

Florida State University Football Media Conference

Monday, November 27, 2023

Tallahassee, Florida, USA

Coach Mike Norvell

Press Conference



COACH NORVELL: Coming off a game Saturday night, just going back and watching it, seeing the way that our guys played, the way they responded, so very proud of our football team.

And there was adversity. Definitely not the start we wanted. Just really in all phases had some mistakes there early.

Defensively, I think allowed five of the first six third-down conversions. They were able to have two extended drives, really kept one possession of the ball. We had one possession in the first half, went three and out. And you never want to do that. We struggled to really get any rhythm or anything going there early.

But being on the road in hostile, adverse situations that showed up, our team just did a remarkable job of being in control of the things they could control, of going out there and playing disciplined, being able to respond to way they're trained to respond. Their heart and determination, just the whole team as a group did the things that were necessary.

The two-minute drive offensively to go down and score in the first half was huge. Tate made a couple of great throws on that drive, had a couple of big plays that we definitely needed.

And then to be able to come back there in the first drive of the second half and had a couple of third-down conversions, big run. It was everything that we needed.

And you have those rivalry games. You know there's going to be the momentum swings. You know there's going to be the ups and downs. And our guys, they were unbelievably confident throughout, and even through some of the challenges that we faced. They were able to rise up. And just really proud of them.

I thought a couple guys I mentioned yesterday to the team, I thought Akeem Dent played his best football game since he's been at Florida State. He was absolutely remarkable.

And some of the tackles he made in the open field against really talented backs was impressive.

I thought that he played with confidence. Whether we were blitzing him, whether he's in coverage, whether he had to make those face plays, he was on it. And really proud of that young man. He's continued to get better.

We have big expectations for him, and you just see him continue to grow even in his last year of eligibility. It's impressive to see. And we need to continue that as we go into it this week, but I wanted to make mention of him.

I thought Ja'Khi Douglas' play on fourth down was a huge play in the game. Tate did a great job getting the ball out. Ja'Khi only had the one catch but what a big one. That's a guy that's really made a wonderful impact for us.

He had a huge game at Pitt. Made a couple of big plays throughout the course of the year. And that was a big play in a big moment to continue to drive to let us go down and put the game-leading field goal there at the end.

So just proud of our guys, proud of the resiliency they showed. It was definitely a team win. Defensively it was awesome in the second half. And it was what we needed.

And to finish up the regular season undefeated was big for us, big for our program, puts us in position this week as we get a chance to go compete for an ACC Championship.

It's going to be one heck of a matchup. Got all the respect in the world for Louisville and who they are. You see the playmakers that they have. You see the coaching staff and the schemes. This is a very complete football team -- offense, defense, special teams.

They're going to challenge. They've got explosive players. It's going to be a heck of a game. And we're excited for the opportunity. Got a lot of belief in our team and what we can do.

Like I told our guys yesterday, I'm extremely excited because we're 12 games into the season, and I see areas for improvement. I see a lot of areas where we get to



continue to grow and get better. And I see a football team that's hungry for that.

That started last night. Went out, had a very spirited practice. I thought our guys did a great job in the weight room. They went out on the practice field, really locked in the meeting rooms to find the corrections, make the corrections and work to apply to get better throughout the course of this week, and we got off to a great start on Sunday.

I can't wait to get out on the practice field. You'll hear tomorrow and continue to take the strides that are necessary to go be better than what we've been.

It was a big win. And obviously anytime you can be state champs and to do that for back-to-back years it's something that's more important to our program and definitely one that will be talked about and remembered.

Q. Tate, how did he come out of the game physically feeling? And secondly how much easier is it for a guy to make a second start after making a first start in terms of all the other stuff is dismissed because you're doing it again?

COACH NORVELL: I think for that to be your first start of the year and first start in a couple of years for Tate, there was a lot that goes to it. And playing in that game, that rivalry, in that environment, it's a lot. And I thought he did a good job.

There's some things operationally that we've got to continue to be better. We had a couple of delay-of-game penalties. And I think anytime you're around Tate, you see he is a hard person to get rattled. He's going to be pretty steady in all things that he does. I think he showed that in the course of the game.

