

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Wake Forest vs Rutgers

Thursday, December 30, 2021

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

Wake Forest Demon Deacons

Dave Clawson

Head Coach

Sam Hartman

Miles Fox

Luke Masterson

Ja'Sir Taylor

Press Conference

DAVE CLAWSON: First off, thanks to all of you for being here and covering Wake Forest Football and the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. We're honored to be here. We're extremely proud of our football program. We had a great season. We had tremendous buy-in from our football team and just had a great year, and these guys have worked incredibly hard to get to ten wins, to win the ACC Atlantic Title. The first team since Florida State and Clemson to do that in about 15 years. To play in an ACC Championship game and to have a chance to achieve an 11th win, which has only been done one other time in school history. So we're proud of our season and thrilled that we have one more opportunity to play a football game together.

I really want to thank the Gator Bowl committee, the Chairman and our hosts and everybody associated with it. This has not been a normal year for bowl games. When we won a tenth game against BC, one of the things we were excited about is, guys, we're probably going to be now in a Florida bowl. When we got the invite to the Gator Bowl, our guys were fired up. We have a lot of players from the State of Florida, and we were really excited to play the one team in the country that beat Alabama, and Texas A&M has a great program and a great team. And then when COVID hit, it felt like 2020 again.

We really appreciate how aggressively the Gator Bowl fought to keep the game going. Our players, we met with them when Texas A&M canceled. And they said that we want to play a game, but we want to play in the Gator Bowl



in Jacksonville, Florida. We don't want to go anywhere else. This was a reward for a great season, and if we're not going to play in the Gator Bowl, then if we finish 10-3, so be it, but we want to play in the Gator Bowl. What they put out was, as they said, appropriately so, was a very aggressive want ad. Then it became a matter of a 5-7 APR team or maybe a team in a second bowl, and I give Rutgers and Greg Schiano a ton of credit. I think it speaks volumes of the job that he has already done there that you had a bunch of 5-7 teams with good APR scores that essentially said, no, we don't want to play in the game, and if Rutgers had turned it down, I'm not sure if we would have played. Maybe we would have ended up against another Big Ten team, but the fact that Rutgers wanted to play in the game and made great efforts to do so, I think speaks volumes about what Greg is building at Rutgers.

They had a great season. This is only the first time since 2014 they've won five games. If you look at the three best divisions -- not conferences -- the three best divisions in college football, whether it's the SEC West, Big Ten East, or ACC Atlantic, we play in one of those divisions, and Rutgers plays in another one of them. They've played a playoff team in Michigan. They have played a top ten team in Ohio State. They've played a top ten team in Michigan State. They've played a very good Penn State program. If you watch what Maryland did yesterday, there's a lot of really good football teams.

I know Greg. I've known him for over 30 years. He would not have taken this game if he didn't believe he was going to win it. This is going to be a very competitive, very hard-fought football game against a really good football team in the Big Ten East. Again, people will look at the record. You've got to look at the schedule, and there's a lot of good football teams with winning records. If they played Rutgers' schedule, it would look differently.

Again, we're thrilled to be here. We're excited for a competitive contest, and we just want to thank the Gator Bowl committee for inviting us and finding a way to save the game. The City of Jacksonville, the people at the Omni for doing just such a phenomenal job of hosting us. Obviously, Mother Nature has cooperated this year, and we're grateful to her as well.



Q. Dave, your relationship with Greg, you mentioned 30 years. Can you pinpoint an origin of how you guys met and then how the relationship has evolved over those 30 years?

DAVE CLAWSON: Greg had a fraternity brother and a teammate of his at Bucknell by the name of Ed Foley, who I'm very good friends with, and Greg is a year older than me, but I got to know Greg through Ed. Then when I went to the University of Buffalo, the person I shared an office with GA'ed with Greg at Rutgers. It was 1990, 1991, and Greg was a secondary GA at Penn State, and I was the secondary coach at Buffalo, and I went down to visit Greg and learn secondary play.

Then as his career went from Penn State to the Chicago Bears to the Miami Hurricanes, I got named the head coach at Fordham in 1999. Greg got named at head coach at Rutgers in 2000. I think we were the two youngest head coaches in the country. Obviously, Greg was at a Power Five level, and I was at an FCS level. I used to go over and visit with him all the time, and we both were trying to rebuild programs that had not had success, and we stayed in touch.

