

DIRECTV Holiday Bowl: Louisville vs USC

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

San Diego, California, USA

Petco Park

USC Trojans

Coach Lincoln Riley

Miller Moss

Tahj Washington

Jaylin Smith

Max Williams

Bryson Shaw

Kyron Hudson

Justin Dedich

Jamil Muhammad

Postgame Press Conference

USC 42, Louisville 28

LINCOLN RILEY: Incredibly proud of this football team. Honestly, all the years and wins and stuff, this was as fun a win as I can remember as a head coach, just with all the changes, all the back and forth, six weeks, 20 plus guys that didn't play in this game for different reasons.

We could have come into this game not caring about it. This team could have easily -- this team could have gone a lot of different ways with it, and to see us come play as well as we did on all three sides, big plays on all three sides. That's a good football team that we just beat up on. It's a really good football team, and a team that had a lot more of their guys throughout the season than we certainly did.

For us to not use that as an excuse and to use it as something that really motivated us, motivated our team, motivated our coaches, was really, really special, and to see -- I thought the team leadership in this game was as strong as it was the entire year. I thought that was a big reason why the guys played the way we did.

I was especially proud because one of the things I told the



coaches today was I thought it would be really important for us to get off to a good start, and we did completely the opposite. We went three-and-out, they go down and score, and it's like, all right, where are you at now?

Then we went on a great run and guys made big plays, and it was just a lot of fun. Kind of didn't want the game to be over in a lot of ways.

We're really proud of this group, proud of the leadership. This is significant for the guys that have been here in the beginning of this journey, and there's been a lot of great moments in the first two years. Now, they're going to get a lot better and it's going to get a lot more fun as we go, but it had to start somewhere, and a lot of the guys in the locker room were a part of that.

A special thanks to the guys that stayed around, because it was important to them because the team was important to them, because USC was important to them. A special thanks to the coaches that did that. It was not an easy situation, especially for some of the coaches on our staff, and our coaches -- especially our defensive guys did a hell of a job tonight.

They got our guys ready to play. A lot of really good coaches and a lot of really good people on the staff, where they could have turned and tried to go on to the next thing, and they stayed because it was important.

Honestly, a bunch of guys in the locker room and the coaching staff felt that way, and that's the reason we won the game. If we wouldn't have had that, we would already be on the bus ride home and it would be somebody else, another coach sitting up here at this podium right now.

Very appreciate to all those guy. Great, great win, great way to end the season.

Q. (No microphone.)

LINCOLN RILEY: He was awesome. He was awesome. I'm not a bit surprised with how he played. He just did what he's been doing in practice, really for a while, but especially come the second half of this year in every practice the guy



was just getting better and better. I knew he would be very confident coming in, and it was great to see him respond.

Kind of the same thing, we go three-and-out on the first drive, and to see him respond and make some of the throws that he made, he was really dialed into the game plan, trusted his guys, got the ball out on time. It was just a tremendous quarterbacking performance.

Obviously a lot of guys around him played very well and made plays, but he certainly led the charge.

Q. What are your thoughts on the receiving corps?

LINCOLN RILEY: They were great. They were great. Guys made a lot of competitive plays. It was fun to see domination of the young guys. Stepped up and made some big plays. Obviously there were several of those, and to see some of our older veteran guys, Tahj, Kyron, some of those guys step up, it was huge.

To see Tabo step in for Lake after Lake got injured was awesome. Yeah, a lot of playmakers on both sides. Guys had chances to make plays on both sides and really stepped up.

Q. Throughout the night the defense (indiscernible) talk about their effort.

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, I give our guys a lot of credit. Like I said, give our coaches a lot of credit over the last six weeks, our defensive players; guys stepped up. We had guys in different positions. I mean, Jaylin Smith played a position tonight he's never played before.

Max has always played a million different positions, so that wasn't much new to him.

But yeah, to see Prophet step up, to see some of our young defensive players step up, some guys that hadn't played very many snaps for us all year. A week ago, basically a week ago, we had to basically change the defensive game plan because of the players that were available and a few guys that decided not to be here. And our guys didn't flinch. Our coaches didn't flinch, leaders didn't flinch.

It wasn't ideal, we changed it, and the guys flew around, played hard, played very physical, and super, super proud of 'em, especially the turnovers, because the first turnover is what got us going, and then like defensively we got us going with the first one and we shut the door at the end with the last one.

