

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Wake Forest vs Rutgers

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

Greg McGarity

John Duce

Dave Clawson

Jimbo Fisher

Coaches Press Conference

GREG MCGARITY: First of all, to Coach Fisher and Coach Clawson, congratulations on a great season. We're so excited that you're going to be here in Jacksonville for really the 77th Annual Gator Bowl.

And to my good friends, Ross and John, as ADs, it's going to be good to spend time with you here in Jacksonville, and I know you are going to have a great time. Two great teams. Two ranked teams. We're really excited. At this time let me pass it on over to our Chairman John Duce.

JOHN DUCE: Thank you, Greg. It's our privilege to host the number 17 Wake Forest and number 25 Texas A&M in the 77th TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. We are only one of three bowls outside of the New Year's Six to host a top 25 matchup. This will only be the second time Wake Forest and Texas A&M have played. The only other time was in the 2017 Belk Bowl, a 55-52 barn burner in Wake's favor.

Let's take a moment and celebrate the accolades of the two outstanding teams. Coach Clawson and Director Currie, congratulations on a tremendous season. The Demon Deacons finished the season 10-3 and are the ACC Atlantic Division Champs. Additionally this season, they held the highest AP top 25 ranking in program history at number 10. This game will be Wake Forest's second appearance in the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. Their only other appearance was in the inaugural Gator Bowl in 1946 where they played the University of South Carolina.

Coach Fisher and Director Bjork, welcome back to the Jacksonville and TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. The Aggies had an outstanding season, finishing with an 8-4 record, two incredible wins against top 15 opponents, including a last-second thriller over number one Alabama. This will be



the Aggies' third appearance in the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. Their last appearance in 2018 with a victory over NC State. We look forward to having both of you here. Thank you.

JIMBO FISHER: It's a great honor for us to go back to the Gator Bowl. Again, my third trip there. Once as a head coach and once as one of the most historic events I was ever a part when it was Coach Bowden's last game and I was the offensive coordinator at Florida State and after that game I became the head coach at Florida State.

The history in what that game meant to Coach Bowden, it was funny because the bowl streak that he kept alive, he had kicked it off in 1982 against West Virginia, and the game went 31-12 victory. The Gator Bowl has a lot of meaning. Not only it's one of the most prestigious bowls in this country. It has a lot of meaning to me, and it's very important, and I say great honor for us to get back into the State of Florida. Great bowl games there. The host and the hospitality and everything that went on in the Gator Bowl is first class. We're very excited to be there. Playing a great opponent in Wake Forest. I've known Dave a long time. We had some great battles when we were in the ACC. He has done a tremendous job with this program. Almost won an ACC Championship and what he did there, he has done a tremendous job. We're very honored to be there, excited to be there, and looking forward to getting down to Florida and playing in such a great prestige game.

DAVE CLAWSON: It's a huge honor to represent the ACC and Wake Forest University in the Gator Bowl. We take pride that we played in the first one in 1945 when Peahead Walker was the head coach, and we are thrilled for our team, and we've had a great year, and to cap it off by an invitation to the Gator Bowl is a huge honor.

I got to know Coach Fisher very well when he was in the ACC. Did an unbelievable job at Florida State. He is a national championship coach, and he has done a great job at Texas A&M. He has two of my former staff members on his staff. His defensive coordinator, Mike Elko, and their linebacker coach, Tyler Santucci. I know how much they respect and think of Coach Fisher.

We know it's going to be a very tough opponent, and



they're extremely well-coached, and we're looking forward to a great week.

Q. Jimbo, how are you doing today?

JIMBO FISHER: Good. How you doing?

Q. This is a couple of teams with two diametrically opposed offenses. You're running the ball a lot. They're pitching it around. However, there's no shortage of teams in the SEC West that throw it around like they do between Ole Miss and Mississippi State and everything. It's not like it's something you kids haven't seen before, is it?

JIMBO FISHER: Well, it isn't, but they're a little different in the way they block up front. I've known what Dave does for a long time. We've kept up with it here because I can say he has two guys here, Coach Elko and Coach Santucci. When they were on TV, we try to keep up on how they do. We root for them. I've always considered Dave a friend, and I have great respect for what he did, and Mike and them always root for them. We've watched them.

They're very dynamic. The RPO system and how they do it up front and the way they push the front, it's a little different than a lot of the guys that do today. He has done a tremendous job of molding his team around a tremendous system.

It's very challenging. They're scoring a ton of points. They go very fast. They go very quickly. They got play makers outside. The quarterback really makes them go. They run the football. You say throwing it, but they can run the football. They deceptively get you think throwing, and then all of a sudden they're gassing you with the run. They're a real balanced team, and defensively they do a great job. Special teams have always done that. It's something we'll have to look at and look at the film. There will be a lot of nuances that will be different, but the no-huddle system is something similar to what we've seen.

