

Vanderbilt University Football Media Conference

Saturday, November 16, 2019

Derek Mason

Post Game

Kentucky - 38, Vanderbilt - 14

DEREK MASON: We created some early, obviously, we were able to get up 14-3 and the defense scoop for a touchdown, I thought we had great momentum. But today we just got out-physicaled on both sides of the ball, up front, we lost the line of scrimmage, did not win the line of scrimmage, didn't tackle very well. Could not tackle very well. I thought they ran through tackles, through arm tackles, and just extended drives and extended plays. They were good on third down where we couldn't get off the field. Again, it goes back to tackling. We had guys at times 7-, 8 yards in front of the chains and they run through us. And again, I mean, it's just not strong enough right now. And that's something that as a young defense, or a fairly young defense with some of those older guys -- or with some of those younger guys on the back end, okay, you got to bring your eyes hands and feet. And when you don't, you can't make tackles, you can't tackle bigger, thicker guys in this conference and that's just the way it is. But I thought they ran hard. We knew that coming in, we knew it was going to be that type of ball game, just for us, Riley Neal and the offense. Because they were off the field so long, I thought it was hard for them to find rhythm. And again, with Riley, I mean, he's got to make some better decisions as to what he's doing when the opportunity presents itself. There were a couple times where for him if he just keeps his eyes up, okay, and as he's moving, but he can find guys. But I thought he went to the check down. I thought he found guys. We just didn't make enough plays for him, and I think in critical situations he's just got to continue to make sure that he keeps his head up and finds his targets.

But again, we just weren't good enough tonight. That was a team loss. I thought special teams may have been the best part of what we did. Defense and offense just didn't provide enough offense, couldn't stay on the field without enough opportunities. And defense couldn't get off the field.

Q. You cycled through all four quarterbacks now, the offense still isn't doing much 10 games in. Do you feel like you've exhausted all your options offensively for a quarterback this year?

DEREK MASON: No. I don't think we have exhausted the opportunity to get better. Today was that type of



game where we knew we were going to get limited opportunities. Kentucky was going to try to play keep away and they did. They played their ball game and we couldn't play ours. Unfortunately with that, okay, and then our offense went for long stretches without touching the field. And then the ebb and flow of the ball game for them was very inconsistent because they just didn't get out there enough and when they did, we couldn't stay out there.

Q. What gives you confidence in the direction of things here the next couple of weeks and also going forward?

DEREK MASON: What happens is this: You want -- I wanted this season to be a great season, like I always do. I want it for these kids. But we had some deficiencies coming into the season. Starting the season 0-3 definitely didn't help it. And when you look at 0-3 teams here at Vanderbilt, they haven't gone on to do very well. So the odds are against us.

So the biggest thing that I tried to get our guys to do every week is make sure that they compete and that they find ways to get better individually, because when they get better individually, collectively we get better. We got a lot of guys coming back next year. And, obviously, quarterback, okay, that's what we have to focus in on because without a quarterback in this conference it makes it really tough to be able to manage your offense and win games. Whether we, whether we're West Coast or whether we're spread, okay, it's still dependent on a trigger man who can deal it and spin it. Right now I've still got young guys growing up, young offensive linemen, young running backs, Ke'Shawn that are growing up, wideouts. The only wide outs that we lose are Justin Shelton-Mosley and Kalija Lipscomb. So with that we got a lot of playmakers here. With that, we got a lot of playmakers here. We got to make sure with the future that we, that our guys all around him. But the weight room, the off season, all those things have to be important. But right now I'm in the midst of trying to get a football team to function now while we still have guys that can make plays. I mean Kalija, Pinkney, Ke'Shawn, are still dudes that can go get it. And Riley Neal right now is the one that's got to manage it. So next week we got a game, East Tennessee State. Let's go play.

Q. For those reasons that you're telling us about

how you're optimistic about the future, have you told those to the administration in-house?

