

October 22, 2007



MARK DANTONIO WEEKLY PRESS CONFERENCE

COACH DANTONIO: Just to wrap up Ohio State, first of all, I thought we went into the football game obviously playing a No. 1 ranked team away from home, and we knew that it was going to be a very, very difficult challenge for us. We played against a very good football team that executed for the most part.

From our standpoint I thought what we needed to do from our standpoint to win that football game was first of all, we had to go down there and believe that we could do that, and I think that we went into the game thinking that, but we needed to have a little bit of something (positive) happen early in the game, I think, to give us a little bit of spark. I didn't think we ever really got that.

We needed to be able to stop the run, and we needed to be able to run the football. Without question, we had to do that. And we were unable to do that in the early part of the game; one busted out, and the thing that's frustrating from a coaching perspective and a player's perspective is that sometimes you look at football plays and say was that a great play by them or a play that could have been prevented by us, and in a couple situations, it was a play that could have been prevented by us if everybody was doing their job. So you would typify some of those things as mental errors in that respect.

From an offensive standpoint, I think Ohio State's defense is outstanding. Every time that there was a little bit of a crease for Javon (Ringer) to hit it or Jehuu (Caulcrick) to get started that it closed very, very quickly. When I look at the defense, I have an appreciation for that obviously. I look at that aspect of their football team and compare it to when I was there in 2002 and 2003, and I would say they're every bit as good, maybe better in that respect.

They have excellent defensive backs; their linebackers close very quickly and play square downhill. Defensive line, they've got numerous

people that they can roll in there and stay fresh. I think Vernon Gholston from Detroit Cass Tech, is an outstanding player, and if you're going to run the football you have to be able to control the tight end, C-gap area and he was disruptive in that area. So with that in mind, that's where we were at.

You know, we had to affect their quarterback, which we were unable to do until late into the third quarter. Once we did do that, things started to happen a little bit for us and we got on the board with a couple turnovers and almost had three.

We needed to protect our quarterback, and I think that we couldn't do that very well in large part because of their coverages down the field and in large part because of their pressure.

Explosive plays, we needed to have them, stop them from getting them, but the same thing happened. We gave up a couple explosive plays, and again, I think it was a little bit of us as opposed to them. You know, those are the things that can be prevented. From our end of things, they did a great job shutting down Devin Thomas and our passing game. We did have an opportunity for a trick play late in the game, but he couldn't get (the ball) it out of his hands.

But going back to the defense, getting the ball back at the end of the game, something I think structurally we have to be better at. We practiced that situation all the time during the summer and had not practiced it as of late, and I think that's a coaching error on my part.

We've got to just over-commit, even if we've got to put the goal-line defense in in that situation, who cares if they score a touchdown at the end, we're trying to get the ball back. We have to recommit. We have to commit all of them up there. So I think that's a structural thing because they are a big, tough offensive unit. They've got guys that weigh 320 pounds coming at you; it's difficult to fend those off. Our coming out defense, when they did have the ball down there twice, with outstanding punts by Aaron Bates, we've got to hold them down there.

But with all that being said, I did think our players continued to play through the tough times. There was very little to really build on in that first half, I guess you would say, but we came in at halftime, recollected ourselves, went back out and played better in the second half and made it a competitive game late in the game, and because of that we're very, very proud of our football team. We didn't throw in the towel where that game could have been a 41-0 shutout, and you guys know it as well as I know it. But we battled back somehow, got within seven points and had an opportunity. So from that perspective, we continued to play up, continued to handle adversity and kept our composure.

I think it was a very cleanly played football game. We lose 24-17, in some ways I don't think the score indicated the closeness of the game; in other ways, we pick up the third fumble and who knows what could happen. But that's why they play the game and that's why I continue to talk about it being a game of inches. It's not miles, it's inches. And we need to continue to get better in that regard to be able to play against elite teams, away from home, and I truly believe that they are obviously one of the better teams in this conference, if not the nation.

