

Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs. Tennessee
Camping World Stadium
Tennessee Volunteers
Coordinators + Players
Press Conference
December 29, 2023

Offense

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, real quick before we go to questions. I can speak for the whole offense, really glad to be out here in the great City of Orlando. Obviously, for a lot of us, it is very familiar. Spent a lot of time here, and man, to be back in the Citrus Bowl, we all agree, it is a first-class organization all the way. Great Bowl. Great experience. Absolutely, top flight from this whole crew.

We are honored to be here, proud to be a part of it and looking forward to going and playing in a great game on the first.

Q. Seeing Iowa's defense all year, what do you see from Iowa's defense that perhaps makes this a different type of challenge than you've seen this year?

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, Iowa, obviously, you can see on tape, extremely well-coached. They play extremely physical. They tackle well in space. They scheme well. They are just a very sound, solid, strong defense from top to bottom. You see a lot of physical play up front, especially from their defensive line, their linebackers, they like to play physically, get their hands on people. They shed blocks. There is a reason their defensive numbers are the way they are. It is all the way to the back end.

Q. Considering how good this defense is and Nico has not had a start before, where on the spectrum of, like, cautious to aggressive do you think Nico should be, and what are you telling him to be in that spectrum?

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, it is not a tune-up game for a starter. This is a kid making his first start against one of the best defenses in all of college football.

I do not think you can go into it thinking differently. You have to go take what is there, whatever they are presenting to it, you have to go take advantage of it. You are still going to have to push the ball down the field. You are going to have to take check downs when they present. We are going to have to run the football well.

Football is still football at the end of the game. We have to block well. We have to tackle well. We have to catch, throw. We have to do all that type of stuff.

To do all of that, then, you are inserting a freshman quarterback in on top of this, where he has to manage the game. He has got to understand situational football, when to take the risk, when to not, all of that, when to scramble, when is a throwaway a good thing,

when is an incompleting a positive. All of those type of thoughts for a young quarterback is what I think you see young guys when they are making their first start get in trouble in sometimes.

Now, he does not handle himself like a young guy, so really confident in that. I think he is prepared well. I think he is ready to go, so looking forward to seeing what he has on the first.

Q. How many practices and snaps have you taken with Nico and what has the transition been like?

COOPER MAYS: He has been the guy all throughout Bowl prep. He has done well for himself. Like Coach said, he does not really handle himself like a young guy. We have had a few weeks here to gel and come up and give him a chance to get ready for the game. He has done a really good job, and he has done the best he can with it.

Q. What can you say about Joe Milton's tenure as a Tennessee quarterback, including staying with you guys and helping Nico through the Bowl?

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, man, what that guy has done for three years for us has been awesome. Like, obviously, to come in and go through what he did, getting injured and, then, obviously, when Hendon stepped in and started playing the way he did. Like sticking around, and not only not being a negative draw on the team, but being a positive influence to it – waiting his time and then stepping in and getting the full-time starter role.

Now he is leaving on his way out, doing everything he can to make sure that Nico is as prepared and as ready as he can, giving him insight. I cannot say enough positive things about that guy, man. He has been a great, what a VFL stands for; that is what I can say about him. He is just a big-time guy. Good character. Great, great ball for us, and I think the Tennessee fan base should be really appreciative of his three years here at the university.

Q. What stood out about Cam's development from the beginning of the season until now?

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, what has been great to see about Cam is he was at a school where he played everything in high school. He was playing quarterback, defensive end, running back, returning kicks, doing all that stuff.

It has been great to see him turn into what I call like an actual running back, meaning his understanding of protection, his understanding of I can not just grab the ball and run really fast. I have to let these guys up front set up blocks. I have to pace things. I have to press holes. I have to do all that different kind of stuff.

It has been awesome to see him not just want to be the big, athletic kid that wants to run fast, but embrace, okay, how do I become a complete and total back.

We have a ton of confidence going into this ballgame that he will be able to step in and perform at a high level.

Now, you lose two guys that have been extremely productive in the SEC for three years. I am not going to act like that is just a plug and place all the time, but if there is a young kid that can come in and handle it mentally and physically, it's Cam.

Q. There's a lot of attrition with the offense this time of year. What's it been like for you, Joey, trying to get everything organized for the Bowl game, and then Cooper from a leadership standpoint, kind of every position having attrition, how are you trying to lead the guys through this as well?

