

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

Friday, December 27, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Texas Longhorns

Michael Taaffe

Press Conference



**PLAYOFF
QUARTERFINAL**



Q. Just wanted to ask you about the communication amongst the safeties. I'm just curious and this may be off base, you can let me know if it's fair or foul. Is the communication any better between you guys, because this year's rotation has primarily been three guys with yourself, Drew, and Jelani as opposed to last year when the rotation was a little bit bigger?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah. I think that three guys really rotating holds a lot of value. Not only do we kind of keep our legs fresh when, you know, I gotta run down on punt or punt return or Jelani is running dune on kickoff.

So we're doing more than just eight-play drives on defense. We're doing special recall teams, and we take that with a great deal of pride knowing that special teams is make or break for a lot of games.

And so, yeah, the rotation definitely helps.

As far as communications with one another, I think the best thing about us three communicating with one another as far as the rotation is we all just love to watch each other succeed. When you see Andrew Mukuba have an interception against Georgia week six or whatever that was, Jelani McDonald is jumping up-and-down on the sideline.

When you see myself make that play last game or last play of the game against Clemson, you see Jelani McDonald jumping up-and-down.

When you see Jelani McDonald make an interception against Florida, you see myself right there putting my hands in the air.

So we're all just so just happy for one another when we make plays. And it could be a little toxic in some rooms that don't have the maturity, don't have the love for one

another to where you get subbed out, it's like, oh, why is he subbing me out? But we don't do that. We're all understanding. We all love one another, us three. So I think it's really cool.

Q. Cam Skattebo's stats speak for himself and he's obviously very confident in his abilities, but when you turn on the film, what do you see from him?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: All around back. I think some people lose sight that he's just a hard-nose, try-to-run-you-over type of back. And yes, he's very capable of doing that, but he's also got great patience, great contact balance, great contact courage to where he's learned his shoulder and maybe somebody is trying to go for his legs, and he stumbles up and stays on his feet and go runs for 40 more yards.

So the way that he can be so versatile as a running back, jump cutting, running people over, spin move, he's got the whole package. And then he leads the team in receptions as a passing threat, too. No. 0 being injured the last couple of games. So he's just a guy that can do it all, and clearly they call his name and he's ready to play every single Saturday. So I'm excited for that challenge.

Q. Talking to you after the SEC championship you just said like this Texas team is going to be so hungry. Now getting back there, just as a leader, what have you seen on that front as far as this group's ability to focus on the task at hand and be as hungry as you said everybody was going to be?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah. Well, I think the coolest thing about that is our team is so versatile. We go to the SEC Championship and it's kind of a shootout as far as defenses. It didn't seem like a lot of people were getting in the paint, Georgia or ourselves, and we lose it at the end.

But I would say a complacent defense would be like, all right, we're good. And we're not complacent at all, but it might have looked like that because we go to DKR our last home game and we're so ready to play and Cade goes in there and does his thing and hits his receivers and he puts

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the most yards that anybody's put on us this whole season.

And so now not only is our offense so hungry because of what they did against Clemson, they're on a heater, but also our defense. We might have won the game, but we didn't play good enough. So our whole team is hungry at the right time. And I love that not only did we win, but we won and we're still learning from failure of, you know, getting balls caught on us that usually doesn't happen.

So we addressed those issues as a team and we're moving forward with hunger in our heart and wanting to come out and play the way we should.

Q. Michael, you've been around PK a long time now. Are there any pet phrases he has that you hear in your sleep, and what would you say his best quality is as a defensive coordinator?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Practice execution equals game reality. He says that one quite a lot. Kind of helps us practice like we should play every single week. So that's one of the ones that he loves to quote.

PK, I think the type of guy he is, he's so calm to where he can get on our tails if we're not doing what we need to do. But if things are freaking out, if they just completed a 50-yard bomb and it's a two-minute situation and we call a timeout and everybody's freaking out, oh, no, are they going to score and beat us.

PK is the one that's not freaking out. He's the one calming everybody down and he's the leader that we need. He's saying all right, here we go. We're going to go this next call.

