

Art of Sport LA Bowl Hosted By Gronk: California vs UNLV

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

SoFi Stadium

UNLV Rebels

Del Alexander

Jackson Woodard

Jacob De Jesus

Press Conference

UNLV - 24, UC Berkeley - 13

DEL ALEXANDER: Opening remarks? Okay, how's that for a substitute teacher? (Laughter).

Today's work was a testament. First, I want to say good season. I know how tough it is to fight through the adversity. We really first wanted to respect our opponent -- Coach Wilcox, his team, his staff -- to get to this point. A bowl game is a reward. Unfortunately, it was a bigger reward for us.

Our players, they're outstanding young men. They're full of character and integrity, and they worked their tails off. To stand in front of them and look in their eyes, they gave me every piece of the motivation that I needed to work tirelessly as a first year interim head coach and to give them everything that I got.

Q. Del, you were on the coaching staff the last time UNLV won a bowl game. Just what does it mean to get the first bowl win in 24 years but also that 11th win?

DEL ALEXANDER: Yes, it means a lot. I got my sticker here with Coach Robinson. I wanted to make sure that not just on the back of the helmet. We did that for once. It meant something different for me than it did for Coach Odom. I've lived it. That was my college coach. I wanted to take one of those stickers and put it on my shirt, my jacket, my shoulder, my chest.

It meant a lot, you know what I mean? I was there. I was there at Arkansas. It's a big deal, and it's a big deal for



these guys right now. That was a big deal for me, and I think Jacob being with me the most, it's a big deal for them.

I've done this so many times that it's a big deal for them to experience it because it's an experience, as Jackson and I were talking about, it's an experience that will last their lives. I've lived it the last I don't know how many years ago that was, but for them to feel it and to get the reward from the work, you know what I mean, and establish a legacy, that's off to them.

Q. Jackson and Jacob, obviously Ricky White doesn't play, but he's helped lead you guys here. Last year after the Mountain West title game, you guys all chose to come back. How special was this win for him, even though he wasn't here, but he's a big part of why you guys got number 11?

JACOB DE JESUS: Ricky is a true part of our team, and we would not be in this position without him. He's is a phenomenal player, and I respect his decision of sitting out. It's a smart decision for him. I believe he's going to be first round, second round pick, and it would be dumb for him to come play in this game and get hurt.

We have nothing but love and respect for him. We know he would have been out here, but he made the right decision.

It just means so much to get this win for him and for our team. This is something that me and Jackson were talking about for this past week like we want to go out with a win and end the season off the way we should because this season has been a great season. We fought through so much adversity and just went through so many things.

We played really well, and we just are so glad, and I'm so proud of my team, so glad that we were able to come up with the W.

JACKSON WOODARD: He said it all. Ricky's a great human being. He sacrificed so much for this team. Obviously we wish he played, but we understand what he has ahead of him.

I'm just proud of my teammates, stuck together and went



and did it.

Q. Jackson, on the day Coach Odom informed the team he was leaving for Purdue, how did you and the other members of the leadership group of this team keep everybody focused on this game and be ready to play the way you did tonight?

JACKSON WOODARD: Immediately when I found out, I called Hajj-Malik Williams, our quarterback, our leader, and we talked for a long time just about what exactly we were going to do.

Then I called Jalen St. John I called Ricky. I could keep going on. I just made a lot of phone calls. We're going to do this.

We know how big this win was. We obviously lost in the Mountain West Championship, which was gut wrenching, hurt. It's hard to describe what this team went through in the last week and a half, and to come out and stay together and go win, it's unreal, and I'm just so proud of my guys.

Q. Jacob, it's been one season for you losing your father this year. It was amazing to see your beautiful family here. Playing tonight, how special is this win for you?

JACOB DE JESUS: It's a very special win, man. It's something I really can't quite comprehend. Just to have the game that I had, it's all God. I'll always give the glory to God. He's the reason I'm here, and he's the reason I'm doing everything.

