

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs Tennessee

Sunday, December 31, 2023

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Josh Heupel

Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



Bowl games are special. They are really special. They are special for the players and special for everybody involved and to be in Orlando and be part of the Cheez-It Citrus Bowl is just a tremendous, tremendous opportunity for us. We are very appreciative of that.

A couple things about Bowl games. Typically, every time you are in one, you are going to play an outstanding opponent. In our case, we tend to be the underdogs. I think it has been all but maybe two in our 20-plus years, kind of seems to be the way it is. Bottom line is both teams have earned the right to play in a game like this. It really is significant in that way.

The other commonality to the Bowl games, it is the last game that our teams will be together, both teams, teams, staffs, etc. Makes a little bit unique in that way, a little bit bittersweet. Certainly, the goal this week for us is like each and every week, you want to try to play your best game and the challenges of the month are a little bit different. That is probably the biggest change.

I have tremendous respect for Tennessee. Josh has done a great job as local people know. He has done an outstanding job, everywhere he has been, he has done an outstanding job and no different at Tennessee. They are just a really good football team, put a lot of pressure on their offensive system. A lot of stress on your defense.

Defensive team, very athletic, good up front, a lot of big strong guys that are active and physical and special teams are very impressive, as well.

Punter has done a really nice job. Really good place kicker, outstanding punt returner, and just a lot to prepare for. A lot of challenges out there for us tomorrow. We are just excited to be here and last game of the season.

Again, like I said, it's really a special thing. A lot of people involved. I think about a guy, our equipment guy, Greg Morris, 23 years as our head equipment guy and 30-plus years in the program. Was a student at Iowa. It is his last game, as well.

JOSH HEUPEL: Good morning, everybody. This has been a great week for our staff, our families and our players. I want to thank Steve Hogan everyone and associated with Florida Citrus Sports. It is a first-class operation. They have done a tremendous job of creating a great experience and taking care of everybody the entire week. It has been fun for myself, my wife and a lot of our staff to be back in the great City of Orlando. A lot of great memories, having spent three years here, and it has been fun to catch up with a lot of familiar faces, those at UCF, but also throughout the entire community.

It has been a fun week to kind of go back and get a chance to see a lot of people that have helped me on my journey and been a part of the success that we have had at the previous stop at UCF.

Excited about the game tomorrow. This is a big-time college football game, great way to kick off 2024. We recognize Coach Ferentz and his staff and their program, what they have done this year, but during the course of his tenure, as well. They play extremely tough, smart and physical. Great opponent and looking forward to kicking off.

KIRK FERENTZ: Same thing. It is great to be here first and foremost. We were here two years ago, and I was at an event last night. Worked with a guy named Bill Brashier, back in the '80s on Coach Fry's staff, defensive coordinator. He had a saying, "There is no such thing as a bad Bowl game. Some are just better than others."

I can tell you firsthand; this is one of the best out there. Just a fantastic experience for everybody involved, our players first and foremost, staffs, families, the travel party. It has just been outstanding.

As Josh said, Steve and the whole committee do a wonderful job. We are certainly thrilled to be back in Orlando and have a chance to play in a game like this.



Just a lot of little side stories, if you will, but it's really all about the game and we're excited to get out there and have a chance to compete tomorrow.

Q. Both of you are making a return to Orlando in your each unique way. Coach Ferentz, last time you were here in Orlando for the Citrus Bowl, we talked about the state of college football and how it changed and all that. You mentioned a text from Coach Stoops; it was an excellent story. But to bring it here what has helped you, and what have you done to maintain that success to return to the Citrus Bowl?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, yeah, sorry to say two years later, we are in worse shape than we were two years ago. I did not think that was possible.

We, the adults, have done a lot to really screw this thing up. We have a great game, so I do – old guy in the room – I have got some concerns about what the future is going to look like.

I think most people are aware that we have some real issues right now. I am not sure what we can come to agreement what the remedies may be. You see a lot of things that just concern you, and again, there are a lot of moving parts. I'm not going to pretend I have all the answers.

Despite all the challenges, I think the thing that remains consistent, the single best part about what we do is we get to work with really high-quality young players, and that has not changed. It was the same way two years ago, ten years ago, and that is the part you really enjoy.

