

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

Buddy Johnson

Press Conference

Q. Buddy, I'm just curious, was there a point or a moment early in the season or in the off-season when you kind of felt like things came together and you had a chance to be really special on defense?

BUDDY JOHNSON: You know, after that Alabama and that Florida game, we knew we had to look ourselves in the mirror and get things together. It started in practice. Guys were just flying around. We wanted to get better. We wanted to make a change. Ever since then, it's only been up from there. I'm extremely proud of the way this team has taken everything, with the circumstances that we've been having to deal with.

But after that Florida game things turned around. You could tell a big change, not only in the game but we could tell that in practice.

Q. After you had some of the opt-outs over the off-season, did you as a senior leader at linebacker, did you feel like you kind of needed to step in and provide some of that leadership to make up for that?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Most definitely. You lose key guys like that, and guys have to step up. You can only be proud of the guys that stepped up, that handled it the right way like Aaron Hansford and Chase, guys on offense. Those guys stepped up huge for us. Aaron Hansford, he's turned into a great linebacker. He came from the offensive side of the ball like me, so there are some things I taught him to help him make that smooth transition.

It's a lot that goes into it, and I'm only proud of the guys that were able to step up for us.

Q. Is there anything in particular that you did teach Aaron moving forward?

BUDDY JOHNSON: I knew that was coming. I can't give you the juice like that, man.



Q. Buddy, from what you've seen of the North Carolina offense, what challenges will they present you guys?

BUDDY JOHNSON: You know, I think they have a great offense. Their quarterback is very great. He stands out on film. He can throw the ball and he can throw it very well. They had two opt-out running backs. We were excited to go against them, but they have other great running backs that's on scholarship, just like us.

And like I say, we'll prepare the right way and we'll be ready for whatever they throw at us, and I'm sure we'll have a great game plan. Coach Elko always gives us his best and we go out and try to give him our best. We'll see how it goes from there. As long as we prepare the right way at practice, we'll be just fine.

Q. Coach Elko mentioned this could be a game that you have to win those one-on-one battles the way they spread you out. Is that something he's emphasized to you guys and how much do you take on that challenge?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Most definitely. Our guys up front, they do a great job. Those guys don't get talked about enough, and just the way they move and free guys -- they free up the linebackers. That's one of their jobs that a stat doesn't get talked about enough. They do a great job with what they do, but like I say, the type of offense they run, you have to be sound in what you do and just be smart and be where you need to be when you need to be, and those are things that will be very important.

Q. Buddy, as you get ready to prepare for this last game this year as a senior, what can you tell us about your experience at A&M over the last four years?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Oh, man. You know, just the change when Coach Fisher was hired, the change -- I remember the first time he talked to the team, he came in the locker room, guys were joking around. He came in, he snatched his glasses off just like that, and he was like, what are you laughing at? There's nothing funny, it's straight business. Ever since then you can tell the change, the sense of urgency around the building and everything else that comes with it. Man, he talked about coming in and changing the culture, and I think he's did just that.



I'm only proud to be one of the guys that were able to help him lay that foundation and make a change and just being able to be a guy that Coach Fisher can say, those are some of the guys that helped change the program around, you know, that's something I'm only blessed and extremely happy about.

Q. What is it about Elko's defense schematically that's allowed him to be so consistent in terms of slowing down the run over the years?

BUDDY JOHNSON: You know, like I say, the D-line, they're everything. When the D-line dominates the line of scrimmage, we don't have any problems. Like I say, the stat that doesn't get talked about enough is the D-line, freeing up the linebackers. We're able to fit and flow fast, and that's just part of his scheme, the way we do things around here. Guys being locked in. Communication is a big deal, guys being on the same page, and he harps on that in practice a lot, and if we're not communicating to each other, he's yelling at you, and I'm sure y'all don't want to be yelled at by Coach Elko.

Q. If you and Hansford do leave, give me one name, who's the future of the linebacker position?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Man, there's a lot of great guys in that room. That room is fired up. Chris Russell, I like the way he moves. He's a guy that's learning and progressing a lot. He's very athletic, very fast. He's a guy that came a long way, and he can only get better. Guys in that room making big time plays -- y'all have been seeing Andre White, he's only getting better week by week. He's getting smarter and he's understanding the game more, and he's able to go out there and play more comfortable.

So guys like that just out there every day -- like I say, guys in that room are preparing the right way. Guys are ready. I'm sure when their number is called, they'll be fired up and ready to go.

Q. Any big events in your life lately?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Yeah, man, I can only spill the beans. I'm sure y'all have seen that. I had a daughter recently. It's only a blessing for me because my father haven't always been around, so for me to give back to someone and just -- it gives me another reason to go out and play on Saturdays and another reason to go hard at practice and little things like that is what matters.

My mom raised me the right way. My mom, she was always my rock and she's always been there for me, so for me to be there for her, like my mom was there for me is a

big thing for me.

Q. What's her name?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Her name is Aaliyah Johnson.

Q. We are talking about your daughter, right?

BUDDY JOHNSON: You're talking about my mom? No, my daughter's name is Aaliyah Johnson, my mom's name is Michelle Stevens.

Q. Do you guys feel like you have to beat North Carolina to prove that you should have been or belonged in the playoff?

BUDDY JOHNSON: That's the talk. Not around here, but that's the talk around. For us, like I say, it's just about controlling what we can control, going out every day and preparing the right way. You know, for us of course emotions were high that day, but the day is over with and we can only move forward. We're excited about the Orange Bowl. The Orange Bowl is a great bowl. I heard we haven't been to a New Year's Six bowl, shoot, since before I was even thought of.