Moving on to the Iowa game, I think it'll be a tough environment there, very tough environment. They're a 3-5 football team, coming off a disappointing loss at Purdue. They'll be ready. I've played at Iowa before having been here, having been at Purdue University when we went out to Iowa as a graduate assistant, so I've been out there a number of times, and it's a very difficult environment to play in. Their backs are against the wall a little bit, so they'll be prepared. They've got injuries, so they're playing young players.

Norm Parker coached here under Coach (George) Perles, and Phil Parker played here, so they're very familiar with Michigan State. Kirk Ferentz is an outstanding football coach, outstanding person, as well, and will have his players ready to play.

We've got to battle back. That's what I can tell you. We'll go (on the road) with an attitude.

Our (honorary) captains this week, I think it's important that our captains be from within. We have two outstanding players from the past at Michigan State, (secondary coach) Harlon Barnett who was a captain in 1989, and (running back coach) Dan Enos, who was the quarterback in '89, which was the last time we won at University of Iowa. They'll serve as our honorary captains and

they'll deal with things from within and give us a perspective of what we're going through and be emotionally attached to our players, so I think it's a good time for them to be honorary captains. With that, I'll take your questions.

Q. Talk about specifically the play of Jonal Saint-Dic and the forced fumbles and what that kind of did for you and the record that he set this weekend?

COACH DANTONIO: Well, I would rather have the record of going back down there (Ohio State) and winning and being 6-2, but Jonal continues to find a way to make big plays. He's a very big-play type of player. This is the second straight game that he forced a fumble that was returned for a touchdown, him being the all-time leader in that area in the Big Ten is certainly an accomplishment, but as a compete defense, including himself, we need to be more consistent in that respect. But he made some outstanding plays along the way, and he did again Saturday, which was a huge play in the game for us.

Q. What's impressed you about Greg Jones and what he's been able to do for you as a freshman?

COACH DANTONIO: Well, Greg is a guy that we had in camp at the University of Cincinnati from Moeller High School. He actually played defensive end his first two years at Moeller High School and then was moved to linebacker. He was a guy that (standing) long jumped 10-2, very athletic in our camp, and I just felt that he was a guy that was a can't-miss football player. He has unique ability to get off blocks. He's still learning, so he still makes mistakes at times mentally but he's an outstanding tackler. He's got a motor, and that's what gets him to the ball. He's a little bit like all the greats, the Chris Spielmans. When I was a graduate assistant at Ohio State, he'd just line up and just go. No blitz would be called, he'd just blitz. But he'd make plays.

Greg is not to that extent, but he has the unique ability to get off blocks and to close on people. He's a very explosive player, and he should be an outstanding football player for us here as the future goes on. With 14 tackles in the game on Saturday, he made some unbelievable plays. He hurdled a guy one time and made the tackle. He's a very good player.

Q. Not necessarily about whether he can play next week, but just about health-wise, talk about Chris L. Rucker's condition?

COACH DANTONIO: Chris had a detached retina, and we knew that last week. It was not as a result of contact. It was more of a degenerative type of thing, so it's been reconnected. We'll see whether he's able to play the rest of the season or not, but he'll certainly be able to play again. It's a positive thing, and the doctors did a great job, but it's sort of a thing that was ongoing, and he didn't even know he had it until he went to the eye doctor to get some glasses and then they saw it at that point. So he didn't even know he had it, but it needed to be fixed.

Q. Can you talk about the job that Kellen Davis has done this year?

COACH DANTONIO: Yeah, Kellen has been outstanding, not just in terms of what the public sees in terms of catching the football, but as a blocker he had an outstanding game against Indiana last week. He continues to be solid in all phases and continues to be a leader on the team. He does not complain about anything. He goes out and plays defense with very little practice at it, and he's been solid there. He certainly is a weapon for us and does various things for us.

The thing I like about our football team, and I continually say this, is our attitude. Our attitude is good. It's strong, and while we may get out of line a little bit in some ways in terms of maybe we didn't bring the total belief. I don't know, but football is a crazy game and we needed to have a little bit of success in the game early, a little proof that hey, we can get in this thing. And we didn't have that proof early. But we got it in the second half – late in the third quarter – and played much better. I think that's an intangible thing that's very hard to capture sometimes, very hard to capture.

