

Valero Alamo Bowl: Texas vs Washington

Monday, December 26, 2022

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Washington Huskies
Coach Ryan Grubb
Jaxson Kirkland
Michael Penix Jr.
Wayne Taulapapa
Press Conference



lot of new guys in the room, but still, it's a brand new program to you and you don't want overstep your boundaries.

But Mike came in, and as a quarterback, I really do think you have to lead, and it doesn't have to be vocal, but you can just give the vibe in spring ball and how he took command of the offense. He stepped up and did a great job that aspect.

Wayne came in later in the summer, which is even tougher to kind of step in, but we certainly needed him because the running back group was young and needed a leader for sure. He did a great job just assuming his role, and it just goes back to the type of players they were at their schools before this. They were leaders there, and it just came with them to UW and worked out great for our offense.

RYAN GRUBB: I'm here with Jax Kirkland, Mike Penix and Wayne Taulapapa. These guys are a bunch of studs, so direct most of your questions to them.

Q. Coach Grubb, what makes each one of these guys a stud? If you've got to say one thing about each one of them that stands out to you and what should stand out to fans about them?

RYAN GRUBB: Collectively, one thing I'd say about all three of them is these guys have majored in perseverance in their career, respectively, and have found a way to impact the team differently, each one of them.

I think Jax brings leadership and accountability up front. Mike obviously as a playmaker, his God-given ability is undeniable, but what he did as a leader when he came into this program and quietly assumed his role and then took over as quarterback I think is impressive. Then just Wayne's quiet confidence and just how he works. His the ability to step into any situation and get the job done right is pretty rare, honestly, in one year.

Q. Jaxson, just in terms of staying on the leadership, when these guys came on to the UW, what was it about their nature and the ability to kind of not force their leadership but eventually become leaders in the program? What traits did you see in both of them?

JAXSON KIRKLAND: Yeah, definitely. I've really got to tip my hat to these two, and we had a couple other transfer guys that came in that were older guys, too. It can still be a bit uncomfortable. Yeah, you have the experience over a

Q. Michael and Jaxson, why the heck have you guys won 10 games and you're underdogs in this game, and does that give you guys a chip on your shoulder?

MICHAEL PENIX JR: You know, for us, it's all about us. In our locker room we know that outside noise we really don't be focused on that. We're just focused on what we can control and what we can do in our room to make sure that we're pushing each other to be great on the football field when it comes to game day.

As far as the underdog thing, man, we like it. We like being in this position. We just want to go out there and show what we can do as an offense, as a unit, and obviously as a team.

JAXSON KIRKLAND: Yeah, to that point, I think Mike hit it right on the head with that one, but I really wouldn't want it any other way, and I know all the guys in the locker room feel that way. 10 wins is extremely special this season, and guarantee you not a lot of people had us reaching that mark, and that just goes back to us not listening to the outside noise.

In the bottom of our hearts, it's not what you have, it's what you know, and we know we're a special group, and we're just going to keep proving that.



Q. Ryan and Michael, what stands out about the Texas defense, what you've seen from them on film?

RYAN GRUBB: Yeah, obviously their interior, their defensive line is a strength. I think their D-line in general creates a lot of havoc up front. Interior-wise they've been able to push the pocket quite a bit this year. In the pass game obviously that will be something we have to address right away.

Their nickel, 23, is a really versatile player that has showed the ability to play outside as a corner. He can get into sub packages. It gives them a lot of flexibility with their second-level players, and I think they play hard. I think that Coach PK has done a good job of getting those guys running to the football. I think they strip the ball; they're violent at the point of attack; and they're coached really well.

They're disciplined. You're not going to get them out of position too often. So we've got to do a great job of trying to get them off their mark a little bit, and I think if we can do that and do a good job up front, we'll hold up well.