Q. Lincoln, with the way Miller performed, has he

solidified his status as the starter next season, and will you still pursue a high-profile transfer quarterback?

LINCOLN RILEY: I can't believe we got to the fourth question. He did a great job. Shoot, he may have scored off anybody that would want to come here anyway. He was awesome. It's a performance game, and I've said previously and our local guys know this, it's really, really important to me the longer I coach and going through this, I don't know it all, but having people at this program that is incredibly important to them, that's the key.

In this day and age with all the movement, when you have guys like that it's even more of an advantage than maybe it was five or ten years ago because it's becoming a little bit harder to find.

Miller has had a passion for this university and program for a long time. You've seen that in his ability to hang in there, to continue to get better. Part of I think the reason he played well tonight is the consistency that he's brought.

He could have bolted off at different times. He's stayed here, he's gotten better, and that's why a night like tonight happened. He is obviously a tremendous leader for our program, was a great leader for us tonight, and I am really excited to see what the future holds for him, because he's going to get better and better.

Q. Earlier in the week you talked about Louisville's defense and how good it was, specifically their red zone defense. Can you put into context what your offense was able to do tonight? They gave up 16 passing touchdowns on the season, six tonight.

LINCOLN RILEY: We played well. That's a good defense. They weren't like a few of the other sides of the ball where -- you know, they weren't decimated by -- wouldn't say decimated, they weren't affected by a lot of guys holding out or different guys.

That was pretty much the same unit that we saw all year. For our guys to make some of those plays, it was great, some of the competitive plays.

Just again, the entire vibe of the sideline felt different. You could tell the guys were just playing for one another across the board. You just felt it. You felt the defense wanted to make plays for the offense, the offense wanted to make plays for the defense.

If one of us didn't make a play or we didn't score or stop them, all right, the other side has got to hold up their end of the bargain, and we did that all night. A lot of credit to these guys.

Q. (Indiscernible).

LINCOLN RILEY: At times, yes. Yes. I think these guys would probably agree with that. Like I said, I think the player leadership in this game was -- and in the last six weeks -- was really, really strong, and the team reflected that in their performance tonight.

Q. Miller, like Coach said, the leadership was very high in this game in particular. How did you step into that leadership position and get yourself ready for this game?

MILLER MOSS: Yeah, I think from a leadership standpoint, we had a really strong senior group and a really strong group that wanted to come back and play this game, and I think that was really led by them. They set the example, and it was easy for me to then fall in behind them. Got guys up here, Tahj and Max is a little younger, but guys like Solomon Byrd and Justin Dedich came up an intent to win this game, so it was easy to follow their lead in that sense.

Q. Coach, can you speak to why you chose the four captains you did and how important those guys were not only for the last six weeks, but how important they've been sitting the tone for next season, as well?

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, I just felt like it was -- we've kind of had this mantra that it's a new team and one game. I felt like if we're going to have a new team, we probably need some new captains. Just felt like it was not anything against the guys that were, because a lot of those guys that played with us tonight were certainly still big factors in terms of the leadership as Miller attested to, but there was a lot of reasons.

Tahj, I kind of told the team when we announced it, Tahj could have -- he's going to be an NFL Draft pick here in a couple of months. He could have had a great case for not playing this game, but anybody that knows Tahj knew there was a zero percent chance that he was going to sit out of this game, and that's why he's going to be a great pro. I thought a great example there.

Chris Thompson is getting ready to make another move in terms of a better opportunity on the field. He's been up front with us about it the whole time. He was a great team first guy this whole year. Once again, could have left and said, no way am I leaving my guys. Another great example.

Bryson Shaw has been I think one of just our toughest most consistent competitors, one of the guys you just know

every day he's going to be there, and every day he's going to fight and give you everything he has.

And then obviously Miller represented the younger group, some of the guys that are getting some of those first time big time opportunities that have fought their tail off behind scenes, have a lot of respect within our locker room, and I think our team was really energized to see not just Miller, but a lot of these other guys get this opportunity tonight.

Just thought they all kind of represented something different, and, again, those four guys deserve a lot of credit, but there is a ton of other guys. Max, Dedich, all these different guys that were a part of leading this group, and they really came together.

Q. Jaylin Smith, you guys were playing today like you had your hair on fire. Everybody was running to the ball. How do you take this game now and carry it over into spring ball and into next season?

Jaylin SMITH: How we carry it on is just hard work and consistency. Carry on everything looking at the film of how this game went, the preparation that led up to it, and ultimately, man, just taking account of it and going with a chip on our shoulder going into 2024.