Q. You're in the home stretch now; you've got four games left. To achieve your goals, to get a quality bowl game, you could argue that you've got to play your best football in the next four. What do you have to do as a team from here on out maybe that you haven't seen yet or do better?

COACH DANTONIO: Well, I think the first thing we have to do is recollect ourselves as a football team just like we have and not set our goals too far in advance. The first thing that has to happen is we need to prepare for Iowa, worry

about just that game and focus all our energies right there. That's the first thing I can say.

We obviously have to run the ball. We've done that. We obviously have to throw the ball and not have turnovers on offense. We've done that. Defensively, we've got to play well against the run. We've done that in the past. We've played well against the pass in the past, gotten turnovers and sacked the quarterbacks, so we have to continue to do that to put it all together. And as special teams, we have to be solid in all respects. We blocked a field goal, had a pretty good day punting the ball, kickoff return was solid but didn't kick off enough. But we have to continue to do the things that have allowed us to be successful.

We can determine our own future right now, and I think that we've played against everybody, and there's been nobody that's blown us out. There's been nobody – at the end of the game – where we're not sitting there saying, "only if," so we'll be in these games. We can win every one of them, and by the same token, we can lose every one of them. We need to stay the course. If there's anything that we need to do, we need to continue to believe in each other and trust each other and stay the course. And we will do that.

Q. Looking at Iowa, I was wondering if you could just diagnose their struggles on offense, and on the flipside, how good is that defensive front seven?

COACH DANTONIO: Well, on the offensive side of the ball, they've had a lot of injuries. They started a true freshman last week at guard; they've started a red-shirt freshman, so they're alternating them in there. They've had a lot of injuries to their receivers, and they're working with a young quarterback. I think that those are the main focuses of their problems right now. We're really just getting into who they are as a football team totally, doing all the film stuff this next day and a half or so.

But they are very, very capable. They have a couple big-play receivers; they have two tailbacks that are able to run the football. They're a very well-coached football team. I think we all know that from past history of Kirk Ferentz' teams. They know how to win. They'll be up against the wall there.

Defensively, their front seven is excellent. They've always been very good. They're always going to put a premium on stopping the run. Their

philosophy is probably a lot from what Norm Parker brought from being with Coach Perles and some of the things that they have done way back, and then also expanding on that, you know, since that time. So Coach Parker does an excellent job, and I know they'll be ready to play. They're very physical up front.

Q. Iowa has been kind of a thorn in Michigan State's side over the years, in good years and bad. Is there something about their temperament that makes them a little different?

COACH DANTONIO: I think they put a premium on toughness, much like we want to do. I think their program is built on toughness. You know, you have a former offensive line coach who's the head coach there. So there's always going to be attention to detail, there's always going to be an aspect of toughness that's going to be brought to their football team, and you see that.

They've had a history of winning close games, and they've had a history of winning it with defense. You know, it's a solid program. And I think when he got there, as I remember in 1999, they were a struggling program, and he built it from the bottom up. He reestablished things much like we're trying to do here. He reestablished the traditions there, and he reestablished the focus. They've got excellent facilities right now, and I think they've recruited very well from what I've seen in the past five, six, seven years.

Q. Looking at these last four games, and granted, it's at Iowa, but do you think this game is the most winnable game to get you to that bowl game?

COACH DANTONIO: No, I wouldn't say that because we're going to approach each one of these games individually. I think everybody has had their problems. What team hasn't had problems that we're playing yet? They've all had their issues; they've all had their problems. They're all going through their own phases of trying to secure their positions.

We'll take them one game at a time and see where we're at. But Iowa is certainly very capable. They beat Illinois 10-6 two weeks ago, so they're a very, very capable football team and they're going to play hard. I know that for a fact. What we have to do is do what we do and do it well.

Q. You mentioned the win against Illinois. This is a 3- 5 football team, but they did

beat Illinois, and they played Wisconsin to four points. How much Jekyll and Hyde do you have with this Iowa team?