I would say he's calm, composed, and he shows up in big games and calls the right calls and puts us in a great spot.

Q. I know the thought is you go 1 and 0 every week, but not every year you're going to have this many all-Americans on one team, a Thorpe Award winner, three year starter at quarterback. Is it one of those things that you guys actually talk about how this thing is setup for you to really win a national championship, or is it just something you don't talk about?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, no. You can't. The type of team that's rolling into Atlanta in the Sun Devils, you can't think about anybody but them, because they earned our respect just cutting on the tape and seeing what they can do.

Their coach is a really good coach. He's got their guys in a really good culture spot. They play for one another. They

block for one another. They run routes for one another. They run for one another.

So the type of team that they are, you can't look past them because all that looking past is all what if you don't take care of business on January 1st. So you can have some fun conversations. You can have some great conversations on Monday night, on Sunday night and at the fire.

But all that is no use if you don't take care of business in Atlanta.

Q. I was able to see your boy, Bam, earlier this week. Went out to one of his sessions, and he told me a story back in 2020 when you all would be working out and some of the guys may get calls from college coaches and they would turn the camera around and point towards you and say y'all need to come get Taafe. What did it mean to you during that time to have those small group of guys believe in you before even coaches at the next level did?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah. Well, that's such a blessing to know that I got guys like that in my corner, and that kind of just shows me what type of guy I am. I don't love doing all the bling stuff, all the stuff for attention, because I can't. The people that are in my corner are the ones that I kind of care about are the ones that I would jump in front of a train for, because those guys have always been there for me. Vice versa, I've always been there for them.

It's definitely hardened me to know the things that I've been through as far as a football player just getting told no over and over and over and just understanding that the guys that believed in me, I'll never cherish those relationships. So no matter what happens in life, the guys that believed in me first, they always have a special place in my heart.

Q. At the beginning of the week I asked Coach Sarkesian about only two penalties against Clemson in ten yards. What was it that changed the preparation? How was that possible? Because you guys averaged more than that. He said it was a result of a come-to-Jesus meeting. I don't want to know anything about the come-to-Jesus meeting because we all have been a part of those. How have you seen the preparation from the team in the locker room, people level up so that we might not see any penalties or we'll see little penalties in the future games?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, it's just your intent and your emphasis. So like penalties are going to happen. Defensive penalties are going to happen. Offensive penalties are going to happen. Special teams penalties

are going to happen. This game is hard. It's hard. They're on scholarship, too. They're getting NIL, too. So you're playing against some really good guys. If we were in the March Madness you're in the Elite Eight, so you're playing against the top of the top.

And that's going to happen. But how you work through the week can kind of allow you to not be in that position. Okay. If you are in that position, what are you going to do if he beats you or what are you going to do if he's stacking your hip and you don't want to get a block in the back and you're on punt return or something like that.

So just knowing that if you're in that position, here, this is what we're going to do moving forward, because we can't have these early penalties to where it hurts us on offense or on defense. We can't get a third and long and get a defensive holding in my position or roughing the passer and they get an automatic first down.

So we can't keep doing so well to where these penalties kind of bail teams out. So that was the emphasis on the conversation.

Q. One factor of this 12-team playoff is that the season gets longer for the teams that are playing all the way to the end. You guys are about to play game 15 with potentially 16 and 17 coming behind it. My question is does this season feel longer than previous seasons for you, whether that be physically, emotionally, whatever it may be?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, it definitely feels longer. I don't know what the other guys said, if they're more politically correct than I am. But it definitely feels longer as a point of we had two bye weeks, and we played the same time last year on January 1st.

It might have been at night, but we played on January 1st last year. But we played one less game. So that in and of itself is telling of how brutal this season has been.

But you don't do all this stuff to get complacent at the end or to stop doing your routine at the end, because then you look back and you're like, all right, I played that game, that game, that game, oh, and that game.

Oh and then we added another game and now we're here at January 1st and we did all that for nothing. So whatever you do, put more into it now because there's only one champion. There's only one person that gets to stand with that trophy at the end of it. So you gotta do more than anybody else.

