

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl: Northern Illinois vs Fresno State

Sunday, December 22, 2024

Boise, Idaho, USA

Albertsons Stadium

Northern Illinois Huskies
Thomas Hammock

J.J. Lippe

Jaden Dolphin

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the pregame press conference for Northern Illinois University. We are joined by head coach Thomas Hammock, to his left offensive lineman J.J. Lippe and linebacker Jaden Dolphin.

We will start with an opening statement from coach, and follow with questions.

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Certainly excited to be here with this bowl game. It's been an awesome hospitality. Thank you. The atmosphere. I didn't know what to expect coming out here, but you certainly got a fan in me. I happened to be on Redfin looking for some places. I may come back out here at some point in time (smiling).

Excited to play. It's been a couple weeks since we had an opportunity to play as a team. Love the preparation we've been able to put into this.

We added some developmental practice as well as practices to keep us sharp, good on good. Really like the way our football team has been locked in and focused.

I'm excited to have an opportunity to play tomorrow. Thank you everybody involved with the bowl game. I thought the Tackle For Hunger was phenomenal.

I did have a chance to do to the tubing exercise, against my will. But I survived, no injuries. I'll be fully healthy for the game tomorrow (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Coach, you talked about the developmental guys.



How important are those practices? I know the answer is usually cliché as far as development. Anybody that really rose in your depth chart?

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Yeah, I think there's probably been six to eight young men in our program that's made tremendous jumps in terms of their ability to play football at a high level.

The first one I would tell us would be Josh Holst. These practices have been phenomenal for him and his personal development at the quarterback position.

Telly Johnson looked like a totally different player than he did in season. The game is slowing down for him.

Romelo Ware will have a chance to play for us tomorrow as well. Has done a nice job.

La'Don Bryant is a wide receiver that I feel like he can be a number one receiver for us at some point in time. Those practices and the competition has really elevated his game.

George Dimopoulos is another wide receiver that I see getting extended time.

On defense, a young man Ivan Moore at the defensive end position. We're teaching them the schemes of our defense, what we expect of those guys.

Lance Ingold is another young man. K.J. McCrae. These are guys you will know who they are next season.

Dashaun Gibson, a cornerback.

There has been a lot of development in our program. These bowl practices have been invaluable for us as far as being able to propel ourselves into what we want to become next season.

Q. With both teams having guys that have played all year not playing, how difficult is that? How did that change in the way you had to prepare personnel-wise?

THOMAS HAMMOCK: It wasn't difficult for us at all, to be



honest. The thing that you see with our team, the strength of our team is the depth of our team.

Although we lost a couple guys to the transfer portal, the guys that are stepping in are previous starters. You look at a guy like Jordan Hansen, who started multiple years for us on defense, our D-line. Pierce Oppong, who is stepping in. A multiple-year starter for us. He happened to get beat out this year by another young man.

The depth of our team is really the strength of our team. There hasn't been one guy that has left that wasn't replaced by a starter. Even at the quarterback position, Josh Holst started games for us.

We feel like we're in a great situation. Obviously if we have some injuries in the game, that's going to test your depth a little bit more than what it would normally would.

We have guys excited to play and excited for an opportunity to show what they are and what it was about.

Q. J.J. and Jaden, talk about what it was like being here this year. How was the week in Boise and getting ready for the final hours before the game?

J.J. LIPPE: Boise is crazy. It's beautiful out here. I've never been really out West. Seeing mountains for the first time, too, that's pretty crazy, being from the Midwest.

The hospitality has been great here. Been to three bowl games, and this is by far my favorite. We're really excited to be out here.

I mean, it's just been a lot of fun, to be honest with you.

JADEN DOLPHIN: It's been a phenomenal setup. A lot of the guys didn't know too much about Idaho. As soon as we got out here, it was awesome. A lot of guys had never seen mountains before, anything like that. It's been a great experience.

Q. For the players, going into your final collegiate game, what is your mindset like attacking the experience?

J.J. LIPPE: Yeah, I mean, if you look at last year, we won our first bowl game in, like, 10 years. We talked about it this week. Ever since we got bowl bound, we were saying we're going to start a new tradition here. We want to continue stacking these wins, these bowl games.

That's our mindset going into this game, that we're going to win this game. We want to start that legacy going forward.

JADEN DOLPHIN: I think the mindset is win by any means possible. We got a bowl win last year. To have back-to-back bowl wins would be huge for the program.

Q. Thomas, talk about how important the bowl system still is. How important it is to the players, how for NIU?

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Yeah, I never had an experience as a player myself to play in a bowl game. Back then it was probably the MAC had one or two teams with an opportunity to go to a bowl game.

I hope players never take these experiences for granted. I think that's important. These experiences of teams winning, grabbing a trophy at the end of a game, you can't replicate that. You can't replicate that experience for these young men.

I really hope the powers that be figure out a way to make bowl games still exciting so guys are not opting out. The way the calendar is set where guys can have an opportunity to play in these bowl games and gain that experience for life, it's something that I think is important.

It's important for the development of them, but also it's important for college football. I hope we can all figure it out. There's a lot of smart people involved in college athletics. I hope we can figure out a way to make these bowl games still relevant.

Not everybody gets an opportunity to play in them. I would have loved to have had a chance to play in a bowl game when I was player, end the season with an opportunity to walk off with a trophy. We've had a chance to do it as coaches, but I wasn't fortunate as a player.

Q. Coach, your overall impressions of Fresno State. You've had a couple weeks to scour film.

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Yeah, good football team. Coach Skipper has done a phenomenal job being pressed into a situation being the interim coach all season. He played at Fresno, has a lot of pride in the program.

They have a good football team. They played a lot of competitive football games all year. Obviously they going to spread you out on offense, try to make sure they do some things on defense to keep you off balance. Extremely well-coached on special teams.

We know we have a tremendous challenge. We have to play our best football tomorrow to give ourselves every opportunity to be victorious.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone.