But just the urgency and communication, he sees everything right. There were a couple times we let the clock get down on us and we were rushed in a couple of moments. Those are things that I think will be an area that will be improved upon this week, just because of the comfort of repetition.

And there was a lot. It was a challenge to communicate. We've got to do a good job around him making sure that 10 other guys are operating as fast as we can as well. But that was one thing that we pulled out the game that we know that we have to be better at.

His demeanor and confidence he had throughout the course of the game is something that you can feed off of. And he had a couple of really big throws, the third down to

Johnny in the red zone on the first touchdown drive. Obviously the throw to Jaheim.

And starting out the second half the crossing route to Johnny was just a big throw in a big moment, one of those plays -- I already mentioned the Ja'Khi throw -- those are those times in the game that you need somebody to step up. And he did a great job of that.

Obviously got hit pretty good there when he was sliding down. I was glad he was able to come back in the game. I think I mentioned yesterday in the press conference, when he got the clearance and he came over and told me he was good -- actually the play we scored on with Trey was basically a double call where he had to see the low kid to make the check. And it ended up in a 26-yard touchdown. And I appreciate his preparation and what he was able to do and what he did in helping lead us to victory.

Q. Seemed pretty obvious that Florida was like focusing on Keon, was not going to let him beat him. He's had couple games where he was a little more quiet. Is there something you guys can do differently to scheme him open or just taking what the defense gives at that point?

COACH NORVELL: He had some opportunities. Obviously you look, we were limited in overall play numbers. The time of possession part of that game was something that made it difficult.

But you try to give guys opportunities. And there were some that were in his control and some that were out of his control. And there were things that, where we can be better.

And ultimately he's a phenomenal player, and we want him to be able to make a positive impact on every game. And he did. He had a big catch there that opening drive of the second half. Obviously his punt return was a huge play in the drive to go and regain the lead.

So he's going to make an impact. Obviously we want to give him as many opportunities to impact the game in a positive way as we can. We'll continue with that.

I thought Johnny played really well. I thought other guys were able to make their presence felt. And that's going to be a part of this week is trying to find ways to get our playmakers and put them in the best position to go make plays.

Q. Rebuild of a program, the growth often isn't linear, but for you guys it's been pretty remarkable -- going regular-season wins, three to five to nine to 12. I

guess what do you think's been the biggest key to the gradual improvement the last few years have been? And how much a testament of the players buying into all the steps that it was going to take to get here?

COACH NORVELL: It all goes to the players. The players are the ones -- they've made the commitment. They put in the work. You can set a standard, but if people aren't willing to push to the standard and hold themselves accountable to it -- I've got an incredible staff. Our staff meeting this morning, the constant challenge for improvement, for growth. We have to work as a staff to be an example of that.

I think you've got to be humble in the work and to the work. Anybody can start feeling good about what you are what you've done or what you've been able to accomplish or, trust me, what I said earlier, one of the things I'm most excited about, we're 12-0. You have an undefeated regular season. It's the fourth time in program history that you've been 12-0 in a season.

Where do you go from here? There's nothing to be satisfied with. You're appreciative of the work you put in. But I want better. And these players want better. We want to see that next step to be taken.

And this week you get to play in a conference championship. You win the game, all things are in front of you.

So I'm grateful for every player, for every coach, the entire department and the support staff, all the investment that's gone in is to see those positive steps. But we're just getting started to where we're going. I absolutely believe that.

When you have a special group of people you get to do this with, you want all. You want to see all the things they can do, all that they can accomplish. And it's a daily journey. And we have the choice today of what we want it to look like.

If we're willing to continue to push and continue to strive for that improvement, then I think you'll find good things on the other end of it.

Q. You mentioned yesterday in the conference call the slow starts in the last few games, not starting as well as you guys would like. I think you mentioned also they were emotional games. How does that manifest? Is it just letting details slip? Why do you think some of those things have happened?

COACH NORVELL: It's a combination. It's not just one

area, it's been a variety of things that have shown up early where we have to be better. And I think I definitely don't -- I'm pleased with the response. It's heck of a lot more stressful when you start off the way we have the last two weeks.