MICHAEL PENIX JR: Yeah, he hit a lot of points, but I feel like just watching them, you can tell they're a very sound team, a physical team, and like Coach said, they're coached very well. Obviously with our offense, we have a lot of confidence in what we bring on our side of the ball, so it'll definitely be a great game, and I can't wait to go out there.

Q. Jaxson, Coach talked about -- and Michael, as well, about a tough, physical line on the other side of the ball. How excited are you ready to do some in-the-trenches fighting for four quarters against a good defensive line?

JAXSON KIRKLAND: Yeah, 100 percent. Watching this team, you get excited because it's a great opportunity for the offensive line and the offense in general, but as Coach Grubb said, the strength of the defensive unit is the interior D-line. You see the push they get, and they have a lot of special players up front, and like I said, I'm just excited for the opportunity ahead for our group.

Q. Coach, how do you prepare for a team where their top two running backs aren't going to be playing and there's a little bit of a mystery and an unknown? And also, give me your impressions of Quinn Ewers as a quarterback this season.

RYAN GRUBB: Yeah, as far as I'd say the preparation piece for us, the two running backs is not a huge part.

We've just got to attack what they put out there and let our defense do the job, but then at the same time -- I haven't watched Ewers very much, honestly.

Q. Coach, one of your receivers, the third guy, Ja'Lynn Polk, from Texas. One of his high school teammates is going to be trying to tackle him. How excited has he been for this game, and what has he done this year for y'all's offense?

RYAN GRUBB: Yeah, J.P. has been excitable all year and a guy that's really fought his butt off to get the job that he's got. We've got a lot of talent in that room, and just anybody that gets the reps, goes out there with that hungry mindset to stay out there, and J.P. is really kind of the emotional leader in that room.

I think to be able to come back here and have a game like this in his own backyard is really special to him. But I think his preparation and the way he's approached his game and just in general this year has really stayed the same. He's got a ton of energy. He's got a big heart. He kind of plays with that on his sleeve a little bit.

It'll be exciting to see him out there.

Q. Wayne, when there is that battle up front as a running back, how does patience play into it in terms of your O-line, Jaxson and them trying to create a hole and then they're pushing this way for you to read and then execute when that hole is open?

WAYNE TAULAPAPA: Yeah, I think it just comes with trust. I've seen them working day in and day out each and every day, so whenever we're running the ball, we have a lot of trust in our guys up front.

If you see the way that they work during practice, during lift sessions, during film study, you have no choice but to trust them because of how hard they work and how strong they are.

It's one of the strongest points of our offense, and really grateful to have Jaxson leading the way.

Q. Michael, what's it meant to have Jaxson and this offensive line in front of you protecting you and keeping you upright this whole season because I know that hasn't always been the case throughout your career?

RYAN GRUBB: Yeah, man, it's amazing. It's a blessing. I appreciate those guys so much. They work their tails off. When I first came here, on my visit I was asking Coach to see the players, and I was able to see those guys, and I

knew that it was a special group.

When I was able to step on campus, just going through the winter workouts, off-season workouts, those weren't easy workouts, and just to see that group always, each and every day after those workouts, continue to come back and do extra reps, make sure that they're working on their technique, it just showed how special that they were going to be.

I knew I had no doubt in my mind that we were going to have the season that we had, just especially with those guys up front blocking for me and the playmakers that we have on the outside. They give me a lot of time to get the ball out, and with those guys on the outside making plays, special things are always going to happen.

Q. Wayne and Michael, what happened in the two losses to UCLA and Arizona State, and what changed in the team after that to go on a six-game winning streak?

MICHAEL PENIX JR: Those losses, those are tough. I just feel like it was just small details maybe that we missed. For us on the offensive side of the ball, we always talk about just making sure that we control what we can control, and just go out there, and our goal is we want to put up 41 points a game. Just going out there and just making sure that we push each other to get that, get that goal, I feel like that would have definitely helped with those games.

