

PAC-12 Conference Championship Game: Oregon vs Utah

Friday, December 6, 2019

Mario Cristobal
Kayvon Thibodeaux
C.J. Verdell
Oregon Ducks

Oregon 37, Utah 15

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Oregon.

Coach, go ahead and make some opening remarks.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Kind of like we just talked about there and on the field, couldn't be more proud of a group of men, I believe they outwork everybody. They are made of the right stuff. They've created a culture that is second to none. A night like tonight validates all their hard work.

Certainly honored to represent the Pac-12 North and extremely excited about winning the Pac-12 Championship tonight.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Coach, no one has been able to run on Utah all year long. What were the keys today?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It was a little bit of everything. It starts with the players, their commitment to establishing the run. Their film study, the way they practiced this week. The way that the line blocked. The way that Herb carried out his fakes and ran with the ball as well. The way that C.J., and Travis and Cyrus all ran the ball. Quite frankly, I think maybe these guys all week long got a little bit tired of hearing we weren't the more physical team. It gives you a little bit of an edge.

But it was all us. These guys, these players, they made up their mind they were going to establish the line of scrimmage, and they did.

Q. C.J., as players did you take some offense to the talk about the run defense all week?

C.J. VERDELL: Definitely put a little chip on our shoulders. We try not to focus on the outside noise too much. Hearing they're the most physical team in the Pac-12 made us want to come out here and work even



more harder.

Q. C.J., as you hit the hole for the 70-yard touchdown, what are the thoughts going through your head?

C.J. VERDELL: Just get to the end zone, man. Pretty much get to the end zone.

Q. Kayvon, have you felt like you've been getting a whole lot better throughout the season? What was it like to play a really good game as a freshman in this big of a game?

KAYVON THIBODEAUX: The proof is in the pudding. We put a lot of work in practice every day, going to work, putting 110%.

I feel like I've gotten a lot better. I'm going to continue to get better. You could say it's only up from here, as long as I keep putting in the work, should see good results.

Q. Coach, with the outside talk about the Pac-12 not being a physical conference, your defense held teams to below a hundred yards rushing. What does it say about the state of the Pac-12 right now?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Firstly, I don't know why it's so quiet in here. It was pretty happy in that locker room. Hopefully you are excited about this stuff, too, now.

If you look at our defensive front seven, theirs, as well as both offensive lines, there are a lot of NFL players, a lot of Sunday players on both rosters. I think what you see happening is the recruiting landscape of the Pac-12 is getting strong really, really quickly. Development is at a premium right now.

We've taken monster steps in the direction of establishing ourselves as that kind of a team. It's all a tribute to these guys, the way they attack the blueprint every single day. So I think it speaks loudly of the direction of the Pac-12.

Q. Kyle was in here before you guys. He mentioned your linebackers tonight and your pressure schemes. Can you talk about those two factors.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Absolutely. It starts with the guys up front, tying up their offensive linemen and tight ends, allowing our linebackers to play free. With that it goes with the fact that Troy and Sampson and Isaac, they did

so much, Lamar, they studied so much film, they felt like they had a really good beat on what they were doing as it relates to tight end sets, shifts and motions, communicating, getting calls passed down, passing off crossers, knowing when they're in man, knowing when they're zoning off, then flat out playing with physicality and toughness.

Tremendous job by them just putting in time, grinding at it. It showed up on the field tonight.

Q. Talk about how suffocating the defense was tonight.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It was off the charts. I also saw they had zero red zone scoring chances, if that is accurate. When you look at those numbers right there, you look at a defense that was just committed to being a dominant force tonight. They did it in the run game, they did it in the pass game. They made a couple of plays as well, credit to them, because that's a really good football team.

The way our defense played tonight, the way they flew to the football, took on blockers, shed blocks, I can't say enough about them. They certainly were such a huge factor in the game.

Q. Coach, Brady Breeze was all over the field tonight, making tackles, grabbing that interception. Talk about how much better he's been getting throughout the year, and also how important it was that he set the tone early.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: You knew they were going to line up in two and three tights, they were going to shift in motion, get downhill with power, counter, inside zone, outside zone, split zone. Your safeties are going to have to play big; right? They run the alleys for you, they're the support players.

Brady just did a great job of getting downhill when he had to. Also did a good job playing out there in center field when he had to make that interception. Played with great eye discipline tonight and physicality. It certainly made a big difference.

Q. How is your headset? What happened on that play to cause you to throw it?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Did I throw a headset (smiling)?

Q. In your game plan, did you want Justin to run, did you think that was a good plan?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: The last question, I'm sorry? The headset, I felt the ball play was being held to the point where we lost an advantage, that we were going to have to burn a timeout. I shouldn't do that to the headset. Headset had nothing to do with it.

