



The American Athletic Conference Championship Postgame Press Conference Quotes Dec. 4, 2021

Cincinnati

Coach Fickell's Opening Statement

“What a special, special night. What a game. I give a lot of credit to Houston. That is a really good football team. The way we came out in the second half...we weren't going to be denied. The seniors stepped up right before we came out at halftime. Coby Bryant, Desmond Ridder and some of those guys stepped up and said, 'we are going to go out in the second half and take control.' They came out in the second half on a mission. I'm so proud of these guys. They have been through so much, with ups and downs, with obstacles. People will say, 'What obstacles? You're 13-0.' The number of obstacles you got to go through, especially when you got high-end guys, and guys that get praise and a lot of different things. But our ability to stay together, to not let the selfishness that happens so often, to not let that affect them... They really care about the things they do with the guys around them. It is really difficult to do this week in and week out. They have found a way because of great leadership. You see it in Desmond Ridder (quarterback), Joel Dublanko (linebacker) and so many more, so many to list. What those guys have done, making our home here, is something they will never forget, I told them.”

Coach Fickell on what was said at halftime

“When you have an older group, when you can look in eyes and recognize who they are, going in at half, it was a battle and I don't know if we did a great job defensively. We hadn't had the ball that many times offensively. They were doing a good job moving and scoring. With the energy, I just wasn't really sure, and I looked into the guys eyes. It kind of went onto the

shoulders of those seniors. I felt really good about what they were talking about and how would we come out in the second half. To put the ball in Desmond Ridder and those guys hands to start the half is huge.

Coach Fickell on potentially making history by getting into the College Football Playoff

“We never talk about history. I try to block it out and ask, ‘what history?’ I mean, history of going to the championship game three times in a row? That is what we look at first and foremost, and we try not to say anything beyond tonight. What we had control over and what we could do. We can take care of ourselves and keep the focus on what we were doing. It’s not easy. They did an unbelievable job and I enjoyed what these guys have done tonight. I know and believe in what is happening...and if it is meant to be, it will be. I don’t think these guys can be denied. Just the way they answered the bell and everything they have done all year. It would be a shame for them to be denied.”

Coach Fickell on scoring on the drive after halftime

“I think the opening drive in the second half is something I define as toughness. Especially when you are coming out in different situations and the momentum of the game is in nobody’s favor. It’s back and forth. The start of the second half is so critical just for the momentum and the energy you are getting. For us to be at home and to have the crowd, I think that was a big deal for us to be able to kickstart the crowd and that is a big factor.”

Coach Fickell on sharing this moment with the fanbase and the team

I think that was something that I haven’t experienced that much...with everybody and the fans on the field afterwards. They asked for the boys to hustle back up to the locker room so we can have our own little celebration and then we can move on. They were playing music and things and I thought it might be a long one out there tonight and I am perfectly fine with it. Let’s just hang out here with the people that have supported us and made our home a real advantage to all that we are doing. If they are still out there when we leave the press conference, I think we are going to go out there and hang out with them.”

Coach Fickell on the expectations of this year and how the team has dealt with them

“That is what I mean when I say that I am so proud of what these guys are doing. The obstacles and the challenges and a lot of it is what to do with what you just said...the expectations. Our league is a really good football league. We are not making history...what history? We do what we do, we want to be us. We try to keep the motivation and not get into the expectations of everyone else. I just don’t mean an expectation to win, these guys work their butts off. We know what the expectation is to win...they do this for a reason. The expectations of living up and try to be something else. We know that being us is good enough. We proved that tonight.”

Coach Fickell on the challenge of finishing off Houston

“That is the tough thing. But some people standing up in the stands or in the box were feeling really good about what was going on. Unfortunately, they knew too much. But we’ve watched enough film to know what can happen when momentum and things shift. So, you are really trying to balance it. You want your guys to be positive, to enjoy it, but you know what is really at stake. I guess that is one of those things that I don’t enjoy a whole lot. The last 12 or 13 minutes, until we got the last turnover with 30 or 40 seconds left, I don’t think I enjoyed anything. But I think we got guys that understand that. We don’t have a young group. I mean, we got some young guys, but you can rely on those guys and these guys right here (Desmond Ridder, quarterback) and the other guy in the huddle on defense (Joel Dublanko, linebacker). They made it known that this game is far from over and we got to continue to finish.”

