

2021 Orange Blossom Classic: Florida A&M vs Jackson State

Friday, September 3, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Florida A&M

Coach Willie Simmons

Keenan Forbes

Markquese Bell

Press Conference



So honored to be here. Keenan and Markquese are two phenomenal football players, amazing young men. Keenan has two degrees from Florida A&M, working on his third. And Markquese Bell is the smartest guy on campus because he's taking one class this fall because that's all he needs to graduate. So he's basically a professional athlete already. He doesn't have the course load that the other 119 guys have.

Just two men I'm blessed and honored to be able to coach. We'll use them every way we can this year because this will be our last year with them. As a head coach you don't get to coach two men like this very often. We're very blessed to have them in our program, two upstanding young men. And looking forward to hearing from you guys today. With that being said we'll open the floor to questions.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Coach Simmons and student-athletes Markquese Bell and Keenan Forbes.

COACH SIMMONS: Good morning. Glad to be here today. I'd like to echo Coach Prime's sentiment to the Orange Blossom Classic committee for your commitment to making this game happen.

We know how important this game is to not only the two institutions, Florida A&M and Jackson State but the City of Miami, Miami Gardens and the entire South Florida. This is a game that FAMU has been a part since the mid '30s. We've had a 40-year hiatus.

Glad to be back in the mecca of high school football, being able to play this great game in Hard Rock Stadium.

We're a football team that's eager to take the field. Obviously everyone knows it's been over 650 days since we last played in live competition. So, these guys are excited. They've had a great training camp, best we've ever had. They're in tip-top shape. They're a close football team. And they're looking forward to showing the world what we're made of here at Florida A&M.

We feel we produce the best and brightest in all areas, not just athletics. And as a football team we take great pride in representing this phenomenal institution every chance we get.

And so we'll take the field with great pride and we'll take the field with excellence, as our motto states, and you'll see a group of young men who represent over 85,000 living alumni at the nation's best institution.

Q. How has the transition been from leaving the MEAC to joining the SWAC?

COACH SIMMONS: Well, we'll find out Sunday. This will be our first game as members of the SWAC. I'm familiar with the conference. I spent six years, three as a coordinator, three as a head coach, before I came to FAMU. So a great conference. A lot of tradition and history.

When you think HBCU football and FAMU rivalries, most of those teams come from the Southwestern Athletic Conference. We're excited to renew those rivalries with teams like Jackson State, Southern University, Grambling State University and so on. We feel it's a move long overdue, and we're finally excited to be part of an amazing conference and looking forward to doing great things.

Q. How important is it, you said you're in the hot bed of high school, the mecca of high school football down here, how important is it for recruiting, for your school and for Jackson State, to be able to hold this Classic here at Hard Rock in the center of all these high school football players, how important is that for you as far as recruiting? And my second question is if you could



just talk about what Coach Prime has brought to HBCUs; he's such a big figure in sports, what it's meant for him to join the conference as a coach?

COACH SIMMONS: As far as high school recruiting, obviously with us being a Florida institution, Miami is an area that we have to recruit. South Florida in general, not just Miami, but South Florida is an area we have to recruit. We have the most coaches on our staff recruiting this area because it has the most talent in the country in one centralized location.

So to be able to play a game in their backyard where they can come to the game and watch us, obviously the game is nationally televised, so the ones who cannot make it will still get an opportunity to see us play. But just to be able to show high school recruits, particularly ones in South Florida, that coming to Florida A&M that will afford you the opportunities to play on prime time television, afford you the opportunities to play professional football, to attend one of the greatest institutions in America.

So that's our message to high school recruits, whether it be South Florida or nationally because we do recruit nationally. But again it's an area that we know we have to tap into. Keenan Forbes is from right here, right here in Miami. And so we have over 35 guys on our football team from this area. And so we know how important it is to building a Florida football team. But everyone else does too. Because when you come to Miami to recruit you'll see schools from all over America down here recruiting because of the amount of talent we have here. But it's an area we definitely live in.

And as far as what Coach Prime has brought to HBCUs, really just an overall -- I don't want to call it awareness -- I think people have known for a long time that HBCUs exist and produce the best and the brightest. We feel like this country was built off of HBCUs. Our backbone. The fiber of our country is all ingrained throughout HBCU culture. So for us, he's allowed -- he's able because of his larger-than-life personality and his influence to say some things that maybe traditionally coaches have been a little bit -- not say afraid -- but hesitant to say. To call out the big networks, the powers that be, to say, hey, look, our product deserves to be televised just like everyone else's.

