

CFP Semifinal Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs Ohio State

Wednesday, December 28, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Ohio State Buckeyes

Jim Knowles

Steele Chambers

J.T. Tuimoloau

Press Conference



**PLAYOFF
SEMIFINAL**



THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by Ohio State's defense. Joining us is defensive coordinator, Jim Knowles, Steele Chambers and J.T. Tuimoloau. We'll start with an opening statement.

Coach, if you can, with the magnitude of a semifinal game, just talk about any changes in preparation. Is it a normal week for you? Does it take on a bigger magnitude? How have preparations been going for you?

JIM KNOWLES: Consistency is important. It's a critical thing to the establishment of a defense that everyone can count on, where the players can be fast. So it's a process that you do try to keep consistent no matter what the magnitude of the game. We've had more time, which is a good thing. So we're able to sprinkle in some upgrades, some different things, work on the game plan longer.

But in general, you want the players to feel comfortable with how you prepare the way you go about your business, no matter what the situation, because when the critical moments come, they need to feel comfortable in their performance and preparation. And to me, you do that with repetition.

THE MODERATOR: Very good. And for the players, I know you guys have gotten to enjoy a lot of bowl week events so far. Talk about what's been your favorite experience, your favorite event, activity for the week so far.

Steele, start with you.

STEELE CHAMBERS: Gosh, it's been a fun week so far. I

feel like as a team, we haven't really done -- we haven't really gone out as much because we've been really preparing for the game. But as far as activities, I think going to the College Football Hall of Fame, that was pretty fun just seeing past Buckeyes and what they've been able to contribute to Buckeye Nation as a whole was pretty cool and being able to play Family Feud or Drop It Like It's Hot, whatever the hell it was called. That was a lot of fun. It's been really nice just being able to hang out with the team the past three days or so, just being able to bond a lot in a new place for a lot of people. So that's been a lot of fun.

THE MODERATOR: J.T., what about you?

J.T. TUIMOLOAU: Other than coming out here, probably be the MLK church and talking to somebody who was firsthand there, just getting to know a lot about the history from somebody and meeting Coach Bill Curry. It was just fun and being there with the team and enjoying the time there. With the big game coming up, I think at the same time, we gotta sometimes not worry about it so much to have some free time, have some downtime. But I'd say that was a pretty good highlight of my week since being here.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll go ahead and open it up for questions.

Q. Coach Knowles, when Darnell Washington and Brock Bowers are on the field at the same time, with Brock being so versatile, do you count it as 11 personnel or 12 personnel and can you explain what that might mean?

JIM KNOWLES: I mean, I think you have to, because of the versatility, the fact that they can lineup tight to the formation and wide, you have to prepare for those two tight end sets. And you know you're not going to get that all the time. But if you're not prepared for that, they can do damage from the line of scrimmage. And then you make the adjustments when they move out, but they're certainly

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dangerous wherever they line up.

Q. Jim, when you look at what happened in the last game, do you try to fix -- was that a game-specific situation, things that went wrong, or were there deeper issues, and how do you differentiate between those and try to fix them in five weeks?

JIM KNOWLES: Yeah. It's explosive plays really, what it came down to. And really what most football games come down to from a defensive standpoint, something that we had been very good at when you look at our numbers over the course of the season. So not systematic, just too many explosives.

You have to look at those on an individual basis, determine what the issue was on that particular play, hold myself accountable for it. If it was a problem with the scheme, the players understand it. We deal with those as a defense together, you know, because those are the critical factors in winning the game. And we talk about them, but we give solutions.

Q. Jim, as you look at this Georgia offense, how big of a challenge is this? What are some of the biggest concerns in defending them?

JIM KNOWLES: Well, it's a huge challenge, one our guys have worked for all year. The versatility of the offense with the multiple tight ends who are extremely talented, receivers who can make plays in various ways throughout the field, running backs who can attack you both inside and outside and a quarterback who just does a marvelous job of managing the whole thing.

It's a complete offense. It's developed like an NFL offense, and they have a bunch of tools at their disposal. So we need to be sound across the board and really play hard with great effort. It is still football, and that makes a big difference. The effort of the players really makes a big difference.

Q. Coach, first to you, just similar question. What is the degree of difficulty as you go from Michigan to Georgia? Any similarities? Is this a tougher test?

JIM KNOWLES: You know, I'm not trying to be cliché, but they're all tough the way I look at it because our job as a defense is to stop the opponent. The stop rate is very important to me, something I think our guys take seriously, and we've done well in our stop rate over the season. So each team presents different challenges, and this is the reigning national champion.

So you're talking about a bunch of guys that are going to

play at the next level. You're talking about a serious program that has a consistency to it and multiplicity. So it's a huge challenge, but we need to take it apart piece by piece. That's what we've done, make sure everybody is on the same page and play hard.

Q. You talked earlier this season about your first season at Ohio State serving as defensive coordinator. It's like the pinnacle of college football, dream test designation and whatnot. How has it been preparing for the College Football Playoff at Ohio State for you personally and your approach and have you noticed any differences coaching ahead of the playoff for you now that you're at Ohio State?

