

Florida Blue Florida Classic: Florida A&M Rattlers vs Bethune-Cookman Wildcats

Saturday, November 20, 2021

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Florida A&M Rattlers Coach Willie Simmons BJ Bohler Bishop Bonnett

Press Conference

Florida A&M 46, Bethune-Cookman 21

WILLIE SIMMONS: Appreciate everyone being here today. Obviously a very exciting time here for this football program, for this university. Obviously we've all endured nine tough years, and [it's] something that as a football team we have endured but also as a fan base, as alum, as an administration. So this football team really felt upon ourselves to come out here and take care of business.

We've tried to keep quiet about it. We worked hard. We made sure we didn't speak too publicly about things. But these guys knew what was at stake. They came out here tonight and played Rattler football, and I couldn't be more proud of them.

Again, we finished the regular season 9-2, on an eight-game winning streak, and if the playoff committee doesn't feel like we're one of the top 24 teams in America, then we need to look at the system and figure out what's wrong with it because it's obviously broken if we don't get in.

Proud of these young men, these two guys to my left and my right; small in stature, but you won't find guys with bigger hearts. Couldn't be more proud of them for how they played, how they responded this year. This young man to my left is going to be nurse one day; this young man to my right has already got two degrees from FAMU. They embody everything this university is all about. Excited about this evening. They deserve the credit, and as always, go Rattlers.

Q. All three of you one by one, talk about this Classic



victory, how sweet it is, nine, 10 years is a long time, and executing the game plan and the fruits of your hard labor.

BJ BOHLER: I can begin. This win was very sweet, very sweet. Just hearing about this nine-year streak, my parents are alums from here, I have a lot of family that went here, so just being able to just go out there and win with my name on my back and end this streak, also going out and getting MVP and just helping my brothers go out there and win, especially the senior class, it's just a very big victory for us.

Can't wait to have fun after. But it was a great time.

BISHOP BONNETT: Yeah, so I've been here for six years. I kid with the guys all the time, I've never missed a Florida Classic. Even when I was a walk-on freshman, I got a chance to always travel to the Classic. I never got a chance to enjoy this, the victory part of it. We've always been leaving with our head down and sad.

So to come out and win, it's a great feeling. My last year, my last guaranteed game here at FAMU, and just to go out and the way I did, it was bittersweet. Coach told me I was at 138, only like 40 yards short from a thousand, but God's plan I will get that next week. Yeah, I'm just blessed to be here and happy to be here.

I want to say thanks to Coach Simmons because he's the one who really put me in position to make plays and just be a great young man, showcase my abilities. Yeah, so thank you.

WILLIE SIMMONS: I think they've said it all, but if you open that door there, you'll see how good this one feels because guys are still celebrating. But great team win, and couldn't be more proud of these young men.

Q. Big game for you. I know you said you had never played in this stadium, but quite a way to go out, huh?

BJ BOHLER: Yeah, definitely, definitely quite a way to go out. This stadium holds a lot of historic events, the Under Armour All-American game, Pro Bowls, big championships.



It's a great feeling just to be able to be in this stadium, playing in this game, and actually contributing and making plays. And of course it's in my hometown, so that makes it even 10 times better. Just coming out here and being able to put on a show, help out my brothers like Bishop Bonnett right here and also help out the team, the whole team, I had a great time being home and able to make plays and win this hardware.

Q. Willie, it started off kind of weirdly in this game but then you guys just pulled away, big plays, three fumbles in a row obviously set the tone for the second half. How do you assess the way these guys came to the table, especially second half?

WILLIE SIMMONS: Well, you know, obviously in these type of games, emotion is always going to be sky high, and you come in and you expect by the way we played all season that things will just click. They didn't all the time, but we were able to keep a great lead. They scored the first play of the game, and so we could have easily said, uh-oh, here we go again, but defensively those guys did what they've done all year; they put their foot down and they said, no more.

Then offensively we really challenged the offensive line at halftime. We really put it on them and said, this game is going to be won and lost with how we're able to run the football. You look at how we ran the ball the second half, those guys on the line of scrimmage and then again, defensively, we could get three turnovers back-to-back, two of them for touchdowns, I mean, it was a great team win.

All in all, these guys, they're different. They're cut from a different cloth. They believe. They play together. They play for one another. They deserve all the credit. They deserve all the credit for just continuing to believe in this process and going out there on that football field and giving everything they have, and that's why I'm blessed and honored to be their head football coach.

Q. That minute or so span at the end of the third, for BJ and Willie, just take us through the ups and downs of it and the on-field experience of making those plays happen. That's the first thing I want to know, what was going on in your mind as those things were happening to really put the game away?

BJ BOHLER: Well, our defense, our mantra is one plus two, go hunt. One play at a time, two percent better every play, every practice. That's what we did, we just went out there and we do what we normally do. We forced turnovers, we make havoc, make things hard for the other team, and we ball out. We just believe in the process. We

believe in one another.

I know that I've got Bell behind me so I ain't worried too much about things getting beat deep. I got a great D-line, a great interior D-line. They're forcing sacks, helping me get the interceptions and the turnovers.