I have always told people in any job, you have X amount of percent of things you do not really look forward to doing, and then another percent, hopefully, you do like doing. If that percent outweighs the other side, then it is still a pretty good deal.

Q. How have you changed in your time as a coach at Tennessee since you left Orlando?

JOSH HEUPEL: No matter what role you are in or whatever profession you are in, you continue to learn how to become a better communicator, how to impact the people around you in a positive way. You continue to refine what you are doing inside of your program 365 days out of the year to allow kids to go be their best and create a culture that they enjoy being and love competing in. Just continue to do that. You learn so much.

As a leader of the program, you learn so much from the people around you, and in particular student athletes.

Those guys have been instrumental in the growth of who we are and what we do.

Q. Coach Heupel, I believe your year at Oklahoma, Chuck Long would have been your quarterback coach.

JOSH HEUPEL: We had a lot of Iowa guys down in Oklahoma.

Q. I was curious if you still have any sort of relationship with Coach Long, or some of the things you might have learned from him as your coach back then?

JOSH HEUPEL: I learned a lot from Coach Long. He helped refine me fundamentally. Helped me continue to grow in my understanding of the football game. How to lead the people around me.

That staff was filled with the Stoops brothers. Jonathan Hayes was there, as well. Those guys are all – have all made such an impact in who I am and what we do inside of our program. You look at the success that we had, that was because of a lot of the things that they learned, while they were at Iowa as players and as coaches. Have good relationships with a lot of those guys where I still talk to them periodically throughout the year.

Q. For both of you guys as well. The December crush and how you guys dealt with it with guys opting out, transfer portal, signing day; all that you've had deal with with Bowl preparation, how did you deal with that and how did you go through that?

JOSH HEUPEL: You want to answer that one (Laughter)?

KIRK FERENTZ: I do not think either of us do, quite frankly.

JOSH HEUPEL: I think Coach kind of alluded to it. The calendar in which we operate now it changes the way December and part of January unfolds for you. I think as we continue to move forward in this great game, is something that we have to look at.

It is different, because when your regular season ends, you go through the exit interview process. Each individual player is in a different position. For a period of time, there is some uncertainty with a portion of your roster.

For us, I think as we finished up signing day, that kind of became, you know, the lead-in to the Bowl game where you felt good about who was there, where they were at, their ability to play in the game, and you know, be a part of your roster.

KIRK FERENTZ: It is just a different world. Even 20 years ago, you had guys possibly opting out for the NFL, not near to the extent now.

There are just a lot of parties involved now, and it us not always healthy voices that the players here and some of the parties involved are not necessarily thinking about what is best for the individual young people. Just kind of flies in the face of what we try to do as coaches I think, so that is part of it.

As Josh alluded to, we have opened the rules up now where it is real easy for people to make bad decisions. I have always -- not always, but for a while now -- I have been just concerned about how our thirst for the playoffs and our thirst for the National Championship race: Two teams, four teams, with all the focus going there with the public and the media, really diminishes some of the other Bowls.

Our first Bowl game in 2001 was in San Antonio, Alamo Bowl, and we won it. Bob Sanders, the shortest guy on the field came out with the ball. Wes Welker was in that group, too, another short guy, but two pretty good players.

Sanders comes out of the game with the ball at the end. They threw a Hail Mary, and it was like we won the Super Bowl. Like that was a really important game and important year for us, our third year; and we did not turn the corner, but at least we were showing progress making traction.

Those games do mean a lot. They mean a lot more the people involved and I just think right now there is a trend where like it is not the whatever game. It does not matter. Anybody that has ever played in the game, that is why you play the game. You play to go out and compete, do your best every opportunity and when I coached at Worcester Academy, every game was important.

We have really drifted away from that a little bit, and I think that is unfortunate, because a lot of people are missing out on some really special experiences, and that is too bad.

Q. You got Luke Lachey and Jay Higgins coming back. As you're looking to bring some more of those guys back who are considering NFL options, curious as to how important a foundation of bring Luke and Jay back, two team captains already know they are back next season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it certainly does not hurt. Those guys are so respected in the program. Rightfully so. They have earned it. That does not hurt.

