

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

Sunday, September 5, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Florida A&M

Coach Willie Simmons

Markquese Bell

Xavier Smith

Press Conference

Jackson State - 7, Florida A&M - 6

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Coach Willie Simmons and student-athletes Markquese Bell and Xavier Smith.

COACH SIMMONS: It's an honor to be here. Again, I want to thank the Orange Blossom Classic committee for revitalizing this game. Great week of events. I thought they did a phenomenal job of giving these young men an opportunity to play on the national stage.

Obviously we didn't have the outcome we wanted. And that's on me as the head football coach. I accept full responsibility. I thought these guys played their hearts out. They played with grit. They played with passion. A lot of energy. And, again, I can't say enough about the heart of these young men to not have played football in almost 700 days, but to come out here and give the effort that they gave, it's admirable.

Again, we'll get better. Obviously we'll look at the film and make the corrections, but this is a championship team. I truly believe that. Again, you win some, lose some in life. But I think you learn a lot more in defeat than you do in victory a lot of times.

We'll learn from this one. And, again, as a head coach, it's my job to get these guys ready to play. We got them ready to play from an emotional and an effort standpoint, but we must do a better job as coaches to fine tune and correct the little things. And, again, that starts with me and trickles down to the coaching staff. But we'll do that.



The next time you see this football team play, you'll see a much more well-oiled machine than you saw today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. Coach and Markquese, what do you think was lacking? I know third downs were a problem and just not sort of -- do you think it was just all the time off that you guys were a little bit rusty, or what do you think went wrong in a little more detail?

COACH SIMMONS: Well, first of all, defensively I thought we played a phenomenal game. To hold that team to nine points, whatever it was, it shows the caliber that we have. And I've said it since the very beginning, I think we're going to have a very dominant defense this year. They showed that today.

Offensively, again, they challenged us. Obviously when you lose a guy of Ryan Stanley's caliber, a quarterback who only had one start under his belt, I think they challenged us and forced him to make throws. And we missed some throws that he's made. He's more than capable of making those throws. For whatever reason he didn't make them today.

Then we made a switch there in the fourth quarter to try to get a little bit of a spark. At that point just had too many self-inflicting wounds with penalties and false starts and things of that nature.

I thought Junior came in under the conditions and performed well. Obviously he'll learn a lot from tonight. The sense of urgency late in the game when it's two-minute (indiscernible) -- he's 18 years old; the last time he played in a football game it was high school. He's going to be a great player for us. He's going to learn a lot from this game.

And as a coaching staff we have decisions to make as to who best leads this program. They're both champions, both great guys. They'll get better. Coach Black will get those guys coached up. But a lot of the third down was just being a little off. I don't think the time off had anything

to do with it. Maybe just fundamentally we weren't as sound as we normally are.

MARKQUESE BELL: No comment.

Q. You made the change at quarterback with Junior at the end of the third. What was the decision behind that and do you stand by the change of quarterbacks?

COACH SIMMONS: Yes. Throughout the course of the game we just felt Resean never got in a rhythm. Like I said, throughout training camp, even in the past, he's made really good decisions. He's made really good throws with the ball. For whatever reason he was a little off. Missed some throws that he normally makes.

Maybe pressing. And that's something we've talked about a lot, not letting the stage dictate how you perform; just do the things you've done every day in practice.

Just didn't really seem as sharp as he needed to be going into the fourth quarter. We felt we needed a spark. I thought Junior came in, moved the ball, did some really good things. But when you fumble the ball on fourth-and-inches, when the first down is wide open, when you drop passes on third down that we never do, when you -- we did a lot of things that are uncharacteristic of us as a football team.

Again, I've got to look inward. Why are we doing those things? For me it's about figuring out how to get these guys to settle down and play fundamental football. We'll get back to the drawing board. We'll watch the film, make the corrections, but we'll evaluate it and see moving forward who we feel gives us the best chance to win and it may be one guy, it may be by committee.

Q. There were 21 total turnovers by both teams -- 11 for you all --

COACH SIMMONS: Total who?

Q. Total penalties. My apologies, total penalties. What are some things you look forward to getting prepared for Valley State next week?

COACH SIMMONS: Little things, details. When we look at penalties, I tell the team all the time -- and I haven't seen -- I don't have a stat sheet in front of me what the penalties were. We've got some pass-interference calls I'll take that, guys are playing football. I thought at times they were allowed to be a lot more aggressive at corner against our receivers than we were against them.

We got a couple of pass-interference calls. I thought our

guys were competing and in good position. I'll take that.

