

# Aflac Kickoff: Syracuse vs Tennessee

Saturday, August 30, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

**Syracuse Orange**

**Steve Angeli**

**Derek McDonald**

Postgame Press Conference



and getting to work tomorrow.

**Q. Steve, was this the identity you envisioned for the offense when you talked about playing tough, physical football?**

STEVE ANGELI: Yeah, I have a lot of confidence in my guys up front. They played their absolute butts off today. Running backs, receivers, blocking, O-line, they played their butts off today, so I'm proud of them.

**Q. Derek, in terms of the tackling, how much is it just facing bigger, stronger guys, and how much of it is stuff that you guys feel like you can control?**

DEREK McDONALD: I mean, that's part of it, but honestly, tackling we're going to miss tackles. That's just the nature of the game. They have people that got recruited to play ball there, too, who make people miss tackles. But it's more about the effort to the ball. If you miss a tackle, someone else should be right there ready to clean it up, and just missing tackles with leverage is something we talk about a lot, so making sure you send it back to your help.

**Q. Sort of missing a tackle on the right side of the body instead of the other side?**

DEREK McDONALD: Yeah.

**Q. Steve, Fran talked a bit about the looks they gave and how they disguised things on defense. Was there anything that surprised you in terms of how they attacked your O-line?**

STEVE ANGELI: I think they're well-coached defense. They play extremely hard. Do a great job in coverage. Hats off to them. They're a great football team.

**Q. He put it on himself saying those five sacks were on him. Was it the front four of Tennessee that was causing problems, or how did you see it? Once things got rolling, things seemed to get rolling for you guys.**

STEVE ANGELI: Sacks are on us as an offense, but first

Tennessee 45, Syracuse 26

**Q. Steve, Coach said what played a big part in you winning the starting quarterback job was your leadership. In a game like this with so much adversity, what was your message to the guys, and how did they receive that?**

STEVE ANGELI: The biggest thing is keep fighting. The culture we have here at Syracuse, we've gone through a lot of adversity as individuals. Collectively when we come together, I believe we have the strongest culture in the country. When things get tough, we just get closer and come together.

**Q. Derek, looking back at this game, knowing that tackling was obviously an issue, what do you take away from kind of that first knee-jerk reaction knowing that you're going to be back at home and you've got another one coming up after playing a team like Tennessee?**

DEREK McDONALD: I think it's just a big opportunity for us. Obviously we can't dote on this for too long, but we have to learn from it and we've got to watch the film and see what we need to fix. We didn't tackle well enough today. There were a couple plays we left out there because we missed tackles and we didn't swarm to the ball, so we're going to fix that this week and be ready to go next week for UConn.

**Q. Steve, obviously not the outcome you were hoping for today, but what were your key takeaways from the game and what you're looking forward to improving on for the rest of the season?**

STEVE ANGELI: Yeah, I believe we have a great football team, a great culture. Just looking forward to next week



and foremost they're on me as the quarterback. I've got to do a better job getting the ball out of my hands, making sure I avoid those negative plays.

**Q. Steve, it seemed like you had a connection with Justus. He had some big catches, forced some pass interferences. What did you see from him in camp that allowed you to go into this game knowing you could target him, and what did you see from him today that allowed him to have success?**

STEVE ANGELI: He's a big receiver, strong hands, does a great job winning his one-on-ones. I think all the work we put in throughout camp gave me a lot of confidence in him today.

**Q. In the no-huddle you guys really seemed to get going. What was it about their defense that allowed you guys to capitalize in the no-huddle situations?**

STEVE ANGELI: Yeah, all throughout camp we practiced no-huddle up tempo, being able to change tempo, go a little fast, a little slow, so when those opportunities arose I feel like we did a good job handling the tempo, getting everyone set and snapping the football.

**Q. Steve, kind of a two-part question here. The first quarter you guys spot them a 17-0 lead. From an offensive perspective you had that key penalty on the first drive that stalled it and then the sack fumble that led to the touchdown. Was it nerves, lack of execution? Can you speak to what happened in that first quarter? Then the second part of that question, what went right after that that you essentially played them even the rest of the way?**

STEVE ANGELI: Yeah, I think we've got to come out and win the first quarter. We can't be digging ourselves in a hole. Me personally, I can't fumble the football. I've got to take care of the football and do a better job of that.

Kind of turning the page on the first quarter, I felt like we responded well and continued to play hard, and I'm proud of those guys and everyone that's a part of our football team. I just think we've got to get back to work tomorrow.

**Q. Steve, you've had less of a chance to get on the same page as a lot of your receivers than most of the starting quarterbacks in the country at this point. Did you feel like the timing was there today with your receivers, or did you feel like at times it might have been a little bit off?**

STEVE ANGELI: I think we have an unbelievable receiving room, an unbelievable coach. I think we're going

to continue to work, and we have a very good offense in my opinion.

**Q. Derek, in terms of what Joey Aguilar presented, what were some of the challenges that you faced throughout this game in terms of trying to defend the pass today?**

DEREK McDONALD: Yeah, I think we focused a lot this week on being able to get home and get lined up. Obviously they wanted to go tempo. I thought we did a decent job of getting home and getting lined up. It was just giving up some explosive plays that hurt us. We were able to get some stops on 1st and 2nd down, and we kept giving it up on 3rd down or we'd get a stop on 1st down and they'd hit a big play on 2nd down. Being consistent I think is the biggest thing we have to work on moving forward.

**Q. How hard is the tempo to deal with in terms of when they connected it seemed like they were getting right to the line?**

DEREK McDONALD: I wouldn't say it's extremely hard. I think the way we practice helps us to handle that, the way we trained the whole summer. We're in good shape, in good condition. Honestly, the tempo of the game felt slower than most of our practices.

**Q. Steve, in the first half on that big 4th down conversion where you hit Johntay, what were you seeing on that play and what allowed you to hit Johntay downfield there?**

STEVE ANGELI: We practice a lot of those plays. Got a lot of great looks from the scout team over the week and was just able to make a play happen.

**Q. I know it might not be one of your favorite plays, but when did you learn how to pooch punt?**

STEVE ANGELI: I've been doing that since I was in early high school.

**Q. Steve, to have a head coach that believes in you on 4th and 10, speak to that, Fran wanting to get something going, wanting to have something there in the first half, just what it means to you to have a coach that really has already thought with you being in your first game here at Syracuse that you can handle something like that.**

STEVE ANGELI: Yeah, I mean, for the rest of my life I'll always be thankful to Coach Fran for allowing me to have an opportunity to come play quarterback at Syracuse. Just

being able to put in the work throughout camp, I'm glad that I give him the confidence in me and our offense to be able to go and do that, and Coach Nixon just making a good call and just allowing us to go execute.

**Q. You've been a veteran of this program; talk about now this first loss of the season, regrouping. We hear the old coach adage about team improvement from the first week to the second week. Talk about you as a leader on defense, where does the team go, and what happens this week as you rehuddle back for the home opener?**

DEREK McDONALD: Yeah, I don't think it's too different than any other week. We're going to have to look at the film and fix the mistakes that we made, but we know we have another opportunity going into this week 2, and it's a huge opportunity for us to kind of get headed on the right track and get this thing rolling. We know what we can do, and I think we showed signs of that today, but obviously there were too many mistakes that we're going to have to clean up moving forward.

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