Q. Justin running the ball, was that key in your offense?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yes, we made that decision. We haven't run him much this year. There's been a reason he's been upright all year. Reason why we worked our way and won the conference championship. Never had to play without our quarterback.

Tonight the way they play cover one, man coverage, they squeeze the ends, they press wide receivers. Justin was going to have to use his feet to make some plays. He was outstanding.

Q. If you had played an easier opponent in your opener than Auburn, you might be in the playoff talk right now. Is that a flaw in the system?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I don't know. I don't know if I'll get in trouble in talking about systems. I think there has to be a lot of weight placed on winning your conference. You can go through your conference and win your conference, especially one where you play nine conference games like we do.

That has to, and needs to, carry a lot of weight going forward because, look, these guys will tell you, they want to play the best teams in the country all the time. They're no way that we're going to go away from that mentality to try to schedule down to appease whatever. I guess I should stop there before I get myself in trouble; right?

These guys, they deserve to find out how good they are by playing against the best. So we're going to keep doing that.

Q. To win this game today you had to win in the trenches. You did. Do you feel that is a Mario Cristobal stamp you are putting on this team, the physicality?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's their stamp. I have zero credit in this. This is all about the players. This is all about the way that they work, the way that they grind, the way that they learn and develop. These guys have learned a lot about themselves as a team, as a family.

That's the secret sauce. The blueprint is there, we put it down, but they're the ones that attack. If you attack in a certain way, you get results like this. That's what's transpiring. That's where all the credit needs to go. It's them.

Q. Coach, this senior class was 4-8 their freshmen year. Now they have a conference championship. How great for the program does that feel?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's validation. It's validation for all that they've done. I don't know if anyone here has been through a 4-8 season. I've been through one of those.

It's about as horrible and miserable as it gets. It causes some people to break down, some people to quit, some people to leave. Then there's a core that just puts their foot in the ground and says, We're going to change things.

They had to change things in the midst of change; right? There were coaching changes, all kinds of staff turnover. That is a special group of men, to be able to do that. That speaks loudly and speaks worlds about what they are in terms of their DNA, in terms of them as people.

I'm very passionate about that because the world would be a better place if you had guys that would grind out like they did, if that was the way it was for everything. They deserve all the credit in the world.

Q. How excited are you on a scale of 1 to 100 about tonight's victory?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: No, it blows that away. I'm excited for these guys. Look, because of what they do, I want it, I always said it - I should have told the other guys - I wanted to see these guys dance in ticker tape. I wanted to see them have that moment. I don't wear any rings, any of that stuff. I wanted this experience for them.

Now they have that as part of their life. They could say they were the very best at what they did because of their accomplishment throughout the season and again tonight. Huge, love it.

Q. C.J., what are some of the emotions going through your mind as you are named MVP of this game?

C.J. VERDELL: Man, first of all, I got to give all the glory to God. I couldn't have done anything on that field without the O-line. They made the holes, paved the way for me to give the big runs. I got to give it all up to them.

Q. C.J., you are joining LaMichael James as the second most all-time rushing in the Pac-12 championship game. What is it like to be with someone in that class?

C.J. VERDELL: It's great, man. LaMichael James, he was a legend here in Oregon. To be with the likes of him, it's just a blessing.

Q. Do you know him, met him?

C.J. VERDELL: Not personally. I've contacted him through social media and stuff. I have his Killer Burgers. Those things are pretty good actually.

Q. With the seniors building things up, you guys are young, what does it say right now the future of

Oregon football being built on a Rose Bowl trip right now?

C.J. VERDELL: I would just say just going to keep motivating us to keep working hard. This is a steppingstone in the right direction. We're going to keep going from here.

KAYVON THIBODEAUX: I think we made it a point to let our seniors go out with a bang. We all kind of just bought into it. We put in the work, so why not bask in the success? I don't see any decline, I don't see anybody that wants to quit. Everybody wants to live up and fill the shoes, yeah.

Q. I'm not sure if you've been to the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day. I know C.J. and Kayvon haven't. Your thoughts about being able to play in the granddaddy of them all, the ambience of that game, what it means?

KAYVON THIBODEAUX: For me it just sounds like another Tuesday.

C.J. VERDELL: I'll repeat what he said: another Tuesday. Ready to get back to work, ready for the opportunity.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: These guys are going to get some time off because they need it and they deserve it. It is a tremendous honor. I've never been to the Rose Bowl before. I watched it, know the pageantry and everything that goes with it.

It is as big of a stage as there is in college football. The best part about it is that these guys and their teammates have earned it 100%. It was not given to them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Thanks, guys. Go Ducks.