

Vrbo Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs Kentucky

Saturday, January 1, 2022

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Stoops

Will Levis

Wan'Dale Robinson

DeAndre Square

Press Conference

Kentucky 20, Iowa 17

MARK STOOPS: Thank you very much. First of all, thank you to all the folks from the Citrus Bowl. Our players enjoyed themselves. They obviously have found a nice balance between enjoying beautiful Orlando, the sunshine, all the fantastic hospitality that everybody gives us here and also putting in the work to beat a quality football team like Iowa.

You know anything about them, you know they are not going anywhere. The first half, I felt like we were really playing very good football. I would have liked to see us capitalize in the red zone and score some touchdowns to create some more separation, but give them credit. They don't make it easy. I felt like, you know, at halftime, one of the last things I said was believe me, they are not going away, but neither are we.

And we knew it would be a 60-minute football game and again, it was. Our team is used to playing a lot of close games, tough games, against quality opponents, and that was the case today.

So once again, thank you to everybody involved. I have a great appreciation for our players and our team and our coaches, and I really feel like they have done a great job this week. In the preparation, we were down some players, and that stood out today.

Some youth and some inexperience stood out in the second half, but that's no excuse. We need to play better, and guys need to step up, and I'm proud of the guys that did. I'm proud being short-handed in certain areas, moving



guys around in certain areas and stepping up and being able to beat a quality opponent in Iowa.

This is not easy to get to this game. It's not easy to win ten games, and just proud of the effort from everybody involved.

Q. You've seen some great individual performances in your time here, but what Wan'Dale did today, when there's so much attention to him and everybody knows you don't have a ton of receivers to try to get the ball to, can you contextualize how difficult it is to do what he did on that last drive?

MARK STOOPS: It is really hard to describe what he has meant to us. He is the ultimate competitor, and you know, he's very selfless. He plays extremely hard. He plays the game for himself, his family, his teammates, this institution, the state.

You know, just plays so hard and makes such competitive plays in big moments. And that's what you need to win a Bowl game, to beat quality opponents. You need your guys to step up and make plays when you need them. And he certainly did that.

I believe that was in the second quarter, the long conversion, the diving catch. Heck of a throw by Will. Not much open on the whole field. They had us in a bad spot, third and forever, and Will makes a tremendous throw, and Wan'Dale lays out and makes that catch. We get that three there, I thought that was very big to convert on some points there.

Q. I know you don't like to rank wins, but considering all the guys you were down, your defense seemed to be -- to come back and win the game, especially against a program like Iowa, it has to be a very satisfying win.

MARK STOOPS: It really is. You know, it's tough. It's tough on a lot of people right now. I feel like our team has handled the protocols as best we can. We've really been in pretty good shape, but we started having some issues between injuries and some COVID protocols. It put us in a



tough spot, and we have some inexperience as it is, in particular, on defensive side of the ball.

And I just really greatly appreciate the way guys stepped up and competed. The two guys you're going to visit with here in a minute, Wan'Dale, I already talked about, Will, and I believe DeAndre is coming in -- DeAndre got hurt. He knew he couldn't come out. We were getting thin. And the way he played through that pain, I don't know how he did it. It just says a lot about this team.

Q. What does it say about the culture you've built that you guys had so much adversity and so many key guys missing; it looked like you were wearing down defensively, and you stopped them the last three times maybe and gave the offense a chance.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I don't know if it was the last three, I'd have to look at the draft (ph) chart, but I know the last one or two there in particular, when we went for it on fourth down, I put him in a tough situation, and fortunately for us that ball was intercepted and saved us about 12 yards and defensively we got that stop.

So it was monumental. It was the game. Our guys rose to the occasion. Offensively our guys converted. We knew coming into this game how good Iowa was defensively. They make you earn the yards.

In the second half we didn't do a great job as a team. Defensively we had an opportunity to pin them. We didn't let them. We let them drive it. They ran the ball well in the second half. That puts -- that limits possessions and it puts us in bad position. But we fought our way out of it. Somehow, somehow, we fought our way out of it.

Q. Y'all had a couple short yardage situations, why did you go to Chris at the end to punch it in?

MARK STOOPS: Well, it was a read. They took -- they took a lot away. They actually had that taken away. Just made a miss.

WILL LEVIS: Made the wrong read.

MARK STOOPS: Well, they had taken you away several times, too, so they were making it difficult. You know, they are trying to get the ball out of Will's hands as well, and they had a guy there with Chris. Chris made them miss, and you know, you could always second guess plays. I mean, you know, they are tough sledding. We knew that going into it. I want to say early, we converted a third-and-two with Will with a read (ph), and then we tried it again and got stopped, and we tried to give it to Chris and got stopped. We tried a little bit of everything.

Q. I know you knew coming in that you were a little thin at receiver and maybe Josh wouldn't be available, but some of those guys, like Dare, how much were you able to prepare without them, did you wake up today and find out he couldn't play?

