

Valero Alamo Bowl: Texas vs Washington

Wednesday, December 28, 2022

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Coach Steve Sarkisian

Coach Kaleb DeBoer

Press Conference

STEVE SARKISIAN: It's great to be here. I think this is credit to the Alamo Bowl and all that they've done. This has been a great week for our players. I think that it's been an awesome experience. We've had good events, great practice site.

I think all in all, I think you get to this point of the week, it's getting ready to actually play the game, which is the fun part. I know that we've put in a lot of work. I think our players have put in a lot of work, and we needed to. A great deal of respect for the University of Washington and their football team, their program. They've got a great team.

We've had to prepare hard and prepare well. I think our kids have done that. I think our staff has done that. We've enjoyed the week, but now we're at that point, I think everybody is ready to play the game.

Excited about it. Looking forward to a great ballgame tomorrow night.

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, I think a lot of the same things Coach Sark just mentioned. Just tip of the hat to everyone here associated with the Alamo Bowl. It's been what you hope. It's an awesome experience for the guys. They put in a lot of work throughout the season, and it's a great reward to be here.

Obviously playing in the game is going to be the final piece to it, and just everything from the travel and the times here with the events, our guys have had a great time. Appreciate everyone who's put a lot of work into it, and our guys have been working hard, too.

Once they flipped on the film and really started diving in to Coach Sark and UT, their football program, understanding what we were going to face tomorrow night, they knew they had to put the work in, so they've been doing that.



We're excited about the challenge that lies ahead.

Q. Coach Sark, Quinn said yesterday that he thought he had it figured out after the Oklahoma game and that the Oklahoma State game was kind of a moment where he needed to dig in. Have you seen him mature since that game a lot and over the course of these practices to where he's doing a lot more things that aren't freshman but more college football player?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think so. I think one thing that is hard when you're a young player and you have some instant success is that you think you do have it figured out. There's a lot that goes into playing quarterback at this level, and whether it's on the field, off the field, fighting through adversity, persevering through adversity, and I think Quinn has had to do that.

He's kind of been exposed to a lot, the good and the bad, the tough times in game, the tough times off the field. I think it's forced maturity. I think he's handled it really well. I think he's represented the University of Texas really well. I think I've seen him grown.

I've said this all along; I think the past couple weeks he's probably thrown the ball and we've executed the passing game better than we have for the last couple months, quite frankly, and that's encouraging because I think that a lot of that is his buy-in, his want-to, his commitment to it. Not that he wasn't committed before, but there's another level of commitment that you go to as a player, and I think Coach can speak to that.

He's got a veteran quarterback, Michael Penix, great player. He had to fight through some of those similar adversities. I've watched his growth. That's part of the process at this level.

I think we live in a world of instant gratification, and perseverance is kind of a little bit of a lost trait. But when you see guys that have it and you see them fight through, I think there's another level of gratification that you can go to, and I think Quinn has seen that, and we've seen it in him.

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Q. Steve, with Roschon and Bijan obviously out for this game, what kind of opportunity is there for those younger running backs? I'm not expecting you to give me a split breakdown, but will those guys, Jaydon, Jonathon, Keilan all have a chance on Thursday?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, all three of those guys will play. Obviously Keilan is not a young guy. Keilan is a veteran player for us. He's been with me his true freshman year when he was at Alabama, so I think he's very comfortable systematically with what we do, obviously just hasn't had the opportunity, but explosive player for us. He's provided a lot of versatility to our offense.

Jonathon and the opportunities he's had from a year ago to this year, every time he's gotten the ball he's played well for us, and we're obviously all really excited about Jaydon Blue. He's a guy that's probably matured as much or more than any of our true freshmen from spring ball until now, so we're fortunate. It's a talented group. Now they're going to get their opportunity to go play and play at a high level against a good team.

Q. Kalen, I'm wondering what this game means for a program where half you guys' games this season were very late on the East Coast and you may not be ranked as highly as some think you deserve, to have a game like this against a big brand like Texas. It's another late game, but what do you think it means in terms of national exposure in proving you belong among the nation's best?

KALEN DeBOER: Sure, I think that's one of the things we talked about early on. We've spoke of that throughout the season when we've had those earlier starts on national TV, and this is one of those. Certainly a great opportunity for our guys. They're proud and we're proud of what we've accomplished this year, and really looking forward to putting our product out there for the country to see.

We're looking forward to that opportunity.

