

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

Friday, December 27, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Texas Longhorns

Pete Kwiatkowski

Press Conference

Q. Pete, just wanted to revisit the comment you made earlier in the season. Fall camp you were talking about Anthony Hill's development as a linebacker, really challenging him to grow as a linebacker, not as a football player. I was wondering, revisiting that four or five months later what you've seen out of him.

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. He's made great strides. In the zone coverage, in his drops. He knows he's still got work to go and things to improve on, but yeah his progress has been good.

Q. PK, Sark was very complementary of Cam Skattebo and the season he's had, especially the way he's playing lately. What do you see out of him on film and what makes him is such an effective pass catcher specifically?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. He's a big physical guy. He's got good speed. He's got good change of direction. He has really good contact balance. He's got I think a thousand yards after contact through the course of the season. And then as far as a pass catcher he's just got really good hands. He makes the catches he's supposed to make, and they obviously highlight him in the pass game. I think he's the second leading receiver.

Q. Coach, Steve has talked off and on about the pass -- the secondary and how the pass defense has gotten better over the season. But I wanted to hear you just talk about philosophically what did you want to change during the off season and why do you think there's been such a dramatic jump in the secondary?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: So schematically we went to more of a post style defense going into the season. We lost T'Vondre Sweat and Byron Murphy and we had AC and Vern coming back.



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We weren't sure how we were going to be able to play the run with two high safeties with lighter boxes, so that was the main catalyst to that switch.

And then from the secondary standpoint playing with a middle closed we were able to play tighter coverage, play with more outside leverage on a lot of the route combinations that we're seeing.

And then credit to those guys. They took their growth and learning to a new level. As much as we like to tell them to stay off social media and not listen to outside noise, they hear it, and so they knew they had to get better.

And starting in January all the way to camp to now, they've attacked that challenge.

Q. Pete, how much of a luxury was it for you in the off season to have an old defense. I mean, you've got veteran guys. Got Mukuba coming in is a veteran guy. How much of a luxury was that for you from a teaching standpoint?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. So when you've got veteran guys like we do, they become coaches on the field for the new guys, right? We install the defense, the techniques, concepts, and the new guys it's all Chinese, right, it's all new language.

So having older guys that have been in it and experienced it and know the ins and outs of it are able to reteach what we're trying to get across to the new guys.

And so the learning curve speeds up for those guys because of it.

Q. Pete, I don't know if you self-critique a whole lot, but has this been your most satisfying season as a defensive coordinator?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: You know me pretty well. You're only on as good as your next performance, right? And so, no, but to answer the question, I've had some really good defenses in the past, and, yeah, to be where we're at right

now, yeah, it's been fun.

And a lot of that's attributed to the players and the assistant coaches. It's fun to go out -- obviously it's fun to win, but there's a lot that goes into winning, and those guys attack every week. Their preparation, the new opponents, the same and the consistency that they've prepared with all season long is a big reason why we have been as successful as we have.

Q. Coach, as we watch this game there's a lot that's going to go on and the defense is going to probably come with their A game as well. But I'm curious for myself and for fans, how can we watch the game better? How can we watch it through your eyes? How can we make the experience better?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. Well, it helps when you have a little bit of base knowledge of how like D-linemen are supposed to play and how linebackers are supposed to play and how safeties are supposed to play.

And if you don't, it's tough, you know. It's tough to know what they're supposed to do. But just the details of hand placements, footwork, pad level. We call them -- I mean they're fundamentals of every position. Eyes. They're not the fancy flashy things, but those are the nuts and bolts. Those are the foundations of every position's techniques and how they gotta execute the calls.

And so the cat and mouse game that goes on with offenses trying to attack us based off our leverage, our alignments, the numbers, how they're trying to attack us in the run game with leverage, changing the motions, changing the numbers, changing the picture and gaining leverage and numbers that way.

But you have to have a little bit of base understanding of what's going on to be able to appreciate that.

Q. Coach, can you just kind of discuss what it's been like these last seven, eight days since the game preparing for a running back like Cam Skattebo, someone who finished the Top 5 in the Heisman voting, but more importantly you guys have prided yourself on run defense. What has it been like watching the film and what's been the most glaring skill that you've just seen?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. It's easy to grab our guys' attention when you just put the tape on and watch him run, break tackles, keep his feet, make guys miss, catch the ball in the back field.

So I mean, first of all, we grab their attention by putting the

tape on how the guy runs and how hard and physical he is and productive he is.

And then for us we just go to work putting in the game plan, learning it, and then going out and practicing not only the calls, but our leverage, our fits.

We aren't able to tackle as much as we'd like because it's late in the season and we've played a lot of games, but as much as we can get into those fits and we can do everything as far as leveraging the ball, bending our knees, getting our near foot near shoulder in position to make the tackle and basically getting in the best position without tackling that's been the emphasis.

And a lot of that to add to that it's also being able to defeat blocks, right? These wide receivers do a really good job on the perimeter. You can see it on tape. They believe, right, they block. They block a little bit extra, a little bit harder, right?

That Skattebo is going to get positive yards and big plays. It all goes hand in hand. That's been the emphasis. And, again, techniques, fundamentals, leveraging the ball, leveraging the blocks, all that stuff has gotta tie in together.

