things because you never know what can happen in the game.

My job is to lead the team, lead our offense, and I've got to watch -- I have to do everything I need to do to lead our offense on the field.

Q. Ryan, I know your mantra is be tough and be aggressive. I don't know what your rushing numbers were, but is this a game where it didn't go the way maybe you thought it would, but it went the way it had to go? In other words, the attacking, pound it wasn't there, but the passing game sure was.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I thought early on we really wanted to mix it up. So I guess we had just over 100-something yards rushing. And then we went down a couple scores. We hit on some big passes, like I think there was three series in a row we had like two or three plays that just kind of kept going.

Then we got into a rhythm throwing the ball. I thought we did have a good mix of run and pass. Some of the stuff that will show up on the stat sheet as passes are run-pass options, whether they're bubbles or throws down the field. I thought C.J. did an excellent job of executing in those spots.

So, yeah, we were a little pass heavy here, but I did think that we played with more physicality up front. I thought the offensive line handled their front very well. They have a good front. I thought we blocked and ran a little harder than maybe in the last couple games. So that was a big emphasis coming in, but we're always looking for a great balance.

Q. You touched on this, the halftime, who said what? What was said that got things going here?

RYAN DAY: I'll kind of leave that for the locker room. There were some things that I probably can't repeat. That's okay. That's the way football goes.

But that's the toughness and that's the edge we have to play this game with all the time. It's a physical game that has to be played fast and violent. Proud of our guys for playing that way in the second half.

Q. Jaxon, I believe you had the most receiving yards of anybody ever in a bowl game. What does that mean to you?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: What does it mean? I mean, it's just a blessing. I've got to give all things to God. Without him, nothing's possible. Got to give thanks to Coach and C.J., of course, for giving me opportunities. And the O-line. It's not just me. I couldn't have done it without them.

I just try to take in every moment every time the ball's in the air. I feel like I did that today. So it's a blessing.

Q. Ryan, how's Lathan Ransom? It looked like a bad injury.

RYAN DAY: I don't know exactly what happened, but it was similar to Josh Crawford. Just standing over him shows you what a tough game it is. Prayers out to Lathan and his family. Hopefully he gets a quick recovery in this area.

Q. Two times on fourth and one you went for the pass?

RYAN DAY: Honestly, C.J. said at one point the play that we called on fourth down, he liked it early on. I was a little concerned it was loud. I'm not sure what they were going

to do. He was looking for his guy over here. He liked that call early on.

Really what it is is making sure guys feel comfortable with the call. He was asking for it. I think it was fourth and three. My heart was in my throat. I think we were on the 40-something yard line. I put my faith in these two guys, and they delivered. That's what it's all about.

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