

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl: Utah State vs Georgia State

Friday, December 22, 2023

Boise, Idaho, USA

Albertsons Stadium

Utah State Aggies

Blake Anderson

Levi Williams

MJ Tiafisi Jr.

Press Conference



say thank you. We've enjoyed it. We know that doesn't come without a lot of hard work.

With that, open it up to questions for you.

Q. You know there's a lot of guys out with injuries, guys banged up, surgeries. Who do you expect to step up into those roles and play key roles in this game?

BLAKE ANDERSON: Well, I think you're sitting next to one of them. You consider the season, the way it's gone, to have a guy step in and lead us to a win to get here, then to prepare the way Levi has, it's a great testament to who he is, how he prepares.

Really I think his teammates, how much trust they have in him. This is something our guys are aware of, but both these guys were voted as team captains. When you talk about a guy stepping up, MJ has been there all year, been their all year, and last season.

Levi's situation was different. To be pushed into that role the way he was late and stepped up, a huge testament to who he is.

We have a lot of guys. I don't think I have a name. You'll see more of Colby Bowman and Grant Page at wide-out with the absence of Micah Davis. Cooper Jones is going to be returning kicks and punts for us with Micah down, as well.

Defensively I think it's going to be a group effort at Will linebacker. I'm always kind of surprised at who the guy is that nobody really talked about that has a great game. I'd love to see one of those on our side, as well.

Q. With so many bowl game festivities, the team has been doing activities, a lot going on before the game. How do you keep the team focused and mentally ready?

BLAKE ANDERSON: Well, I think it's really their job. I try to bring them back to square one before we start any event. We want to enjoy the bowl events. We had a blast

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl. We're here with head coach Blake Anderson, Levi Williams and MF Tafisi Jr. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach Anderson, then open it up to questions.

Coach Anderson.

BLAKE ANDERSON: Appreciate everybody coming. This has been a really, really good week. We've had a great time. As you talk to the guys, you'll find out real quickly that we try to make the most of the week, enjoyed the bowl events. Really everybody we've come in contact with has been phenomenal.

Luckily had a chance to go to a handful of bowls in my career. Just the hospitality this week, the events, just how everybody, I don't know, bends over backwards to make a great week, it shows.

Practice has been good as well. I think our guys are prepared to play. We know the opponent is well-coached and just as excited to be here as we are. We know the challenges ahead of us.

But also I think our guys have really come with a mission to enjoy the week but also be prepared to play on Saturday and play our best game. Hopefully that's what we do.

Thanks, everybody, that puts this on. I know it takes a lot of people throughout the course of the year. This doesn't happen overnight. To have a bowl game that's been going on as long as this one has with the history and tradition, means a lot to us to be a part of it.

Anybody that puts time and effort and energy into this, we



... when all is said, we're done.®

tubing the other day. Probably more of a blast than we should have. If you look at the side of MJ's face, you'll understand (smiling).

That was a goal. Just my belief is a bowl game is a celebration of a season that you earned. To be here takes a lot. There's a lot of teams that aren't in bowl games and don't get that opportunity. When you do get there, you want to take advantage of everything that is there, but also at the same time have the maturity when it's time to work, be ready to work.

I've seen nothing other than really maturity from these guys all week. When we've met, had walk-throughs, practice, we've had some of the best we had all season. I thought that was the same building up to getting here. When we've played, we've played hard and had a good time.

We'll see the result of that on game day. We'll either be ready or we won't. That comes back to these guys and them allowing us to be able to do both.

Q. MJ, quite the season for you guys, two double overtime victories, close games. Tell me about the battle you went through and what it means to be able to play in a bowl game tomorrow.

MJ TAFISI JR.: Yeah, it was just hard work for us. The biggest thing was putting trust in each other. It means so much for us to be in a bowl. I really feel like we worked hard. I felt like we deserved it more, so...

Q. Coach, an opportunity to get above .500. How important is that in a process of a season?

BLAKE ANDERSON: I think I keep it in perspective. It's still one game. To me it's the big picture of what this team has been through. Those that have followed our program know where we were this time a year ago with the portal really attacking our team at a heavy rate. A year later, a ton of guys stepping up and saying we're staying put and fighting together.

To go through the injuries we have had, to have gone through the schedule we've had to get to that point, which I think our league is the best Group of Five league in the country at this point, to be able to manage some close wins in tough situations with a beat-up roster.

I'd love to get to 7-6. It sounds and tastes better than 6-7. I don't think it defines this team by any means. I think getting here is really what defined them.

The energy it presents, the momentum it creates in recruiting, the guys that are coming back, which is most of

our team, a very young team, there's only a handful of seniors. I think the momentum that would carry over to January would be huge both in recruiting but also in the off-season.

I'd love to send these guys out here on a positive note, a memory, something they won't forget. You always remember the last game you played win or lose. We'd like it to be a positive outcome for them.

Q. Levi, obviously a couple years ago you had some good memories out here. Did you give any thought after the New Mexico game of saying, I'm done? Drop the mic and go out on a touchdown play? What was the conversation like to come back and play this game?

LEVI WILLIAMS: I would say I just owed it to the team to come back and play. They've been busting their butts all season. They've been working so hard. For me to do that, I feel like it would be a little bit selfish for me to just kind of ride out on that last thing.

But, yeah, I'm super proud of this team. I'm so excited for tomorrow, what we're going to produce tomorrow. Man, I'm just excited. One last ride with all these guys, MJ and everybody, so...

