

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

Tuesday, December 31, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

South Carolina Gamecocks

Shane Beamer

LaNorris Sellers

Press Conference

Illinois 21, South Carolina 17

SHANE BEAMER: First of all, congratulations to Illinois. They made the plays when they needed to make them, and that's very much the story today.

I just want to thank everyone with the Cheez-It Citrus Bowl. What a week this has been. This has been a first-class bowl game, first-class group of people, from Steve Hogan, which does an awesome job leading us up, to our amazing hosts Mike and Terry. I appreciate you guys. You are all awesome. To Captain Thomas with the Orlando Police Department, who's a stud, God bless him, and Orlando PD and their service. They were a fun group to be around. The people at the Renaissance hotel. It's just first class in every which way. We told our team the first team meeting when we got down here that this bowl chose us. We wanted to go out and validate their choice with the way that we played today. We, ultimately, weren't able to get it done.

Really, it's a hurt locker room in there, as you can imagine. A lot of guys that have poured their heart and soul into Gamecock football and wanted so much for them to get that 10th win. We weren't able to get it done, but like I just told them in there, just don't lose sight of the journey that we've been on and what these guys have done since January when they came back.

We've got a hurt for our seniors that we didn't send them out better, but just told them in there, don't forget this feeling. We play Virginia Tech in 243 days, and we've got a lot of work to do between now and then.

Questions?

Q. Shane, seemed like y'all moved the ball fairly well for the most part but had the troubles in the red zone.



Can you speak to what the issues were down there?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, just this game, this week Hale was finishing, and we just didn't finish drives today. Then, we came in at halftime, it's whatever the score was, 7-3, and you look at the stats and we're in pretty good positions. Third downs, I think we were 7-for-11 on third downs in the first half. We were running the ball. They had only had, I think, 20 plays on offense in the entire first half. They hit one play on us on the RPO early in the game, but other than that they had done a good job defensively. We just weren't able to finish down there, whatever it be, offense and special teams. We all had a hand in it.

Q. (Indiscernible).

SHANE BEAMER: It's heated and competitive out there, but in all my years of being around football, I've never seen an opposing head coach come over to the opposing team's sideline and basically make a gesture towards the opposing head coach. I think he was upset about something that we did on the kickoff return in regards to Juju on the throwback to Nyck Harbor. I would say he needs to check the rule book, because that's something that we cleared with the officials before the game. Disappointing.

I've got a lot of respect for him. He's obviously done this for a long time, but in all my years of coaching I've never seen that happen. An opposing coach come over, while his player is hurt and, basically, have something to say to the opposing head coach. I've got my own team to worry about. We weren't good enough today.

Q. Nick Emmanwori didn't play in the second half --

SHANE BEAMER: It's an internal team matter. Not going to discuss it.

Q. Defensively there was a few 3rd and shorts --

SHANE BEAMER: Not trying to be short. I'm not going to discuss it. It's an internal team matter.

Q. Defensively a couple 3rd and shorts, had a hard

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time keeping your defense off the field. What do you think was kind of the issue when it came to stopping them in the run game on the situational part of it?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, they did a good job. I went for that fourth down right there. There were thoughts of kicking -- at the end of the game there were thoughts of kicking the field goal. I thought we had a good play call. We weren't able to convert on it, but went for it because I said if we don't get it they're going to be on the seven-yard line or something. We felt good about our defense being able to go out there and get a stop.

They did a nice job. They popped that run in there, and they were mixing up personnel groupings on us. I'll have to look at the tape just to see. I think we weren't great probably tackling today, but just got to -- the whole key, everyone just doing their jobs, players, coaches. We just weren't quite good enough today.

Q. Shane, how do you feel like things went with Mike calling plays today from the sideline, and was there anything in particular you feel like maybe could have been done better from the offense and just him in general?

SHANE BEAMER: I thought it was smooth. Certainly, it's not the easiest situation for him to be in, where you're calling plays for the first time this season. Not to say that he was poor by any stretch of the imagination. We moved the ball. We just didn't convert in some critical situations and whatnot, but did some good stuff, tried to mix it up, but, certainly, we'll all be better.

We all had to step up our games today. We weren't just missing our former coordinator, but there was a graduate assistant and an analyst that weren't here today, too. Everyone had to kind of adjust their roles and, certainly, could have been cleaner and a little bit better, but we will be going forward.

Q. Shane, just want to give you a chance to elaborate in case you will, but what could be seen on video replays was Bielema walking away with his arms out, gesturing and looking toward the sideline. Was he looking at you --

SHANE BEAMER: Yes.

