

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Wake Forest vs Rutgers

Friday, December 31, 2021

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

Wake Forest Demon Deacons

Coach Dave Clawson

Sam Hartman

A.T. Perry

Brandon Chapman

Luke Masterson

Miles Fox

Press Conference



Wake Forest 38, Rutgers 10

DAVE CLAWSON: First off, thanks, all of you, for being here and covering Wake Forest football and the Gator Bowl. Just a great team win. Really proud, first of all, of our seniors. Just the leadership that they've given us and the resolve and the buy-in. Some of them for four, some of them for five, and some of them for six years.

Our coaching staff I thought did a great job. Especially given the change in game. They gave up their Christmas and their Christmas Eve. I'm sure their wives aren't real happy with me right now, but we get a little bigger bonus for winning the game, so we'll make it up that way.

I thank the fans and all of the whole Deacon Nation that showed up and our students, and I really want to thank the Gator Bowl staff, John and Greg. This game was in jeopardy about eight, nine days ago, and the job they did to find another team and to keep the game going, we are really, really grateful to the whole Gator Bowl committee and the city of Jacksonville and the people at the Omni where we stayed.

Just a special week, but at the end of the day a lot of the bowl experience is based on how do you play, and we're really proud of our football team. Eleven wins for the second time in school history. We have the second longest bowl streak in the ACC now, and we came out this year with a very bold goal of going from good to great, and

I think that we accomplished that.

The game I thought -- first off, I want to give a lot of credit to Rutgers and Greg Schiano. There's not a lot of teams that would do that. I think the fact that his team, he chose to play, and he wanted his team to play, and they wanted to play gives you the idea of the type of program he is building at Rutgers.

Greg and I have been friends for over 30 years. I think he is one of the best football coaches in the country, and he sees the big picture. I think a lot of programs might not want to play if they don't think they can win, and we knew we were going to be a favorite, and Greg knew that too, but he takes a very big-picture approach, which good leaders do, and he knows this bowl experience is going to help Rutgers build a really good program.

In a lot of ways we have similar challenges. We're in a very competitive conference and I would say even a more competitive division. You look at the Big Ten, and you look at the ACC, and most of the teams that are at that eight, nine, ten wins are in the Atlantic or the Big Ten East or the SEC West, and we play in those divisions.

Again, just in terms of the game today, obviously, the turnovers were huge. Getting a pick down by the end zone and Sam playing turnover-free and our offense playing turnover-free, and we just had a lot of guys step up.

Certainly we had three running backs, and A.T. Perry had a heck of a game. He has had a heck of a season. We didn't have Jacorey, and I thought Taylor Morin and Ke'Shawn Williams really stepped up.

Again, proud of our team.

And I am really, really tired. (Laughter.) I'll answer questions as long as you want, but I've got a nice stiff drink waiting for me back at the Omni, and I'm going to celebrate tonight. (Laughter.)

Q. Dave, the first two possessions Rutgers had the ball, looked like they moved it. I think it was 141 yards, something like that. Then I think it was 113 on the next

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six possessions. Did anything change for your defense, or did they just get settled into the game?

DAVE CLAWSON: I was going to fire our defensive coordinator, but that was me. So that wasn't an option. In all seriousness, we did this collectively. I want to thank the defensive staff. When you try to put together a game plan, and the guy that's been running the defense the whole year isn't there, and our whole defensive staff, it was a team effort.

There wasn't one coordinator for this game. There was seven coordinators. But what we did is they run a play called the Power Read, and we kind of had prepared some edge pressure to defend that play, and then they started running a play that we call the Truck Play, and they were just kicking us out, washing the movement, and we just stopped calling the blitz.

In third downs, we were playing some two-deep concepts, and they were hurting us with some digs. And we switched in the second half, and we played a little bit more three-deep concepts. We did a little bit more rush three and drop as opposed to pressuring. Some of the third downs they hit.

My background is mostly on offense, so I'm running everything I hated to see as an offensive coach. I'm bringing all these different pressures and zero heat, and they're just picking it up and ripping us. And kind of backed off of that and said, hey, let's play coverage and let's defend the intermediate routes.

