

Valero Alamo Bowl: Oklahoma vs Arizona

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Jedd Fisch Team One Brent Venables Team two Head Coaches Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for the head coaches' press conference for the 2023 Valero Alamo Bowl. My pleasure to welcome the head coach of Arizona, Jedd Fisch, and head coach for Oklahoma, Brent Venables.

Let's begin with an opening statement from Coach Fisch.

JEDD FISCH: Thank you and thank you to Valero and the Valero Alamo Bowl. Has been a fantastic week. We got here on the 23rd. Everybody has just been phenomenal. The city of San Antonio, everybody that works with the Alamo Bowl, just wanted to say thank you first and foremost. Thank you to all the media that came over their Christmas holiday to cover us and join us.

We're certainly excited. Our team's ready to go. It has been awhile since we played a game. Those guys have been practicing 14, 15 times. I think all they want to do now is play another team and not look at one another.

We know we got an incredible opponent ahead of us. Oklahoma has done an amazing job this year, amazing job in years past. It is a true blue blood of college football.

The opportunity for us to play them we don't take lightly. We're very grateful for that. We know they got a heck of a team. We're going to have to bring our very best tomorrow evening. We hope it's in front of a sold-out crowd. If you haven't gotten your tickets yet, buy now (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Coach Venables.

BRENT VENABLES: Good morning, everybody. Appreciate everybody being here. I'd reiterate everything Coach Fisch said in regards to San Antonio. Amazing city, as we all know, incredibly hospitable. Thank you to Derrick Fox and the Valero Alamo Bowl committee. Just a wonderful week.

Great opportunity to have some free time where we could meet the other staff, get a chance to share in what you go through during the course of a season. Really appreciate the opportunity to play a quality opponent like Arizona.

This is a team that, again, as we've said, is as hot as anybody in college football right now. Have a great deal of respect and appreciation for what Coach Fisch and his staff has done, what their players have done.

They've developed things the right way. Recruited these guys, have kept them there and developed them. They've gone through some tough moments as they built their program. They can play with anybody. I think they've shown that this season. We've talked about it constantly.

Our guys are excited to play. We have 70 scholarship players that are committed to finishing what they started. Really excited about what we've seen. Opportunity for the 129th team in Oklahoma history to have a chance to go after an 11th win. What a blessing that is. Been done 27 times in Oklahoma's history. Tied with Alabama. We got a great opportunity against a fantastic opponent, easily one of the best matchups in all the bowl season.

Looking forward to tomorrow night.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Coach Venables, a few years ago you were the head coach but didn't coach this game. I remember you watching it from the sidelines. Coach Stoops pulled you up on the podium afterwards. Being back here, does that bring back fond memories? Have you had a chance yet to take stock in how much your life has changed in two years?

BRENT VENABLES: I really haven't. Seems like dog years. Seems like a decade ago that that took place.

It was a very cool moment for me. As I've said before, Coach Stoops recruited me. I was 17 years old. That's one of the many messages we promote to our players, that your relationships is what is the real enrichment in your life,



opportunity, the pathways that are going to come from those relationships.

Incredibly indebted to Coach Stoops. Joe Castiglione, president Joe Harroz and their belief in myself, my staff, all the support we've been given.

Gone through a lot, like a lot of people in college football. What a time, Coach Fisch, to make your head coaching debut right in the middle of a real storm, if you will.

It's been a real blessing, a lot of fun. A lot of growth, a lot of change since that time. A real cool moment to be back here in San Antonio. It brings up a lot of those memories from that night, for sure.

Q. Coach Fisch, from an outsider's perspective, can you look at what Oklahoma has done with Brent? Brent, same scenario, with what Coach Fisch has done in three years.

JEDD FISCH: I have a ton of respect for Coach Venables, both when he was a defensive coordinator for years. We had dinner together the other night. I said, How many of these head coaches jobs did you turn down? He is at the highest of high levels of coaches.