Q. MJ and Levi, you're probably playing in your last collegiate game. What is the mindset you have? What do you think the mindset has been with the teammates that you have in similar circumstances?

MJ TAFISI JR.: It's one last ride. I want to leave it all out on the field, especially for these boys.

LEVI WILLIAMS: Yeah, second what MJ said. It's one last ride. Just going to empty the tank for this team. They deserve it. They've worked so hard. Lots of adversity this year.

Going out there and trying to get a win is going to be hard. We got a really good Georgia State team coming in. I think we can do it. I think we're more than capable of winning this game.

Q. MJ, a lot of guys from Georgia State left in the portal, a lot on offense. What are you expecting from Georgia State on that offensive side of the ball, a lot of guys you haven't seen on film?

MJ TAFISI JR.: I'm not expecting anything different. I mean, obviously they did have a few guys leave in the portal. Nothing different. I know that they're going to try to do whatever they can to beat us, too.



Q. Levi, what are you seeing on film on the defensive side?

LEVI WILLIAMS: I mean, they're a really good football team. Like Coach A said, they're really well-coached. They're going to be a really physical football team. We're going to have to block up front and run the football ball at the end of the day.

We're up for the challenge, but it's going to be a challenge tomorrow.

Q. Blake, what do you take of both teams taking different paths to get here?

BLAKE ANDERSON: Definitely different ways to get here. They started off 6-1. I had a good chance to watch them several times early in the season when they were really rolling.

I kind of lost track of them in mid-season. They fell on tough times. You never know what causes that. To get to 6-1 says a lot about what Shawn has done. I have a lot of familiarity with him and that league, having been in there, playing head-to-head against them. I feel like I have a good idea of what it's taken for them to get here. I think he's done a phenomenal job. To be able to rally back, get the team going over the second half of the season for us was a different challenge. We struggled early. We could have very easily given up several times throughout the year. These guys just wouldn't let it happen. To be honest with you, the locker room never gave up, never gave in. We kept working. Practices continued to get better and better.

I'd like to think that brings us in with some momentum maybe they don't have. We'll take any edge we can get. At the end of the day you have to get out and make the plays. Maybe this bowl trip is just what they needed to get to get the spark going. We expect their very best. If I know Shawn, he is going to have them going anyway. That's just the culture that he creates.

Q. Favorite moment of the week and favorite gift in the gift suite?

MJ TAFISI JR.: Favorite moment for me was definitely sledding. Coach already kind of caught me out. I had a blast doing that. A lot of times my teammates said I had a death wish trying to do some crazy stuff (smiling).

My favorite gift was probably the Amazon gift card.

LEVI WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'd have to go with the sledding.

The sledding was probably the most fun. In 2021 when I came here, it got canceled. It was definitely, definitely fun to do that and hang out with the guys. I'm glad that no one got seriously hurt.

I got a Blackstone in the gift suite this year. I'm excited to see that, cook on that, so yeah.

Q. You had a pretty decent record in your career against Georgia State. Anything in your previous history that informs you for this game?

BLAKE ANDERSON: The teams are obviously different at this point. There's been some water under the bridge since last time I played 'em.

To me, I think just the culture and what to expect kind of from Shawn Elliott's team. He's an O-line coach by nature. They've always run the ball extremely well, stopped the run, and played a very physical, very enthusiastic brand of ball.

To me, what I think I would carry over from our previous history is just the culture to expect, what to expect from kind of how they're going to approach the game. Beyond that there's a lot of things that are different for both of us at this point.

I do know we're going to have to stop the run, be able to run the ball, and you're going to be tested physically up front. To me that's something we've talked about a good bit leading up to this game.

Q. Coach, you made several appearances at several bowl games. What do you see some of the benefits of the team performing at a bowl game, and for the program as a whole?

BLAKE ANDERSON: Everybody makes a lot of extra practices. It does help. We get a handful. Not as many as you might think with the timing of recruiting and the portal and finals and all that. We really got one extra week of prep. Only added a couple extra practices to that. Didn't go with the spring ball type mentality. We didn't have the bodies for it and honestly the time as well with everything else.

I think the momentum, what you carry, just kind of consistency of going every year. I don't know the numbers at Utah State, but for me as a head coach it's nine out of ten years. That's something I want to be able to go into every recruit and tell them we're going to play in post-season play. I want to show them that Utah State is going to do that. Building and continuing on that streak is important.



Celebrating with guys that you care about is a huge part of it. I don't take that for granted. These guys are about to move on and do a lot of different things in their life. I want to make sure we get one good, solid opportunity to appreciate each other in that locker room. It will never be the same after Saturday's game.

I think there's a lot of added benefit. Experiences for those guys maybe they never would have had. I don't know how many times they're going to snow tube for the rest of their lives. They had a couple hours together to make some pretty good memories.

Q. Favorite version of the potato?

MJ TAFISI JR.: I love fries. I love fries. I can eat it all day every day (smiling).

LEVI WILLIAMS: I'd say potato skins. I feel like they get a bad rap, but they're pretty good.

BLAKE ANDERSON: I wasn't expecting that (smiling).

I'm a fries guy, too. Burgers and fries, pretty cool.

LEVI WILLIAMS: Potato skins really (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

BLAKE ANDERSON: Thank you y'all so much.

LEVI WILLIAMS: Thank you.

MJ TAFISI JR.: Thank you.

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