My only request for our players, particularly the last ten days was if you have not made a decision, compartmentalize that stuff. It is like high school kids with recruiting. Do not let that dominate your life. You will spend the whole time looking over the fence.

It could be really distracting. It is hard. It is a really hard thing for the young people to go through two years ago. I thought Riley Moss was a little distracted down here, quite frankly, and then he surprised us all and came back. He was not distracted his senior year.

It is a tough thing for young people to deal with, so our request is to just put it on the shelf. They have plenty of time to make the decision when they get back, and, ultimately, it is like recruiting in this way. You want the player to make the decision that is best for him and he has the best seat in the house for that, but he has to go through it methodically, get good information, and accurate information from people that actually do know, not Uncle Joe or some agent telling him this, this and this. We just try to give them good information to deal with.

Q. Now as you wrap up year number 25, Phil Parker has been with you for all 25. Obviously the overall defensive results have been acknowledged, but is there anything that Phil does that you think really has not gotten a ton of attention that's been key to his success?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, Josh mentioned the Stoops. When I was an assistant at Iowa, I always looked at Phil, guy was three-time All-Big Ten. He is not very big, he was not that fast, but he is really short and stuff. I always felt like he could be in the Stoops family if he was an Iowa guy.

I had great respect for him as a player, and now I have had a chance to work with him for 25 years. I will say this: Unequivocally the best secondary coach I have ever, ever been with, and I have been around some pretty good ones.

He is a quality human being. He is half-crazy; I think you have noticed that. He has a little different personality. I do not want to call him an acquired taste some of those looks he gives you, it is like, okay, yeah.

He is just a tremendous football coach. He has had two jobs in his whole career. That is kind of unusual for a guy his age. That is just who he is. He wants to coach football. He is all about the players and all about trying to get better. I think Josh hit on this earlier. Just when you are around good people on a day-to-day basis, players, staff, that is the fun part of it, and it is neat to see Phil's efforts being recognized a little bit right now. I am kind of surprised the national stuff, because we normally do not get those kinds

of things, but it is so deserved and just really fitting.

Q. You mentioned a lot of those Bowl games losing their luster with opt-outs and guys leaving. That has not been the case for your program. Why is it different at Iowa?

KIRK FERENTZ: I do not know if I can answer it other than despite all the changes right now, there are still – I think there are still players out there that want to do it for the right reasons, and really enjoy the competition of the game.

The thing about football that is so unique, and I never coached any of those -- well, I did coach girls' basketball two years. The AD made me do it at Worcester Academy. Football is so different, because you get so many moving pieces, so many moving parts.

When guys get to understand what the value of teamwork and working together with a bunch of folks a fifth-year DB might not know a freshman offensive lineman real well, but when you get them to understand that everybody is trying to do the same thing, I think it makes it really unique and special.

I think there are still a lot of players out there are that are motivated for that, and you have to look hard and be a little bit lucky, too. We have been really fortunate to have a lot of good guys – and it is usually the guys in the front of the room are the ones. I mentioned Lachey and Higgins, two guys that are great leaders. They help bring other guys with them and, hopefully, stay focused on what really is important.

Q. Coach Ferentz referenced the unhealthy voices that some kids here. How much have you all encountered tampering and how big of a problem do you feel like that is in today's game?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, certainly a part of it. Players have so many different people as they are going through their process early as young players, you know, before the recruiting process even starts out from people that are training them to high school coaches to people that they have relationships with, seven-out-of-seven, that type of thing. It's certainly part of the college land scrape right now.

Wish I had a silver bullet to change all that. I do not think I do.

KIRK FERENTZ: I was thinking of a funny story. It is probably 15 years ago. We had a guy visit our campus for maybe all of, I don't know, 16 hours, because he had to move and all that kind you have stuff. I was told afterwards,

give his mentor, Omar, a phone call.

So anyway, I gave him a call. We are talking about the situation a little bit. I finally asked Omar, I said, "If you don't mind me asking, what is your role?"

"Oh, I'm a mentor."

The young man that we were talking about is about 6-7, 330 pounds. I did not ask him, but I was really curious, like do you mentor anybody on the chess team or the debate team. Sometimes those things happen. It is really unfortunate. There are predators in every business, every profession.

