

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

Saturday, December 28, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Illinois Fighting Illini

Barry Lunney Jr.

Luke Altmeyer

Press Conference

BARRY LUNNEY JR.: I'd love an opening statement. I usually don't give you guys an opening statement at home.

Obviously, we're thrilled to be here. It's been a great week already. Love the way our guys have been locked in, in practices, both at the homesite and here at the bowl game. I know our football team in general is super excited to play, offensively.

I think we're pretty healthy, and the guys have been really tuned in to what's going on in the game plan. Obviously, a tremendous challenge as we go and face South Carolina and their defense. Much respect for them.

But, I know our guys are excited to play, and we're looking forward to getting this game underway soon.

Q. What stands out to you about South Carolina's defense?

BARRY LUNNEY JR.: Well, obviously, when you watch them on film, you just see a super well-coached [team] -- like you would think when you're playing a team in the Citrus Bowl that's a 9-3 SEC team, that's what you would expect, to play somebody that is super well-coached. They've got really good players across the board. That's what you see.

Obviously, the way they're playing the last six, seven weeks of the season, playing as well as anybody probably in the country. I think that starts with the defense and the way the defense tackles, runs the football, play really aggressive. They play within their scheme, and they play really confidently.

LUKE ALTMYER: Yeah, I think Coach hit all those points. If you win nine games in that conference -- I was in it for



two years and I lived in it forever, and if you win nine games in that conference you're probably a pretty good team.

Defensively they're a fast, physical, confident group. They trust their scheme really, really well, and they fly around and tackle well. A very confident group.

I know they will be going into this game, because of their success that they've had.

It'll be a challenge for us, much like we've faced all year. We know that we take care of kind of what we do internally, I think we'll be fine going into the game. Very excited for the challenge.

Q. Luke, how much was it announcing your decision to come back as early as you did, how much of that was to clear the plate and let you focus on getting to this game, preparing for this game and then preparing for the future?

LUKE ALTMYER: Yeah, there's a lot that goes into it. I really wanted to make a decision kind of sooner rather than later. Obviously, if I was playing in the bowl game that was a pretty good indication that I would probably be back and wanted to really just get my feet pretty firm where I'm at.

Once, I kind of made a decision in my head and with my team that I was going to be back, the next step was to really, I guess, announce it in this day and age, so that's kind of what you've got to do.

It was a no-brainer. I love being here. I love the coaches I do it with, love my teammates. I love the community that I'm in. They've helped me here as long as I can, so hopefully with this new NCAA rule I can just keep coming back. Yeah, I really enjoy it.

Q. Luke, we talked about obviously your growth on the field, but how have you grown personally the last couple years, and Barry, for you, what have you seen from him over the last few years?

LUKE ALTMYER: Yeah, it's been really a complete 180



just from, I think, me mentally. I think coming off of last season. I knew there had to be some sort of change to kind of get to where I want to go. I had struggles, obviously, physically with my play, but I think those physical struggles were really a mental, kind of a spiritual, emotional thing. I knew I had to do work there to really take a step, and I did with coaches like this, Coach Lunney and outside sources, pastors, psychologists, to really help grow my tools off of the field. I think that's been the whole change.

I think at the end of the day my talents are my talents. The player that you see on the field today was really the player that you saw last year. It's just the confidence and the mental strength that I have spiritually and emotionally and mentally has really gone to a place where I didn't think it could go.

That's just thanks to the people around me. That's really why I want to be here. I'm surrounded by so many great people and people who know Christ and people who know me. I really understand who I am as a person and know I can just keep on taking it to new levels and new heights. Just had so much fun with it this year and excited to keep moving forward with that.

BARRY LUNNEY JR.: Yeah, I would absolutely -- I don't know if I've seen in my coaching career a young man -- to Luke's point, his skills are his skills. When we first got him, he first came here, you could just see the talent. Obviously, Luke possesses a lot of physical talent and really did some good things last year for us in his first year here. But, just the change that we've seen from him and just -- it's been really fun to watch, because I would really just completely stamp exactly what he just said, just the change of -- it was really fun to see his true personality, his true self. Just him being comfortable in his own skin, knowing who he is and knowing that the results don't define him has really, I think, allowed him to play with a great deal of freedom.

