

San Diego County Credit Union Holiday Bowl: Iowa vs USC

Thursday, December 26, 2019

Clay Helton

Kirk Ferentz

USC Trojans

COACH CLAY HELTON: Good morning, everybody. Like to start off by saying thank you to the Holiday Bowl and the City of San Diego. What an unbelievable experience, not only our media family, but our football family has had this week.

Mark Neville, we'd love to thank you, the CEO of this Holiday Bowl, and all the Red Coats for their hospitality has been nothing but first class all the way through. Captain Brett Crozier of the USS Theodore Roosevelt; the kids got to be on that battleship, and experience that was a unique experience and a lot of fun; and then yesterday being at Sea World, I literally got to see 21-year-olds turn back into 12. That was something to see and a great experience for our football team.

And now the most fun, to have the opportunity to play a great University of Iowa team tomorrow in front of the City of San Diego. Both fan bases, going to be a great crowd and will be a great experience. It's been great week of preparation for our football team.

We'd like to thank Southwestern College and their hospitality for allowing us to use their facilities, and you know, we look forward to the opportunity tomorrow to put on great show, both universities. With that, thank you.

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Thank you. First of all, feels kind of strange to be the home tome in California when we're playing Southern Cal. Their trip here is probably a little less eventful than ours.

It's great to be here, certainly, and we're thrilled about every aspect of this thing going back to when we received the bid from Mark and Paul. So kind for them to consider us and to select us for this game.

I have personal experience going back 32 years ago as an assistant. We were here in '86, '87, had just an unbelievable experience and it's even better now. San Diego is a town that's certainly changed a great deal, but one thing that hasn't is the hospitality extended by all the Red Coats and everybody associated with the Bowl.

It's been first class for our players. They have enjoyed every bit of the experience, the naval ship, the zoo. Things that we certainly can't duplicate in Iowa City and an opportunity to play a really outstanding football team Friday night.

Every bit about the trip's been great and we're just thrilled to be here.

Q. Just wondering over the years and the many Bowl trips, when you come to value the most about these trips with your team?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Every venue is different, certainly. We were in New York

City a couple years ago, so nobody is going to complain about the weather on our front for sure, but what a great trip that was.

I think the games are always challenging, exciting, always difficult. But the single best thing for me is it's an extension of our season. We get another month to be together, to practice together, and be together and enjoy another great experience.

So that's the best part. It just prolongs the season a month. Yeah, offers the players a lot of rewards that they richly deserve after investing so much since last January.

Q. Coach Helton, Iowa's defense is a bend, don't break. Anything similar you've faced during the season in the Pac 12?

COACH CLAY HELTON: It's one of the best defensive fronts we've faced all year, and I think they do a great job on first and second down efficiency. They are so well-coached. You don't see them missing assignments or getting out of gaps and if they get you in third-and-long, they are elite. I truly believe their pass rush on third down allows them to play advantage coverages because they can rush four and get to you, and that's always a deterrent for offenses.

You have to stay in that third-and-manageable against them, and that's how they are, that bend-but-don't-break, because they get off the field. You look at that third down percentage efficiency, it's one of the top 20 in the country, and as well as their defense, and it's the reason that they are only giving up 13 points a game.

Q. Remind you of anyone you've played?

COACH CLAY HELTON: You know, it being a four-down front, playing some quarters coverage, safeties that are ultra aggressive, reminds you a little bit of Cal and what they do with Justin Wilcox, a big front that is athletic, good linebackers, good front, with a secondary that just doesn't blow coverages and the safeties get heavily involved. I would have to say probably Cal and that defense.

Q. Coach Helton, with some of these -- at the end of the season, with your athletic director -- does this Bowl game in particular feel like a fresh slate, fresh start, or do you even think of it in those terms in?