But our guys are prepared. They understand. It comes down to the execution of all the things that you worked throughout the course of a week. And there were a couple of third-down conversions we gave up. All the right intentions -- eyes are right; just a small fundamental here or there that lost leverage, gain leverage. A little bit more communication in that time.

So those things sometimes happen early in the game. And you've got to take a deep breath and you've got to go and respond and make the correction or just have a little bit more focus on the finer elements of putting yourself in the best position.

We saw that there in the very first drive. I think I might have mentioned after the game, Trey Benson had an unbelievable game as the game went on. That first run he had, I was pretty frustrated with the first run.

All the things that you work and you do -- and he knows it. And he came over and said, Coach -- he knew immediately. But it's just in those times where you want to do everything for your team and you want this to be the perfect game. You want it to be -- you don't have to go and almost do too much.

Sometimes I think you see that in those emotional games. We'll have an emotional game come Saturday. All we need to do is just go be us.

We know we're playing a great opponent. We know we're going to play in a great atmosphere and it's going to be all the things you want to be able to play in a championship game. But just go play your game. And trust what you see, trust your fundamentals, and I think that will help contribute to getting to a better and faster start that we're accustomed to.

Q. On the sacks that Tate took -- the one in the end zone and I think there was one in the second half, too -- is that just a matter of more reps, more live game reps -- you know what I mean, like, the pocket feel and presence, is that something that comes with more reps?

COACH NORVELL: The third down, we got zero blitzed. And we knew that was a potential of what we could face and what we would see. There are things we have to clean up and just trusting what we saw and reacting

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

accordingly.

And then the second one was really -- it was a coverage sack that they matched up the concept really well. They got a good push inside and the pocket collapsed on him. Those are the two -- there were two different extremes -- but I think the thing I was proud of Tate, as much as anything, is he came out of that game and he did not put the ball in jeopardy.

We knew that was one of the key components of this game. And sometimes when you face that, whether you face a house blitz, if you just throw the ball up or if those things happen, you're putting yourself in harm's way.

Even on the second sack, where everything was covered down, they did a really nice job in it, not necessarily forcing it. Obviously he was trying to work himself out of the pocket and to be able to be a threat with that. But I thought it was something he did really well.

Then the pass to Ja'Khi was the exact same presentation of pressure of what we were sacked on. And he saw it. He reacted. He put the ball where it needed to be. And that was one of the biggest plays in the game.

You saw growth and progression throughout it. But those are all part of those learning experiences and things that you practice and the early application of it there within a contest.

Q. I know it's a new coach and different team and all that, but the fact that Louisville was the team that Tate had to come in and beat last year, does that give him extra confidence going into this game?

COACH NORVELL: It's a different team. They've got a lot of new players, some guys that are returning, guys we're familiar with. But it is the next game. It's the next opportunity.

You're playing in a championship game, getting a chance -- the two best teams in the ACC are going to square off. We've gotta go -- and every player, no matter how many games you played up to this point, how many games you started -- you've got to go be your best in this one; for Tate, for all. We all have to push ourselves to that level this week, and I know we're all excited about the opportunity.

Q. I know you take pride in what other FSU athletic programs do. Volleyball won the ACC, co-ACC champion, they'll be playing Friday. And soccer is playing the College Cup on Friday. How much excitement do you feel when other programs are doing great and you're in the ACC Championship the same

weekend?

COACH NORVELL: It's awesome. And for all the programs right now to see the continued progression. Coach Pensky and what they're doing in soccer, it's exciting. Coach Poole in volleyball, it's remarkable the season they're having.

And as we all continue to aspire for more and put our best foot forward, it's what makes Florida State special. This is an athletic department and university that's striving for excellence.

And we're trying to do that on the field but also with what we're doing off the field. When you're around successful, like-minded people that have a desire and a push and achieve to the best of our ability, it's contagious within a department.

We are huge fans of all the programs. With basketball starting off and Brooke, they've started off with a great start. Leonard and the basketball team had one setback but came back with a remarkable response in a Top 25 win.

That's what this department is about. We have great people, great student-athletes. Just really grateful for the opportunity we get to represent it. And obviously we have our shot come Saturday night.

Q. Wanted to ask you about two Louisville playmakers. Jawhar Jordan. What impresses you as a running back? And Jamari Thrash as a receiver, what makes him such a difficult matchup?

