

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

Saturday, November 19, 2022

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

## Florida A&M Rattlers Willie Simmons Xavier Smith

### Press Conference

Florida A&M - 41, Bethune-Cookman - 20

**WILLIE SIMMONS:** Good to see everyone here. Very excited today. Obviously a big-time win for this program. Guys really did what they were asked to do, which is come out and play inspired football, play with passion, focus a lot, and they did that.

I'm just inspired to see those guys compete for four quarters. And at times, we didn't play our best, but again, we did it when it mattered the most. This guy here, last Florida Classic, definitely wanted to see him out the right way and what better way than to come home with the MVP trophy.

Caught a touchdown and finally redeemed himself and threw him a touchdown after throwing the pick early in the year. But just a big-time player and we're going to definitely, he's a special guy. When you coach a long time, very rarely do you come across players like Xavier Smith. So blessed that had he's a Rattler and very excited to bring home a Florida Classic.

**Q. Offense seemed to execute most of the game, but that punt, that fake punt, on third and short worked to perfection. How often do you guys practice that?**

**TERRY SIMS:** (Laughing.) About every day. We have the utmost faith in Coach Chili Davis, our special teams coordinator. I think this is the second or third fake that we've executed this year, and those guys do a really good job of just buying in to everything that we do.

We called it, the punt, before, but they didn't give us a look that we wanted. So then they called it again the next time and it was the right look. And Faddoul was a high school



quarterback, so he threw him a nice tight spiral. At that point, it was just whether JP was going to catch it. But he caught it and extended the drive. We were able to score and really put the game out of reach.

But, again, hats go off to Chili Davis, our special teams coordinator.

**Q. Coach, of course Isaiah Land didn't play today, but you insert Anthony Dunn, the freshman, and he has a very big performance, five tackles, three tackles for loss, forced fumble, forced -- fumble recovery. Just tell me about his performance and just provide a little update on Isaiah Land's status from today?**

**TERRY SIMS:** Isaiah took a shot to the knee last week. It was a knee that he aggravated. Well, he got injured versus Sacramento State and then re-aggravated it last week against Alabama State.

So we were kind of optimistic that he would be able to go, but when we came out yesterday for the runaround, he just didn't feel it, and so he we definitely didn't want to put him at risk of further injury.

But he's one of our team captains. He was able to talk to the team and really challenge the defensive line. We were without Isaiah and Gentle Hunt, and so those guys really stepped up.

Anthony Dunn has a chance to be a special player. He is a very, very explosive at six-five, 250 pounds. He's a monster. He showed it today. He's from Orlando, so obviously another guy that came home and really had a big game in his backyard. But he has a bright future if he continues to grow and mature.

**Q. Xavier, we talked earlier this week. You said winning last year was your favorite Florida Classic moment. Now you're the Florida Classic MVP. Where does this moment right here rank?**

**XAVIER SMITH:** Probably the same as last year. It's about the same. I'm just happy to win with my teammates and win with my brothers. So I'm going to enjoy this win.

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I'm going to enjoy this win with my teammates and I thank those guys, for sure.

**Q. You all have won nine straight. You'll have applied to host next week. What would you tell the committee about why Florida A&M University should be in the playoffs, being one of the hottest teams in the FCS and much more?**

TERRY SIMS: Well, our motto this year is Leave No Doubt. And then last year we had a docuseries on us entitled: Why Not Us?

So what else do we have to do? All we've done is won nine straight games. Our two losses are to a North Carolina team that's going to play for the ACC Championship game and a Jackson State team, for all intents and purposes, that's undefeated and ranked No. 5 in the FCS.

We beat everybody else on our schedule. We've done what we've needed to do. We can't go back and turn back the hands of time and play Jackson again. We can't play North Carolina again.

But all we've done is show consistently over nine weeks that we're an elite football team. We're in the FCS top 25 and we should be in both polls this week.

So if a committee looks at what this team has done, not just this year, but over the last three seasons, it's our third straight year of nine wins, third straight year of finishing in the FCS top 25. What more do we have to do to show that we're one of the top programs in the country?

If we're not in, it's obviously bias because these guys have done everything that they needed to do to show everybody that we're won of the top 24 teams in America.