JIM KNOWLES: No. I mean, I really have not taken time to do that. That's not my job. My job is to prepare these guys the best I possibly can for the challenge that awaits them. These are the expectations of the Ohio State University. We expected to be here.

When I took the job, I knew that it would lead to this. So we've made it to this spot, and you don't change what you're doing unless there's a problem. So we certainly know the last game was not how we want to go out. We know there were the issues, and we've addressed them. But otherwise, you keep the same course of action. That gives the players confidence. They need to know they have a leader who believes in them and that we're going to have a great plan and allow them to play fast.

Q. Steele, we'll ask you an easy one. How does it feel to be back in Atlanta, Blessed Trinity kid?

STEELE CHAMBERS: I figured I'd get that one. It's been fun. I live like 25 minutes away. It's just been really nice having a close proximity to home, just having a lot of people from my family being able to come out to the game. They usually can't. It's just been nice. I try to show everyone around. Couldn't get into the aquarium. That sucked. My dog's pretty close. That will be fun to see him whenever the game is over. I think it's just really nice being able to come home, play in a place that's familiar to me before I got into college. I think that will be really fun.

Q. Steele, I'm going to follow up on that. You figured it was coming. You got some experience in this building with BT. What are your memories of playing inside Mercedes Benz Stadium, and I know it's a business trip for you guys, but is it going to feel a little different in your hometown and in a building you've been in before?

STEELE CHAMBERS: Yeah. I think my experience is like 50/50. We've lost one year, won another. But it's going to

be really fun. What to call, I think something for me that I take into account is that -- it's just a bigger stage. So I don't really like to dwell on the games in the past because this is a lot bigger deal, honestly, to me and to all the guys around me.

So I try to forget about the past, just try to move forward, think about this game coming up as something bigger than what I've been used to in the past.

Q. J.T. and Steele, Stetson Bennett, I think it was maybe the Tennessee game, he broke contain and juke the guy and got the ball into the end zone. Just how important will it be as the players to get pressure on him and to not allow him to break contain and keep plays alive like that?

J.T. TUIMOLOAU: Stetson Bennett is a great player, a great quarterback. I think we have to do our job and trust in each other. He has shown times he can be very elusive, and I think we have to stick to the game plan and trust one another and do our job.

STEELE CHAMBERS: I think it just comes down to doing your job and just trusting the guy next to you that whatever his assignment is, he is going to get it done.

Yes, Stetson Bennett is a great player. He's got this weird little dead leg thing he does, that's annoying, whenever he is out in open space. But he's a great player, and I think it's going to take 11 guys to really stop him and stop that entire offense.

Q. Jim, you mentioned just going off that question, how hard it is to contain quarterbacks. Even going back to that Toledo game of trying to track a guy that can move around the pocket, and emulating that in practice, I wonder how you prepare for that, for a quarterback as talented as Stetson is in throwing, but also making up with his legs.

JIM KNOWLES: You work on it all the time, but like I've always said, it's a balance. You don't want to hold your rush men back. You want those guys to be able to go. But you have to operate with fundamentals, with the knowledge of how this guy likes to scramble or at least create room for himself and where he moves to.

So you establish game plans, and you show your guys and you illustrate it, but at the same time, you don't want them holding back. So you're right, it's part of the game. It happens at all levels. Some guys scramble more than others. But if you're going to be effective in your pass rush, you gotta be able to go. You just have to have knowledge of the seams and operate on multiple levels and have other

players with eyes. That's important, have eyes on him, to be able to react to the scramble.

Q. Jim, you talked about the explosive plays. A lot has been written about basically five plays. If you studied this, did it come down to those five plays in your mind?

JIM KNOWLES: Yes.

THE MODERATOR: Well said. Okay.

JIM KNOWLES: And I love you, Don. You know that.

Q. J.T., not often you see football teams rotate in tackles. How rare is it, I guess, and how do you go about studying maybe seeing three different guys out there between Broderick, Amarius and perhaps Warren McClendon?

J.T. TUIMOLOAU: I think it all starts with preparation. Just being ready for whatever is being thrown at you. Great group of guys, great tackles. I think we just have to stay poised and just be ready for the changes.

Q. Coach, knowing how different you set up your scheme than any other team in college football, how much of preparing for Georgia is looking at film from previous games, for example, the SEC championship against LSU and how much is going to be feeling them out in the first half?

JIM KNOWLES: That's a good question. I mean, you're always going to take a lot from what you've seen, and you have a chance to piece a lot of things together to have an idea.

But you're right, it's all a guessing game when it comes to coaching and preparing. And you look at what they've done. You look at -- they look at what you've done, and you're trying to predict and guess, okay. But meanwhile, both sides are coming up with different game plans. So a lot of it, like you mentioned, is about adjustments and determining their attack early on, and they'll be looking at us the same way.

Q. Coach, the two plays that Michigan made to the tight end, it seemed like your safeties may have been caught looking into the back field on those two plays, one for a long touchdown and the other for an important fourth down conversion. I guess those are veteran players that you had in those situations. Just what happened in those two instances, and what have you, I guess, done to preach discipline in this last month or so so those type plays don't happen again?