DEREK MASON: No, I haven't had an opportunity to talk about that. I'm sort of staying in the moment in terms of where we're at, again. You got close to nine, ten guys returning defensively, which is what you want. But the weight room's got to be important. That's what you know about this conference. It's a line of scrimmage league. And when you have guys coming in that are juniors and seniors, that way, and you got young guys in the secondary, who are going to get stronger, you'll play better. But I just think collectively there's a lot of talent here. And Vanderbilt's always going to go in waves. It just is. There's going to be cycles of bowl teams and opportunities. It's not going to be an every-year opportunity, unless, unless these guys get it young and we hit it hot. I mean, there's going to be waves and cycles in this deal, and I'm just in a wave right now. I'm just in a wave and cycle where we're not where we want to be, but we just got to continue to keep pushing.

Q. Jared Pinkney was only targeted once today and he was held without a catch for two straight weeks. Why has it been so hard to get him involved in the offense?

DEREK MASON: Man, there were opportunities, I thought, in this. I thought, again, like with Riley, he looked a couple of times, and you say he was only targeted once. Riley looked at him at least three or four times, as I looked at it tonight, he just didn't get the ball. So I don't know if it was coverage -- I got to go back and watch the game. I'm just watching it from the sideline. The only targeted pass was the one you saw thrown to him where he was close to Kalija. But a lot of times there's more to it than just that. It's the idea just, is there underneath coverage? Is Riley trying to throw into double coverage? That's sort of what happens. I truly believe he should be able to get the football. Reasons why he can't get the football? I don't know. I say, I say often, football finds energy, and Pinkney's working hard. I just don't know why he's not getting the ball. So we just got to keep going. We'll find a way next week to try to get him his touches.

Q. Going against their reserves, but you got some rhythm late going up tempo. Do you wish you would have done that earlier?

DEREK MASON: I don't know. You talk about tempo. Again, we couldn't get off the field defensively, so you can go up tempo all you want to, but if you don't, if you can't stay on the field and sustain drives, all you do is put a defense back out on the field like for more snaps. I think in watching us function today we just needed to get off the field defensively to give our offense a chance to get rhythm. Those guys sat out for a long time and I just felt like in watching it, I probably wouldn't

have done anything different. I thought we had some key drops on third down. I mean one goes through Kee's hands, like, another one goes through Cam's hands and that would have given us an opportunity. I mean these guys, we just got to make some plays. Everybody's got a job to do. Can tempo be good for us? Absolutely. Tempo can be good for us at times, but just got to make sure you're trying to play complimentary football.

Q. Are you looking forward to changes and tweaks -- you mentioned the weight room, that you can make in the off-season, or do you feel like you're still present in these last two games?

DEREK MASON: We're still present in these last two games. I write down everything I know that needs to change, okay, and I just keep moving forward. From week-to-week there's something that shows itself, there's something that comes up. Growth is optional, change is inevitable. I know that. So, like for me, I'm always working hard to be where my feet are, but knowing, okay, some things need to be different, look different, whether it's strength, whether it's schematically, whether it's -- there's a variety of things, but right now you got to deal with the present.

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Cam Johnson

Allan George

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really young team and, but I don't really see that youngness or our youth as something that's detrimental or that can hurt us, I think it will help us in the future and that's what we're looking for, looking towards to now.

Q. That's the third time you guys have scored on defense this season. Do you see the potential in the defense when plays like that happen?

ALLAN GEORGE: I think I see the potential in the defense one more than just the plays that we score on because we rip at the ball and pull at the ball and we force turnovers and we try to at least in about every single game that we play, so the mentality is not changing, just on those plays I feel like.

Q. Cam, you guys had a good drive there at the double pass by you, most of these games you guys are scoring early, first 15, 20 plays, good drive and then it peters off after that. What is going on there after the first couple great drives?

CAM JOHNSON: We have got to execute better. I always heard that it's the first, first down is the most important on offense and I know you see a couple times we were going three and out and then you see when we get that first, first down we're moving the ball, so I think it's just execution early in the drive and making sure that we get the drive going.

Q. You guys gave up over eight yards per play on defense towed do you think that's attribute more to the line of scrimmage other missed tackles what do you think is going on?

ALLAN GEORGE: I think overall across the board from the front end to back end we just got to tackle more and our coaches, they prepared us for it, since training camp, it's just since the summer they have been beating in our heads that tackling is we got to wrap the guy up and drive our feet, so we just didn't execute that today and I think that's why those, that statistic is what it is.

