



**Allstate Sugar Bowl
Ohio State
Defensive Coordinator
Press Conference
December 29, 2020**



Q. It seemed like a little bit of a scramble at safety with the Big Ten title game. We saw that Marcus [Hooker] was a game-time decision. We didn't know about Ronnie [Hickman] until a little before kickoff. How much did that scramble the plans for you guys at safety? I know there's a limit of what you will say ahead of Friday. How much closer to full strength do you think you guys will be there?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: It was a big scramble, and we had three healthy safeties ready to play in the game. And so there was -- that was significant. And the kids did a really nice job. That's the COVID environment, right, of adapting and overcoming and accommodating and we would certainly like to be much more -- much closer to full strength on Friday.

Q. When you look at Clemson and how they kind of use their wide receivers specifically, it mirrors a little bit to how you guys use Chris [Olave] and [Haskell] Garrett, which is an outside guy and slide guy who gets the majority of the touches. When you guys do good-on-good, how much does going against those two guys and the way they use them maybe prepare you for what you're going to see on Friday?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: I think that's a great question. I think every day we get to go good on good is a good day for us because those are some of the best wide receivers in the country in our facility. And these guys we are playing are just like them. So the ability to compete against great skill day in and day out is critical when you are trying to get ready to play a team like this.

Q. As you look at Trevor Lawrence, what is the most outstanding thing he does? I know that's out of 20, whatever. What is the one thing you think that just sets him apart? Urban Meyer was telling me, the thing that's really interesting is he's a great runner but he's really fast, too, and you don't necessarily see both of those when you just watch it on video. Just what's your take?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: To Urban's point, he's deceptively fast. You will see when players have angles on him and he outruns the angle. I think that the thing that -- he does so many things very, very well. So I would say he's arguably one of the great college football quarterbacks of all time based on his production and winning games.

He is a play extender, and he does a great job of avoiding rush, side stepping rush, getting outside the pocket, running the ball or extending the play and throwing the ball. And he makes very, very, very few poor decisions. I think he does a great job with his pre-snap recognition. He's got a plan in mind when he catches the snap. But when the plan is altered, he does a great job of adapting to that.

Q. This matchup is becoming more and more common on the field but off the field, as well. You guys regret against Clemson a lot. I think that became a little bit more common in the two years you weren't here. Certainly it's ramped up now. What it's like recruiting, I guess, similar guys as Clemson? You have a guy in this class and you just signed Jordan Hancock who was committed there. What was it like recruiting Jordan when he was committed to another program?



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DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: We had recruited Jordan very hard and had felt very good about him and he made a decision to commit to them, and I respected that. I respect that decision.

But we had developed a pretty decent relationship. I think they're great recruiters. I think they do a phenomenal job when they have kids on their campus. That's always a battle and you know that, when kids are going there to visit.

I do think we both identify the same players from the same parts of the country, and so you're going to battle. When you go to recruit against the best teams in the country and they're good at what they do, it's going to be like that.

And Jordan was a perfect example of that. There are kids -- the elite players have some really good choices and those kids and those schools are all -- they're all battling for those guys.

Q. I want to ask you about Tommy Togiai and the impact he's had on your defense? That position is kind of a thankless one but it's so important. What kind of a jump has he taken, and how important has he been to the defense?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: I wasn't here last year, so I can't tell you -- speak clearly to the jump. I can tell you that we have had players like that. BB (Robert) Landers was like that. It's just an active force of the interior of the defense.

Now, they were two different players. BB was quick as a cat. Tommy is strong as an ox. The thing that Tommy does is he hustles so hard, day in and day out, at practice, in the games. He just is relentless. That's what I feel like he does in the middle of the defense. He's just a relentless force. If you don't stay on him, he's going to find himself at the ball. The interior defensive linemen have just done a really, really good job this year.

Q. I want to ask you about the other guy in the interior. Have you ever seen anything like what Haskell Garrett has been through this year? And what's it been like for you to watch it as a coach?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: Not in my experience. And I'm glad. To be honest with you, I hope I never see it again. But for somebody to be where he was in August to where he is in December, it's a miracle. And I've said that before and I believe it. It just continues to be re-proven every time he takes the field.

He's very serious about what he does. I think he feels like -- and he would have to tell you, but I think he feels like he's got a new lease on life. I can tell you that my interactions with him became more positive, more upbeat, happier, more hugging, more of all those kind of things.

So whatever it is that caused that, or sparked that in him, I mean, he is playing really, really well, really hard. He was a good technician. And Larry [Johnson] does such a great job with those guys. But he's eating it up, you know? And he just wants to be great. And I just love being around him.



