

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Alabama vs Michigan

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Alabama Crimson Tide Tommy Rees

Press Conference

Q. The two quarterbacks you haven't talked about are Dylan and Eli. Talk about them and Dylan moving up a little bit.

TOMMY REES: Dylan has been up with us throughout the season. He did a really nice job through the off-season and through camp, and we just felt like his ability to develop and have him up, have three guys repping was important, especially that kind of post-South Florida, working him in the mix.

I think Eli has progressed tremendously throughout the season. He's really put a lot of work in. We had kind of a plan of development for him midway through the season. We started getting him some work extra with what we're doing offensively, so it's not always scout team opportunities for him, trying to get some of the extra guys out there with him post-practice and doing some things with our GAs to kind of be in the system that we're running, so he gets to steal some reps that way.

The cool thing about bowl prep early is you're doing less game plan and more good-on-good, and we were able to give Eli a lot of reps during that. You've seen the growth with him, and I think both have a high ceiling and a lot of upside to their game and excited where it could go for them.

Q. What went into not allowing the players to take home their tablets and keeping everything in-house?

TOMMY REES: I don't want to get into the whole Michigan deal with whatever they have going on over there. That's not a decision I'm making or anything like that. Our focus has been on how do we get our players best prepared to go play this game and really just focusing on what we can do and less about them.

Q. How much effect does that have on going over practice where it has to be -- how much does that



affect --

TOMMY REES: I don't think we've put any harm to what our preparation can look like with any of the things that we've done.

Again, we're focused on us, less about that stuff and more on what we can do to play well.

Q. One thing your boss does really well is as the game changes, he changes with it, and he's good at adapting whatever his system is to the players. Have you seen that in action since you've been at Alabama, and can you speak a little bit to Nick Saban's adaptability?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, I think it's a great point and one that -- the game is changing right now in college football, and there's a lot of conversations behind the scenes of how that game is changing, and you see his ability to adapt to it and his understanding.

I think one great skill is his anticipation of where it's going and being able to react to that. In a smaller view, you just look at our season and our ability to adapt as the year has gone on and tried to play to our strengths, I think that comes from the top. That's the challenge every day is, okay, this isn't working, what can we do to find a way to play better, to do some things.

Being around it every day, it challenges you to think and it challenges you to evolve and it challenges you to find ways to work and give your players an opportunity to have success. That's one of the great skills he's had or has, and part of the reason I think success has followed.

He's been through it now for a lot of changes in college football. It's still changing. His adaptability to it has been tremendous, and being a young coach and being around it and seeing that in action has been tremendous to my own development.

Q. How have the expectations that you've had coming into the job being under him kind of matched up with what the reality has been of this season?



TOMMY REES: Yeah, I said it in there. You take these jobs, you take this opportunity, knowing the challenges that come with it. For me personally, you want that. You want to be at a place where the expectations are high. You want to be at a place where the demands are high. You want to be at a place where football is important and people care, and you understand what comes with that.

For me that was part of the allure of the job. Learning under Coach, growing under Coach, again, being challenged every day in how you think and how you develop and being prepared, like those are all positives.

For me, that is something I wanted. Coach has exceeded any expectations of whatever preconceived notions you could have of working for him, you find yourself every day finding little items of meaning or what we're doing that you're going to take with you.

You've got to remind yourself that this is unbelievable, the learning experience and the growth you're having while also being present in the moment of going after success and finding ways to be effective on the football field.

Greatness is a term that's thrown around a lot, but I think working for Coach, you really see it. For me, again, as a young coach, that's part of the opportunity that Alabama presents.

Q. The individual players aren't allowed to watch film on their iPads. Could you better explain that situation?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, I'm not going to get into the whole film, sign stealing, I'm not talking about it. Like I said, our job is to give ourselves the best chance to have success on the field. We're focused on what we're trying to do, and that's really it.

Q. Is this a mandate by the College Football Playoff Committee? Is it something you're doing as a precaution?

TOMMY REES: Like I said, I'm not getting into the whole thing. It's just not my area to talk on.