We kind of adjusted the game plan in the second half. We gave the players the routes they were running and how we were going to cover them. And you do that at halftime, and then you go out in the second half and you can make those adjustments. But to get a football team to execute it doesn't always happen.

They executed it. They did a great job. We had a few coverage sacks today in the second half that were because of the second half adjustments.

Q. Did the official give you any kind of a satisfactory explanation on Ryan's ejection?

DAVE CLAWSON: Again, I -- and live, I didn't think he hit him, and then I didn't think he hit him in the replay. Obviously, if they ruled it a targeting -- I lost my mind a little bit, and I apologized to the officials. If the replay confirmed targeting, obviously, I was wrong, and I shouldn't have reacted the way I did.

But they were going up and down the field, and that was

kind of the defensive coordinator hat that I lost my mind. I apologized to the guy afterwards. That wasn't appropriate.

Q. But you still don't think it was targeting?

DAVE CLAWSON: I don't know. You start saying things like that, and you get fined, so --

Q. I get it. The other thing is I know that you were expecting Greg to come out aggressively and play like he had nothing to lose, but did you ever expect somebody to change quarterbacks on five plays in a row?

DAVE CLAWSON: We did. If you look at what they had, they run a pretty extensive Wildcat package. They've done that all year, and then their starting tailback didn't play. Their backup was on crutches, and then their third got hurt.

I've been in that situation before, and you say, okay, who here can carry the ball? We expected No. 9 to play, and when 9 was in the game, we thought it would be a little bit more quarterback run.

And then, obviously, when they were in the Wildcat package when 21 was out there -- his number is 42, 21, they change his number all the time, and then we saw him on the sidelines practicing passing because when he was in the game, we were playing cover zero and outnumbering the box. Then they called one pass, and we flipped to a zone coverage, and he still hit it.

That's what good coaches do. They adapt. And he was down some players, and he had a lot of guys that signed with agents because they thought the season was over, and they didn't get those guys back. I thought Greg and his staff did a heck of a job to make that a competitive game. Those guys thought their season was over four weeks ago.

Again, to want the game, accept a bid, and get a team ready in five days and play the way they did, you know, I certainly don't feel like we out-coached them. I think our offensive staff did a good job, but I think our defensive guys just kind of -- our players outplayed them today. But Greg and his staff did a phenomenal job to make that a competitive game.

Q. A.T. Perry, 10 catches, 127 yards and a touchdown. While he didn't get the leaping one we all thought he was going to, what can you say about his performance today, the season, and how does that look when you are trying to sell that to guys in the room currently that are freshmen or recruits saying, hey, if you bide your time, this is what can happen?

DAVE CLAWSON: He is in the room, so I'm going to tone it down, whatever I say here, because I don't want it going to his head. He is coming back next year. We've had receivers step up every year since we've been here, and whether it's Scotty Washington, Kendall Hinton, Sage Surratt, Greg Dortch, and when Donovan Green went down this year and he got hurt, 18 knew he was going to have a chance to not just play, but have an impact.

That's an example of a guy that just worked so hard and was ready and took advantage of his opportunity, and what a phenomenal season. First Team All-ACC. The bowl performance he had. He gets better every week and every year, and it's going to be really exciting to get him back next year.

I think there's a whole other level that he is capable of getting to, and if he buys in and makes that step, it's going to be -- we're going to have a lot more fun next year. And we get Donovan back, and I think if you look at Taylor Morin and Ke'Shawn and Jahmal Banks, I don't think we're going to fall off a cliff here.

Q. How does it feel for the players, you, the program altogether to get to 11 wins for the first time since 2006?

DAVE CLAWSON: When the year started, we came up with a theme of "Good to Great," and you don't throw that out there unless you think you can really achieve it. The credit belongs to our players. We do this for a living and a job, and this is what we do. To get a group of 18 to 22, 23, and this year maybe a few 24-year-olds to buy into that goal and sacrifice for each other and truly put the team ahead of themselves is really hard to do.

Our guys did that, and that's why we're in this position. We are talented. We have good players, but there's a lot of talented teams that have a lot of good players that don't find a way to get the double-digit wins.

We're not here if we don't have those intangible qualities, and our football team has that. Again, it's a fun week but also an emotional week. It's hard to see this year end.