Q. Was there more to it than what I just described?

SHANE BEAMER: No, I don't believe so. I think his issue was when we threw the throw-back kickoff return, our kickoff returner did this, which for most teams that's a signal that it's a touchback and you're not going to return

the kick. You're allowed to do that as long as you don't do a waving motion. It's no different than on a punt. If the punt returner comes pointing to the ball that's bouncing on the ground, he's allowed to return it. If you're doing this, you're not allowed to return it.

There was no waving of the arms, and I cleared it with the Big 12 officials before the game. I told them we were going to do it, making sure they were good with it, and they said, yeah, just as long as he doesn't wave the arms.

I think he had an issue with that. You have to ask him why he didn't take it up with the officials and why he felt the need to come over here, while his player was on the ground and look at me and say something to me and do that motion at me like I was full of you know-what-to do it. That's what I have an issue with. I'm a competitive guy. When somebody says that to me, I'm going to respond, because I thought that was bush league, just to be completely honest.

Again, I have my own team to worry about. Give them credit. I've got a ton of respect for Coach Bielema. I've really enjoyed being around him this week. We're two competitive guys. I thought that was uncalled for, especially when his own player is on the ground hurt.

Q. Earlier this week Illini defensive coordinator Aaron Henry talked about how they take a lot of pride and don't take four-star and five-star guys out of the portal and they develop one-, two-, three-star guys. When you're scouting this team and now of course after playing them, for a team that doesn't have a lot of high-rated recruit guys, is it what they do fundamentally, execution? What is the key to develop along those lines?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, I can't speak to their program. I can't imagine if there's a four- or five-star elite defensive player that they're going to say no thanks, we don't want you. I don't think that's probably going to happen. Maybe it does.

I think they're just very well-coached. I've got a lot of respect for their defense, because they do what they do, and when I say that, that's a compliment. Like they're going to get up in your face, they're going to play man coverage. They don't bring a lot of pressure. When they do, on the quarterback draw, where they got LaNorris in the first half into the half, I believe, that's their main pressure. They do that in a go-to situation. They bring some edge pressure, which they did to us some, as well.

I have a ton of respect for them, because they do what they do. They say that we're going to be very good

fundamentally, as well, and they are. They're well-coached. They're hard to beat. Nobody has scored a lot of points on them this year outside of Oregon. Penn State is playing in a playoff game tonight and scored 21, and they got a long interception return that led to one of those touchdowns, if I'm not mistaken.

They're a good defense, and they've got good players. Let's not act like this is Wabash College. Is that a Division III school in Illinois? Wheaton, is that a school? There you go. I went to a basketball camp at Elmhurst College back in the day in Illinois, Michael Jordan's camp. I don't think they have football, but let's not act like this is some Division III school out there without good players. They have all-conference guys. The nickel No. 14 [Xavier Scott] is a really good player, and the linebackers are really good at what they do. What's the defensive end, 17 [Gabe Jacas]? he is a really good player on the defensive line, and 23 [TeRah Edwards] is a handful.

I have a lot of respect for them. They do what they do, and they do it well.

Q. There was a number of times where it seemed like they had some late substitutions that threw things off or forced you to call a time-out. What led to that, and was there anything with the play calling or subbing guys out that you could have changed about that?

SHANE BEAMER: No. Look, I'm not like -- we got beat. There's some inconsistencies in how things are done from league to league. How some conferences interpret substitutions rules and how other conferences do it. Today was the Big 12. It's a little bit different than what the SEC has been. We've had SEC officials all year, and I think it's up to each crew how they're going to handle substitutions.

Look, we do it, too. If a team subs late in the play clock, we will sub and try and run the play clock down. It was happening a lot today, and, typically, if we sub a running back for a running back, then that's it, or if they were to sub a running back for a running back, then we might get one guy in the game. I'll have to go back and watch the TV copy, but it just seemed like there was a lot. They sub and then they sub again, then they sub again, which they can get their people out there. This isn't me complaining, it's just a little bit different.

A big thing of what they do is when the defense yells "move" on the line of scrimmage and you stem and move. We did it on defense on the first drive of the game. We got called for delay of game on defense, and then late in the game when we were down there in the red zone. They did "move", and our guy jumped, but we got called for it. It's just the inconsistencies.

Again, this isn't Shane up here blaming the officials, but I don't think it's necessarily anything that we have been a little cleaner with substitutions at times? Absolutely, but there was just some discrepancies in how that substitution is handled and something that I was really just trying to get an answer with. Even on the communication at the line of scrimmage, that's something that I called, because in the SEC, we do it a little bit differently. The stemming and the moving at the line of scrimmage. I called John McDaid, the head of the SEC officials, as soon as I found out that it was going to be a Big 12 crew, because I said, look, one thing they do is they make stems and verbal calls at the line of scrimmage as a defense. How is it going to be officiated, because every league kind of has their own interpretation of it, as well.