When people are really invested in young people, that is a good thing, and the you see a little drift now, some players after training with this guy instead of their high schools. It is the world we are living in, right now.

What we do is not really that hard. Like training is not all that hard. It is just a matter of hard work, having a good plan and right down the list. None of the stuff is really that complicated, but what is complicated is all the peripheral noise and peripheral interference and all those kinds of things.

Again, circles back to you have to get kids that can focus on the things that are important and keep their attention there, whether it is playing in a game like this or – year round. it's always something that is an obstacle and distractions are not new to life. I mean I did coach starting in the late '70s, but the distractions that are available now have really changed, and social media has really driven that, too.

There are more things to try to be proactive about than there used to be, I guess.

Q. As difficult as December has become with the transfer portal, with an earlier signing period; God forbid you want to spend time with your family over the holidays, you have to prepare for a game. Next year, it gets exponentially worse because both of your programs have been in competition for a playoff, and next year you have a 12-game playoff and games in the middle of the month. How do you anticipate trying to navigate this, and is now the red light flashing that something absolutely has to change or you guys will either burn yourselves out or there will be some tragic results?

JOSH HEUPEL: If you look at the placement of the first round of playoffs, everything that is going on in those first couple weeks of December, how do you add in preparation

for a game of that size and magnitude during the course of what is happening. It was not like I was not on the phone or flying somewhere or in somebody's house or at a school every minute of the day. There is not enough time to accomplish everything that you needed to at this point in the season or at this point in the calendar, let alone if you are preparing for a game like that.

That is where, again, the calendar of how everything unfolds, the game has changed so quickly, so dramatically. I do think it is something that we have to look at.

KIRK FERENTZ: Those are just some of the unintended consequences that we really do not give thought to before we make decisions. The irony, in my opinion, it is like a lot of things that are going on right now. We always lead with what is best for the student athletes, but we do not always practice that with some of the decisions we make.

There are certain absolutes I kind of try to live with. When you are involved in game prep, when you are involved in competition, in my mind, our focus needs to be on our place, the guys that are on campus. That is what we promised them in recruiting and meanwhile, like Josh, we are flying over here and seeing this guy and all that kind of stuff.

It gets a little bit tricky that way. In my mind, the competition part of what we do should be protected. Really should be protected for everybody involved. There is a lot of gray there right now and that is something we are going to have work through. Sometimes, again, that pressure, the playoff pressure, we have to do this, have to do that.

I have always marveled – North Dakota State is a great example, because they go every year and play 18 games. Like, how do you guys do that, take finals and all the things that they have to work through? It is really a heck of a challenge and puts a lot of pressure on the players, too. Not to mention the wear and tear of a season, because it is a hard game. This is a hard game to play.

Q. You mentioned on Tuesday that Joe Milton was going to be on the sidelines during tomorrow's game. What role do you want him to play, and how beneficial that could be to not just Nico, but the entire team to have him there?

JOSH HEUPEL: Joe has done it the right way during the course of his career. You look at how everything has unfolded, he is a guy that chose to stay. Believed in his teammates what we were building, and how his coaching staff and players around him were going to help him grow as a player. Did a lot of really great things during the course of the season.

He has been a huge impact on our program for game day on Monday. Be another voice to help Nico as he comes off the sidelines, things that are going on. Being able to help him get ready for the next set and also create positive energy.

Besides being the quarterback on the field, throwing the football, making decisions, every other part of his roles that he has had during the course of the year he can still have on the sideline.

Q. Can you elaborate just on your return to Orlando, any feelings of nostalgia, warm feelings? And also, just year three at Tennessee, where is your program at and are you -- did you expect it to happen so quickly?

JOSH HEUPEL: As far as what we have done at Tennessee, where we started and took that program over at, how we were able to build a culture, re-solidified the locker room, continue to grow, and the success that we have had.

We have been disappointed with some of the results this season, obviously. Who we are, what we are about and how we are continue to go grow, what we have been able to recruit, we are really excited about the future.

There are so many people that go into reestablishing the foundational pieces of one of the greatest programs in the history of college football, and we have to continue to grow. We have to go chase championships. I know that is a standard at Tennessee, but excited about the future.