Q. Coach seems to think that you guys had potential on defense beyond this season. I don't even know if you are starting a senior at this point, but do you see what he sees in the future of the defense?

ALLAN GEORGE: I do and I feel, I spoke to this earlier in the season, after one of our practices, that we're a

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Mark Stoops

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MARK STOOPS: Mark Stoops. Really proud of our team top to bottom. Proud of our coaches and proud of our team to bounce back. We faced some adversity last week, tough game. Sometimes that can linger. It did not this week, as you can tell. Our team was very prepared, very motivated and played extremely hard once again. They have been doing that. As I mentioned, I don't know, go way back, partly through, halfway through the year or after the start, I just have been very proud of the team and their identity. And playing extremely hard and being prepared and controlling the things they can control, really responded well tonight. We faced adversity early. It's one of those deals where you're frustrated, you feel like you're in complete control, but they get a strip, fumble, touchdown and that can flip momentum very easily. And our team didn't flinch, went right back out there and methodically took care of business. And that's the way we operate when we're at our best and it was a total team effort tonight, so very proud of the group.

Q. That moment when you go down 14-3, what are you thinking was most critical in that flipping, the momentum not getting flipped there?

MARK STOOPS: I think just the confidence to know that we were in good control and have to go right back at it. I think that it would be easy to, for some people to panic or the guys to panic if they didn't have confidence in what we were going to do. Because let's face it, we are methodical right now and there's not a ton of explosive plays. Now we created some, and we created some big yardage again and controlled the clock. However when you go down 14-3, if you're not a team that has confidence in what we're doing, you could flinch right there, because you know points have been hard. But that wasn't the case, so we just kind of went back out there, there was plenty of time, and I think it was good and we were relatively clean. If I'm not mistaken, there wasn't another turnover, is that right, the rest of the game. So that was a big, that's a big piece of it right there.

Q. You've been talking about not flinching for years. How much of that is just an ingrained part of the culture with your team?

MARK STOOPS: I think, I hope that that's the way they



are. We talk about it, we coach it, our coaches -- but our players, it comes from preparation. You're going to have confidence if you prepare the right way. And as I've said many times, we all know important how important the outcomes are, and we all hang on to those plays that determine a win and a loss sometimes in very tight games. And those are really hard, on fans, on people, you know, and everybody in the organization.

However, it's about us and our preparation as a team and their identity and the way they're doing things, for me. You're going to win, you're going to lose. As I mentioned to the team, life is that way, this game is that way. You're going to go through some tough losses, and you're going to -- it's brutal. But we cannot be defeated in our mentality. And I like that about this group.

Q. How has Kavosiey grown to be able to do what they did today, him and Chris?

MARK STOOPS: I noticed it today, a little bit of growth, you probably did too. Just some of the runs they made today, I hadn't necessarily always seen. You've seen flashes, you've seen them do some really good things. But today I saw a couple runs they kind of took over. And they were pretty determined tough runs. Then also, they showed some really athletic plays. I thought Kavosiey, the one toss that he got and he showed speed and then he showed agility and balance where he cut it up and turned it into a critical first down early. So they -- and then Chris with the couple runs where he ran so physical. The third down run, I think, maybe -- he converted a first down. I'm not sure if it was third down, but he put his shoulder down and showed balance and created that first down. I mean, those are some tough yards and some tough runs, so I'm really proud of him.

Q. I think completing some passes probably opened up things for them. How refreshing is, how nice was it to see Lynn be able to run the two-minute offense right before half?

MARK STOOPS: That was, that was, it was fun to see. It was good. It was critical for us to work on that and to do that and to convert on a passing down when it was an obvious passing down. It was a big play, that momentum. You talk about that middle 8 again, you talk about last four minutes of the first half and the first

four minutes of the second half, and boy, that really dictated the game for us today, getting that score right before half, and then setting the tone and momentum in the second half with taking the opening drive and getting a touchdown as well.