We all just believe in each other, we feed off each other's energy, and that's what you're seeing happen, the back-to-back-to-back turnovers, and that's what you're hearing inside of there. We just believe in each other. We trust in the process, and one plus two, go hunt.

WILLIE SIMMONS: BJ said it all, but I think scoring the first play of the game probably was the best thing that could have happened to this defense because it really woke those guys up and made them realize, that 'Hey, the standard that we set for ourselves is excellence across the board, but particularly defensively, just how we've been able to perform all year, we make it really tough for the other team.' After that play those guys, again, they played lights-out football until the very end.

We gave up a couple of late touchdowns when the ones came out of the game, but again, you find a better defense in FCS football, I'd like to see it because this group is special.

Q. How would you describe what was going on within the walls of the locker room over there?

WILLIE SIMMONS: Probably it's censored so we probably can't say what's really going on right now. But just excitement. We work over 300 days a year for 11 opportunities. Winning is hard. People don't really always understand how hard winning in football is. These guys have done so every way imaginable.

After the first game of the season, there were a lot of people that doubted this team, losing a one-point game in the Orange Blossom Classic. A lot of people expected this group to fold, but we made a commitment in that locker room that night. I took ownership of the loss, but these guys really bought into the idea that we have to do it together, and by hard work, by commitment, by sacrifice, by all the things that we talk about in this program, and that's what these guys have done all season long.

Again, we're peaking at the right time. We're playing our best football right now. That's what you want.

Again, I'd like the opportunity -- I'd love the opportunity to continue to play because again, I do feel like this team right now is one of the top football teams in America.

Q. How do you get these guys to come down in such a short time when you're looking at a playoff game that these guys are not so consumed by this celebration, because this is huge, ending an incredible streak?

WILLIE SIMMONS: Well, we have a 24-hour rule. Win, lose or draw. These guys know, we get 24 hours to celebrate, 24 hours to sulk and moan, and we're back to work the next day. It's 7:00, so we've got 24 hours to blow it out.

But these guys have done it all season. They've come right back to work on Sunday with a scouting report, hit the practice field, and it's business as usual. That's what's allowed this football team to grow and mature the way that they have because we don't ride the wave. We don't get too high, get too low. We let them be young men; they deserve to celebrate right now, so they're going to celebrate. But we know it's back to work as usual come tomorrow once we get word that we're in this playoff.

Q. You knew you had to win this game to keep the season going hopefully; how important was it to win the way that you did? Style points mean something; you guys had a big win today.

WILLIE SIMMONS: Yeah, we tried not to talk about it, but we felt we needed to win in convincing fashion. The last two Florida Classics that we've been a part of have come down to the last play of the game, and so we -- in these type of games, a lot of times that's what happens.

But again, when you have a group like we have that's locked in, and when they get locked in, I mean, you've seen how good they can be. We knew we had to win the game for multiple reasons. First and foremost, we had to get this monkey off of our backs. I mean, it was something I feel like I'm 50 pounds lighter right now because of this win.

But again, it was hard not to talk about it. You definitely didn't want to put too much emphasis on the streak, but we knew we had to win this game for many reasons. The guys responded in a major way. They showed maturity. They showed growth. Now we took care of that part as far as getting that monkey off of our backs, but now we know there's more to play for, and we knew that we had to win in convincing fashion to get some style points for this hopeful playoff selection.

Q. When you look back at FAMU history with the possibility of playoffs and with you being a FAMU historian, knowing that head coach Billy Joe, who's now in the Black College Football Hall of Fame, was the last coach to lead FAMU to the NCAA playoffs, how

does that feel when you're judging your place? How do you feel taking your place with the FAMU great coaches?

WILLIE SIMMONS: No, that's not a fair question, you know that. You take this job, you're chasing -- you're chasing not even ghosts, you're chasing people you never will catch. Like there will never be another Jake Gaither. No matter how many games we win here at this university, no one will be able to duplicate what Jake Gaither did.

Rudy Hubbard won this thing. We're talking about getting to the playoffs, and not many HBCs get that opportunity. Rudy Hubbard won the whole thing. So that will never happen again as far as being the first to do something.

But Billy Joe brought an air of excitement around here that we haven't seen, hadn't seen before and really may not have seen since he left.

But again, I take it as an honor and a privilege to sit in that office every day knowing that I'm a part of history, a part of greatness. I think these guys feel the same thing. When we walk down that hallway and we look at NFL Hall-of-Famers and we look at the College Football Hall-of-Famers, the First Conference guys, what this program has meant for so long, that's why I'm so thankful to my boss, VP Gosha, for coming in and making the commitment to getting us the facilities that we have.

It means something to a young man when he can see what he's a part of, when he can see the championships, when he can see all the things that we're chasing every single day, and it's a constant reminder to our young men that we don't have to reinvent the wheel. The path has been set. The foundations have been laid.