Q. Miller, can you talk about what you told the offense to mentally prepare to get back out there?

MILLER MOSS: Yeah, 100 percent my fault on that swing. Turning the ball over in the red zone is not winning football, but I also had the mindset that I'm not going to allow my mistake to be the reason we don't win this game.

Just told them it was 100 percent on me. As long as we do our job, we'll be all good, and I think we responded positively. But that's not winning football. You can't turn the ball over in the red zone, so definitely got to be better.

Q. Miller, afterwards you and Caleb shared a moment. Can you share what he had said between you guys?

MILLER MOSS: Yeah, I mean, people are always trying to pit quarterbacks against each other, especially in the same room in college these days, but we've had a really, really positive experience working together.

I'll always appreciate Caleb for what he did not only for me, but for this program. He was a great leader for us and obviously a tremendous player, and we will always be really, really great friends, and I think that was just kind of showcased there.

Q. Miller, are you aware of the nickname that's already

circulating around campus, It's Miller Time?

MILLER MOSS: Yeah, I've heard it before.

Q. How do you feel about that?

MILLER MOSS: It's cool. We could get a little more creative, but it's cool.

Q. Tahj, what are your favorite moments as you leave USC now as far as games, maybe plays, maybe something in practice, whatever, whatever, and also, do you have a special meal you're cooking tonight?

TAHJ WASHINGTON: No, I ain't cooking tonight. I just got to finish packing tonight. That's hard to say. I've been here three years and treated every day the same, so it's kind of hard to pick out a memory.

But just these last six weeks have been very memorable. Me and this team have went through so much adversity lately, and how we just came together, it made a huge difference.

You could see tonight how everybody show cased that brotherhood that we talked about, and that's just been what's on the top of my mind right now.

Q. Miller, with transferring so common nowadays, can you talk about how staying and developing the last three years has helped you?

MILLER MOSS: Yeah, obviously a difficult first year for me in college, a lot of ups and downs and adversity in that situation.

But I think it's just more a testament to the guys in that locker room and to the leadership and our coaching staff that made me want to stay. I love those guys, I'll ride for those guys, and I think Coach Riley has done a really. Really great job in quarterback development obviously with the guys that he's had.

I trusted him and I trust his process, so love being around those guys, and going to continue to do so.

Q. Miller, you've done a great job this week deflecting the spotlight from your head, but then you went out and made yourself the story of the game. Given your path to this point, can you put in perspective how special this was and were there any moments that hit you along the way tonight?

MILLER MOSS: Yeah, it's a good, positive moment. I still think more so for the team than for me personally. These

six weeks weren't about any individual, they were about us and the people that wanted to be here and wanted to play this game and wanted to come together, and then obviously like I did some good things, there were some things I could do better definitely. I'm sure I'll watch the film and there will be a ton of stuffy need to clean up.

Personally it's a good step in the right direction, but definitely a lot to improve on, a lot to accomplish.

Q. Max, this season the defense has been much maligned and berated by the media. As you reflect on your time here at USC, can you describe something you'll remember the most?

MAX WILLIAMS: There's a lot of moments I can remember. Like Miller just said, the last six weeks we all got close together no matter what happened, coaches leaving, players leaving. We all came close together, and I think this being my only bowl win, championship win in my five years here, it's definitely the most memorable.

And special credit to my teammates and the coaches for putting us in the right position to go out there and make plays like Coach Odom, Coach T. Mays taking care of the secondary. It could have been easy for them guys to just leave, and they didn't. They was on us every single day.

Guys got better in the room. Jaylin got better. ^ tone with the punch-out at the end of the game, he got better in these six weeks. Guys wanted to come out here and play no matter what, and we wanted to win. I felt like we showed that tonight with the energy we had, and yeah, it was a great day today.

Q. Justin, obviously you've been around Miller quite a bit these last couple years, but what did he prove tonight to you, to this team with his performance?

JUSTIN DEDICH: Yeah, it's a cliché saying, but trust the process, sticking through it, because when you get your opportunity you've got to shine, and Miller is the definition of that. He's seen it. He's been ready to play for quite a while now, and then he finally got his opportunity, and he showed the world that he's ready to take it. Super excited for him. He led the offense very well. Man, I'm just very proud.

Q. Justin and Bryson, we've heard so much about the last six weeks, you guys are older guys, could have opted out of this game. What was so significant for you guys about the last six weeks and what does it say about the leadership of the team finishing 1-5? What were the last six weeks like?