Q. In a big picture sense, how remarkable is what Lynn has done?

MARK STOOPS: It really is. You have to give him the credit that he deserves. You're right, because we're all sitting here watching this unfold through this season and we kind of get tired of talking about it and y'all may get tired of writing about it, but you really have to give him some, the credit he deserves because it's not easy doing what he's doing. And it's not just some athlete back there, you know, just making plays. He's doing some amazing things. It really is. And, again, it comes to really proud of Coach Grant, Coach Henshaw, all of our coaches, the position they're putting him in, him understanding it. And then the reads and the things that he's doing, I mean, he's executing it. And then he has that toughness too. You put him back there and he makes people miss, but he also lowers his shoulders and runs over people when he has to. So just, you put it all together and it's pretty remarkable some of the things he's doing right now.

Q. Some of the people that were able to get on field today that haven't played a lot, how valuable is that?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, got a little sloppy there at the end. There was, we got a lot of guys in. It got a little hairy there. We -- I kind of gambled and put them in there earlier than probably normal. Because if they score there in the fourth quarter, you cut it to -- if they get the first down, they cut it to a two-possession game there with, what, maybe nine minutes or something, eight minutes, you put a little, they put a little pressure on there. But the defense got the stop, which was good, because I wanted to get those guys some quality reps. And offensively the same thing, certainly at quarterback. That's why we were throwing it a little bit, getting Sawyer, getting the dust off him and letting him get some game reps. Normally, you know I would be wanting to run the clock and get out of there. I have such great respect for Coach Mason and this program, so I would have liked to have got out of there, but we needed the snaps, our team needed it. So Sawyer needed to make some throws.

And then it was really important to get Walker in there. And that's been on my mind to get him in the game. So really proud of him and just what he's done and what he's meant to this program. And so I wanted to give him a few throws and get him out there, get him some snaps and just see what he can do. He deserves it. So that was good to see.

Q. What does it do for team morale when you get all those guys in there? It seemed like everyone was really excited on defense and offense out there.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it's really important. Because that's a what, you know, this game, through the season, it's so difficult, as I've mentioned a couple times, you take some, you take these young people, you take their hope away and it's brutally hard. Some of these guys are just practicing and we talk about it and Jason always gives me some great tips and pointers. But you keep on sewing your seeds, keep on doing what you're supposed to do, and eventually you're going to collect on that. And generally it's much later than you want it to be. But generally if you keep on doing that it's going to be more than you want it to be. So that's hard to see for young people. And so that morale is real important and it's important to get them in some games and keep their hope up. And that's why through some tough losses it's easy to cave. It's easy to give in. But our team hasn't done that and we're creating a good identity and we're not perfect, but I like the mentality of this team.

Q. What's it like, you're on defense on third down on the road, but the crowd's getting loud.

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, it felt good. It's always good. Thank you to the fans that showed up. As I mentioned throughout the week, we hear you on the road. It was a great feeling tonight to see a lot of blue up there and to hear them. And they made a difference and our players really enjoyed it.

Q. How do you feel about your defensive depth at this point? Jamon was your top tackle guy today. How much is that helping you?

MARK STOOPS: It really helps us. And Jamon needed those reps and he needed some reps when the pressure was on. And we got to continue to do that with him because he's an athletic guy and he's got great size and length. There's a lot of little things he's still got to put together but that will come with some reps and keep on playing. But I feel good about our depth, I really do. We go fairly deep up front and we really feel like we have some talented backers coming up. Inside, we got to keep on creating some depth. You saw Bemby playing a little bit inside. If we could get him coming along there that would really help us, bode well for the future. Because outside and across the front, and especially if we get Phil a sixth year, you got some good depth coming up and putting guys that are playing a lots of snaps.

Q. The offensive line, I know they like to run block. But still when the other team knows you're probably going to run, how much have they embraced that had challenge of we're going to be a

grind it out, methodical team?