I told those guys last night. If we could get together in one week with the same group and do it all again, I would sign up. Some of them are back, but guys like Luke Masterson, Tra Redd, Su Kamara, Brandon Chapman who spent six years in our program, Miles Fox, a bunch of them, you can replace them as players, it's hard to replace them as people.

They've been incredible. They're men. They've been

incredible leaders for our program, and we're going to miss them. But we're going to enjoy this one. And this was a historical season. We tied the record for the best season in Wake Forest history, and we're hopefully part of a debate of what the greatest team is. And the 2006 team was an incredible team, but the 2021 team was a really good team as well, and we're proud that we were a part of it.

Thanks. Go Deacs.

SAM HARTMAN

Q. Congratulations, Sam, for obviously a great performance, a great team win. When you look back and looking at a number of the golds that you set that aligned with "Good to Great," how do you feel, and then how do you feel this is going to feel going into next season?

SAM HARTMAN: Yeah, it's everything. It was a lot of -- a big question, but I think -- I'm just enjoying the moment right now. I think next year is going to be next year, and like Coach said, we're going to take a little bit longer than 24 to enjoy this one. So I'll get back to you on the last part next year.

But, no, I'm just happy for the seniors. I think it just goes back to those guys. Coach hit it hard. This group has been there since I was a freshman, since I was out there running around at 170 pounds to when I'm out there throwing four picks and losing us games. They've been there for everything. The highs, the lows, they saw it through for me. I can't thank them enough.

And the same with the coaches. We're blessed to have a group of coaches that have stuck together, and especially on the offensive side and stuck with me from the O-line, tight ends, running backs, receivers, they've had my back through it all. It's a team game, and wouldn't be here without them and wouldn't have that performance without them.

Q. Looked like you had a moment before the game where you were talking with Riley Skinner, the 2006 quarterback from the past 11-win team. What did that moment mean for you?

SAM HARTMAN: It's always cool, somebody that you know is a legend here in Wake Forest and a legend here down in Jacksonville. Yeah, it's a cool moment to talk to somebody that kind of did what you want to do, and he has always been a great supporter of mine and a great guy, great family.

Q. Just through all the highs and lows this season, how does it feel to end on a really high note just winning a bowl game, going to 11 wins?

SAM HARTMAN: It feels a lot better than last year. I can tell you that. You guys aren't allowed to laugh at that. (Laughter.) Come on. No, I'm just kidding.

It's great. It hits back on the seniors. For those guys, those last games, that was one of the biggest crushes of last year's deal. I just knew that some guys' games, that was it. That's what they had to end on.

To give them that performance and give them that experience for Chapman, who is in the room, two touchdowns, how about it, right? Those are the moments why you do it, why you put in the work, and why it's so special.

Q. Sam, I see the wrap on your arm, and it's been kind of obvious been a little bit banged up the last few games. How has it been getting through those injuries, and how is it going to feel to have a little R&R for the next few weeks?

SAM HARTMAN: It's going to be nice. Everybody on this team is kind of playing through injuries to play -- that was 13, right? 13 games. 14 games. See? 14 games. To stay healthy, it's a blessing. In this offense you got to take hits and make the sacrifice of your body.

Blessed to be leaving here with nothing more than a couple of bumps and bruises. There's a lot of guys that have been doing it all year, and it's a team effort and rest and recovery coming up soon.

Q. Sam, I guess your overall thoughts on accomplishing the "Good to Great" mantra? I know that was a big talking point in Charlotte, and ACC Media Day, going back that far, and probably before then.

SAM HARTMAN: It's huge. You want to set big goals. You come here, and you get told you're going to Wake Forest because of education and it's a beautiful campus or whatever. You know, I came here to play football and play at a high level and playing with the big dogs.

And we did that this year, and I think that it's just going to be something we can piggyback off of next year. I think it's just for guys, recruits coming in, and guys looking at Wake Forest, it's just not a warning, but kind of a reminder that we're playing ball here, and that's what you can do at a high level of execution. And when you buy into something bigger than yourself, can you get it done.

Q. Do you think that Wake Forest will get preseason recognition and will be able to -- will be thought of as being able to play with the big dogs next year?

SAM HARTMAN: I hope not. Go Deacs.