**Q. As far as the rushing game, you only were limited to 30 yards rushing. Were you concerned about that? And can you speak on the resiliency of your team winning the nine games in a row.**

TERRY SIMS: We scored 41 points. So I'm not a stats guy. I don't really look at the stats. We did what we needed to do. That last drive, we ran the ball. We didn't throw it. We turned around and handed the ball off and marched into the end zone.

So we ran it when we needed to. And then that's what we're about. We're not about stats. We're not about trying to pad the -- even Xavier going over a thousand yards, we didn't even know it until after the game. So we're not just, our team is about doing what we need to do to win. It

might not be sexy, but it's productive.

**Q. What would you say about your guys' execution tonight? It seemed like there was a lot going on on the touchdown to Xavier, the double pass, obviously, executed perfection, great arm, and then the fake punt. Just you guys executed at a really high level and brought home the win. What would you say about that and how that contributed to the win?**

TERRY SIMS: Well, football is about execution. When you play in these type of ball games, it comes down to the team that executes the best. We really drove that message home to our guys this week, that we really needed to be on point with everything that we did. So I thought we threw the ball extremely well. Again, I thought we ran it when we needed to.

Then defense, aside from losing contain a few times on a very dynamic quarterback, those guys did extremely well. Then obviously with the fake punt and our coverage, even our returns, I thought special teams did a really good job.

So offensively, defensively, special teams, I thought we played a pretty complete football game and showed, again, that we're a really good football team when it matters.

**Q. That trick play on the fake punt, that was pretty gutsy. It was what -- y'all had a one-score lead. Talk about that particular drive, though, that took 3:35. In terms of rating it, in terms of important drives this year, would you rate that as one of the most important 3:35 in Florida A&M football?**

TERRY SIMS: It's the most recent 3:35, so it's obviously the most important. But no, our fourth quarter we challenged our team. Everything we do, from our off-season program to training camp, is geared around fourth quarter.

So we got the guys there to mid-field and just said, Hey, look, everything we've done since January is for this moment.

Defensively we really stood up. We were able to run the ball there that second half. Then we were able to really execute on the fake punt and some of the things we needed to do to put the game out of reach.

But, again, I tip my hat to how these guys just stayed resilient through the face of adversity and really just dominated the fourth quarter.

**Q. Xavier, you and your quarterback Jeremy Moussa seemed to have it planned out all night. And I just**



**wanted to ask, could you talk about you and Jeremy's connection or chemistry?**

XAVIER SMITH: It just starts in practice. Like, it just starts in practice. We just kind of take it to the game to where we talk about it. After each play, sometimes when we misconnect in practice, we kind of go to each other, we tell each other, Okay, look, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, or he tell me, this is what he's looking for and stuff like that.

So it just comes into play when we get in the game now we're on the same page and now you can see the connection as to how much work we put in.

**Q. Xavier, we usually ask the coaches kind of the message that they give their players, but I would love to hear from you as a player, like, how do you guys kind of rally together as players in terms of what kind of motivational lessons you teach each other, ways that you hold each other accountable, especially on a night like tonight for a win like this?**

XAVIER SMITH: Before every game we have captains' talk and we just tell each other, Let's play for each other, let's play as one, and let's do it all four quarters.

So it stands down to the talk that we have before the game, and when guys see the passion of the team leaders talking or the captains talking, they understand how much the game means to us. So I feel as though it's the captains' talk before the game that we tell each other how much it means to us.

**Q. Xavier, we talked about this earlier this week also. You got a thousand yards. You were the last receiver to get a thousand yards, doing it in 2019. With this being your last year of college football, does this one feel more special?**

XAVIER SMITH: Kinda sorta, I guess. I don't know how it feels yet because it just happened, I guess. I really haven't got a chance to just sit back and think about the moment. I'm just really thinking about celebrating this win with my team and that's been my main focus, so I really haven't had a chance to just sit back and hone in on that one.

**Q. Talk a little bit about the Florida Classic. It's different, what it means personally. If you both could answer.**

TERRY SIMS: Well, it means, one, it means Thanksgiving dinner is going to taste a lot better this week.

