

Capital One Orange Bowl: Tennessee vs Clemson

Saturday, December 31, 2022

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Josh Heupel

Joe Milton III

Squirrel White

Aaron Beasley

Press Conference

Tennessee 31, Clemson 14.

JOSH HEUPEL: First, I said it during the course of the week, but thank you to everybody involved with this entire setup. The Orange Bowl committee, South Florida, the hospitality has been second to none. This has been a special game for me in my past, and I've always been treated the right way here. A fantastic week for our staff and for our players, great experiences for them, and obviously it culminates tonight with a great win for us. Thank you to Vol Nation for showing up in the way that they did, fun to see them fly in from all across the country and come and help us go compete tonight. I appreciate everything that they've done, not just tonight but on our entire journey this season.

It was awesome, fun to see so many VFLs, former players show up during the course of the week four days prior to game day and they started showing up in droves out at practice, around the hotel. It was great to get an opportunity to connect with you guys.

You guys have built an unbelievable legacy here, and it's something that we're continuing to strive to go chase and embrace every single day. Thank you for the legacy that you've left.

All season long we've talked about learning how to compete and finish at the end. This month the message was really consistent with that, as well. It was about finishing our season, finishing this legacy, for the guys that have been here the last two years or whenever they came in, I'm not sure a group has done more in a shorter amount of time to help revive a prominent program the way this



group has.

So proud of the players and the staff, the connection that we have, being accountable to one another, loving to compete and doing it together every single day.

Tonight was a lot of fun. Unbelievable defensive performance. Special teams were rock solid, and Joe and the offense were able to find a way to make a bunch of big plays and get the ball into the end zone. Great night for Tennessee. The best is yet to come, but really excited about what happened tonight.

Q. Coach, what do you say to people who insist still that bowl games don't matter, and what was the significance of the win tonight?

JOSH HEUPEL: Man, bowl games matter. You watch them every single day, you can see the energy, effort, strain, the excitement, the disappointment on the other side. They matter. It doesn't mean that everybody has everybody for the ballgame. That's just the nature of where we're at during the course of bowl season.

But it matters for everybody that shows up. It matters to the head coaches, the assistants. It matters to the fans. It matters to the players. These guys are prideful. Clemson is prideful. When you line up and compete, man, you're going to compete with everything that you've got. These are rare opportunities. 21 years ago, whatever it was, I got an opportunity to play here inside of this stadium, and the memories that I have from that, I don't talk about my playing days a lot with these guys. I'm old enough that some of them weren't even alive, but I think they bought into that, that these moments matter, and it's something that they will remember for the rest of their lives.

Q. The significance of it?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, it continues to put our brand, the style of football, and it's a legacy moment for the guys that are here that are graduating, but it's a springboard for us moving forward.

Again, our brand is out in front of everybody. I think we've

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

beaten three out of the last four national champions during the course of this season. 11-win season, which hasn't been done since 2001. There's so many positive things, so much momentum inside of our program that the entire country, our players, our fan base, recruits, can see the trajectory of where Tennessee is and where it's going.

Tonight is a big night.

Q. Joe, you're such a cool, calm guy. It doesn't ever seem like anything rattles you. Tonight you had it all on display. What were the emotions like for you when you're making those passes?

JOE MILTON III: Pretty much just got to stay calm. That play is going to happen. When it happens, it's going to happen. When you come to the sideline you've just pretty much got to stay equal headed. The next play got to happen. You have to move on to the next play. The last play you can't go back and change it after it's done. After those couple footballs that was thrown downfield, I was pretty much just humbled, as I always am, pretty much just -- I smiled a couple times, but it's fine.

Q. Aaron, for you, big game tonight, had a couple sacks in the first half, several tackles for loss. Talk about your growth as a player as you continue to hone your craft at linebacker.

AARON BEASLEY: Yeah, just buying into the coaches, listening to the coaches, loving on my teammates. My teammates push me. I couldn't do it without my D-line and my back end. Just shout out to them, shout out to the coaches. They keep me going.

Q. Joe, you're coming from Pahokee Florida, representing South Florida here tonight at the Orange Bowl and being the MVP, how does it feel doing it in your own backyard?

JOE MILTON III: It feels great. I've pretty much been talking about it the whole month ever since we figured out we were coming down here. It was a statement game for Tennessee but also a statement game for me playing at home.

