

Capital One Orange Bowl: Texas A&M vs North Carolina

Monday, December 28, 2020

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

North Carolina

Hard Rock Stadium

Jay Bateman

Press Conference



So we've got a real challenge on our hands. Obviously we're going to have to do a really good job up front. That's where it all starts, and from there we'll have to cover them. They're going to force you to make competitive throws and play competitive coverage, and that's going to be the key in the game, I think.

Q. Jay, my question is regarding Patrice Rene. I'm curious what you've seen of him this year and how he's grown as a player throughout his time with North Carolina.

JAY BATEMAN: Sure. You know, Patrice unfortunately got injured last year the second game of the season and really worked hard to rehab. With the pandemic, it was hard for him to rehab. He had to go back to Canada, then we had to get an embassy to let him back into America, and probably put him a little bit behind with his rehab, but he's really done a great job and played really well for us at times. I think he's been -- it probably hasn't been quite as much playing time as he would have preferred, but he's been a great leader and a great captain and I think he will have a chance to play in the Canadian Football League for 100 years.

I think he's a great kid and I'm looking forward to watching him as he continues to play.

Q. I was just wondering in terms of A&M's offense, how do you look to limit their production on Saturday?

JAY BATEMAN: You know, they're a really good offense. They're the offense you would think, a top two or three team in our country would have. They're No. 2 in the country on 3rd downs. I think Kellen Mond is a terrific football player; really, really smart, doesn't get fooled. Really impressed with him. I think the offensive line is one of the best, if not the best offensive line that we've played since we've been here. And I think the two running backs, 28 is all-SEC as a sophomore. You could look back, I pulled this up for the DBs last week when they announced all-SEC and it was like the last ten years of all-SEC tailbacks, and they're pretty well-known guys.

And then the kid who I think is a tremendous football player is No. 0. He plays running back, he plays slot receiver, he plays outside receiver. He is a tremendous football player.

Q. As you may know, Chazz Surratt has opted out and we all expect Eugene Asante to step in at that linebacker position. What do you expect from him? How does he compare to Chazz? I know he's a little different. I know he was a late add to that class. What did you like about him as a prospect that's going to lead to what he's going to do for you on Saturday and in the future for UNC football?

JAY BATEMAN: You know, when I got hired, Eugene was a kid I knew about. I thought he was a tremendous high school football player, and I think I got hired and talked to Tommy about him. Tommy watched him and got on a plane to go see him because we were pretty positive about him. Little bit of a late bloomer. Played tailback most of his high school career, kind of became a linebacker as a senior and really started to blow up. Eugene is a traffic football player. We've said all along, we want to play him more. Well, now is his chance.

I think Eugene can really run. He's really athletic. I think a lot of the things Chazz does for us in coverage, a lot of things Chazz does for us as being the extra run defender, Eugene would do a great job with. I'm looking forward to seeing him play. Chazz is a tremendous player. I wish I had them both. But Eugene will do a great job.

Everybody on our defense, everybody in our defensive staff is extremely confident in Eugene. Not just in this game but in the next however many years we have him. We're very confident in Eugene and he should be very confident in himself. He's really worked hard to get himself to this position.

Q. What have you seen from him in practice leading up to today and to the Orange Bowl? Are there any challenges that he's had to kind of get used to this role or give us some insight how he's doing leading up to this role.

JAY BATEMAN: You know, honestly I think Eugene

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prepared every week knowing that he could be an injury away from playing. Every time Chazz has had to come out, we've stuck him right in. I think Khadry Jackson has done the same thing behind Jeremiah Gemmel. We've said all along we've got a lot of confidence in those kids. Has he prepared a little bit differently because he's absolutely the starter and taking more reps and all that stuff? Yeah, but Eugene has worked really, really hard every week he's been here to play.

The great thing about coaching is you get a kid like this and you get a chance to let him go play. I could not be more excited to watch him play, and I think he's going to play great.

Q. Back in August you kept telling us how excited you were about Eugene's potential and you were excited to get him on the field. Was it just that Chazz was so good you couldn't take him off the field?

JAY BATEMAN: So we played him against Virginia Tech. Tried to play him at nickel a little bit, and some of the things were a little bit more DB skills than he probably has right now. Not that he couldn't do it, but he just hadn't practiced it. That obviously didn't go very well for us.

But yeah, I mean, Chazz is probably going to be a top 30 or 40 pick in the NFL Draft. And it just was hard to take him off the field. We would talk every week, Tommy and I would talk and say, we should put Eugene in for this, put Eugene for that. To pull Chazz out was really hard.

But I promise you, I don't know if there was a better backup on our football team than Eugene Asante as far as like a guy that didn't play and you knew if he went in the game would play great. I'm just telling you, like I can't wait to see this kid play. He's going to make a bunch of plays. He plays the Will linebacker on our defense which makes a lot of the tackles, and he's going to make a lot of tackles.

Q. How do those conversations go? Maybe he was ready to get on the field and play a lot but obviously there was that dude in front of him. Did you maybe have to amend the mindset during the course of this process?