Q. Michael, congratulations on second team

all-American with the Associated Press. Was there a conversation with you and Coach Gideon before the season? You had five different guys starting at safety last year. Those guys peel off, three of them peeled off. Was there a conversation of him saying, hey, we're relying on you, we need you as part of that competence growth that you've talked about this year?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: No. It was actually the opposite. He said, I'm bringing in guys. I'm bringing in some really good talent. I'm bringing in some young guys that are really good. I'm moving Jelani McDonald to safety and Derek Williams is getting a whole lot better.

Oh, and then we're bringing one of your best friends, Andrew Mukuba, in. So if you don't step up then you're not going to be playing for us.

And that's how Texas is. So take this under the chin and know that if you're not the leader that you should be, if you're not the player that you know you can be but nobody else might see but yourself, then you're not going to see the field a lot.

So I took that and ran with it and was like, all right. So coach is giving me a chance. He's giving me an opportunity to roll out there with the ones come spring. So there was going to be a lot of guys nipping at my spot and if I don't play the way that I should, if I don't work the way that I should if I don't practice and be the leader that I can be the way I should be then it will be a different result for me individually.

So that was kind of how that conversation went.

Q. After the Clemson game, you said you were glad that Cade had some success against you because it forced you to reevaluate some things. What lessons did you learn this week, and how did you apply that in practice?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, like is the whole thing that Coach Saban always said. When you play not a game up to your standard but you still win, some immature players look at that as like it's a win, we can't learn from it because we won so let's just keep moving on.

But this group that we have is so mature that Jahdae is on the phone with me at 10 p.m. after the game and he's like, dude, I just watched it; like we need to get better. Like we need to start tomorrow, as early as 8 a.m. and start getting better and going to the drawing board and going back to where we always have been the last 13 games, because that wasn't good enough. That wasn't our standard.

And so that's kind of what the group is. We're mature enough to where maybe we didn't communicate as a back end, as good as we usually do to where they found a busted coverage here or there and Cade was mature enough to find it and put the ball on the money and give his receiver a chance. So we're a mature group to where no matter if we win or lose we're going to come back and we're going to get better.

Q. Jahdae was talking about PK and I guess a willingness to be really patient changing plays, kind of late in the play clock. I'm curious, obviously, I know you've only been in one place, but just from what you know about college football, how unique is that and I guess to what extent do you think the experience y'all have on defense allows him to kind of do that?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah. I think that's one of the biggest things in college football, who can say that they've played with a DC for four years, not a lot of people in this era where coaches are moving around, players are moving around. And so I think the trust with one another goes unsaid.

And he knows that me, myself, Jahdae, Alfred Collins, Barryn, we've been and multiple guys, but we've been in this system so long that we know that -- we kind of know his tendencies. All right, if they catch us in this we're going to roll to this. If they catch us in this we might keep it on and see what they're going to bring at it for the next drive. If they catch us in this, all right, now we know they're going to do that so we have another changeup.

So he has a lot of trust in us, we have a lot of trust in him and that's kind of where it comes from.

Q. I wanted to put your coaching hat on a little bit. The way you guys play aggressively this season in the back end, what would have happened or what kind of problems would it have caused if AC and Vernon and the defensive line didn't have as good a season as they did? If y'all couldn't stop the run, what problems would that have caused?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Would have left me with a whole lot more of one-on-one tackles from 18 yards deep, which is no fun if anybody played defensive back. So allowing them to -- okay, let's just say they don't make the play. Let's just say that Alfred Collins doesn't take a triple team and still make the play like he's done before.

What they do -- the least thing they do is they make the ball carrier bounce to where I have time to where I'm a good enough player, I believe in myself to where I can read, run pass pretty well. Best in the nation is what I

believe.

So I'm reading run pass. I'm coming downhill after I'm reading run pass and he bubbles out. Now it makes a tackle way easier for myself.

And so the least they're doing is making the ball carrier stop his feet. The things that they usually do is they're making the play on themselves. So you don't see a lot of one-on-ones with Alfred, with Vern, with Dre Moore, Barryn, Colin Simmons, Ethan Burke. You just don't see a lot of one on ones because they're playing so well that you gotta double team those guys.