Desmond Ridder on where being undefeated at home ranks on his list of accomplishments

“I mean that is pretty high. Obviously, we take great pride in playing here at Nippert in front of a wonderful crowd and a wonderful student section. It’s just a blessing. All of our hard work paid off. During the summer, we run the stadium steps where it’s seven up and downs on the steps for seven home games. We do it every summer ever since I’ve been here to make sure that where we are playing is a special place. It was pretty rowdy tonight, and I am going to miss it for sure.”

On the progress of Cincinnati’s football program

Luke Fickell: “I think when you first walk in here, you’re almost ignorant in a sense. You’ve got this vision and it’s pretty clear, then you get through year one and reality kind of hits. But you just go back to work. To see a growth, it’s so amazing, it really is. To see these guys, and what they’ve done, how they’ve handled it, that’s what you love about it. We’re going to talk about 13-0, and 27-straight at Nippert, but to see how they’ve done it is what you love about it. That’s why you coach. Winning is great, but to see these guys grow and create bonds with each other, that’s the thing that people forget about this game... There’s probably 15 or 20 guys that played with us for the past three years in that locker room celebrating, and they’re every bit a part of this, even though they weren’t on the field.”

Desmond Ridder: “I’ve had my ups and downs both on the field and in life. For me, Coach Fickell has been a coach, a friend, a brother, a father figure. He’s a person I’ll always look up to and I’ll always thank him for giving me the opportunity to come here and play under him. He means the world to me.”

Joel Dublanko: “Coach Fickell said, inch-by-inch, getting better and better each year. I think that’s a testament to our guys and the culture. It doesn’t matter what happened, but we just always find a way to get better. I think we did that, and we’ll continue to do that. I think that’s why we’ve been so good at home. We’ve had a great atmosphere to play in these last few years. “

On Marcus Freeman becoming the head coach at Notre Dame

Luke Fickell: “I’m incredibly excited. Like I said, there’s 15 guys in our locker room that have played with us the past three years and some from earlier than that. Those guys are a part of what we’ve built. Marcus Freeman is a huge part of what we’ve built. When they move on, I take pride in knowing those guys were a big part of what we did. The experiences I have with these guys is what makes me as a coach. Obviously, we’re excited for him and those people because they’ve been a big part of us, and we love it when they have great opportunities like that.”

Joel Dublanko on his interception

“So, they’re attacking the middle throughout the game and the coaches were telling us to be really good on zone integrity. I saw where the quarterback’s eyes were looking, he threw my way, I threw my hands up, it went in my hands and I was like ‘Crap, I have the football right now.’ I ran, protected it and the rest is history.”

Desmond Ridder on the offense’s hot stretch

“In the pregame meeting before we left the hotel, Coach Fickell said the biggest difference in championship games are turnovers and momentum. Things that are going to swing games and change the way people play. For Joel (Dublanko, linebacker) to get an interception in a big-time situation, it was huge for us. For us to be able to go down and score, it changed the momentum of the game.”

Desmond Ridder on being a part of the group that took the program to new heights

“It feels great. And Coach Fickell always talks about leaving the place better than when you found it, and I’d definitely say we’ve done that.”

On Jerome Ford being healthy again and winning the MVP

Jerome Ford: “It felt good to be back out helping the team in any way I can.”

Luke Fickell: “Just get him the ball. He’s done an unbelievable job. I give a lot of credit to Jerome. When he walked in here, and we were winning...Sometimes when new guys come into the program, they expect things to happen right away. I’m so proud of how it worked out for him. Meaning, when he first came in, it didn’t just happen. I don’t know if I’ve told him this, but

he embraced the culture. We don't worry about the selfishness, and we take care of each other. We try to enjoy so many other things other than stuff on the football field. He (Jerome Ford, running back) was able to do that in that first year. It's really paid off for him, our team and our program.

