

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

Monday, December 30, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Texas Longhorns

Steve Sarkisian

Press Conference

Q. Just wanted to ask you, like, I'm trying to do a story on Sark, how he has unlocked like the beast at Texas.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Everybody is on the same page since. And then we kind of reset ourselves and just said, hey, we're in a four-game playoff, you know, and it was a great celebration at DKR to have that first home game in the CFP. It was an amazing environment.

And with the extended time between games, we took a moment to celebrate that and then it was back to work as usual. It really wasn't very difficult. We have a really mature team, an older team, that I think understands the task at hand.

Q. Any challenges with a New Year's Day bowl, new city, any tricks as a coach to make sure they're staying on task and focused?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Differently than before. If it is just your traditional New Year's Day bowl game, and you're at the bowl site for about a week or so, a little bit different challenge.

This being a playoff, and we're only here for about three days with the goal to be back here January 20th, you know, you always have -- as a coach, you have your concerns, but like I said, we're a really mature team. Knock on wood. We do it the right way. Obviously we got curfew and all those things in place, but I think our guys understand, like I said, the task at hand. They're focused on that.

Q. Could you take me back to when you worked as a job, when you were looking for a defensive coordinator, what drew you to PK? What is it about him that made him the right choice?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think a couple of things. One, I



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always admired the guys that made it hard on me, and we competed against each other a few times when he was at Boise and I was at Washington and I was at USC and he was at Washington. Obviously a ton of respect for Coach Petersen who he worked for.

And I thought what he did was really sound. It didn't seem overly complicated, but yet his defense has always played really hard. They showed good awareness. They affected the quarterback. And at the end of the day, then it became a personality fit, did he fit into the culture that we were going to try to put in place here, and it worked out.

Q. When you faced him back then, what is it that he did as a defense coordinator that made it difficult?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, again, I think it was that they were sound. They didn't have lapse in coverages, and they weren't out of gaps. And they played defense, sound defense.

I thought they always did a really good job, as I said, of affecting the quarterback. And then they created turnovers, and I think now four years in for us, that's kind of the calling card of who we are, right, the effort that we play with defensively, sound in the back end, creating turnovers and affecting the quarterback.

And so, again, I think that that's -- when you build the defense, sometimes it can take a little bit of time especially for a guy like PK who had been at Boise for so long with Coach Petersen. Then they went to Washington. They built it there. And for him to come with us again from year one to two to three to four, we can really see the growth.

Q. Did you have a relationship with him before he got hired?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Just acquaintances, but not a really relationship that way.

Q. What was it like kind of getting to know him in the early stages?



STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, the guy that helped a lot with this was Justin Wilcox. Justin was my DC at Washington and at USC. Justin and PK worked together at Boise. He was kind of the conduit between the two of us, and once he came on board, we're both West Coast guys, both California guys growing up. So it was pretty easy to kind of mesh from a relationship standpoint.

Q. I remember that first year, there was some rough goes, for everybody, the whole team that year. But what did you see from him like as defense had its own challenges this year that gave you confidence that this thing was going to get to where it needed to be?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I thought I saw a ton of maturity. Here's a veteran coach who's been around the block a few times. And like I said, I don't think anybody in the program panicked in year one. We were going to stay true to who we were. We were going to continue to recruit to how we wanted to play.

We were going to try to instill in the players how we wanted to play, and it was not ideal in year one, but I think the level of consistency coming from PK then to the rest of the defensive staff, I thought was a huge component of that.

Q. Coach, you've had a stake in the SEC, coaching at Alabama. You kind of understand the landscape. Your first year in the SEC and these changes, what do you think that you accomplished all of when your guys to kind of to get them to understand the transition (indiscernible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think the natural thing to point out was the physical grind that the SEC puts on you, the body types, the speed, the physicality of which the game is played in the SEC.

But the thing that we worked a lot on that I thought paid dividends for us was the mental intensity needed week in and week out in this conference. From top to bottom, if you don't show up and play well, you can get beat.

And I think we saw that kind of across the board in the conference this year. I think a credit to our players. I thought they showed up every week ready to play. Naturally we didn't win every game. But for the most part, whether it was at home or on the road, we showed up ready to play, and we didn't have those lapses that maybe some of the other teams had.

