

# Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: Michigan vs Texas

Tuesday, December 30, 2025

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

**Coach Steve Sarkisian**

**Coach Biff Poggi**

Press Conference



think it has been reenergizing because so many guys are practicing right now with opportunities to play in the ballgame. I do think that it has gone well for us.

**Q. Steve, earlier this week, we spoke with Wink Martindale, and he spoke about being in favor of a salary cap. I know you've been vocal about some of the evolution of college sports and some of the changes that are needed. Would you be in favor of a salary cap considering the fluidity of roster movement right now?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: First of all, I have a ton of respect for Wink Martindale. We worked together in 2004 at the Oakland Raiders, and obviously his career and what he has been able to do as a defensive coordinator is tough, it is hard. He is taxing on an offense. That's that.

The funny thing about a salary cap in college football is we actually have one, but nobody knows that because I don't know if anybody is adhering to it. There is a salary cap and there are caps placed on how you can pay your players and publicity rights and revenue sharing and things of that nature.

But as I have said before, there is no teeth in anything we have put forth right now from guidelines in the NCAA. People have continued to be creative to find ways to pay their players, and I don't blame anybody for doing that.

The reality of it is, we did do that. I think that we have to continue to find more ways to put guardrails around what we are doing or we are going to have to start to get more creative and adapt in a space that we can benefit more from. Because at the end of the day, we are in a production-based business, and we have to produce. To do that, we have to field the best team that we can, culturally and physically, to try to go win championships year in and year out. I am not saying you are every year, but that is kind of how we are measured.

To be fair to the University of Texas, our job is to remain as creative as we can to find opportunities to do that.

BIFF POGGI: Well, it is good to be here. I must tell you that I am talked out by now. My opening statement is happy to be here, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, to echo Coach Poggi, it is good to be here. I appreciate you all being here covering the game, supporting what we are doing. It has been a long journey to get to this point. I think everybody is ready to go and excited to play.

**Q. I know you talked about it about a week and a half ago, but this bowl is different, a lot of young guys stepping up into new roles. How different has that been the last week and a half in the prep?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I thought it has gone really well. We have had to adjust kind of our practice format because of the numbers being down. You just don't get to replenish the numbers when guys move on. When you look at 20-or-so-odd guys that are not with us that were with us throughout the season, at the end of the regular season, we had to adjust how we practiced.

One thing that we have done has been a little bit more servicing of each other from offense to defense, defense to offense, as opposed to scout team. It has been great for me, because it has allowed me to see the whole team all practice long, as opposed to being separate offense and defense and doing things simultaneously.

I have really enjoyed it. I have enjoyed being around a lot of our younger players, and I think that they are excited to show what they can do. You can feel the excitement from their teammates, some of the older guys, that maybe they came into school with and now they are seeing some opportunities for them.

It has been, like I said, a different format of practice, but I

But to answer your question, I think there technically is a cap, but I just don't know that anybody is adhering to it.

**Q. Thoughts on each other's starting quarterback?**

BIFF POGGI: Well, Arch Manning, first of all, that young man, the way he has carried himself in a pretty intense spotlight is just amazing and a credit to his family, to Steve, their coaching staff. He is an unbelievable player. I mean, he is everything they say he is.

One of the things that happens is you all tend to bless people to the highest highs, and then when the first time they should make a mistake, you like to drag them to the lowest depths of hell, and the truth is somewhere way in the middle.

I think he is an outstanding leader. The things he says and the things he does shows his leadership, but as a player, I mean, he can do it all, right. He can make all the throws. He is intelligent. He can run. He is a problem. For a defense, a real problem.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I would say for Bryce [Underwood] this is somebody that we evaluated really hard coming out of high school. It is really hard to play quarterback at this level. Maybe at different levels it is a little easier, but at the level that we compete at, as a true freshman, and do it at a high level, that is really hard to do.

We are talking about Arch. Arch is in year three. Bryce, to go win nine games as a true freshman at quarterback, I get there's going to be some adversity along the way throughout a season as a true freshman quarterback, but the stick-to-itiveness for him. Obviously a very gifted, very talented young man.

And probably two of the more -- for both quarterbacks -- two of the more polarizing figures in today's game when you think about the story of Arch, but yet here is Bryce in the world of NIL and people are going to make stories out of stuff, whether true or not, rather than just focus on the young man.

To Biff's point, I thought it was great yesterday. We had an event together with both teams at the Fun Spot with the youth of the community of Orlando. There is Bryce and Arch and they are having a great time. Just two young guys that are enjoying an amusement park.