I feel like we left a lot of things out on the table in those games, but I feel like those games showed us how mature this team is and how much fight that we have because even in those games we were -- the UCLA game we were down a couple scores. Just seeing the team just always continue to have confidence, continue to push all the way to the end, it just showed fight all the way through. It just showed that this team has so much character, so much grit and will never give up on anything.

Just being able to bounce back from those two games and win out is amazing. It was an amazing month of November being able to beat a lot of good teams that we had to face. It just showed that this team is always going to fight no matter what.

WAYNE TAULAPAPA: Just to piggy-back off of Mike, I think one thing we wanted to work on the whole year was focusing on ourselves and our details and what we can do just to succeed as an offense. Obviously those two games came back as a setback, but our main goal is to each other, to key in on details and continue to focus on what we do, and I think it showed out, especially in those later games. Just happy to be a part of our program where

you've got a bunch of guys who are willing to sacrifice so much to continue to work so we can succeed as an offense.

Q. Coach, you have the top 3rd-down conversion percentage in the country. What do you think is the biggest reason behind y'all's finding success and being able to move the chains on 3rd down?

RYAN GRUBB: Yeah, we get that question quite a bit. It starts with the players, honestly. You need guys that can execute the stuff you draw up, and these guys attack that every week. They've been awesome.

I think a couple of key components is obviously there's a larger percentage of plays are passing downs. We've been able to do a really good job of protecting Mike, taking care of him, and when he's back there and has time, I think he can make great decisions, and as Mike already mentioned, I think when we give them an opportunity, the guys on the outside, they'll make that play.

I also think just our staff collectively, Shep, Nick, Coach Marks and Huff, I think that we work together really, really well. That's what it comes down to. I think people get in rooms and guys have ideas and man, I want to do this my way, I want to do this my way, and if you can get to the best idea and put the best thing out there for the kids, they can succeed, things get pretty easy pretty quick. I think we've done a good job of that.

There's a lot of A or B plays that Mike has had to make some decisions on, as well, and get us into a good play, and he's done an awesome job of that all year.

Q. Michael, can you explain your decision to come back next year, and do you feel like this team has National Championship possibilities next year?

MICHAEL PENIX JR: Yeah, for sure. You know, that's definitely one of the reasons. I just feel like there's just a lot of stuff that happened this season that was great, but at the same time, I feel like it was a lot left out on the table. Like you just mentioned earlier, the two losses. I feel like those are games that we wish we had back.

But at the same time I feel like just me coming back and just being a part of this program, being a part of this offense for another year underneath my belt, I feel like it'll definitely help elevate my game and I'll be able to help elevate everybody on the offensive side of the ball, as well.

I feel like it was definitely the best decision at that time, so that's all it was. I definitely feel like this team is definitely going to be in the National Championship, Pac-12, all that.



That's the reason I came back.

Q. Mike, some of the Texas DBs mentioned that you basically trust your receivers when it comes to the 50/50 balls. How did you develop that trust, and when did you get a sense that you could rip it with any of those three guys and they would come down with it?

MICHAEL PENIX JR: Yeah, all off-season, I talked about it a lot. Those guys, they work extremely hard. I don't have to worry about those guys taking off reps in practice. I feel like it's just a very mature group. We came a long way. It wasn't always perfect, but at the same time, those guys understand what it takes to be a great team, what it takes to be a great offense.

Whenever they came out to practice, they always bring a lot of energy, and we've got a lot of guys -- those are young guys, as well, but those are guys that people look up to on this team as leaders still because of the way they work and the way that they perform and the way they help the younger guys out on the team. They show that each and every day in practice.

When I first stepped foot on campus, I had those guys already texting me asking when can I have throwing sessions with them. Just seeing that those are the guys that are going to come to work from day one, it just showed that I would be able to have confidence in them by the time the season came around.

Once that time did come, I'm 100 percent confident wherever I throw it, somebody is going to come down with it in a purple jersey.

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