

# TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Clemson vs Kentucky

Thursday, December 28, 2023

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

## Kentucky Wildcats

## Coach Mark Stoops

## Devin Leary

## Ray Davis

## J.J. Weaver

### Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Time now for the Kentucky segment of the final press conferences before the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. I'd like to welcome up to the stage the head coach of the Wildcats, Mark Stoops; quarterback Devin Leary; running back Ray Davis; and outside linebacker J.J. Weaver.

Coach, if you'd like to have some opening comments.

MARK STOOPS: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. Our team has had a fantastic week. We're enjoying ourselves and preparing.

I'd like these guys to tell you a few things about themselves.

Go ahead, Devin.

DEVIN LEARY: How's it going? My name is Devin Leary. I'm from Sicklerville, New Jersey, originally. I'm a grad transfer. This is my sixth season, my first season now at Kentucky.

Really happy to be here. Very thankful for the Gator Bowl to welcome us and all my teammates, the rest of our staff.

Honestly, it's been an incredible week and we're looking forward to playing this game.

RAY DAVIS: How you guys doing? I'm Ray Davis from San Francisco, California. This is my fifth year, my first year at Kentucky. Kind of like what Dev said, appreciative of being here. Great opportunity to get on the field one more time with the guys, try to accomplish something that



we've been wanting to do all season. I'm happy to be here.

J.J. WEAVER: Good morning. My name is J.J. Weaver. I'm from Louisville, Kentucky. I just announced I'm coming back for my sixth season at University of Kentucky. I'm excited to be with the guys one more time, playing a great team in Clemson. Great opportunity. I'm blessed and honored to be here.

MARK STOOPS: I wanted you to hear a little bit about these guys. That's what it's about. I'm so appreciative of these three that are with me today and our entire team. It's extremely difficult what these young men go through. The season in the SEC can get quite grueling. I really just appreciate our team's effort.

I told them from day one that I just really like this group, I like the fight, I like the grit, I like the way they compete. We finished the season on a good victory.

We're playing a great opponent. Like to recognize Dabo, Coach Swinney, for what he's done. The consistency with what he's won is really truly amazing. He's done a remarkable job. They have another very good team this year, finishing with four straight victories. We know how talented they are. They're just a very talented team. I could go on and on about them up front, defensively I know they have some players that aren't playing, but they have plenty of depth.

Really built like an SEC football team, the teams we compete against each and every week. This team looks like that way. Very big, physical, explosive at each level, defensively, offensively, the same. Very talented players. Very well-coached.

It's going to be a great challenge for us. I think it's really important to try to end on a good note. I told 'em before the Louisville game that the last two games of the season are the only two games all year that we're going to either walk off the field with a trophy or without one. I can tell you from experience, it feels a heck of a lot better when you have to stay and have one of you present us a trophy and take it back home.

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That's what we're looking to do. Again, I like the preparation. I like the way our team has handled themselves this week. TaxSlayer Gator Bowl, the folks, the people, are always good to us. This is the third time I've been here since my time at Kentucky. You're remarkable. We greatly appreciate it.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take some questions.

**Q. Mark, what have you seen out of your team here in practice? What have you worked on to go out there and improve?**

MARK STOOPS: Our approach always is to try to leave Lexington, when I give them a brief break, for them to go home, see their families for Christmas, everybody was on time, made their flights, got back here.

When we get here, it goes rather quickly. They can tell you that. It goes fast. We want to be completely prepared when we leave Lexington. Come back here, freshen it up, get the timing and rhythm and everything back going.

It's been great. We'll wrap it up right after this press conference. We're going to go and finish up our last prep, have meetings, walk-through, things like that tonight.

They've done a really good job. They seem very focused. We love Jacksonville. We love the festivities. We greatly appreciate it. But they've been very focused.

**Q. J.J., I wonder if you could walk us through your decision and why you decided to come back to Kentucky.**

J.J. WEAVER: Yeah, I was dealing with a lot off the field, so mentally coming back, I needed my mental to get focused, get back ready, my body back in shape.