JAY BATEMAN: I give him a lot of credit, he went over to special teams and he was playing 25, 30 snaps a game on every special team. And we tried to get him in on some 3rd down stuff, and he embraced his role. I think Eugene is well aware of how great a player Chazz is, so I think he saw like hey, look, I've got a great player in front of me, and when think time comes I'll be ready.

We told him every week, look, you're playing linebacker,

you're not playing kicker. You could get hurt. Chazz could get hurt any minute, so you'd better be ready to go, and I really believe he prepared that way. It showed -- the first day of practice, he walked out there like -- it wasn't like, who's going to go to Will? Everyone on the defense knew Asante was going in, and he's prepared and he's going to play really, really well.

I promise you, my concern is not Eugene Asante. My concern is tackling 28 and 0 with everybody. Eugene is going to play great.

Q. Mack talked up the similarities between A&M and Notre Dame and kind of what they did and how they were structured. Could you speak to some of the differences in schematics offensively for those teams?

JAY BATEMAN: Sure. I think Notre Dame was a little bit more committed to 12 personnel with the two tight ends in the game. I think Notre Dame's two tight ends are both great players. I think Texas A&M's tight end is a first-round pick. So they're a little bit more in the three wide receiver world. I guess really No. 0 is kind of running back, kind of a receiver.

I think the biggest schematic, Texas A&M does a lot more schematic-wise in the pass game, a lot more formation-wise. They're going to make you defend a little bit more of the pass game than Notre Dame did. But a very similar commitment to the run game. Where Notre Dame I think was -- it was going to be more play-actions and quarterback runs. Texas A&M is going to say, okay, if you're going to insist on taking the run away, we'll spread you out and throw it. I think the two quarterbacks are very similar, both really veteran guys that can hurt you with their feet.

So I think there's a lot of similarities. I think Texas A&M has a little bit more varied pass game, to be honest with you.

Q. From your perspective really the last three games is when your defense really seemed to take off. What do you attribute that to, just the performance, especially against Notre Dame and Miami?

JAY BATEMAN: You know, I think we had some young kids that had improved. I think our kids have done a better job managing some of the situations we were in. I honestly think we just -- we talk all the time about what's important to us and what our standard is, and I think we went through a couple weeks there where we didn't really back that up, and I think once we kind of got back to that, we kind of refocused before the Notre Dame game. I felt like some of our senior leaders, some of our older guys, Tomon Fox,

Jeremiah Gemmel, who you'll hear from in a little bit, did a great job of saying, this isn't what we want to be. And our kids played really well against some really good offenses.

Our kids are excited about the challenge. It's a huge challenge, but that's why they came here is to play in these games.

Q. This is kind of crazy to be asking, but who will be the backup if Asante has to come off the field for some reason? Who's backing him up now?

JAY BATEMAN: So Khadry Jackson has played Mike and Will. He could go in. We've got a freshman in Cedric Gray, who I think is a dynamite young football player. One of those two would go in, and we'd feel pretty confident about those two guys, also.

Tommy has done a great job in that room. Jeff Schoettmer and Tommy Thigpen, who work with our linebackers, I feel very confident with any of those guys going in the game. Obviously Chazz and Gemmel are really good players, really veteran players. They played most of the snaps, and I think Eugene will play a strong percentage of the snaps, but Cedric would go in or Khadry would go in and we'd be fine.

Q. Do you change any of the calls like to tailor specific to Eugene's strengths or to the flipside of that, to stay away from his weaknesses, or the system is the system and you're going to stay with this scheme and he's plugging into it?

JAY BATEMAN: You know, so I think Eugene and Chazz had a lot of similar skills, and I think when we recruit for that position we're looking for that kind of guy.

I mean, certainly there's some changes. I don't really want to like -- I kind of want Texas A&M to figure those out by halftime, know what I mean? So there will be some changes. But honestly they're very similar guys. They both are really athletic. They both can really run. So I think there will be a lot of similar -- there will be way more similarities than there will be differences.

Q. I was just wondering, I assume your first match-up against Jimbo Fisher calling plays and just wonder if you get a feel for the way you calls games. Does he remind you of any play-caller you've gone up against in your career?

JAY BATEMAN: So I've been talking to Stacy Searels for the last two weeks because he was his O-line coach and trying to get a bead for him. I think he's a tremendous football coach. I think he's a tremendous play-caller. He

does a lot. So I think schematically he gives you a lot of conflicts, probably as many conflicts as anybody we've played.

I have a lot of respect for him, a lot of respect for their players. I don't know if he reminds me of anybody else, but I do think this: I think he's committed to running the football, and if you don't stop the run, the rest of it doesn't really matter. I think like a lot of people, that's where it starts, and he's got some really talented kids to run the football with and a really good O-line. That's kind of been our focus, but he definitely is going to give us some challenges for sure.

Q. How would you characterize your defense?

JAY BATEMAN: I think we like to kind of be aggressive, try to -- I don't know, defend the run, try to take the run away, make you throw the ball. I don't know. Pretty multiple, do a lot of different fronts. Hopefully you're going to say, man, that Bateman guy is pretty smart. Hopefully.

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