

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

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Texas A&M Aggies

Hard Rock Stadium

Mike Elko

Press Conference

Q. I guess I'll start with the obvious one. Your thoughts about, I guess, the challenges that Sam Howell poses, and does he kind of put him in the same kind of class as the guys you've faced like Mac Jones and Kyle Trask?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think Sam is an extremely talented quarterback, throws the ball very accurately, and there's really no limit to how far he can throw the ball. That's one of the things that jumps off the film is just his arm strength to throw the big ball down the field is extremely impressive.

Yeah, I think this goes back into an extremely balanced offense that can hurt you a lot of different ways, throwing it and running it, and making sure that we're tight in coverage and that we don't give him open-access throws to make it easy for him.

Q. Mike, does your preparation change at all when you see the guys that they have opt out, the two 1,000 yard running backs, their top receiver?

MIKE ELKO: No, I don't think so. Obviously we have a tremendous amount of respect for the North Carolina program. Mack has done a great job recruiting there since he's been there. Obviously those are extremely talented players that have chosen not to play in this game. But we're operating under the firm belief that there are more talented football players in that program that they're going to put in and easily fill those roles.

Q. Just wanted to ask you about your three years at Texas A&M, what's been kind of the most rewarding aspect of this time?

MIKE ELKO: Wow, that's a broad question. It's been a heck of a ride. I've told our kids this a lot this year. Extremely proud of how far we've come as a unit. Probably just from a mentality and culture standpoint more than anything, how we go about our day-to-day business,



how we approach preparation, how we get prepared to play games.

I think we have made some tremendous strides behind the scenes in all of those areas, and I think that has kind of helped, obviously, the product on the field become better as we've been here over three years.

And also extremely proud just of how they've handled this season. When you get your hopes up that this year could be a really good year and then you deal with all the obstacles and hurdles that we dealt with this year, obviously those kids showed a tremendous amount of maturity in handling it the way they did and continuing to do their work and go about their business and doing it the right way.

Q. You were one of the more vocal coaches, I guess, on social media after the College Football Playoff committee made its decision. How do you help your guys get over that disappointment and then focus on business at hand? And that's North Carolina.

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, quickly and easily. Obviously we believe we had a tremendous season, but that was for that day. The day after that, you kind of employ that same 24-hour rule, which is, it's on to the next task, and for us the next task is winning a New Year's Six bowl, playing our type of football, playing the way we're capable of playing in the Orange Bowl. You quickly get a really talented opponent in front of you and you start watching film on them, and you realize how much energy and effort this thing is going to take for us to go out there and have success in this game, and it becomes a really easy transition to just move on to the next thing.

Q. How have you seen Aaron Hansford really progress this year? Obviously with Anthony opting out a lot has been put on his shoulders, but how have you seen him come into his own this year?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, Aaron has had a really good year for us. Like super proud of how he's done that. It's been a tremendous growth for him from last year kind of being a 3rd down player to having to take on the ownership of being out there every down in the game, going through the run schemes, knowing the run fits, knowing the pass drops, not just being a blitz, which is I think what he is

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exceptional at, and really has embraced that challenge.

I think probably maybe more than anyone in our program he's gotten better every single time he's gone out there on Saturday and played, and so we think he's become one of the better linebackers in the country. Really happy for him and everything he's done.

Q. Great run defense, but you did have a few games where you gave up some yardage. When you went back and looked at those games, were there common themes why a few teams were able to run the ball against you?

MIKE ELKO: No, I don't know if there were common themes. I think in this day and age with offenses attacking you sideline to sideline, it takes a tremendous amount of discipline to defend the run because you're not just defending three yards and a cloud of dust anymore.

I think any time you get lapsed in what you're trying to do and how you're trying to fit something and where your eyes are supposed to be, any time that relaxes in any way, shape or form you put yourself at risk to give up big plays in the run game. I would say maybe in some different ways, that led to some of the lack of execution in the games where people were able to run the ball.

Q. If I could follow up, are you where you thought you would be in year three, and what's left? Is it just better talent and more depth across the board?

MIKE ELKO: I don't know where I thought I would be or where I thought we would be. When you get into these jobs, you just kind of put your head down and just try to work to get better every day. I had no expectation of where we would be.