I'm just so thankful for Coach Del, for Jackson, all of my teammates. They all had something to do with it, and they were all there for me. Especially these two guys right here, they were all there for me while I was going through everything.

It's been, like you said, one heck of a season and one heck of a bumpy ride, but I wouldn't have rather done it with anybody else. I'm just so glad we came out here and did what we did today. It just means so much to me to do it in front of my family.

I see my mom crying after the game. It touches me. It touches her. To see where I'm at right now and where I was at two years ago, it's just crazy.

Q. Jackson, one heck of a career at UNLV. You're going down in history. The legacy you're leaving at UNLV, what have you set up for this future of this program?

JACKSON WOODARD: Man, first of all, I'm so blessed. I keep talking about my teammates, but they just went to work. They helped me in so many ways. Then this coaching staff. Obviously Coach Odom played a huge role, Coach Scherer played a huge role in my success.

Coach Del in this game, I don't think he's getting enough credit for what he did. He set a vision as soon as he got the job. He called us in. He was the right man for the job, and he just went to work. He's gritty. He's tough. He's a really phenomenal coach, and I think he needs more credit.

Man, it means everything. This city, the city of Las Vegas, UNLV as a whole is in a really good position. It's a special place. It's a second home to me, and I'm just happy with this victory tonight.

Q. Jacob, how does it feel to be like one of those idols for Hispanic kids growing up that don't really see that type of ethnicity or that type of culture on the field, especially in football at your position? How does it feel to represent that? Are you proud? What are your emotions with that?

JACOB DE JESUS: I definitely feel -- I'm glad that I can inspire other kids that are similar to me, similar to my size, similar to my ethnicity. It just means a lot for me to inspire those other kids because I know how it feels. I was in their position, in their shoes, and I was always the underdog.

It definitely feels good to be able to just inspire those kids.

Q. Jackson, held Cal scoreless in the second half. They had eight drives. They had no points. What was the key for your defense to keep them off the board?

JACKSON WOODARD: That's got to be the theme of ours, shutting people out in the second half. Obviously wish we'd started a little bit quicker, but that's just a testament to the team.

We stick together. You go back to the Reno game, they score on the first drive, just bomb. First drive, it doesn't faze us. We go back, get the correction, and just go back to work.

That's this whole team. We just go to work. I'm so proud of my teammates. We take what we're given, and we just run with it.

Another huge shout out to the coaching staff. They do so good on halftime adjustments. Coach Scherer is one of the best in the game at halftime adjustments. That's one of the more impressive things, I think, as a coach. Whatever you can do to come in at halftime to fix the little mistakes.

We just made a few adjustments and then just went and played our butts off.

Q. Del, you said you guys were putting your heads together to sort of run the offense. Who was calling the plays for you guys? How did that work? Then specifically that fake punt. Can you talk about the genesis of that play and how you decided to call it?

DEL ALEXANDER: I'll start with the offense. The communication went from Coach Merchant to the quarterback. That's kind of the guy that works with him as a position coach behind the scenes, the fighting, you know what I mean? The why are you calling that? The no, call this, stuff you guys don't hear.

Our strength as a staff allows us to be that way. We've been together for two years. With Coach Marion moving on, it wasn't going to be easy, so I had to be the voice of reason. I know that we could call the same plays. It was just a matter of everybody being on the same page.

There's a voice now. We're talking about Coach Vice, we're talking about Coach Ford, Coach Longshore, and Merchant, and everybody's got to play. But at the end of the day, the plan was set to come together as a community of coaches, agree on what the best plays were for the next drive, as well as making sure by third down or another situation like red zone that we were prepared and we agreed on the collective number of plays, and we ran those.

When it comes to the fake punt, I don't know. My head was in the clouds, and Coach Shibest said, hey, you want to run it. I didn't even figure out where the ball was. I said go. I'd seen it every day in practice for a year, two years, and I said go. I think I was facing the wrong way, but I saw it go, and I went, good, that worked.

