

ReliaQuest Bowl: Vanderbilt vs Iowa

Wednesday, December 31, 2025

Tampa, Florida, USA

Raymond James Stadium

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Clark Lea

Postgame Press Conference

Iowa 34, Vanderbilt 27

CLARK LEA: Let me first thank Jim and the ReliaQuest Bowl. This was such an incredible experience for our program. What a first-class operation. What an incredible week here in Tampa. We're so grateful to have had the chance to compete today against a really good Iowa team.

Credit to Iowa and Coach Ferentz, his staff, his players. They played better football than we did today. That team we played against is going to make it hard on you if you don't play a clean game. We did not do that.

The three phases never really seamed up. I thought early on, when we got our cleats in the ground on defense, you know, offensively we were taking on sacks and putting ourselves in tough situations to get out of. Obviously the special teams penalty there to end the first half was a gut punch. We had what we needed to overcome it, but that's tough water to take on in the middle eight where we've been really good.

Then coming out at half to go 3-0, to have the delay of game on the fourth and inches kept us out of a potential conversion. Then obviously credit to the punt returner. Nice return, and they were able to punch one in on defense.

The end of the game, one stop away. That really hurts, but I told the guys, you know, there's no one phase and no one player that takes responsibility for this. We all are, me included, our staff included. That's really not the point. That's a painful way to finish, but -- that's what's great about the arena. You go in. You're not guaranteed. You have to go win it. We didn't do that.

That doesn't take anything away from that group of players and that coaching staff and that support staff, what they poured into this. We're disappointed, but my emotion right now has nothing to do with that. It's the end.



This team has set a new bar for the program, and I'm going to miss those guys. Luckily, we'll bring enough of them back to keep building, and we'll find others to hold them and aim for more. This group has set such a high bar for us. First 10-win season in program history. That's the best football team in Vanderbilt football history. I want to make sure those guys are proud of that despite how we feel.

The pain we feel, it will resolve. We will get past it, and we'll work past it and be left with something we can be really proud of. For me as the head coach, it's something I get to build upon, which is so exciting.

Thank you to all the fans that showed up, specifically Commodore Nation for being here in support of us. Again, I want to say thank you to Candice Lee, our athletics director, and Chancellor Diermeier for being here today too for their support. I want to say thank you to my family for being here also. Thank you, Jack, Mara, Clark, and Allison. Big thank you to the team and the staff for all the hard work you've put in.

With that, I'm happy to answer questions.

Q. The punt play where you had the penalty, what were you intending to do on that play?

CLARK LEA: Well, one of their most dangerous players is their punt returner, and so we knew that coming in. I think there's times where you can overthink that stuff. We've covered some dangerous guys this season. We don't try to -- we believe in who we are, but one of the ways you can neutralize a return is just by rolling out and extending the amount of time the punter holds the ball. It's no different than any time, it makes it effective on a rugby punt. That's what the attempt was.

I loved the play. I think Nick just lost track of where he was on the field. There was a time where I was yelling, run, run, run, and had it been a more manageable conversion attempt, I think that there would have been room for that.

Nick Haberer has been fantastic this season. We probably



used him a little more than we wanted to today. You know, it's a great lesson for us all to be in our teach state from here on out. Unfortunate situation. It was totally within the strategy we were trying to accomplish and neutralize the punt return.

In that moment too, keep in mind at the end of the half you just want them on the long field. You do not want to give them a possession midfield or across the 50. It felt like we were on track for that. We just lost track of where we were on the field.

Q. In an era where maybe bowl games are losing their relevance a little bit, both you and Kirk Ferentz shut that down yesterday and shut it down today with a hard-fought game. How important is it that both starting quarterbacks played in the game, too? You don't see that too often. For Diego and for, you know, both of them to play, how important is that?

CLARK LEA: Well, I think I can speak for their quarterback, too. These guys are tough competitors. It's no surprise that they would show up and play.

I think it's reflective of the DNA of the program. I said this when we accepted the invitation here. We love playing football. I don't know if there's a way we can put four quarters back on the scoreboard and go play some more, because we would do that. If you want to maybe play again tomorrow, we would like to play again tomorrow. But that's the spirit of our program.

Obviously Iowa has that in their DNA too. I've got so much respect for them. I think when you play in a game like that, you realize they're just not going to let you make mistakes. You know, they're just not going to let you get off schedule. They're just not going to let you have a penalty on a punt and not make you pay for it. That's the team we want to be too, and that's the team we've been a lot this year.

The difference in this game is we made mistakes, and we weren't able to play our way out of it. That's a credit to them and how they play.

But, look, my emotion, I mean, I swear to you, if we could do this again, I would do it, and I know that's the spirit of our team, too. That's the significance of bowl opportunities.

As long as they're going to give me a chance to play another game, I'm going to play another game.

