

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Clemson vs Kentucky

Friday, December 29, 2023

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Stoops

Press Conference

Clemson-38, Kentucky-35

MARK STOOPS: A very difficult loss. Terrific football game. There were so many moments in that game where I'm so proud of our football team and the way we responded, the way we fought back. We faced a lot of adversity and overcame it. Mistakes and turnovers, penalties, there was a lot of things that you're not very proud of.

The bottom line is I greatly appreciate our team's approach, the way they worked, the way they did things throughout the weeks leading up to this, the way they were down here, and the way they fought and played a very tough game.

Coaching-wise, I think there's a lot of things that we can do a lot better, and we need to get to that. You know, we have to have a strong offseason. You can't have so many negative yardage plays, runs that are not giving them a chance to get going, taking sacks, putting the ball on the ground, penalties. A lot of things that are on us as a staff.

I love this team. I wish for their sake we could have ended it with a great win, and it was a very difficult loss, but, again, this team is a team that I love and appreciate the way they've handled things. We'll move on from there.

Q. What do you tell them after going through so many emotions in the fourth quarter?

MARK STOOPS: Just that. I told them after we went down, I said, Guys, we're still going to win this game. With some guys that had some plays that affected it, I said, Hang in there. Sure enough, those things came true. We had an opportunity to bounce back and score and put us in a position to win the game.

Again, very proud of that part of it.



Q. Mark, your defense only gave up 13 points on four possessions that started inside your own 40 there, but then the last drive they drove down the field. Was that fatigue? Was it going too conservative? How do you think that last drive went?

MARK STOOPS: Well, we will always second-guess ourselves on calls on certain things. We get the pressure, we get the intentional grounding. The next play really hurt us. It gave them an opportunity to get it to fourth and manageable there. Obviously that's a play that will haunt us for a while.

We were down our two top corners at that point. You know, you try to do some things and play some coverages that can protect them. We had a nickel that was inexperienced that could have cut underneath it and just -- whatever.

We could play better. We could call defense better. We will second-guess ourselves on that one.

Q. Mark, Devine's turnovers there in the fourth quarter, was that a case of doing too much? What did you see on those plays, I guess?

MARK STOOPS: Well, the last one is what it is. Another tip, the strip sacks fumble was inexcusable. You have to tuck the ball at that point. He had people all around him.

You try and create and make something happen, but we have to protect the ball on the fumble. You can't do that. Give them all the momentum at that point in time. I think a little bit of everything.

Q. I know that obviously you're thinking about this game right now, but you're also losing guys like Ray and Devin and some of the seniors who have been here a while. What have they meant to this program, and going out like this is probably pretty tough for them as well.

MARK STOOPS: It's very heartbreaking for me to see them go out this way, but I just told them that in the locker room that for all the guys that are playing for Kentucky for

the last time that we love them and appreciate them and everything that they've done for our program. They have laid it on the line for us.

I told you day one, and I have stayed consistent through this, that I really like this team. I like coaching them. I wish we could have had a different outcome here. We had an opportunity to finish really strong and try to get two Ws against two ranked teams and find a way to put ourselves in a position, and it's a game of inches and yards and a play here, a play there. So it's a tough one.

Q. Mark, I guess I would be remiss to not ask about how good Barion was scoring three different ways and what a threat he was as an all-purpose threat today.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, that's part of it. With offensively we needed to try to have some balance. I think Ray made a great run early, and then throughout a big portion of the game there was just too many of those runs again where there was zero yardage and putting us in predictable paths.

But with Barion -- and that's kind of tough because we really want to be mixed on first and second, putting them in a bind, you know, first-second/first-second. Actually I think the first touchdown was a second down play action, when they went to a simulated pressure. Much to your point earlier, we could go to one of our simulated pressures, and we split them on it. It's the double-edged sword, crowding outside, giving them verticals, taking away verticals, giving them the outside. It's kind of the game that you play. But certainly was explosive plays.

Q. Eight sacks, really getting after Klubnik all day. What was going well for the pass rush?

MARK STOOPS: I think some of the movement was a big thing, some of the games, some of the simulated pressures. Putting it all together was going well.

I think some of the run game, some of the GT, the gap schemes that they were running hurt us and split us a few times that we've got to get straight.

Q. You mentioned at the beginning it's a critical offseason coming up. After the way the last two seasons ended with the SEC changing, how big is the next few months and for determining what this program is going to look like in a new SEC?

MARK STOOPS: It's huge. The offseason is huge right now. It's free agency, and you have to make sure you're putting yourself in a position to make a team better.

I think we have a very good football team we're putting

together for next year that we're going to try to keep on adding pieces to, but I think we have an opportunity to have a very good team, and we just have to stay the course and adapt to the way things are and continue to bring in great transfers like Ray and the others that we have and guys that fit our culture and continue to give us a chance to win.

Q. We noticed then the kickoff return that Barion had for the touchdown. Was there anything in particular that you were able to pinpoint in Clemson's kick coverage that made that successful for you?

MARK STOOPS: No. Barion made a very good run on that one. The time before he was very close to bringing that one out. I think he made a good decision. There was very good hang time. The one he actually ran back there was good hang time on.

Whereas our kick coverage team struggled, but we were not kicking the ball very good. Against good teams and good returners, if you hit balls with not hang time on them like that and low kicks, and one of them kicked the opposite direction what we called, that's not good. We have to kick the ball better.

But, no, I don't think there's anything we really identified. We've done a nice job on kickoff return for a good portion of the year. When you have a guy like Barion that can really -- has the speed and can make somebody miss, he is a threat.

Q. I think all of us were trying to catch our breath throughout that fourth quarter. How did you keep everybody calm for that wild roller coaster?

MARK STOOPS: Well, I think there's a fine line there. There's also -- there's some mistakes that we made as well that we've got to get corrected, and you've got to -- you could always second guess yourself on whether I could take a time-out and get the defense a little bit of rest and making sure we're putting ourselves in a position. You want to get to keep that clock moving as well for them.

It was a heck of a football game. I would be remiss if I didn't recognize Dabo and the job that he's done and winning five straight, and his team is a very good football team. It's very well-coached. It's a great organization, and they played a very good game. We both did.

They made a few more than us to win it, and credit them.

Q. You've talked multiple times about keeping the big man happy, No. 0, Walker. He was big-time today. How are you impressed with how he continues to



improve and continues to make even greater marks on the game?

MARK STOOPS: As I have told you guys many times, what's probably more impressive -- well, the way he plays is impressive, but the way he leads, the way he practices, the energy that he brings every day, the leadership that he shows is most critical to our program, and he's a big piece of the continuity in the defense.

We played a good portion of that game very well. Like you said, we dug deep, and it showed the character of Deone and a lot of the defensive guys, when we got put in bad situation time and time again, to rise up and to hold them out, and just came up a couple of plays short there at the end.

Thank you.

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