I think it was a great opportunity for me just to come back for my last season, be a great leader. Lead the guys on and off the field for sure.

**Q. Devin, you faced Clemson a few times in the past. How much does that help you having that kind of familiarity with the team?**

DEVIN LEARY: Yeah, I think it definitely helps. We know that they're going to come in a hard-nosed team, well-disciplined. Coach Swinney does a good job with them every single year. Like you said, I'll be able to give some keys to our players of what type of team this is, how we need to approach it with a focused mindset.

Of course, we're enjoying ourselves here, but at the end of

the day we're coming to win. We have to be on our Ps and Qs.

**Q. Devin, what does it take to beat a team like this? What can you draw from winning a big game against a program with a name brand like this?**

DEVIN LEARY: Yeah, I think first you got to start fast. You got to not hurt yourselves with any kind of self-inflicted penalties. It's going to be a four-quarter game. We know that. They're going to come out here and be well-prepared, like we will be. At the end of the day, all four quarters is what it's going to take to win this game.

**Q. Ray, can you talk us through your decision to play in the game? Did you expect you were going to play in the bowl when you announced in the draft?**

RAY DAVIS: Yeah, I mean, first kind of having the opportunity to prepare with the guys again for another week, to be able to go out there and practice with them, get in game prep mode, enjoy the festivities of getting ready to compete one more time.

For me, I started this chapter September 2nd. I wanted to be able to finish it, be able to go out with the guys. My decision was based on just being able to play for my guys one more time.

When I found out it was Clemson, I knew the opportunity that we had to play a really good team, I decided to step up to the plate and want to play.

**Q. Mark, some of the early signings with you during this practice, how beneficial is it for those guys to be part of this week, see what everything is like?**

MARK STOOPS: It will be interesting for me because this is the first time we've done that. We have the guys here. I think they seem to be enjoying themselves.

It gives them an opportunity to spend some time with these players, even like Ray and Devin are going to move on, just to learn from them. Cutter has been back there. Devin works with them. Just get their feet wet. Can't hurt.

It's been great having them. I hope they enjoy it. They better know this is a little bit easier than we normally would be, too. We kick it up a little bit early in fall camp and in spring, so...

Let me clarify. I shouldn't say 'easier'. Let's say less physical in practice. This time of year you have to be careful with these guys.

**Q. You dealt with opt-outs in the past. This year there's only a handful. How much do you appreciate some of the guys like Ray coming back and deciding to play again?**

MARK STOOPS: I think it says a lot about these players. It says a lot about our program. I don't know how you want to clarify that. There's guys that are in the portal. Other than that, we're at 100%. Jeremy had another issue. Kenneth has a surgery. We'll miss those two.

It says a lot about the leadership of this team. I think everybody wanted to finish on a positive note. They know we have a real challenge in facing a very good football team in Clemson. The respect that we have for them. We're trying to finish with a victory and bring home a bowl trophy.

**Q. Mark, before you guys came down here, we got to meet Dekel in the press conference. What has it been like getting to know him better, have him around the team?**

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, Dekel is going to be a great addition. He's a guy that I think the big thing for me is just getting a great handle on that wide receiver room, building the depth that we need. He's young. I think he's very relatable to the players, but yet he has a great discipline about him. He's a no-nonsense guy. It's nice to find that balance when you have a young guy, not with a ton of experience.

He's produced on the field and been a very good coach. So he actually was with us back in Lexington getting a feel for us. He didn't come for the bowl. That was a mutual decision. For me, I want him to start when we get back, have a fresh start, give a complete reboot of that wide receiver room, get ready to go.

Just with his presence back in Lexington, through the bowl prep, Devin can comment on it, I feel a difference in that room already with these players. I feel the concentration, the detail, the way they're competing, they're stepping up. Hopefully that will reflect during the game.

**Q. J.J., I know this bowl game streak, has that been a point for you older guys to get back on the winning side?**

J.J. WEAVER: Most definitely. Last year losing, we got to play through the whole year with it, the bad taste in our mouth getting ready for spring ball, Carpenter.