Neither of them are bigger than what people want to make them out to be. They are both young men working hard. They are not perfect and trying to get better. But that to me was indicative of who they are as people, and I think that is probably the more important thing.

**Q. I know you're going for ten wins and that's the goal, but you also have the opportunity to play young players in this game, as well. Is there a way to mesh both of those kind of things? And the second thing is, when you go from 85 scholarships to 105, have you thought about what you want to do with the walk-ons?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I like to compete, and I have never gone into anything that -- where you don't try to go win. Whether that's with young people, old people, whatever that looks like, that is my responsibility. This isn't some sort of exhibition or something, man. We are trying to win the game. We are going to do whatever we can do in our power to go try to win the ballgame. I think that is first and foremost.

I don't know if we will get to 105, quite frankly. I think that is a really hard number to get to. It sounds like a great idea, okay. But if you really do it by the letter of the law, we have X amount of dollars that we essentially can spend on revenue sharing and/or publicity rights, however you want to look at it, okay.

If you have 85 scholarship players, that number gets spread amongst however many of those 85 you want to spread that amongst. You go to 105 now, I don't get more money. I am just getting a more watered-down version. Great, I want 105 scholarship players, but I just don't know if we can afford it, quite frankly.

What happens to your scholarship players, maybe a few of those guys put on -- as your walk-on players, maybe those guys get put on scholarship. I mean, it is an opportunity to bring in a few more PWOs with an opportunity to earn a scholarship and there is a light at the end of the tunnel if I keep working hard.

There is some incentive there for that. I don't know if by the fall of next year we are going to have 105 scholarship players. It just doesn't seem realistic to me right now.

**Q. Michigan hired Kyle Whittingham, and I believe you've competed against him at multiple different stops. What should fans expect from him at Michigan next year?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Some history there with his time at BYU and my time at BYU and then him going to Utah with Coach McBride early on in his career. Then staying on through Urban and ultimately taking over, an opportunity to coach against him as a head coach when I was at the University of Washington and at USC.

A ton of respect for his program that they had at Utah. The

discipline, the toughness that his team has always played with, their unique ability to adapt with the times offensively, but yet defensively some of their core values and the way that they play, the physical brand of football coverage. I would expect nothing less from Michigan with Coach Whittingham. I think he is a great hire.

**Q. How are you approaching your backfield this week? And are there any lessons you learned from a couple years ago at the Alamo Bowl when Bijan and Roschon opted out beforehand?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, we have guys back there that have played some, right. Christian and James have played some throughout the year, especially early in the season when guys were banged up. Michael Terry has been a great project for us about midway point of the season when we moved him to running back.

I'm excited to see him. He has really shown some things to where, man, hopefully he can get out there and have some opportunities. Obviously, Ryan Niblett has been there for some time.

My goal is all those guys are going to have an opportunity to contribute in the game. Again, I think we are more than capable back there to go do that.

I think the biggest thing we learned in that game is get more first downs than we did in the Alamo Bowl, so we can get more carries and be on the field more. Michael Penix had a good game, and when he was on the field, it was hard. We learned that two years in a row. We have to get more first downs to get more carries to run more plays.

**Q. With everything that's gone on over the last few weeks surrounding the program, what would a win tomorrow mean for this team itself coming away with that?**

BIFF POGGI: A win would be -- it would be icing on the cake. But the real win for us has been the way these kids have handled adversity, and the way they have come to practice every day. The way they have just had to isolate themselves from an onslaught of outside noise.

We are coming to win, but we feel like we have a lot of good things have happened these last three weeks at the University of Michigan. It is about the players. It is because of the players.

A win would be great. We are going to try our best. I can guarantee you that. We are going to play hard, but I don't think what these kids have done in the last three weeks should be overlooked in any respect.

**Q. Can you talk about some of the young guys? You mentioned Michael Terry, but some of the guys who have stood out to you during those Bowl practices?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think on the offensive side of the ball, I touched on Michael Terry. I think we have seen in real time the growth of Nick Townsend at tight end, but also I think in Emaree Winston, I think both those two young players have shown the right growth as we have gone throughout this season.

And then a few other people on offense that are (audio interruption) like in the Nick Townsend role, but now he is kind of elevated into more of a significant role, and he feels almost like a veteran. He feels like he is in year two already, which has been great. Then, like I said, I talked last week about Jaime French and Kaliq Lockett and their growth. That side has been really good for me.