Q. Michael, PK was talking about how in between last season and this season y'all switched to some closed field coverages. Obviously I know that puts a lot of -- a lot more responsibility on you, but at the same time if you look over and see No. 7 and know that he may not be able to have much help, how much confidence do you still have that Jahdae is going to be able, even if left one on one, to make it a win for the Texas defense?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah. Well, that's like football 101 when you see closed safety let's take the one on one shot at least a couple of times a game. Just to test my guy versus your guy. We believe in our guy and that's kind of what people think is you see press, you see one high let's take the fade and just worst case that happens they get a P.I.

The best case that happens they catch it and score a touchdown. But they've done that many, many times in the last 14 games, and it's gone well for the good guys most of the time. So nobody's perfect, but it feels pretty good knowing that we got two guys out there that are really good football players, and it kind of lets me hone in on my details and my individual work more.

Q. Michael, just kind of a two-part question here. Firstly, obviously there was a lot of hype coming in that the SEC was going to be filled with a lot of great quarterbacks that you guys were going to against and you have done a great job at minimizing those plays, but in comparison to what you've seen on the film what has Sam Leavitt brought to the table and what have you guys seen that is similar to the SEC quarterbacks you have seen for much of this season? And then secondly, a whole lot of players, particularly on both sides of the ball, are former Longhorns at ASU. Can you just talk about maybe the relationships that you have with them? Barryn was talking about the relationship he has with Xavion Alford a few minutes ago. Can you talk about the relationships you have

with the former Longhorns that are now in Tempe?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, I don't know Xavion just because he left before I got here, but heard he was a great guy. Heard that -- who else -- I was with Jake Smith. A couple of guys older than me loved him, was best friends with him, and I was excited to have that relationship.

But I'm glad that he's doing well. He was super nice to me when I came in as a freshman and he didn't have to. I was just a walk-on.

So Troy is a great guy. Zac Swanson, another guy that was younger than me. So I tried to help him out. But he was a great friend. And then Prince Dorbah, another guy that has always been there for me, has always been supporting me and trying to motivate me through my journey.

So a bunch of throws guys am I for getting anybody else? I can't quite remember.

Q. Clayton Smith may be the only one I can remember.

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah. I didn't ever cross ties with him. But all those guys, obviously they'll be extra fired up to play the Longhorns, because anytime you leave a school and you know some people, it's always fun to play those guys.

So they'll be fired up for sure and I'm excited to play them. The first part of your question I forget.

Q. About Sam Leavitt and just his skills as a quarterback and what you've seen on film and how in comparison -- how in comparison his skill set is to the quarterbacks that you've seen this season.

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, for sure. Well, great question because I think I see a lot of Marcel Reed in him to where you can make the play on your own, you can give it out to your ball carrier and let him go make the play. You can give it out to your wide receiver who's 6'5" and let him go make a contested catch. Or you can throw it in the slot.

And so he can do whatever he wants with the ball, and you gotta take that with a grain of salt and come ready to play and know what his strengths are.

Q. Just wanted to go back to those 2020 sessions during COVID with Bam. What do you remember the most about that time? And also, did it feel like a full circle moment whenever not only you and Mukuba, but Bam was there to celebrate Jahdae for that Thorpe Award?

MICHAEL TAAFFE: Yeah, it kind of shined a light a little bit on what we've done. Obviously you give all the credit to Jahdae. That's his award. That's what he did with himself. I know he's going to be selfless like the type of player he is and try to give it to more people than maybe deserve, but it's him first and foremost.

But the 2020 sessions, it ties back even more to 2020, but just all I remember is just hungry to prove myself right. I get a chance to maybe check in on zoom school and maybe not pay attention and go work out a little bit more.

So that's what I love to do. I try to hit the books as hard as I can, but I'm a football player. So we all know how that goes.

Kind of just a great opportunity. Not a lot of people got blessed in COVID, and it was a hard time but for us we were lucky to get to do that and get to work with each other and get to compete with one another and it was so fun.

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