Q. For Josh, Joe was sort of filling in for Hendon, Squirrel for Jalin, Aaron making plays that Jeremy would make during the year. You have three guys here that all stepped forward. What's the philosophy that you have where you can plug and play and still stay at this elite level?

JOSH HEUPEL: Next man up. You can phrase it however you want to. That's not coach speak. We talk about it. We

live it every day. We talk about competing the right way and preparing for your opportunity. You don't know when it's coming.

We've got young guys that continue to get better. I like the fact that our guys love being in the building. They love learning and growing. They enjoy who they're doing it with. It allows us to continue to take strides, individually and then collectively as a football team. Where we started and where we are now in that way is so different.

We've got good young players. We're losing some really good veteran guys, obviously, but the future is freaky bright for Tennessee football.

Q. Joe, it looked like you were looking for Hendon there on the stage and then he gets up there and shares that moment with you. I know some of this process he's been Zooming in meetings, Joe was talking about in the locker room how you did the call sheet together. What's this been like leading into this bowl game sharing this with him, kind of his presence still a part of this team even though he's been hurt?

JOE MILTON III: For me, me and Hendon lived together for this whole semester of school, so just watching film together every day, just enjoying these moments that we have. Any play can be your last, so we pretty much just every time we go home, pretty much just talk the game plan out. After we talk it out, he'll come back to my room probably at like 1:00 and say something like I don't really like that read, how do you feel about it. We'll talk about it. It doesn't matter what time it is. We'll get up in the morning for meetings --

JOSH HEUPEL: I think you're in bed at 10:30 every night; what are you talking about?

JOE MILTON III: But other than that, it just felt special having him up there. He put in a lot of work for this. If you want to be truthful, he got us here. I had to get it done for him.

Q. Can you talk about why your defense was so effective tonight and what some of the game plan was that you executed?

JOSH HEUPEL: Obviously there was a ton of pressure, multiple in our fronts. I thought we did a good job against the run game. End of the first half got a little bit tired, they hit some on us, a little bit in the third quarter. But multiple coverages on the back end, and we played better gap integrity. We tackled better in space, and we were better in our coverage, not perfect. Obviously the PIs were disappointing on our part, but continued to fight and



compete.

Great red zone defense, situational football tonight. You've got to get points when you're in the red zone, you need to get sevens, and defensively we found a way to tighten up when they were on the plus side of the 50, and on the field goals they didn't make many of their attempts, and found a way to get off the field. Created turnovers, too.

Q. Kind of going off of that, the Tigers were held without a touchdown for just the second time this season in the first half. Obviously a lot has been made about Clemson's top-notch defense. Do you think people kind of counted you guys out in that way?

JOSH HEUPEL: I think our defensive players continue to grow. We had guys that were playing in the middle part of our defense, more reps than they had been during the course of the season. It's a prideful group. We continue to get better. There's some youth back there.

The fact that we had more health in the secondary with more opportunities to practice allowed those guys to go out and play in a better way. Throughout the course of the season, training camp, last spring, just those guys didn't -- they missed a lot of opportunities to improve, and I thought they got better during the course of this last month after the end of the regular season.

Q. Squirrel, I'm not going to let you get off easy on this one. When you found out Jalin and Cedric weren't going to be playing in this game, how did you embrace stepping up and taking on a larger role?

SQUIRREL WHITE: Yeah, I just went like to Bru, Ramel and just stayed in the building extra and just worked on my game and stuff, extra film, and I knew I had to step up and stuff.

Q. Squirrel, back-to-back for you here. Overall, just to touch upon that, can you just talk about the receiving corps just the talent of it overall, and in your opinion what stands out about the receiving corps of this team?

SQUIRREL WHITE: Yeah, I feel like we're the best, like all of us come to work every day and we just ball out and stuff.

Q. On the field afterwards I heard you say the best is yet to come. That seems to be a mentality you've had throughout your tenure here. How often do you preach that to the guys in the room, and where do you think that comes from for you?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, I just know that where we started,

where we've gotten to, but there's so much left out there for us. It's in individual habits, it's in us continuing to improve in communication as coaches, refining what we're doing inside of our building, as we continue to develop depth inside of our program, recruit.

One of the great lessons, I said this to the football team after the game tonight, is two years ago there was so much outside noise that wasn't necessarily positive, and none of those guys paid attention to it. They decided collectively and individually to go accomplish something, and they worked for it.

If you set your mind to something and you work, you really can go up and accomplish anything. That's a great lesson for this football program, but it's a great lesson for these guys as they move into life.