Q. You mentioned a lot when you worked for the SEC. Is it more than just -- what else do they have to have to be a guy that you guys want to work on?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think there's gotta be a competitive nature about them, right? It's one thing just to be big, but if you're big and lazy, that doesn't help much.

I think all these guys are of high football intelligence. They play the game with the right intangibles, critique and effort first. And not all of them maybe came in that way, but they learned very quickly the standard with which we like to play the game defensively.

And a lot of them have grown throughout the years. And I touch on those defensive linemen for a reason. When we started with Coburn and Ojomo. Then it went to Sweat and Murph. And now with Alfred and Vernon and with the influx of Jermaine and Bill and those guys, they've all kind of matured and grown throughout the years. And that's the expectation for our players, that when they arrive just because they're big humans, they're not finished products. And there's a lot of growth and development to be had. And now they're seeing the proof in the pudding of what can happen if you do it the right way.

Q. How much of that (inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think it's all parties. Coach Becton did a great job with what he does from a physical standpoint, but also a mental standpoint. I think the coaches and the development that they have on the field, I think there's a credit to their teammates, right, of holding each other accountable and the standard of which we want to play the game and the way we work in the off season.

So I think it's all kind of tying together, but again nobody is more important than what Coach Becton and his staff do in the weight room in the off season conditioning.

Q. Size, speed, what else is required?

STEVE SARKISIAN: You know, those two things were critical for us. You know, I think, again, like we -- I really value competitors. And a lot of times, not every one of the guys we recruit is a multi-sport athlete. But we really look for that. We look for guys that compete whether it's in track, whether it's in basketball, whether it's in baseball, whether it's in wrestling, whatever that can look like, we're looking for true competitors because this league challenges you that way.

You just don't get to take a week off because the moment you do, you can get beat, and we've seen it, right? We've seen it across the board. We got a lot of teams complaining that they didn't get into the College Football Playoff, but they stubbed their toe along as well.

Q. When you started doing this, I remember the first

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year you guys took a lot of guys and you guys haven't (inaudible) high school development. Is that kind of the ideal balance for you?

STEVE SARKISIAN: For sure. We believe in high school recruiting. We believe in getting players into our program and developing them physically, mentally, emotionally, buying into our culture.

And we really use the portal as an offset to fill needs, and we all have needs. There's natural attrition that occurs. Our own transfers, our own guys leaving early for the NFL drafts, injuries, mismanagement by us.

There's no science to this. We try our best. And so when you have those things come up at a position of need, that's how we try to offset that with the portal.

Q. Personnel staff has been really stable for the most part this year. How much of that has helped you?

STEVE SARKISIAN: It's been helpful. I mean, really when we came on board, the guys that have been the most stable there were Brandon Harrison, John Michael Jones. And they were on the staff previous. And we obviously retained them, and both have really grown in the program with me, you know, and I've been really impressed.

I've always said, and this was something from Coach Carroll, it's a lot better when you can hire from within because they know what the expectation is, the standard, what you're looking for, and so for us to be able to promote those two guys, especially within the program has been huge.

Taylor Searels comes in very early on. She understands it, and we've had some movement at other positions, but they've been really been the core of that personnel department.

Q. -- really kind of setting the tone?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah. Our thing was always just tell us what the rules are. And I'd rather -- much rather -- whatever the rules are, let's try to navigate it to the best of our ability rather than spend a month complaining about the rules.

We went to work on the rules, and I do think we've done it as good as we can. I don't think anything we've done has been perfect. We've tried. And we've learned a lot along the way.

But, again, we just attacked it like anything else. Whatever the rules are, and you tell us these are the parameters to

operate within, we adjust to it as best as we could.

The portal was a whole another thing. When we first came in in year one, we didn't have the portal like that. Then the portal hits. Then NIL hits. And so it was a huge kind of transformation of running the program from year one to year two to year three that was much different than what I thought I was walking into to where we are today.

Q. Coach, what does it mean just to be here on this stage and taking on ASU in the quarterfinals?

STEVE SARKISIAN: It's amazing. This is a heck of a journey. This season of college football to be in the forefront of the expanded CFP and to be part of it, you know, a year ago we were one of four teams to be in the College Football Playoff, and they expanded it to 12. And I think everyone's assumption was, oh, you just go back.