Q. Coach Sark, last time you brought us down here, your offense scored 56, your defense gave up 67. What are the chances of your offense putting up 56 tomorrow and your defense giving up 67?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I hope it doesn't go that way again. My neck was sore after that. I felt like it was a tennis match.

But you know, bowl games, they're crazy in how they can go. Obviously Washington has got a very explosive offense. These guys are fantastic playmakers. They've

got a great scheme, really good quarterback, good up front. We're going to have to score; we understand that. But hopefully we don't have to get ourselves to 60. That would not be good for us and probably not for them, either.

Hopefully it's just a good football game. Hopefully we tackle well, which is going to be important. That's always your concern going into a bowl game when you're off for about a month is tackling and then conditioning.

I think we're prepared for those two things, but that's always the challenge going into a bowl game.

Q. Those of us from Seattle who have followed you through your career, one of my guys yesterday said that you're a lot less Pete Carroll and a lot more Nick Saban; how are you different today than you were your first year at Washington?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I still think I've got a lot of Pete Carroll in me. You don't spend eight years with somebody and them not have an impact on your career. But from that time, I got to spend three out of five years with Nick Saban, and I think you learn a lot that way, too. Obviously two different ends of the spectrum of the way they go about their business.

But the end result, both guys are winners, and they do it their way.

I think the biggest thing I found out for me is how do you be Steve Sarkisian and not try to be Pete Carroll, not try to be Nick Saban but be me, and I think that has created a lot of comfort for myself and for our staff and for our players that they know what to expect on a daily basis from me, and ultimately I think your team starts to take on your own personality, and I think that we've got a good personality on our team. We work hard. We're tough. We're disciplined, but yet we know how to have fun together.

I think that's probably a little bit of a blend of both. I'm fortunate, man. I've got a chance to work under two of the best in our era of coaches. I don't take that lightly.

There's a lot to be gained and a lot to be learned from both guys.

Q. Steve, obviously you want to win every game, but when you're building a program and you're in your second year, what do you feel like is at stake in a bowl game like this?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, there's nothing like, for us, getting nine wins. Look at the last decade of Texas football; how many times has there been nine wins in a

season? We're trying to build something that is sustainable, that can withstand the test of time. We don't want to be a one-hit wonder. We want to be able to build this the right way, and I think we are doing that. I think our players recognize that.

But validity is winning, right? You are what your record says you are. That's why I think this game is obviously very important to all of us in our organization. It's going to take a really good effort. We're going to have to play really well in this game to do that.

But inevitably, I think we're doing a lot of things the right way. I think we're coaching the right way. I think we're recruiting the right way. I think we've instilled the culture in our team the right way.

But inevitably it comes down to performing and performing the right way on game day, and that's the next opportunity we have is tomorrow night.

Q. Steve, that's a real fast track down the hall and there have been fireworks in this stadium. What do you remember most about that shootout with RG3 and what did you learn from that experience?

STEVE SARKISIAN: We were just talking about it, yeah, and I remember Keith Price was our quarterback, and he had a fantastic game. I think he accounted for seven touchdowns, threw for over 400 yards; I mean, it was a fantastic performance, going against RG3, who was the Heisman Trophy winner at that time.

I also remember we couldn't stop the run. It felt like they were handing the ball off and it was just chunk after chunk.

But it was a great game. We had an opportunity to go up three scores. We couldn't do it, and they were an explosive group. Coach Briles had that team rolling at that time.

Like you said, I hope we're not in the 50s and 60s tomorrow night; that probably wouldn't bode well.

Q. Around the messaging you've talked to the team about playing well when the whistle blows, good fundamental football and not worrying about making statements, things like that, just playing good fundamental football against a good team.

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, it's always what you can control, and that's just the way we've gone about it from day one. A year ago when we got together, and I know I've been asked what's going to be a successful season, what's it going to take wins-wise, and it was never about that. It

was about us every day being the best we can be, and that continuous improvement that happens throughout the course of a year.

I think we have improved in a lot of those areas that matter, and it starts with what we can control.

Just like Coach said, the tackling piece, it's been over a month since we've played, and I think we're sharp. I think we're practicing hard. But there's another level of intensity that happens, especially in a big bowl game like this.

Our guys have been up to the task, and I think they understand, and we're trying to get back to that grit and that determination that it took to win some big games in November and the mindset that you have to have in those games, and that's what it's going to take. It's going to take all of that and then some tomorrow night.