When he chose to come to Oklahoma, it was one of those programs you want to monitor, you want to watch, you want to see how quickly will he put his stamp on the program.

I think that's what it comes down to. It's not about necessarily always turning something around. Everybody is in are a different and unique situation. It's what he's done with his program the way he wanted it.

When you take a team that for years under Coach Riley were going to be a score-fest type team. Now you watch Oklahoma, they can score with everybody, top five offense, but taking the ball away 26 times this year. When you see a team that has done that, the respect I have that Coach Venables in two years goes from six to 10 wins, adds four wins in his second year. On top of it, it's just the way they play.

I know there's a saying like: those who know know. When you watch their film, you know. You know that Coach Venables is going to have a ton of success because of the way his program and his culture clearly is taking notice.

BRENT VENABLES: I think probably under the current state of college football, the best compliment I can give Coach Fisch and his staff is their ability to retain their players in a really tumultuous time.

This isn't coach speak, it's the real thing. It will all come to fruition here quickly. They've got NFL guys all over the place. They got players that can go anywhere in the country, that are in high demand in the landscape of college football, yet these players have chosen to stay. They are connected to something. They have built it on relationships, they've done it with the things that can sustain and have longevity in a time where college football has become more and more transactional.

They've done a good job with development and connection, doing it the right way. Recruiting guys out of high school, signing them, developing them, creating an environment where the players feel like they're valued and they're part of a family, something bigger than themselves. Then they play that way.

Incredibly efficient of a football team as we've seen all year. Might be the best opponent we've seen all year.

Q. Brent, wanted to ask you about Jackson Arnold. What kind of progress have you seen from him over the bowl prep season? What are some of the key areas of growth? Coach Fisch, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the story about Bob introducing you to your wife.

BRENT VENABLES: Jackson, he's been around the game since he came out of his mama's womb, been throwing the ball around since then.

He's got a great demeanor to him. I think when I was a young coach I thought the quarterback had to be like the middle linebacker, rah-rah, emotional. After I coached Sam Bradford on the scout team, who later become the No. 1 pick in the draft, I learned quickly as I tried to get Sam to do it like I wanted him to do it. Maybe his way is better.

Very cerebral, consistent, same guy every day. Puts the work in. Just a fantastic teammate. Very highly recruited, well thought of, yet there's no entitlement whatsoever in Jackson. He's got the instincts that you want him to have, the poise, whether it's the ability to climb in the pocket, patience, trust guys around him, throws open with great anticipation, all the skills you want a guy to have.

You've watched him in his backup role. He might have two or three bad practices where, Boy, leave a little bit to be desired. Not as much of an opportunity as what he has now.

Now if he had a bad play, he doesn't have a bad series. If he had a bad series, he doesn't have a bad day. He's

quickly able to regain his composure and not let a bad moment really affect him. You've seen that happen throughout the course of the season, but especially during the last several practices.

JEDD FISCH: Coach Stoops story. I was a graduate assistant at the University of Florida. Back then, there wasn't, like, a hundred graduate assistants and 20 analysts. There were just two of us.

We were at the coaches' convention. My wife was working for Grant Taft at the AFCA, working for a company that put on their convention.

Coach Stoops just won the National Coach of the Year, Oklahoma won the national championship in 2001, January of '01 is when the convention was. At the end of the night we were all getting done with the banquet. Amber and a couple of her friends were at the table next to us. He said, That might be a good person to say hello to, Jedd. 21 years later, here we are. Pretty cool story.

Obviously Coach Stoops means a lot to us, as does Coach Spurrier. We were sharing that story with Coach Venables and Julia the other night. Always a good little connector.

Q. Brent, Arizona has a ton of offensive weapons. Talk about what you have to do to stop them. Coach Fisch, because Oklahoma has a new coordinator, new quarterback, does it change anything on how you prepare for Oklahoma?

BRENT VENABLES: I think you've seen what the quarterback Fifta, what he can do. Special player. His instincts, his command, his decision making, his ability to improvise. He has great weapons. He helps them execute at a really, really high level, completing 74% of his passes, top five in the country. He's got a great presence to him.