COACH CLAY HELTON: I'll be honest with you. Since the day that Dr. Carol Folt, our president, and Mike Bohn, our athletic director, have come on campus, I have felt nothing but support. You know, for them to be able to evaluate a season and say: Hey, Coach Helton is our guy, we want to give him the tools and resources and support needed to be able to take that next step from a Top-25 team to a National Championship team, is one that as a head coach, you're very appreciative for.

But also, it's something that I look forward to and it started to be honest with you right after the season. You looked at the first steps of being able to keep a Graham Harrell here, who I think is one of the top offensive coordinators in the country and to extend his contract was an initial statement right off the bat.

For me it's the next game and the next opportunity. It's kind of like Coach Ferentz said, to be with your team for an extra month and to be able to play a top-25

opponent, No. 16 in the country like Iowa, it just helps us for the next step.

We are going to look at this game and the focus and the preparation that we put into it. It's going to be very similar next year. You look at our schedule next year, there's probably six top-25 opponents that are going to be on that schedule. So what a great opportunity and a great experience for our kids to be down here in San Diego competing against a team like the University of Iowa.

Q. Have you made a determination on Markese Stepp for this game?

COACH CLAY HELTON: He'll be out. Just has not progressed the way we want to, and his confidence level is not there. He's practicing. But when you're talking about a 230-pound man, that has to put a foot in the ground.

For us right now, I go by three things: Is he medically cleared, is the confidence level there and how is my gut on it, and right now the confidence isn't there and I don't feel good about it. So we'll hold him out for this game.

Q. Can you talk about building on momentum in this game going into next season? Over the last two months or so that you've had practices, where do you feel like the team has made the most strides?

COACH CLAY HELTON: Probably the twos and threes to be honest with you. Gaining those extra reps for some guys that are on the cusp of playing, and some guys that have given us some valuable minutes, also, you look the a Dorian Hewett, Adonis. You look at a Kenan Christon, those guys that are going to really have to be factors for us in the near future; those guys that are sitting right on the cusp of even having a larger role and contributing more, I think that's probably where it's been the most over these last three weeks is to be giving those good-on-good reps to them and allowing them to put things on tape that we can grade off of and educate them on.

Q. For both coaches. Once the game is over, we enter about a month of almost player free agency, whether they go to the pros or transfer. How do you approach this upcoming season when you know you have a few players who may decide to either jump to the NFL or decide to leave the program? What kind of conversations do you have with them, and how do you balance your self-interest with the best interests of the players?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It's pretty simple. We'll just continue dialogue. We've already tried to present accurate information regarding the topic you're talking about, and we've given them all that. We'll go into more depth after the new year here.

Right now our focus is on this game, quite frankly. We've asked the players to put it aside. They have done a great job of that. They get it. They are mature guys and they understand it's all about this game.

Plenty of time for everything else afterwards, and quite frankly, one nice thing about playing the 27th, we get a little bonus time to think about stuff and that will be one of the topics.

Right now I could care less. I'm just thinking about this football game. That's the beauty of football, don't have to worry about all that for the next 48 hours, whatever's left. That's one of the best things about it. We'll just kind of zone it out. Get to it when it's appropriate.

COACH CLAY HELTON: I'm with Coach Ferentz. I'm so appreciative to our kids and our staff. They have really focused on this football game and the importance of this football game, not only for the future of our football team next season but what an unbelievable opportunity, and I think that's why you see from freshmen all the way to seniors, in preparation, have really competed their butts off over the last three weeks getting ready for this game.

And then afterwards, you know, there is that time. The NFL, you don't have to declare for the NFL -- I think the date is January 20th this year; that we have provided some accurate information to those young men that are considering it. We have already provided that.

But I think every story is different, and you have to take the time with each and every kid whether it's a graduate transfer or it's a young man that's making an NFL evaluation, to be able to sit down with themselves and their families and be able to hit their pros and their cons, because every one is different. Every situation is different. I don't think you can treat them all the day.

There's some guys that are going to be Sam Darnold and be a top three pick, and you say, you know what, you're not going to be drafted any higher, this is as high as you can go. So if you choose to make this decision, man, I support you. That's why you came to USC.

