



Weekly Press Conference Quotes
Head Coach Luke Fickell
Nov. 15, 2022

Head Coach Luke Fickell

Opening Statement

"I obviously just want to start off by saying our thoughts and prayers are with the University of Virginia, that entire university and particularly the football program, and everybody involved, there's not a whole lot that words can say. I'm sure everybody has probably done the same thing. This community, this football program, obviously, our thoughts and prayers are with them during this tragedy and all that have been involved in it. We've got a kid in Jowon Briggs, who was a part of that program just two and a half years ago and still has a lot of good friends there, knows a lot of the people that have been involved in that. So, I know it's tough on him as well. We've actually been able to have the chance to sit down and talk to him a little bit about it yesterday and just to make sure he was all good. It affects all of us, whether we have kids ourselves or everybody within this football community, everybody that sends kids off to college, it's a scary thing. So, thoughts and prayers are with them, and everybody involved. Obviously not easy to move on but the reality is we do, and last week was a crazy one for us. Great to have a Friday night game when all said and done because you get a nice little break there on Saturday to take a couple deep breaths. More than anything the great thing about Friday night was the atmosphere and the environment that our student body started, and obviously the rest of the community created. I knew there were some big [high school football] games going on Friday night. That's going to take away from some things at some point in time, but it was amazing to see that it didn't take away from the Nippert at Night atmosphere, and it was one of those games that we really needed it too. It wasn't the sharpest that we've played all year, especially when that momentum and energy shifted, we really relied upon that student body and the atmosphere that we were playing in to bring us back and find a way to win a game. That was a really great night in the sense that we've done it again, we found another way to win a football game. Different than maybe some of the other ones, but nonetheless, another way to win a football game, if that means return a kick for 100 yards, if that means making another stop on the last play of the game, if that means punting another ball with 11 guys up, and a lot of situations that you practice maybe one time in camp, that you don't always have a chance [to use], or even in six years here of ever coming down to those situations and actually do them in a game. We've had more of them this year than I've ever been involved with. But we've executed them and found a way to get it done. So, it's tough, but we move on now and

we're going to change the whole mindset going on the road and get our guys back into understanding this is when the playoffs start. That's just the reality. You're in that situation now. That every one of these [games] is incredibly critical as you come down the stretch, and there are no playoffs in college football but for us has started."

On responding to the accusations of intentionally injuring ECU player

"I didn't know [they said] that. A game is a game, and you play the game really aggressive. I wish we wouldn't throw kids out of football games. There are times to throw guys out. There are not malicious targeting hits [very often]. [ECU's] guy was thrown out two years ago here for a targeting penalty on an onside kick. It is what it is, I don't think the guy had malicious intent. I don't believe that we had malicious intent. It's a part of the game. It's unfortunate that people would feel that way. I would imagine it's an emotional thing when you say it at that point in time. I hope it's just an emotional thing and they don't really believe that about how we play the game and how we teach our guys to play the game."

On how to coach players to hit and tackle correctly

"Well, we always talk about it, defenseless players are to be hit in what we call the strike zone, between the chest and the kneecaps, that's what we call the strike zone for any receiver catching a ball as a defenseless player. We talk about it, we coach it, it's hard to drill it [in the players head] but in those situations we all talk about shoulder lead tackling. I mean we are a shoulder lead tackling team. We say all the time, hey, we're playing some zone and you get crossers, whatever you do, you make sure you hit with your shoulder, and [Bryon Threats] is running as fast as you possibly can. To me it looks like he is legitimately leading with his shoulder. There's time to be thrown out of games. We've had a couple in the past, the UCLA game a couple years ago where we legitimately hit a guy in the head...But when there's a change of level, when it's in the process. I don't think those are conscious decisions. It's not a launching thing. I hope and believe that we're going to change the rules, like the NFL, and not just eject guys unless it's malicious intent. So, if there was malicious intent, we would obviously tell him look, this is what we taught, you cannot do this, it must be a shoulder lead tackle, the way we teach it. I believe that's what he's attempting to do. It's tough because he has got to run 37 yards...so you know it's a bang bang thing. We continue to teach with a shoulder lead tackle, staying away from all head between the chest and the kneecaps. You can't bat an eye about it, you just got to keep moving on. It's tough for both. It's not like every time there is a targeting [penalty] a guy gets knocked out the game. Nobody even knows who the ball is being thrown into. So, it's not like you're targeting any particular thing. It's a part of the game. We all know we're trying to make this game safer and better, and we teach it to be safer and better. But there are still situations where it is still a violent football game."