JOEY HALZLE: I think on the front end a lot of it is like, all right, who are we actually playing with. That is what the big, big thing you are getting to now in Bowl games. When you are starting your game week prep, plays are great, scheme is great, but the players matter more, so who are we actually playing with.

As you get down to it, you realize these are the guys we have and how do we put these guys in the best position to go be successful.

That is the main thing in Bowl season, what that has become, is with the opt outs and the transfer portal and all that stuff, who are the 11 that we are rolling out there with. Okay, these are our guys, now let us put them in the best position to be successful.

COOPER MAYS: For the leadership part, nothing really changes. The standards are going to remain the standards long after whoever is gone. Just rising to the standard and doing stuff the right way, handling yourself like a man, being there on time, doing stuff the right way, making plays. That is what we are here to do, and that is what we have been taught. So nothing is going to change based off who is there, who is not there.

Q. Joey, a year ago at this time you had become the offensive coordinator, and I know you had been in the offense a long time but where have you seen yourself grow personally in that role last year at this point to now?

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, I think last year at this point, it was just trying to figure out the right way to go about everything, trying to figure out how do I work into this.

Now, as I feel I am more comfortable in it after a full year of doing it. I have my routine. I know how I need to operate in a day-to-day to make sure I am as prepared as I need to be on game day to give this team the best chance to go be more successful.

It is morphing from trying to figure it out, make sure I do not screw something up. To, okay, this is my routine, this is what I need to do to be successful, this is how I need to prepare to feel prepared on game day and really taking that step as far as the day-to-day of how I operate with the team, staff and quarterback room, too.

Q. Joey, from your vantage point, working with Nico for a full year now, where is one spot or a couple aspects of his game that have taken the biggest jump from your vantage point?

JOEY HALZLE: In his defensive recognition, he really dug into that. A lot of freshmen quarterbacks are like, cool, teach me the plays and I will figure it out. He really wanted to dive into, all right, how do I judge a defense, what am I getting as far as tips and how do I know when I'm getting pressure, when am I hot, when am I not.

He has really dug into that. Like I said at the beginning, not like most true freshmen handle themselves. He was big into that side of it.

Mechanically, when someone comes in as highly touted as he was, a lot of times, they feel like they are finished products. He was not. He wanted to come in and be like, all right, what do I need to do to take my physical game to the next level as well.

He came in and was completely open with tinkering with the mechanics, his lower body, all of that. That is why I think he has made the growth that he has and why I think the guys out there with him have the confidence that he will go perform at a high level when he is called upon.

Q. Every quarterback has the routes and plays and protections they are most comfortable with. Nico, I'm sure his list is a little different. Have you had that conversation with him this week of what he's most comfortable in, or did you sort of already know that before you got here?

JOEY HALZLE: Yes, did we have -- last week or the week before the first week of the Bowl prep, treated it like a true game week, like we are ready to play when we break for Christmas.

We had the whole conversation of what are you most comfortable with on third downs, what are you most comfortable with in the tight zone, what are you most comfortable with as your first normal down calls. All of that has been talked about.

You feel like, but until a guy has a full week of prep, as the guy. I don't think they really know. They are kind of following, like, man, I actually am not comfortable with this, I am extremely comfortable with that.

As we work through that together, that has been a good working relationship. As a freshman, not being on the scout team, but being as a two all year, you have a little bit better understanding. Until a guy goes through an entire prep as the guy, they do not even really know themselves.

Q. What has Squirrel White meant to this offense this year and what's ahead for him?

JOEY HALZLE: Yeah, Squirrel, he is just an explosive play waiting to happen. That has been one of the biggest things for him is he has legit 10.4 track speed out there. You put guys like that on a bunch of grass and you let them go run really fast, cool stuff happens.

He has been the guy we can rely on to be, all right, we need to go take the top off of this right now, we need to go stretch the defense. Squirrel is a guy that can go out there and do it on any given down, any given snap.

He has been a big, crucial part of this offense.

Q. Without giving away the game plan, what are the challenges of tailoring things for Nico as opposed to what you would normally do for Joe?

JOEY HALZLE: I think it still starts with what defensively makes sense, you know what I mean? That is where it has to start. It cannot be like we have a freshman quarterback so we are not going to do this.

Yeah, you have to be smart about the positions you put him in. You do not want to put him in any negative spots where you are like, yeah, this might be a bad play, but let's see if he can get us out of it. That is not a process you go into with.

It still has to all start with what actually makes sense scheme-wise and then let us start refining it to what he is the most comfortable with.