And then there's some young men that are in that graduate transfer model that you say, hey, you know what, right now, I don't have a crystal ball, but right now, this is where you stand on our football team; if we had to play another game today, this is where I think you can go to. This is how we can help you get there.

And then just provide them the most clarity and transparency you can so each family and each individual can make the best decision for themselves.

Q. You've had several losses in the last few years -- I imagine that's never easy. This week, Coach Fry; are you hearing his voice in your head a little bit, certain situations in practice, kind of reminiscing?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Not necessarily any of those moments, but I alluded to the two years we were here, and that was near the end of my time here as an assistant. Rita Foley actually said it a couple days before we left. Made the comment about this is probably his favorite Bowl to go to, and it's easy to understand why. Maybe had one of those moments that day.

You know, the biggest thing is I think his impact just overriding with our program is so significant, and same thing with the Big Ten. He changed Big Ten history in my opinion, and obviously changed Iowa Football history forever. You know, his impact, and then on top his vision, whether it's the Tiger Hawk, ANF sticker. All those things

that he was able to think about and see, that other people probably just didn't have that ability.

He's a huge reason why I'm here obviously. Every day, you think about that.

Q. Will you have (indiscernible) available?

COACH CLAY HELTON: Right now with the foot sprain, it's about 50/50 to be honest with you. He got some work yesterday. We'll see where everything lies at the end of today, but I think you know, right now, it's 50/50 at best. He's fighting as hard as he could. Fought yesterday. But we'll see.

Q. This is about as healthy as you've been in a while --

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully we can get through today and tomorrow. We always seem to have some drama.

Again, we see arrows going up right now with guys, they have been out working. Great to get Brandon back. I don't know if he's full speed but he's pretty close. He just hasn't played in a while, but great to get him back.

We had a couple bumps in the road earlier in the week but looks like both those guys will be fine. They have been back working and hopefully make it to the gate here without any more drama.

Q. How much do you value the Big Ten and Pac 12 matchup?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: As long as I have a voice at Iowa, hopefully I'll have it for a while, we're not playing out here non-league games. If they want to come to our place, that's fine. But traveling out here and doing the time change, and then you know we had a two-hour rain delay at Arizona State, we're not going down that road again, I can assure you that.

Bowl game is a whole different deal because you have a chance to get out there and get acclimated a little bit. I think it's outstanding because I think the conferences are very, very similar just in terms of their philosophy towards the game and towards academics. Not trying to get on a pedestal, but always felt like the Big Ten is the epitome of what college athletics should be about. And I think there's a reason with that association that's so longstanding with the Rose Bowl; I think there are a lot of parallels there.

It's exciting for us and it's truly a foreign opponent because there aren't many crossover games, so when you come out, beginning of the month, you're starting from total scratch. Fortunately you have some time to get ready and just familiarize yourself a little bit with the roster, and all those kinds of things. It's real, truly a fresh approach every time.

COACH CLAY HELTON: It's a great moment to be honest with you. This is the reward you get for the finish that both Iowa and USC had, finishing so strong down the stretch. You get to play these type of big games, and I think that outside the Playoff, somebody told me there's only three Top-25 matchups and to have a Big Ten/Pac 12 matchup, man, that's special. No. 16 versus No. 22, with these type of

fan bases that do travel, let's all live in the moment because the moment is going to be fun tomorrow.

Q. Have you decided what you will do tomorrow to honor Coach Fry?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We made an announcement earlier in the week that we'll take the Tigerhawk off the helmet. Our governor had the flags in our state lowered to half-mast; she suggested that last week. This is something Coach Frey did during his time as a head coach during -- following two tragedies, two tragic events, and we just felt like it was a really fitting way to try to pay tribute to him, and it was really well received by his family. That's the most important thing from my aspect is just having their approval.

