

Valero Alamo Bowl: Oklahoma vs Arizona

Friday, December 29, 2023

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Oklahoma vs Arizona Wildcats

Coach Jedd Fisch

Dalton Johnson

Jacob Cowing

Tetairoa McMillan

Noah Fifita

Gunnar Maldonado

Press Conference

Arizona 38, Oklahoma 24

JEDD FISCH: I'll just say I'm really thrilled for our team today. The way our team played this game I thought was just pretty amazing. Defensively, six takeaways in a game, they kept us in the game, they made plays at the right time. They scored a touchdown. They set up great field position.

I can't say enough of our defensive staff, our defensive players and what they did for this game. Just amazing.

I would say that on top of that, I think offensively, Noah, T. Mack, Jacob just made some plays in the passing game when we needed it.

Together I think as a team we just played great football, but more than anything, I would say two years ago we started this journey, and we were coming off -- we got hired here, we went 1-11, and everybody believed in what we were trying to get done, and these guys up here, almost all of them joined us, Dalton and Gunnar were there for that first year, the other three guys came and joined us after the first year.

Just for this team, the amount of players we have that joined us while we were going through the adversity, for them to be able to experience this now is pretty amazing.



Q. Jedd, you guys were down by multiple possessions there in the second half. What was the conversations like with the team and what did your team show you tonight?

JEDD FISCH: Well, it was 24-13, and they had the ball on I think driving into the red area. Then we have an 89-yard return for a touchdown by Gunnar to make it 24-19. There's not a lot of conversations that are going on -- halftime was 14-13, we talked about, hey, it's going to be a battle.

We were expecting a battle. There was nothing going to be easy even though we went up 13-0 in the first quarter. But the guys just kept competing. I really believe our strength staff does an amazing job of making an emphasis of the fourth quarter is when we win games.

We made the play on defense, then Noah made an unbelievable play on the two-point play to Montana to make it 24-21, and at the time I think the springboard occurred and I think Irby made an incredible pick to kick a field goal to tie the game up, and then those two touchdowns in the fourth quarter were fun to be a part of.

Q. Jacob, when you saw Noah roll out and you were open there, did you see that the path was open for you to be able to go all the way, and was there going to be anything that could have kept you from getting in the end zone on that touchdown?

JACOB COWING: As soon as I caught the ball, I turned, looked up field, saw Montana block for me. If it wasn't for Montana getting that block for me I don't think I would have got in the end zone.

I appreciate him for doing that and looking out for me to get in that end zone.

Q. Noah, from taking the ball over at Stanford to sitting here now, what have you learned about yourself and the team and the guys beside you?

NOAH FIFITA: I think the biggest thing for me and the thing that I've been emphasizing the most is trust, and the



biggest blessing this year is my coaches, my teammates trusting in me the way they did.

There was a lot of times that I was struggling and our offense was struggling because of me and nobody flinched, nobody doubted me, so I really appreciate that.

Being able to trust Coach Fisk, trust play calls, trust our preparation, that's the biggest thing I've been emphasizing since I've taken over the job.

Q. Gunnar, take us through the forced fumble early in the game and then the long fumble return. Just take us through what you saw on those two plays.

GUNNAR MALDONADO: The forced fumble, that was just great pursuit by our defense, something our coaches preach on us and we practice a lot. We have a lot of high effort guys, and when you have that, good things happen.

Then on the pick six, man, that was just an amazing play from Dalton right here. He just had a great break on the ball, great hit on the guy, ball came out, and then my teammates just rallied with me and blocked as hard as they could all the way down, and we got in the end zone.

Q. Jedd, defensively you guys were able to hang in there, 24 points but six turnovers and 28 points off of those turnovers. Can you just talk about the effort defensively that your team gave tonight?

JEDD FISCH: Yeah, it was phenomenal. Six turnovers in a game is a dream, number one, and we scored 28 points off of the turnovers, so that helps.

But when you look at it, the way our defense played all year, they just got better and better and better and better and better, and they just kept finding ways and finding ways to make plays.

We've got one of the greatest stories this season with the defensive turnaround from a year ago until today, and the fact that we have so many players returning again just sets the standard and raises the standard.

And Coach Nansen and Coach Akina and Coach Kaufusi and Coach Cecil, Coach Richardson, amazing job of getting these guys in position to play hard, believe in the system, and then be able to make the plays like they did today.

Q. Jacob, in terms of the offensive end for you, just ending your career this way, being named offensive player of the game, going out with a bang, what does it mean for you to have this moment?

JACOB COWING: It means a lot, but first I just want to give credit to my teammates for pushing me day in and day out since January, going through fall camp, spring ball, summer conditioning, getting me to where I'm at today, the athlete that I am today.

If it wasn't for those guys pushing me each and every day, I don't think I would be here today the athlete that I am.

