

# Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

Saturday, December 28, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

**South Carolina Gamecocks**

**Clayton White**

**Alex Huntley**

Press Conference



CLAYTON WHITE: Good morning. Obviously we're definitely excited to be here. It's a great opportunity. It's always great to be playing football in December in the state of Florida. Obviously I'm excited for our players to have an opportunity to play their last game in this beautiful state. Obviously we've got goals, we've got aspirations to finish the season off strong just like our opponent.

Speaking of our opponent, we knew -- I knew once we saw Illinois and it was coached by Brett Bielema, I've coached with a lot of coaches that's coached underneath him, so I really wasn't surprised when I watched the tape over the past couple weeks and the type of team that we're facing. Very well-coached, good players. They're really solid at all positions, definitely on offense, and not really a weak spot at all. Definitely excited for this opportunity. Can't wait.

Any questions?

**Q. Boogie, Vershon just mentioned he was in that team meeting after the Alabama game where you guys talked with Shane. What do you remember from that meeting about how you guys went into it?**

ALEX HUNTLEY: Yeah, just really setting the standard for ourselves. I think the whole year we all kind of knew what we could be, and that was just kind of one of those moments where if we wanted to accomplish what we wanted to accomplish, we had to win out. We had to do what we had to do, and we all knew it was possible and we all knew we should do that. That's all it was.

**Q. Clayton, I imagine getting to the bowl game is nice because you can just focus on the bowl game, but the last couple weeks, what was the process like of balancing preparing for a bowl game but also having to deal with the transfer portal and all of that?**

CLAYTON WHITE: Yes, obviously over the years, NCAA is trying their best to make it compatible for the coaches. They've obviously moved the signing day up. That was a big plus. We didn't have to worry about trying to sign guys, as well, so it was actually a little bit better than in the past.

But you definitely want to try to get the best of both worlds. You've got to be very organized with your time, and Coach Beamer sets a lot of time for us to make sure we're doing both, trying to make sure we're obviously getting ready for Illinois, keeping our players intact, making sure they're feeling the love from us as well in all types of ways, and obviously just got to do a great job of dividing up with your staff and you're sharp on just being organized on both.

**Q. Boogie, what can you share about your battles with Vershon over the years?**

ALEX HUNTLEY: Yeah, just really what he said, iron sharpens iron. It's cool to see your teammate but also one of your best friends grow as a player and as a man. It's been real cool. That's my brother. I'm going to miss it. But it's crazy to think about because probably over 100,000 times, like a crazy number. I've seen it all. It's crazy.

CLAYTON WHITE: Especially if you're counting pods and one-on-ones and team practices, easy 100,000 reps for sure over five years.

**Q. Coach, last week nearly every defensive player that was talking said that Fred Johnson is someone who next year they think is going to step up in a huge way. What do you see out of him to makes him capable as a player?**

CLAYTON WHITE: I think it's an honor when one of your older teammates kind of appoints you as someone who has an opportunity to take the next step. The reason is because of how he carries himself every day.

We feel like most of our guys that we bring here are athletic enough and smart enough to play at this level, but if you can be a true freshman and consistently do it throughout the four or five months that he's been here, I



think that's the most impressive part that we've seen in Fred, JayR, whatever you want to call him. But I think it comes from his parents, I really do. I think his parents are a military background, both of them, and I do think that has paid off for him in a tremendous way, and it's going to pay off for him in the future.

Obviously athletically he's probably one of our top athletes on the football team when it comes to just athleticism, God-given ability. He's one of the top five by far, I think. I know for sure. But I do believe that his parents' background, his military background has paid a huge dividend on his discipline and his consistency.

**Q. Coach, when you watch Luke Altmyer on film, what are some things that stand out about him and the challenges he'll present?**

CLAYTON WHITE: Yes, sometimes it's good to watch. When you're in the regular season, you don't get a chance to watch the entire season on that Sunday so you watch it throughout the week, and then by Thursday you realize how good of a player he is.

But I've had a chance obviously it's been two weeks since we realized we were playing Illinois. He's a really good quarterback. I think his mobility to move around the pocket is big time. I think once he gets outside the pocket he's a threat. He makes smart decisions. He has under 10 interceptions this year, so he's taking care of the football.