But it means Rattler Nation's off my back for about 364

days. (Laughing.)

But, no, this game means everything. You can't really put into words what the Florida Classic means, just the pageantry, the battle of the bands, the community service, the recruitment, everything that makes this game what it is, the City of Orlando, Florida Blue, the title sponsor.

I mean, it's the best Classic out there for many reasons, and we're just blessed to be a part of it, and definitely blessed to be on the winning side of it.

**Q. Xavier, your brother Kareem played at Florida A&M and he played in the Florida Classic. Do you get a chance to one up on him because you got this?**

XAVIER SMITH: (Laughing.)

Yeah, because I guess during his time, they never got a chance to win this game. But to him, me win it or this team win it and the rest of the teams that's going to win, I'm pretty sure he feels as though he won, just as if he was out there on the field playing.

So I get to say I was part of the teams that won, but I'm pretty sure he feels the same way that I do.

**Q. Xavier, what does it mean to be a Florida A&M Rattler? After a performance like this -- breaking the streak against Bethune-Cookman, which was here when you started -- what has it meant to you to be a Florida A&M Rattler over your collegiate career?**

XAVIER SMITH: It means the world. I feel as though people can understand and see the passion that we have for FAMU. It's like no other. Like coach said, it's something you can't really put into words. It's just a feeling of passion, a feeling of not wanting to let these people, not wanting to let the alumni down or the fans down. It means the world to me. It means the world to me.

**Q. Central Florida is huge when it comes to FAMU recruiting. Xavier, you're pretty much playing in your backyard. Coach, can you speak how important this area is for recruiting? And Xavier, how big this is to do it in your backyard. Polk County is right there. Just kind of how that feels.**

XAVIER SMITH: It feels good because a lot of people they get a chance to come to this game and get a chance to see not only me, but it's a lot of other guys who are from the area as well on this team. So they get a chance to come out and see us play and they get a chance to see us play at a high level. So it means a lot.



TERRY SIMS: It's just huge. Again obviously it rotates who is the home team. So who can invite recruits. But just for them to see the environment. We talk about playing in big venues, in front of packed houses. Just the atmosphere, the band. It rivals any type of atmosphere you've been a part of.

So for us from a recruiting standpoint it's very critical that we continue to lay our footprint here in central Florida just like north Florida and South Florida as well. It's a great state, the best state in the country for high school recruiting. We got to make sure that we comb every inch of it to bring the next Xavier Smith, the next Isaiah land, the next Chris Faddoul. And again if we continue to do that we'll build this program up to be a perennial power.

**Q. Tough question for you. Outstanding season this year. Outstanding since you've been here. How are you dealing with the distractions of other colleges having interest in you?**

TERRY SIMS: We just keep coaching. Again, it's a blessing because that means you're being successful. So that's a tribute to these guys. If we weren't a program that was showing weekly that we're consistent, that we're dominant, no one would care.

So again we don't, we tell our guys every day to be where our feet are. That message applies to us as coaches as well. So I have assistant coaches who are being courted by other schools. And if someone feels that I'm a coach of interest then they will reach out.

But again I can't focus on that. I got to focus on being the best head coach I can be for these young men and the blessing that it is to me to be able to coach them. Because there's no other group of men that I would rather be around than these guys I coach every day.

**Q. Coach, do you feel like you still have unfinished business trying to win the SWAC?**

TERRY SIMS: Well, I mean, we still got more football to play, so always unfinished business. Obviously we've set high goals for our selves, but right now our focus is the playoffs. We'll worry about the SWAC next season. That's already done. Jackson State, kudos to them, they took care of their business and they will represent the East in the SWAC Championship game.

But this football team is on a mission to go out and win an FCS Championship. We're still the only HBCU to ever win an FCS Championship. Hopefully the selection committee will give us that opportunity tomorrow. So that's where our focus is.

**Q. Xavier, if you all have the opportunity to be selected to play in a FCS playoffs, what's the message that you have to your teammates to try to execute and get the job done to finish it?**

XAVIER SMITH: Continue to attack every game as we did all season. Just play all four quarters hard. That's all we got to do. I feel if we play hard, we play as one, we play as a team we'll come out on top.

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