

Pac-12 Football Championship

Game: USC v Utah

Friday, December 2, 2022

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Allegiant Stadium

USC Trojans

Lincoln Riley

Caleb Williams

Postgame Press Conference

Utah - 47, USC - 24

LINCOLN RILEY: Obviously, disappointing night for us. You come as far as this team has come and this program has come in the last 12 months, you get that close to winning a championship, possibly much more.

Obviously do not get it done, it's a tough pill to swallow. When you get to the top like this, these games that have so much riding on them, it takes so much to get here, especially where we started from. To get here and not get it done, not play our best, very, very disappointed. Very disappointed locker room. No other way to say it.

I want to give Utah a lot of credit. They battled their way to get back into this game. Did a tremendous job. They played better than us today. They certainly deserved to win tonight. They were definitely the better team tonight. I want to give their coaching staff, their players a lot of credit. They certainly deserve that.

Our guys deserve and our program deserves a lot of credit for being here right now, there's no question. Proud of the way these guys battled really all year, battled tonight, had some obviously things not go our way, kind of continued to keep fighting, kept it a pretty tight game there at the end. Didn't have quite enough to get over the hump.

Obviously made mistakes all across the board, our play didn't really resemble the way we've played the majority of this year. Disappointed with some of the missed opportunities out there. But that's the name of the game when you get to this level. You got to go play good football to win. We didn't do it.

Obviously there's a much bigger picture and outlook here of the progress that's been made here in the last 12 months. So we're not going to walk around like this is



some funeral, all right? We've made some great progress to be in this moment. We expected to win tonight. We didn't get it done. But that changes nothing in terms of the direction and trajectory of this program, and it's due to guys like these two guys here, all those guys in that locker room that are heartbroken right now that battled. Had guys refusing to come out of the game. Guys continued to battle as things went on. We've done it all year. No real surprise there.

Not something as a head coach you take for granted. Love coaching this team. We've responded to any type of adversity that has hit us all year. This will be a different kind, but I expect our response will be at an elite level. We'll find out where the next one is and be ready to go.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Lincoln, you've seen a lot of players in your career. The guy to your left has to be one of the gutsiest performances you've seen. What was the conversation with your backup warming up? Was there a consideration?

LINCOLN RILEY: Definitely. He popped his hamstring on the long run that was on a second or third drive of the game. I asked him at one point, Are you 50%?

He was not even close to 50%. I definitely thought about taking him out. He wouldn't have let me, and he didn't let me. He wouldn't even let me take him out at the end.

Yeah, in terms of guys I've coached at that position, maybe the gutsiest performance I've ever seen. Most guys wouldn't have even played. He still gave us a chance. We had to change the game plan, had a change lot of things on the fly. He just kind of kept battling and willed us.

We had a real shot there at the end. I thought, after we scored the touchdown and made it a three-point game, that we had some real momentum on our side.

No, it was -- shit, that's as gutsy of a performance as you'll ever see.



Q. Lincoln, does something need to change philosophically or schematically to put defenses on the field that are as good as the offenses you put on the field?

LINCOLN RILEY: I think tonight defensively we obviously played really well early, had a lot of momentum.

They seized it there in the second quarter. I thought really the second half really changed. I felt like we were in position a lot defensively tonight. We dropped two or three very easy interceptions. Those are such big momentum plays. They made some of the competitive catches that we didn't make.

At the end of the game, we got way too focused, we panicked a little bit, got way too focused on trying to strip the ball or trying to make big plays as opposed to just getting them on the ground. Our tackling was very poor at the end.

A lot of things we got to correct going into this next one.

Q. Lincoln, to follow up on the defense part of it, two long touchdown runs in the third quarter were both plays where it looked like your guys were more focused on taking the ball away than they were tackling. Is that something you teach?

LINCOLN RILEY: To take the ball away?

Q. To take the ball away first rather than tackle.

LINCOLN RILEY: I don't know that I'm going to justify that question with an answer.

Q. Caleb, can you describe what you felt when you got hurt and then what it was like trying to go through the rest of the game?

CALEB WILLIAMS: You ever have an old rubber band? Yeah, kind of felt like that (smiling).

The rest of the game I felt it, but I had something that I always go by -- not always go by, but something that I have watched and admired, a person that I admire, Kobe. He always said the game is bigger than what you're feeling.

I was in my head encouraging myself that the game is bigger than what I was feeling. I also had a group of guys that was looking at me to go out there and lead 'em to victory. That didn't end upped what happened, but that's what was going on.

Q. Coach, not having Vorhees out there tonight, can

you talk about that absence.

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, I mean, he's one of the best offensive linemen in the country. So, yeah, obviously not having him was a disappointment. He's really battled the last half of the season. Really hasn't been anywhere close to 100%.