But he's a good player. He could play in any conference, any team in America, but he's definitely one of those quarterbacks I didn't really know about until we were playing him, but I definitely know who he is now for sure.

**Q. Boogie, you talked about it a little bit before Senior Day, but has it hit you this is the final game in five years, and is there a moment you think it might hit you on game day, Gamecock walk, whatever, where, oh, this is kind of it for me?**

ALEX HUNTLEY: I think after the locker room after the game. I'm trying my best to not really think about it, just trying to be where I'm at, enjoy this time and just get ready for the game. That's kind of what's most important -- not kind of. That is what is most important. That's where my head is at, but after the game I'm sure I'll be feeling it.

**Q. Boogie, as you think about the memory over the years, you're from Blythewood, played your high school ball at Hammond, what's the pride you take in winning and playing at a high level for Columbia?**

ALEX HUNTLEY: Yeah, it's one of those things where it

really is personal, just being able to represent from the place you grew up and the people you know very well. It is very personal, and I'm just glad to be able to do it. I'm glad to be able to make Columbia happy, have people to just represent.

It's sad that it's coming to an end, but it's been an amazing time.

**Q. Clayton, after the year your defense had, it wasn't a surprise to see your name pop up in some head coaching things. What did it mean to you to get an extension, get a raise, and everyone on the staff almost coming back and doing the same?**

CLAYTON WHITE: Yeah, I would definitely start by saying I'm obviously proud of how our guys attacked this year from January 1st. We knew that we had an opportunity the way we end the last year in 2023 if we got the nucleus back and added a couple pieces and then some freshmen popped, that we had a chance to be one of the best defenses. We said that right after the Clemson game last year.

But yes, it is very humbling and I'm grateful for all that good old stuff that you guys -- the contract extension. To me being here and a Gamecock is the most important thing.

I think obviously what Shane has built here, I think we definitely want to continue to keep it going, but it was very important for us to come back, get those guys back and have a great year, but we're excited about it.

**Q. Clayton, the passing combination of Altmyer to Bryant, how difficult is that from your standpoint? Is Coach Gray working on a plan for that passing combination?**

CLAYTON WHITE: Yes, I think Illinois, like I said, they had a receiver that's -- they have one guy that's opting for the pros. They have another guy who's the active leader right now in yards and touchdowns, I believe, in Z-Frank. I think those guys are really good, and then I think we've got to do a great job of understanding where they are located on the field, and they have a great running game, as well.

I think the most important thing is we have to play smart football. We have to practice well the next couple days, play winning football and do what we do, just make sure we're being who we are, getting after the football and trying to get some turnovers and play gang tackling and all those good ol' things.

**Q. Alex, I'll give you the last word on the Vershon thing. Who's won more battles between you and him**

over the years?

ALEX HUNTLEY: It's been me for sure.

**Q. Landslide?**

ALEX HUNTLEY: Yeah, landslide. It's been a little mix, but I'll take -- got to give him some love, but I will take that little step up. A little bit.

**Q. Four of Illinois's offensive linemen were named to some various All-Big Ten team, first, second, honorable mention, what have you. Did y'all know that as a defensive line? Does that give you a little extra motivation? How do you view that?**

ALEX HUNTLEY: Yeah, just have respect for their whole team, like Coach said. Great coached team, great players. Just have the same respect for each team we play. Just nameless, faceless opponents kind of thing, have great respect for them. But we're just going to go out there and execute our game plan, play hard.

**Q. Clayton, we don't know how it's going to go yet with trying to get Bam Martin another year, but what have conversations been like since the NCAA passed that rule that maybe he can come back next year with the JuCo exemption?**

CLAYTON WHITE: Well, obviously when the rule first -- when the Pavia rule, let's just say it, the Pavia rule, the NCAA when they write things like that, they make it very hard to understand the language unless you really can read and get a professional person to explain it to you. Obviously Bam, his case is different than Pavia's because he's a year older. You've got to fight for what you want, and obviously we're going to fight for it.

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