

Starco Brands LA Bowl

Hosted By Gronk:

Boise State vs UCLA

Saturday, December 16, 2023

Los Angeles, California, USA

SoFi Stadium

UCLA Bruins

Coach Chip Kelly

Ethan Garbers

Darius Muasau

Press Conference

UCLA - 35, Boise State - 22

Q. Coach, after the way you played today, how much does it deter you from thinking about even going into the portal looking for a quarterback? And, Ethan, do you feel like this was possibly the best performance of your career in terms of just winning the team over and meeting your expectations?

COACH KELLY: I think Ethan won the team over a long time ago. He's been our starting quarterback. The only issue we've had is Ethan got banged up. It's got nothing to do with it. He knows he's the starting quarterback here. I've got great faith in him.

What we saw today was what we saw against Stanford and what we saw against USC. Talking to him pregame, he didn't feel he was 100 percent, couldn't go. That's the type of player he is. He said, you better go with Collin, but I'm ready to be a backup if we have to go. When Collin went down, I said are you ready to go? He said he was, and he played fantastic.

ETHAN GARBERS: That whole performance was for the team for the seniors. Like Darius, like Duke, all those guys, man, they really laid the foundation for this program and for the younger guys, and that win and that performance was all for them.

Q. Now that the season has culminated, what's your initial assessment of the year and what's your growth plan as you guys transition to the Big Ten?



COACH KELLY: Our initial assessment is that we wanted to send seniors like Darius and Duke and Alex Johnson, Kenny Churchwell out the right way. That was our goal.

And we did it. And that's what it is. And then there's obviously the beginning stages of everything, getting ready for the 2024 season. But there's so many different things we have to do. We're aware of it. We're excited about the opportunity going into the Big Ten.

But today we'll savor this victory and the performance these guys did.

Q. First half you guys gave up 16 points defensively. Second half, they scored late there. Could you talk about the adjustments made there on the defensive end in the second half and just the performance of T.J. Harden, two touchdowns, 100-plus yards?

COACH KELLY: I think our defense actually played well in the first half. We just missed a couple of tackles. They were where they were supposed to be. The runs were fit the right way. The long screen pass they had, we had a couple shots at 'em, didn't get them down. Give credit to the running back for Boise. It was a pretty good run by him.

We felt confident, we were in the locker room at halftime, that everything that happened in the first half, it was us, missed tackles on the defense and penalties on the offensive side of the ball. We felt like if we could clean it up, we were poised to break out in the second half. And that's what happened.

Q. Ethan, when you saw that Collin went out, what was going through your mind? Did you feel that you could just rattle off 21 quick points? Darius, second half, the defense looked like they picked it up. Did you say anything? What did the defense say to each other at halftime?

ETHAN GARBERS: When I saw Collin laying there and it didn't seem like he was ready to go, just kind of flipped that switch in my head, it's time to go to work. I think that's what we did.



DARIUS MUASAU: As far as the defense, the first half we weren't really playing to the standard that we set out for ourselves, we put out for ourselves coming into this season.

Going into the locker room, this is a player-led team. Coach says that all the time. We had our captains step up, give a little speech, and that's all we needed to kind of kick our butts and get right into the right mindset.

Q. Ethan, what was clicking so well with J. Michael, hit him three times for 40-plus yards? What was working so well downfield?

ETHAN GARBERS: Just all the work we've put in since he got here last January, that whole year, and the summer and the winter and the spring, working on that, working on those throws. At that point, when we were out there, it's just muscle memory, and we've done it so many times. We called it and we got the right look and we executed.

Q. Ethan, your season has been so resilient from where it started to where it is now, the win over USC, and the win in the bowl game, where does that resiliency come from, because it's changed this program game in and game out?

ETHAN GARBERS: I would say my whole football career has been resilient. That's life. Coach says that all the time. Life is hard and if you can find a way to get through these battles and win those battles, it's going to help you out in the long run. That's pretty much it.

Q. I'm sure it was a fun phone call for the folks in Manila since this qualifies as a morning game again.

COACH KELLY: 4:30 is not bad. We'll live with 4:30. It's the Pac-12 after darks that used to get to us and the away ones. Being home in LA was awesome. The fact we could play in SoFi was really, really special.

Q. Ethan, you took part in the Senior Night ceremonies. Are you coming back next year, or what will influence your decision?

ETHAN GARBERS: Yes, sir, I will be coming back next year for one more year. I'm excited to see where we can take this thing. Go Bruins.

COACH KELLY: Merry Christmas.

Q. Ethan, Duke was telling us this week that he felt like you have lately been paying more attention to detail in practice. Is that something you've noticed

about yourself, or just what has it been like these past few weeks?

ETHAN GARBERS: Playing in the game and kind of getting the feel of how it all goes, the game of football is broken down to just every single play matters. And the details of every single play, stepping the right way, putting the ball where it needs to be, it's all important.

And the details -- the little things are what wins games, and I think that really showed.

Q. You've taken a lot of criticism lately, from me included, do you feel vindicated at all? The program, the direction you're taking it?

COACH KELLY: No, because we don't pay attention to that. These players can tell you that. We talk about being the most prepared and the least distracted. If we did pay attention to that, we would be distracted. It's tough. I'm older and so that stuff really doesn't bother me. I'm not a social media guy. I can't do that.

