



K-State Postgame Press Conference

December 31, 2022



COACH KLIEMAN: Yeah, let's start where it needs to start. Thank you, K-State fan base. Thank you, K-State nation, for coming out in droves. What we saw at the pep rally last night, with probably 10,000, 12,000 people supporting these guys, is why we all came to K-State.

And the fans out there today were phenomenal. We got off to a good start. I wish we could have given them a better show after that first quarter. But my hat is off to the best fan base in college football for coming out and supporting these great young men.

We talked in the locker room. Obviously disappointed in how this ended in our performance, but don't be defined by a moment. Be remembered for your body of work. And this body of work will be remembered in Kansas State history forever, because these guys were Big 12 champs and deserved it and earned the right to be Big 12 champs and represent our conference in the Sugar Bowl.

Didn't play our best football today. Give credit to Alabama, but appreciate the guys staying in the fight for four quarters.

Q. Coach, did it feel like once the miss on that fourth down at the goal line that just everything swung out of favor and every gamble you took didn't work?

COACH KLIEMAN: Yes, I would have done it again. Deuce [Vaughn] would have said let's go again. And the fact that we wanted to go ahead at halftime. It was under a minute left or a minute left or whatever the heck it was. Make a really good call and just don't execute it.

And then, shoot, they're at the 1-yard line and we're going to use time-outs and try to get the football back. I mean, we're in attack mode from the start.

And give those guys credit. We didn't make a tackle when we needed to make a tackle. And can't let them go 99 yards to make it what it was at the end of the first half.

A 21-10 game that -- I'm never going to second-guess myself -- and you guys know that from being around us. And we've gone for it on fourth down all season long -- when we had a chance to go up 17-14.

Q. Coach, along that same line, at what point did you make the decision to try the on-side kick to start the second half?

COACH KLIEMAN: When we were in the locker room talking. We've worked these kicks every week all year long. Guys will tell you, every week, we have it in. Every week we have it in. And we didn't execute it the way that it needed to be executed. We were trying to put it between the two guys.

That's a hard kick. Ty [Zentner] didn't hit it probably the way he wanted to. But we also knew we had to take some chances because of the last two drives that they had on offense, where we struggled to slow them down.



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And whether or not it's an 80-yard drive or a 45-yard drive, once again, we came here to win, man. We didn't come here to try to keep this thing close, whatever. We came here to win. And that's what we thought was the best opportunity.

Q. Eli, your last game in a Wildcat uniform. I'm wondering if you can just speak on the emotions you were feeling walking off that field or maybe the emotions you are feeling right now. Also, what you'll remember most about your time at K-State.

ELI HUGGINS: Yes, I'm upset. I'm obviously mad that we lost. But the reason I'm crying is my time is up at Kansas State. It's such a special place with so many special people. I've just made so many good relationships over the years.

I can't say enough about the coaching staff and everyone in the university. It's just a place I'll hold near and dear to my heart forever. That's why I'm emotional right now. But so many good memories, and I'll be coming back for many years to come.

Q. Deuce, did you get the looks you were looking for, that you expected from Alabama's defense?

DEUCE VAUGHN: Yes, sir. Especially in the first half, they did some things that we didn't see on film as far as pressure-wise. Got in some good looks for us and gave us some success early on.

They ended up changing up some things, changing up some tendencies as they went on in the game. Credit to them, they did a really good job in doing that. For us, it was just kind of having to adapt once we saw that. We weren't successful in doing that.

But, no, credit to Alabama. Whatever they did coming out with some adjustments, they did a really good job with it.

Q. How would you describe your 88-yard run and what went right on that play?

DEUCE VAUGHN: That's all blocking. Just the duo scheme, and they split open in the middle. It was great blocking, not only by the O-line but downfield by the receivers to get the safety. And then after that, it's a sprint to the end zone.

Q. Coach Klieman, you talked about the importance of looking at the whole body of work with this team. What made this group so special character-wise, and then obviously on the field as well?

COACH KLIEMAN: Yes, just the power of belief and the power of player ownership. Those guys took ownership in the locker room, ownership in the football team.



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It's pretty special as a head football coach when you know that your phone is not ringing at night and you're not going to have kids doing things that they shouldn't be doing. And I've never been around a football team that does knucklehead things off the field that's successful on the field.

And these guys were phenomenal kids off the field. And it translated to great players on the field, because they're disciplined, they're committed. They're tough. They're selfless. That's what I'm going to remember about this group.

Q. Deuce, just how hard was it as a player to see the momentum swing go from you guys knocking on the door, maybe taking the lead late in the first half, to being down 21 so fast in the game like that?

DEUCE VAUGHN: It's always tough. But you have to stay in the fight. Going into this game, we knew it was going to be a four-quarter football game. And that momentum swing, that's a good football team that we lost to.

