

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

Saturday, November 18, 2023

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Florida A&M Rattlers Coach Willie Simmons Terrell Jennings

Isaiah Major

Press Conference

Florida A&M 24, Bethune 7

WILLIE SIMMONS: Honored to be here today and thank you for taking the time out. Obviously a huge win for the program. Proud of these guys for, again, just checking another box. We came into this season with a lot of goals in mind, and we've accomplished all of them so far. It's a testament to their character, their hard work, their sacrifices that they make every day, and I'm honored to be the leader of such a great group of young men.

10 wins regular season around here hasn't been done in a long time, but as we all know the work is not done. We've got a SWAC championship game. Blessed to be hosting the game on Ken Riley Field at Bragg Memorial Stadium. We'll have our 24-hour rule. We'll extend it a little bit longer because we don't play next week, but once we hit the field again Monday, it's business as usual.

Looking forward to a rematch with Prairie View A&M, and again, it's going to be a great match-up.

All in all, proud of the guys tonight. Three straight. Again, we suffered a streak there for a long time and felt pretty bad coming out of this game, and feels really good to be three years in a row on the front side of it. Thanksgiving dinner will taste a lot better this year, but I'm proud of these guys.

Q. 10 wins this year, first time since 1999, first time since 1998 getting 10 wins in the regular season. Can you talk a little bit about that, Terrell, one of the longest tenured guys; Coach, you've been here and it's your first 10 win season as a head coach; Isaiah, you



were a new guy last year but you've seen the growth of this program. Can you talk about how important getting those 10 wins was this year, just a monumental achievement for FAMU football?

TERRELL JENNINGS: I think it's a testament to the work we've been putting in since the whole season because it's not a good feeling when you know you have more you can do. I'd say it's a good feeling now we're on the 10-win streak. We have 10 wins. We never did that. I personally haven't did it since I've been here, so it feels great to be on the win side.

ISIAH MAJOR: To just piggy-back off of what Terrell said, it's a blessing to be in the position we're in. Coming in last year as a transfer and coming up short, not being able to make the playoffs kinda hurt, so to control our own destiny throughout the season and to be where we are, it feels definitely good.

Q. Terrell, I don't know if it was your mom or who it was holding up the giant poster cheering you on. To see the support and love that you had and just the excitement to show out in a game that means so much, what was in the air for you today?

TERRELL JENNINGS: Honestly, I had lost my aunt two days ago, so my heart has been heavy this whole weekend. Just playing for her and then my family just being here, it gave me an extra boost to go even harder because I know my auntie is not here, she's watching me, so I just had to ball out for her. Then my mom, she's been coming to every game for 16 years now, so I expect --

Q. Something was very obvious to me on the sideline. First of all, you were coaching until the last seconds went off the clock, intently coaching, and your message to the players was, you all still have to get it right. We may need you. There was no Gatorade bath after. You said earlier in the season that winning this game is special but it's not your ultimate goal. How did you convince your team because they seemed to operate that way, as well?

WILLIE SIMMONS: Well, it's a group effort. You have



guys like Isaiah Major, Terrell, Mouss, Kamari Young, Stanley Mentor, our leaders and all our leadership council, we understand the standard, and we don't waver from that standard. Yes, we expected to win the game, just like we expected to win the east. We expect to be the best team on the field.

It's not just something we say. We have to work that way every day. They know me, and they know winning is one thing, but how we win is very important, making sure that our brand is always represented, that we're doing things the right way, and we're playing for something bigger.

The first four years we were playing for a playoff berth, playing for a mythical HBC National Championship, but this time we're playing for a SWAC championship, and the way we played today, obviously Prairie View will get this film, and if we're doing things that give them something that they can take advantage of, that's detrimental to us. So we've got to make sure that we're always playing Rattler football, and that's following our seven Fs, that's playing disciplined, that's playing together, not being individuals.

So whenever we fall into that mode every so often, I have to remind them, and guys, I may have to remind them that hey, this is not who we are. We've got to make sure we're doing the little things right. Just proud of the guys. They're growing up right before our eyes, and this journey that we started this year, we think we're going to finish it the way we all envision doing so.

Q. Isaiah, looking at Coach's answer just now and looking at the defense that's regarded as one of the best if not the best in the SWAC, just talk about the message. You guys only gave up seven today. Talk about the message that you instilled in the guys throughout the week making sure you guys were playing the FAMU level of defense today.

ISAIAH MAJOR: First, I would like to correct you on the best in the SWAC. But it's challenging at times, but the guys want it just as much as I do. So to reiterate to them that I'm one of them while being a leader, that I'm a foot soldier, as well, and that's how I see it. Those guys follow along, it's kind of easy to get to them, just talking to them, elaborating that I'm in there with you. Just situations like that, guys like Stanley Mentor who helped me, Gentle Hunt, Dre Jones, my linebacker partner Johnny Chaney, it's a collective group, it's not just me. But they definitely helped me out, and it works well.

