

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl: Eastern Michigan vs San Jose State

Monday, December 19, 2022

Boise, Idaho, USA

Albertsons Stadium

Eastern Michigan Eagles
Head Coach Chris
Creighton

Taylor Powell
Jose Ramirez

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the 2022 Famous Idaho Potato Bowl press conference. We're joined with Eastern Michigan and from there head Coach Chris Creighton, Taylor Powell, and Jose Ramirez. We'll open up with a statement from Coach and then open it up for questions.

CHRIS CREIGHTON: Good morning. Thanks for showing up today. We sure are excited about being here. We have been, and we continue to be. The game obviously is 24 hours away or so. That's obviously the cherry on top.

But really appreciate the hospitality from the bowl and from Boise. Very few of our guys have been to this part of the country and have been doing an awesome job hosting us and allowing for guys to experience Boise, Idaho. Really appreciate that.

We've been having a really good year. We've been trying to break through seven-win seasons for a number of years now. It was the first time that we were able to beat both of our in-state rivals in the same year beating Western Michigan, who you all got to play earlier in the year.

And then in the last and final game of the season we hosted Central Michigan, and we have a Michigan MAC Trophy, and we were able to hoist that and celebrate our seniors in our final home game at The Factory and hoist a trophy.

Then to be invited here to the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl to play San Jose State. Hadn't put together sort of in the moment that the only bowl win in our entire 132-year



history was back in 1987, and it was against San Jose State. I lived for eight years in San Jose, so just some, you know, weird, cool things. We're really excited about being here and can't wait for tomorrow.

Q. Coach, can you talk a little about what you feel like are going to be the keys to the game? You are facing a dual-threat quarterback and some of the things that San Jose State has been able to do. What are you guys looking to do tomorrow in order to have success?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: It 100% starts with taking care of the ball and taking the ball away. I don't know a coach in America that doesn't believe in that, but how many of us are able to execute that successfully? Well, the answer is San Jose State. They're the tops in the country after 11 games of taking care of the ball and taking it away.

We lost or tied the turnover take-away ratio in our first seven games, and we talk about it. We breathe it all the time, but we're unsuccessful for seven straight weeks.

We've taken care of the ball and taken it away the last five games, so we've been able to turn that. San Jose State has been consistently good at that all the way through, and I think when it's all said and done tomorrow, that will be the statistic that we all look at.

Secondarily to that would be you mentioned their offense. Fantastic quarterback. Any time that a guy can hurt you with his arm and his legs, it's a problem. And then, obviously, you have to protect him to be able to throw the ball to the wideouts, which are as good as we've seen all year. They're really, really good at what they do.

So we're going to have to do as good of a job as we possibly can. Limit explosives and keeping those guys in front and make them have long fields. We're going to have to take the ball away, play great red zone defense.

Offensively we're facing the defensive player of the year in the Mountain West. You got to hear from 92 this morning at the FCA breakfast. I'm sitting there listening to him, and I thought it was a stud as player, and now I'm listening to

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him as a person, and he is just a phenomenal guy. You can just tell he is a leader in the program and then, what, a three-time All-Conference linebacker. Just really good on defense.

We've been good this year when we've been able to run the ball and keep people off balance. In addition to taking care of the ball, we're going to need to get our running game going. Not exclusively. We're going to have to keep people honest because we can throw it as well.

I think it's a great matchup. I mean, they're really, really good. We're going to have to play at a high level.

Q. I'm sure you guys have been reminded every day since Selection Sunday about the 1987 team. Have you guys talked to anybody that played on this team, and how special is this game knowing that everybody that was on that team is going to be paying so much attention to this game specifically?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: Well, I've been at Eastern Michigan, this is the end of my ninth season. And we talk about and hear about the 1987 team all the time, thankfully.