Q. When you watch the Texas film, was there a particular game that jumped off the screen to you? Coach Sarkisian, when you watched the Washington film was there a particular game or moment that jumped off the screen for you, as well?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, I don't think it's one particular game. I think it's what you see as the season is going on, the close games and the competitive battles against the teams that are in the national playoff, are winning a conference championship. I think the physicality just overall, especially here late in the year is what jumps off the screen to me, and starting on the defensive side, you know each and every day, their offense has to go against their defense.

That's the piece that I see is that there's a physicality, there's an intensity that Texas plays with that we're going to have to be ready for.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think for me, I think there's a totality of a body of work, right. These guys have played well all year. I think one game that stood out to me, because I've been in the game, I think going to Eugene and beating Oregon in Eugene in a hard-fought game against a really good Oregon football team, that was really impressive because their backs were against the wall. Oregon kind of got a little bit of control of the game, had the lead, had the chance to kind of solidify it, and UW kept fighting and finding a way and finding a way, and ultimately got a victory in a heck of a rivalry game on the road.

I know that was a -- having been part of that game, that's a huge moment for that football team and that school and the city of Seattle. I know that was a big moment for them.

Obviously there was other great wins, and winning the Apple Cup and all those things, you see the body of work throughout the season.

They're kind of unfortunate because the Pac-12 changed the rule this year not to have a North and a South division to where if it was North and South they would have been representing the North and playing for a conference championship. Kind of fell on a little bit of bad luck the way that it went, or we could be staring at the Pac-12 champs right now.

The reality of it is, this is a really good football team, and it's a totality of the body of work, but I do know going and getting that win in Eugene, that's a heck of a win.

Q. Kalen, obviously you guys are still waiting on a decision from Rome, but have you been surprised by basically all your other underclassmen who were looking at the Draft choosing to come back, and is there a piece of feedback from those guys that stood out to you for why they wanted to come back for this program next year?

KALEN DeBOER: It doesn't surprise me, but I know it's really a hard decision. As the season was kind of coming to an end, the last two, three, four weeks, you had those conversations, and just kind of started to get a feel of what they needed to know. You could tell in the tone of that conversation what they would like to do, but they really needed to do the research and understand what the opportunity could be, especially moving on to the NFL.

I'm proud of just the way that each guy has been thorough in his own way, the piece of making sure that in the end, they do what's best for them, but I think the common theme has been a lot of they don't want to miss out on what's ahead here in this program.

They're excited about what they've built and what the opportunity is, not just in this game but next season, and so when you have those relationships amongst your team, they don't want to miss out, and they know how important each of them are to the success of the others.

We are waiting for Rome, but it doesn't surprise me, but I never took it for granted.

A guy like Jalen McMillan, who was one of the later ones to make an announcement, he's pretty much let us know even during the regular season towards the end that he felt in his heart that this was what was best, and I think a lot of his teammates knew that, and that may have even influenced their decision, as much as it feels the other way from the outside.

I'm just proud of the guys and super excited about the future. We have work to do, and we've got to make sure that we take care of business and give everything we've got in this game, especially for those that don't have another chance to play, and that's our senior class, which is 14 guys that have really left their mark and left a legacy, especially after a year ago, turning it around from a 4-8 season.

Q. Sark, can you talk about what you've seen from Jonathon Brooks in the bowl practices, what stands out, and to what degree does he have to prove himself still to you and the coaches, and how will this game play into that?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think Jonathon has done a nice job for the last two years of following the guys in front of him. He had great leaders in front of him with Bijan, Roschon and Keilan. Those guys go about their business like pros. They're very intentional in what they do, not just on the football field but in workouts, in the classroom, in life, the way they conduct themselves. So I think he's had great role models that way. He goes about his business the same way.

The one thing Jonathon can do, he's a natural runner with the football in his hands, and whether it's between the tackles, on the perimeter, he's got great ball skills. So the biggest thing for us is for him just to go out and be him, not try to do more than what he's already shown us. He's more than capable to be a very good football player for us.

Now it's just about being in the moment and just being him and not trying to do more.

Q. How can a positive result in this game springboard the program into 2023 with effectively most of the team coming back?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, I think it's just built on the momentum that we've had, especially here in the last six weeks of the season. That momentum has just always been positive. It's always going the right direction. I think it just adds to that.