We understood they're going to make plays. And for us on offense and defense, we had to stay in the fight. We weren't able to do that the entire game, and things got out of hand.

So it's just one of those things where we kind of understood there are going to be momentum swings. We got up really quickly. That was our momentum. Then they started playing well, and we just kind of had to try and stay in the fight.

Q. Coach, on Alabama's first two drives, you held them to a combined 26 yards. Deuce [Vaughn] has the 88-yard run. What, if any, adjustments did you see Alabama made that led to five straight touchdowns?

COACH KLIEMAN: They were able to hit the explosive play on us. That was kind of the fear that we had. They're pretty talented. Their quarterback (Bryce Young) is a pretty good player. They have good wide receivers. And they did, I thought, a really nice job.

We had them in third and 10, and maybe get off the field again. And they throw it to a really good running back. Makes the kid miss. We kind of lose the cup, and he takes it for a huge gain to make it 10-7 really fast. I thought if we had gotten off the field, but we didn't.

That's the whole thing. We talked all year long about not giving up explosive plays; and today, they were able to get some on us .

Q. Coach, you were able to get Adrian [Martinez] in there for a couple of snaps in the first half. Were you able to kind of execute that two-quarterback strategy the way you hoped?



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COACH KLIEMAN: I was excited that Adrian got a chance to play in a bowl game. He came here and transferred here to win a championship and have a chance to hopefully play in a bowl game, and helped us win the Big 12 championship.

And when he got hurt, that was the goal, was to try to get him healthy enough to play some.

It became Will Howard's football team. Everybody knows that. But Will and Adrian are so close, I thought it was important for C.K. (Collin Klein) and I to try to find a way to get Adrian a few snaps.

We were able to do that. I saw a big smile on his face. Saw a big smile on Will Howard's face that Adrian got a chance to play in a bowl game.

Q. Coach, Brian Branch, you saw him all over the field where the secondary is concerned. But what impressed you about the ground he was able to cover against your offense?

COACH KLIEMAN: Yeah, they've got really good defensive players. They tackle exceptionally well. They get off of blocks, and they played well.

Q. Coach, if you don't mind me asking just about the quarterback (Bryce Young) on the other side. It's kind of a career day for him. What were the challenges like to try to defend against him?

COACH KLIEMAN: He won the Heisman for a reason, for starters. We were mixing in three-man rush, four-man rush, five-man rush. We were able to get some hits on him. We were able to fluster him a little bit. But when you've played as many snaps as he has, it's hard to get him flustered for very long. Credit to him.

And I didn't get a chance to see him. I think I ran into one of their coaches. Just thanked him, tell him thank you for playing, because that's what college football is about. I was happy Bryce played. I thought that was really good for college football and really good for kids to see.

Q. Eli, if you don't mind me asking either, last game in a Wildcat jersey. You've seen the program grow. How do you feel about the program as you leave it?

ELI HUGGINS: Yes, it's trended upward every year I've been here. It's been a pleasure to be a part of that. I have no doubt going forward, we have a ton of good leaders on this team and a ton of great young guys who are going to step up. So I have no doubt they will continue to head in the right direction.

Q. Deuce, with the foundation that Eli [Huggins] and some of these other seniors have set, you guys competed out there. Like Coach (Chris Klieman) has talked about, almost had the lead. Took the lead late in the first half. Do you feel like there's kind of a foundation and you feel like guys want to come back to this stage and maybe even go further?



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DEUCE VAUGHN: Man, the foundation that's been set by this 2022 team is something that's going to be felt for years to come. It's a special group. And the young guys came in and they understood the system and they hopped in really quickly.

The guys that have been here understood the system, and it's one of those things that's going to be a trickle-down effect. And now, those young guys are starting to become vets. And as they get into their sophomore and junior and senior years are going to be able to teach that to the new guys that are coming in.

And man, that's one of the things about K-State. This is a special, special place. The people that we have inside this building are special people, and that's not going to change. We are going to continue to bring in special people.

So this is just the foundation, for sure. And man, it's only going to trend upward from here.

Q. Coach, I wonder if you could just speak on the impact of the two guys sitting next to you (Eli Huggins and Deuce Vaughn) have had on Kansas City State football as a whole.

COACH KLIEMAN: Yeah, they've made me a better person by being around them. They're both servant leaders in the fact that they make everybody around them better because of their work ethic, because of how they approach everything that they do -- whether it's in the weight room, nutrition, academics, whatever it may be.

I'm the fortunate one to be able to get a chance to coach Eli for the last few years and get him to come back for a sixth year. And I was the only smart one to recruit this kid, because nobody else did. And he's been pretty special to me and will be forever.