BRYSON SHAW: I know I can speak for Justin and myself, there was no way we were opting out of this game. This game means so much to this program for us to do that. Going 1-5, that's not us. We wanted to finish this thing on the right note. We're competitors at the end of the day. There was nothing taking us two out of this game.

Q. Kyron, walk through that sequence where you blocked the punt and two plays later getting rewarded with a touchdown pass.

KYRON HUDSON: Well Justin trusting the process all week, to be honest. That whole week I was getting blocked on that play, so just like Justin said, when your moment comes, be ready for it.

So next thing you know, I was wide open, just went in and put my hand up. Then just being able to have the opportunity to go out there, capitalize, that really changed the momentum, which I was definitely excited about.

Q. Jamil, what did you feel like you guys did differently in terms of defensive execution and just overall effort this game, and looking into next year you guys have talked about wanting to revitalize the defense. What do you hope this game sets in terms of a standard for approaching the spring and going into next year?

JAMIL MUHAMMAD: Yeah, like winter and the spring going into next year, I think what we did was really just hone in on the little things. Like I said in an interview last week, it's just all about doing that, and like Kyron said, trusting in the process and trusting in the guy next to you and playing for the guy next to you. We came out on the good end of it tonight.

Q. With the way Miller played, do you feel like he won the starting job for next year? With Jaylin, do you feel like he's kind of the next up, the way Kalen was a leader for the defense?

JAYLIN SMITH: What Miller did out there is something that is going to help us in the future, so personally, yes, he did. I'm super excited for Miller. He waited his time, and he's ready for it, and he's the guy that we need.

Q. Bryson, you guys, you were pretty thin in the secondary. You played a lot of snaps. How did the coaching staff prepare you guys to get ready for kind of maybe a new game plan based on the personnel you guys had available?

BRYSON SHAW: Yeah, the defensive coaches did a great job. Taylor Mays step up when Dante went out, and he

killed it right from the start. He's a legend, so he has that respect right off the bat, but the way he coached us, he coached us hard, coached us with passion that he has.

You guys all know T. Mays, just we were all so excited to play for him.

And then Greg Brown, he brought his enthusiasm to the group, too. We were all just having fun practices were the most fun myself I don't know about these guys, but practicing this last month, this has been the most fun for me personally playing football in my whole life, this last month.

We talked about this team that just played, like I would take this team over everybody. I love this team.

This last month has been something special. I mean, you guys saw it there, but we were confident in this. We knew this was going to happen just based off the belief in each other.

Q. Jamil, the last chapter of USC football for the Pac-12 is officially closed. As you guys get ready to transfer to the Big Ten, what message do you have for your future opponents?

JAMIL MUHAMMAD: That we're going to play a great brand of football and come prepared. We're going to come ready to do what we have to do, do anything we have to do to win the game because it takes what it takes.

Q. You guys weren't surprised by how Miller played tonight, but there were a lot of people around the country who were a little surprised, who didn't know a whole lot about Miller. What were you guys not surprised that he had the game that he did?

BRYSON SHAW: The thing I noticed about Miller right when I got here is his composure and how confident he is in himself. And he's a leader. He's like a natural leader. The guys really gravitate to him.

He wasn't nervous at all. Talking to him, he's a cool, calm, collected guy. He's a killer, man, and he's got ice cold veins, and he showed that tonight. Just right away I knew what kind of guy he was because he's a professional. He's a professional guy.

Q. Kyron and Jamil, you guys are probably the luckiest football team in America right now because you basically played a spring game because there was a bunch of guys who didn't get reps, and they got reps tonight against the No. 16 team in the nation. How do you take that momentum from this game where you

got to play a live spring game and carry it into winter weights, which you probably start lifting in two weeks and taking it into spring ball and bring that culture that you had tonight out there on the field and bring it in with the incoming freshmen this summer?

JAYLIN SMITH: That's just going back to preparation and being ready for your opportunity. All year some of these players that was out there, for instance, like Ja'Kobi, a young receiver, didn't have that many opportunities this year, but when his opportunity came, he capitalized with two touchdowns.

Today was his first, capitalized with another one. This is like a foreshadow for next season. This is like giving everybody, our fans, everybody, especially that people that doubt us, a foreshadow for what's going to come.

I can speak for Jamil, I can speak for everybody in here. It's going to change and we're super excited.

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