I still think we are just scratching the surface of what we are capable of. And I don't mean that to sound any way other than it does. I still think there's a lot of room for us consistently to be a more dominating defense play in, play out. I do. I know we've had some success this year and there's been games where we've shown up, but I still think we're just scratching the surface of what we're capable of.

Q. What is the main emphasis or two to your defense when you're taking on a team that is statistically as balanced as North Carolina?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think this game is going to be a lot about winning one-on-one match-ups. I think the way they play offense, they're going to spread you from sideline to sideline. If you commit numbers to the run, they're going to throw it. If you try to commit numbers to the pass, they're

going to run it. And they're going to put their kids in space where they're getting one-on-ones.

In different ways across the board, we're going to have to find ways to win one-on-one match-ups, whether that's up front, O-line versus D-line so that we can play boxes where we're able to stop the pass a little bit cleaner, or when we do commit to the run that we're winning one-on-one on the outside with our DBs. I think that's the trick to these high-powered offenses that go sideline to sideline. Someone has to win somewhere in order for you to be successful.

Q. You are No. 1 in the SEC in total defense, No. 2 against the run. Do you talk to your guys about the wrecking crew lineage and do you feel like your players have earned that label this year?

MIKE ELKO: So I appreciate you asking me that because I want to make sure everybody understands our stance on this. We are honored when the term "wrecking crew" is thrown around in reference to this defense. We understand how important that is. It's a Texas A&M tradition, and how important that is to this fan base. I think when our guys say or I say we haven't earned that or that's not something we're chasing, that was a successful era of Texas A&M defense. That was not something that could be accomplished in four quarters, one game, one season, one moment.

If we can get to the point where over the course of years we are playing at a very, very high level and we are helping this team win championships, that's what the wrecking crew means to me, not just like hey, you guys came out and played a good game, so the wrecking crew is back. I don't want to undersell what that group did for Texas A&M football.

But I also respect the heck out of that tradition and am honored any time people use it to reference us. But that's just not a name that we want to be throwing around lightly around here. We know how important it is to people.

Q. What makes DeMarvin Leal such a special player that goes beyond the stat sheet?

MIKE ELKO: I don't know if I can answer that. He just walked in the room. No, Marv is a special kid because he's one of those kids that is supremely talented but also has an extremely high-level work ethic. I think he's a kid who isn't just relying on his talents to be successful. He's continuing to work. He's continuing to grind. He gets better every time he goes on the field. And his energy sometimes is really infectious for our group because he kind of leads us out there through some of the dull

moments of practice.

Q. I was curious from your standpoint, the defense has gotten better in a lot of different areas, but is there one that you're most particularly gratified to see this year in terms of the improvement that was made, one that just kind of said, hey, we need to get better in this area and we did, or you saw the effort that went into that?

MIKE ELKO: I don't know if there's one area. I think I'm happy that there were games where we went out there against SEC West foes and were able to play like a championship-level defense. I think that's something we have challenged our kids all the way across the board since we've been here that if you want to be great in this league, in this division, there's going to be times where we have to carry our weight heavily, and we've been able to do that.

You know, and then I think everything needs to make sure we understand this, too: Defense and offense go hand in hand, and when you run the ball like we do and you control the line of scrimmage like we do and you get to spend as much time watching our O-line move people like we do, that helps, too. Let's not undersell that element of this thing.

I'm proud of this team and how this team has grown from a physical standpoint and how we approach games and how we get after people.

Q. Generally speaking, when you look ahead to where you'd like to see your career go, is head coaching something you'd like to get into at some point, whenever the right opportunity presents itself?

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, I think everyone has ambitions for their future. But those things are just kind of on the back burner. When you're at a place like I'm at, when you're in a program that is one of the best programs in the country, when you're extremely happy in College Station, living in the area we live, it's not something that you spend a lot of time focusing on, to be honest with you. I know people like to spend a lot of time focusing on it, but I'm just extremely excited and honored to be the defensive coordinator at Texas A&M.

Where my future takes me or what happens in the future, I don't really spend a lot of time worrying about it.

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