MARK STOOPS: They always do. That's where some of that, we were looking tonight, and some of the runs we hits on third down, you guys can see that where it helps you because certain pressures and things that were coming, we were looking at, and the offensive coaches were checking that from the sideline, but the still got to collect it all up and block it. But we split them for some huge plays tonight and they always embrace that and --

Q. Is that a job that Coach Schlarman has done?

MARK STOOPS: Just remarkable. He really is. John is just amazing, to be honest with you. He had some treatment this week and then he had to go back for another little procedure. I don't want to get too invasive in his business. But he doesn't want any attention. But he has to drive his own car down here or Friday or have somebody drive him down here on Friday after another procedure and he shows up at practice. We thought he was going to miss it, but sure enough, we got here and he pops in there and got the smile on his face like nothing's going on and goes about his business. And it's a really remarkable story what he's going through and the job that he's doing. And it can't help -- it can't do anything but help, I would imagine, with these players and inspire these players to see what he's going through. And so they can't feel sorry for themselves, that's for sure. And John's done a great job and so has the O-line.

Q. Obviously last year you had an elite defense, but in some ways is this year almost as rewarding with everything you lost on that side of the ball and how well they have been playing?

MARK STOOPS: It is, it definitely is. Very pleased, just gave all those defensive coaches a big hug and a thanks because I think they're doing a really great job with some inexperienced guys. But as I mentioned, early, I mean we were going to go through some issues, I mean that just happens. You have to make some mistakes to get the growth and experience, but we have talent and it's getting better and better. Very pleased, because there's a lot of players out there that are going to be playing the next couple years. So I like to see that and appreciate the work that those guys are doing.

Q. You guys dominated third down and red zone. Eight of 11, four of four inside the 20. I know last week that was something that this season you mentioned that guys have got to punch it in?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, you knew that coming off last week, that was the story of the game. We needed to make some critical plays in critical moments and this week we did. Again, proud of the coaches and players and having a mindset to get that done.

Q. How do you keep AJ from getting discouraged?

MARK STOOPS: He'll be fine, he'll be fine. He'll be all right. He's just, you know, you have to be able to handle that type of adversity and he'll be back in there next week and he'll be the starting running back and taking the snap on the first play of the game when we're in there offensively and he needs to just get right back at it and we have a lot of confidence in him and he'll be all right.

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Josh Ali

Post Game

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Q. Coach said it was a complete game, you guys played a complete game. Can you talk about that?

JOSH ALI: Yeah, as a team as a whole we came out here ready to play. Everybody knew their assignments and there was no skipping any beats. Even when they went up in the first quarter we didn't rush or anything we just played our game.

Q. How badly did y'all need a game like this?

JOSH ALI: Very bad. Just a game, I think this, just a game to go to a bowl game, so we're happy about that. So just to get our team back together we needed that one.

Q. How good was it to be able to put together a two-minute drive, I know the offense has been leaning on the run heavily but how nice was it to be able to get the tempo run?

JOSH ALI: It was great. Running backs was doing well, opening it up for the receivers a little bit. We made plays and they made the throws and we made our place and it was good.

Q. What was going through your mind when the ball was hanging in the air?

JOSH ALI: On the touchdown? Oh, I just got to catch it. I'm already in the end zone I just got to catch it.

Q. Is there anything that kind of like freaks you out a little bit, I know a lot of fans were holding their breath?

JOSH ALI: Yeah, yeah, when I saw a tip, I mean I kind of thought that it was going to go over his head but when it was tipped I just knew you I had to grab it like there was no other option in my head but to grab the ball.

Q. Did y'all do anything differently when y'all were in that two minute offense than kind of the normal passing down situation?

JOSH ALI: We did basic stuff, we ran basic things hitches and corner routes and basic things and it worked out.

Q. How does how nice was it to be able to get back



in the end zone?

JOSH ALI: It felt great. It makes me want to go out every weekend and score a touchdown. It just feels great putting points for the team, we're winning right now and well we won tonight so it feels good.

Q. How good was it just to get kind of like the win in the fashion that you did. A blow out victory from basically three and a half quarters there?

JOSH ALI: It was great. It's something that we really needed and everybody did their part, everybody did their job, everybody played fast and physical and it was great team win.

Q. How are you going to sort of ride this now into the final two games of the year?

JOSH ALI: We're not stop being we got to go hard every day, in practice we got to know, no hiccups no nothing, we got to go hard every day. For the next three, four weeks.