



Allstate Sugar Bowl

Ohio State

Head Coach Press Conference

December 28, 2020



COACH DAY: Just got off the practice field. Team's been working hard getting ready to play in this game. Really looking forward to going down to New Orleans and playing in the Sugar Bowl. What an honor to be going down there. Such a great city.

And certainly wish we were spending more time in that city and getting to know it. Been down there a couple times. Went down there for a Super Bowl. Just unbelievable culture and great people. So it will be a different experience, but we're still excited nonetheless and excited to play against a great opponent.

A rematch from last year. So the preparation has been great. Everyone had as good a Christmas as we possibly could have, not able to really be around our families.

But the guys have overcome a lot this year, and now we have to finish the race. We've got to finish it strong and looking forward to continuing the preparation as we head to Friday night.

Q. You said last week you thought Justin [Fields] would be fine. He said he would be fine by Friday. Have you had to do anything with that thumb to hold him back or limit him? Do you have any concerns about what he could be able to do on Friday night?

COACH DAY: No, no, I think he'll be fine.

Q. As a quarterback and now as a play caller, when you're going up against a team when you know they have guys who can get consistent pressure up the middle, up the middle of the line, how does that change the things you have to think about as a quarterback? And then now as a play caller, how has that changed how you coach a little bit, how you call plays?

COACH DAY: The defense is second in the nation in sacks. They create a lot of disruption, like you said. Really good players and really good schemes. They've done it against just about everyone they've gone against.

So we've got to understand that. We've got to understand the patterns. We've got to do a great job of firming up protection. The quarterback has got to understand that. And it just comes down to preparation, understanding the different patterns that you're going to see. Knowing that you're going to see some things that you maybe haven't seen before. That's part of it.

And they know us very well. They always have really good schemes. So we'll have to continue to do a great job preparing so that when we get out there on Friday night, you know, we're anticipating as opposed to reacting.

Q. It's funny, Ryan, I think I asked you the same question last year, but I'll ask it again. When you're going against a defense led by a coordinator like Brent Venables who has this huge reputation, et cetera, justly deserved, does it pique you and your staff even more to sort of figure it out and go to battle against something like that?



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COACH DAY: Yeah. I mean, he's one of the best defensive coordinators in college football, and he does a great job calling the game. Seems to always know exactly what the other team is doing in terms of the plays that they're running each play and seems to call the right defense into that play a lot. And why that is, I don't really know. But I can tell you that he's been doing it for a long time, and it's a good challenge.

Q. You talked a little bit about how the players have had to sacrifice so much, sacrifices really from everyone. Have you sensed stress from them throughout this? And how do you deal with that as a coaching staff? A different kind of stress than you would normally deal with in a normal year.

COACH DAY: Yeah, there's definitely different stressors that are going on, for sure. And they're coming from different areas. The stress of living a different life than you lived last year and all the different things that come with it: Not being around your family, not being able to socialize, not having fans, not receiving the rewards of hard work, games being canceled, and handling disappointment. All that stuff adds up.

I think the fact that they really had to stay in isolation for the most part. And then I think there's also the stress of the body and the emotional toll this season has taken. I think for some guys who have done everything right in practice throughout this whole time, while others have missed practice -- and the amount of people that have missed practice in the last month alone here is staggering. And so those who have practiced every day, that stress load adds up on them as well.

So I think, like you said, all those things add up to where they're at right now. In some way it callouses you and makes you stronger, and that's a good thing, too.

Q. Ryan, I wonder if you could reflect on the circumstances of how you got to Ohio State. It was after that 31-0 loss to Clemson where Urban [Meyer] kind of retooled the staff. If that doesn't happen, are you there? Because obviously you flourished since you got to Ohio State.

COACH DAY: Yeah. I was with the 49ers at the time and had a few conversations with Coach and jumped at the opportunity to come to Ohio State, not knowing exactly what was in store. Certainly didn't in my wildest dreams think I would be sitting where I am right now, but I guess that's college football.

And it's been a blessing. I learned so much about what Ohio State is, what the Buckeyes mean to so many people throughout the country, what winning at a high level means. And just blessed to be around such great people like Gene Smith and all the people here who strive for excellence.

It's been great. Our family loves it here. And, you're right, sometimes I wake up and just have to pinch yourself a little bit because it wasn't that long ago that we never would have thought of being in a situation like this. But a lot of that has to do with the people that are around you. We have great assistant coaches and great players and great administrators here, and that's what makes this place great.



Allstate Sugar Bowl Ohio State Head Coach Press Conference December 28, 2020



Q. Ryan, in a normal bowl season, you guys would typically be there a few days in advance of the game and you would have all these festivities and the team would partake in some of that stuff. This year is obviously different. Have you tried to recreate some of that going into this game? Or is it just entirely different and just a game? What is that like?