Well, we're the only one of those four teams that made it to the 12 team playoff. So it's a credit to our staff, to our players. It's an honor to be here. The Peach Bowl does a fantastic job. And so, again, we're just embracing it and enjoying the journey, quite frankly.

Q. Unique situation, you guys won 12 years ago, (inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, it is unique. I think Coach Dillingham has done an awesome job. What he took over was not an easy task. He's done a tremendous job, he, the staff, their players. They play hard. I've got a ton of respect for him. And I'm an old Pac-10, PAC-12 guy.

So I have a lot of admiration for those Arizona State teams, Coach Snyder, Frank Kush. I became really good friends with Jake Plummer. When he was playing at ASU, I was playing at BYU. Keith Poole, that whole group. So to see Arizona State back, I think is good for college football as well.

Q. (Inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, again, I see a veteran group. And I think naturally the expectations from the outside for their program probably weren't very high. There were so many new faces.

I think just on defense alone, there's 33 transfers of the 44 in the offense, defense and the two deep. So to watch them grow, you see a better football team today than they were in week one.

And the last month and a half of the season, like I said earlier, I think they're playing as good as anybody in the

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country. They've got great schemes on both sides of the ball high level. They have play makers on both sides of the ball. The quarterback is playing at a high level. Obviously the runner is a fantastic player.

They've got a ball-hawking defense. And we say it all the time how valuable the ball is, I think they're a plus 15 turnover margin team. And when you do that, you always give yourself a chance to win and clear the air doing that.

Q. Two touchdown favorites, they don't even know that. He said he just mentioned it. Do guys not pay attention to any of that stuff?

STEVE SARKISIAN: No. We don't talk about that stuff. We just turn on the tape. Not really worried about the other stuff.

Q. Coach, you've expressed much respect for Dillingham. (Inaudible) are you expecting a beat down to be an issue?

STEVE SARKISIAN: No. I expect it to be a tough game. They're a really good team. Like I said, a ton of respect for them, how they've built this program. A ton of respect for how their team plays the game.

They play really well in critical moments. They've won a lot of tight games early on, but I think the thing that's been most impressive as a coach, they've gotten better as the year has gone on. And you can see them coming together as a team.

I think that's a sign of great leadership, whether it's from the staff or from the leaders on their team. So we're expecting a tough game. That's for sure. It's going to be a war.

Q. Coach, what's one thing that you've been able to take away being an experience here playing in the SEC championship game and getting a chance to come back in preparation for the quarterfinals?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think the biggest thing is control what you can control. At the end of the day, the field is the field. And the opponent is the opponent and the game is the game.

And we always operate at our best when we have to do what we need to do, and it's a beautiful stadium. It's a big crowd. There's another really good team on the other side of the ball, but if we're trying to get the result we're looking for, we've gotta focus on what we need to do and that's playing good football, execution, details, effort, physicality. All the things that matter to us is what we try to focus on.

Q. When you talk about health as well going over a weird string of injuries on the offensive side of the ball, how has that time frame being off and how have you managed being able to make sure that you're still physical in preparation for what you're going to see from Arizona State?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think, one, our depth has been critical this season. You never know where you're going to need the depth. And we've needed it at some really key spots, running back, quarterback, receiver, offensive line.

We've been hit about at every position on the offensive side of the ball. A credit to our medical staff in getting the guys back when they have. And we've just had to manage our practice plans, and that was the plan going into the season. We said it might say 17 games to win a National Championship, and that's a lot more than it's ever been.

So the adjustment of the practice plans, how we've kind of worked with our players from a walk through perspective, a little bit more of an NFL mentality. Yet when we do have those physical days, we go cut it loose.

Have some guys been limited along the way, sure, but I do think it's been a good approach for us, and I think it's been helpful getting our guys ready to play each week.

Q. What have you been able to take away first playoff victory ever in the history after beating Clemson and then building off of that success in order to try to get your second in a couple of days?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think the biggest thing is, hey, at this stage, there's eight teams left, they're all good. And not every game is going to go perfect. Adversity is going to strike. And how we respond to that adversity is critical.