As we continue to move forward, everybody inside that locker room understands there's a whole lot left out there for us that we can improve upon, that we can control, that can help us continue to climb as a program.

Q. Josh, Hendon Hooker Zooming in for meetings as he had his knee looked at and being a presence here, what has that meant and what has he meant in the last two years?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, the fact that he's committed to this program and to his teammates, to Joe in some ways, that he wants to be a part of this experience, that he wants to finish his legacy here the right way, I think it speaks to everything of who he is. This program has climbed -- this is not taking away from anybody else inside of the building, me included, this doesn't happen without Hendon. I say that meaning -- these guys would say it, too. He's special. As you build a program, you've got to have somebody that's selling your message from inside that lives that message every day and gets the locker room headed in the right direction, and Hendon wasn't the only guy that did that, but he certainly was spearheading it.

There were a lot of guys that started moving us in the right direction from the inside out.

Q. Josh, when you describe it as freaky bright a few minutes ago, what does that look like to you? You have those freshmen, whether it be Squirrel, Josh Joseph, Elijah Harris, played a lot more reps and snaps tonight. What's that future look like in your mind?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, playing electric football on the offensive side of the football field, scoring a bunch of points, defensively being aggressive, fearless, ferocious,



and being the best defense in the country, and having that same mentality on special teams. Like we're just getting started in what we're developing here.

I love coming to work with these guys every single day. We continue to recruit, man. Tonight our brand is in front of everybody again on a national stage. It was a primetime game, and they got a chance to see who we are, how we play, how we compete together, the connection, the energy, and man, I think someone wants to play an exciting brand of football and have more fun than they can imagine, man, this is a great place to come compete on Rocky Top, and an unbelievable fan base.

Q. Squirrel, I talked to Joe the other day, and he said that you guys kind of developed a relationship when you first arrived, and he just really trusts throwing it to you down there. How much has he helped in your development over the last year?

SQUIRREL WHITE: Yeah, when I first got here, I was rolling with all the twos and stuff, and Joe would be my quarterback. He was just like hitting me and stuff and trying stuff and just found like a --

Q. Was the ball coming hard, Squirrel?

SQUIRREL WHITE: Yeah, absolutely knocked me off my feet, yeah.

Q. Aaron, what was different defensively for you all until Clemson got to scoring range and once Clemson got to scoring range? It looked like two different defenses in some ways.

AARON BEASLEY: When they got in the red zone and stuff? I just feel like -- I don't know, I just feel like we played better when the pressure was on and they were about to score. We didn't want them to score. I feel like that played a part in our schemes and stuff like that.

Q. Squirrel, kind of a funny one, but have you realized that your name is buzzing on social media because your name is Squirrel?

SQUIRREL WHITE: Yeah.

Q. You looked it up already?

SQUIRREL WHITE: No, no, no.

Q. Joe, you said this was a statement game for you. What kind of statement do you feel like you made?

JOE MILTON III: The Vols are back on top.

Q. Josh, what do the next few weeks look like for you? After the season is over, a lot of changes, you've got hires to do, rosters, who's coming back, that kind of stuff. Can you walk us through that?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I was going to try to enjoy this one. Thanks for ruining it. (Laughter.)

I want to enjoy a couple days with my family while I push forward on some of the problems or the issues that you already talked about. We've got recruiting the 4th through the 8th and we'll move forward on staff and all those things here as the beginning of January unfolds.

Q. Josh, you said that getting back in the rhythm of calling plays wasn't going to be an issue. Was it?

JOSH HEUPEL: No. First of all, we've got a great staff. Joey Halzle does a fantastic job, Glen Elarbee does a fantastic job. Those guys have been with us forever. Tonight we probably weren't in great balance early on, but some of that was what they were doing on the defensive side of the football.

Q. Let's talk about some of the greatest memories that you have from this season because there are a lot of them.

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, man, you think back about this season with this group of guys, finishing it the way that we did here will certainly be a great memory. Some of the huge wins during the course of the season, inside Neyland Stadium, Florida, Alabama. As much as anything, though, you really do remember just the daily interaction and the journey that you're on with these guys every single day, in the meeting rooms, out on the practice field, eating dinner with these guys.

I talk to them a lot about it because in my playing days, when I look back on those days, it's not just the playing that you remember. A lot of it's just the small interaction, the moments that you get a chance to hang out with your brothers. It's been a really special journey here with these guys this year.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

