

# Valero Alamo Bowl: Oklahoma vs Oregon

Monday, December 27, 2021

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Oregon Ducks

Coach Tim DeRuyter

Brandon Dorlus

Jeffrey Bassa

Jordan Happle

Verone McKinley III

Press Conference

TIM DERUYTER: We'll start at the far end. We have Jeff Bassa, we have Brandon Dorlus, Jordan Happle, and Verone McKinley III.

Really pleased to be here in San Antonio. It's been an unusual year, but we've got a special group of guys that we've been able to coach, and to have one more opportunity to show what they can do, I know these guys are relishing this opportunity, and can't wait to play a storied program like Oklahoma.

With that, any questions you have, we'll be more than happy to answer.

**Q. Tim, by our math today, you're without 17 players on defense, 14 that started the preseason on the two-deep. This isn't about excuses or pity parties; this is context. How do you sum up the season as a whole with that being such a huge part of it, and then in terms of the game prep, when like five or six of these guys, this changed in the last couple of days, how much did this impact bowl prep where players like Jackson LaDuke among others were practicing on campus but they're not here?**

TIM DERUYTER: Well, it's kind of been a theme of our whole year, as you mentioned. But I think it really speaks to the resolve our players have had. We've had a next man up mentality the whole year. It seems like forever ago, but going to Columbus nobody gave us a chance because we didn't have KT and we didn't have Justin Flowe, and I don't know who else we were missing that



day. But we had guys step up, guys like DJ. That week we had to teach him how to play outside backer, and he ends up getting a sack in the game.

That's the beauty of football. It's never about who's most talented that day. It's who plays best that day and who plays together as a football team. Our guys have bought into that.

We've had some guys opt out and other guys' injuries or whatever reason are not here with us, but the guys that are here, they're going to show up and they're going to play.

**Q. Tim, playing into that, your team has experienced a season of guys being in and out of the lineup. How much does that factor into the comfort level of, hey, yeah, guys aren't playing, but we've been through this before and guys have had to step up before and we've seen success with that?**

TIM DERUYTER: Well, I don't know about comfort level, but I think it's just the mentality of our team. We've had a next-man-up. We'll figure it out.

Football is such a metaphor for life. What we've gone through as a country the last two years, you've got to figure it out as you go along. You look at other bowl games this week, people having to pivot. Our guys are learning lessons in football about life and about stepping up and about being responsible, having a guy next to you trust you. That's what I love about this.

We will find a way to show up on Wednesday and compete like hell, because I know the resolve in these guys' hearts.

**Q. Tim, Bennett tweeted something alluding to the fact that it seemed like he's ready to go. What would it mean to have Bennett back for this game on Wednesday given what he went through earlier in the season?**

TIM DERUYTER: Yeah, it would be huge. He was such an inspirational part of our team early in the season. He was a guy who wasn't really heralded going into the fall. He had a great spring, a great fall camp, had an

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opportunity, and he really seized it and made huge plays for us in the first half of the season when he was healthy.

To have him go down the Friday before Stanford was a little bit of a kick in the gut for us because as a coach you rep the guy all week, so that's somebody else's reps that you would have loved to have had, but it was unfortunate for him, but the fact that it was important enough for him to get his body back, to get ready, to be able to practice with us the last couple days, and I think he'll be ready to help us, that's just been huge. I know he's champing at the bit to play and can't wait.

**Q. How close in your estimation is Bennett to where he was left off physically? And for Verone and Jordan, from what you've seen the past couple days in practice, how close is Bennett to being the player he was two plus months ago?**

TIM DERUYTER: You know, it's hard to tell. We're not going full speed right now. I don't think he's going to be able to be in on a 12-play drive just from a conditioning standpoint, but he's moving around really well. So it looks like he's right back where he was.

But until it's live bullets flying, you don't truly know. When he's got to make that tackle that he made all fall, the one-on-one-in-space tackle, intercepting balls, just being in the right place, those kind of things, you've got to wait until game day to see if it'll show up. But knowing him, he's going to find a way.

VERONE MCKINLEY III: I think he's ready. He's been opening his hips, transitioning. He's been playing physical when he's kind of had to and just getting back into rhythm of things. That's what he's been doing. So I think for the most part he looks good.

Of course there's some little things you always want to clean up, but it's Bennett; he'll be ready to go.

JORDAN HAPPLE: Yeah, I'll just say the same. Obviously losing Bennett was a tough blow to our team, but I think watching him over these past few days and weeks come back from that injury, it's been kind of tremendous to watch, and I think he'll be ready.

**Q. Coach, you've been around some really good quarterbacks during your coaching career. I was wondering, is there anyone that Caleb Williams reminds you of, and can you talk a little bit about Caleb's strengths as you scout him?**

TIM DERUYTER: Yeah, he's really, really talented. In certain ways, he reminds me a little bit of Ryan Tannehill

as athletic as he is. I was with Ryan at A&M when he was a receiver and then moved over to quarterback. He's a guy that has a ton of arm talent like Ryan, can make all the throws, and yet he can really, really run.