I looked at a couple things in last week's game. We get down 7 to nothing. I don't know if we've given up an opening drive touchdown all year. And then we respond to get up 21 to 7. Then within two plays, we lose our starting right tackle. We lose our center. We lose our starting running back, and nobody blinked.

We just went back to work. All the while, we went into that game playing without our starting wide receiver. So adversity is going to strike in games like this because the other teams are too good.

How you respond to it to get recalibrated and refocused I think is critical, and that's what our guys did the first game, and we're going to need to be able to do that again in this



ballgame.

Q. Everybody knows how good Cam Skattebo is. What about Sam Leavitt, is he able to take care of the football? What does he do that provides some challenges for your defense?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think he runs their offense really well, and you can see him growing as the season has gone on. They've got a really good scheme, and you can see when people are trying to commit themselves to stop the run. And when he's finding those one-on-one matchups to create explosive plays, it showed up in the Big 12 Championship game for him.

And the athleticism that he possesses as well that when things break down, he can use his legs. So they pose a lot of issues because of the balance they have from the offensive, and they wouldn't be able to have that balance if he didn't play the way he played. So the ball security, does a great job with that. The efficiency in the red area, and then the ability to make plays off schedule are all things that are very challenging.

Q. What's the keys for success for Texas to come away with a victory on Wednesday?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think the ball is paramount. Their turn over margin is incredible. I think they're plus 15 on the year, something like that, plus 16.

I think there's a lot of physicality that we're going to have to play this game with on both lines of scrimmage, and ultimately scoring touchdowns in the red area.

I don't think we can walk out of here thinking we're going to win this game 13 to 10. We're going to have to score some points. And to be able to do that, we're going to have to be really efficient in the red area.

Q. Word on the street is there's some talented football players in Texas. What does a game like this mean for recruiting because Arizona State likes (indiscernible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think at this stage, this is a great platform for all eight teams that are in the CFP. And we were fortunate, like I said, last year to be in the Final Four teams, to be in the 12-team playoff and now to be at eight and be on the stage, I think is great.

For us, it's I guess a validation of the trajectory of the program. That last year wasn't a fluke and that we're back here again and this is the standard at the University of Texas. I think everybody wants to play and be part of good programs, be part of good teams. So, again, this definitely

doesn't hurt us to be on this stage.

Q. Big 12 really got overlooked. But what can you say about the Big 12 competition. You remembered it and maybe now (inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, it's a very good conference and difficult one. The University of Texas I think was in the Big 12 for 27 years and won I think four conference championships. It's tough. It's difficult.

And for Arizona State to win it their first year in is a testament to Coach Dillingham, his staff, those players. You go into some tough environments on the road. The conference championship game is a tremendous environment in Dallas.

And so I think it does prepare you for these types of ballgames that you have to play in. I know it was helpful for us a year ago last season, but also helped us this season on the journey that we were on in the SEC.

Q. And finally, I also cover the Arizona Cardinals. Talk to Marvin Harrison, Junior from time to time. I can't believe that Arch and Marvin aren't like best buddies.

I'm curious, have you had any difference coaching him and I'm thinking about how Marvin might be reacting to having a famous father and RJ having a famous uncle. I'm curious what that looks like from your perspective?

STEVE SARKISIAN: You know, we don't treat him any different. We just coach him as normal. But we learn that throughout the recruiting process, you know. I thought they handled the recruiting process really well. It wasn't some big song and dance. It was more just focused on is this a good fit for him, and I think that was probably something that was a little bit attractive to them that he was going to get treated just like one of the other guys. And he's been that way.

If you took the name off the back of his jersey, all he is is a great teammate, works his tail off, competes at a really high level and wants to do whatever he can do to help the team win.

Q. Are you also surprised he and Marvin Harrison, Junior aren't tight? That stuns me.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, you know, Peyton is not his dad. So a little different format.

Q. I just would have thought, you know, having parents, whatever in the business, I'm thinking Ron James, Marvin Harrison, Arch Manning.

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Steve SARKISIAN: No, sir.

Q. Everybody talks about how this season could occur, but if you look at your roster and a lot of these guys are playing 50 and 60 games, state championship in high school. How much does their success in programs in high school help you recruit guys from those type of programs?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, we made that an emphasis a couple years ago. And a lot of that, I think that was our second and third recruiting classes. We really tried to identify really good players, obviously, with good character, but that were coming from programs that had either competed for state championships, won state championships.