Q. When you think back about Nate's three years as a starting quarterback, what stands out to you about the time?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Probably the first word that comes to my mind would be steadiness and dependability; I guess that's two words. They go hand-in-hand. He's just extremely steady. He's so dependable.

And then the other part, any football player it's good, but particularly for quarterback in a system like ours, or a system like USC's a young guy has got to really be mentally tough; he's got to be physically tough, and he's got to be poised. Their quarterback has displayed that at a very early age in a really impressive fashion.

I think Nate's done that his entire career. He's been a tremendous player to be associated with. We're all going to miss him but we're glad he's with us for one more game. I know he's looking forward to having a chance to compete one more time as a Hawkeye.

Q. (Inaudible.)

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Totally different. A flashback to our first Bowl game against Texas Tech. The roots of that whole system started back with Coach Leach, so it's going to be a big, big challenge for us.

It's a tough preparation and it's going to be tough to play them out on the field because they have got really outstanding players. Their receiver core is as good as we've seen. Just talked about the quarterback, he's extremely impressive, for any age, but for a freshman, it's uncanny how poised he is back there. He's slippery. It's going to be a challenge for us.

Q. Will this be the fastest you've played --

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: You know, the myth about the Big Ten I think gets a little blown out of proportion. We play some guys, you line up against Michigan, they have some guys that can move around pretty good and disrupt you at every position and I think probably a similar comparison there.

Yeah, their receivers, these guys get a million balls and they know how to get open and they know how to catch it and they know how to run afterwards and that's going to be a starting point but hard to find any position on the roster where they

don't have guys that are very active and very talented and very dangerous.

Q. In your experience, how possible is it to build momentum for the program heading into next season with a game that's so far out?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: There's no question it helps. But I also put an asterisk, we have experienced both. We're 8-8 I think in 16 games in the Bowls. There's a reason for that. Usually you're playing a pretty good team, so those games can go either way. It's hard to find a matchup where it's, you know, who is good right now in the NFL, Seattle, right, versus St. Mary's. You don't get those matchups.

So it always helps to finish on a positive note, there's no denying that, but it's not the end of the world either. It's not catastrophic if you lose. It's all about enjoying the game. Going out and playing as hard as you can like you do every week, and hoping that you play well enough to deserve to win and that's our goal for tomorrow.

But we'll handle the circumstances either way. It's certainly not the end of the season and it certainly doesn't anoint you to a championship bid next year, either. There's no down side to winning, either. It's better to win.

Q. Your quarterback -- information overload, how does a young guy process -- and what has impressed you?

COACH CLAY HELTON: Obviously there's trained and untrained and Kedon is one that's been trained by I think two terrific coaches. It was one of the reasons that when Kedon came in as a freshman in that spring training, he was an early graduate, it jumped out to us that the things that he saw and the things that he picked up and how fast he picked up the playbook was very unusual. It allowed him to continue that competition in the fall.

And there was a reason that he was put ahead of two upperclassmen. Not that the upperclassmen were bad players; he just was producing at a very high level. You resemble your coach, and I thought Kurt did a wonderful job with him and then Graham has done a phenomenal job taking over and allowing him to progress.

It's been neat to see him -- I'm a quarterback coach by trade and to watch a young man grow from game one to where he is now, that's what you want to see as a head coach, especially at the quarterback position. I thought our team would grow as our quarterback grew, and as he got better and more confident, more comfortable and became a better quarterback throughout the season, so did our team.

So he's a huge reason that we're sitting here today in San Diego.

Q. You mentioned you feel like you're a bit of a road team -- how much are you counting on the Hawkeyes' fans traveling to San Diego?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I think any indication, I took a walk last night and saw a lot of black and gold all over the place. It's great. From what I hear, the stadium is going to be really electric tomorrow night, great crowds from both sides.

Our fans traditionally travel really well, and you get a destination like San Diego -- the trips in the '80s and also in '91. It's all good. Any help we can get from anybody else, we're all for that, no doubt about it.