So it's just a big-time blessing for our team to get this far, and man, I'll tell you, guys are fired up, and man, the biggest thing for me is like what I keep talking about is the way the program has changed, and it's only the beginning. It's only the beginning. There's a phrase I'm sure y'all know that says, "It's always calm before the storm." It's calm right now, but the storm is most definitely coming, and guys should be worried for sure.

Q. What was your reaction, because you've had such a great year, so what was your reaction when the all-SEC came out and you weren't on it?

BUDDY JOHNSON: As everyone knows, I've never been in it for the rewards. Like I say, my D-line should get all the rewards. Those are the guys that do all the hard work. And just for me, just to see all the guys around me getting rewarded is more so for me because as a leader of this defense, I want to be one of the guys that were able to help those guys get to where they want to be in life. For me it's only about leading guys and being there for guys. It's been a hard year on everyone.

And like I say, we play in a great conference. We have great players. There's obviously something I need to get better at, and I can only look at myself in the mirror and get better at those things.

Q. Kind of piggy-backing, there have been examples

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

of teams that just missed the playoffs and then got to the bowl game and really didn't give their best or didn't show their best. Do you see any signs of that? And did you guys guard specifically against that in your preparation for the bowl game?

BUDDY JOHNSON: No, I don't. Ever since Coach Fisher has been here, we've been 2-0 in bowl games and that's only because of the way we've prepared for them. We've prepared like it's a National Championship game around here. We don't get lost in any of it. We have our fun after the game or whatever, but while we're down there, it's still a business trip for us, and we handle the things we need to handle.

And like Coach Fisher always says, control what we can control. I think we do that and we do it the right way. We handle our business like I say, but it's still important to us. Putting a cap on this season is what we're focused on right now, and that's something we look forward to doing.

Q. You and the seniors are kind of in an interesting situation because this year of eligibility doesn't count, you can come back next year if you want to. Have you thought about that at all in terms of weighing the decision whether to pursue the NFL, whether to come back here? When will you make a call on that?

BUDDY JOHNSON: The big question. You know, I've thought about it, and like I say, it's only -- a player can only dream of going to play in the league, but at the same time, everything that Texas A&M has rewarded me has only rewarded me more than I could ever imagine. But the things that Texas A&M can offer me with coaches and my teammates, that family bond, that family atmosphere, getting better as a player, so it's a lot to think about. Whatever me and my family comes up with, but I've been talking to my mom a lot about it, and like I say, that's my rock over there, so however she feels and however we feel together.

But it's a lot to think about, and like I say, it would be a win-win situation for me because I trust the coaches and the guys around me. I respect them a lot, the way they handle business. Like I say, it would be a win-win situation regardless.

Q. Buddy, we hear Jimbo talk about this a lot. This team learned how to win. Can you describe to us why this year it clicked?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Practice. Just like I say, the way we prepare in practice, it's amazing. It's night and day. You turn the film on from last year to this year, practice. It's not even about the game, it's the way we prepare at practice,

guys flying around more, emotions get high at practice, but guys are able to calm back down and finish practice because once a team makes a play on you, you get frustrated, but what you're going to do after that frustration, are you going to let it continue to eat you up all game or are you going to wipe it away, clear the lens like Coach Fisher says and makes the next play.

No one knows what is the big play. The big play is the next play, so being able to control what you can control and focus in and lock in on little small details is something we've improved in a lot.

Q. Obviously if you move on and some other seniors are moving on, is this program here to stay in the top five and eventually be in the Final Four?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Yeah, there's not a question at all. Like some of us say around here, ain't no question. Man, I'll tell you, with Coach Fisher, everything he's done, like I said, it's only the beginning for this program. He's built a culture around here and that's how things are going to roll around here. It's just going to be like that.

Q. Who or what do you think poses the biggest challenge, whether it be just this game or moving forward in your future endeavors?

BUDDY JOHNSON: Who what?

Q. Who or what poses the biggest challenge, whether it be just this game or in future endeavors?

BUDDY JOHNSON: The biggest challenge?

Q. Do you feel like North Carolina or what you've got coming next?

BUDDY JOHNSON: The biggest challenge for me will be being where my feet are because I have a lot going on right now. So being able to eliminate the clutter, I'm not saying there's any clutter, but at the end of the day it's business. Me being able to focus in on what the task at hand is, being where my feet are would be one of the biggest challenges. As long as I take it the right way and prepare like I need to, I think I'll be just fine, but that would most definitely be one of the biggest challenges for me.

Q. I don't know if anybody has really asked you guys this, but with COVID-19 and it being kind of a strange year, leading up to the bowl did you guys get to do a lot of fun things, cool things? Is that going to be really curtailed? Is it going to be strictly a business trip or are you going to be able to do anything fun?

BUDDY JOHNSON: I'm not sure. Whatever they have for us we'll be there. Right now, like I say, we are where our feet are. Right now we're preparing the right way. It's business. As of right now it's business to me. It's business to guys around me. That's just the way we plan on rolling and doing things.

You know, like I say, at the end of the day a bowl game is about going down and having fun, but at the end of the day it's still about winning and doing your job, so for us it's a business trip, but at the same time we look forward to having fun, as well.

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