It is what it is. It's not why we lost the game, but it was just some inconsistencies that we had to battle.

Q. Shane, I know you can't speak for them, but it's been 31 days since you've played but that's a long time without playing and you lost your OC, had a couple guys opt out. How hard is it to try to keep that momentum you had before this extended break? How difficult was it for you this time?

SHANE BEAMER: I mean, it is. They were in the same thing. Illinois, I mean. They had a really good win over Northwestern at Wrigley Field in their last game. They had a long layoff and so did we. It's something that you always struggle with as a head coach, because you want to find the balance of keeping your team sharp and ready to play in the next game and keeping that momentum, but you also want to give them a break. You've got final exams. It's a long layoff, which is why I said this is so much like a game one, first game of the season, because there is such a long layoff. You see special teams play, you see the teams that maybe don't look sharp tackling and whatnot. Something that you're on guard for, with, and I thought both teams handled it well.

But I wouldn't say it was necessarily a challenge. Our guys were ready to play. It might not have looked pretty today out there, but we've had a good week. Our guys were excited about being down here, handled their business the right way.

We didn't have issues with curfew. We didn't have issues with poor practices. The people at the Renaissance Sea World, the head of security at the hotel, came to me yesterday on the elevator and said of all their years this is the most respectful and enjoyable team they've ever had at that hotel, which I appreciate him saying that. We've got some awesome young men, and it was very important to

win this 10th game. That's why there's hurting in that locker room, and there's a lot of tears in that locker room right now, as well.

When you've got guys that poured their heart and soul into this. You've got guys like Kai Kroeger and Tonka Hemingway, who just with them playing in this game today, no one in the history of South Carolina football has played in more games as a Gamecock than Kai Kroeger and Tonka Hemingway. That's really freaking cool.

Yes, I get it, we had a couple opt-outs, but you had guys that wanted to be here. They hurt right now, and as a head coach I'll always look at how to be even better about making sure that we're sharper and ready to play. It's similar to the schedule that we had in 2021 when we played North Carolina in the bowl game. It's similar to the schedule that we had against Notre Dame two years ago.

We'll always look to see how we can be better.

Q. Shane, you kind of alluded to your postgame message to your team in the locker room, but from your perspective what will this team be remembered for and how have they laid a foundation for years to come to build on?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, I would hope they'd be remembered for the foundation they laid and the amazing moments that they created this season. There's a lot of people if you look at those preseason projections, very few of them even had us in a bowl game in 2024. I may or may not have some of those saved on my phone as reminders because there was a lot.

Some of y'all, as well; some of the national media. There was one thought we were going to go 3-9 and someone thought we were going 5-7. There weren't a lot of people picking us to be in a bowl game, much less the Cheez-It Citrus Bowl. Guys like LaNorris, who was voted a permanent team captain by his teammates and the rest of these guys said, that's BS. We have a heck of a team, and we're going to go work our butts off and leave this program better than we left it after the '23 season. Since they've come back in January, they've been unbelievable.

I know everybody sees what we did the last 12 weeks or 13 games, but just the work that these guys put in from January, July, August, throughout the season. I just told them in the locker room, to sit there and be 3-3 at one point in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and there was a lot of hurt and frustration in that locker room, because at that point we had two losses by a total of five points.

The way that group came together. I hoped that they would

be remembered for that, that in life, adversity happens and adversity comes your way, and when we dealt with adversity at 3-3, no one in our program blinked. To run off six wins in a row like we did and have a shot at the playoff going into the last weekend. Then to come down here and have an opportunity to win 10 games, I'd hoped they'd be remembered for the great moments on the field for a lot of the things they accomplished for the first time ever at Carolina and just what a special group of young men they are. We talked about it in our team meeting last night, the legacy that they left.

I said it in the locker room at Clemson after the game. I think it was on one of our social media accounts, but they're the example of what it's supposed to be as a student-athlete in college athletics. This senior class, whether the guys that have been here since 2020 or the guys like D-Knight and Torricelli that came in here this year. It's a really special group of guys, and I'm going to miss the heck out of them.

Q. LaNorris, it's been such a great season for you individually and as a team. This is how 2024 ends with those guys over there celebrating and you in here right now. Describe what is this feeling like for you at this moment.

LaNORRIS SELLERS: We obviously wanted to win but some things didn't go our way tonight. You have to get back working and focus on next season.

Q. LaNorris, just kind of building off of that, knowing that you still have several years left in your career here at South Carolina, what kind of foundation does getting to this game and this experience of being in a game like this do for you as you continue to lead this program?

LaNORRIS SELLERS: It just shows us what we can accomplish. It was a couple plays away from being in the playoffs the first season we had. We know what it takes now. We just have to put it all together.

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