Q. I know Coach at the beginning talked about how this was just kind of another goal checked off the checklist that you set at the beginning, but when you opened that door, we could hear the celebration still

going on in the locker room. Can you take us through how special winning this game is and what the celebration is like in postgame though you've gotten three in a row now?

WILLIE SIMMONS: Make no mistake about it, we turn out when we win. It's the Florida Classic at the end of the day, so whether it's playing for a championship or whatever, it's still the Florida Classic, so the guys are excited to win. We celebrate all wins. Wins are hard to come by. Half the teams that play football today lost. So we never want to get to the point where we lose focus on how important winning is, as a fan base, as players, as coaches. We've got to remember at the end of the day it's always fun winning.

We're going to have a great time. We're going to celebrate it. We'll give the guys 24 hours to blow it out, and we'll come back to work. But again, my alma mater has taken some shots this year, the head coach, because of the standard that's set there, and you forget that they won a lot of games, and sometimes people tend to forget that. But winning is hard. We make it sometimes look easy, now sometimes we make it look hard, too. But again, we work for this. This isn't just something that happens. We don't just roll the football out there and just go play.

We go early, so if anybody wants to see 6:00 in the morning on Tuesday and Wednesday, come and watch it and you'll see how hard these guys go. You'll see how fast they practice, how intense it is, and that's why we've had the success that we've had. We have really good players, but these really good players work their butts off, and that's why the winning is fun because we know how hard we work to get there, so when we do, we want to celebrate it.

Q. Coach, when you think about what you've done this season and what it's meant to you so far and your players, what are you going to do different for the SWAC championship? Are you going to change anything, and what would you change? What would you correct or -- I know you've seen missteps throughout the season. How are you going to fix that?

WILLIE SIMMONS: I told these guys yesterday, we're not going to change anything. We're 10-1. We clearly have done something right. But every game is a new challenge. You make the corrections, obviously it's going to be the same routine. We're going to get the film, we're going to break it down, we're going to watch it. We're going to go do that on Monday morning and we're going to get back to work.

It's the same thought process, it's the same routine. I think these guys have responded the way they have this year

because they're used to that routine. They know win, lose or draw, it's the same Coach Simmons on Sunday team meeting, it's the same Ryan Smith, the same Joe Henry, the same Doc Gamble, the same strength and conditioning coaches.

We don't allow the situation to dictate how we respond. I think that's a very, very important aspect of our program. We're not going to ride the wave. We're going to stay consistent and focusing on the things that matter, and that's what we're going to do.

Because it's the SWAC championship game, no, it doesn't change. Nothing changes. Our preparation will be exactly what it is. We'll change this week's schedule because it's Thanksgiving so we'll give the guys time off for Thanksgiving like we do every year. But aside from that, when we come back Sunday of next week, it's go time.

Q. I want you all to kind of describe the whole Florida Classic weekend for you. It's not like a regular game; there's a lot of fanfare. You got the luncheon which I've never seen anything like that in my life for the luncheon, and you had the game and you didn't see the halftime. I've only missed one Florida Classic since 78. I've never seen that much contention in a halftime. But with the game, just talk about the full atmosphere that you all get to experience as players and how special that is. Coach Simmons, your first head coaching job was at Prairie View and you get an opportunity in the SWAC, different team, different side of the bracket, to actually host the SWAC championship with a chance to go to the Celebration Bowl. How special is that to you on your journey as a head coach?

ISAIAH MAJOR: The overall experience at the Florida Classic, it's mindblowing. The luncheon, just to see all the alum, the old heads, how much it means to them. Parking lot brawls everywhere. It really means a lot to them to come back at halftime and see more people in the stands. It's unreal. Me coming from Oklahoma City, actually played in a classic game in high school, Miller versus Douglas we played the Soul Bowl. So I've seen it in some forms. But magnitude on this level, just to see everything that's put into it, it's a blessing.

TERRELL JENNINGS: Isaiah said, yeah, it's amazing to see how many people care about us and this program. Like what Coach said earlier, they'd rather us go 9-1 and win this game instead of going 10-0 and losing it. It's amazing to see the support that we had behind us the whole week, from the luncheon to see how everybody is into it, even the other school, it's an amazing experience. Y'all have to experience it one day if you could during the

week.

WILLIE SIMMONS: I'm just interested to see how Dr. Ramos is going to top this one. He let it all hang out this luncheon. It was amazing. No, again, and I'm not thinking too much about Prairie View at this moment. I'm going to enjoy this win and celebrate with these guys and go spend some time with my family, and we'll get to Prairie View on Monday.