I don't know if we had a holding or whatever, but it's the offsides, it's the false starts. We came out of a timeout on a fourth down and jumped offsides. We can't do that. That's not on those kids; that's on us. As a coaching staff, how in the hell do we let a kid jump offsides when we just came from the sidelines on fourth down. The first things we should be saying as coaches is watch the football.

That's me because I depended on the coaching staff to do it and they didn't do it. It's on me to get down there in the huddle and make sure they watch the ball. Everything we did wrong to beat ourselves tonight, that's all on me. As the coaching staff, we didn't pay enough attention to detail to get these guys prepared to do the little things right.

We don't jump offsides on fourth down or fumble the ball on fourth-and-inches, we don't get a field goal block when all you have to do is punch the widest guy, but we decided to do something different -- guys are just doing things that are uncharacteristic. And that goes back to fundamentals. As a coach, I gotta figure out why we got on this stage and did those things. And hopefully you won't see those types of mishaps again.

Q. Could you all three talk about what did it feel like to be finally playing in person in front of fans? Just what was it like for you, the atmosphere? And then also your first impressions of Shedeur Sanders in his college debut.

XAVIER SMITH: How did it feel to play in this game?

Q. With fans again, with so much time off, how did it feel with the fans and the band?

XAVIER SMITH: It was great. It was great. It took us a little while to get going. But we'll be ready.

MARKQUESE BELL: It felt good.

COACH SIMMONS: After a year lay-off, obviously we talked to the guys about not having the pregame jitters, not being nervous. But you can never fully know what it would feel like for a guy to play football for the first time again. Even as coaches.

Our game-day routine, our pregame, our meetings, all those things we take for granted. We're creatures of habit. When you're not able to do those habits for a year, sometimes it's hard to get it back. So at the end of the day there are no excuses. We've practiced. We've been on the field.

But I think now that we've got this game under our belt, now we'll get back to playing really good football like we have the past two years.

Q. (Question off microphone)?

COACH SIMMONS: The game atmosphere was great. The crowd was into it and active. I caught the last few minutes of the halftime, the Marching 100 did what they always do and showed out. It's good to see. But football is back. We're excited about football being back.

I know Rattler Nation is excited. Didn't have the outcome we all wanted and anticipated. But this is a program, this is a university that's -- we're winners. We've been knocked down before. People have tried to knock us down for over 130 years but we've shown our resilience. And as a football team we'll do the same thing.

Q. You talked a lot today about penalties and players not getting into rhythm, whatever the case may be, but what are some of the positives you take out of this game going into next week's game against Valley?

COACH SIMMONS: I thought the defense played phenomenally. The one penalty is probably the one downside. I thought those guys competed. Did a really good job. You hold a team to nine points, you expect to win especially what we've done offensively throughout the years we've been here and throughout my coaching career.

You tell me a week ago or yesterday that we would hold Jackson to nine points, I would say we won by three or four scores.

But offensively we were never in sync. Penalties have a lot to do with that. Our offense is designed on tempo. Can't play with tempo when you're false starting or dropping passes or when the ball hits the ground and we get penalties, we never establish our tempo.

We'll get back to the drawing board figure out what we did wrong. And, again, offensively I think we'll be much better than what we were. But I thought defense played extremely well. I thought Jose kicked the ball extremely well in his first game with us. Made a long field goal, kicked the ball in the end zone on kickoffs.

I thought Faddoul punted the ball phenomenally. Special teams-wise, other than the one punt return we gave up where we had three guys standing right there in front of the returner and didn't tackle him, other than that I thought we did a really good job on special teams.

Special teams, defense, I thought we won it. Offensively we never really got in a rhythm to impact the game the way we wanted to.

Q. You've been in Texas, and there's a lot of talk and people are really excited about FAMU coming to SWAC. And first game, folks said welcome to SWAC, welcomed you back. What were your thoughts about being back in SWAC and as far as FAMU being there? And what's your message to the SWAC teams?

COACH SIMMONS: Again, I spent six years in this conference. I cut my teeth as a head coach in the SWAC. Phenomenal conference. That's why we're so excited about joining the conference. We know the caliber of football and the pageantry and the branding opportunities that the SWAC provides.

And so we made the right decision. I stand 100 percent behind the decision from my vice president and the director of athletics; our president, Larry Robison, and everyone who had a hand in making this move.

And so we had a nice run in the MEAC, but that's over and now we're in the SWAC. And it's always tough when you start the year with a conference game. You don't get a chance to work through the kinks and make some mistakes and still have a chance to get out of there and it doesn't affect your overall conference standings. But when you open the gate with a conference opponent, somebody is going to end the game 1-0 in conference; somebody is going to end the game 0-1 in conference.

We didn't do enough to get it done, to finish 1-0. But there's a lot of football left to be played. And we just need to take care of our business now and I think we'll be fine.

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