Defense

TIM BANKS: Super excited to be here. We want to thank the Citrus Bowl for having us. I can tell you our families and all the players are having a tremendous time here in Florida, in Orlando. We are thankful for this opportunity, and we are definitely looking forward to taking on a really good Iowa team this Monday.

Q. Iowa's offense obviously has had some notable challenges this year. How much pressure do you feel like you can put on their quarterback with the defensive line that you have?

TIM BANKS: Yeah, we are obviously always trying to apply some pressure when we can. One of the things that makes Iowa unique is they are very rarely off schedule. They work really hard to stay on schedule, I should say.

We have to do a great job stopping the run, putting ourselves in a situation to be able to rush the passer. Right now, our main priority is making sure that we can put ourselves in a situation that would give us a chance to hopefully try to apply some pressure.

Q. Tim, it's been quite the month for the secondary for you guys, a lot of faces in and out. What's that process been like and how have you seen some of those young guys step up and prepare for their opportunity in the Bowl game?

TIM BANKS: Yeah, I think the key word is "opportunity." Obviously, we have had some transition back there, and we wish those guys the best. We are super happy for the guys that are here.

There are going to be great opportunities, some guys that have played some, some guys that have not played at all. But, at the end of the day, we believe in the standard being the standard regardless of who is out there.

We are looking forward to watching them perform this Monday. I know these guys have worked really hard and every single person in that room believes in them, and we are looking forward to watching them perform this Monday.

Q. How have you seen Elijah develop this year, and what do you think he can improve on moving forward?

TIM BANKS: Yeah, Elijah has had some challenges, obviously, but he has really done some good things for us as well. I think at the end of the day he is a guy, who had not played a ton the year prior, was kind of forced into the starting lineup because of an injury early.

I thought week in and week out he worked his tail off to put himself in the best possible position to be successful. We love the kid. He is one of the hardest workers on our team.

I think, just like everybody he has things that he can continue to grow in, and I think he is really fighting to do that.

We are excited for him. This will obviously be a great challenge for him, but I know he is up for it. It will be fun.

Q. Wanted to ask you about James Pearce and what has made him so successful, especially off the edge, and what's his upside?

TIM BANKS: Yeah, I think the sky is the limit for James. He is a tremendous worker for us. When we recruited him, we knew he had a tremendous upside, he had good size, good length, I should say, but he has worked really hard to put on the proper weight to get stronger.

Extremely athletic. I think he is just scratching the surface on how good he can be. He has, obviously, made a name for himself as a rusher, but I think he has a lot more versatility to him. We are going to work really hard the next coming months to make sure we continue to grow his game.

We are excited for him. It is hard to find that type of size with that type of athleticism, and we feel very fortunate to have him part of our program. To watch him grow, from the first day he stepped on campus to where we are right now, makes us extremely proud of the kid.

Q. Aaron, two things for you. One, what's going through your mind with a little bit of time in between games and knowing this will be your final game in the orange and white?

AARON BEASLEY: Honestly, I am trying to be in the moment. I am trying not to think about that too much. I love playing for this university, and I love playing for the T. I am going to enjoy every last minute I have doing it.

Q. Last game for Aaron sitting right by your side. What have you seen from him this year and since you've been here at Tennessee that has made him such a dynamic player and leader in the room?

TIM BANKS: I think that last statement – leader. I would not say he is the loudest guy when you walk in the room, but you can see his play, how hard he works, the way the guys respond to him when he does speak to them. It has just been awesome. You love to see guys grow and develop. To see where he is right now, we could not be more proud of him.

Tremendous worker. Instincts off the chart. We are definitely looking forward to watching him run through that T one more time and put it on stage this Monday.

Q. What can you do as a linebacker to help that young secondary and make their lives a little bit easier?

AARON BEASLEY: I would just say communicate. Communicate well with them. Making sure we are talking pre-snap before the play happens and making sure we are on the same page. I feel like once we are not on the same page, things do not go so well.

I would just say communicating with them before every play.

Q. Coach Banks, another guy who has played a lot of football for you, Jaylen McCollough, final game, his 54th start, what value has he brought to your secondary and defense?

TIM BANKS: It has been awesome. It is like having another coach on the field – extremely bright. Just a pleasure to work with. He is one of those guys who really loves the game. He is a guy that will text you, asking you about different plays in the middle of the night.

It has been awesome. I did not even realize it was so many starts, to be quite honest with you, until someone brought it to my attention a couple weeks ago.