And I think we're seeing the value of that now. We have guys that are very comfortable competing at a high level like this, and I think that wasn't unintentional. It was intentional to find guys that competed at a high level so that as we worked ourselves into this arena that our guys would be comfortable competing at a high level.

Q. Physically do you think it also helps them? It's not new to them to play this high level?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I'm sure it's helpful. The challenge as you go from one level to the next, right, high school to college ultimately to the NFL and what the playoffs look like there, they're unique in their own way, but I do think it's helpful from a, like I said, just kind of management of your body and your mind to compete at a high level as you get closer to the goal of winning a championship.

But I think the exposure, like I said, Colin, Anthony Hill, all those guys that did it at a high level, I think is helpful for them.

Q. Did you have to change the way you coached knowing the season could be longer?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah. We adjusted practice plans for sure. We adjusted practice plans all the way back into training camp and throughout the season to even now.

We're going to have to play 17 games if we want to win this whole thing, and that's -- you don't think three more games off of when you play 14 last season, what three more looks like, but that's three more games because they're all physical games. These eight teams that are left are all here because they're good, but they're physical. And that physicality can take its toll on you late in the season.

So we just want to make sure we have enough tread on our tires to do it at a really high level hopefully until January 20th.

Q. You mentioned the eight teams. There was 125 teams that would love to be right where you are today. How much do your guys appreciate this opportunity and embrace it?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think our guys really appreciate it. I think that, you know, a year ago, we were one of the four. And I think the natural thing was, oh, we're going to go to 12 and it's like a foregone conclusion. You just get back into the playoff.

Well, you turn around when those 12 teams were announced, we were the only one of those four teams from a year ago that made it back into the 12. So I think there's a great appreciation for just how difficult it is to make the College Football Playoff and then to have success when you're there.

I think the vets on our team don't forget the taste in their mouth from a year ago, in New Orleans when we came up short. And so I think there's a real sense of serious approach to what we're doing. It's very business like, but yet we have a fun group that loves to be together. But I do think there's a high level of appreciation of just being back in this stage.

Q. The process to get here is step by step, but you got a lot of senior leaders that have been here, they were here for five to seven, Gunnar Helm. They're going to be gone. They're going to be making a lot of money this time next year.

What example do you think they set for the younger guys that are going to be stepping into their shoes next year?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, what I love about it and what I love about our culture is we really try to highlight and promote the guys that do things the right way and whether that was Roschon Johnson and Bijan Robinson early on to a Jordan Whittington to a T'Vondre Sweat.

As guys grow in our program, we really try to push them to give them that voice, to give them that exposure so that other guys can see what it looks like. So I think it's a credit to Jahdae and Gunnar and Jake and those guys to kind of understand to follow the lead of that.

But I can already see it in younger players following these guys' leads. So hopeful that just becomes the natural progression for us. As guys move on, that next wave of guys step into that role of a leadership standpoint and hold

one another to the standard of what it is to be a Texas Longhorn football player.

Q. I talked to your seniors. They want to win this thing for you, too.

STEVE SARKISIAN: (Laughs).

Q. How does it make you feel because these guys have been through it. I mean, this did not happen overnight?

STEVE SARKISIAN: No, it did not. It's been a heck of a journey. And we all knew it was. I think if it was easy, somebody else would have been sitting here, right? And it's not easy. But it's really gratifying, right?

And we say it all the time, is it difficult, yes. Is it worth it, yes. And so these guys have poured a ton into this thing. Obviously our staff has too. So like I said, to be on this stage is amazing, but I think we're beyond just being happy to be here. We're trying to go win it. And that's a little different mentality maybe than we had a year ago.

Q. Steve, were there some things when you started out as a head coach that your age helped you with and that hurt you as you were trying to establish yourself?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I mean, I look back on it when I was 34 thinking I didn't know what the heck I was doing. I was day to day. It was like what's today. And I look where we're at now, and there's definitely a level of consistency that I have.

I will say when I was 34, I had a ton of energy. I think Kenny does, too. His energy is incredible. I think his rapport with his players is always helpful when you're a little younger. That energy is needed when you're struggling and you're one like I was. When I was first time coach at Washington, we were not a great team. But we started to build ourselves into a program. That went to four straight bowl games.