But obviously the old adage it's hard to beat a team twice. The thing is that we beat them pretty handily, too, so that's the challenge for this team and the message is can we be mature enough to prepare for a team that we beat by 35 points or 38 points, 45-7 earlier in the year.

Stop on that journey, and we've got to make sure that we prepare the way we prepare to we'll be fine. This group is mature. I have no doubt that they'll come in and do what needs to be done, but we're going to enjoy this one the next couple days and then we'll turn our focus to the championship.

Q. Could you speak to the impact of this winning season as far as recruiting? A lot of people may not have noticed but you brought a plethora of recruits and high-level recruits.

WILLIE SIMMONS: Well, obviously winning helps. But I'll tell you what, man, I've said it numerous times, Devin Rispres does an amazing job of recruiting these young men and just contacting them weekly, inviting them to games and making the experience great.

But the success that we've had is attributed to these guys. We had to recruit Terrell Jennings out of high school. Terrell had Group of Five offers and chose to come to FAMU. Isaiah Major had Group of Five offers and chose to come to FAMU. We're not the No. 1 defense in the SWAC, the No. 2 in the nation without Isaiah Major. We're not a formidable rushing attack without Terrell Jennings, and so Coach Simmons gets a lot of credit for being a really good coach, but I've called these same plays for about 15 years, and they don't always get to the same success that they get now because of the level of players that we have.

Recruiting is the lifeblood of any program, and again, what we're building, and we say building, which means it's continuous, you have to be able to recruit top tier student-athletes to keep it going because as much as it'll hurt, this guy has only got two more games with us, and this guy to my right only got two more games with us, and we've got to find a way to replace that production, and you do that through recruiting. It's great to be able to see the caliber of student athletes that we've had all season long,

especially at the Florida Classic today, but that's the way we're going to be able to keep this thing going.

Q. Last year at the end of the Classic we all left not knowing if FAMU was going to play another football game this season, and during the Classic you were playing for that, hoping you were going to get that playoff berth and it ended up not happening. How comforting is it knowing that you won the classic, which is you say the most important game that matters the most, and knowing that you have a guaranteed another football game left to play in two weeks?

WILLIE SIMMONS: One thing I will say, it's a good thing you're a beat writer because you like bringing up bad moments. You've always got to have the bad news. Why we got to talk about that? No, I'm joking with you.

The phrase that we talked about that at senior day, Nick Dixon and I were having a conversation and the guys were talking about it in the locker room the other day, I think Ja'cory was the one that said, guys, today, the Thursday practice, we didn't know last year that was going to be our last practice because we just knew going into the game, we win the Classic, we're in the playoffs. It was an extremely disappointing day to not get that at-large bid.

But I saw a group that day that I knew that this day was coming. Like the look in their eyes when we walked out of that team meeting -- we get back in the weight room because I knew I had a hungry group coming back because never again would this group allow someone else to control our fight, and that was something that we talked about all season long.

They took care of business. They put the work in. I don't know if many of them even remember that feeling, but they've just used that momentum to just fuel them to do everything that we've asked them to do, and that's why we're in the position we are today, because again, these guys, that was a dark day for this program.

But I think it ignited something in us that got us to this point.

Q. Isaiah, you've been already listed for postgame accolades and you're a tackling machine, almost averaging 10 tackles a game. How do you stay focused? How do you remain humble when you're garnering attention from not just envelope scouts?

ISAIAH MAJOR: To be honest, it's been my path, and it hasn't always been the easiest road for me. I went Division II out of high school, got into -- and being a child, had to grow up, had to go to junior college, learn some lessons

there which then led to here. I've seen it all. I've seen five stars come back to JuCo and lose it all. I've seen players go DI from practice film in JuCo. I've seen it all various ways. My first Division I game was ACC football against North Carolina.

I mean, for that to be my first DI game, I'm grateful, and I would never take it for granted.

Q. Coach, you said at the beginning that Thanksgiving dinner is going to take extra good. I just have to know what you're looking forward to the most. Is it the turkey, the mashed potatoes?

WILLIE SIMMONS: I'm going to eat a little bit of everything. I'm turkey, I'm fried chicken, mac and cheese, dressing, sweet potatoes, green beans, chitlins. I'm a country boy, from Quincy, so any animal that's running around Quincy right now is in trouble. We're going to cook it every way imaginable.

But no, my whole family is here tonight. That's one of the blessings of being a head coach at FAM is that you get to enjoy these experiences right there with our family. It's definitely going to be a special feeling.

We'll feed the guys, too. We won't give them all the stuff that I'm going to be eating because it's probably not good for you. We've got a championship to win. I won't run gassers when we get back but they will, so they've got to make sure they eat a little bit healthier than me.

TERRELL JENNINGS: On that note, we won't be eating much.

WILLIE SIMMONS: He was throwing up last game, so we've got to make sure we check on him.

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