The guys are excited, and new challenges, right? New challenges, not just within our conference now but outside of our conference. The greatest challenge up to this point against a really good football team. It will say a lot about the preparation and what this means to them with the effort that they put forth tomorrow.

Q. Kalen, just about Michael Penix, this is a young man that came to Seattle, had to battle two local kids,

beats the Ducks, beats the Cougs. Been quite a year for him. What's impressed you most about your quarterback?

KALEN DeBOER: Probably just the poise through it all. I think in some cases looking back on it, there might have been as much pressure winning the position. I hate to say that because there's a lot of pressure in those individual games, especially after you're not surprising anyone with your production. But I think winning that position and then having to dive into winning the football team.

I don't think it took long because after a game or even just a couple throws that he made to start the season, I think -- I know the Husky Nation was impressed, and our team had seen that throughout practice. But I think the poise and just everything that he has shown throughout the year, I think the cool thing is that he's got this really neat personality, and he's comfortable with who he is. More and more I think anyone who's following our program is seeing that come out.

There's an intensity to him as far as getting prepared and getting ready to play and being the best he can be and putting the work in, but there's also this just, man, this is another one of the guys, a great teammate who assumes the leadership role when needed and necessary, and when it really is hard. But also just really laid-back and not above anyone else on the football team.

The humble and hungry, that definitely applies to everything Mike is all about.

Q. Sark, you've got some pretty good leaders that have been leaders for you the last two years moving on after this season. I wondered during the bowl practices, have you seen guys that are planning on coming back next year step up into those leadership roles, and how important has that been to identify those guys and know who your leaders are going to be when you get back in January?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, it's been really cool. A guy to me that has really stood out that I've seen from my time here from the beginning to where we are now has been T'Vondre Sweat. This guy has really started to mature in a way that -- he has a really positive impact on the guys around him. Obviously he's a really good football player, imposing figure, and obviously demands kind of respect when he speaks, but yet I think he's doing it in a way of maturity, and in his own way I think the players really respect that about him. That has definitely shined through.

I think J.T. Sanders is another guy who came in with a lot of hype freshman year, was a special teams player, then

produced on the field this year as a sophomore. I think he's grown into his own of being that leader mentality. I think Jaylan Ford in his own way.

I think anytime you perform first, then your voice carries a lot more weight, and I think that's one of the things about all three of those guys, they've performed this year. They've produced this year. Now they're stepping into those leadership roles and they carry a lot more weight and a lot more validity when they speak.

Q. Coach DeBoer, with all the opt-ins back for this game and for next season, how has that maintained the team cohesion and made it easier to prepare for this game?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, less distractions, right? It doesn't mean there hasn't been conversations, just because it isn't about necessarily the opting in for this game, it's just the future that we were talking about for so many guys and trying to figure out if they're moving on to the next level or if they're sticking around.

I really do feel internally, and we haven't really talked about it, but I do feel like there's, again, that momentum that continues to just keep us moving forward when you see another guy and more and more guys deciding that they want to stick around and be a part of this, not just this week but on to next year in 2023.

Q. Coach DeBoer, your secondary has been beat up and depleted all year, and when you look at Texas you've got a guy that can blow the top on the defense in Xavier Worthy. How big of a concern is that? And Coach Sark, you recruited John Ross and coached John Ross. How similar is Xavier to John Ross?

KALEN DeBOER: Yeah, I mean, I'm certainly aware of who he is. He's from Fresno and knew who he was through his high school years and what he's capable of. When you have a well-rounded team and a balanced attack like they have offensively, you can't just focus on him because the run game has certainly been a force, as well.

We have to as a defensive backfield and just as a defense as a whole understand where people are at and what those tendencies are and do a really good job of staying on our toes.

A guy like Worthy certainly has that capability to beat you at any time.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think that's a fair comparison. The elusiveness, the ability to get to top-end speed like

Ross had and Xavier has, there's definitely similarities there for sure.

I credit Xavier a lot; you can come in with natural ability, but he works his tail off, and he's the first guy on our practice field every single day. I can't beat him out there. He's always working on his craft. That's a sign of a great player.

John Ross was very similar. He worked at his craft. I remember playing Ross on defense at times when we just didn't have the secondary. We put him at nickel, and I don't know if everybody knew it yet; we only played one coverage every time he went in, and it was man because that's what he could do and he knew how to do it.

Xavier could probably be a great DB, too. They have the movement skills, the ball skills. They both have really high football IQs. They understand the game. That's probably a fair comparison.

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