I feel for our players at times because what used to be in the information age, we're not in the information age anymore. We're in the information overload age. And I think you have to really build a moat around your mind and allow the right things in. And I think these guys have stayed the course. You watched their performance today; I think they've really done that. It was just a challenge, I think, for them. Not as much for me because I don't pay attention to that.

And I know you're an outstanding writer. I see you on ESPN and all these other things -- I'm not saying this in the wrong way -- I've never read anything. I don't read the newspaper. That's just because I've got a job to do, and my job is to prepare these guys and create an environment where they have an opportunity to be successful and then get out of their way let them do it.

We've had challenges. We've had challenges with adversity. We've had challenges with injuries. But we don't make excuses, nor do we let other people make excuses for us. This is life.

What these guys showed today is that I'm really proud of them. I'm really proud of how they responded. And that's what a competitor does. A competitor responds. A noncompetitor reacts. This group does it every single day.

Did the ball bounce our way every single time? No. But that's football. That's what it is. But I think as a football coach, you have to teach life lessons. Sometimes those life lessons are hard and you have to go through them as a

group, and we did. But the performance today by this group was special.

And it's a truly special group. When you look at their statistics, this group won eight plus games three years in a row.

It's the second time it's happened since 1988 at UCLA. That's what I'm really proud of is what these guys did, how resilient they were. And to beat a really good Mountain West football team in Boise State team, that's a really good football team.

But ours guys came out in the second half and won that football game. It wasn't handed to us. We won that football game and I'm proud the way they performed.

Q. Coach said you weren't feeling 100 percent after warmups. What were you feeling at that point and why weren't you able to kind of go at that point? And how difficult was it to make that call on your own and say I have to sit this one out to start, at least?

ETHAN GARBERS: This whole week and just before the game, I just wasn't feeling 100 percent myself. To answer your second question, when I looked out there and the team needed me and that's my biggest priority. I mean, I'll sacrifice my body for the team for these guys that we put blood, sweat and tears into it. And at the end of the day, it's all for them. So it was an easy call, to say the least.

Q. Both your quarterbacks ran for a lot of yards today. Was that something that was in the game plan or was that just good improvisation?

COACH KELLY: No, it was. We felt our offensive staff, I thought, put a really good plan together to exploit some of the things we saw in Boise's defense. We felt like the quarterback run game was going to be really, really important to us.

We also felt like our vertical passing game was really important to us. You saw that express itself. So give credit to these guys. Like we said, our job is to come up with a game plan, but they have to execute it. They executed it to a tee. I was really proud how they did it.

Q. Obviously if you're going to make a decision about a defensive coordinator what did Ikaika show you? He's been on your staff for two years now. What did -- I guess, the game plan that he put together and what he showed you as someone who maybe is a candidate if you look internally?

COACH KELLY: Ikaika did a great job, but I think that

entire defensive staff did. It was awesome to play in this bowl game. But from a coaching perspective, it's probably you didn't want to because of the date of the game.

This was a week of recruiting. Our kids were in finals. Ethan missed two days this week because he had finals. He had two on Thursday. I'm talking to him over the phone, asking him how he did on his finals and then also trying to ask him what routes he likes.

But there was a lot of things going on, but I think our defensive staff did an unbelievable job with the Ikaika, Ken Norton Jr. Brian Norwood stepped up. We had a chance to take two of our analysts because we lost three coaches. Clancy Pendergast did an unbelievable job. Greg Burns did an unbelievable job -- that entire group.

I think our coaching staff reflects our players. The old adage, it's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit. I think the entire defensive group put together a special game plan. And I was really happy with how they did it.

The same with Ken Niumatalolo stepping up, first time. We lost our quarterback, our tight end coaches, one of them got the Oregon State offensive coordinator job -- I'm so happy for Gundy -- and Jeff Faris just got his first head-coaching job. For us to do what we did on offense where Ken's up in the box for the first time, he coached the tight ends, I've had more fun than I've had coaching in a long time the last two weeks because I actually got to be in the quarterback game and coach quarterbacks again. Sometimes as a head coach you get disconnected from those guys because you manage the team but you don't have an individual position group.

It's a special group with Ethan in there. So I think our entire coaching staff did an unbelievable job. Especially with kind of all the outside things.

But if you go back to what we talked about, Bill, being the most prepared and the least distracted, we didn't let finals, we didn't let recruiting, we didn't let any of that stuff get in the way of what the most important thing was and that was to send Darius and this group of seniors out the right way.

Q. Darius, what's it mean for you to keep this program going, knowing this was the final game for Pac-12 conference (inaudible) you're part of it defensively?

DARIUS MUASAU: Very bittersweet feeling. Sad that it's my last collegiate game over these past five years. Love this game with all I've got, and I wouldn't want to end it off with any other team than the UCLA Bruins. Playing with the brothers that I had out here, made a lot of great

friendships that I'll cherish forever, great memories.

You mentioned the defense we had this year. I was just so blessed. It was a blessing just to be on the field with these guys. We play for each other out there, and I feel like it shows every game that we play for -- we trust one another, and we love one another so much. And I feel like that's how we play, and it shows every game.

Like I mentioned, it's very bittersweet. I feel like either tomorrow or Monday I'm going to sit down and just really reflect on my collegiate career and just going to be really sad that it's really coming to an end. But I have training coming up for the NFL, training for the draft. So that's another exciting chapter in my life. I'm looking forward to that.

But I'm thankful for all these coaches, for all these players. Love each and every one of them.

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