He's got tremendous poise, more so than you would expect for a guy who's only a freshman. He presents a lot of problems because if you only have one guy there to tackle him, he's going to make someone miss, either running through it because he's strong or faking it and running around you.

We've got to be aware of where he's at all the time. As a pass rusher, we've got to keep him leveraged in the pocket or have somebody assigned to make it spill somewhere where we know where it's going. It's quite a chore to try to defend him because they're a different football team since he's been in.

**Q. Tim, with Popo not here, Jackson Powers-Johnson is now on defense for you guys. What does he bring? What are your thoughts? It's early and probably a very quick move, but just your impressions of him at that spot?**

TIM DERUYTER: Well, all year long, when we'd go offense versus defense, the front all the time to compete and get each other developed better, I always noticed him on the other side, how physical he was. He's a 300 whatever, 15-, 20-pound - I don't know where he's at right now - big man who is really, really physical at the point of attack, runs his feet really well and plays with a tremendous motor.

As I watched him on the other side of the ball, I was always kind of in the back of my mind thinking, man, that guy ought to be on defense. For whatever set of circumstances, it has worked out that way. He'll be playing interior defensive line for us, and we're trying to get him as much defense as we can so that he can play as fast as he's capable of but not bog him down mentally.

That part is a little bit difficult for him right now. We're probably going to have him on a little bit of a smaller menu, but he's going to play physical and he's going to play really, really hard.

**Q. Tim, I know these things happen during bowl season a lot, but with Lincoln Riley leaving and not only being the head coach but being the offensive coordinator, that being his offense, how much more difficult does that make it to prepare for Oklahoma, or does it?**

TIM DERUYTER: It's just one more thing. You know, it's

interesting, when you're on defense, it's always a reaction mode. You anticipate certain things. All we can show our guys is what they put on tape. I can't imagine they're going to install a brand new offense, but they could. We're showing our guys other things that maybe they hadn't majored in before just so that we're prepared for different things, but that's just part of football, especially as a defensive coach, that you have to get your team ready for.

**Q. Brandon, I wanted to ask about Jackson Powers-Johnson, and as a guy at the position, how much have you given him a crash course the last couple of weeks in terms of technique and stuff just at this level? He played in high school but it's a different bear when he's trying to line up next to a guy like you and go against an offensive line like Oklahoma's?**

BRANDON DORLUS: Yeah, everybody knows the transition from D-line to O-line is going to be tough, especially on this level of football. When I've seen from him, he's looking good. He looks ready to play. There's some things he's got to work on, but we know he's not going to be in on a 12-play drive. It's just next man up, and he's doing a great job so far, and I'm helping him with the little things, and he's going to be all right.

**Q. Verone, I know it's a few hours away, but does the Alamo Bowl mean anything a little extra special being a Texas guy?**

VERONE MCKINLEY III: I wouldn't say as much, but it's big to me because it's another opportunity with the guys. We've had kind of a long season, a lot of ups, a lot of downs, but we always stay together, so just kind of going out with a bang. We didn't like the outcome the last time we stepped on the football field, so we want to make sure we make it right and go out on top.

**Q. Verone, you've talked a lot about the culture of this team the last couple of seasons and everything that's gone on the last month or so with this program on and off the field, how has the culture been able to keep this team going in the right direction and together like you guys have shown?**

VERONE MCKINLEY III: I think we've had a good job of older guys keeping people together and trying to tell young guys, don't just do anything rash, just kind of stay patient and relax. College football is at a place where there's always going to be movement. That's just what happens, especially when you have a good team. Coaches are going to move, players are going to move, whatever it is, but at the same time the O is going to stay the O, regardless, no matter who's here. So we can either sit here and woe is me and look down on it, or we can get

ready to go and understand that we still have a game to play, and whoever is here is here because they want to be here, and that's who we have, and we're going to roll with it and make sure we go out there and do our jobs.

**Q. Brandon, have you given thought as to what your plans are for your future for next season, and are you enrolled in class a week from today?**

BRANDON DORLUS: No, I'm declaring for the draft -- no, I'm playing. (Laughter.) I'm coming back. I'm coming back for another year here.

**Q. Jeff, just your thoughts on the year for you going into the season you were supposed to be a safety and you've had to move to linebacker. What's this year been like for you and do you maybe anticipate considering staying at linebacker next season?**

JEFFREY BASSA: Well, you know, as of right now I'm really not too worried about next year. I'm really just worried about finishing this year with the boys going out with a bang like Verone said. That transition -- transitions are always going to be hard in college, and just in life in general. It was hard for me at first, but just spending extra time with Coach Wilson, Coach Kwame and all my other defensive coaches just for believing in me and then trusting in them.