COACH NORVELL: Both those guys are tremendous playmakers. Jordan is fast, he's strong, he's tough. He's got really good balance and feet. If he gets in the open field he's got game-changing speed. He's a dynamic player and plays in a great system that creates space for him. He knows what to do when he gets it.

It's going to be a great challenge for our guys. I think they've got three backs that are really, really good. So definitely a great backfield.

Thrash, he's so good with the ball in his hands. He's a guy that can win in routes. He can change directions. He does have the vertical play-making ability. But when he gets the ball in his hands he's tough to bring down.

He's a catch-and-run type of player. You've got to be on top of him in a sense of being sticky in coverage and not allowing him to get too much space. And obviously whenever he does get his hands on the ball you have to

rally to get him down. If not, he can definitely make you play.

Q. They ran the ball 44 out of 60 plays. Did you expect them to run that much? And how do you think the defense fared in the rushing attack?

COACH NORVELL: We did. We expected them to. Having a young quarterback that was really kind of a dual threat, we knew there would be probably more of those opportunities that would present themselves.

And I thought our guys did a good job. There were a few things fit-wise we got misaligned, had a couple of misfits that allowed bigger runs than what we wanted. But I thought our guys, they battled.

And they were tough, they were physical. I thought you sensed the pursuit and obviously that physical nature of what we wanted to play with.

Because it's a big offensive line. Couple of really talented backs, and just the dynamic what the quarterback brought to it.

But I was proud of our guys. And to be able to make the adjustments there in the second half to try to eliminate some of those bigger runs that they had had, it was impressive.

We were able to create a good number of TFLs and explosive plays defensively. And those guys, they did a great job.

Q. You made mention about, in July, you guys had a plan for where you wanted to be in December and that it's kind of come to fruition. Was it a supreme confidence you would be 12-0 at this point? Was it hallmarks through the season where you wanted to have certain guys here in October and then have them perform this way in December? Could you talk a little more about that?

COACH NORVELL: You want to see progression. I know we talked about it the last few years, but you want to be pushing and playing your best ball in November so you can go into December and have these opportunities.

And to be able to go through the year undefeated, that's a great thing. But you want to make sure that you're putting your players in a position that they are building throughout the course of the year.

And guys get bumps. They get bruises. You get tired. It's part of the journey. But you don't want to see the fatigue to

show up in their performance.

You've got to be smart with them. You've got to make sure you're taking care of them. But you're also building them up throughout the season, and it all points to times like this. This is what you do it for, to be able to play in a championship game, to be able to carry that over into all things that are beyond.

So do I want to be 12-0? Absolutely, yes. To say we knew exactly that it would be that, we felt like if we prepared and put our guys in the best position that they could achieve to all that they could. And they've done that to this point. Obviously we have a plan this week of what we want it to look like and what we believe we need to go play our best game come Saturday night. We've got to go execute that plan.

Q. The offensive line, it seemed a game where they had challenges with the opponent. And then also with maybe some injuries that they were fighting through. It seemed they endured throughout the game. Could you talk about if, is grit the right word?

COACH NORVELL: They had that. We've got good depth on the offensive line, but it's definitely been tested. Guys -- Rob Scott, he's a guy that started three years here and he's had a challenging year just of what he's had to deal with physically in trying to get himself available throughout the course of the week.

We feel like he's getting there and going to be able to provide us more assistance. In that, Maurice, he battles. He got rolled up once. He's had to fight and work through it.

I thought Darius Washington probably played his best game. I was really pleased with what I saw from him.

You see J.B.'s getting better. We've got a really good group. Some of the challenges that showed up were real. But there's also times that I thought we did a lot of good things. And it's continuing to make sure that everybody's in flow and in sequence to optimize the opportunities we get whether it's in protection or run game.

Our offensive line, they work their tails off, and it is a talented group. It's one that has been tested, but it's one that's responded with mental toughness, physical toughness, and I know they're going to be ready to battle because we have our hands full with an extremely impressive Louisville front.

Q. The defensive line rotation, especially early on, is the fourth quarter Saturday, with the high-level play



that Jared and Pat gave you late kind of proof of concept how you hope that plays out?