We just have to go out there and do our best and do what we know we're capable of doing, and we'll be just like those teams. We would love an opportunity to try to do what Rudy Hubbard did in '78 and do what Billy Joe did in '98, almost do the same thing. Give us a chance, and I think we'll be able to show the world what we're really made of.

Q. Coach, you started talking about playoffs back in early, mid-October. That was before we got into the heart of the SWAC schedule and this game here, and now that we're finally here, can you share a little bit about the PR strategy and just the talk and the conversation that went into that back in October that brought us to this point here. Anything you can share?

WILLIE SIMMONS: Well, you know, you learn a lot from

history. Growing up I was taught if you don't know history, you're likely to repeat it. In 2015 we had a football team that won nine games or eight games, depending on how you look at it. Same situation; finished the season with one of the nation's longest winning streaks, had the most explosive offense in the country, No. 1 in the country in scoring offense, lost two early-season games to the conference champ and to an FBS opponent and got left out of the playoffs.

But I think the problem was we didn't start having that conversation until the last week, so there wasn't enough time to really push the envelope and say, hey, this is a worthy football team. We never even got ranked in the top 25. Well, this year -- my AD is a lot of things; he's very smart and strategic, too, so we knew going into it after we felt that Jackson -- it would be hard for Jackson to lose two more games that, hey, we have to shift our focus. Let's shift our goals now to the FCS playoffs, and we cannot wait until the Florida Classic to start having that conversation.

So now it puts a lot of -- I won't say pressure, but it puts the onus on us to go out and perform and win because we knew that a loss would knock us out. We went in week 4 and we told the young men, and I was as honest as I could be, all right, guys, we passed out all our things in the beginning of the season, and SWAC Championship Celebration Bowl was on the top of that goal list.

Now we're changing, we're shifting. Our focus and our goal now is to make the FCS playoffs, and this is how we get it done. So these guys believed in that. They bought into it, and for eight street weeks, we played football as well as anybody in America.

Again, if the nation hasn't noticed, we're ranked in the top 25 now, we'll probably move up, and I know a couple of teams that lost today that hopefully helped us out, but again, we shifted our focus to the playoffs early enough that the conversation could start being had nationally, and I'm thankful to my boss and to other people that really put it out there because I think the nation has finally taken notice.

Q. Just the sequence there to end the third quarter, I was certainly flustered trying to keep up with all that. What were your emotions during all that, so much happened to change the game, and talk about how your defense changed the game like that.

BJ BOHLER: I can start it off. Emotions were high, just excitement, joy. Those three -- I really thought my first strip, fumble, scoop and score, I thought that sealed the deal, but then you come back with a Markquese Bell interception, then you bounce back with a Gentle Hunt

scoop and score, so I'm kind of like speechless at it. That doesn't happen often, you get three plays like that back-to-back, boom, boom, boom. Emotions were high. I'm glad that we were able to just go out there and show that we're the No. 1 defense and that we can't be messed with.

BISHOP BONNETT: I feel like the emotions really started changing after Terrell Jennings made a heck of a run. He made a heck of a run. He's like my little brother. He plays up under me. So to see him do that kind of gave us a lot of energy.

To be honest, after Markquese Bell made that pick, Coach just came up to me and ask me what play you want, and said, hey, what run you want. I called the play I wanted, and right before I ran out, Coach Stanchek said, hey now, you got what you wanted, and made it -- everything just played how it's supposed to, and that's all I can say about that.

WILLIE SIMMONS: Yeah, I think at that point, it's a Florida game, especially as a head coach you try to stay locked in and get a feel for how things are going. At that moment, you knew it was over at that point. The party officially started in Orlando once BJ scooped that ball up and scored. It was an amazing play. I mean, an amazing play.

It just shows this team -- it speaks to who they are. Got a ball called on them, a hitch route, but didn't quit. We talked about finishing, and stripped the ball on the sideline and picked it up, and Bishop will probably disagree, but BJ's our fastest football player, so once he picked it up, nobody is going to catch him.

And then he come back, and Bell, just great to see Bell finally get his hands on one. He's been right there, playing hard, just doing everything, and to finally get an interception was just great, and then man, big Gentle. How about big Gentle Hunt running and scooping and scoring.

We feed off our defense. We have all year. When these guys make a play just like BJ had, at that point you kind of knew, yeah, this is our night.

Just great job, and normally I'm critical of posting out penalties. I think we got three consecutive unsportsmanlikes. Bishop did his Lambeau leap into the end zone, BJ had one and I think Gentle had one. But again, the party had officially started, so they'll also have to fine me on those, and I'll gladly take those unsportsmanlikes.

But just couldn't be more proud of these young men for what they've accomplished all year, not just tonight but all



season long. It's just a tremendous adversity, so thank you guys for your support. Thank you guys for being here this evening. Be safe out here in Orlando in these streets because Rattler nation is about to turn up in Orlando, so anybody who's out, just make sure that you wear the orange and green. Thank you, guys.

BJ BOHLER: Last words, Bethune was on a 9-0 win streak. We came in there and we beat them. You know what they say, Coach? A cat only has nine lives. Let's get it.

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