On finding a balance when tackling

"We do it every week. I mean, it's not just [Bryon Threats]. It could have been any other middle-of-the-field safety in that situation. The uniqueness is a lot of middle-field safeties can't get to the point of attack outside the numbers. You don't even expect the middle of the field safety sometimes to get to an inside fade ball outside the numbers. I think all those things are

different. The [targeting penalty] in Tulsa, he was a little bit out of control. When you're out of control and you just try to dive at some point in time, you're putting yourself in a situation. It's the same thing. The ones that should always be thrown out of the game is when somebody legitimately launches, when someone hits somebody that's on the same plane. When the offensive guy changes planes, I don't think those are the ones that should be ejected because you can't ever really know where they're going to be at that point in time. We protect quarterbacks and we all understand that. I don't know that there's anything we're going to do different. We continue to educate, to teach, and make sure our guys understand what the defenseless players look like. I hope that those things, those situations don't continue to happen because they're hard on all of us. No matter who it is, I don't think players should be thrown out of games."

On Temple finding their rhythm offensively

"I didn't watch them as much early, before they had made the switch a quarterback, but they've done a really, really good job. They're very efficient at what they're doing. They fill in the ball incredibly well, they mix it up. The quarterback's only taken six sacks and he's throwing the ball maybe 40 times a game, and that's over a long period of time. So really, really efficient at what they're doing. They've got great balance. For a young guy, he understands the game. He understands where his outlets are and what he needs to do if it's not there. You can see that. You can see the growth even from game five onwards."

On the younger guys finding ways to win

"I think it's an expectation. One of the bigger differences is, even in year one or two, guys expect to win. Yes, they prepare, they do all those things. But when it comes down to crunch time, a lot of times, it's about an expectation. Who really believes they can get it done. We panic at times, and we show immaturity a lot of times. Then suddenly, in these really critical moments, you see this mature group step up. We give up a 4th and 14 and you're like, oh my goodness, here it is. Can we handle this? And then all of a sudden, the maturity steps up, plays are made, and we finish the ballgame. It's really hard. My dad in particular calls me afterwards and says 'I think I'm done. I don't know if I can do this anymore. You're lucky you're young and your heart can take it.' I don't know that I'm young and I don't know that I can take it. It's more than anything that expectation that they're going to get it done."

On Ja'Quan Sheppard's impact this season

"He's done a great job and he's been consistent. Not saying he's the only one, but I think he's one of those spots that going into the year, I think everybody would have said, 'Okay, what's it going to be like? What's he going to do? What's going to be like when a guy catches the ball for the first time in a long time?' There's a lot of guys that fill shoes and not just do a good job but are under pressure and scrutiny and they're not quite what somebody else was. All those things, he's done a phenomenal job of handling. He's played really well. He's been very consistent. I don't think he's ever tried to be the guy that was there before him. He's truly being who he is and playing the way that he does. He's really grown up."

On Armorion Smith filling in for Bryon Threats

"He has played a lot this year. He has played a lot of special teams wise, filled in some games not just when [Bryon] Threats got in trouble or when he got ejected. He has actually played in a lot in some other situations in big games. That is what is fortunate for us, whether a guy gets hurt or something happened like the other night, we have a player that has some experience and has played some really critical roles and has the ability to step in and play. You can't devalue the big plays that are done on special teams and the maturity that you gain to playing on some of those special team units. Just come to practice, you will realize the pressure and emphasis on that. Those guys where sometimes that's maybe their role at a younger age and as they grow become a lot more ready than people would believe to step in those high-pressure situations."

On what he meant on this is when the playoffs start

"That is our whole objective. We have always wanted to play for championships and I think that now you are in a position where it is all or nothing, and I am not saying that every game isn't like that, but you are trying to put in a little bit more of an emphasis on what you need to do and you want to make sure these guys understand that. So that's what we really say, it's not like we're putting a sign up here and saying 'Now the playoffs begin' but it's just an understanding now that we have trained and we have done all these things to get to November, and to be in a position where November really matters and don't forget that November really matters."

On whether he compares this year's team others he has had

"This year's team reminds me of none. Yes, I do compare sometimes because you try to draw upon all of your experiences. Just like you compare players and guys and things like that, but it's more so in a situation you're trying to compare like 'How did that work?', 'What did I do?', 'What did we do?' and 'How do we handle this?' You are always drawing from those past experiences, but I would really say this is very, very, very unique and I am not sure I have been in one that's been any bit similar. I don't know like I said with all the different ups and downs, the way different games have ended. We haven't been in a whole bunch of those situations. The emotional shifts, a lot of times you get in a rhythm of a game, you feel it, and things adjust, but like the ups and the downs, I think have just been uniquely different this year. I don't know exactly, you know, it's back and forth. You are down, you are up you are playing really well, then all of a sudden you give up big plays. It's just a lot more unknowns that we have had kind of throughout games, not just a year, but in particular games."

On Ja'Quan Sheppard as one of the defensive players of the game against East Carolina

"The number one thing I think is consistency. I think that he's been very consistent in what he's done and that's what we asked him to be. We knew he was going to be a newer starter, even though he's been here for a while and as you go and do this you are going to develop more and more things, but you have to be consistent. I think that's the key at that position in particular. There's just so many shots, so many opportunities that are taken at that spot that you got to have consistency, the ups and the downs are probably more than any other spot. It has to be

consistent because if you get in one of those situations where you're not consistent, you lose your emotions, that snowball grows a lot faster at that position than any other."