Q. Jedd, what do you think the difference was on offense in the fourth quarter compared to the previous two?

JEDD FISCH: You know, I think that we just -- we kind of settled down a little bit in the fourth quarter. We made some plays. T. Mack made plays to get us going. There were some big time slants that he caught for us. Some big time plays over the middle that he caught for us in that situation. Noah hung in there. Used his feet a little bit more. I think a couple of those scrambles made a big difference for us.

Obviously Jacob made a huge play for us in our dash pass, and then we were able to run the ball there at the end. We tried to run the ball. We struggled early and really struggled throughout the game, and credit to Oklahoma. Oklahoma has got a heck of a defense now, and Coach Venables is probably one of, if not the best, defensive coach in the country, so they gave us a lot of challenges and a lot of unique looks.

But our guys hung with the plan. We adjusted a couple things here or there, and DJ brought us home, as he always does, with that final run.

Q. Dalton, you were part of this program when things were low and you stayed when Coach was hired. What does today and really the season overall mean to you?

DALTON JOHNSON: It means a lot. There were some dark times that first year. 1-11 is never fun. The building is rough to go to just day in and day out.

But I believed in Coach Fisch, believed in the coaches he brought in and the people we had in the building. U of A is home, and this win means everything.

We came a long way, and this whole team, the whole staff, the whole facility deserves it.

Q. Jedd, you made a switch up on the offensive line. Obviously Morgan was out. What did you see out of the O-line today?

JEDD FISCH: Yeah, we made a couple changes. I think everybody competed really well. I think they brought some challenging looks, challenging fronts, challenging games that made it difficult on Joe on his first start, made it difficult on Raymond on his first start at left tackle.

Kicked Jonah back out at tackle there in the fourth quarter and brought Leif in at guard and tried to make a couple changes there.

But in the end we were shuffling around and we were trying to get our best five out there. Jordan Morgan is a first-round pick, so when you lose him for the last game at the left tackle position, you're going to end up having a couple challenges early.

But I think the guys settled in, and we were able to get done what we needed to.

Q. Noah, the last two games Jacob Cowing and T. Mack went off. What did you see out of those guys the last couple games, and how would you describe the connection you have with them?

NOAH FIFITA: It's just kind of what they did. I think it took me a little time to realize that I was making it harder on myself not throwing to them when they were one-on-one. In different ways they win every one-on-one battle that they have. Make my job real easy, I am sure they make Coach Fisch's job real easy, and they're real reliable. I don't think they've really had a drop since kind of this whole season.

Every time you need a play you know they're going to make it. Their competitive edge, like I said, every time something needs to happen, you can trust that they're going to do it with no hesitation, so continuing to rise to the occasion, and like I said, they make my job real easy.

Q. Jedd, how do you teach a team how to finish?

JEDD FISCH: I think that we just talk about it a lot, and we work really hard, and we don't really change. We don't change the way we work. We condition after practice. We don't really give days off if we don't have to, and we work very hard.

I think finishing is a part of that. The way our strength staff has handled the off-season program and our win-first program, the way our coaches understand how we coach and what our expectation is, I don't know, finishing is the most important thing you can do.

You don't win the game in the first quarter and you don't win the game in the second quarter and you don't win the game in the third quarter. If you learn that and you believe

that, then these guys go out there and they don't flinch. They know that the fourth quarter is going to be the time that they've got to be at their best.

Q. T. Mack, what does this year mean for you considering highest rated recruit in program history. How do you feel about your decision looking back?

TETAIROA MCMILLAN: I mean, the year that I had is all because of my teammates and my coaches. It's just -- the year that I had is just a reflection of them, and without them, I wouldn't be here. Just the trust they had in me to make plays, to be there when I needed to be is the reason why I'm here.

Q. Jedd, going into a new conference next year, you return a bunch of guys. How do you think tonight sets you guys up for next year?

JEDD FISCH: Well, I told our guys we're going to enjoy tonight, okay. We're going to enjoy -- we're going to put an end to this season. Tonight was the last game of this season. Then we'll take a little break and we'll come back, and then we'll start preparing for the Big 12.

We'll be going into the Big 12 with a lot of momentum. We're on a seven-game win streak. It's pretty awesome for Arizona football to be on a seven-game win streak.

We're just going to go out there and we're going to enjoy tonight. We're going to enjoy our time back at home. We've got some fantastic players with fantastic families, and it's their time to go enjoy their New Year's with their parents and New Year's with their friends and New Year's with their families and we'll come back in January, January 10th or whatever it is and start working our way through the process of getting ready for the next conference.

But I love our players, and I think the reason why we can do what we do is because our players stay and our players work hard and our players believe. Where else would you rather be than go try to be in the top 10 or better next year?

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