To me they're the closest group -- whenever people come back, whenever we have an event, there's guys from the '87 team. They're wearing their rings. They just had a phenomenal experience, and they set the bar. They've done things that nobody else has ever been able to do in, whatever, 132 years. They're great people. They had a special experience.

So I think somebody did a story on the fact that we have a freshman free safety whose dad was a freshman on the 1987 team. There's just, again, a lot of cool, weird things that have happened comparing the two different years.

Yeah, they're the standard that we've been trying to climb to meet, and we will have failed again this year as they won the MAC Championship. We talk about those guys and celebrate those guys all the time.

Q. For Taylor and Jose, I know, Taylor, you've only been here for one year. Jose, you've been here for four. You bounced back from the JUCO system, though. How special is this final game for you guys? How do you want to go out and finish your senior years, and how do you want to be remembered as EMU players after you finish this?

TAYLOR POWELL: I'll go. When I was trying to figure out where I wanted to go for my last year, I narrowed it down to pretty much three schools, and the one that spoke to me was Eastern Michigan because I wanted to go to a place

where I could make history and leave the program better than I found it.

In the offseason we were doing our winter workouts, and we were talking about our theme "stack 'em" and basically focusing on the process every day. We've stacked the winter on spring, spring on summer, summer on fall camp, fall camp on season.

Now we're here at the very end of the road, and we're just super excited to do something that hasn't been done in a while. Especially with this senior class. This is the tightest team I think that I've ever been on. A bunch of these guys will be in my wedding. So I'm just super thankful for all of them.

Yeah, Jose, you got anything?

JOSE RAMIREZ: Just go off what Taylor said about offseason. Just our theme being "stack 'em," and this final game for us just means we can stack on what we did from this whole season, the years that we've been here. Just starting over. Yeah, we had a good season, but just starting over. Taking the 1-0 approach every day and just avoiding the noise.

I know there's a lot of noise going on, offseason talk and stuff. Just being ready for tomorrow. Just finishing out with a bang and being different because we did everything in the season, but this is what matters at the end of the day.

Q. Jose, can you talk a little about facing a dual-threat quarterback like Chev and what he is going -- kind of the problems that he presents to you with your defense? What kind of things are you going to have to do to shut him down?

JOSE RAMIREZ: I think the things we've got to do is everything that was taught in practice. Just the coaching, the game-planning we get, just attacking like we did this week. Just attack practice like we was going against him.

I feel like we've seen other quarterbacks this whole year that was dual-threat. Just a couple of weeks ago. I feel like we'll be ready, and the defense will be ready to help the whole team win.

Q. Who do you feel like he is closest to that have already played?

JOSE RAMIREZ: Closer? I don't know. Probably -- I don't know. I feel like Kent State had a dual-threat quarterback. I feel like that was a good test for us.



Just watching that film and relaying it back to this quarterback we're going against, I feel like it will be a good matchup. And we just have to win the finish at the end of the day.

Q. This is your fifth bowl trip, Coach. What have you picked up from the first four that maybe will help you and your players come away with a win?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: It's a good question. I think philosophically you sit around as a staff and think about your approach and what you should do differently, what you shouldn't do differently. There's two ways of looking at it.

One is you believe in what you are doing, and you just keep pounding the rock knowing that what you are doing is right and that eventually it's going to -- the wall is going to fall. Or do you just blow everything up and take a radically different approach?

Even this season we've made some adjustments to how we have attacked even starting back in camp and how we've attacked this season that I think probably to the outside eye would not look all that relevant, but within our program we've made some adjustments on -- really relied on science more and looking at how much these guys' bodies should take and can take throughout a week and studying that and talking about it incessantly.

Really now that we're here in bowl week the change isn't as much from what we've done other bowls, but more so following what's been successful for us throughout this season. I don't think it's going to look any differently from the outside.