On if there are parallels to 2018 and 2019 teams

"I don't think so. I don't. A lot of time it is the makeup, it is what the expectation is because there was a completely different expectation in 2018 and 2019. I don't mean the outside, I just mean from us in general. If we had been in some of these situations in 2018, I don't know if we would have had the same year just because I don't know that we created an expectation to win and we created what winning looks like. Without having that right now, I am not sure it would be the same. I don't know that there are a whole lot of parallels, you won close games and found ways to win, but it is different than we were finding ways to win right now."

Graduate Linebacker Wilson Huber

On this year's defense

"Ultimately, we just find a way to get it done. I think in the past, we've maybe been more of a dominant defense, but ultimately, like those teams of the past, we find a way to get the job done in most circumstances. That just goes back to what we're trained to do. We fight, we're gritty, we get after it until the final whistle. In a lot of situations, it's very good for us."

On the comparison between this season and past seasons

"As my old self, I've seen the evolution of a lot of these Cincinnati teams, under Coach Fickell. I think that one of the biggest differences between those teams versus our team now, is that no matter what situation we're in, there's no panic on the sideline. You never see guys get out of themselves because of the score. Deep down, we've seen time and time again that if we do what we need to do, regardless of the situation, we will play ourselves back into the game. That's just who we are now. It's been awesome to be a part of."

On limiting defensive penalties for the rest of the season

"Yeah, it's something that we can't do, especially when we're playing good teams. It's something that will bite us in the butt. It didn't against ECU, but it will. If we want to get to where we're going, we can't let that affect what we do. We have to stay within ourselves and play with each other because a lot of the penalties are completely unnecessary. That's on me, as one of the leaders on this defense to bring the guys in and just remind them that that stuff is all extra. It doesn't have to do with what we want to do. That is something that we've got to address with the team, and I've got to take full responsibility for those things."

On the pressure on the linebackers because of injuries on the defensive line

"I don't think so. The same expectation is held with the linebackers. With the injuries that we have had, the guys have stepped up and done an incredible job. So, it's not like we're playing with our hands tied behind our back. We still have an expectation to go out and make plays and

be the leaders of the defense at the linebacker level. It really hasn't changed. The guy's up front have done an absolutely incredible job. Without them we wouldn't be having this season we are."

On Temple's quarterback situation

"Yeah, he's a young guy. I haven't seen a whole lot yet. We're still getting into that preparation. From what we can tell, he's a baller. He throws the [ball] around. He's confident in what he does. He's led an offense to over 500 yards in the last two weeks. They're very capable with what they do. But ultimately, it comes down to what we need to do and how we prepare."

On the importance of November games

"It's very prevalent in what we're doing. November is for contenders. We're in a spot now that shows that we are capable of doing everything that we set out to do this year. So, I don't know if the urgencies higher, but we're still going about the business the way we've done it in the past. It's in the back of our heads that we have two weeks left in this in the regular season. So, the message with us was, what are you willing to do in for two weeks? Because in two weeks, if we do what we need to do, we're going have a chance to achieve our goal."

Senior Wide Receiver Tre Tucker

On Jaden Thompson's 100-yard kickoff return

"Yeah, so actually all week, we're preparing for that, we kind of knew, these past few weeks they've been kicking kind of all over the place. So, we prepared for it and when I go look at the film, it was in a grey area, but I think he did have the right of way to take it, but I couldn't even see where it was going. The biggest thing is just making sure you communicate, so I was yelling me, me, me, me, me and he didn't hear so I just remember throwing my hands up, like, all right, and then I ran up. And then it was just in slow motion, I just saw him, and I was like, no way. And he just broke out. And I'm just watching him, and I see someone coming. I think it was a kicker if, if the kicker gets him this, this is going to be bad. So, I just started running and he ended up taking it, taking it all the way. And I just utter belief. It's crazy."

On Ben getting up in front of the team and acknowledging he was not at his best

"That was tremendous. I mean, he's a great leader, I think it's hard, because that guy has a bunch he must do, not just on the football field off the field as well with all everything that he hears. Just shows how strong he is, and I know, everyone in that locker room has his back, so for him to stand up there and acknowledge that, that he's not playing his best, that just makes us more inspired to do our best for him. He's a great guy, a tremendous leader. And I'm excited for him for the rest of the season."

On the pressure of the next two games.

"Well, the scary thing about Temple is they got a new coach and new coaching staff. So, they are playing their best ball in November. And that's what we pride ourselves on, make sure

we're playing our best ball in November, and I think they're doing that. It's a good team over there. I'm excited to play them. I know a few people there and I know that tempo has always been a problem for us. Even before I was here, I can remember, my senior in high school, they were undefeated, and they went over there and played Temple away and lost, you know, that was one of the only losses other than UCF that year. But Temple was always a tough place, a tough place to play, and they're always a tough team. So, I think everyone's going to be on high alert. Obviously, no, we got next week, but this week is just as important, just because of how they play and who they are. Everyone's going to make sure that the focus is to have a good week of practice."