I think defensively, there has been quite a few faces there, but Bo Barnes has probably gotten the most opportunities because of what has happened at linebacker. We have seen a ton of growth out of him just in his practice habits. I think that has been a huge component there.

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about some of the guys in the secondary. It is hard, because I want to talk about everybody, but surely Jonah and Zelus and their play in the secondary there has been huge.

Those have probably been the main guys. Again, I have been watching all of them. I had a chance to watch everybody in practice. I don't know how much they are all going to play, but a guy like Myron Charles, how different he looks today, as opposed to where he was three and four months ago, all those things are really encouraging. Josiah Sharma, another guy, like where he was three, four months ago, where he is today, it is a dramatic difference.

There is a lot of growth in a lot of these guys. That tells me our future is very bright. Now, we are going to have to shore some things up throughout the portal, but, man, I have been encouraged by the development of a lot of the players on our team right now.

**Q. Since you lost four running backs, do you expect to bring in one running back or more? And if you could talk about the risk of going after elite receivers with three freshmen that you just mentioned and Jermaine (indiscernible) coming in?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think it is all so strategic, right. Because it is one, about need. It is two, about money and the cost and where is the market. Which agent you're

dealing with. There are some agents that are rational, and there are some that this is their first time ever being an agent.

I don't even know if they are licensed to be agents, but all of a sudden they get to be agents, because we have no certification process in college football, where in the NFL you have to be certified in. College football, it might be their college roommate their freshmen year, who is their agent right now, and this guy is throwing numbers at you. It is like, we can't even deal with this. You just move on.

It is unfortunate, and we will get there in college football, but right now it is a tough situation. That being said, although there's so many factors that come into what you are trying to do, what are our needs. What are our luxuries. Those are two different things.

Then, trying to find the right mix and the right fit, because we can't lose sight of some of these kids that we signed out of high school, either. We have a pretty good running back coming in by the name of Derrek Cooper that we are excited about, as well.

Again, we have to have our list of needs, our list of wants and our list of luxuries, and then what's the dollar sign next to all of that and then what is the bottom dollar from an organizational standpoint.

The idea that I can sit up here in 2025 and talk about money and players and things, right; pretty crazy. From where we have gotten to, from where we were four or five years ago to where we are today. That is the reality of the situation of college football right now, and that's where we are.

Again, I think there is nothing wrong it. We just have to tighten it up. Hopefully, we can get there sooner rather than later, because I am probably going to be on the phone with an agent today that is going to throw a number at me that I'm going to be like, Good luck, I hope you get it. If you don't, call us back, but I can't do that number.

**Q. You guys have the 80th helmet right in front of you. This game has meant a lot to a lot of programs over the years. What do you think it will be like to compete in the 80th Cheez-It Citrus Bowl this year?**

BIFF POGGI: It is amazing when you think about it, 80 years of this game. Actually in 2015, I think, we were here, and I was in the stands and my son was a player in this game against the University of Florida.

It has a great history and a great tradition. It is obviously picking from, as (FCS CEO) Steve (Hogan) said last night,

the first pick from two fantastic conferences, the SEC and the Big Ten, and you get great matchups.

It is an honor to be here, it really is. The thing about it is once we get on the buses, we are not thinking about 80th, 85th, 75th. We are thinking about Texas and going and playing.

It is an honor to be here, and it is a credit to Orlando and to the people that run the Bowl that they have done 80 years of this. Very few organizations do 80 years of anything. It is really quite an accomplishment.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, just to piggyback that, I think one thing that the Citrus Bowl has been able to do over time is -- look at the iconic brands that have come and competed in this game year-in and year-out. This year is no different. They are getting Texas versus Michigan, right, in a primetime kickoff slot right before the playoffs.

What they have been able to hit home runs on is viewership. I am as excited as anybody to see, what does our number look like coming out of this game on the 31st. How many viewers do we have.

I wouldn't be surprised if we actually outdo viewership of some of these playoff games that were played, because I think that is ultimately what the Citrus Bowl has been able to do. You think about some of these iconic games and players that have played in this game, it is an honor, it really is.

Again, I have some firsthand experience of being here in 2019 at Alabama when we played Michigan in that game.

Again, you think Alabama, Michigan at that time, but what did that do for our team? That team went on to go undefeated and win a National Championship in 2020.

They have been fortunate to get some quality teams in this game, and like I said, we are honored to be part of it, and to play against a university and a team like Michigan is definitely an honor, as well.

