

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Duke vs Ole Miss

Friday, January 3, 2025
Jacksonville, Florida, USA
TIAA Bank Field

Ole Miss Rebels Lane Kiffin Press Conference

Ole Miss 52, Duke 20

LANE KIFFIN: Exciting day for Ole Miss, for the players, for the fans. That's a really good team that we played, a team that won nine games, had one of the best defenses statistically in the country. I think they were best in negative plays in the ACC, creating those, and very well-coached.

I think our guys -- I know our guys talked a lot over the course of the month, especially the last week, of making this statement, feeling that they were left out of the playoffs, so they really wanted to make a statement against an ACC team that had two teams in the playoffs and a team that they looked at as taking SMU to overtime.

Proud of the way that they played. We screwed up with the fake field goal early, but outside of that, just completely dominated a nine-win team on offense and defense in the game. That was great to see.

I do apologize, I told Manny at the end, Jaxson's touchdown pass to Jordan, that was just those two guys. I actually tried to take Jaxson out if you saw earlier, and he refused to go out, which says a lot about him. But he and Jordan came up with that play on their own, and he was supposed to hand the ball off. I didn't like that part.

But the rest of the day was a really big statement about these guys, not just how good of a team they are, 10 wins, and all 10 wins I think are double-digit wins. I don't think many people are able to say that. But these are games that a lot of teams struggle to show up for, players opt out, or even if they don't, we've seen some teams that were really good teams struggle in a non-playoff bowl game. I was really pleased for our guys to show up, 8:00 start here. It was great to see.

Q. I know that you had no doubt that Jaxson was going to play and play hard, but on his first play did



you really want him to take Alex Howard head on?

LANE KIFFIN: That's just who he is. Obviously he didn't listen very well because we subbed him out if you didn't notice. Austin came in and he just waves him off.

I think kind of when kids get a certain age they don't listen to you as well. I felt like that was kind of the case today with his touchdown pass and running people over instead of sliding and then not coming out of the game. But he's awesome.

I hope that regardless of how wins and losses go, I hope that our fans appreciate this time frame of what's going on with Ole Miss football but specifically this quarterback, all-time winningest quarterback, all-time most yards. That's special. I've played football a long time with some really good quarterbacks. Just hope everybody appreciates what they saw, statistically in the play, but what they saw from a competitor and leader that a lot of guys wouldn't even have played in the game.

Q. Lane, your team kind of returned to a bygone era of college football with guys opting into the game rather than opting out. What do you have to say about guys like Jaxson and JJ and Jared, some of the ones that built the foundation of this team, and what they've done throughout the course of their time at Ole Miss?

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I think it was an amazing statement of what they did because you have some guys that have been here for a while, like you mentioned, Ivey and JJ and Jaxson and some others -- even Bentley had talked about preparing for the draft. But they had been here a while. Then you had newer guys like Walter, Nolan, potential first-round pick, Princely, really high pick that played. I met with Walter at half and said, okay, now you should come out, and he still went and played in the first couple series of the second half.

I told them last night, you are an old-school football in that mentality. Like you actually care about your team and your brothers in the locker room and you're playing for them. That doesn't happen very much anymore, unfortunately. I told them, actually that's how it always was, and they didn't



realize that.

Q. This is you guys' third 10-win season in four years. It's just the 10th in the 100 some years it's been. What has that history meant to you and what you've built here in just five years?

LANE KIFFIN: Well, I think it says a lot. I think it says a lot, too, because the SEC is so competitive now, and you've got even newer teams in the SEC since way back -- probably four have come in, just two in the last year.

It just says a lot about these players in this era to do that. It says a lot about the commitment from the chancellor, from Keith when they hired us, and then continual commitment throughout that process, not just here's the job but then we needed things. We needed things with facilities. We needed things with staff budget to be able to get coaches like we have and be able to get a Pete Golding to come. They've given us everything we've ever asked for.

Q. You mentioned in the trophy presentation that you're just getting started, that you're building for next year, that kind of thing. You obviously lose a lot of not just players but leaders off of this team. How difficult will it be to billed to replace those guys and build without taking a step back?