COACH NORVELL: Absolutely. Not just with the defensive front. It's really with as many positions as you can. We're finishing the game strong. When you're able to see guys, whether it's Byron or Gilber there at the end position that can go in there and give you really quality reps throughout the course of a game, it's just that much more gas in the tank that Jared and Pat will have in those critical situations.

I thought that was a heck of an ending in how those guys were able to play in the fourth quarter and obviously the impact they were able to make. So it is a big-picture approach.

I think it was mentioned even in the preseason, just when you look at successful teams, when you can have that type of rotation throughout the course of the year, one, it's going to be needed.

We've had guys that have been up and been down, but when you are able to get to this time of the year and they still have that growth and you are taking off some of that pound to their bodies, you get to play at a really high level whether it's in the fourth quarter or the month of November now heading into December. Definitely excited about how it's all come together.

Q. I know coaches like to look forward, but when you look back at this season, what Jayden Daniels did to the rest of the schedule -- and his only touchdown against you guys came with a minute left, down by 28 -- and then also what Clemson has done since you guys beat them; you're the only team to beat them in Death Valley, they're 8-4, they're a top 20-ish team. I guess 12-0 is 12-0, that's always awesome, but those wins so long ago now, how important are they, how big are they in hindsight, what you guys did to Jayden Daniels in winning in Death Valley?

COACH NORVELL: We knew the challenge going in. As the season progresses, there's always going to be different elements showing up. We knew Jayden Daniels was going to be a really good player this year.

And they had very talented receivers. We knew it was a game that we were going to have to play at a very high level and I thought our guys, they answered the call.

Did they make some plays? Yes, they did. But our guys, they battled. We gave up an 80-yard touchdown on a bunch of young guys getting their first snap ever. And that was something that still shows up and still something is --

but I thought for the majority of that game, especially in the second half, just to do what we did, was awesome.

And you see how he's progressing. He's had one of the best seasons in college football history probably. He's done a remarkable job. He's a special player. But I was proud of our guys then and I'm still proud of them now for what they were able to do in that game.

And then the Clemson win, that was -- I knew it then. You never know what the final record is going to be. And to be honest, everyone has their own situations. But I knew going into that place, it was going to be hard. It was going to be tough. And to do the things that we did being down, having to come back, to win it in overtime, I didn't expect anybody else to go in there and win, and it's something we can point to and say that's one of those moments. It's something we needed as a program. It's something we needed for ourselves to just show that we could go and do in a very adverse situation. Nobody wanted to sit there Friday night being down 12-0 on the road.

We've been there. And that's where you can take that experience and say, all right, stay true to who you are, go get better, let's make the adjustments that need to be made and our guys found a way.

Q. With Tate, did the down-and-distance situations and the field-position situations, did that affect what you were tempted to do with him in that situation considering it was his first start in a long time early in that game.

COACH NORVELL: It was early, yep.

Q. And when he was coming off the field, was he seeing it, when you watched the film, did he see --

COACH NORVELL: I thought he -- there were a couple of plays where maybe his eyes didn't get exactly where we wanted, but he saw it. I mean, he was on it.

It was the worst combination of things you could hope for at the beginning of a game for a first start of the year for him. But that's where you sit there and, like, the appreciation for him, the poise, the ability to respond, the intelligence, the preparation.

I mean, when we get sacked for a safety and we're down 12-0 and really hadn't done anything on offense, to come back on that two-minute drive, and the throw to Jaheim, it's like, all right, that's a real guy.

And the third down to Johnny, like, he's throwing the ball before Johnny is even coming out of the break. Just, man,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

it makes me so proud.

I'll tell you, I was proud of Brock. Brock gets in the situation, true freshman, been injured for most of the year, all right, here we go. And he's got something about him that is just really impressive.

But there is the expectation. You never know when your number is going to be called and what are you going to do with it.

I thought Tate saw the field extremely well. He knew where he wanted to go, like I said, other than a couple plays here and there. But a lot of guys have that.

That's something -- that goes back to at the very beginning, we're 12-0 here at this point and there's so many areas we get to continue to improve. And now the challenge is on us to go get better.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports