

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Texas vs Arizona State

Friday, December 27, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Arizona State Sun Devils

Brian Ward

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We've got defensive coordinator Brian Ward on our call. Thank you for the time, Coach.

We are playing the 2024 Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl on January 1st against Texas.

Q. When you kind of look over this Texas film since whenever you started looking over it, what kind of stands out about the rushing attack, especially what they were able to do against Clemson in the first round?

BRIAN WARD: The biggest thing is they overwhelm people just with their size and their athleticism up front. Clemson is very sound defensively, what they were trying to do. Guys, you could tell, you can get comfortable playing against certain levels of competition, and guys can get comfortable up front, basically peeking in a gap and then beating a block and going and making a play.

You could see that Clemson guys were used to doing those type of things, and when they were doing it, they were just kind of getting overwhelmed up front. When they would peek, their backs were patient enough to be able to find open seams and exploit them.

When you see a sound defense like Clemson with some of the athletes that they had up front who were used to having success against the guys they lined up against, then going up against a front, an offensive line like Texas, they were trying to do the same things they'd done all year and it just wasn't working for them, and it led to some explosive plays for Texas.

The backs are very patient. They complement each other, but they're really explosive. They run the football with confidence that their offensive line is going to be able to cover guys up and open up running games for them if they're patient enough.



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They present a whole new different set of challenges than we've seen all year.

Q. Wanted to add about that Texas offense, Coach Sark and everybody always talks about how much control Quinn Ewers has over the offense in his third year. What do you sense about his grasp and how comfortable he is in making presnap decisions and things like that from what you've seen on tape?

BRIAN WARD: He's just a guy that you can see how comfortable he is throwing against zone coverage and knowing where to go with the football immediately by the time he hits his back foot.

When he sets up, he can recognize deep zone coverages. He can recognize special players. He can recognize when there's a middle of the field that's closed and when the complementary coverage underneath the deep safeties is playing either deep or shallow.

When he hits that back foot and gets rid of the football, you know he's a guy that's comfortable throwing against any zone coverages. When he gets man coverage, he does also a great job of being able to see where he wants to go with the football.

The biggest thing that you can see just from his growth from when he was a younger quarterback, with each game he gets more comfortable as he continues to go. That's just a testament and that's a tip of the hat to the consistency, the offensive system that he plays in.

Q. Just moments ago Shamari Simmons, who obviously is going to be out for the first half of the game because of the targeting penalty in the Big 12 championship, said that he's Montana Warren's number one fan. He basically made confirmation that Montana Warren is going to be the starter in his place. What are the conversations you've had with Shamari since that targeting process kind of quieted down when the appeal couldn't take place. What are the conversations you've had with the DB room as a

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whole, with Montana, with the guys that are going to need to step up in the first half?

BRIAN WARD: Tackle with your shoulder and not your head and your face, that's been the number one thing. If you get a free shot on anybody, same thing we practice every day and every week. Slide the head, never hit with your helmet, never hit with your face, and always try to run through the football.

It's just one of those unfortunate situations, guys that are playing fast. Shamari, a guy that started 25 straight games for us, never had a targeting penalty in his entire career. He was adamant that he slid his head. If you watched the film, you could argue the quarterback is a scrambler. If he felt pressure, he was going to step out. He was always going to step to his right, and Shamari didn't slide his head enough and didn't anticipate the quarterback stepping to him.

But just the conversation is we're just going to keep doing what we're doing and continue to move forward, keep developing the room. Guys got to keep getting better. It's never been about who we play. It's always been about us and us finding our best potential as a room and as a defense, and that hasn't changed.

I'm excited about Montana. We've been excited about him since the moment he stepped on campus. Now's the time for him to show what he can do. He's more than ready. He's been ready most of the year. It's just the other three safeties have played such a high level of football and have played such outstanding football and he's played some nickel for us, he's played some free. Whenever he's come in, he's been very consistent, very stable for us. We expect him to be that presence on next Wednesday.

Q. You got several Longhorns on your side of the ball there. Wondering if you could speak to their emotions and mindset. Is there payback, or how are they looking at it? What's their impact been for your unit?

BRIAN WARD: All those guys have been great additions to our program and our culture, and all those guys -- you know, it's funny, that's what the portal has been, right? One man's trash has been another man's treasure, and that's really kind of the philosophy in terms of recruiting this portal.

We're just grateful to have these guys, and they all add value to our roster and our depth. It really is, I mean this is yes, we're playing in a big game, yes, this is the quarterfinals of the playoffs, and yes, it's against a great Texas team that's been ranked at the top of the polls all year. Yes, we have familiarity with -- a lot of these guys

have familiarity with the roster or have even been on the roster before.

But just really trying to keep the focus about us and taking one play at a time. Just doing our 111th and being consistently good and occasionally great on defense and keeping our philosophy moving forward.

The more the guys can focus more on us and not the external things, the better off we'll be.

Q. Can you talk a little more about Alford and Prince Dorbah?

BRIAN WARD: Alford, he's obviously in my room, and I worked with him every day for the last two years. Just seeing him just grow up as a leader in our program. When he set foot on this campus, he was on a mission, and I think a lot of it had to do with his time at Texas and at USC.

He felt like, hey, this was his last opportunity to really get this done and to make ASU the place that he was going to be the very best he could be, and that's really all he is. That's what most of these kids are. They just don't really know what they're capable of until they actually set their feet in the ground and decide to be that person.

That's what Xavion's done since he got here. He's been that leader. I'm just excited. I'm going to try to keep him level headed because he's going to be playing against his home state and the team he rooted for growing up and that he probably still roots for, you know what I mean, when he's not obviously playing them.

Then Prince, same thing. He's been nothing but just a joy to Coach since he's been here. He cares. He's turned into a leader and a mentor among a bunch of our younger players, and I'm sure just that growth, he's starting to become who he's meant to become on the football field here at Arizona State.

Obviously it's through different storms and different challenges and change that you grow, and both those guys have done that. Credit to Texas for being a part of that.

Q. Coach, you talked about obviously Xavion right there and obviously Montana's starting, but from your standpoint, the next guy up, doing the 111th that you talked about. From your standpoint as a coach, what's been the most rewarding thing about seeing these other guys, the leaders, help these guys be ready to go?

BRIAN WARD: Leadership is influence. We tell our guys that all the time. Some guys lead by example. Some guys

are the torch bearers, they're way out front of everybody. Or they're the guys behind everybody pushing them along. We really have different leadership styles on the defensive side of the ball.

Most of these guys didn't come in with the leadership mentality. A lot of these guys are influenced by somebody else. Seeing these guys and the encouragement that they give each other, the belief that they have in each other and the belief that they have in us coaches, it really is, it goes hand in hand.

There's an old adage that says -- old phrase that said people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, and that really goes both ways. That's something that we really do share in this locker room and in this program and in this building.

Credit to our head coach for building that and laying that foundation for our culture and hiring the coaches to really move that vision forward. It really has. That's why we've had the season we've had this year.

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