Q. You talked in the preseason about connecting with the quarterbacks off the field. What have you done with Jalen to foster that relationship?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, I think as the season goes on and you kind of learn how to reach different people, and as you're working and coaching. Our job as teachers and coaches is to bring the best out of our players and bring the best out of what they can do, and a huge part of that is

how do you reach those guys.

That's a challenge when it's a new player with a new coach. You try to find out kind of what makes them go off the field, what makes them go on the field, what are the things that give them confidence, what are the things that can bring the most out of them.

For Jalen and I, the relationship building over months has been really positive. He's an unbelievable human being -- it's an unbelievable kid. Like the way he's able to face adversity, the way he's able to push through things, the standard he holds himself to, like those things probably started with his parents.

He's done an unbelievable job throughout the season of staying true to that. I think an underrated quality is just the humility he has to want to get better and to want to be the best version of himself.

For us as a coach, that's refreshing because he wants all those things.

You've got to kind of find ways to lighten the mood every once in a while with players. Can you get him to laugh? Can you get him to calm down? Can you get him to feel relaxed and comfortable?

Then I think the thing we've been able to do throughout the season is as you start building the system around the quarterback, it gives the quarterback a lot of confidence, and then when they start to have some autonomy in what you're doing, it gets greater buy-in from the player.

I think that's all part of the growth, and that shows trust and belief in the individual, which ultimately then can help bring the best out of what they have.

Q. The South Florida game might have undermine his confidence. What did you do to manage that?

TOMMY REES: I think you build him back up, and I think a lot of credit goes to Jalen and his mental toughness to go through those things and his ability to say I'm focused on -- you talk about the humility, that's where it really comes into play.

All right, we didn't play well against South Florida. He didn't play. It would be easy for him to look at that as a negative. He was humble enough to say, these are still the areas I need to get better. I am committed to my teammates and this program to do those things.

He pushed forward and kept working. Again, like his competitive toughness and his confidence are probably two

of his greatest qualities he has, and that's not really something you can figure out until you're put into some adversity or you're put into the ability to go play in the games.

Q. Talk about Kendrick Law's package. What's the skill set that he has?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, he's a strong, powerful, fast athlete. So finding ways to get him on the field, finding ways to get him in positions to have success is important. You want to exhaust all the resources you have as an offense, personnel, all the things you're given offensively.

Obviously his development throughout the year and being able to add things to his plate I think has enhanced some of the things we can do.

But we have a lot of guys like that. So finding a way to balance all the skill players we have has been important through this home stretch, and K-Law is just one example of that.

Q. You mentioned building an offense around a quarterback. When you had that first month when you weren't sure who was going to be tapped as the starter, how difficult was it to find a groove and to have the offense settle in?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, I think you're looking for your identity in those points of the season. I think as the year has gone on and we said this is who we are and who we are going to be.

I remember early in the season saying who we want to be and who are two different things. Who we thought we were going to be or who we can be are going to be two different things and that's okay. Let's just work to find ways to build who we are and what we can do and build around it.

Throughout the season we've been able to continue to add to what we're doing and stack things on top of each other, where you look at what we're doing now versus nine weeks ago looks completely different.

It was a slow progression of adding things to our plate, but that's part of the development and part of the progression of the season. I said it in there, but the credit goes to our staff, staying together, buying in, this is what we're going to do, finding ways to develop our guys. The players buying in, owning their role, having the ability to learn and grow and develop what we're doing.

Again, you get a lot of gratification looking back and seeing the progression that we've had.

Again, all the credit to those guys for putting in the time and work to find our identity and become the offense that we're trying to continue to build to be.

Q. One thing about this offense is that it's all around. There's not a 1000 yard rusher or receiver. That's the first time that's happened at Alabama. Was there some strategy to doing that from your perspective, or is that just kind of a happy accident that that happened?

TOMMY REES: I think we have a wealth of personnel where there's a lot of guys that you're trying to get incorporated. So when you have all these pieces that you feel like can help attack a defense, you try to put them in positions to have success.