Q. How will you remember Diego and his career here, and how will you remember this team?

CLARK LEA: I think part of remembering this team, first, is the work we do to ensure that they're remembered as a team that started something that has deep roots and truly lasts, you know? I hope this doesn't just become a blip season, right? It's got to be something that we can pull forward.

My goal would be that in ten years we draw a line back and say, that's where this all began. I think we can do that. And then to say, also, that Diego is a huge part of it. I think he's the best player in the country. He's the best competitor I've ever met in my life. He's the best teammate I've ever met in my life.

This guy has redefined what it means to connect with people. Everyone wants to have an opinion about him. I mean, you know, all I know is this: You want him on your team. So we're going to miss him, but also, we're not going to forget him. He's left his mark on our program, and I'm so excited for him for what's next.

I'm so excited for him to be able to shoot his shot in the NFL, and I'm never betting against that guy. I hope the right people have paid attention to his season, because this dude has been doubted his entire life. Everyone is wanting to say something about what he can and can't do. This guy is going to make it. He's not only going to make it, he's going to find a way to play at the level he's found a way to play at for us. I believe that with all my heart.

We love Diego, and we're going to miss him, but we won't forget him. We'll make sure that teams to come are reminded about the things he did as a part of this program.

Q. Every time on third down seemed like Vonnahme had a big catch. What led to his success today?

CLARK LEA: They were able to find some soft spots in zone, and the challenge is you're in some zone pressures where you're giving up a seam ball, and there's one in my mind that he just was wide open in one of those critical drives at the end that we needed to stop. I think at the time he was able to beat man coverage. He was able to create space for himself. The quarterback made a good throw away from coverage, so he's a really good player. Credit to him.

We did not do enough. Our third down performance was lacking today. And, again, some of that is on our end, some of that is on their end. But certainly he was a thorn in our side today.

Q. Did Iowa do anything that surprised you that you weren't expecting?

CLARK LEA: No, I think they played to their identity. I think that's why they were as effective as they were.

I felt like in the first half we did not play to our identity. I think we were trying to do too much. So there were times where we were in the go zone, and you know, we took a sack because we were trying to get in the right play, and we're not seeing it as clean as we need to do see it.

I felt like they had their stretch run game going. I felt like we settled in against it. When they got in the red zone, they were able to get the ball in the end zone. The first drive was unfortunate, you know. We got the third down, and we felt like we had a chance for the sack, and again, credit to the quarterback. He made a really good play.

It's a really good team, a team that has identity. I think they played to that identity today. They did a better job than we did, and that's why they won.

Q. Did you think about maybe going tempo early? I know that's a tough thing. What was the decision with that?

CLARK LEA: We like to get into that as we kind of create success on offense. SO when you are able to get the defense on their heels, you kind of push the pedal down. That's where it's the most effective.

We don't line up and just run a tempo offense from snap one for the reasons you're saying. You know, we wanted to establish a run game. We wanted to be able to spread the ball around and do the things that we've done effectively.

I think if we would have found some success and gotten in sync offensively early, we would have been able to push the pedal down some, but they got us off schedule. We were behind the sticks because of penalties on offense. We were in situations on third down where we gave up sacks.

I think in the first half the majority of our possessions ended on a third down sack. You're probably one first down away from being able to push the pedal down some. Second half we got behind, and we had no choice, so we had to get going.

Again, credit to them in the first half for keeping us off schedule.

Q. You lost Chase at one point I think early in the game. What was the injury, and how did that affect what you wanted to do?

CLARK LEA: Well, Jordan -- we lost Jordan, yeah. He's got a knee. It's not anything that I think is going to keep him on the shelf for long, but it was inhibiting his ability to move today. He wasn't able to come back out. I think he's going to be okay.

When you lose your center, that's a big deal, you know? That guy has been really important to us, but I want to credit Cade McConnell for stepping in there, and Sterling Porcher played a bunch of snaps for us today. Those guys stepped up, and that's part of having a good unit.

I'm glad Jordan is going to be okay. I hate to see that, but he's got a bright football future ahead. He's got a lot of snaps ahead.

Q. With Diego, Eli, and others moving, on how good do you feel about Vanderbilt football?

CLARK LEA: Well, I feel great about it, and not because it's straightforward. We have work to do. We'll have some big shoes to fill, but that's part of the excitement of this. We're going to figure it out as we go. We'll have to change identity in some ways. We'll have to change, tweak some systems, and we'll have to win games differently next year than we did this year. Again, that's the fun of it.

What I do believe in is I got a locker room of guys that are connected, that love one another, that love playing football, and that will be returning to take this further. That's a great starting point.

We'll have work to do over the next couple of weeks to see where we net out in the portal and what we need to make sure we keep it going. We're going to introduce I think 20 freshmen in January, which will be great to get those guys' careers off and running, and the work of a coach begins.

I feel great about it. I'm excited about the future. I'm excited to be at Vanderbilt long-term, and I can't wait for the next steps.

Thank you, guys, very much.

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