Q. Coach, how did you feel about Jacob's return on some of those punts there? How do you think he helped the offense when it was struggling sometimes?

DEL ALEXANDER: I mean, Jacob is special back there. He's one of the best punt returners that I've seen and coached. I think we had a long conversation before his biggest return. We talk about it. We talk about him going back there and being focused and catching the ball fundamentally.

We know that he's kicking the ball with no hang time, but he's also trying to kick it right or left and catch Jacob off guard, and we caught it. Jacob went back there -- I say we because we're in this together. I said, Jacob, no hang time

and distance. If you get it, get vertical, like we work on. That's something that he's done the entire time that we've been together, and that's what makes him special and unique.

Q. Jackson, after the Mountain West Championship, it was said this team didn't get enough breaks to go their way. Tonight you get a missed field goal. Tonight you guys get a fumble recovery off a backwards pass. How did it feel to get those breaks tonight in the biggest game of the year? Did it feel like you guys didn't really get those breaks until tonight?

JACKSON WOODARD: Well, people call them breaks, but I just call them good plays by us. It's the same way around when it comes to the Mountain West Championship. Boise is a really good team. I wouldn't call them breaks they had or we didn't have. They just made plays and we didn't.

I don't really believe in breaks or good luck or bad luck. If you look at the field goal, we were getting pressure all night. The D-line were getting their hands up, causing distraction.

Yeah, obviously we did exactly what we were supposed to do. Coach Del put out a plan, and we went out and executed at a very high level. I'd credit the break on the field goal, if you call that a break, I'd credit that to the D-linemen just making plays.

Q. Question for Jackson and for Coach. How much did Jacob inspire you guys with everything that he's been through this season?

JACKSON WOODARD: I could say so much about who he is as a person, which means so much more than football. What he went through was something that no one should have to go through, and the way that he did it was incredible. He's got a family. He's got a daughter, Mimi, who's the light of this world.

To be able to manage that and come back the next week and go compete for this team, that means everything. That inspired the team. That inspired me. He's your brother for life for me. He's family. But he inspired the whole team.

The whole team rallied around him and wanted to go do this for him. He's a special person.

DEL ALEXANDER: I think, like Jackson is saying, it's really about the team. In terms of inspiring me, I'm more in a parental role. I'm a little bit more about his well-being, making sure that he is right mentally, making sure that he is -- he understands the moment.

And being his coach and watching him in this situation speaks to his family, speaks to his father and his mother and how he handled it, and the opportunity to go home and see his father and the dynamic after a game when he drives home to see his father one more time.

You look in his eyes and you ask him if he's okay, and he's going to say yes. When you know he's not okay, you pull him into your office and you say, you sit down there. You know what I mean? You take a minute because we know that's what you need at that time.

All along, Jacob's in there, and he took his minute. Again, how he was raised is once he comes out of that room, he's about business. I think that's exactly how his father was. He plays because he was inspired by his father. His father loved watching Jacob play and being there for him. You watch the videos, and his dad's the life of the party in the stands. I know that's where his inspiration is from. It's just special to see.

Having lost my father, I'm like, okay, Jacob, I know how this feels, and I'm not going to let you just dive into football as if nothing's going on. Let's talk about it, and let's make sure that you're good with it and not just trying to be a jock, an emotionless jock.

JACOB DE JESUS: If I could just say something, these two guys were always there for me while everything was going on, even before my dad passed away. I knew I could always come talk to either one of them about everything. Mostly Coach Del because I was in the receiver room with him.

He was just always there for me, like I said, even before my dad passed away. I knew he was going through the cancer. Coach Del recognized it in me and he sensed it in me. He said, if you need to go somewhere, go. I went into his office, and I remember crying. He came and talked to me.

I'm just so thankful for these two men up here and just for everything that they've done for me. Coach Del even came to my dad's service. He's just always been there for me through it all. Just like he said, he went through it. He knows what I'm going through. He knows the emotions and just everything that I've been through.