So I have a ton of respect for the job that he's done at Arizona State. But again, the energy I think is a huge asset when you're taking over a program that you're trying to rebuild and you're younger and I think the connection to the players, one, your own players, and two, from a recruiting standpoint.

Q. What about the energy now with everything the job entails, it's different than what it was in 2009?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think the energy needed on that, and I also think intuition and kind of thinking outside

the box in this era is important, too.

And he doesn't have years of experience of this is how I've always done it as a head coach. So he's got a little bit more of a blank canvas that he can kind of shape in how to build the program and manage the portal and manage NIL and manage in the new CFP, managing conference realignment. All those type of things, I think is probably helpful for him as well.

Q. I was going to ask you about this. Talk to me about the fact that you've worked -- (inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I was aware of Beaufort High School. We had -- their head coach actually worked with us, Jess worked with us in Atlanta. So very aware of Beaufort, and we recruited Isaiah coming out of High School. And obviously he chose to go to Alabama.

And then when he went back into the portal, it made an easy kind of rerecruit because we had already known he, his mom and dad and everybody. Glad to have him. He's a special player. Hopefully he's good to go here on the 1st.

Q. (Inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: What I loved about LaValle was we worked throughout the week and come game day, man, he made me feel so confident in myself. It was never a big rah-rah speech. It was more about, hey, you put in the work, go trust in what you do and let's go do what we do.

And so it always felt so simple when I was there. And so they use the term KISS it at BYU, keep it simple, stupid. And so we try to keep it simple here too. Like every week, it's not some new thing, and I don't have the circus coming into town to try to motivate the players.

We try to build a level of consistency in our approach to what we do, and we value the things that are important so that we can have confidence to go play at a high level when the game comes.

Q. Josh Harris came back a few weeks ago with the Chargers and he said the experience was kind of surreal. He did it a couple of weeks ago and he is doing it again. What is the experience like when you walk into that stadium?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, Mercedes Benz some would argue is the best stadium in the country. It is definitely unique. This time of year it sucks because you don't get to open the roof, and just watching that roof open is a spectacle in and of itself.

But, again, a lot of great memories, and a lot of great moments, coached a lot of really good players over those two years, and coached in some big games in college in that stadium as well, whether it be at Alabama or now here at Texas. So it's always you think of it, man, you're in that stage. You're in this arena means you're probably pretty good.

Q. Well established rapport with (indiscernible). What are some of the challenges in trying to not recreate it, when you lose that entire receiving core?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think it's definitely challenging. This is a little bit of the day and age of college football. And especially for us, you know, we're an NFL driven style offense, and it's very intricate and it's very detail oriented.

So his experience I think is helpful to bring those guys along quickly. And I think it goes without saying you can see the rapport that he has with Matt Golden, the rapport that he has with Gunnar Helm.

I think you're seeing the development of the rapport with DeAndre Moore and Isaiah as the year has gone on and definitely the rapport with the running backs. I think Quinn's management of the offense has been really good. But I think he took this in stride really well and assumed the role of I'm the leader now, and I gotta get these guys on board as quickly as possible to have the success we want to have.

Q. It feels like those last three weeks (indiscernible), is that a part of this that Isaiah was hurt and Quinn was hurt and you're trying to piece things together and once you kind of get it together --

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, this has been a challenging year from that aspect, you know, Quinn goes down early in the year. Actually DeAndre was a little banged up early in the year. Then Quinn gets back. Isaiah gets banged up.

So a couple of the main staples have been Gunnar and Matt. And we've seen the success they've had, but we're at our best when we have all our weapons. And hopefully like I said, hopefully on the 1st, that'll be the case.

Q. Vernon gets married on the spring game. Michael Taaffe is an all American walk on. Tre Wisner has done what he does. Do you have a chance to appreciate all that too throughout this?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Oh, yeah. I love that. I love all of these guys and the stories that we have. And there's a lot of really cool things to be proud of as their coach and just looking at the growth and personal development of so

many of these guys, but yet everybody's gotta a unique journey that they're on at the University of Texas and then we're on this journey collectively together.

