

# Famous Idaho Potato Bowl: Northern Illinois vs Fresno State

Monday, December 23, 2024

Boise, Idaho, USA

Albertsons Stadium

## Northern Illinois Huskies

## Thomas Hammock

## Josh Holst

## Nate Valcarcel

### Press Conference

NIU 28 - Fresno State 20 - 2OT

THE MODERATOR: We have the Northern Illinois University Huskies. With me is head coach Thomas Hammock, Nate Valcarcel and Josh Holst.

We'll open with coach having a couple comments.

THOMAS HAMMOCK: First of all, what an awesome game, what an awesome atmosphere. Proud of our players. Proud of our coaches. We stayed committed, stayed in the fight for one another when some things didn't go our way.

I couldn't be more proud of those men in the locker room. We got a lot of seniors that's invested a lot into the program, helped build our program, set the foundation and the standards of our program.

What an excellent way to go out as champions of the Idaho Potato Bowl. I couldn't be more excited, to be honest with you (smiling). Had to be a great game on TV, so...

With that, I'll open it up.

**Q. In the overtime sessions, talk about the reverse double pass stuff.**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Yeah, at the end of the fourth quarter I was really kicking myself for not going for it on the fourth and one situation. I thought we had a chance to control the game. When they missed the field goal, at the end of the game, I said we're going to empty the clip and figure out ways to go win this game by any means necessary.



Our players went out there and executed at an extremely high level. Would love for Josh not to kneel down on the smoke, but he came back and redeemed himself with a bunch of plays down the stretch.

Proud of our guys. They executed. George Dimopoulos did a phenomenal job executing those plays at the end. Our guys wanted it. They wanted it for those seniors. I was proud that we were able to get that done.

**Q. Coach, can you talk about on those plays, it looked like it was almost the same play. Were you duplicating it with a different receiver?**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: No, same receiver. George Dimopoulos was a quarterback in high school. He was a great athlete. We have tremendous confidence in him. We've been executing those plays all bowl practice.

The first one was a smoke pass to the tight end. Then the second one, we run a lot of jet sweeps this year, it was a jet sweep with an option to Dane Pardridge. The execution was almost flawless with the throw and the catch.

Then obviously the two-point conversion. Josh is a tremendous athlete. George is a tremendous athlete. We were able to convert.

**Q. After the first play of the game, you're thinking this isn't going your way. Dramatic turnaround from that. Talk about your mindset after that pick and you were able to change things.**

JOSH HOLST: Yeah, it sucks to start the game off like that. It's the first play of the game. You have the entire game left after that. Got to put it in the back of your mind, think about those seniors the whole game. That's what I was thinking, you got to come back and respond for these seniors.

**Q. As far as the trick plays go, for you being able to be in a situation like that, seems like a lot of fun, what was the talk going on in the huddle?**

JOSH HOLST: Yeah, I was just telling George to make a

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good throw. First one was a great throw obviously. Knee went down. That sucks. Get the snap, give him the ball. The second one, it was an all right throw. Dane made a great catch. Obviously the two-point conversion he put right there. He did really well.

**Q. Coach, can you talk a little bit about as far as defensively what you were able to do.**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Yeah, I thought our defense really settled in after the first half. I looked up and we had 20 minutes of time of possession, they had eight, yet they had 13 points. We gave up the long pass. We gave up a couple plays that we knew they were going to try. Obviously the two quarterback rotation we were onto.

Our defense has always been a second half team. They always make adjustments. Coach Benedetto and his staff does a tremendous job. Our players does a tremendous job.

In the locker room at halftime they were making adjustments. To me, I thought they played the way they played all season. It was great they were able to finish, especially with the interception. That gave us a lot of momentum in the second half.

NATE VALCARCEL: Like Hammock said, coming out of second half, we executed very well. I think nobody could question our effort, which goes a long way on the defense. I'm just blessed that we can go out here with a win for the seniors and the NIU team.

**Q. Nate, you're one of the over 30 seniors on this team. Get to leave on two straight bowl wins. What's the legacy of your class?**

NATE VALCARCEL: Right now I'm emotional, but it's a blessing for the seniors to go back-to-back bowl wins, obviously go out with a win...

I know this season for seniors, it's a season we won't forget.

**Q. Can you talk about facing two different quarterbacks. What kind of challenge did that present for you guys?**

NATE VALCARCEL: Yeah, I mean, obviously we had a couple weeks before we had the bowl game, so we prepped for both quarterbacks. We knew what 3 and 7 could do, what their strengths and weaknesses were. We game planned very well for both of them.

**Q. Josh, you had a couple drives on offense that took**

**a lot of time off the clock, but ended up without any points. Talk about overcoming those moments.**

JOSH HOLST: Yeah, it's always next-play mentality. Obviously we had 10-, 12-minute drive. Went all the way down to the one, we didn't put it in, which we should have obviously.

You just got to put that in the back of your mind, like I said earlier, put up points. When the defense doesn't allow one point in the whole second half, you got to put up points and ultimately win the game.

**Q. Interesting game in terms of the special teams on both sides. What did you see from your perspective?**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: Yeah, no, it's interesting because their punt team is the same exact style as our punt team. When you have two different units that have the same exact scheme, you obviously know what hurts the scheme. We tried to keep them off balance.

They made a great block at the end of the first half, but they missed the field goal. Obviously our field goal unit has been a struggle all season long. We got to make sure we put a lot of work and emphasis into that unit to be better.

We signed a kicker and we got a lot of guys that's going to come back. But we have to be better. Those are points that need to be put on the board.

Then we knew they had a good kickoff team. Our first kickoff return should have been a fair catch. Our second kickoff return should have been a fair catch. We didn't execute in special teams the way we needed to.

I was proud of our offense and our defense. Two or three phases, when you have a chance to win those, you have a chance to win the game.

**Q. Coach, what were those play calls, the trick plays you used in the second overtime, what was the name of those?**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: The first one was Irish. We ran it against Notre Dame. The luck of the Irish, that was the first call. Then the next one was Jacks.

**Q. Did that work against Notre Dame?**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: You know what, it was wide open and we did not connect on the pass. But we didn't need it to win the game. But we've carried that play all season. We put it in that week.



We have wide receivers that can throw the ball. That call was Irish.

**Q. Where does this rank for you guys, finishing up like you did, this season?**

THOMAS HAMMOCK: I like the perseverance of the young men in our program. As a coach you always talk about handling adversity, handling the highs and the lows of the season. These guys, our whole football team, stayed in it. We had guys go in the portal, guys do different things. This group of guys stayed together as a unit, as a team, as Huskies, to go out there and win.

To say that you beat Notre Dame at their place, you won eight games, you finished as a bowl champion, I would like to say that's a pretty successful season.

We lost some one-possession games. We'll be better. We got a quarterback that's going to continue to get better. He's got to obviously get better speaking. But he's going to be a doctor, you know, so he's still learning. There's certain words you can't say to the media. This is his first time, first of many, and he will grow from these moments.

We have a great relationship, just so you know. We banter back and forth because he has the right type of moxy about him.

**Q. Josh, you're a freshman, but game MVP here in the bowl. What does that mean to you?**

JOSH HOLST: Yeah, it means everything. But I feel like if we could give an MVP to our whole defense, that's where it should be, our whole offensive line. All those guys played their heart out. I just did what I could, did my job. I feel like those guys played even better.

**Q. Nate, the defense really clamped down in the second half. What did you see, what did you change?**

NATE VALCARCEL: I think just offense giving us the momentum. Obviously we got to give momentum to the offense, offense got to give it back to us. Them playing well, them scoring points kind of just had us settled down. Everyone did their part.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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