COACH DAY: Yeah, it's been very different for a lot of reasons. One, there hasn't been that much of a lead-up time. Usually you have three weeks, at least two weeks. This was quick. I mean, this was I guess 12 or 13 days. Plus, you had Christmas in between. So there hasn't been a lot of downtime that way.

And, really, we're not able to do a whole bunch of stuff together other than practice because of everything that's going on, certainly all the positive tests that have come up over the last month. So we've taken a lot of precautions that way.

So it's going to be more just like a game. We're going to go down there the night before, get some rest, get to the hotel, wake up, get ourselves ready to go, and then go play the game Friday night.

So, yeah, it's one of those things that we're just going to have to sacrifice this year, is the bowl experience. You think about it, it's kind of a downer because you would love to spend a week in New Orleans and all those things that come with a bowl game. That's part of the reward that I was talking about that these guys -- that's been taken from them this year.

Whether it's fans in the stands, whether it's the recognition, or whether it's the number of games you play, and a bowl experience, those things do add up. You could say they don't, but they do. And it doesn't mean you need to sit around and cry about it, but it's something you need to be aware of. And so, yeah, once we get down there, we'll try to do everything we can. But in the meantime, it's getting ready to play the game and it's all preparation here.

Q. It's rare, I think, even for a player of Justin's [Fields] magnitude to maybe get another chance to go up against one of the -- the only team that's beaten him to this point, at least at Ohio State. I guess, how do you see this game playing into the legacy he could leave here and just the opportunity that's ahead of him as a competitor?

COACH DAY: Well, I think he left that field wanting another shot and now he has another shot. He's not the only guy that has felt that way. There's a lot of other guys on our team that felt that way. You would have never thought you were going to make it all the way back here to go play in this game. And the journey was so strange to get here, but here we are.

And now we have an opportunity to go play them again. And this is the reason why everybody works so hard during that off-season, was to get to this opportunity. Now we've got to go make the best of it.



Allstate Sugar Bowl Ohio State Head Coach Press Conference December 28, 2020



Do I know what it means? I don't know. It's an opportunity to go play Clemson. And if we win, we go play for the national championship with everything that's gone on this season. And that's what matters. Has it been normal? No. But here we are. We asked for this opportunity, and now we've got to go.

Q. You mentioned practice a little bit ago. I'm just wondering if Chris Olave and some of the other players who were out against Northwestern have returned to practice? And how much -- if you've got the whole team together practicing, how much that will help now as you prepare for Clemson?

COACH DAY: One of the challenges for the last month has been, like you said, the amount of guys that have been in and out for whatever reason, whether it's been for the virus or guys just being out because of injuries. The numbers are off the charts. So that has been a major challenge, is trying to prepare for games but having guys come in and out of stuff.

We have a bunch of guys back. Guys are starting to practice now. It will be good to get some of these guys back to play on Friday night. But it's not like you just throw them back in there and they're going 100 miles an hour again. There's a ramp-up to it. They didn't really do anything for ten days. They had to pass their cardiac test, and then you have to kind of ease them into it, especially the skill guys because of soft tissue injuries.

I think we're doing as good a job as anybody of having a really good protocol and how to get them back safely to play. But it certainly has been a major challenge. Guys in; guys out. Like I mentioned before, that puts a lot of stress on the guys who are in there who are taking the reps in practice. You have to practice to get better, and we haven't had the luxury of playing in 13 games leading up to this. So we have to continue to practice.

So that's been one of the challenges this year, and it's something that our guys have embraced. It hasn't been easy, but they've overcome it, and here we go.

Q. You talked a lot since you've been here about your offense and staying aggressive. I'm just wondering, does aggressive always have to mean throwing the ball? Can a team be aggressive running the ball? Or just what's your idea when you think of that? And why is that the preferred position, for lack of a better word, for your offense?

COACH DAY: I don't think it's preferred. I think the idea is to score. Like in the Big Ten championship game, we ran for 330 yards in the game. I forget exactly what the number was. So we're always going to strike a balance. We always want to do that.

I think when you look at the numbers, I think they would probably show that that's what we have. We have a pretty good balance. I don't know what our passing and running numbers are right now. But we always have to put pressure on the defense, and throwing the ball is a huge part of that. That also opens up the run game, and I think that's part of how you attack teams. And if you're not executing at a high enough level, then you need to get that fixed.



Allstate Sugar Bowl Ohio State Head Coach Press Conference December 28, 2020



But whenever you start not calling it aggressively, that's when bad things happen. You lose confidence, and that's not the way we're wired. We're going to go out there and try to score as fast as we can and try to score as many points as we possibly can but, at the same time, keeping that balance of controlling the ball. So whatever that is.

And then we'll look schematically what gives us our best chance. In certain teams, they load the box and you have to throw the ball.