The receivers are fantastic. They got great speed, they got length, size, play-making ability. They make a lot of competitive plays, 2 and 4 in particular. The tight end 84, an excellent player, big body guy. The running back, I love the running backs, a stable of them. 6 gets the majority of carries. Runs with power, speed, with an edge and an attitude.

They have an excellent offensive line. Offensively just a really, really confident unit that plays with a lot of precision, a lot of physical toughness. Two years in a row, one of the most explosive offenses in college football.

It starts with the run game, those types of things, but they have the ability to attack you vertically, certainly to pound you in the run game. They do a great job in all their screen

presentations, as well.

JEDD FISCH: Seth Littrell, I met Coach Littrell a couple years ago when he was the head coach at North Texas.

It provides a great challenge because when you look at their offense and you look at statistically where they were with Coach Levy and with Dillon, you see probably one of the best five offenses, not even probably, one of the best five offenses in the country. Now you're sitting there and trying to make a determination when you're game planning the offense with a different quarterback and a different coordinator.

Coach Littrell has called plays. You can go back and chase, At Indiana, what did he do? When he was at North Texas, what did he do? When he was at Arizona, what did he do? At some point in time you have to play fundamental football and believe in what you see, say there's going to be certain principles that his lineage will bring.

It's three weeks, how much are you going to change in three weeks? It's that fine line of chasing ghosts which all of us can do in the coaching profession, try to find, What if they do this or that, what if he changes that. We say, We have to line up in formation, line up quickly and be prepared for a system of offense.

Now we have to defend a quarterback that we haven't seen a lot of, but we know how talented he is based on high school recruiting, the games he's gotten in, and a coordinator that has done a great job wherever he's at. That was a great challenge.

Q. Coach, can you go into a little bit more on Noah.

JEDD FISCH: Noah is a redshirt freshman quarterback. Came in here from Servite, California, with three of his teammates: No. 4, McMillan, No. 88, Keyan Burnett, and No. 5 Jacob Manu. Pretty good high school team. All four of them came together. Noah was the ringleader.

We offered Noah probably within a month of my arrival on campus. I guess he was a junior at that point. He was committed to us and stayed committed to us for 10 months.

What I love about Noah is he committed to us when Arizona was on a 12-game losing streak. He stayed with us when we went 1-11. If that doesn't speak to his character, I don't know what does.

He is an incredible preparer. He loves the game of football. He's addicted to the game of football. He's somebody that not only does everything right off the field,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

he does everything right on the field.

I would say this: if you have great habits off the field, you usually have great habits on the field. His habits have certainly allowed him to be a 75% passer and be prepared and able to walk into the game. His first-ever start was against Washington who at that point in time was on a 16-game win streak. We lost 31-24. The second start was at the Coliseum when we lost in triple overtime. Since then he hasn't lost. Since then he's led the team, and he's a wonderful kid.

Q. Ethan yesterday was talking a lot about the buy-in from the players. Could you speak to the buy-in from the program, where it is now versus a year ago.

BRENT VENABLES: I would first be remiss if I didn't mention the young men that aren't playing in the game for different reasons. I love every single one of those guys and want nothing but the best for them. We have several guys that are going on to the NFL, getting ready for All-Star games.

Certainly as Coach Fisch and I have had several conversations with the free agencies right in the middle of the Playoffs, the bowl system, it's a very unique timing standpoint.

I don't blame any of the players that are looking for a better opportunity. You got to do it now so that you can maybe have a little more leverage in a place that's a very short, small window. Again, from a timing standpoint, not ideal for anybody. But they have to do what's best for them.

I just wanted to say that first of all.

Have great appreciation and respect for the guys in our locker room, as well. We do have, again, I think every coach would sit up here and say the same thing, but the buy-in has never been higher. I think the results from the season would say that.