When he got the head job at Tampa Bay, I used to go down and visit him every year for not training camp, but for OTAs, and he would give me access to his team meetings, staff meetings, any meeting I wanted to. And then Greg's first year that he was not with Tampa, he came up and spent two or three days with us at training camp at Wake Forest, and I asked him to do an assessment of our whole program. Where he thought we were good. I asked him to evaluate coaches. He had a three or four page report that was really helpful, so I think we're both grinders. We don't talk to a lot of other coaches during the season. When I'm dealing with a head coaching issue, Greg is certainly a guy I reach out to, and he has reached out to me as well.

I think he is one of the best coaches in all of college football. He is one of the smartest, brightest coaches I've ever met, and I just have a ton of respect for him. And, again, I know how competitive he is, and I know that he wouldn't have said, hey, we're in if he didn't already study our film and say, we can beat these guys. He is a competitor.

Q. We've talked a lot about the challenges Rutgers had getting here and logistically getting the team back together, all of that. I'm just curious from your standpoint, you were preparing for one team. Completely different opponent. Even their personnel. You probably are not even certain who might be playing in this game for them. I'm curious the change

in opponents, how has that affected you?

DAVE CLAWSON: Instead of making it a bowl experience for our staff, it's made it more like a regular season game. One of the great things about bowl games is you can break down the whole season of 12 games, and you can take your time. It's usually over the holidays, so you try to create a schedule that the bowl game is a reward not just for the players, but the staff. We had it all set up that our staff would be home Christmas Eve at 7:00 to have dinner with their family. We were going to work five or six hours on Christmas, and then the game switched, and then it became a normal week. Christmas Eve became a 12-hour day. We worked 14 hours on Christmas because it became like a typical Monday-Tuesday before a game, so for the players I don't think the experience was that different. The impact was really on the coaches. As you spent 80-some hours getting ready for Texas A&M and then a week before -- and that's normal. Usually you have a week to prepare for an opponent. It just made it from a bowl experience to kind of a regular season preparation.

Q. This is a question for Ja'Sir Taylor. Two key themes of this team are "1-0 every week" and then "good to great." Describe to us how you've been able to maintain that mentality, especially as we've noted with the recent change in opponent, the health landscape, things along those lines?

JA'SIR TAYLOR: As Coach said, I don't think the opponent change really affected us that much. It just changed it to a normal week preparing for a team. Then going 1-0, that's something we preach in our locker room and our meetings each week. It's very hard sometimes to do that, but when you go into the team meeting room, connect with your guys and just focus on the task at hand, it kind of gets easier.

Q. Sam, before they changed opponents, in one of the early news conferences Jimbo Fisher talked about how difficult Wake was going to be to defend and that you did some things that other teams did offensively, but you block it a little bit differently, and he said there were some challenges. What is it, do you think, about your offense that puts so much stress on other defenses?

SAM HARTMAN: I think the biggest thing is we've got playmakers everywhere, and every play can be an explosive play. Shout out to Coach. He puts us in situations where we can be successful in first down, second down, third down. I mean, yeah, we do things differently, but it's all the same. Ball goes forward, and we try and get first downs and get touchdowns. I think it's just the explosiveness on every play that is probably the

biggest challenge to defend.

Q. (Off microphone)

SAM HARTMAN: That's about it. There's explosive plays, possibility at all times, and it keeps defenders on their toes.

Q. Sam, can you touch a little bit on the benefits of having an extra game after the ACC Championship game versus last year where it kind of felt like you got to stew on the bowl game against Wisconsin for an entire year and now you get another chance to get back out there?

SAM HARTMAN: Yeah, it's nice to get another crack at it. For the seniors, I think about them. I felt like I carried that one after Wisconsin for a while just knowing that a lot of guys' last games went out like that, but I was happy for the seniors, like Luke, Chap, Ja, Miles that they get a chance to go out on top is probably the biggest thing.

Q. If any of the seniors want to take this one. Just describe the ascension of Wake Forest over the last few years. I know Dave mentioned that it's the first time a non Clemson, Florida State name has won your division. What has this year meant to you and your dedication to this program?

SAM HARTMAN: I touched on this. We all have senior talks, and I think I touched a little bit on this in my senior talk. I think when we set that motto to go from good to great this year, it was a really aggressive motto. It wasn't something that we've done in the past, and I think when we put that out there, the whole ACC looked at that, and if we didn't accomplish going from good to great, it would have looked pretty stupid. I think just the complete buy-in from everything, from winter workouts to spring football to summer workouts and into camp, it was the best that I've ever been a part of at Wake.