We deserve the same opportunities to showcase our fine young men just like everyone else. I don't think that Coach Prime is the reason that we've had 19 of 32 NFL teams at our practices this training camp. I think Markquese Bell and Keenan Forbes is the reason for that. Those guys have put in the work and have made themselves NFL prospects. Same as Xavier Smith and Chris Faddoul and Antwan Collier and the other guys that we have that NFL

scouts are asking about.

I don't think he's made HBCU football better I think he's brought awareness to the product we put on the field and made people take a second look. Thankful to him for that, but there have been great football coaches in the HBCUs for a very long time, Jake Gaither being one of those individuals.

Q. How has your experience been at FAMU and what would you like to say to considering high school athletes that are considering attending an HBCU?

KEENAN FORBES: This is a great place to be. I've been to other places before getting to FAMU. But I can say it's truly an honor. Great people.

MARKQUESE BELL: Just like Keenan said, we've both been to multiple universities. And to me I feel like this is the best fit for me. It's a family atmosphere, like you walk on campus, you just feel like you're home. Any athlete that wants that feeling should come to FAMU.

Q. Keenan, being from South Florida, what is it going to be like do you think on Sunday to be able to play here at Hard Rock Stadium and for you and all the 34 players that are from down here?

KEENAN FORBES: It's a blessing, dream come true. I live, like, right down the road. See the stadium from my house. So to be playing here, all my family coming, it's a real honor.

Q. How many family -- how did you divvy up the tickets?

KEENAN FORBES: Some of the teammates gave me some tickets. But it's a lot of family. So they want to see me play so they're going to pay.

Q. How many people do you think will be here for you?

KEENAN FORBES: Probably 20, 25.

Q. Coach, how do you prepare for Shedeur Sanders? He's a high school kid so you don't have much tape, I guess you have from high school. But what do you expect from him as a quarterback?

COACH SIMMONS: Obviously we've had an opportunity to watch his high school tape. He's a quality football player. He's smart. He's accurate. He's wise beyond his years. And so being that he comes from that type of pedigree, I don't think the stage will be too big for him.



He's watched his dad play in NFL stadiums his entire life. His dad just said, he's had a chef. I make Dr. Robinson and them pay me pretty good. I don't have a chef. For a young man that's 18 years old, to only know a chef. He knows what big stage is.

But for us it's about preparing for Jackson State. And as a coaching staff, it's our job to let the game come to us, just like we want these young men to let the game come to them. So there will be elements of unknown. It's the first game of the season.

So whether we played last season or yesterday, you know, every time you get to the first game you always have to understand there's an element of surprise that's there. So for us it's about taking those challenges head on. Not getting frustrated if they show us something that we haven't seen that we haven't prepared for.

So there is no game film, collegiate game film to scout Shedeur Sanders on. It's just high school film which obviously doesn't give us a good indication of how he will react to the speed of the college game.

And so but these young men are excited about getting on the field. And I think at the end of the day I think he should be more worried about our dark cloud defense than we should be about his first college game.

Q. The fact that they played a spring season and you didn't, is that any kind of advantage? And the fact that you haven't played in over 600 days, do you worry about rust and/or people being just so overexcited to be out there and playing for the first time in so long that they'll be distracted or something like that?

COACH SIMMONS: Well, I think it's important to understand that when we say we haven't played in 650 days, we've played football. We played football every day because we practice. And we try to simulate game situations every time we take the field. We have not played in front of a live crowd in over 650 days.

But we were fortunate enough to have some spring scrimmages. We had our full allotment of spring practices. We had 25 -- by the time we hit the field on Sunday we've had 25 great practices. And these guys even practiced last fall when we decided to forego the season.

And so they've been on the football field. They've been going against each other. And to me that's almost as good, because I feel like we have the most talented offense and defense in the conference. And so for us to go good on good every single day has prepared us for the speed of the game, has prepared us for multiple things on

both sides. And so we're just excited to be able to hit another color at this point. That's what we're looking forward to.

We played football this entire time. We just haven't hit somebody that doesn't wear orange and green. We're starving to bang on somebody else because they've been banging up on each other about a year and a half.

Q. With the huge alumni base from South Florida being Rattlers, do you feel any pressure putting on a great performance on Sunday?