But he's just another example of guys on all sides of the ball that have really battled. Have an impact? It probably did. Certainly when you lose one of the your best players up front, you have to shuffle some things around like we d that's part of it.

I feel like the group we put out there was perfectly capable of playing well. Losing Neilon at the end when we had a little bit of momentum certainly hurt, too, because somehow you're shift ago lot of people. Some of our depth showed up a little bit there at the end.

Obviously hope to be able to potentially get him back for the bowl. We'll see how that plays out.

Q. Coach, can you tell us what was so difficult about running the football tonight against Utah?

LINCOLN RILEY: A couple times that we didn't execute early. Some of our run game honestly became not totally limited, but when your quarterback's playing immobile, it's certainly a factor there as well.

People got to play us a little bit differently with him when he can move around. That changed some of the run game. I certainly deserve fault at that. There's times that I could have and should have stayed with it more as far as calling the game.

Q. Lincoln, obviously only two losses this season, but both to the same team. What is it that Utah does in particular that creates a tougher matchup for you guys?

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, they're two very different games. First game at their place, listen, they made plays. We made plays there, too. We had obviously a lot of chances and a lot of things that didn't quite go our way that night.

But they're a good football team, right? They make you earn it. Quarterback's played a lot of ball. They've got some really good skill. Defensively they're very strong. Had a system in place, guys recruited for a long time, you see the continuity, how that's built. You kind of feel that with the way their guys play.

You got to give 'em credit. Part of when you get to kind of

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

these moments in these big games is groups that have been there before. They certainly have. A lot of our team has not.

We had our chances up there. We certainly had our chances tonight. You got to tip your hat to them. They're a good football team. You got to play well to beat 'em. We played well up there, but not quite enough to overcome it. Tonight was obviously way too spotty.

Q. Lincoln, as you look at all the things that happened tonight on the line, to what extent do you feel this game was won and lost at the line of scrimmage?

LINCOLN RILEY: I mean, it's a big factor every single game. But it's not a singular factor. I mean, we all own in it. Again, you can go look at this game from so many different angles, right? Had a lot of momentum early. Even after Caleb got dinged, we were still stopping them there defensively.

We had a chance after we got the fumble to separate there. Think of how that game feels if offensively we purge that one in. Those are the big-momentum plays when you look back, so much can hinge on those.

We drop our for sure interception and they pop a score the very next play on a third-and-long, a play we didn't tackle very well. That's the game right there, right?

It comes down to they made more plays than we did. They played better than we did. The line of scrimmage skill, it's all of the above. The line of scrimmage is certainly very important in games like this. It was important tonight. But so are the other parts, as well.

Q. Coach, congratulations on an incredible season. You inherited a team that went 4-8. Here we are sitting here 11-2, talking about the possibility of championships.

LINCOLN RILEY: I like this guy already (smiling).

Q. Congratulations to you and Caleb. In terms of the game, it felt like two different games. What did you see in terms of kind of a sequence of plays or schematics or things where you felt the tide was turning? What did you see in that shift?

LINCOLN RILEY: I think there were two parts, right? There was the one we just referenced, which was we're up, we get the turnover, we got all the momentum in the world. We don't punch it in. They regain momentum for really the rest of the second half.

Then I thought after we scored, we kind of held serve there defensively for a while when we still weren't playing very good offensively in the beginning of the third. Then we scored and got it to the three-point game. I thought that was kind of the key sequence right there.

We held serve, but weren't able to hold serve there. Offensively we just didn't play very well together much. Even the beginning of the half, we're getting stops, but then we're going three-and-out down there.

We had some chances to surge. We had a chance to really separate in the game early. We didn't do it. Then we obviously had a chance to go back and get the lead or separate there a little bit there in the third quarter. We didn't do it.

I think Utah did a better job playing together. They did a better job when they surged. They made us pay for it. They got the combined stops and scores together and went on better runs than we did.

Q. Lincoln, I know there's a bowl game still left to play, but for you guys, roster stuff is going to be taking the forefront with transfer portal and recruiting. Where do you feel you need to take the next step with this roster so you finish with a win here next year?

LINCOLN RILEY: All parts of it. All parts of it.

So much is going to reset right now. We'll get an idea as these next few weeks go on. Obviously we're going to prep for a really, really good game coming up next. So obviously that's going to be the main thing.

Certainly we'll be taking an eye towards next year's roster. Again, it's not like you have the whole roster at your disposal, pick the spots. There's going to be a lot of changes. That's college football this day and age. We understand that.

The guys we have in the locker room now that are with us next year, we know what our mission is, it's to be in that same locker room and feel a whole hell after lot different than we do right now. We'll bring in a couple of pieces that are going to help us on that journey.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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