As far as being back in Orlando, I mentioned at the beginning, it is unlike you to show up late for a press conference. I thought that might get a couple chuckles out of the Orlando crowd (laughter), but maybe not.

This is a great city. My family, myself, we absolutely love living here. A lot of our staff at Tennessee was with us here. It has been great to be back in this city. To the administration, Coach Malzahn at UCF, they were great and allowing us to go practice there.

Rode in the first day. Rode through campus. Get off the bus, you are sitting right next to the Bounce House. Get a chance to get on the practice field. It was a lot of fun, because there was so many great memories that came back. Got a chance to talk with a lot of people that have been a huge part of my journey and our journey.

It has been a great week. We had a night where we had, I don't know, 25, 30 players that got an opportunity to come by the hotel and hang out it. Was a great night.

Q. Building on what Scott asked earlier, if we put you in charge of college football for a day and you could change some things about the calendar, what would you do? What would you change?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think first thing, we need a commissioner. We talked a little bit about that yesterday, I believe.

It is a lot of independent contracting right now, and it is really hard to get people to visit. I said something to Jim Delaney about that, I do not know, 13, 15 years ago, sitting in meetings, listening.

It really seems like, in my opinion, I am going back over a decade, seemed like the five Power Five commissioners need to get in a room and visit. Maybe throw a couple athletic directors and coaches in there as well just to get some specific feedback, that type of deal. Just have a summit and really basically blow everything up and try to start over again and maybe come up with a little better model.

That was a while ago. Things have changed and continued to change. A lot of things to address.

I think some type of common voice or common set of -- we do not have any structure right now. I guess that is my biggest complaint and there is not a transparency when you talk about NIL, a lot of embellishment, a lot of stuff going on out there.

Six years in the NFL, I never had a bad job and I enjoyed my time in the NFL. One thing about NFL: 32 teams all played by the same rules. Everything is the same. The field truly is level.

It is a really good thing if you can draft a good quarterback; that is a good thing. That gives you an edge, or if you have a really good owner. Certain jobs have inherent advantages. At least in that league, like everybody kind of starts even.

When I was in the league, the Bengals were terrible. Now they have played at a really high level. Just shows everybody has an opportunity.

I am not sure college football is like that a little bit. Somehow, some way, we have to come up with some structure. I guess, if I can boil it down to one thing, and then everybody -- there is enforcement, too, which is another thing the NFL has and college football is really lacking in that department.

It is hard. Because we have had a governing body try and overlook however many schools play collegiate sports and there is a big difference between football and whatever. Football, co-college, the AD was up there 10 years ago, we were talking about some rules, cut blocking, coincidentally. He had no idea what he was voting on and he is a really good guy; so I am not mad at him. It is like, why are you voting on it? You do not have any idea on the topic.

Just an illustration of some of the -- we need to centralize things a little bit and at least try to come up with some kind of structure that is workable for everybody.

JOSH HEUPEL: Games always change. I think that is a positive thing. Growth. It has changed so rapidly, so quickly that I do think you have to take -- somebody has to take a hard look at how we put all these pieces together and continue to have the greatest game that there is. Do it the right way for everybody involved, and players at the center point of that.

To do that, I think you have to have all the players, and I said players; all the decision-makers in the world and somebody has to grab a hold of the reins and take it in the right direction.

Q. Coach Tim Banks was asked the other day about losing a few guys to the transfer portal and how he viewed it, and he called it an opportunity. How would you say the younger guys have taken advantage of that opportunity or risen to the challenge, especially in this final week?

JOSH HEUPEL: Yeah, our practice and our preparation back home and here has been really good. The Bowl season, and Coach was talking about the changes during the course of his career, too. There are more guys that have opted out. You have guys that have made decisions to go to the NFL. Some have hit the portal.

It creates opportunity for guys that maybe have not played a ton on a unit. They have gotten some reps, probably played a lot of special teams. It is an opportunity for the young guys to take ownership and prove that they are ready to go play at a high level. In some ways, those Bowl games are a culmination and a finish to the '23 season, but they are also the start and kickoff for a lot of those young guys to '24.

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