Q. I know you talked about you've played closed field coverages and things like that, but when you can go ahead and put no. 7 and line him up from one of their top receivers, how much does that help the entire defense when Jahdae can basically lock up a guy across from him depending on his assignment?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. When you know you got a guy like that that is really sticky and is going to lock his guy down and you can do some other things, little subtle things, leaning the post to different guys, you know, linebackers don't have to get as much width in a drop.

There's just subtle little things knowing that you got a guy that can lock his area of the field down.

Q. Pete, just wanted to ask you a quick question about the technology this year. I know that was a big topic of conversation heading into the season. From a defensive perspective where have you seen that helmet communication benefit the most?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: For us, we signal and also communicate through the mics. I think the benefit from a defensive standpoint has been the offenses, they might be stealing our signals or trying to steal our signals, but they might not see are those signals really the signals? It's just another fog, right? It's another area that puts fog on the playing field. I mean, we could be using the mic system

the whole time or not. I think that's been a big advantage for us.

The other thing that I noticed is offenses are not necessarily going as tempo as fast as they have in the past, because maybe they're concerned about us getting communication from the sideline to the guy with the helmet to change calls, make him aware of stuff if they're lining up in formations really fast.

So those are probably the two main things.

Q. Good afternoon, PK. After the Clemson game, Michael Taaffe said he was glad that Klubnik had some success against your pass defense because it forced him to learn some things. What did you learn from the Clemson game?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: What I learned from the Clemson game is, you know, we've gotta be on point with our -- when we play good quarterbacks and quarterbacks get hot, we've got to make sure, right, that -- it goes back to the week of preparation, right? That we are preparing in the right way to take whoever we're playing's best shot.

And I think that was the main thing out of it. And then, you know, it reminds these guys that these quarterbacks that are athletic and accurate, we gotta do a good job of making them feel uncomfortable and do everything in our power to try and keep them from scrambling around where it now gets into plaster drill and guys can create space or take advantage of the dead areas in our zones.

Those are probably the two main things.

Q. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year. How specifically have Johnny Nansen and Kenny Baker contributed to this defense, and where has Colin Simmons improved the most and what's his next step?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah, Johnny and Kenny have been awesome. Kenny does an outstanding job with the D-line teaching the techniques and getting them focused on the details of playing those techniques.

And then Johnny's been awesome with the linebackers helping them with their pass coverages and the issue plays that we see week in and week out playing cover three a lot.

And so, I mean, whether it's those two guys, right, Coach Joseph, Coach Gideon, everybody's got a hand in the kitchen here making this thing work. It's not just one guy. And the players respond to him.

And then Colin, what was your question about him again?

Q. Where has he improved the most this year and what's his next step? What does he need to improve on most?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. The improvement he's making is in his technique and fundamentals. Pad level, hand placement, being physical on a consistent basis. The easy stuff for him or what comes easy to him is rushing the passer, coming off the edge, but being able to play the run game at a really physical level, that's where he's making strides.

And then his next step is just being able to know the defense inside and out and just decrease the mental busts that he has during the course of a game.

Q. Pete, appreciate the time. Do you aspire to be a head coach? You've been such a great defensive coordinator for so long. I was just curious whether you held that aspiration at all?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: I have not actively aspired to be a head coach, no. Just I stay in my lane. I do the best job that I can at whatever role I have, whether it was a D-line coach or a linebacker coach or safety coach. But I've never actively chased head jobs.

Q. Good afternoon, Coach. I wanted to maybe if you could talk to me about the journey that it's taken for you to have a complete defense like you have now. I remember asking you a couple years ago about a pass rush and you said, what pass rush? Last year we were talking about the secondary and challenges there. This year it's more complete than it's ever been. Can you just talk about from start to finish how you were able to finally get here?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. It starts with trust, right, getting the guys believing and trusting in the coaches, and then in turn, they by their performances and how they practice and go out and play earning the trust of the coaches.

And then it's paired with getting them to believe in playing hard and playing physical, playing for each other. We versus me mentality.

And then recruiting. We've done a good job of getting better players and creating competition. And the guys have responded to that, right? Everybody wants to start. Everybody wants to play. And so as you bring in better players and then they start pushing those guys, that raises their level.

And so the level of competition that has risen amongst the position groups and then going against our offense every day, right? They post a lot of challenges with what they do in the style offense, being able to run the ball, shifts and motions, all the different pictures that we get.

We got to align to them formationally. All that ties together. The biggest thing and the belief, the trust, the caring for each other and playing hard and physical.

Q. Coach, normally in this type leading up to a late January -- or a late December-early January bowl game it's really important for these extra practices for the young cats. Can you speak on what their roles are still? Is it still about development for them or is it still just about the game prep and scheme installation on a week to week?

PETE KWIATKOWSKI: Yeah. You try and get those guys -- I mean, during the course of the season you're talking to them and coaching them up on the techniques and fundamentals that they need to get better at and keep growing as they're going against the offense on the scout teams, right?

But the way it is now, especially in the playoffs, it goes to -- you don't have like 20 practices or 15 practices. It's week to week, game to game. So it's very much in-season mode.

And then you got the portal situation where guys aren't here to develop, you know. They leave and look for another opportunity somewhere else.

So all those factors sort of -- it's not the same as it was when it was just strictly bowls and you have these three-week periods to get ready for your game.

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