On being on the field when the fans stormed the field

Desmond Ridder: I can't remember where I was for the UCF game where I saw the fans rush the field, but I definitely will remember this one. It was wild. At the end of the game, I didn't know if the security was going to stop them. But seriously, it's just a blessing for them to be able to celebrate with us.

On if Coach Fickell will watch the College Football Playoff Show

Luke Fickell: What time is it? We have a Senior Appreciation Banquet from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m., so the answer is probably no. We'll be celebrating what these guys have done over the last four, five or even six years.

Houston

Head Coach Dana Holgorsen's Opening Statement

"I'm not going to start with the negative obviously we didn't play good in the third quarter, I think our opponent had something to do with that. Very proud of our football team, we've had a heck of a year. We've had a great week of practice; we were motivated to come into a home game for The University of Cincinnati. Rowdy atmosphere, incredible environment, fantastic football team, well-coached, great players. A solid on all three sides of the ball. We went toe-to-toe with them for as long as we could. Very proud of our football team. What I look at out there is what I want our team to look like, and our stadium to look like next year, and I think that we can get that done. I think we can accomplish that. They've been working at it for a couple years longer than we have, so very proud of our team. I'm encouraged with how we've played; I'm encouraged with the position that we've been in. I'm excited on continuing to get better. Top four football team, they're deserving of the CFP berth, that's history. Coach, congratulations, Coach Fickell and his entire team. They're first class."

Coach Holgorsen on the final fourth-down opportunity

"No, the answer is no. Is it the reason we lost? No. Did it change the game and create momentum? Absolutely. 4th and four, the kid makes a heck of a play and it just changes everything. Great teams have to overcome that. Championship teams have to overcome that, we did not. All the momentum went to their side and we had a hard time stopping it. Three touchdowns later, which was a one-point game at halftime. I felt like we left some things out there in the first half where we would have had a halftime lead, that's on me. Didn't finish good enough in the red zone. Then, you look up there and you're down twenty-two points. Huge momentum swing that we were not able to overcome, which is why they're the American champions- that's the bottom line."

Coach Holgorsen's thoughts going into halftime

"We did a good job offensively possessing the ball, and I think that our time and possession was 24-6. We possessed it well, we moved it well, we didn't finish drives good enough to beat a team like this. When you get down there two or three times, you got to score more. We didn't play great defensively, but we settled in. They're a team that is a streaky-momentum-type team, so we weathered the storm, and we played good in the second quarter, which was awesome to see. Went toe-to-toe with them, in a crazy environment, though our halftime was good we just came out and they seized momentum, you know that's what championship teams do. They outplayed us in the third quarter, I was proud of our guys for not shutting down, they kept playing. Tank (Jenkins) made a hell of a play, and we went down there and overcame a lot, scored, then we just ran out of steam so to speak. Just proud of the way our guys fought, just kept playing throughout the course of the whole game."

Coach Holgorsen's message to the team after the game

"Just proud of them. Thank them, proud of them. The seniors in particular, but the whole team. This was a very tight team. A lot of memories were made this year that these guys will remember for a long time, which is what it's all about at the end of the day. Got to the championship game, didn't win it. Maybe if we would've won that first game, I don't know what they would have done, probably still would've had to come here anyways, to an undefeated team. Neutral site games are supposed to be neutral site games. It's disturbing that an 8-0 American team has to go on the road and play in this kind of atmosphere. Hopefully we can be 8-0 and we can host this game next year because it's a huge advantage. It's a huge advantage in the championship game. I don't get it but it's not for me to say."

Coach Holgorsen on Cincinnati's CFP opportunities

"I don't see how they (CFP) can kick them out. I'll probably get fined if I really give my feelings on what the CFP is but I don't know how they would kick them out. They're 13-0. Their only loss in the past two years was to Georgia. Georgia lost, there's chaos, so who knows what's going to happen. I don't know how you'd keep Cincinnati out. I think year three, Cincinnati year three, was my first at Houston. They came to our place and you could tell that it was a team that were getting better and getting better. They haven't lost there (Nippert Stadium) since 2017. That is four years, they haven't lost there in four years. We took them toe-to-toe for as long as we could and keep fighting till the end. I'm just very proud of our team and I think we're on track to seeing the same thing in Houston next year."