We still went up to the mountain the other day. I'm glad that we did, right? We went ax throwing, and I'm glad that we did. We travel well wherever we going, however long we're going. Where sort of at least in the back of our mind when we're doing those different kind of events is when everybody knows why we're here. We're here to play the football game and to play at a really high level on Tuesday, December 20th, at 1:33 in the afternoon.

So this trip has had a really good feel to it because we've practiced well, but we've also enjoyed being here. Feel really good about our preparation.

Q. Win, lose, or draw, what is the most memorable thing from this class of '22, this whole team, that you are going to take in your memory until the day you are done coaching and you are sitting around and reminiscing about your teams? What are you going to remember about this group?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: Two things come to mind just off the bat. It was back in January when we started our winter workouts, and it was these guys. It was what we call our torch bearer leadership group. Basically our last year guys and then some two year guys. We would meet weekly, and we were just talking about how winter workouts were going and how well they were going.

They were talking about how we had to keep stacking the winter workouts, and that was sort of the term is to "stack 'em." That really became our theme for the whole year. I've been doing this as a head coach in college for 26 years, and the years that we've lived our theme it's been a special year.

Our guys have been living our theme, so that part I will not ever forget about these guys. I think also that they are just the strength of our culture, and the culture is our program.

On October 29th we were playing Toledo at the end of October for the lead in the MAC West, which hadn't been done probably since 1987. That late in the year to be leading the way with a few games left, and we lost a heartbreaker by 3 points.

Jose and I had about an hour and a half long conversation two or three days later. It was a hard thing to go through. Then we still had a bunch of season left. But they, again, like the teams that have come before them, are unbreakable.

As much as we put into winning a MAC Championship this year, being our best, going after that, believing it was going to happen and sort of in football terms suffering a very painful loss, the resolve, the resiliency of these guys, the love that they have for each other just always overcomes. It blows me away. I absolutely love coaching these guys. They have so much depth of character.

So we won our last three games, and now we're poised and ready to give it all we have tomorrow.

Q. Taylor, can you talk a little bit about -- I don't know if you've seen the weather forecast for tomorrow, but Coach was talking about the emphasis on holding the ball and not making a lot of turnovers on offense. Is there anything you guys have done or played in any weather like this or any tips that you guys have talked about that's going to maybe help if you getting into a game tomorrow with a lot of snow?

TAYLOR POWELL: Yeah, we're from Michigan, so we play in pretty crappy weather every day. This weather is actually beautiful. You know, super excited.



We played Kent State, and it was colder than this and snowing a little bit, and we did just fine on offense, so I don't think it will be an issue.

Q. Coach, one thing that I feel like is part of your personal theme when it comes to coaching, even before you came to Eastern, was taking players places where they haven't been before and having them experience great new things that they have never experienced before. That can certainly happen this week with this bowl game and all that. But as a whole for you, why is that so important to you? Why is it so important to have these guys experience things that they haven't done before and lift trophies they've never lifted before?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: It's going to take longer than a press conference to answer that one, but I got into coaching 31 years ago probably because I couldn't do anything else, but it wasn't -- there was, what, one game on a week on TV, and people weren't getting into it to make money.

I found out really quickly after I first started coaching that outside of loving God and being a husband and father that this was what I was put on the earth to do. I truly do want to make it one of the most incredible experiences of our guys' lives.

I think that the foundation of that is relationships. No matter what new experience people have, if you don't trust the guy on your left and you don't like the guy on your right, it doesn't become relevant. But when you get people from all different backgrounds, ages, different parts of the world together that are really good people that can be in real relationship with each other, just around the passion that we have for football, I think that it can be an absolutely incredible experience.

So part of it is new experiences. You know, we just had an official visit, and one of our visitors, it was his first time on plain. It fires me up. Never been on a plane before.

Like I said, so many of our guys on our team, coaches hadn't been to Idaho before. So when the tubing thing was not working or whatever, we still took an entire bus just to be up in the mountains and to see them and be in the snow, and our guys had an awesome time.