The seniors obviously helped lead that, but even the scout team. The scout team was the best scout team that I've ever seen, and we had complete buy-in from the whole program. And I think if you are going to accomplish something that we wanted to accomplish, you have to have that. It was really a team effort, and I think everybody completely bought in from the start to finish.

MILES FOX: Kind of piggybacking off that. I haven't been here as long as everybody else up here, but since I've been here in 2019, I've noticed the culture is just different. Saturday mornings, the whole team is in the indoor working out. Coaches aren't there. Then going from there, and it's getting better every single year. It's just been something very special to be a part of.

Q. Miles, with the departure of Lyle Hemphill to Duke, obviously, things have gotten shifted around with who is calling plays, coaching adjustments, et cetera. How do you feel like the guys have handled the departure/moving to this different sort of system and playcalling going to the game?

MILES FOX: Coach Hemphill did a great job. We're all going to miss him. All the other defensive coaches have done a good job game planning, not skipping a beat. We're really confident on how we're going to do. We're fine.

Q. Dave, I know your offensive coordinator is from New Jersey, and you have some -- you have talked about Fordham, and you have a lot of Northeast roots. Can you talk about your philosophy recruiting New Jersey. Can you just talk about how you've made New Jersey an emphasis?

GREG SCHIANO: I always joke that the heart and soul of our program is probably going to usually come from within the five hours of Wake Forest. So if you look at our roster, it's predominantly North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia. Jacksonville has been a great, great city to the Demon Deacons. From Riley Skinner to John Wolford and Ryan Smenda and Je'Vionte Nash, it's been a really good area. Sometimes the arms and legs can come from anywhere, and we will leave our little five-hour circle to get a player that we think fits our school, fits our culture, and can make a difference in our program.

With Ja'Sir, he was kind of a late addition. It looked like he was going to Temple, and we needed a defensive back, and his film just popped out when we watched it, and we flew up to New Jersey and spent time with him and had him visit. I think guys like Ja'Sir and Luke and Chap and the other guys up here kind of epitomize our program. A lot of players we take maybe flew a little bit under the radar in terms of recruiting rankings, but they had intangible skills, a work ethic, a love of football, and to me they're as good as a lot of the four and five star guys we play against two or three, four years later. These guys up here with me right now, they can play anywhere in the country. We go after guys that we think that their best years are ahead of them, and there's no question with Ja'Sir, we thought a couple of years in the weight room and he had the right makeup to become an elite corner in the ACC, and almost all these guys up here proved us right.

Q. Dave, you touched a bit on recruiting. With the State of Florida, you have Luke up there, himself from the State of Florida. How important is it this game and having this sort of spotlight on Wake Forest going to

envision helping recruiting when you are going against Georgia, Florida, Alabama, all these schools?

DAVE CLAWSON: I don't know how many recruits we're going to beat on Alabama because we're in the Gator Bowl, but I think the ten wins, obviously, 11 would make it even more elite. I think there's right now 14 or 15 Power Five schools in the country that have double-digit wins, and we're one of them. The facilities we've built have helped, but this is all you don't go from the bottom to the top. There's a ton of incremental steps that you take to go from noncompetitive to competitive, to average, to above average, to being a great football team, and we don't want to just be a great football team. We want to be a great football program. Great football programs find themselves in this position maybe not every year, but consistently. All of these and getting to a tier one bowl like the Gator Bowl only helps us moving forward with recruits. We had 12 commitments this year, and some of those schools that you talk about, the very, very elite in college football, came in on some of these players late, and if we don't win ten games, don't get to an ACC Championship game, don't get a Gator Bowl bid, maybe they feel that they should go somewhere else and play big-time football. And now they realize, no, Wake Forest is playing big-time football. These guys helped establish that, and now it's our job to keep that momentum going so that "good to great" doesn't become a one-season theme but a program theme.

Q. I have several people texting me asking. I know it's kind of warm in Carolina right now, but, Luke, especially now knowing you're from Florida, are you guys enjoying the Omni? What's the go-to hang-out right now?

LUKE MASTERSON: It's been awesome. We've been lucky to have really good weather too. Sometimes this time of year it's been cold and rainy. We've been lucky to have some sun. We've all been hanging out at the pool a little bit. The hot tub has been a big place to hang out after practice and stuff. Just being out at practice too, feeling the heat, guys getting a little crop-top action on the shirts and just enjoying it.

(Laughing)

Q. How is the hair holding up, Sam?

SAM HARTMAN: I don't know. You tell me.

(Laughing)

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