COACH SIMMONS: Have you ever spoken to a head coach at FAMU? As soon as you take this job, I mean, it comes. I don't care where you're playing. These people expect to win. We're the greatest HBCU in America. So at the end of the day, like FAMU head coaches are expected to win.

So, no, there's no pressure. At the end of the day no one expects more out of Willie Simmons than Willie Simmons does. Our players know that our standard is excellence. That's what we talk about.

For us, we say the only way to achieve excellence is to chase perfection. So every single day of my life of these players lives, as a football team we're chasing perfection. Until we attain it, we're working.

So I don't have time to think about the, quote/unquote, pressures that come along with doing a job. I think about the pressure I put on myself to be my very best self every day for these young men. How do I come every day and be the leader they need me to be.

How do I get them motivated to be the very best men that they can be because that's really what it's all about. Yes, we want to win a football game, and we plan to win a football game. But to see a guy like Keenan Forbes who has graduated twice already, who will have a third degree by the time he leaves FAMU, who will have an NFL career. But even when that's over will have a life outside of that.

To see Markquese Bell be able to provide for his grandmother, with his professional career and with a degree in hand from an institution that opens doors around the world, that's why I come to work every single day. Not just to win football games.

If I'm just judged on wins by the time I leave this place, whenever Dr. Robinson gets tired of looking at me, I would have failed these guys if all they talk about are the wins and losses.

Q. Would you like to expound on the Nike deal with LeBron James and the university, too? How has that impacted you all so far since this started?

COACH SIMMONS: We have a lot of sayings at FAMU. One is that we brag different, which we do. But we also say we're the school of firsts. And that's what -- if you look throughout the history, when it comes to the first people that have done things, it's filled with Florida A&M Rattlers. This is the latest one. We're the first and at this time the only school to have an exclusive Nike apparel deal with LeBron James. For us it's about continuing our brand.

We're trendsetters at FAMU. That's what we do. We set trends. So LeBron James' team was smart enough, he's a smart individual, he was smart enough to attach his name to a brand that will grow both of us together. And so we're excited about it.

Our basketball team has benefited greatly by it. Went down to Puerto Rico with brand new LeBron James shoes and came back undefeated. I don't know if it's because Coach McCullum is such an amazing coach, or they had some great shoes on that the best basketball player in the world manufactured.

But it's just something that brings more attention and notoriety to a university that already has a ton of it. So we're about brand building. We want to grow this Rattler brand. When people see that Rattler head, it means something.

So I tell people all the time, I've coached a lot of places and been around a lot of football. You see a lot of programs that have to put their names on their logos. We don't. When they see that Rattler head, immediately they know what it means. Whether you're in Florida, whether you're in New York, whether you're across seas, like my wife and I were two years ago, when I had a FAMU shirt on with nothing but a Rattler head and people were coming up left and right talking about FAMU -- in Italy of all places.

And so we know how strong this brand is. And I think LeBron James and people beyond that are starting to understand and recognize that as well.

Q. When you were young, did you ever come down to Miami from Quincy to attend Orange Blossom Classic?

COACH SIMMONS: No, I never came to Miami, the Orange Blossom Classic. I know I might look a little bit older, but I'm only 40 so the game stopped around the year I was born. So know I never got a chance to come to the Orange Blossom Classic as a young man.

But I didn't spend much time in South Florida during my youth. We're about seven and a half, eight hours away from Miami up there in what they call South Georgia, North Florida.

Down here they don't consider where we are Florida. Sometimes we have to remind them that we do vote for the governor and those types of things. And the capital actually is in Tallahassee. I think sometimes people forget that. Only time people from Miami come to Tallahassee is during session. That's the only time they come up to the country. It's a great game that I've known about my entire life.

Q. I've heard rumors, news lines about your being recruited by other schools. Yes, I've heard --

COACH SIMMONS: You said they were rumors.

Q. And those things -- putting a real coach against Deion Sanders. He has no college coaching experience and saying that you, with the experience, what do you consider as an advantage for that scenario?

COACH SIMMONS: Well, that's a tough question to answer. He's a coach. He coached six games this spring. He's understood what being on the college sideline is like. He played the game forever. The man's a hall of famer.

Q. We're talking big college.

COACH SIMMONS: Football is football. So whether it's Optimists down here in Miami. You asked about it down here in Miami, Pop Warner football ain't real. They'll tell you.