It's big. We need this one for sure. I'm excited for it. I know the guys are excited for it. We just want to play

different than we did last year. Last year we had a lot of opt-outs. This year we got everybody. So I'm excited for it.

**Q. You mentioned Clemson looks like an SEC team. Could you envision them in the SEC one day? Would you like to see them in the SEC one day?**

MARK STOOPS: I really would have no comment on that. I don't want to be reckless. Once I say one thing, that will be national news. I'll stay away from that and focus on this game.

A lot of respect for Clemson. But we're really focused on this game. I'll let people with higher pay grades than me make those decisions (smiling).

**Q. Devin, with this being your first bowl game, how has this week prep-wise felt?**

DEVIN LEARY: Yeah, I mean, it's definitely a little bit different because, like Coach said, you're playing for a trophy. For us, it's a great opportunity for us to enjoy ourselves out here. But at the end of the day, like I said, we've come to win. We've come here to end this game on a good note, end our season on a good note.

For me, I've been to -- I think this is now my fourth bowl appearance, but I've never played in one due to injury, so I'm really excited for this opportunity.

**Q. Devin, could you say a few things about your previous games against Clemson.**

DEVIN LEARY: Yes, sir. Every year at NC State, whenever we were playing Clemson, we knew they were going to come to play. We knew that every single time we were going to face them, if you have one minor mistake or if you didn't do your job to a detailed manner, they were going to take advantage of it.

Coach Swinney does a great job year in, year out to have those guys prepared. Even with a couple guys that have opted out on the team, we know the next man up are going to come to play as well.

For us, we just have to be aware of that and understand that we have to come out fast, we need to play our game. At the end of the day it's going to be four quarters. I'm excited for this one.

**Q. J.J., on your decision to come back, were you thinking about that all year? When Coach White was crying after the Louisville game talking about missing you... When did you make that decision?**

J.J. WEAVER: Man, I was thinking about it the whole year, to be honest. I was taking it slow, taking my time with it, going through the process.

But after the Louisville game, me and my mom sat down, actually see what I wanted to do, so...

Nah, it was exciting. I don't know.

**Q. Coach, a lot of the bowl games have been high scoring. Any particular theories?**

MARK STOOPS: These offensive coaches have all this time to diagram creative new plays, I guess (smiling).

I think a couple things. Number one, some players can get rested and get healed up, go back to playing extremely fast. Going through the 12-game schedule, the SEC schedule, our players, it takes its toll on you. They needed a little bit of time to just be aware from it, just lift, run, get their bodies right.

We get back and get focused on the game. I'm not sure, I mean, to be totally honest with you, I haven't had an opportunity to watch too many bowl games thus far. I'm not sure if I have a real clear answer on that.

Hopefully we'll score some points (smiling).

**Q. Ray and Devin, if I'm remembering correctly, I think you committed to UK the same day out of the transfer portal way back when. Can you reflect on playing with each other throughout the season, what this last opportunity to do that will be like on Friday?**

RAY DAVIS: Man, I mean, it's crazy because, again, me and Dev committed together. We sat in the car together and talked about these moments, having the opportunity to play the games we've been able to play, play in big games, to be in Kroger Field, to feel that atmosphere.

As we reflect on it, think about it, it sucks that it's over. But we're blessed to have been here, blessed to have been able to be a part of such great team, for Coach Stoops to give us a great chance to come here and showcase our ability, what we were able to do at players. Even for J.J., to be a leader, to accept us in the locker room, just let us be who we are, be the type of player that we wanted to be.

It's been great. Again, it's this team, being a part of this team is mentally amazing. It's great 'cause outside of football, these guys are like our brothers. We spend almost every day with each other. Knowing that whenever you go on that field, you're getting ready to step on Kroger Field, everybody is behind you, it's a good feeling to have.

To know I was able to achieve some historical moments with a lot of good guys and a great coaching staff has been good.

DEVIN LEARY: Yeah, just to kind of go off of that, it's pretty crazy how fast everything went by. It feels just like yesterday that me and Ray were contacting each other, that we were going to do this thing together and commit on the same day. Fast forward, we're here at the end of the season.

