

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

Saturday, December 28, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

South Carolina Gamecocks

Mike Shula

Vershon Lee

Press Conference



Q. Mike, you've mentioned this a little bit the last couple weeks. What's it been like for you stepping in, kind of getting acclimated? You've been around the program, so it's not like it's a big move, but what's it been like for you and how has the adjustment been?

MIKE SHULA: Well, again, I've been extremely grateful. It's been very busy. Grateful, first of all, to Coach Loggains who's moved on to be the head coach at App State for bringing me in last year and for Coach Beamer to allow that to happen, and just to be a part of this season. Hopefully I've been able to help out a little bit.

And moving forward now, even though it's been busy, it's exciting. You're right in the middle of it, obviously as a coordinator now, but just being around quarterbacks in general.

Just haven't been back in college football for a while, and it's very refreshing. I kind of noticed that the first day of I think my second day on the job was our first day of spring ball. To see this football team develop from that day in all three phases, especially offensively, it's been pretty cool.

We want to -- like I said, we've got our work cut out for us. That's what both teams are trying to do, end the season with a win and send these seniors off the way they deserve to be sent off, and then get ready for next year.

Q. Coach, will you be calling the game from the field or up in the booth?

MIKE SHULA: I'll probably be on the field, yeah. Obviously just in this quick turnaround, we've kind of discussed back and forth, but yeah, I'm going to be down on the field, so LaNorris can't get rid of me.

Q. Is that what you've done before, have you been up top before, and what are the advantages?

MIKE SHULA: So I've done both, and I think there's advantages to both. When you're upstairs obviously you can see more. You can see a little bit faster. It's a little bit more of a controlled environment.

MIKE SHULA: Good morning, everybody. I think I can speak on behalf of our entire football team, we're thrilled to be here. It's postseason. We're playing in late December and January. That's our goal every year. To be able to come down here in Orlando at one of the most prestigious bowl games throughout college football, we're excited.

For me personally, a lot has changed over the last couple weeks. Really excited, super excited, very grateful for this opportunity to represent the University of South Carolina and to work with guys like this. We're excited about our match-up. We know we've got our work cut out for us against a really good Illinois defense and good football team, and just want to put our best foot forward and play four solid quarters of football.

Q. Vershon, how are you feeling, first of all?

VERSHON LEE: I'm feeling good.

Q. No lingering effects from whatever it was yesterday?

VERSHON LEE: No, no, I'm good now.

Q. Vershon, the middle three of the line, you guys played a lot of football together. What's it mean to be going out there with those two guys one last time?

VERSHON LEE: It means a lot. You get to spend a lot of time with guys. Even though they came in this year, you get to spend a lot of time with guys, learn a lot about a guy, and you just want to always be able to finish on a positive note with your guys and your brothers, have fun one last time on the field and be able to put out something that you'll always be able to remember.



But down on the field there's much better communication with the players, especially with the quarterbacks. That's the advantage down there. As long as you have good people upstairs that you can rely on on accurate information, I think it bodes well for what we're doing this week.

Q. Vershon, five years at South Carolina. Have you thought about this being the last stop on the journey? What's next for you? Is it the NFL? Is it something else?

VERSHON LEE: Yeah, I've thought about this last game for a while now. Every practice that comes up is my last practice with the Gamecocks. I've thought about that.

After the season, I am going to train and get ready for the draft. Yeah, that's the decision. That's the plan that I do have moving forward.

Q. Coach, you said this process has been pretty quick and fluid. What is the process like for you installing your philosophy? Are you keeping some of what you and Dowell maybe collaborated? What's that like with such a quick turnaround in the game?

MIKE SHULA: Yeah, it is a quick turnaround, however, we've had a few weeks, so that's been beneficial. But probably a little bit of everything of what you just said. We want to keep on keeping on with what we're doing and D-Lo has done a great job with our offense, and again, from the first day of spring, all the way to getting into fall training camp and what these guys have done, we want to keep building on that.

We've had some really exciting games where all three phases have done their job and contributed to wins, and we want to be able to do our part.

Offensively it's just trying to get a good feel of, again, what we've done well, keep building on that, and then if there's other things we can add from certain backgrounds, then we'll do that.

Q. Mike, what have you seen from the running backs this week and the last couple weeks without Rocket, and do you judge this week and this game almost as an audition for 2025?

MIKE SHULA: Well, it's probably human nature to do that, but I think the biggest thing we're all locked in on, we're focused and locked in on, is everyone knowing their assignment, doing their job, and making sure as coaches that our players, our running backs in this case, feel really good about their assignments.