He certainly understands the challenges and responsibilities of being the quarterback of a Big Ten football program at a marquee university. He's really just gravitated toward that role and just taken it to a new level, and it's been fun to watch.

Q. Barry, you've added a couple transfers to your offense here. What do you like about Ethan Hampton, and what does Justin Bowick add to you, too?

BARRY LUNNEY JR.: Yeah, obviously, we're excited to add them across the board. I know you're specifically asking offensive guys here and guys that I can comment on. Justin is a guy that we're really excited. He's a big, huge frame, who in limited action last year due to health challenges really started to take off.

I did a lot of research on him. He came from EIU, who I have a dear friend with Chris Wilkerson there and he just raved about who he was and what he was. You could see that interacting with him. I think he's going to add a lot of competition to that room. A big target who, again, had a really good year in a limited sample size last year at Ball State.

Ethan, once we set out and knew we were losing Donovan. Obviously, I kind of mentioned at home about how important it is for us to structure the room with experience and infuse that with young talent and compete, and that's what Ethan wants to do. He wants to be able to come here and compete. Obviously, somebody that has I think eight or nine games' starting experience. Obviously, it's been talked about a lot, he was a quarterback for the NIU team that beat Notre Dame. It wasn't just Ethan, it was the whole team that beat Notre Dame, but that experience was appealing to us.

He's an in-state kid that is familiar with our program, and we reached out to him, and there was some mutual interest there. All of a sudden, it kind of came together nicely and kind of fit the bill of what we were looking for to help stabilize that room.

Q. Justin Stepp obviously has a history with South Carolina. Has he said anything this week about wanting this game a little bit more than any other opponent?

BARRY LUNNEY JR.: Well, not really. Obviously, he's familiar with the coaches and has got a great deal of respect for Coach Beamer and the guys on the staff. I know he's good friends with Coach White and several of the guys on the staff. I just know that.

I've got a history with Justin myself. I worked with him at Arkansas. Obviously, we were thrilled to be able to get him last year in the off-season, and he's really done a great job helping our room, helping our offense, helping the receivers grow, and we're thrilled to have Justin.

Obviously, we're thrilled to be in the Citrus Bowl. I think it's a unique situation. He's playing his former team. I know all he wants to do is help our football team do the best they can do when it comes to game time.

LUKE ALTMYER: Yeah, I don't think he's brought that distraction into it. I know it can be really easy to. I know there was a kind of deal where we could have played Ole Miss and that kind of thing, so it's very similar, I think. I know if we did, I wouldn't have let that distract me or our team, and I wouldn't have even talked about it a lick.

He's, obviously, been super focused on getting his receivers in particular ready for this game, and, obviously, there's a little bit of excitement to it for him and that's understandable, and that's just human nature. I'm excited for him to go out there and experience that, and his family, as well. Excited to go play for him. That'll be really fun.

Q. Barry, obviously without Pat in this game there seemed to be an opportunity for some of those younger wide receivers. What have you seen from those guys and what can this be for them to be springboarded into winter, spring, fall camp?

BARRY LUNNEY JR.: Yeah, anytime you watch a bowl game, if you watched the games this season already, inevitably, there's somebody on every one of those games they talk about, it's like, this is his first career catch or he's only played 22 snaps or has never started a game. You see guys across the country get opportunities they hadn't had during the course of the year. That's one of the byproducts of how some of this has trended towards over the last few years in bowl games.

You have opt-outs, you have transfers, whatnot. It creates opportunities across the country. We have a fair share of those that will be presented at game time, and I think they're excited. They've worked really hard.

You're talking about, obviously, to answer your specific question about the receivers. The good news about those guys is that they've had roles this year. They've gotten their feet wet. They know what it's like to play in Big Ten games. I think that part of it's really good for them, because they know what to expect to a large degree. I think they're really excited about their opportunity, and there will be plenty of those when it comes time to kick it off.

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