

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

Saturday, December 28, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Illinois Fighting Illini

Aaron Henry

Miles Scott

Press Conference



what you're going to see in LaNorris Sellers and what's the challenge of containing him?

AARON HENRY: Well, I think back to even last year, Toledo, Dequan Finn, I think over the course of the last couple seasons we've played some guys who were really, really talented and who have presented problems to us.

So I think facing a young man like will LaNorris Sellers, I think he's a little bit different. The reason why he's a little bit different is because he is 6'3" and I think he's 230, 225. He's just a bigger target. He has a live arm. Obviously they're on a really, really hot game win streak, and he was the Freshman of the Year for a reason, and he's done a really good job for them.

I do think over the course of the last couple years, some of the teams that we have played, not holistically but with some of the things the quarterbacks have been able to do in terms of running the ball and being able to run around a little bit, they have helped us to a degree prepare for a young man of this caliber. It's not like we're going into this game blind and we haven't faced a running quarterback all season.

It's really, really hard to replicate that. I think kudos to Trey Petty. I know some of you guys probably don't know who Trey Petty is, but he's been our look team quarterback, but he's done a tremendous job, and LaNorris Sellers is really hard to replicate, but he's done a tremendous job for us over the last 15 practices of really kind of giving us that look.

MILES SCOTT: I would also will Dequan Finn was probably the first person I thought of going back to last season, just the way that he's able to escape the pocket and evade defenders. I seen one play against Clemson where it was like a cartoon, four dudes was on top of him and he just escaped out of it and ran for like 30 yards after.

So he's definitely a problem, and I feel like a lot of the quarterbacks that we've seen are talented for sure, but I think LaNorris Sellers is in a different category.

Q. Aaron, South Carolina is making a switch at

AARON HENRY: First and foremost, good morning. I think it's only right to let you guys know that I woke up feeling the cheesiest. (Laughter.)

Without further ado, obviously an opening statement, we're really excited to get ready to play a phenomenal South Carolina football team. They've done a great job this season. Obviously they're 9-3, so I know there's a lot of history in them trying to get to their 10th win, just like us.

As a team, I feel like our guys are locked in. They're focused. From a lot of the practices that we had back at home, parlaying to yesterday, I think our guys are ready. We're really excited about this opportunity, know it's going to be a really, really good football game, and I just can't express to you guys how thrilled we are to just have this opportunity.

One, I think for our younger players, it gave us 15 more practices. In a day and age now in practice, being able to practice with your players, especially your young players, having guys enter into the portal, whatnot, that is vital in regards to your program. That was really, really big, and just seeing how our guys just collectively, even throughout the season, came together and over the course of the last couple of weeks with these practices and getting ready to come down here, just you form a lot of really cool -- you kind of see a lot of really cool relationships that you don't really get to see throughout the course of the season because they don't really have a lot of school going on.

It's been a good time. We're really excited about the opportunity ahead, and without further ado, let's get rolling.

Q. Aaron and Miles, you've obviously played some really good quarterbacks this year, whether it's Jalen or Dillon. Have any of those guys prepared you for

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offensive coordinator. Mike Shula is coming in to call plays for them. Does that change anything you have to do defensively or do you think they're going to run the same sort of schemes and everything at you guys?

AARON HENRY: It's funny, you asked that, so I had a chance yesterday to watch some Alabama film, to watch some Carolina Panthers film -- I'm joking. I really believe that LaNorris Sellers is so talented -- I'm sure they'll have some wrinkles in the way Coach Shula calls it. I'm sure he'll have his own twists. They've had a lot of time to prepare for it. I don't know if I really envision them just getting away from everything that they've done because they've had so much success with it.

I know it's all about trying to keep his quarterback comfortable. I'm sure there will be some wrinkles there in regards to how they utilize him, but the film kind of speaks for itself. My grandmother used to tell me if it ain't broke, don't break it. They had a lot of success in what they've been doing in regards to how they've utilized him.

I'm sure there will be some wrinkles. I'm not really anticipating a complete wholesale change offensively. If they do, I'll be shocked, but I think that's why bowl games are kind of played. I'm sure there's going to be some shocking things, but I just think as a defense, there is nothing in terms from a schematic standpoint that we haven't seen this year, outside of a talent like LaNorris Sellers. But from a schematic standpoint, in the Big Ten you see everything. We've saw spread offenses. We've saw power football. You kind of see the gambit.

I want to congratulate Coach Shula in getting the OC job, but I'm not anticipating a complete wholesale change in regards to the offense.

Q. What have you seen from guys like James Kreutz and Malachi Hood in the last five, six weeks since Dylan has been out and how they've helped stabilize losing a team captain like him?