MARK STOOPS: Dare was questionable the whole time with a couple issues. Don't really want to get into too much. Well, you know he had one issue, the elbow injury he was dealing with and then something else popped up as well. So we were able to prepare, but doesn't make it any easier. They have some guys that can rush that puts pressure on you and you have guys playing new positions and so on.

But again no, excuses. They played hard and we played hard. Our coaches started chipping, started helping the left tackle a little bit and giving him a little bit of time, and we got the ball down the field.

I felt like we had some very good success with these two throwing the ball when we could spread them out on early downs. Again, field position hurt us on several possessions. We were backed up and needed to get a couple first downs, air it out a little bit and spread them out and get some space.

But once again, give them credit. We knew they make it difficult.

Q. This is your fourth consecutive Bowl win, and this is multiple times where you guys have come down to the final couple drives. What does it say about your program and the resilience of your team to fight to the end to win Bowl games?

MARK STOOPS: We are used to that. We have won a lot of close games. I think it comes down to our players caring about each other and having a toughness and having a resiliency about you. You know, respecting the game. We talked about playing the game with honor, and you know, they do that. These players do. This is a player-led team.

These two guys right here are new to our program, but they have had an enormous impact in our program and fit right in and have become leaders and really made a big difference this entire year. They made a very big difference today.

Q. For Will and Wan'Dale, a guy not in this room, Chris Rodríguez, did a lot, and you had a very balanced attack today. Can you speak to his contribution to open it up for you to get down the field there?

MARK STOOPS: I'm sorry, I was talking to him --

Q. That was for both of you. You guys are the ones in the salt mines.

MARK STOOPS: Let Wan'Dale answer it.

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: C-Rod, he comes to work every week. There's definitely times during the week you could see he's banged up from the weeks before and how much we are running him. I think he's the best back in the SEC, and I think he's going to do whatever he can to get us those extra yards and not go backwards, and just always fighting for us. That's what makes C-Rod special.

MARK STOOPS: I'm going to get out of here and you can talk to these three guys. Does anybody have one last question before I pop out? Thank you.

Q. What are your emotions?

MARK STOOPS: You know, really, you're so busy in getting all your prep ready. My last messages to these guys and going through my protocol, really didn't think much of it. I went out on the field early, saw some people I knew, saw the colors. I thought it was cool, you know, just to see the Hawkeyes again. But then it was right back to business.

So I have a lot of respect for their program, but I have a lot of respect for these guys, too. So thank you all.

Q. For Will and Wan'Dale, the offense was off for most of the second half, but you got that second-to-last drive, got some momentum there and had one last chance. Where was your head when you got in the huddle into for the final drive?

WILL LEVIS: Lost my voice, going to try my best. Credit to the defense for getting the ball back to us, three-and-out, letting us get the ball back with three minutes and change. We were in a two-minute mentality, but gave us some breathing room to go out there and know we had definitely enough time to get things done.

Just trusting in our preparation. We've had a great three weeks of practice. Bowl game, you get more practice. So you have to take advantage of those days of practice, and we definitely did all the way up until our run-through yesterday. We had great Bowl prep and practice.

And we haven't been very successful in two-minute drives so far this year, so it's great to see the work on that pay off in the biggest moment possible.

Q. Wan'Dale, can you walk us through the play at the end that set up the game-winning touchdown? Seemed like you made a guy miss ten yards later. How do you know when you're going to go left, right, and can you walk us through that?

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: We had a cell (ph) concept, I believe it was DeMarcus, he took the corner out and I just kind of went underneath him. I got the ball, and once I turned, I saw a corner coming at me and wanted to make him miss and whoever else was coming, make them miss.

I don't really know how to explain it. It's just more of instincts. You just go out there and do it. I can't really tell you how to do it or what to do. It's just God-given I guess.

Q. You go to the locker room, you come back out there, you're running on the sideline before you go and you ask for your helmet. What's going through your mind? You probably have a lot of adrenaline and a lot of pain and then you get that game-stealing interception. How much emotions went through your head in those moments?

DEANDRE SQUARE: It was a lot of emotion because I was ruled out. I wasn't even supposed to come back in. But Coach Stoops talked about doing something bigger than yourself, and all I could think about is my teammates. I seen the way the game was going, and I just felt like I needed to step in no matter how I was feeling. We got a lot of days of rest. I can rest up, so I didn't care.

Q. I know Will has made his intentions known about coming back, and you guys flanking him have decisions to make. Are you close to making those decisions? Is that something you're still thinking about?

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: I'm going to sit with my family and talk and sit with them and do what I feel like is best for us, and I feel like that decision will come soon.

DEANDRE SQUARE: I'm definitely going to talk to people I love and see what's the best option for me, definitely.

Q. Will, could you talk a little about DeAndre, I was watching him talk about I'm ruled out, coming back, and you're shaking your head. The competitor that you are, what are your thoughts?

WILL LEVIS: Yeah, it takes a lot of heart to do something like that. It's kind of like storybook; it's a storybook ending, he gets ruled out, goes back in there. I don't know what they hopped (ph) you up with in the locker room, but it made you feel good enough to go play.