**Q. For people that have not seen KJ Lacey, what should they know about his skill set, and what have you seen from him over these 15 practices?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I've been excited for KJ. Talking about Bryce, right, obviously starting and playing for Michigan as a true freshman. Well, our guy has been in the lab working, in KJ. I have been very impressed with KJ, his work ethic. It is not easy to go from being a four-year starter, State Player of the Year in Alabama to coming and redshirting, and that is a hard concept for anybody.



But a quarterback, it is really hard. Giving KJ credit to putting his head down and working, and ton of credit to Coach Milwee and Coach Bimonte for the time they have put in. Like I said, I got a chance to watch him firsthand now over three weeks. His play-making ability, his anticipation for throwing the ball, his accuracy, his ability to use his legs.

And his stature has changed. You look at his body today as opposed to where his body was last spring when he arrived on campus, he has put in the work in the weight room. That is what you hope for in a developmental year from a quarterback perspective of where this guy -- how far he has come, an understanding of the offense, development of his body, leadership skills on the field.

All those things that I think he is on the right trajectory to become a really good player for us.

**Q. Given the last couple of weeks, you guys only have a handful of opt-outs. Most of your team is down here. What is it that has kept this team motivated to play on Wednesday?**

BIFF POGGI: Oh, well, there are opt-outs and there are opt-outs, right. There are different kinds of opt-outs.

We have three that were starters, two on defense, one on offense, who declared they were opting out. Now we have some others that this week have decided not to play based on injuries.

Our number is probably more like 12 to 15 in actuality. But look, it is the Citrus Bowl and you are playing against the University of Texas, who was the preseason No. 1 ranked team in the country. Who, in my opinion, should have gotten one of those bids.

Our kids are excited about competing against them. The only other SEC team we played this year, we got beat pretty good by Oklahoma at Oklahoma.

Our kids are looking forward to playing, and if you can't get excited about playing against Texas, then you might be in the wrong sport.

They are excited. They have worked really hard, and here is the interesting thing, and Steve knows this. You want to coach the guys that want to play, right. The guys who don't want to play, you have to respect that as a coach. There are multiple reasons, very complicated levels, go through all that, why they make that decision.

Both of us are from a time where this was a reward to play

in a Bowl game. This is for a bunch of hard work, this is a reward. You can't spend too much time thinking about the guys that aren't here, because they have made a decision. You want to coach the guys that are here, whether they are experienced or they are not experienced.

And like Steve said, we have seen a lot of guys we didn't see much from all year, have stepped up in these Bowl practices and done a really fantastic job. We are, like, asking ourselves, well, what the hell kind of coaches and players are we that we didn't, like, know this about these guys earlier? I has been a great thing for us.

Look, it is Texas. It is an honor. It is an honor.

**Q. Just wanted to ask, you mentioned how you're able to see all the guys now because it's a limited roster during practice times. Curious to know, your time in the league, how has that helped you adapt to this time period where you have limited guys during practice?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: To your point, I did rely on that. Traditionally, at least for us, the offense goes on one field, the defense goes on other, the scout team teams go service those guys, and you are practicing simultaneously.

Well, in the NFL, your one team is on one field, and your offense goes whatever the rep count is, call it eight plays, ten plays. There is the scout team there, the service team, but then you fill in with your twos and your threes to help service the offense and you switch, and then you are all on one field.

When our numbers went down, we went to more of that model, not exclusively, but more of that model. That has allowed me to see those players on a regular basis and see work ethic of guys.

It was helpful. It probably is most helpful, obviously, with my time with Dan Quinn in Atlanta, because he had great competitive practices and the spirit of practices. Tapping into those things I think has been helpful.

I'll say this. I think all of our coaches have really appreciated it, because you think about a Kenny Baker, right, he coaches the defensive line. Now, he is able to coach Myron Charles, Josiah Sharma while they are in, as well, as opposed to them being on the scout team field and so on and so forth. Kyle Flood, same thing. I think that has been beneficial, and again, it makes you think about, is that not a better way to go.

Now, it limits your number of reps that you can have on offense. It makes practice longer. There are unintended consequences of some of that. There is the cost effect of

some of that, but there are benefits to it as well.

Trying to find that sweet spot and balance of something that maybe we can tap into more moving forward, I think there's something to be said about that. I do think that time with the Falcons has been helpful of just putting a practice plan together that we all could benefit from.

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