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Q. Congratulations on the success this season. I don't know how much you've gone back and watched the tape of this game. You weren't there obviously a year ago. But Ohio State did a great job of containing [Travis] Etienne, running the football, and a really good job with [Trevor] Lawrence and his wide receivers and tight ends. Where they beat Ohio State was the quarterback run and the screen game to Etienne. Three touchdowns, long touchdowns, out of those plays. I know it's part of everything. You can't to stop everything. But how do you stop all four of those things in a game like this? And how and where do your guys have to be about all the different ways they can attack you?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: Yeah, it's a great question. I don't think anybody stops them. I think you want to try to slow them down. You want to try to contain them. You want to try to eliminate those big plays. They do it to everybody. Their explosive tape is the longest tape you've ever seen.

I think the running back is a fantastic player in every phase of the game. He runs the ball inside. He runs the ball outside. He catches the ball out of the backfield. He catches the ball on the perimeter. I think he's dynamic. Obviously the quarterback run, which shows up at this time of year, is important to their success. And that's what winning teams do.

They have a formula. They've got talent across the board from the numbers to the numbers. And so if you went into a game and said, we're going to take this one thing away, they have plenty to beat you somewhere else. And so you have to prepare for all of it, and you have to play a great game for four quarters in order to have a chance at the end.

Q. Going back to the interior on the defensive line, have you seen an extra pep in the step of Jonathon Cooper now that he finally gets to play Clemson?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: (laughter). I can tell you this, the remarkable thing is if just to watch how these kids have managed and handled everything. But Coop is a flat-out leader.

I was talking to him. We had kind of a walk-through practice the day after Christmas and Coop says, Coach, we need to wear cleats. And he was right, and we did. And you just love that kind of leadership. He's all in. He's pushed his chips into the middle of the pile for this game, and I think we'll see Coop's best effort.

Q. Coach, we all now Shaun [Wade] could only play a half last year. I know you weren't there last year, but can you just sense how motivated he is for this game?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: Well, in many ways, the way that game finished is a big reason why Shaun came back. He's passionate about winning. I'm not going to say he felt responsible, but he felt shortchanged or whatever. I don't know what the right word is to be honest with you.



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He's been motivated all year, and he's a great leader. But this game obviously means a lot to him. He's prepared extremely well. He wants to go out and have a good performance. He wants to help his team win. And that's the main thing. But there's no question that coming off the field at halftime, or before the halftime last year, was very, very hard for him.

Q. You and other people have been talking about [Travis] Etienne's versatility. When we talked to Clemson, they talk about your linebackers' versatility. I'm just curious, when you guys moved those guys to the positions that they're in this year, was it a matchup like this that was kind of in mind? And how does this alignment of linebackers and the versatility that you guys have maybe help you match up against Etienne?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: Well, I think when you're going to play teams like this -- And it's a great question. I think when you're going to play teams like this, you've got to have speed on the field. And you've got to figure out a way to get fast guys out there playing in the right areas.

And for us, you know, moving Pete [Werner], getting Baron [Browning] on the field in a different capacity, having a kid like Justin Hilliard who can play all the spots, and then that anchor in the middle, Tuf Borland. I think that versatility gives us -- it certainly gave us a great chance when guys were out because of COVID. But it gives us flexibility.

And I agree with you that when you're going to play teams like this, you're going to need those kind of flexible players that can move around and do different things during the course of the game to help you try to win.

Q. Haskell [Garrett] made a comment to us that he's spent a lot of time this year on trying to learn more than just his job. He wants to know the coverages. He wants to know where certain guys are. He says it's helped him play more freely. That's a really mature thing to commit yourself to doing. How many other guys on your defense do you feel have made the decision to try and learn more than just their position? And has that made you better as a unit?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR COOMBS: I think that -- some of them chose to do that, guys like Haskell, Pete [Werner], certain players. And then some of them have had to do it just because all of a sudden, you show up at practice and there's four guys that aren't going to be able to be there. So now you've got to go play the spot and you've got to know it. And the young guys have really learned that, not necessarily because they want to but because they have to.

But I think the maturity of these kids that are looking forward to extending their career down the road -- I remember having a conversation with Haskell about three-deep coverage versus two-deep coverage and why do you play this one and why do you do that one. And he was really interested in how that might affect him on the defensive line.

And I think you're right, it's a very mature way of looking at things. And I think the more guys on your defense that you have thinking along those lines, the better chance you have to have success.