So we don't ever not take the time to appreciate that and all that we're doing. And I do think there's a real level of gratitude on our team for the opportunities that we have.

Q. If you turn on the tape of last year, what do you see? What do you make of the stories?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I see a team that is really well coached in all three phases, that plays hard, that plays physical. I see a team that has progressively gotten better as the year has gone on. And it's pretty simple to understand if they're two deep on both sides of the ball, the 44 players, 33 of them are transfers.

So it takes a bit of time to find that rapport. But I think it's a real credit to Coach Dillingham of a guy who's maximized this era of college football. And of course, they probably weren't picked very high. There's so many new faces. And the job that he's done and that their players have done has been tremendous.

And I know there's been a lot of other great stories around college football this season, and they probably don't get enough credit for being a great story this year in college football for the job that he's done.

Q. (Indiscernible).

STEVE SARKISIAN: We just turn on the tape. We don't treat one team different than the next. We turn on the tape. This is their strengths. This is maybe an area where we can try to take advantage of them. Here's what's going to be important in this game to go execute it, and we got a ton of respect for them, that's for sure. You turn on the tape, it's easy to respect them and say we need a good week of work to get ourselves prepared to play.

Q. (Inaudible).

STEVE SARKISIAN: It's incredible. I've been saying it all week. I was 34 when I was first-time head coach, and I can't imagine being in a College Football Playoff at that time, you know. Every day was like riding the emotional roller coaster for me when you're trying to rebuild a program.

So what he's been able to do in year two, credit to him, credit to his staff and then credit to his players and those players buying into him and what they're doing, so again a ton of respect for the job that he's done.

Q. Now that the physical work is mostly wrapped up, any keys for the next couple of guys to get your guys ready to go?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think make sure we're dialed into the details of the plan in all three phases, make sure they're in the right mental space, emotionally, physically we're there. Emotionally you want to be there so that we can have the confidence when that ball is kicked off at 1:10 to go out and do what we do. I try to remove the wondering and what ifs and just let our guys trust the plan and go cut it loose.

Q. (Indiscernible).

STEVE SARKISIAN: I love our game and I love it from a fan's perspective. When I was a little kid, I loved to watch it. I love watching it now. And I have a ton of appreciation now more than ever having been in this seat long enough to know how hard everybody is working every day for those 60 or so plays they get on their side of the ball and appreciation for the players like that can make those plays at critical moments, you know.

I was admiring Michael Penix last night, having played against him in this game a year ago, and the come back that they made. They have the lead. Then they got the come back and Jayden Daniel, those two rookie quarterbacks and what those guys were doing was awesome. Watching Bijan and what he is doing, there are just a lot of story lines in that game. It was fun.

Q. (Indiscernible).

STEVE SARKISIAN: And do I need some commitments, I said I could go out and get four commitments today, but those four commitments aren't going to be good enough to compete at a level we need to compete at.

I credit Coach Flood for staying the course. And at the end, you sign a Kelvin and a Cam and a DJ and all those guys that kind of avalanche that happened at the end of it all, I think really helped changed the trajectory of our program.

And as much as the appreciation of a Christian Jones and a Jake Majors, these guys that were here when we got here, I think that group of guys shifted in the thought process of how we're going to build this team, and we're going to build the team inside out.

And we definitely did that on the offensive side of the ball in that class, and I think you saw us really doing it now with the defensive line class from the portal a year ago to what we did in the high school ranks this year.

Q. Does that speak to just leadership and the brotherhood those guys have together?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah. I think so. There's a level of maturity in that group. And they're all different. Like Kelvin is like this so mature, he walks in the door from day one, and he was the only non mid year. The other six guys were mid year. He comes in the summer and starts as a true freshman.

And then you have DJ who's like every day, I always joke him. He's like my son. He always has something going on. I have a great relationship with him. Two totally different guys, but yet in the end, the rapport that all of them have together I think is helpful.

And I think there's a credit for like Jake in all that, too, because here's all these new faces, but if you ask all those guys his connection to them all, for them all to stick around so far has been pretty incredible. Not a lot of people do that.

And for us not to have to go in the portal to recruit offensive linemen when every other school is chasing -- if a guy goes in the portal and says he's an offensive tackle and started any games, it's like a flock to them, and we just don't have to do that. We're fortunate that we're developing those guys from inside our program.