Coach Holgorsen on the impact on the AAC if Cincinnati makes the CFP

"Up until this point, it's been impossible, so I hope it happens. Based on history, I don't know. The American is a good football conference, good football is played. Us and Cincinnati are two very good football teams that went out there, and it was a heck of a football game. Very proud of our team. I've already said I think they should get in and I hope it happens."

Coach Holgorsen on Clayton Tune's performance

"It's hard to run the ball on these guys, especially into the red zone we had to use him. He's done a good job of extending plays, he hasn't been able to do that for about 85% of the season."

He's gotten to a point where he can do that a little bit more, that's one of the things that makes him a great quarterback is him being able to extend plays. We had to get him going a little bit in the game too, just because it's hard

On the emotions of reaching the championship game but coming up short

Cornerback Marcus Jones: "It definitely hurt. We put a lot of work into the off season. As you can tell, we lost our first (conference) game this season. We had our little streak and momentum when it came to the end, it was one of those situations to where we played a good game in the first half and we let it go. It definitely hurt."

Defensive Lineman Derek Parish: "It never feels good losing, especially not in a game like this after the momentum that we gained. I'm not going to go on a soapbox, but it hurts. Losing sucks, but maybe it builds a fire."

On hopes of claiming a win at the end of the night, but looking at the progress of the program

Marcus Jones: "Definitely, but we want a "W" in front of that, that is the main goal. Falling short is never what you want."

Derek Parish: "It was definitely one of those situations to where the younger guys get to see what this atmosphere is about, and you get to see Cincinnati's great environment with the fans and also how the game flows. This is always great for the younger guys"

What was the vibe at halftime? It seemed like you guys were in a position that you wanted to be in.

Marcus Jones: "At halftime we were basically trying to keep our foot on the gas, you never want to get complacent. What we did on defense was, they were getting a lot of explosive plays, so we were talking trying to get everything right to prevent those from happening. On offense, we were doing good we were moving the ball, so we just needed all 3 phases to basically do what we do."

On witnessing the celebration

Marcus Jones: "We definitely wish it was us, but they are a great football team. They are solid everywhere. So it was one of those situations where the emotions came out when you see all the fans come out. We just wish it was us."

Derek Parish: "I agree. We definitely wanted the roles switched. But you have to respect it, and it sucks but you have to take it on the chin, keep moving and get better."

On the toughness of playing in Cincinnati's environment

Derek Parish: "I personally think it shouldn't matter. Whether you are on a field, parking lot, grass, or turf it's an atmosphere regardless if they are there for you or not. It should be energetic, but I don't think that plays a part."

Marcus Jones: “The atmosphere is definitely different. You know they have a whole bunch of fans, the atmosphere was real nice. It shouldn’t affect us, we should go out there and play our game. Cincinnati played the best.”

You had a really good play, and you jumped up and looked surprised when there was a flag for pass interference. How did you feel on that play?

Marcus Jones: “I saw the receiver turn around so I played his hands. I’m not going to get upset at the ref because it’s his job. I saw his face, and it looked like he didn’t want to throw it at first, but then he threw it and I was like, “ahh.” Its one of those situations where all I could do was play the next play. I can’t get mad at him for doing his job.”

On Cincinnati’s CFP chances

Marcus Jones: “The first thing you have to do is respect the team who has only lost 1 game in 2 years. It’s hard to do, its hard to win in general. So going 1-0 every week and putting up the points and beating teams like Notre Dame, it shows a lot especially for the other teams in the conference. It’s just a shame that you have to do good for 2 years to get into the college football playoffs. But it’s one of those situations where it’s good to see, because in this conference there is great football. Just like coach Holgorsen said, its great to see one of the teams in our conference play for the championship.”

On the third quarter

Derek Parish: “It was hectic and it was fast. I guess we got the rug swept from under us for a little bit, but we didn’t panic and we knew what we had to do to get out of the situation. Things are never perfect, we just have to do better in those situations to prevent them.”