COACH DANTONIO: Well, that's tough to say because I have not watched all eight games yet. I've been dealing with one, two, three games here, on both sides of the ball. But I think that a lot of what's happened to them is as a result of some of the injuries they've had, especially at receiver and along the offensive line, some of the struggles they've had there. They've had some guys knocked out on defense, as well, so a lot of that may be relative to exactly who's playing for them this weekend.

You talk about young, I saw a statistic that on their last road trip, they had 22 freshmen and red-shirt freshmen, and 15 sophomores traveling, so that's 37 players in their first and second years of eligibility traveling with them, so that's a lot.

Q. As a first-year staff, when you talk about the three losses, how much does it help that you weren't blown out in those games? How much does that help as far as getting your foundation going and helping with this team?

COACH DANTONIO: I think it builds credibility towards what we're trying to do. It builds credibility in terms of where we're at with the football program and what we're trying to accomplish. You know we're only a few plays away (from winning those games), either coaching decisions or players making plays or a recruit away. We're only a few plays away from being a 6-1 football team or 7-1 football team really. It's always going to be tough down there (Ohio State), the way they play. But we're still only a few plays away, and that gives you credibility to keep moving in the right direction.

The fact that we have five wins right now, a 5-3 football team, gives us an opportunity to take every single game one at a time and not put a premium on if we don't win this one, oh, it's doom and gloom. We can play it all the way out and continue to reach our goals and be very systematic in terms of what goals we want to reach. If we're able to win this game then the next goal will be to win the seventh game and continue on from there. I think that's a good thing, and we'll build on that.

Q. Could you assess the play of the secondary and again now they're going to be facing some young receivers, just the

opportunities they could have this weekend?

COACH DANTONIO: Well, I've said all along, I'll be very up front: we have some talented players in the secondary, but we've been inconsistent. A lot of it has to do with eye control and attention to detail at times, just laying it out the way it is.

Sometimes, the mistakes that we make are lack of attention to detail or focus if that's what you say. It's not focus prior to the snap, it's focus as the play continues on. Some of it, in the case of the deep ball versus T.J. (Williams), he had him cut off the double pattern, which means they ran it out and up, it's one-receiver route, it's him and them, he had the guy cut off, ball is thrown inside, probably not where it should be thrown, but ball is thrown inside and we have to be in the coverage we're in and the guy makes a great play on the ball.

At another point in time, we should have a middle of the field safety. On the long touchdown pass in the second half, playing middle of the field coverage, deep is the deepest. If I told you deep is the deepest, you'd be deep, so somebody is behind you. So to me that's a mental error.

So you take it as – it doesn't mean you can a guy, it just means we need to be better in that respect. We need to understand why that play was successful, and that's what I'm talking about. Was that a great play by Ohio State or was that a poor play by us? In my opinion, it was a poor play by us. It's one play, but it makes all the difference.

That's why I continually talk about it being a game of inches. It's backpedaling into your middle third as opposed to opening up and driving to your middle third. It's something as small as that gives you your extra depth. But we'll get there. Sometimes, you have to take a step back before you can move forward, and our guys are very willing and they're very coachable.

Like I said, I love our guys' attitude and their work ethic. We'll come to work and we'll come to play, and we'll be competitive.

Q. You keep referring to them being coachable. Talk about that. Going into a game, you're not dealing with him having to give you excuses . . .

COACH DANTONIO: Our guys don't make excuses, they accept responsibility. I want to accept responsibility, too, because it's all-inclusive. Maybe we did too much, maybe we tried to do too much, and maybe we didn't do enough in certain other areas. But it's coaching and it's players, and

we have to lump the two together and make sure that we always say "we" when we're talking about what's gone on. It's not one person's fault, it's not one unit's fault, it's not one segment, it's all of us. When we do win, it'll be the same way. It won't be because of one person, it'll be because of all of us.

But the attitude of our football team has been good from the time that I arrived here, and it is still healthy. We're going to clean up everything, the mess in our lives. We're trying to clean it up and redirect.

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