A.T. PERRY

Q. Congratulations. Have you ever jumped that high on a football field as you did with that one play?

A.T. PERRY: I actually have in high school. That's the first clip on my huddle is me jumping over somebody, and then I had ran over another kid by accident. I didn't know I hit him that bad. But, yeah, I have before, but it was a senior in high school.

Q. Before that, did you not realize you had stepped out of bounds, or were you kind of afraid you might have?

A.T. PERRY: I didn't think I did because when I caught the ball and I turned, I looked at him; and then I was like, all right, I'm by him. But I didn't think I went out of bounds. When he called me out of bounds, I kind of got mad. I wanted that to be on "SportsCenter."

Q. Finally, just comment on -- you guys haven't played since the ACC Championship Game. Everybody -- sometimes there's a little rust there. How do you think the offense was able to perform at such a high level for the first drive?

A.T. PERRY: After that ACC championship, yeah, made a decision, we got to come here and win this bowl game. Just keeping up with the pace of the game and the pace of our offense as well while we're away from football for three weeks.

I mean, the leaders kept us straight when it came to us preparing for this game. You know with all the COVID and stuff like that. Yeah, I mean, we just moved on from the game. We just came in, came in -- after the ACC Championship, came to the bowl game and made the plan. Just got to finish out.

Q. A.T., what was the feeling of -- from eight days ago, when it looked like this game might not get played, to being able to get out there and play another game and kind of put whatever sting was left from the ACC Championship behind you?

A.T. PERRY: I kind of wanted to play so bad just to finish out with the seniors. I never had a bond with the team like

this before, so I knew how important it was to them, and I made a promise to myself that I'm going to finish it out with these boys.

Q. What does it mean, just can you speak a little upon having Sam this season and how he has played throughout the season and in this game, and then what it means to the program that he is coming back next year?

A.T. PERRY: To me we actually worked really hard together this summer. I made it the goal just to get with him, go over the offense, go over the coverages, going into indoor, passing the ball. That was my goal, just to get with him and stuff like that.

And as a team, for next year, all I got to say, we're going to do even better than this year. So no cockiness, just confident in these guys. Just what we have and what we have produced this year, we're going to be really, really good next year.

Q. A.T., was there -- at what point of the season did the light come on for you, and was there a little bit of extra motivation playing in Florida?

A.T. PERRY: Yes, there was extra motivation to play in Florida. Just coming back to the state, I ain't really been here in so long, and just coming back here and putting on a show for the people back at home, it's actually exciting. It's fun. I just stepped on the field, and I was, like, ah, I'm home. It's time to go crazy.

Q. Obviously, congratulations on today. Speak to the individual and collective growth this year as it ties onto that bigger theme of "Good to Great."

A.T. PERRY: With me, that was kind of my goal too of being great. Just not with football, but just being great in everything I do, whether it's coming to school, just football itself, outside of school with family, stuff like that.

That was my goal, for me to be great. So when I heard that our lingo was "Good to Great," I was, like, this is a sign. This team is going to be really good.

Just for me, I just told myself I got to be great with this, just when you are catching the ball, stuff like that. The theme, it was kind of creepy just telling myself I want to be great in everything, and then we have the lingo "Good to Great." I knew this team was special, though.

BRANDON CHAPMAN

Q. Brendan, are you a touchdown machine now?

(Laughing) is it just that simple?

BRANDON CHAPMAN: Yeah, I mean, I doubled my career total just today, but, no, I mean, I give it all to the system that we run. That second touchdown I thought was going to go to Blake, but he was covered, so I was the second read, and I caught what was thrown to me.

I'm just really proud of this team and everything that we've accomplished thus far. There's nothing but light at the end of the tunnel here. I'm looking forward to how good this team is going to be next year.

Q. What are your thoughts on tight end next year? It's a bit of an unsung position, and it feels like you've prepared that group a lot just being a leader and especially with two touchdowns today. Do you think that will kind of rub off on the guys next year saying, you know, earn our time, and we can have a couple of touchdowns in a game too?