Exactly what Ray just said. We're just blessed to be able to be a part of this culture, blessed for Coach Stoops to bring us in. Having guys like J.J. and all of our teammates accept us for who we are.

Especially me and Ray coming in as new guys, we can't be more than thankful for our teammates, the staff and all of BBN. Every day you want to fulfill and live out your dream. That's exactly what we were able to do this year.

**Q. Ray, you have seen some talented defenses this year with Alabama and Georgia. What do you see from Clemson's defense?**

RAY DAVIS: Truthfully, like Dev said, we know Clemson is going to come ready to play. They have some really good guys. Even the opt-outs, the guys behind them are future first-rounders, future second-rounders, future guys who are going to become very talented players over the course of these upcoming years. We know they're going to come at us, bring everything they got.

They got some really good D-linemen, Xavier Thomas, No. 3, he's a stud. I think Bo Carter, their linebacker, very physical, very athletic. The secondary also, for DBs, they love to tackle, they like the contact.

Just knowing we have to be able to start fast, continue to play Kentucky football, not try to do too much, not try to do too little, just do what we can control, go out there and play our game.

They're going to prepare for all of us. We have a great offense, a great quarterback in our O-line and receivers. We know that they know that we got some guys. We got to be able to give it to our play-makers and go out there and play our game.

**Q. Devin, not to keep hammering home this point about you finally being healthy for a bowl game. Have you had a chance to reflect how surreal it is, the last time you were here, Kentucky was your opponent, now you're playing for Kentucky. Your signature win at NC**



## State was against Clemson.

DEVIN LEARY: Yeah, I mean, exactly like you said, it's just crazy how everything is coming full circle.

I do remember being here last time, Kentucky kind of whooping up on us. It's going to be good to be on this side of the ball.

But honestly, just thankful and very grateful for everything that I've been through in my journey to finally go out and end on a good note, to finally be able to play to end the season.

For me, last time strapping up in this uniform, going to give it all I got, just like my teammates. I'm just glad to go out there to war with all my brothers.

**Q. Ray, your head coach said in multiple press conferences that he was never surprised at your performance. Were you ever surprised how this year played out, how successful you were here in this Kentucky uniform?**

RAY DAVIS: Yeah, throughout the season I just knew that I had to be myself. I knew I had high standards, high standards for myself and high expectations for myself.

Like I said before, I knew the guys before me, they set the expectation, they set the standard. I had to go out there and meet that, achieve that, to be the best person I can be on and off the field, represent Kentucky the right way.

Every time I stepped on that field, I knew that I wasn't necessarily playing for myself, I was playing for the 11 guys on the field, I was playing for the whole University of Kentucky. I was playing for BBN, playing for something much bigger than myself. I knew no matter what, whether it was a good or bad game, I had to go out there and just be me, know I got to let the game come to me, I can't try to force anything.

I appreciate Coach Stoops a lot. Again, I wouldn't be where I am today without this opportunity to come here to Kentucky. I think I can speak for Dev on that. We would not be able to achieve these moments and memories with these guys without Coach Stoops believing in us, having us come in and be a part of this program.

I mean, I try not to get emotional because, again, I wouldn't be where I'm at. I kid you not. I mean, it was hard during the past four years, coming here just mentally, I felt so much better. I felt like everything just was set right. It all comes full circle.

My second bowl game ever. To be out there, be able to come out here and just play, hoist up a trophy potentially, is a great moment.

MARK STOOPS: If I could piggyback off that. It shows how our game is evolving. If you've listened to me for 11 years, you get tired of it probably, you constantly talk about building and all that.

It's different now. You have the opportunity to bring in two great young men like these two and speak the way they do, speak of our culture. It says a lot about them. It says a lot about J.J. and the guys that are leaders that do set the culture.

It's year to year now. It's different. This is a changing world we're in in college sports. I think our team has done as good a job as we can at adjusting to that. We're blessed to be able to bring in two young men that are sitting in the podium with me at the end of the year because of the impact and leadership that they have.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Stoops, Devin, Ray, J.J., thank you so much.

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