We are proud of him. I think it says a lot about him as a man and his durability and being able to fight through some bumps and bruises.

We are excited for him. Not only has he been a tremendous player on the field, but, definitely, a great locker room teammate and a guy that we have enjoyed coaching through this ride.

Q. What's your scout on Iowa's offense when you watch them on film, and what do they do well?

AARON BEASLEY: I think they do well up front. I think the O-line does a really good job working together. I feel like they will show us some stuff that we really have not seen this year. They run a lot of 13-personnel and 12-personnel, and they will stay in that all game. I feel like that is a little bit different, stuff we really have not seen.

But overall, I feel like they work well together and they do a good job for sure.

Q. Tim, I wanted to ask about Iowa's passing game. It's been so anemic this year. You've been dealing with some losses in the secondary. How confident are you in the back-ups that are playing in this game that you have not seen as much this year?

TIM BANKS: Yeah, I mean, we are confident in our whole team. Like I said earlier, the standard is the standard. As cliché as that may sound, we preach that from the beginning to camp to obviously the Bowl game. Regardless of who is in the game, there is a certain level of expectations that come with stepping out on that field, and those guys understand that.

Again, you throw out all the records, in my opinion, the stats and all that stuff. The guys have had a couple weeks to get ready to work on things they need to improve on, no different than us.

We are going to go out there and put our best foot forward and do everything we can to try to get this victory. I think those guys have worked their tail off. They have been working their tail off. They are excited about that challenge, and we are going to go out there and fight and try to get this victory.

Q. Can you describe, as an assistant coach in college football today with today's landscape, what December is like for you with all those moving parts right now?

TIM BANKS: Chaos. Is chaos a good word?

It is definitely challenging. It is different for me. I have been doing this for a couple decades, and this is obviously a new landscape for everybody, but it is what it is. You have to be able to navigate through it. I think the programs that grow will be the programs that handle it the best.

Like I said earlier, we love our guys and the guys that are here, and we wish the guys that left the best, but it is just the nature of the beast right now. It has been really busy. There is a lot going on. Obviously coaching your team, obviously recruiting.

At the end of the day, the University of Tennessee is a great place to be. We do not have any issues of getting guys that want to be here. It is a lot of players who want to be here. It is a lot of players who are already here, and we are definitely excited about the ones we have and the ones who want to be here.

Q. With those young DBs that are getting their first start, first real a lot of playing time, do you see the impact next season of what they do in this game? This is sort of a head start for Nico. Do you see it that way with your young DBs?

TIM BANKS: Yeah, it is the same. Anytime you get a chance to get some reps under your belt, it is a chance to build upon it. Game reps are obviously different than practice reps, and having a chance to do it in the Citrus Bowl on this type of stage will definitely be a valuable experience that those guys can build upon heading into the spring and into the fall.

It will be great for those guys to go out there and cut their teeth and get this thing going to get them to springboard to build upon it, absolutely.

Q. Iowa's tight end position has faced a lot of injuries, but what have you seen from the guys, Addison Ostrenga, Steven Stilianos, on film?

TIM BANKS: Versatility is the first thing that comes to mind. Those guys are obviously really good in the run game, but the way they move them around and get them as a focal point in a lot of the pass game has been impressive.

Obviously, I have seen Iowa from back in the day at the other places I have been, so they have a great tradition at tight end. Anybody that they recruited to play tight end was probably pretty good at their high school.

They got our respect, A, the way they block, and, B, the way they use those guys in the passing game. We know it is going to be a great challenge for our linebackers and safeties in terms of the matchups in the pass game. Then, obviously in the run game with some of our edge guys being able to read some of their blocks. It is a challenge, and we are definitely looking forward to it.

Q. Big-picture question. With all the chaos you talked about in December, I don't know how much time you had to look back at the regular season, but as a whole, how do you feel your defense performed this season and how would you assess where improvement continued, where things came up short, and how would you assess your play during the course of the season?

TIM BANKS: Obviously, our goal is to win every single game. When you do not win every single one of them, there are things that you want to improve on.

At the end of the day, we felt like we made really good strides. We felt like we had good senior leadership, and we felt like we did a lot of things to move the needle in the right direction.

I am excited, I really am. I think we played good defense most of the year. Obviously, when you don't win them all, you are disappointed. Obviously, we will take time after the season and take a deeper dive after the season to see where we can continue to grow.

But, overall, I feel like we played outstanding.

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