It's not like we sat there and said, hey, we've got to have this balance and this spread, but you look at we have a few running backs that can go out there and impact the game, so we've got to find ways. Some games one is running better than the other and that becomes his game.

We've had some guys in and out of the lineup where that impacts who's in, but you see guys like Isaiah Bond step up into the role he's stepped into. You look at guys like Kobe Prentice who's showed up in big moments, Kendrick Law is a guy in the back half of the season that we got involved a little bit more.

Amari is a guy that's been in there throughout the season and able to present some challenges for defenses.

You're just looking at all the pieces and finding ways to make sure that you're attacking teams the right way. If somebody is trying to take a certain player away, how can we get the other pieces around.

To me, that's a credit to the talent that we have throughout the offense and the wealth of talent that we have at different positions and then trying to be multiple and present different challenges to what defenses are seeing.

Q. When you were playing Alabama in 2012 when you were at Notre Dame --

TOMMY REES: It was a fun night. (Laughter.)

Q. What was that like, just your takeaways and the differences maybe between their team and your team after that experience?

TOMMY REES: Well, I didn't play in the game, thankfully -- I'm just kidding. That happened like that, that game. Like the quickest -- it was like we showed up, we're

excited, and then, boom, it was over. I remember Sweet Home Alabama playing, walking off the field.

They were clearly better than we were. That was a great team that I was a part of and a lot of proud moments and a lot of people that I'm still very close with and a lot of people I hold in high regard. But we were outmatched that night.

We faced Alabama twice in my career, once as a player, once in '20 in the playoff game. They present a great challenge, and it's personnel driven, it's schematic driven.

To see the consistency from 2012 to now in the program is really something that should deserve high praise.

Q. (Indiscernible) what's it been like living in SEC country and what do you make of college football consolidating --

TOMMY REES: Yeah, I think it just means more, right? That's the slogan. I think the SEC experience has been unbelievable. The ability to -- like when you play that schedule week in and week out, stacking those games on top of each other is the challenge.

You go on the road to Mississippi State, you can't hear. Those challenges of like anywhere you go, it's a focal point. That's what makes this conference special.

I did grow up in Big Ten country, and I worked and played in that area of the country pretty much my whole life. This experience has been unbelievable. I think you see the importance of football.

As somebody that loves the game and has been around the game my whole life, it's pretty special, pretty unique, and the support from the fans, and like I said, you want to come to a place where football is important. You want to come to a place where that expectation, that challenge is present.

It's been a really great opportunity for myself and going through the whole schedule. It's been pretty cool.

Q. Going back to 2012, how much do you think that created that Alabama intimidation factor that carries to this day?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, we saw it firsthand. It was eye-opening for sure. But like I said, I think the consistency of where the program was to where it is now and seeing that throughout this -- what is that, 11-year stretch, it's pretty remarkable to have Coach have the consistency that entire time.

Q. The one year that you spent in the NFL, how close are the two games? I'd ask as much organizationally --

TOMMY REES: Yeah, I think the way Coach runs his program here is there's a lot of similarities between the NFL and the way we're operating day in and day out.

I think the games are a little bit different, although they'll be becoming probably more similar now than they were eight years ago.

You see some of the college game trickling into the NFL. But I was very fortunate. I worked under some great coaches. Ken Whisenhunt, Nick Sirianni with the Eagles, our wide-out coach, Shane Steichen head coach of the Colts as our quarterback coach. There was a great staff that I was able to learn under.

You think you know football, and then I got around all those guys, and I was like, I really don't know anything. You get a great learning experience that way.

I think you learn -- Coach McCoy was our head coach and the attention to detail he put into everything was probably one of the things I took with me more than anything.

Q. When the Irish faced Michigan in 2019, how much difference does the defense from Michigan's perspective look from a size perspective differ from the 2019 defense that you faced?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, they were pretty good that year. They had the two edge guys that were both high picks. They had the middle linebacker was a high pick. They had a really good star. It was a good system in terms of who was calling it.