And to go back out there, not only just to play but to get the same-stealing interception, first of all, I mean, how many dropped picks have we had this year and then you make an acrobatic play like that? Just a storybook ending. I'm so happy for him, and he deserves all the recognition.

Q. Wan'Dale, I know you talked about you didn't get to play in a Bowl game at Nebraska and this was your first one. How important was this day for you, just the way you went out?

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: It was just special. I mean, if you know anything about Nebraska, that's a rival school for me. I've lost to them for two years in a row, so this one was a little bit more special, especially for the guys I played with out there, and then just personally I wanted to beat these guys and I wanted to finish out strong with my teammates here. So it was just good to get that win. It felt really good.

Q. Any one of you can answer this question. Previously I had asked the head coach about the importance of leadership on the team and how that translates into your culture. With a win like that, talk about the importance of how that leadership helped you guys get the win.

WILL LEVIS: Yeah, being new to the team this year, making the captain, to be a leader, was my biggest goal. I mean, kind of going off on a tangent, but a year ago at this time I was in a pretty dark place. I was looking for an answer from God as to like what I was going to do, whether stay at my previous school.

Ironically enough, those feelings kind of started settling in after I got yanked in the Iowa game. Getting benched doesn't feel good. And having to think about what I wanted to do, and to come here and make a decision, betting on myself, trusting God's light in coming in here and be a leader for this team, it makes it so easy when I have got guys like on my left and my right around me to go out there and be my best and do my best to lead these guys however I can.

We had those moments today in the game where it wasn't necessarily going my way, or our way, and we kind of had to just keep pushing, keep trusting, keep up a positive attitude, and you know, it came together, and I'm so glad it ended the way it did.

Q. When you made the decision to come back here and play for your home state, just what was in your mind? And then how this year has played off, has it exceeded expectations?

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: Definitely. Me coming home, I had the mentality of coming and working and just do everything I can to help our team win. And as time went on, they started trusting me more and more, just to do more and more.

So I just tried to do everything I could, and then everything came with it. And so I'm just extremely blessed that they gave me the opportunities to go out there and make plays like I did, and he gave me every chance I could to go out and catch all the balls I could.

Q. DeAndre, what did you see on the interception, how good a catch was that? And you guys rank artistically, better catch: DeAndre or that third and 26 diving catch?

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: Square got it.

WILL LEVIS: Square (Pointing to DeAndre).

DEANDRE SQUARE: I seen coverage, I was watching 48 because that's what they was targeting a lot, and I had my eyes on him, and it was like he wasn't even looking for the ball. Once I look back, I seen the running back, and I'm like, oh, wow. If he catches it, I'm going to have to make a tough tackle either way. I wasn't even looking at the ball and I seen something flying and I'm like, whoa, there's the ball.

I was like, okay, do I just let it fall or am I close enough to catch it? I'm like, I'm close enough to catch it, so I just get under and it fit right in the pocket. I didn't have to do anything. It fit perfectly.

Q. Sounds like you had a Karate Kid/Mr. Miyagi moment in the locker room?

DEANDRE SQUARE: I was in a lot of pain still but Marquan helped me out a lot. I was ruled out and I was kind of debating on, I was like, okay, I'm trying to wait for certain stuff to kick in but Marquan grabbed me. It was a time-out, he grabbed me. He like yanked me and was like, "We need you," and then something clicked at that moment.

I told Gabe to give me my helmet. He was like, "No, we got to see you run first," and when I ran I didn't feel any pain. I just could run, like you know, so I grabbed my helmet, I was like, oh, first play, no, this hurts.

Q. For any of you, with a win like this and the way you guys are recruiting, ten wins, what is the future of this program?

WAN'DALE ROBINSON: This is the standard, ten wins. That's what it is. Every year from now on, you want to win ten or more.

WILL LEVIS: Coach Stoops deserves all the credit in the world for what he's done with this program. This is obviously my first year with the team, and there were a lot of guys before us going back a few years that Square has played with that really built the foundation for what the program has been able to do right now.

So big thanks to them. I was able to see it firsthand when I lost here the first time in the Citrus Bowl. So I mean, yeah, like Wan'Dale said, this is the standard now, and we have to hold everyone else to the standard on the team.

Once these new guys and the recruiting class comes in, it's a great class but we have to make sure they come in with a positive attitude and looking to learn and get better because if they want to be a part of even a bigger step to the next level, whether it's a year six Bowl game or College Football Playoff or SEC Championship, we need to take it up a notch.

Q. Three years ago when you won this game, it was Chris who got the game-clinching play on the last play with the fumble. What did it mean to have him here with you all today, and what were you thinking about in the last play?

DEANDRE SQUARE: It meant a lot. When I seen him out there today, I just knew that I was going to have the ball at some point. And I was planning on running to give it to him, but the ref snatched it from me, so I couldn't do that.

But yeah, that's another person I thought about when I just wanted to be just like, yeah, I'm in pain and I want to stop, and I thought about him and I'm like, I've got to go. I've got to do this.

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