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I probably wouldn't have been so confident if we hadn't done some of this before. I feel like when Matt Corral left, I feel like a lot of people thought we're going to have this downswing and that was just kind of a Matt Corral thing.

Our team, I know we won 10 games, we won 11 the year before, that's 21 in two years, but our team this year was a better team. We lost three one-score games that two of them we have the ball up by four with two, two and a half minutes left and make a couple 1st downs and we win the game. The team before went 4-0 in one-score games, so we were actually a better team as you look at now you've got 10 wins and double-digit wins. That doesn't happen very often with SEC teams and the good bowl teams.

My point is we can keep getting better just continuing to add players and add pieces and keeping our staff together, too, which has been very critical. I think we said at the beginning of the year, I should remember this, I feel like this was the first year where all three coordinators, we were able to keep them maybe the whole time that we've been here. We've always lost one or two of them every year.

Q. We've asked you so much about Jaxson this year,

but with respect to the future with Austin, what do you hope Austin picks up on about Jaxson with sitting under him, and how do you hope Jaxson can rub off on who's next?

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, when I say this team is like a family, it really is because of the way that they just played for each other. Again, you're playing the second half of a blowout and guys are going back into the game. I'm not going to say which ones specifically, guys that we were told actually weren't team type of guys at their previous places. So to see that is such a family -- like the players here help change the ones coming in.

Then I look at the family in the quarterback room, and then when you say that about Austin, he had this big brother show him every way to do every single thing right except for making his own plays up at the end.

So that's so valuable. It's one thing just to learn how a guy works, but how he prepares, how he works, how he treats people, how he wins his team over. Austin, that's a really awesome thing Austin got to experience.

Q. That throw from Jaxson where he was fading left and threw it 51 yards to Watkins, from our vantage point pretty spectacular. How special is a throw like that?

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, that really was an amazing throw. He'd had a great couple weeks of practice. He was hurt, I don't remember exactly how many games, but there at the end he was hurt with his ankle and wasn't the same, and he got hit pretty hard in that Florida game, wasn't the same in the fourth quarter in that game, and then limped around kind of in the Egg Bowl. Him having a full month being full strength, he showed how he played earlier before he got hurt, and again, we had some bad breaks this year, and the best receiver in the country wasn't even out there just like he wasn't out there for -- what, I think he played in five games.

For Jaxson to do that, set those records, not having him after five and a half games or something is amazing.

Q. This whole year you could say has been deeply affected your team with the transfer portal adding all those guys and Duke being down their top two quarterbacks, what are your overall thoughts on the transfer portal and specifically you had to add guys while you're also prepping for Duke in December. What are your overall thoughts on maybe the timing of that, as well?

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, I think, as I mentioned, it's a really



... when all is said, we're done.®

broke system that's got to be fixed. To have portal -- we lost guys going in the portal, a couple defensive starters or a couple starters that went in the portal that would have been playing, so kind of affected us as well as them, especially their quarterback situation.

That's why I was proud of our offense. That was a really good defense that caused a lot of problems that didn't have any opt-outs. Them not having their quarterback didn't have anything to do with whatever it was, 589 yards of offense. That was our offensive players playing really well against a really good defense with a tough scheme. I was really pleased by that.

Q. You mentioned all the offense, 447 for Jaxson tonight. Where do you feel like this ranks as far as games you've seen him play over the years? It's a pretty special way to go out.

LANE KIFFIN: Yeah, it really is. I feel like he did this similar game against Penn State in a bowl game last year. I don't know if the stats were quite as large, but similar defense, it was Manny's defense at Penn State, and he made just a lot of great, really accurate throws. Players made plays for him, Trey was playing that day. But this was a really good game. He had the one kind of lateral called back that screwed up the one drive.

But 27 of 35 for 404, four touchdowns, no interceptions is pretty awesome.

The Gator Bowl was amazing this week. The hospitality, the hotel over there, the people were awesome and really made it a great experience. So I want to thank all them. It was awesome. Thanks.

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