But look, I played against Michigan for four years in college. I've coached against them three -- this will be my fourth time now.

They've been a great program for a long time. They've had really good players for a long time. Schematically they've had head coaches come in there and put their own twist on things and have success. I have a lot of respect for them. They're very good on defense, and they have been for a while, and their personnel is strong and big and physical, and they play their style of football, and I think you see their guys in the back end and they've got good corners and good safeties that can challenge you on the perimeter.

You look at Michigan, for me, my entire life, you look at Michigan on this pedestal, and I don't think it's any different. I think they have a great team, and they do a really nice job defensively. Jesse is a really good

coordinator and presents a lot of challenges for what you're trying to go attack.

Q. How much of Milroe's improvement was made possible by the offensive line's improvement? How connected were those two things?

TOMMY REES: You know, I think tremendously. I think both groups have grown and developed throughout the season. I think when you feel confident in your ability to run the ball, when you feel confident in your ability to protect, it helps the quarterback a lot. I also think Jalen has done some things to help them, and I think they've done some things to help Jalen.

I think when you have a collective group, like we talk about offensive football, it really takes all 11 doing their job to have success. If a left tackle gets beat and gives up a sack but a corner gets beat and is giving up a touchdown, the sack takes place first, so the bust never happens.

On offense if you have one guy not doing their job, it can wreck a play. When you look at our growth offensively, I think it's really all 11 guys on the field buying in and understanding this is our job, this is what we're trying to do, this is how it might help somebody else out on the field, and that's something we try to preach to our guys every day.

Q. Has some of the adversity you went through as a player in college helped, especially early in the season, dealing with Jalen and the offense, things not clicking so much?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, so I think I have my own experiences that I can lean on and I have a unique perspective that way, but Jalen's growth and Jalen's ability to fight through adversity and be mentally tough has nothing to do with me as a player.

I think I can be a sounding board. I can relate back to my own experiences. But again, that credit goes to Jalen and his ability to keep pushing and keep working and want to develop into the player that he's been.

Q. From a size and athleticism standpoint, the defensive front and front seven for Michigan, compare favorably to the SEC?

TOMMY REES: Yeah, they're very good up front. I think that's a strength of their team. They're athletic. Their D-line coach Mike Elston was at Notre Dame for a long time. I worked with him. I played when he was a coach. He does a great job. You can see his coaching, the way they use their hands, they way they get off blocks. They're

athletic. They have power.

Their front is really good. They have two linebackers. One of them has played a lot of football for them, so you can see his instincts and his experience show up. They both can run. O, their star nickel, is a disruptor out on the field.

They present a great challenge. We see great fronts in our conference, but they're right there, and they're as good as anybody we'll play.

Q. How many notebooks have you filled up with things you've learned from Nick Saban and how beneficial can that be?

TOMMY REES: It's been a really unique experience because you're so focused on the task at hand and being present in the moment and trying to find ways, but then you have these little moments where you can reflect on some of the higher arching themes or little nuggets of information you take with you that you kind of know this is something that is able to provide insight or things that you can look back on for your career in terms of how he handled it and how he looks at things.

I think being around it, it kind of seeps into you, but then there's also these moments where okay, that's really good perspective, that's something to remember moving forward while also, again, you're so enthralled in being present in what you're trying to do day in and day out that those moments are here and you feel them but you try not to -- that's for another moment to kind of reflect back on.

Q. Are you old enough to have any memories of your dad's experiences at the Rose Bowl with UCLA? Did you grow up hearing about them?

TOMMY REES: Listen, the Rose Bowl in my family was like a holiday. I wasn't old enough to experience it here while he was at UCLA, but the Rose Bowl, like every year it was like, we're stopping what we're doing and we're watching the Rose Bowl no matter what. Like this place is majestic to my family.

It's pretty cool to be here. Pretty cool to have our family here. My brother obviously played at UCLA and spent a lot of time here. My mom spent to UCLA and spent a lot of time here. This experience for our family, it's something, again, down the road to reflect on will be a pretty cool thing for us all to experience.

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