I want my life to count. We talk about being impact men. These guys are way more than football players. Now, don't get me wrong. They are really, really, really talented and can end up playing in game for a long time. Could make a living from it and all of those things. That's awesome, but

when it ends, it they're always more than football players.

So we talk to them about being an impact man because our world needs that and our communities need that, our families need that. So as coaches we better be living it and practicing what we preach.

I don't want my tombstone just to have a win-loss record on it. I want to be in relationship with these guys and with the coaches and have an impact on the men that they're becoming. That might sound corny to people and what not, but I believe that.

As much as our world is trying to change that and make it a business deal, I believe in those things. Love these guys. Love our team. I think you can have both. They don't just have to be chess or checkers pieces, and that it's not just a Sunday school class either. You know what I mean?

I think you can care about people and invest in their life and have relationships and hold people accountable and be demanding and at the same time be really, really good on the football field. Not claiming that I'm good at that, but I'm darn sure going to try to do both of those things at a high level.

Q. Coach, you run a 4-2-5 defensive scheme. Would you describe that as a hybrid between a nickel and dime defense, or how would you describe it?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: We've been a 4-2-5 ever since Coach Nethery got here in 2016. This year really in the back half of the season I don't know if you would call us a 4-2-5.

We have made some major adjustments that San Jose State I'm sure has watched every game, so they're going to be prepared for much more than a 4-2-5. We've been in an odd front. We played some bear. We've been in both open coverage and closed coverage and have mixed those things up.

Prior to ten weeks ago I could explain to you exactly or answer your question, but now we are definitely different than the 4-2-5 we started out.

Q. That's quite evident since you started the year off as somewhere far in the hundreds in ranked defense and ended the year in the 55th ranked defense in the country, I believe, so you definitely made some improvements.

CHRIS CREIGHTON: It's a credit to our defensive staff, led by Coach Nethery. Our whole defensive staff really challenged themselves after Game 4 to think through what



kind of adjustments we could make because we've been running the 4-2-5 for several years and at a really high level. You know, when you do something, you get really good at it, but other people also have a chance to study it and to figure it out.

Midseason to make adjustments that have been very effective week-in-and-week-out, I couldn't be prouder of our defensive staff. Of course, it's the players that end up having to learn it and do it. It's something when the season is all over, we'll really reflect back on what a job they've done.

Q. I have one more question for Jose Ramirez. You have 12 sacks on the year. So it seems that you are pretty good at sacking the quarterback. What goes through your mind when you sack the quarterback?

JOSE RAMIREZ: I just help my team. I mean, what goes through my mind, I feel like rushing the passer, I feel like if I don't get there, I'm doing a bad job because them guys have to cover a little bit longer or I'm not helping my team out. It's just a grateful feeling that I can play this game that God put me on this earth for, so yeah.

Q. Jose, Coach said that you guys had a long conversation after the game against Toledo. Talk a little bit about what went on there and what kind of -- what's changed since then or how you guys decided to finish out the year the way that you have?

JOSE RAMIREZ: Well, shoot, I can't really talk about the talk too much because that's a man-to-man thing that I appreciate Coach Creighton for. Like he said, he is trying to make us impactful men. He is an impactful man in my life.

But basically it just goes back to what we were talking about in January about "stacking 'em." It's hard to stack them after a tough loss, but that's what we had to go back to. I know it was dreadful for a little bit of days for people on our team, but that just shows the type of team we are.

It's not like years before or anything else. It's not just we're just lose, and it is what it is. I feel like we had to start over, and that's what we did. Then we had to empty out the tank for the rest of the season, and we're not done yet. We have one more. We're going to go get this win and do our best for Coach Reed too. Yeah.

Q. What do you feel like was the biggest change that you guys made on defense after the first four games? What was it scheme-wise or whatever that you guys did that kind of turned things around for defense?