This is a group of guys that are highly invested, several of them in the last two years, obviously starting in January we had 97 players in their first or second year at Oklahoma. This is a group of guys, whether it's the new guys that just showed up, 63 newcomers in January last year, scholarship and preferred walk-ons, or it was guys in their second year or their third year in the program or fourth year in the program under a different staff.

It's been fantastic. We've got great leadership. We've got guys that care deeply about their opportunity and care deeply about their teammates. Certainly, again, what this game means.

Again, the whole principle of finishing what you started, that's what you want to have, a life that embodies that.

Q. Jedd, college football bowl games are allowing teams to use wireless communication in helmets. Is that something you're working on? What do you think about adding that?

JEDD FISCH: Yeah, I'm all for that. I came from the NFL, so that's kind of how we've been communicating. It's nice to get back to that. I think we'll be kicking that off in the first game of next year, from what I understand.

We're not going to be using it in this game. We will very much be using it, as far as I'm aware, starting the first game of next year. That will give everybody spring football, training camp to work any kinks out.

I still think they need to legislate it. I'm not on a legislation committee. I would say this. You shouldn't be in someone's ear for 30 seconds or when they're standing over the ball. I think that will be a distraction more than a help.

The NFL has got a lot of things figured out. This is another thing I think they have figured out. Cut the thing off at 25 seconds, give a coach 15 seconds to talk, then move on. I think if we could do that, get this legislated properly, put it in one person's helmet, not 11, we have a great chance of being successful here. If we do it the other way, I think it will cause more harm than good.

Q. Brent, I was rereading a story you told about being at this game in '98 with K-State, having to make a tough night before visit with Coach Snyder about what you were going to do, your future. I know how much he means to you. Do you still think about that night, that particular moment, how it pivoted one way or the other what's happened since?

BRENT VENABLES: Absolutely, I think about those moments. Those are life-changing decisions that propel you to the what's next, give you opportunity.

Certainly that was as agonizing of a decision. Only left a couple of programs. Every one of them is really difficult. But well thought out. You trust your instincts. You pray. You look for a little bit of guidance, keep the faith that your experience and wisdom and faith will get you to the next spot.

Coach Snyder, again, I wouldn't be sitting in front of y'all had it not been for his belief in me and the opportunities that he gave me, as well.

Again, got recruited to Kansas State by Coach Bob Stoops as well. When that moment came in 1998 to either stay at Kansas State or move forward, I knew I needed to get out of the nest and learn how to fly. I needed to have another lineage, if you will, to the coaching tree, another place to go and, again, learn and grow.

At that time I didn't feel like I was ready to be all the responsibilities I was offered at Kansas State. I had great self-awareness. I wanted to continue to develop and learn as a coach. You promote that to your players all the time. It's not an overly popular thing sometimes. For me as a young person, I did have that wisdom.

The other thing I remember was not winning the game. We lost 37-34 to Drew Brees. He throws a fade route third down to win the game.

My life has been enriched through those relationships and certainly that was a moment that was incredibly difficult, but one that I've been blessed ever since.

I do think about those things quite often. Great people have helped me get to this place. Coach Snyder, Coach Stoops are two of them.

Q. Jedd, how important is it for the trajectory of the program, the fact that you're facing a team with a background and history of Oklahoma?

JEDD FISCH: I mean, the program is just getting built. We're just getting started. This will be the fourth time, if we can get to 10 wins, that the program since 1930 has gotten to 10 wins. The 11th time it's gotten to nine wins.

Then you get matched up in the Valero Alamo Bowl which is one of the best bowl games in the season. Then you get to play against a team that is a 10-2 football team, that is elite at everything they've done in football over the course of years.

I told our teams, seven national championships, seven Heisman Trophy wins, 19 10-win seasons in the last 20 years I think.

When you look at who they are, what they are, it's a huge part of the game. Just like I told our staff this morning, the next 24, 48 hours till kickoff, we have to treat this like now we're ready to play a game. It's not about a bowl game, not about who we're playing, it's about how we always prepare these final 48 hours. It's got to be us being at our very best.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coaches.