MILES SCOTT: Man, honestly, even with James and Malachi and every other young guy that's on the team, you see them step up into positions, whether they're just thrown into the fire or whether they've just got to come up. It's just good to see James -- James is a super smart dude and so is Malachi, as well, so the talent that they have hadn't hindered them on the field. It feels like we haven't really lost big parts of the defense, knowing that those guys were prepared to step in and take advantage of their roles.

AARON HENRY: I guess to echo that, I think part of the deal, Coach Archie, this is his first year at the University of Illinois, and during our hiring process, one of the things that

I look for or that we look for as a defensive staff is people being able to teach. You have to be an elite teacher. It's not about -- I'm not really concerned about how much football you know because I think being able to teach football is relatively easy, but how well can you take a complicated system and scheme and how well can you teach it to somebody that may not know it as well.

So during Coach Archie's interview process, we kind of put guys through the ringer a little bit, and there's a couple of questions we ask them in regards to teaching and how does he teach.

Coach Archie McDaniel is an incredible teacher, and the way he's prepared that room has been absolutely awesome because, like, even going into fall camp, we knew because it happens every year, we knew that there were going to have to be multiple players that played behind Dylan Rosiek, and the way he's prepared those guys has been absolutely incredible, but along with that, Grant Morgan. Grant Morgan was an all-conference, All-American linebacker in the SEC, and the way he's complemented Coach Archie in working together and teaching these guys has been absolutely incredible.

Then to see their growth from the beginning of the season towards the latter part of the season has been absolutely awesome.

These young men, they've literally been waiting for these opportunities and moments, and when they've came up, they haven't shied away from them. I think a part of their growth and development outside of their skill set and ability, it's really been the foundation of how the coaches have taught them, which I tip my hat to Coach Archie and Coach Morgan.

Q. Aaron, you reloaded on your defensive front with some guys from other schools. What do you like about what those four guys bring to your defense next year?

AARON HENRY: Yeah, man, I think the key thing is to make sure we can win the line of scrimmage. You can have the best players on the back end as possible. We pride ourselves on playing well in the secondary. But we all know SEC, Big Ten, Pac-12, wherever you're at, NFL, it starts up front.

We've made it a point, especially this off-season and moving forward, to just find experience and try to find the best players that fit us. I know there's a lot of people in the portal looking for stars. They're looking for this, looking for that. This ain't how we operate. We're looking for, one, experience, if you have experience, and two, are you a fit?

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Do you have experience and are you a fit?

A lot of the young men that we've went after, they are experienced and they fit what we do and how we do it. So we've been able to add a couple of significant pieces that we believe.

I know oftentimes people can watch film and say, well, that kid wasn't a good player, but he played 600 snaps. Well, they didn't think that he -- they obviously thought he was a pretty good player if he played a bunch of snaps for them. He probably could be utilized different in their system and scheme.

For us as coaches, we're just trying to find guys that fit our system, that fit how we do things, and then from there, because we know we can develop players. If anybody knows anything about Illinois football, we are the best in the country at not taking four and five-stars. That's easy. Taking four and five-star players are easy. I can do that with my eyes closed. But we take guys who are zero, one, two, three-star recruits, walk-ons, and we develop them at a really, really high clip.

If we can take a guy who's an experienced player at another school and he has a year or two years with us, we've got a pretty good opportunity to be good. That's what we pride ourselves on.

Q. Miles, along those lines, I'm curious what it is about the system that has allowed you to go from walk-on receiver to second-year starting safety in this defense.

MILES SCOTT: Man, honestly, I have to tip my hat to the coaches. I've even talked to guys that have went here and went to other places and they truly tell me it's not like this anywhere else in the country. Just the way that these guys are able to truly make it a family feel, like outside of football, and then within football, we learn so much about the game that it makes it easy going out there on the field. We're so prepared. Week in, week out, season in, season out, fall camp in, fall camp out. I'm prepared for everything. Every time I step out there on the field, I'm prepared because of the way Coach Henry prepares us. The way that coach B prepares us, we're always doing football 101. All we talk about is football and the ins and outs of the game.

And I feel like that's really what develops us as a whole, whether you're a walk-on or a high recruit, we're all getting developed and you see that year in and year out since Coach B has been here.

Q. Miles, what's this game mean for you guys, the opportunity against South Carolina and a chance to

get a 10th win? What's this mean for you guys?

MILES SCOTT: Honestly, it's a chance to make history. We'll be I believe the fourth team to win 10 games in Illinois history. It's huge in terms of the grand scheme of things.

But at the end of the day, it's just another game. We've got to see it as that and not put so much on it. We're prepared for the moment. We haven't had 15 practices yet, but we're closing in on that number, and just taking it one day at a time, not trying to make it bigger than what it is.

That's how I live my life, too, just one day at a time. I'm not even worried about tomorrow. I'm just worried about today's practice and the travails of today because tomorrow brings enough of its own and yesterday is gone, so all we're worried about is today.

AARON HENRY: Preach!

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