Q. Two questions. First, Coach Clawson, have you seen Mike Elko evolve and continue on his progression of his career? I think he has moved on from being --

DAVE CLAWSON: I hired Mike when he was 23 years old at Fordham University, so Mike is the one coach that's been with me at every one of my head coaching stops from Fordham to Richmond to Bowling Green and then Wake Forest. Mike and I are still really good friends. We just talked two or three days ago, and Mike is a tremendous coach. He is very innovative. He has an incredible knack

of game planning and feeling how another team is going to attack him, and I mean, he is one of the very best defensive coordinators in the country. Again, that's a guy I hired back in 2001 or 2002, and we've been very close ever since.

Q. Jimbo, I know DeMarvin Leal announced he is going to go to the NFL draft. Do you know, is he going to play in the bowl game. Is there any other opt-outs for the bowl game that you know of so far?

JIMBO FISHER: I don't believe he will. We'll have to wait see for sure, but I don't believe he will. I'm sure he will go train and do the things he will do to get ready for the draft.

Q. At this time in the season is there a little bit of recruiting for some of these draft-eligible guys to play in that last bowl game for you all?

JIMBO FISHER: Well, I think not about playing in the bowl game. They're getting the information now. Do they want to go pro? Do they not want to go pro or not? We're getting that information. One thing we've been fortunate is get really good information for our players so they can make a great decision. That's one of the processes we're definitely in right now.

Q. Dave, I wanted to ask you about Warren and Mike, obviously, know each other as well. Offense against defense. Who do you think has the advantage or is there no advantage maybe because they know each other so well?

DAVE CLAWSON: They might know each other too well. I mean, those are two guys that went against each other every single day for eight years. Mike and Warren were my offensive and defensive coordinators for five straight years at Bowling Green and then three years at Wake Forest. Then we went against Mike when he was a defensive coordinator at Notre Dame as well.

You can read too much into it, but Mike knows all the things we do, and Warren certainly has a feel for how Mike likes to call things. These are to me two of the guys at the very top of their profession. I think Warren is one of the best offensive coordinators in the country, and I think Mike is one of the very best defensive coordinators in the country. So both sides will be extremely well-prepared, and Jimbo does a great job running a program.

Again, Jimbo says we had some great matchups when he was at Florida State. I mean, they weren't so great for us. They won all of those games, so his memory of those is probably a little bit more enjoyable than mine.

(Laughter)

Q. One for each coach, if I could. Jimbo, what are the chances that Haynes King could be ready to play in this game?

JIMBO FISHER: I don't know about ready to play. That's a big stretch, and I don't think. He is able to start running and getting back, but he hasn't done anything for three to four months, so that's probably a very unrealistic thing and something we probably wouldn't want to do. Maybe he will come out and get some practice time because you get 15 practices or whatever we can get in here. We'll have 12, 14 of them. Maybe get him out on the field a little bit. He hasn't played since the opening game, and he is just now getting back, and we still have to see where he is at, what he is doing, and having that. It's just good to get him back on the field and get him running. He just now started to be able to run and letting him run on his own, so playing would probably be a far cry.

Q. Coach Clawson, if I could, was there a team that you guys played this year that had any similarities to what A&M does offensively?

DAVE CLAWSON: Again, we certainly defended Jimbo when he was at Florida State. Certainly some of the pro style stuff that Jimbo does, but Jimbo is innovative as well, and he has advanced and done different things. We literally just found out a couple of hours ago that we were playing them, so our film study is very -- there's not a big sample size that we've been able to look at yet, so I could probably answer that question a lot better in about a week.

Q. Jimbo, last year Devon Achane was the Orange Bowl MVP as a freshman. Do you expect to play more freshmen and underclassmen to kind of see how they are ready for next year in this bowl game?

JIMBO FISHER: No, we'll play the guys that we've been playing. The guys are the best guys to win the game. This year is not over. That would be unfair to the upper classmen who have played all year. We're going to put the best players on the field and try to put the best team on the field so we can play well and hopefully end on a great note against a good team. If the young guys develop in practice and we see they can help us in the game, that's great. If not, we'll make our adjustments and play with the guys we've always play with.

Q. Jimbo, just a quick follow-up. You said this is still this year. You want to finish. How much emphasis do you put on that? You haven't lost a bowl game here at A&M, and you have one of the best winning percentages, bowl percentages.

JIMBO FISHER: They're keeping score, so any time they're keeping score, I'm putting one in. I don't care if it's spring, summer, fall. And it's a bowl game, and, I mean, I'm a traditionalist. I love the bowl system. We're challenging it in a lot of ways, and I hope we can improve the thing.

I'm a traditionalist. The bowl games, I respect them. I remember watching them as a kid on the holidays and couldn't get enough of them and watching all the great games in the history of this game, and it's important to me. More important, they're keeping score, so we're going to play our tails off and prepare our tails off and hopefully play our tails off. It doesn't matter to me. We're keeping score.