JIM KNOWLES: Yeah, I mean, nothing is perfect in this game. If it was, we'd be playing on a computer, but we're still dealing with humans. So when things go wrong, as you mentioned, and you got great players and really good young men, I think if any fans are alums of Ohio State would recognize just the kind of quality of people that we have in the program, they'd be really proud.

So you look at the things that you're talking about, and you say, well, okay, he's a really good player. He's a really good kid. And something went wrong. So people want to point blame, and that's where it comes back to me. I mean, it's definitely, you know, our players, they are always trying to play their best. So now it's up to me.

I think it's easy and a cop out as a coach to say, well, that guy blew this particular play or he didn't get it right and I coached him on that. Well, I didn't. I didn't do a good enough job. If he didn't show up in the game doing it right, then the fingers need to be pointed back to me, and then say, okay, what did I call, why did I call it, why did we not finish that play right. And those are the things that keep me up at night and just keep working on it and grinding on it.

And when you have a team and a bunch of good guys and people don't point fingers at each other, we all just get in it together. You own it. You accept the accountability for it, and you work to get better every day. And that starts with me.

Q. Coach, in preparing for Georgia's offense, I was just wondering how familiar are you with Todd Monken? Have your all's paths ever crossed before?

JIM KNOWLES: I mean, I know the Monken family well. I mean, I don't know Todd that well. We've crossed, but Jimmy Monken, it's a big coaching family, and Jimmy Monken was in my fraternity at Cornell. He's not a coach, but his dad was. So it's a big coaching family.

He certainly does a great job, and you go back to all his stops, and he did a great job at Oklahoma State. So we have that in common. I don't know him well, but I know people that know him. Everybody knows each other in the profession, just have a lot of respect for what he does.

Q. Coach, just how difficult is it when the run game is effective for Georgia and then also all their play action is built off of it and it all looks similar.

And Steele, when you're a linebacker, how does that run game impact maybe your pass drive? Where are you supposed to be off the play action?

JIM KNOWLES: Go ahead, Steele.

STEELE CHAMBERS: I mean, yeah, it's certainly hard. I mean, they certainly bait you with a lot of play action plays. I think at the end of the day, it's just following your eyes, just knowing your keys, knowing where you're supposed to be and what kind of situations. I think it's just having discipline, I think, being able to play both the running and also the play action.

JIM KNOWLES: That's what complete offenses do to you. They try to put you in conflict. That's the whole idea of an offense that's complete and total and has different tools and targets and ways to keep you off balance. And they do a great job of it.

Q. We talked about Chip Trayanum yesterday, and he talked about returning to the state of Ohio where he grew up, playing running back and linebacker and just the pride he had in getting to wear the Scarlet and Grey for the team he grew up in the state of.

How have you noticed the way he's prideful of playing for Ohio State and his home state coming back to Ohio? How have you both noticed that and the way he's embraced the culture in your program?

STEELE CHAMBERS: Yeah. I love Chip. As soon as he came in, he was just a huge big ball of energy for everybody. He's a really great upstanding guy. He's just been able to do whatever he can for the team, going from linebacker to running back, sometimes going to linebacker.

He's just a good guy. He's a team guy, and I think he's a big reason why we are where we are this year, guys like that being selfless, just doing whatever it takes to get to the highest level out here.

JIM KNOWLES: Yeah. Great kid. I'm with Steele. I'm afraid we might have lost him for good to running back. I don't know. But he's a lot of fun to be around. And like you said, you can sense that he's really happy to be home. And we all cheer for him on offense, because he's just a good guy.

Q. For all you guys, how anxious are you to get back on the field against this football team, and will this defense, Jim, do you detect an edge with your guys going into this game?

JIM KNOWLES: We're anxious. I mean the guys, they have an edge. I know they're grateful for the opportunity to be playing on the biggest stage and really just want to go out and play their best. And they're just hard working,



determined, have fun with it, but really focused. Really focused, Don. I can sense that in our players.

STEELE CHAMBERS: Yeah. It's been a month since we've played. But you can tell even in practice everyone's got a chip on their shoulder. And J.T. gave a rousing speech right before we got in the playoffs game that gave me goose bumps. But I think from then on, everyone's been really serious as to what we plan on doing. So the last month of practice everyone's been going at it full tilt. And I think you can really see this on Saturday.

J.T. TUIMOLOAU: Yeah. They pretty much hit on everything. Just being motivated, staying patient, patiently waiting for Saturday to come, but in the meantime, just gotta continue working.

THE MODERATOR: J.T., you got anything you want to share about the speech?

J.T. TUIMOLOAU: Yeah. It was just pretty much just at that time I think it was very, you know, it was very uncertain time. No one knew if we were going to get in, but I think it was just more of everybody gotta stay ready and hold each other accountable. The more we talk about within our team just has to be displayed at this moment, telling them that, you know, shared a speech where pretty much a testimony where humans might plan the course, but God plans the steps, and we just gotta trust in His plan, and there's a reason for all this happening, and we just gotta keep trusting in Him and believing in Him. And we got a blessing that we are here, and now we just gotta keep going.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, gentlemen.

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