Q. It's kind of a rebuild next year, though, right?

STEVE SARKISIAN: We'll see. We'll see what that looks like. But, again, I have a lot of confidence in we're getting a glimpse of who Trevor Goosby is. We have a lot of high hopes for Jaydon Chatman and Cojoe.

And, again, I'm leaving some guys out, but I really think that -- yeah, Baker -- I really think we've got a really good room, and I think they value the work ethic that it takes to become the player that we're asking them to become. So I think we're going to be okay.

Q. (Inaudible)?

STEVE SARKISIAN: It's been fascinating because I think Blake sees a little bit of himself in Michael, and I think Michael -- in essence, Blake gave Michael something to shoot for of who you could be in this program. And the work ethic that he has is undeniable. His football IQ is incredible.

But I think the thing that -- I don't want to say surprised us was his natural leadership is infectious, and he didn't waiver off of that just because he came in as a walk on

from West Lake High. He knew who he was and he knew the standard. And so I think he helped change the mentality some of championship mentality in our program.

Now, we brought in a lot of guys that year that were state champs, played for the state championship games and so on and so forth. But probably nobody was more important to that than Michael, but I do think he and Blake have that rapport that is helpful.

Q. What attracted to you to Blake as a coach?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I wanted somebody that had a real connection to the program, and so that was the first part. At the time I was trying to hire Jeff Banks, but I didn't know if I was going to be able to get him out of Alabama.

Blake was a special teams coordinator actually at Ole Miss. And so it was a little bit of a safety net for me. I knew he could coach safeties, but yet if for some reason I didn't get Coach Banks, I was getting a guy who had been a coordinator in the SEC on special teams.

So now it's been helpful because I really have two special teams guys where Blake can help Jeff so much. But again when I got to know him, I felt like this guy is going to be a really good recruiter. He's a good young coach. He's coached football at a high level. Wasn't somebody who had been a D-2 guy. Had been in the SEC. He had been really good coaches, Will Muschamps of the world, the Lane Kiffins of the world. Just seemed like a natural fit. He was an ex player, a starter, opportunity for him to come home and help us build something.

Q. Are you still able to get done what you wanted to do?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah. I didn't ever for a second feel like we were handcuffed, you know. And that's a credit to that kid. It's a credit to Coach Flood. You think in one game, seven snaps in, you're at Kyle Field in that game playing left tackle against a really good defensive front; that A&M front was excellent.

And then two weeks later, you're going in at right tackle against a really good Clemson front with some talented NFL players. And so he just has a really good demeanor about himself. The moment never seems too big. But he plays hard. He plays tough and very impressive.

Q. Seems like a very smart kid; is that correct?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, he is. He's extremely intelligent. Very competitive. I think his basketball background helps him. Definitely see the athleticism. But

the physical development that he's had in our program over the last couple years has been really pretty incredible. It's one thing to add weight, but still keep the mobility that he has, and then the level of physicality that he plays with is very impressive.

Q. You mentioned in the joint press conference kind of the hot young coach path that you were on. How do you go from that hot young coach to having that sustainable career and have multiple stops in big programs?

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think you've gotta be willing to learn and you gotta have some humility. I don't pretend to know it all. I try to surround myself with really good people.

I'm not afraid to steal from other people that when they do something good, whether it's a play, whether it's visiting with other coaches, other staffs, NFL, college. Again, I think you gotta be versatile. You gotta be willing to adapt, right, use the adage from Coach Saban all the time "there's a reason dinosaurs aren't on the earth anymore. They couldn't adapt."

So we try to be adaptable to the times. Again, I think you gotta have a sense of humility and understand that you don't have all the answers and then try to surround myself with really good people that I can trust.

Q. (Indiscernible).

STEVE SARKISIAN: His energy is pretty incredible. This guy, he brings his energy at a very high level, and you can tell it's infectious to his staff and to his team, and I think the creativity, they're a very creative team that way. Offensively most notably, but really defensively. They believe in who they are and they do it at a very high level.

Q. Do you have any interest in the NFL?

STEVE SARKISIAN: I have interest in winning on January 1st. That's what I have interest in. That's a hypothetical. I'm not doing that with you. I don't know. Okay.

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