Woody has been there always for me too, just texting me while I was away, just always checking in on me and just being a brother and a teammate. I'm just so grateful for them too, both.

Q. Coach Del, obviously there was a lot going on with the quarterback situation this season, but when you

look at a guy like Cameron Friel, he stuck around till the very end when he probably could have left. What does it mean to be able to get that guy a win and his journey, especially dealing with him on the offensive side of the ball?

DEL ALEXANDER: There's a team full of Cams, guys that have very small roles. You saw a freshman catch a ball today. That might have been the only play he was in the game. That was one of the things that I tried to make sure that they understood, that this was about a collective effort. It wasn't about one guy.

Especially when you look at the landscape of football, it wasn't about stats. They've got guys with better stats than us. You've got Boise leading the country in sacks. They've got better stats than us. But at the same time, the wins, where do they come from? They come from everybody, the little pieces and parts.

The guys, we were looking at it, the 60 players that play on special teams, and some of those guys that don't see a rep on offense or defense. But how huge is our special teams? So the buy-in is unreal in this day and age.

When you talk about what inspires me, looking at those guys and watching them work together, that's what inspired me.

Q. For the players, this team has broken a lot of records this season. What does it feel like to finish out what has been one of the most historic seasons for the program?

JACOB DE JESUS: Definitely, it feels great. Like I said, me and Wood were talking about it. Me, Hajj, Wood. It just feels good to leave with this mark, leave with this win.

I feel like last year when we lost the bowl game, it didn't feel the same, you know what I mean? It was a great season, but man, we weren't satisfied. To end the season like this for this team that fought every day, went in every day, and put in all the work all year, like I said, with everything we've been through, it feels so good to finish the season like this.

JACKSON WOODARD: This is exactly how we wanted to finish this with a win. 11 wins, that's huge. Not many people can say they won 11 wins in a season.

We came out -- I gave a lot of credit to Coach Del, and I'll keep doing it. If you look at the team and how many seniors and old guys and potential players at the next level, the success that the players had, to look at the team and see how many people stuck around to play for this bowl

game, it's unheard of nowadays, but it shows you how close we are as a team.

We're all brothers, like truly I'll be with Jacob for the rest of my life. I could go on and on. But it's a special way to end it. We finally got some hardware. It's just really special.

Q. Jackson, with you being an amazing player all year, winning Defensive Player of the Year for Mountain West and now the Defensive MVP for the LA Bowl, what are your next steps going forward?

JACKSON WOODARD: First of all, I need to credit all this to Jesus Christ. He's my savior. I lean on him through all the weeks. Us players go through ups and downs, can I keep doing it? Am I good enough? I lean on Him for all of it.

It's a credit to my defense for where I am at this point. My defense has gotten me so far. The coaches have gotten me so far. Then God willing, I'll get a chance to play at the next level. That's a dream of mine, and I'm going to go work my butt off and try to do that.

Q. We heard from the Coach, but I wanted to hear from the players, how has your experience been with the LA Bowl, the Art of Sport LA Bowl?

JACKSON WOODARD: They did an incredible job. It was a bowl that I'll remember for the rest of my life. They had events that were set up just at the right time, allowed us to be as a team. That's what we talked about with Coach in our captains meeting. We wanted to be together as a team and really enjoy this experience as a team, not go our separate ways.

I think the LA Bowl can such a good job at bringing us together as a team and allowing us to really enjoy the work that we put in throughout the season. Then to be able to play in SoFi is incredible. This is a sweet venue. It's an experience I'll remember forever.

JACOB DE JESUS: Exactly like Jackson said. I've had a great time this past four days. It's been amazing to be with my teammates. Like Jackson said, we're seniors. It's our last time getting to be around these guys and to be together as a team.

It just felt really good, and you guys did a great job. I love all the stuff that we got to do -- Universal, the Cosm. It was all amazing experiences. Then like Jackson said, this is a phenomenal stadium, great venue. It was awesome to play in here. I'm glad to say I played in here.

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