We want everybody out there on game day just not thinking, just reacting and playing, knowing their stuff so well.

All those guys have had obviously a lot more reps. The best way to learn and get better is through experience, and we haven't played games, but these guys have had a lot more opportunity to get reps in practice, and hopefully because of that they'll be better and do a good job on game day.

Q. Mike, kind of going off that with the running backs, how do you manage splitting up how you guys replace the amount of carries that Rocket has this year because obviously it's quite a bit. Do you just make it a group effort or one guy gets more? How do you manage that?

MIKE SHULA: Yeah, I think it's a little bit by committee, but also I'll leave that a little bit into the hands of Coach Blackwell, our running back coach. He's got a good feel for that. When you have guys that you feel like that can come in and contribute, more than one guy, sometimes you go with the hot hand as well and see how that's going.

It'll be a feel thing. We'll talk about it probably more so in between drives as we go, and then there might be certain plays that we maybe have one guy do that we would ask him only to do that, not the other guy.

A little bit of a combination of all those things.

Q. Vershon, if you had to estimate, how many times have you and Boogie gone head to head with a one-on-one or team period over the years in practice?

VERSHON LEE: A lot. Endless. Every day. A lot of times. Me and Boogie go up against each other like every day. That's really like a brother. Iron sharpens iron, so I really appreciate Boogie for all the years. A lot of times, a lot of reps.

Q. How tough can that be when you're running into a guy that's your teammate like that so many times over the years? Is it challenging to kind of manage that aspect of it and still be teammates and friends?

VERSHON LEE: No, it's more so fun. We make fun about it. We always try to keep a competitive edge, but we always you make sure we know it's football and we keep the brotherly love with it and always stay connected. Nothing too much.

Q. Vershon, the SEC and the Big Ten, both two

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conferences that pride themselves on physicality, the same with South Carolina and Illinois. What's the excitement level to establish that physicality in this game?

VERSHON LEE: It's really exciting because when you go up against physical teams, it always comes to who's going to be the most physical team. You always pride yourself on physicality, so you always want to be the guy to come out on top and show everybody that you are the most physical guy. It's been on top of our board and something we're really keyed on.

Q. Vershon, talking to some of the other guys, they've been talking about a team meeting that happened after the Alabama game where basically you met with Shane and said, win out. Were you a part of that meeting and what are your remembrances from it?

VERSHON LEE: Yes, I was a part of that meeting. What I remember is everybody before the meeting, we were already talking about it in the locker room, and when we get into the meeting room and Coach Beamer is talking to us, how do you guys feel? And everybody felt the same way. There was nothing else to do with the rest of the season than win out. That was the plan. That was the goal. So that was the plan we set.

Q. Mike, what was the process of landing Air Noland out of the transfer portal, and how do you balance that with LaNorris? Did you talk with him about bringing in a new guy?

MIKE SHULA: Yeah, I'll probably defer to Coach Beamer on the whole process on how that goes. Just in general, we want to be about collecting good football players, especially at that position, and making University of South Carolina a place where quarterbacks are a commodity, so to speak.

Anybody that comes in here, it's my job as a quarterback coach and as the offensive coordinator to find out what our quarterbacks do best and get the most out of them, make sure they're most prepared, just like any quarterback coach, make sure they're the most prepared quarterbacks. It's a challenge every day. In my opinion, I'm probably a little biased, but one of the greatest positions in all of sports to play in and to coach. When your players do well, you feel great. When they don't do well, you feel like it's all your fault.

Now working with these young guys coming in as opposed to the last few years where I've been working with guys that are older that have been kind of the finished product from what college coaches, how they've prepared guys, it's

a unique challenge. You're working with younger guys that are kind of away from home for the first time and dealing with handling all that, guys that, as our two guys here now, have done a great job with.

But yeah, so it's exciting to have guys on, and Coach Beamer talks about we're all about competition and it's one of our core values. We coach each guy the best we can and have them ready to play.

Q. Going into this game without one of your tight ends or Brady is doubtful. How do you work around that and what do you do from an offensive perspective from you're thin at that position group?

MIKE SHULA: So yeah, each week we've got to be ready. Kind of look at our depth chart and where guys potentially, there could be a lack of depth quickly.

Yeah, it would be potentially different personnel groupings or other guys stepping in, and we want to, like I said earlier, keep building and doing the things that we've been doing, but if we have to tweak personnel because of injury or whatever, then we'll do that and come up with -- as we've done during the course of this week, just come up with a plan for other people stepping in.

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