**Q. Jordan, it certainly seems like you and AB have quite an interesting friendship, or at least he loves teasing you. I wanted your perspective on the season that he's had and the criticism -- really over-the-top criticism that he's faced from fans, from outsiders, and the threats, those things. From your perspective as somebody who's so friendly with him, how have you seen him handle it? How do you view how things have transpired here the last six months?**

JORDAN HAPPLE: I mean, first and foremost I think a lot of people -- it's easier to talk kind of behind keyboards and stuff like that. It's a lot easier said than done to play the quarterback position at this high of a level. When you look at things from a broader spectrum, you see that he actually had an incredible season and he's done a lot of things that not a lot of people could do.

But I think that's just part of life and it's part of the game. People are going to hate. People are going to say what they want. You kind of just have to block it out.

From a personal outside of football, AB is an incredible human being, just a good person, good friend, good teammate. He's done nothing but spectacular things for this team. I think everyone will ride with him on this team.

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**Q. I want to ask you about Kennedy Brooks, their running back. He's had three 1,000-yard seasons. Only one other running back in OU history has done that. What do you see from Kennedy on film?**

TIM DERUYTER: Really patient runner, a guy that sets up his blocking well, very well, runs through a ton of tackles and then he can take it off the top. When you watch him play, you don't notice spectacular speed or anything, but he's just really, really patient before taking off, and he's been a very durable back for them, and again, makes that offense go when you've got that guy that's constantly moving the chains because he's not getting tackled for loss very often.

**Q. Because of some of those absences that I referenced earlier, who are your second-team deep safeties other than Scoop? Is Kwez moving back there and then Avante is outside in that case? How thin are things starting to get?**

TIM DERUYTER: Yeah, I don't mean to put you off, but Coach has asked that all those personnel questions to be dealt to him tomorrow. Sorry about that.

**Q. Verone, I know you've said that you haven't decided yet on your future, but just what's the -- we don't know if we're going to talk to you after the game. What's that process like for you? What's that mean, not your decision, but what are the factors you're going to be weighing on what you do next?**

VERONE MCKINLEY III: I knew going into this year, I kind of said it I think in an earlier interview, if I have a good season I'm sure there will need to be some decisions made. We've gotten to the end of the year. There's been a lot of talk about it. For me it's just been talking to my family. I've talked to Coach Lanning of course and the new staff and just getting information. That's kind of the biggest part of it, just getting more and more information, real information, not something you just want to hear. But that's something that's still in talks, and we're still working through that. That's kind of what goes into that.

**Q. Tim, Oklahoma will clearly be a little bit more open, and between that and depth and other things at the moment, do you look to employ perhaps a bit more dime because not only do they go wide a lot but because of numbers that you just are facing right now across the board, that that may be a little bit more advantageous? I don't think this will give away anything.**

TIM DERUYTER: Well, with Jeff being a former safety,

we're kind of in dime all the time right now. Yeah, you're absolutely right. We anticipate them being in a lot of 11 personnel. They do a lot of spread things. But as far as dime, we're still a little thin depth-wise at some other positions, so we're kind of working through that.

**Q. Jeffrey, you've had a tremendous impact as a freshman this season. What have you learned this year that you're going to take into next season and into this ballgame?**

JEFFREY BASSA: Some of the little things I learned is just little things from my teammates, just football-wise and on and off the field, in the classroom and in the film room. I've learned multiple countless numbers of things that could help me improve my game and then countless things that can help me as a human being in becoming a better person, as a man. Just going into next year, really just applying those things to my game and just making me a better person.

**Q. Brandon, now that you say you're coming back, I'll follow up with what are the things you look to work on in choosing to come back? What are the things you want to improve so a year from now there's not even a decision to make, that you had such a good season that it's obvious that you're going to go pro a year from now?**

BRANDON DORLUS: Well, obviously the year -- I feel like I had a pretty good solid year, and Coach Joe really taught me to not be satisfied. Going into next year I just want to be more of a dominant player, more of a consistent player, cause more havoc. I just want to show the nation that I'm going to be one of the top D-linemen in the nation.

**Q. Verone, this is kind of a shot in the dark. You were recruited by Clemson, correct?**

VERONE MCKINLEY III: Yes, sir.

**Q. Can you talk about your relationship with Coach Venables during that recruiting process just to give us a little insight what he was like back then?**

VERONE MCKINLEY III: So I knew Coach Venables my freshman year because his son and I played on the freshman All-American team, the Adidas Freshman All-American team. That's when I met him, and that's kind of how that relationship started. Coach Venables is somebody that I've known for quite some time now, and a phenomenal coach, phenomenal person, and just really a smart football kind of brain guy, and I think that he's going to do a great job at Oklahoma. I kind of saw this coming just because of the past, and that's kind of how our

relationship started. They offered me, of course, and we've built that relationship. I just chose to come to Oregon.

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