We didn't throw the ball as efficiently in the last game as we would have liked to have. We missed a few opportunities. Could have been a bigger number, but it wasn't. You learn. You've got to get better at it.

We're always looking for that balance. And being aggressive is both. It's sometimes playing with tempo. It's sometimes taking shots. But at the end of the day, if you're forcing the team to defend the entire sideline and run and pass and the quarterback run, I think that's when you put the most stress on the defense.

Q. If I can follow up on that just quickly, last year in this game, you guys kicked two field goals from the 5 yard line. That would seem to run a little counter to almost everything you just said. I'm just wondering how those two field goals have sat with you over the last year as you framed your mindset for this offense this year.

COACH DAY: Yeah, you don't want to go back and replay the game last year. But one of the issues was field goals in the red zone and not scoring touchdowns down there. We had one called back. We had a drop. It just didn't happen.

So we've got to make sure that we're scoring touchdowns when we get down in there. But in games like this, we've also got to be smart. If our defense is playing well and kicking field goals is something you've got to do at that time, you've got to do that. You can't just be reckless either. We also went for it on fourth and one and threw a touchdown, I think it was, in the fourth quarter. We're always going to be aggressive, but at the same time you can't be reckless.

Q. How important is this game as a program marker? You guys are right there. You're up 16-0. It slipped away. But you've got Alabama and Clemson. How important is it that it is Clemson and that you have a shot to make a statement?

COACH DAY: I don't know. I don't know how to answer that, Rob. I would say in a normal year I would probably have a better feel. I don't know.

I think this is more about this team and these guys on this team, the leaders, and what they've done and their story, the story that these guys have and their journey to get to right here and what the final chapter is going to be. That's more to me what this is about. This is about a bunch of guys who have just been through so much. The season canceled, then restarted, and then games canceled, and here they are, right back to where they started a year ago to play Clemson again. It's just an amazing story.



Allstate Sugar Bowl Ohio State Head Coach Press Conference December 28, 2020



I think it's more about them than it is a statement about where we are. We'll see when we all come up for air and maybe reflect on that in the off-season. But this is more about our culture and our team. And I really would love for these guys to have something at the end of the season, a big ring to show for everything they've done because they've sacrificed so much. That's really the story to me.

Q. Given all that you just mentioned, this might be a difficult question to answer. I know Dabo [Swinney] has been fairly outspoken about the idea that playing 11 games as they have is different than playing the six that you have. When you compare this year to past seasons, do you feel like your team is in a different place having only six games under their belt at this point in the year, physically, emotionally, mentally? Or has the toll of all the other stuff been so great as to sort of ameliorate any level of differentiation there?

COACH DAY: Yeah, I mean, everything about this season is different, from the amount of games we played to all of the above. I don't even know where to start. We could talk about it for an hour. But, yeah, everything about it's been different.

And to sit here and tell you exactly where we are compared to years past, no, it's totally different. Everything about it's different, the way we practice, the way we eat, the way we meet, the way we travel, the way -- everything. Preseason camp to all of the above. So this is a different season in all areas.

Q. With everything that Justin [Fields] went through in the last year, the way last season ended to the Indiana second half to Northwestern, how do you stop him from trying to do too much against Clemson when obviously there's so much riding on his shoulders? And then secondarily, how much did Justin change you as a coach in the time that he's been at Ohio State?

COACH DAY: Well, I think the first thing is you just have to win the game. I think one thing that happens a little bit at Ohio State is that people want you to win a certain way here. And I think sometimes that's a little dangerous.

But right now, there's only one goal, win the game. It doesn't matter if you win 6-3. Doesn't matter if you win 52-51. Just win the game. I think that has to be the approach, not we're going to beat a team by 28 points, are we going to throw for 500 yards and be on the Heisman trophy watch or whatever. It's win the game. If you win the game, you move on. That's what matters. So I think that's the focus.

It's been fun. Every time you have different quarterbacks come in, you learn a lot about yourself and you build different relationships and certainly have a special appreciation for Justin as a competitor and as a person.

Q. The fan bases of these two teams, some view it as a rivalry. I was just curious kind of what you thought and what people in the Woody think. Clearly you guys recruit against each other. You've played in a lot of high-stakes games. What do you think of this Ohio State-Clemson series?



Allstate Sugar Bowl
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December 28, 2020



COACH DAY: Well, it's the second year we're playing them in a row. And they've won two national championships here. I think it's four of the last five years they've been in it. I think they won six ACC championships, if I'm correct. They've been right at the top of the game for almost a decade now. So they're up there.

And then when you look at where Ohio State has been in the Big Ten and playing in the CFP and our games against Clemson, if we continue to win, we're probably going to run into Clemson or Alabama along the way. So rivalry? We're not in the same conference. But certainly if we move on, we're going to see these guys. It's always great to get to this point and play against a great competitor like Clemson.