JOSE RAMIREZ: I mean, I feel like that just goes back to what Coach Creighton was saying. Trusting in the coaching and trusting in the process. We know our coaches are going to put us in the best position to win, so just trust in the coaching and trust everything that goes on.

Just, like, going back to your question about the dual-threat quarterback. They can have a lot of good players on the field, but we trust other coaches to put us in the best position.

Q. Coach Creighton, reading a lot of about a 51-pound pipe wrench that's part of your culture with the program. Can you talk a little bit about that, and did the pipe wrench make the trip here?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: It did make the trip. Yep, it's here. Yeah, again, I don't want to put everybody to sleep, but when I first got to Michigan, I had never lived in the great state of Michigan before. It took a couple of months to really figure out the people, the area, the school.

To make a long story a little bit shorter, there's a toughness. There's a blue collar work ethic. There's character. There's values in Southeast Michigan.

Yeah, we went and visited a tool company, and the president gave us a 51-pound pipe wrench. It really has three different meanings. One of them you'll have to go see the movie "Good Will Hunting" to figure that one out, but our theme that first year was to "close the gap."

With the pipe wrench there's two vices as you screw it they close. Just always -- every one of us is right here as a coach, as a player, as a man, as a woman, as a husband, father, whatever it is. There's another line wherever we're at that goes above that line, right? That's our potential. We want to be people who wake up in the morning wanting to close the gap from wherever we are to wherever we can be.

So the pipe wrench, it's a wrench. It's blue collar. It's hard work, right? It definitely possesses that. It's close the gap. Then "Good Will Hunting," we watch part of that movie together every year.

Yeah, it went up to Bogus Basin with us, and we had a snowman try to carry it too. It ends up being a pretty big deal whoever leads us out onto the field carrying the wrench each week.

Q. Talking about parts of the country, did I hear you right? You were eight years in San Jose? When?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: I was born in San Francisco in



1969. Then at 4 my family moved to San Jose, and the Alburquerque Valley, and I was there until I was 12, and then we moved up to Seattle. Yep, loved it.

Q. Coach, another San Francisco native. We love it, but this question is for the players. I was really fortunate to ask the last group out here this question. In football my third favorite play is the batted pass. Taylor, Jose, can you talk about what it feels like right after that play when the pass is batted down either your pass or your hands knocking it down, please?

TAYLOR POWELL: I have a funny story about that. I was fortunate enough to get invited to the Manning Passing Academy and spend some quality time with Peyton and Eli. Somehow this topic got brought up.

Peyton was telling us how he thinks it should be illegal. You know, it should be, like, hey, redo the play. That's my take on it. We're not playing volleyball. We're playing football. That's what I think (laughing).

JOSE RAMIREZ: My take on it is as a D-end, as a D-lineman I feel like it gives you that little swagger. Makes you feel like a DB. After you bat down and look at the quarterback and give them a little swipe or a little seat belt. That's my take on it.

Q. Given that this may be the final question and we are in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl, I also asked this to the Spartans as well, what is your favorite way to prepare a potato?

CHRIS CREIGHTON: Go ahead.

TAYLOR POWELL: For me it would be, you know, a little olive oil, chop them up a little bit, a little olive oil, a little salt and pepper, throw them in the oven, have a nice little potato with your steak. That's what I would do.

JOSE RAMIREZ: I think, I don't know, probably the same. I like mashed potatoes though, so probably cut it up, boil it up, take it out, and mash it up with some butter in there, salt and pepper in there. Yeah, eat it with a little chicken or steak, whatever.

TAYLOR POWELL: There you go.

CHRIS CREIGHTON: My wife does an awesome job with mashed potatoes. She puts something in there that makes it really, really good. I'll tell you, my first year here I had a loaded baked potato, I'll tell you that, and it tasted really, really good.

THE MODERATOR: Any last questions? Thank you to

Eastern Michigan, and best of luck tomorrow.

CHRIS CREIGHTON: Thank you. Appreciate it.

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