Q. I believe pee wee football in Tallahassee --

COACH SIMMONS: Football is football. At the end of the day, there's 11 guys on the field. The dimensions are 100 by 53 and a third. So, if you know football, you know football.

Head coaching is about more than just calling plays. I call plays as a head coach; he doesn't. Most coaches across college football don't call their plays. That's why they have offensive and defensive coordinators. So, being a head coach is about being a manager. If you have managerial skills you can be a head football coach.

There's a ton of great coaches who never played the game or didn't play it at a hall of fame level. There are a ton of hall of famers who have not had great coaching careers. So, it doesn't necessarily -- being a football player or being

a great player is not a prerequisite to being a coach. Being a great leader, being a great manager, being a great person -- being a person who can adjust to adversity is what makes a head coach.

What I know about Coach Prime -- we're not best friends but we've had a relationship for the past five or six years -- he has those things. I can't go into the game saying with my 17 years of coaching experience that gives me an advantage against him, because he's been doing what this job entails for a very long time.

Q. Keenan, being a Miami person, coming back as, coming back to sort of a bowl game atmosphere, what's it like for you being in your hometown but as a visitor now, staying at a hotel and being driven around in these fancy buses? And what's it like, how does Miami seem differently when you're here for the Orange Blossom Classic as when you're just here normally visiting your family?

KEENAN FORBES: It's a little different. But it's still home. So, like, it's kind of cool telling people we're about to get off on Exit 2X by the stadium, telling them where I live, stuff like this. It's been a great way to go out my last year.

Q. Been able to see your family?

KEENAN FORBES: Yes.

COACH SIMMONS: I didn't know when that was, we hadn't sanctioned that. (Laughter.)

When have you had time to see family? What have you been doing? I'm going to have a conversation when this is over. (Laughter).

We need some tighter security at the hotel, by the way. (Laughter).

Q. This moment has finally arrived after 600-plus days. I want to know some of the primary things that you've learned from this scene up during the pandemic or what they have taught you?

COACH SIMMONS: That they're a resilient group of young men. I'm so blessed and honored to be the head coach at Florida A&M. I pinch myself every morning -- one, waking up knowing that I sat in the same office as Billy Joe; that my name is attached to men like Jake Gaither, Rudy Hubbard, William Bell, Ken Riley. It's a humbling experience for me.

But the last really year and a half has taught me so much about the fiber of these young men. They could have

given up at any moment. VP Gosha and I were talking yesterday about the two moments we had, the tough moments we had to tell these guys, to break it to these guys that we weren't going to be playing football. Those were probably the two toughest days I've had on this job.

So at that moment they could have left. They could have transferred. They could have given in, given up and done whatever. Because we love to say that they come to college to get a degree. And they do. But they're student-athletes. So part of the reason they come to FAMU is to get a great education. The other part is to play football. And for the last year and a half, we have not been afforded the opportunity to do the other things we love.

And so for them to stick it out, to come to practice every day with just a great mindset, great attitudes, I can't remember many times where I've had to stop practice to talk to them about effort or intensity. I mean, they love competing.

So these young men are going to be successful. We plan to be very successful on the football field this year, but I have no doubt in my mind that you're going to look up in five, ten, 15, 20 years and the young men that take the field this Sunday will be the future mayors and governors and police officers and attorneys and school teachers and politicians -- just influential people and leaders throughout this state and this country because of what they've shown us over this last year and a half.

So, again, phenomenal group of young men. And there's not another group in the country that I would rather run out of that tunnel with this Sunday.

Q. Markquese, you came into FAMU after being a highly touted high school athlete, did well in college and came to FAMU and immediately showed why you were so highly touted, winning All-American. This year before the season even starts you're pretty much a consensus All-American. How do you stay focused, put those things in the back and just think about hitting somebody besides Bishop Bonnett?

MARKQUESE BELL: About putting my brothers first. Like, I feel like this season is about us, not me. And I want to go out there and win the SWAC Championship for all of us.

So all the preseason accolades, I don't really get too much into it because it don't really matter to me. Like, if I get it I get it. If I don't, I don't. But if we win that SWAC Championship we all can celebrate that, we all can hold onto that together.

COACH SIMMONS: And if he hits Bishop one more time in practice we gonna -- hurt my starter. God, dog.

I want to give a shoutout to our president Dr. Larry Robinson being in attendance today and his lovely wife, Ms. Sharon. Great supporters. Just phenomenal leadership at the university. And Vice President and Athletics Director Kortne Gosha, SWA and tight-pocketed money manager Karai Lockley here.

But just, again, they make our job easier to come to work every day knowing that we're in this good fight together. So just want to give a huge shoutout to them. Keith Miles in the back, university communications, shoutout to him. Ms. (Indiscernible), she's still part of the family. Wanted to give all the Rattlers -- Josh Padilla, our SID. Great team at FAMU.

Q. (Inaudible).

COACH SIMMONS: I've got one that's better. But Chris Faddoul --

Q. (Inaudible)?

COACH SIMMONS: (Indiscernible) is an invaluable asset to our program, even though he's gone on to bigger and better things, he's still very supportive. And our guys know who he is. And, of course, Chris is purposefully trying to make sure that his records stay intact. Because Vaughn will let him know quickly if he's not doing his job as a punter.

Q. How is the impact of having NFL teams at your training camps impacted the players? I know no players got drafted from HBCUs last year in the NFL but having a large amount of teams visit your team during training camp and hopefully throughout the season, what kind of impact do you think that will have on the players?

COACH SIMMONS: I think it has a huge impact. I think back to my high school days as a highly touted student-athlete. Whenever we would come to practice and see major colleges on the sideline, it didn't make you practice harder, but it reinforced that hard work that I'm putting in is being noticed. Every day, when Keenan and Markquese and all those guys come to practice and they look over and they see me talking to a scout from the Dolphins or Jaguars or Bucks or Saints or any other teams that have been on our campus, it reinforces the message that you can achieve all your goals from right here at FAMU.

Everything you set out to do when you come to college you

can achieve them at FAMU. You want to be an All-American, there's living proof with these two guys. You want to go to the NFL, these two guys will show you, along with the other guys on our team that are on the radar, that that's possible.

Want to get a degree from the greatest institution in America, living proof, will be living proof in about four months. Want to play on national television, we'll do that on Sunday. Everything you aspire to do as a collegiate athlete you can accomplish all of that and more at FAMU.

You want an ESPN crew following you around every single day for five months, where you can't even go to the restroom in peace, it will happen here at FAMU.

Just this place, again, like I said, is transcendent. There's no other institution in America that can boast what we have here at FAMU, from academic, athletic and arts reputation. You find one, you let me know.

But this place is special. I've known it since birth, being that I'm a product of Rattlers. Married to a Rattler. My son's a graduate now, not right here, but the law school. This place has defined me and made me who I am. That's why I can talk so boldly about it because I've seen firsthand what a Florida A&M education can do for you.

But, again, these guys they understand how blessed they are. That's why when you walk in that locker room and that Rattler head is right in the middle, you better not touch it. There's a severe penalty for touching that Rattler because we know how important that is.

After we win this game Sunday, our team will go to the best band in the land, the Marching 100, and we will sing the school alma mater with pride because we know how important that is to what FAMU is all about. This place means everything to us as a people, and we want to make sure that the world knows that.

Q. Markquese and Keenan, your experience at the locker rooms, the renovations that were done to the stadium, how has that been? As well as let's talk about the name, image and likeness deal, do you have any deals right now?

MARKQUESE BELL: I'm not really getting too much into the name, image and likeness. I'd rather focus on the season.

For the locker room, the locker room came a long way from when I first got here to now. It's a lot of improvements. So I thank the guys that put that work in and went out and raised the money for us to get all the new stuff that we're



getting. It really means a lot to us.

KEENAN FORBES: Pretty much the same. I'm not really into that image and likeness. Focusing on the season. Hopefully we get into Atlanta and bring one back to Tallahassee.

The locker room came a long way. FAMU is changing for the better.

Q. Congratulations on your season previously. You're very proud of that. And it sounds like you're starting to bleed orange and green?

COACH SIMMONS: I was born orange and green. Have been bleeding orange and green since I was born at Tallahassee Memorial. If I was born a few years earlier, I probably would have been born at (indiscernible). My mom was the first of six in her family to graduate from FAMU. So I spent -- I was on the set long before I was old enough to be on the set.

And, so, no, this place has made me who I am. And, again, getting the call to come back as head coach is one of my proudest moments and happiest moments as an adult. So, no, I'm not starting to bleed orange and green. It's been flowing through my veins a very long time.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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