Q. Good evening, coaches. This question is for both of you, but I'll start with Coach Clawson.

Coach, this is the first time that Wake Forest is playing in a bowl game in Florida since 2006. How big is it for you and your program that you are playing a game -- that you are playing here in the Gator Bowl on New Year's Eve.

Coach Fisher, the same question for you would be, you mentioned getting back to Florida and playing a game back in Florida. How important is it for your team to be able to have this opportunity to play a game here in Florida?

DAVE CLAWSON: Well, it's a big deal. We joke with our players that the more games they win, the better the bowl, and the warmer the weather.

(Laughter)

We beat BC to get other tenth win. We were excited to play for the ACC Championship, but the other thing we said is, hey, we're going to be hopefully on a beach in Florida for a bowl game if we're not in Atlanta. Our players are very excited.

The Jacksonville area is an area that we have gotten a lot of great players from Riley Skinner to John Wolford, and there's a number of players on our team right now that are from the Jacksonville, Florida, area. So for our fan base and the parents of our players, Jacksonville is an ideal location. I think we'll get a lot of Deacon fans there and a lot of parents and a lot of families, and it's very drivable from Winston-Salem, so we hope we can sell a lot of tickets and have a lot of black and gold in the stands.

JIMBO FISHER: Same here. Florida is renowned for the great bowl games, which has warm weather and the things. When we went to the Gator Bowl in 2018, it was the first time they had ever went to a Florida bowl since

Bear Bryant was the head coach, if I'm not mistaken. Maybe even before that. It was somewhere back even before that. It was a great honor. We went to the Gator, and we've been to the Orange since then, and now we're back in the Gator. Getting warm weather and getting to Florida, those are renowned bowl games that have great history, great tradition and great to be a part of, so we're very honored to be there, and it's very important to get to those. You are higher, the more wins you have. You want to get in the best bowl games, and we're blessed to be in a great one in the Gator Bowl against a great opponent.

Q. One question for each coach. Coach Clawson, like you said, you just found out a few hours ago, but at first glance, what is it about Texas A&M that maybe stands out to you?

DAVE CLAWSON: Well, again, we are just preliminarily beginning our study on them, but, again, just having coached against Jimbo before, they're always going to be well-coached. They're always physical. He can always run the football. Has a great play action game. I've known Mike Elko for 20 years, and they're always very talented. We played Texas A&M in the Belk Bowl in 2017, and just talent across the board. Always physical up front. Great defensive linemen. Just a really good football team. And to be 8-4 in the SEC West, and they beat the number one team in the country, this is a team that can play with anybody, and it's going to be a very challenging game. Whenever you have the combination of talent and great coaching, those teams are always hard to beat, and Texas A&M has both of those things.

Q. Thank you. And, Jimbo, if DeMarvin does not play like you indicated that he probably won't, how do you think that impacts the effectiveness of your defense?

JIMBO FISHER: You lose a great player, but that's part of the world we live in today. The guy has a chance to be a first round draft pick and most likely will, so that definitely got a big bearing on him and what we do.

We have a lot of other players. We've played with injuries and guys out here and there all the time. That's something you do, just like you have to treat it like an injury and adapt. We have other great players and great ends that we think can really play, and they're going to have to because the challenges that Wake Forest presents and the numbers. Like I said, Dave has done a tremendous job. I think he does as good a job as anybody in the country. I mean that. Not just because he is on there. He has taken Wake Forest to the levels they've never been at in the rankings this year.

Just the way they play, how they do it, they way they're

prepared, the way they're coached in all phases, you have to be totally sound in everything you do, and every trick, every inch they got, they'll take advantage of it, and they're going to be tremendously competitive, and they're going to be very diverse in the things they do in all phases. Those are going to be great challenges.

Losing DeMarvin, that's key, but we had that happen to us a lot. This year has been an injury year anyway. We're used to having a lot of guys out, so we've adapted pretty well.

Q. Jimbo, I know you weren't coaching in 2017 for the Belk Bowl, but you were there and --

JIMBO FISHER: That was a he heck of a game.

(Laughter)

Q. I was wondering how you took that game to frame how you took over the program, just I guess would have taken over when the clock hit zero.

JIMBO FISHER: I was like Ali Frazier. One threw a haymaker, and the other threw a haymaker. That was a tremendous game. Dave came out on top. They scored 55 points. Texas A&M lost with 52. It was a tremendous football game, and like I said, whatever they have to do to win games, they do it, and Dave has done a tremendous job of that.

It was a great game to watch, and you also knew that, hey, we had some weapons, but there's also things you had to fix. You were playing a great opponent, so I just kind of enjoyed the game as a fan. That was one of my less stressful games as a head coach. I was a head coach, but I wasn't a head coach. I just enjoyed the game. Wake and Dave did a tremendous job.

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