

Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs. Tennessee
Camping World Stadium
Tennessee Volunteers
Head Coach Josh Heupel
Press Conference
December 3, 2023

JOSH HEUPEL: Good evening, everybody. So excited to be with you here today and be the representative to be able to talk about us having the opportunity to go play in the Florida Citrus Bowl. Our entire program is so excited to have the opportunity to come to the City of Orlando, represent Tennessee Football and our university on New Year's Day. This is a huge opportunity.

Appreciate Steve Hogan and everybody associated with Florida Citrus Sports and choosing Tennessee, it's been a long time since we've been able to be down in Orlando and we are looking forward to the opportunity of coming back.

For myself, it's an area that I'm familiar with. Our family is, as well. We're really excited about the opportunity to be there. I know that our players are going to enjoy a great week of festivities as they have an opportunity to partake in some of the things that are available there inside of the community.

Excited about being in Orlando, playing in this football game. It goes without saying that we understand the quality of the that we are facing in Iowa. It's a proud football program. Coach Ferentz has done an unbelievable job over his tenure there. You look at them winning their division two out of the last three years, having an opportunity to play for their conference championship last night. Statistically, you look at them, they are one of the best in college football defensively.

It's a program that prides itself on playing hard, playing smart and playing physical, and they certainly do all of those things.

Again, looking forward to the opportunity to be down in Orlando playing in a great game, one that as a kid I grew up watching on New Year's Day, and excited for the opportunity.

Q. Obviously Iowa has got one of the best defenses in the country. What do you know of their defense, and what do you think about the challenge of playing against the different style of defense they have?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, haven't had an opportunity to watch a lot of them as we are wrapping up the season here. We have been in communicating.

I know philosophically, they haven't changed a whole lot over the years. They are big, strong and physical, first and second level. Have really good athletes on the third level of the defense. You look statistically, they are always difficult to run the football against. They typically do a great job on third downs.

You look at them statistically this year, their pass defense is one of the best in their league and across the country, as well.

They make you earn it. They are not going to give you anything. You have to go out there and take things and earn it. They don't make mistakes. They play with great discipline and fundamentals.

So this will be a huge test for us on the offensive side of the football.

Q. I understand you were part of the game back in 2011 when you were on the Oklahoma staff in the Insight Bowl. Am I correct in saying that?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yes, you are.

Q. What do you remember from that prep? You worked a lot with the Stoops brothers and Coach Norvell, so you have a lot of connections to Iowa from just prep and the cultural connections. Iowa's maybe most important player is their punter. How do you scout a punter and how do you prepare for what a weapon he is for Iowa on both sides of the ball?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, I haven't watched a bunch of him but I do know statistically, one of the best in the country and has been a huge part of flipping and changing field position for them.

You know, just spent a lot of time, as you mentioned, with the Stoops brothers, Jay Norvell. We had a lot of other guys, Chuck Long, Jonathan Hayes, those are all guys that were a part of my playing days and part of my coaching career that have a long history that played their football at Iowa.

You know, it's a program, as we prepared in 2011, you knew it was going to be tough, smart, physical, disciplined; that it's a football team that doesn't beat themselves, and you've got to go out and match those things. Haven't had a chance to watch the tape yet but I know those things are still true with Coach Ferentz leading that program.

Q. You alluded to it but can you talk about the excitement that goes into returning to the Orlando area for yourself and also your players that are from Florida, including John Campbell is from Orlando obviously but just the excitement of you returning to the area and what it means for your players not from the area as well?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, for our players from the area, it's an opportunity to get back home. So many family and friends that are going to have an opportunity to watch them play

but get a chance to be a part of the entire week in the buildup to it, and you know, those guys have great pride, first of all, but are going to take a great amount of pride in their preparation the way they go play and having an opportunity to share that experience with their family during the course of the week.

For myself, some of our staff that was with me, not previously there, so many friends that are in the area, have an opportunity to catch up with them. We absolutely loved our time. It's a great city. It's an opportunity for us to get back to an area that we love and are extremely familiar with.

Q. Obviously Bowl games, there's an angle of using those practices to help your younger players. You obviously have a pretty big group of young guys on your team. How will you kind of structure the next few weeks as you guys sort of get ready for the game and balance next season versus getting ready for this game as well?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, we had a couple of young guy emphasis practices last week as we were conducting our exit interviews before we got out on the recruiting trail. Our older guys were there for some of the individual, just getting movement, knowing we were going to be gone for an extended period of time before we got back this weekend.

But our young guys were able to get really good intentional work in some of our group settings and all of the team stuff was designed for them.

So we'll continue that as we get back off the road this weekend and we'll always have -- we'll always be extremely intentional in continuing to build those guys in. Some ways, it's an extra spring ball for those guys.

We'll have high school midyear guys that will show up in the middle of December, as well, and they will get their first exposure to college football.

Q. As a former quarterback, I want to get your perspective on decision-making as it relates to playing time. We see a difference in stance on this across the country. How much do you weigh or balance how a quarterback is playing in practice versus what you're actually seeing on game day? I don't know if you can put a percentage on your evaluation process, but obviously some guys are quicker to pull the trigger and put another guy in for a quarter or a series. What's your stance on quarterback?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, there's no perfect science, no equation that gives you a percentage of what you should be weighing. In general, though, whether it's the quarterback position or other things, the phase that you're saying in practice are inevitably going to show up during the course of a ballgame, too, positive or negative.

As a coach, whether it's quarterbacks or offensive line or DBs or whatever it might be, you're going to put the guys out on the football field that you feel give you the best opportunity to go win a football game, and all the little things add up to the big things that everybody sees as you go and play in a football game.

Q. I know we've asked you about the timetable of like COVID seniors and meeting with them to find out if they are coming back, but what about the opt-out guys, the guys that are NFL Draft prospects, do you have to know now whether or not they are going to play in the game, or is that a conversation later in the month?

JOSH HEUPEL: Well, I think that's something that typically happens as they get closer to finalizing their decision. You know, last year, we had a good bulk of guys that were going to be in the draft that ultimately participated in the Orange Bowl.

This is a great game against a great opponent. You know, certainly hope that we get a bulk of our guys that are going to help us go be ready to play on January 1.

But as those guys continue to have their conversations and inch closer towards a decision on whether they are coming back for a year or going into the NFL Draft, you know, those are things that you continue to talk about with them at that time.

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