BRANDON CHAPMAN: The tight end room at Wake, we're a bunch of grinders. You can go around the board from freshman to senior. Obviously, Blake is a great tight end. He is going to be phenomenal next year. Cam Hite is definitely going to step up. He is going to get in the mix. We have a lot of great tight ends that are developing and becoming playable. I think the future is very bright in that room, and I'm really proud of these guys.

Thank you, guys.

LUKE MASTERSON

Q. Luke, they looked like they moved the ball on the first two possessions, and then I think the next six or seven they, obviously, went scoreless, and they had fewer yards than those seven in the first two. What adjustments were made along the way, and did you feel like you guys settled in?

LUKE MASTERSON: I think the first drive of the game we had four third downs that we didn't get off the field, so it really just came down to execution. We had to cover. We had to get to the quarterback more. Our tackling wasn't great to start. It was just execution and getting off the field, and we got them the third down. We started doing that, and we started playing better.

Q. Were you happy with the response in the room once Smenda got ejected for targeting? It seems like you guys didn't miss a beat from this.

LUKE MASTERSON: I hate it for Smenda that he couldn't finish it out. He is a great player. We have a solid room of



guys that can play ball, and he was cheering us on from the sideline, and we got it done.

Q. (Off microphone.)

LUKE MASTERSON: We were playing a lot of the same calls. It just came down to execution, to be honest. It came down to tackling, our D-line winning, our linebackers winning at the point of attack. Gavin, that was a great play that he made at the goal line there for the interception. Obviously, creating turnovers is huge for us. Z.K. with that pick, too. Just making plays and executing the defense. When we do that, we're a great defense, and we started playing well towards the end of the game.

Q. On a little bit of a somber note, what was your view on the kickoff that Ivan got hurt on, and have you guys been able to be in touch with him at all?

LUKE MASTERSON: I haven't got in touch with him yet, but I'm sure we'll figure it out on the bus and get in touch with him. It didn't look great, so all the prayers to him that he is going to be fine, but he is a great dude. He is a great player, and I know that he is going to be resilient and attack this offseason and get better.

Q. On a bit of a brighter note, what are you going to take away from the season, and how did it feel to go out in your home state?

LUKE MASTERSON: It's hard to put into words. This last month has been a lot of reflection on the season and just trying to take it all in, but I'm just going to miss all the guys. I love the guys, man. We have a special group this year. Just the complete buy-in from everybody. The coaching staff, the players, the scout team, everybody bought in this year, and I'll remember that forever because if we didn't all buy in the way we did and completely buy into our "Good to Great" motto, we wouldn't be here. Just really grateful I got to be a part of this and love this team.

MILES FOX

Q. Miles, I guess you haven't been with Wake as long as some of these other guys up here, and it's been a little bit of a journey for you with the Achilles and transferring in. What did today mean to you to be able to close it out with an 11th win?

MILES FOX: It was very bittersweet. I said in an interview yesterday, this culture is different. I remember my first week here, and the first Saturday I was there all the guys were in there working out on their own. No coaches. That's just special. I didn't realize how big it was at the time, but everyone bought in, had a great season. We

lived up to the motto "Good to Great." We did what we said we were going to do, and a lot of people don't do that. I really love this team.

Q. Miles, being a 27th year senior, are you happy with the way your career kind of turned out at this point, and what's next?

MILES FOX: Definitely. Like I said, I love this team, love the coaches, and hopefully the NFL is next. God's plan, but I feel confident in my abilities.

Q. You mentioned being able to do what you set out to do and the great season that you guys set. Did you feel like that was met with skepticism from outside the locker room, and did that bring you guys closer inside the program this season?

MILES FOX: You see the preseason pros every year. They always have us picked seventh, eighth, and we lit a field afire every year. So everyone doubting us just helped us out more and made us hungrier, you know?

Q. You're leaving, Sula is leaving, Luiji is leaving. You're searching for a new defensive coordinator. Do you think there's been a solid foundation left with the rest of the room, both the ends and the tackles of this is what the standard we have to hold ourselves to for the next year plus?

MILES FOX: Definitely. Rondell Bothroyd is going to be one of the best defensive ends in the country next year. We have Dion Bergan, Tyler Williams, Kevin Pointer, Bernard Gooden, Kendron Wayman. I can go on and on. We have a bunch of talent, and those guys are going to step up.

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