

December 30, 2013



An interview with:

COACH CUTCLIFFE COACH SUMLIN

THE MODERATOR: Coach Cutcliffe, we'll start with you, an opening statement, and maybe if you could talk about how your bowl week experience has been so far and how your players have enjoyed being here in Atlanta?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Certainly. First of all, we're honored to play against a program like Texas A&M. Certainly what they're doing now under Coach Sumlin and their history, their tradition. Obviously one of the more exciting teams in all of college football over the last couple seasons. It's been fun to watch them until you had to start watching them to prepare for them. It changes a great deal then.

Our week has been special. It's been diverse in the events. I've watched our players enjoy every part of it from playing games at Dave & Busters to an incredible FCA breakfast, a great message that was delivered there by Derrick Brooks and Steve Fitzhugh, then from cart riding, to visiting children's hospital, to the Martin Luther King Jr. Experience yesterday. You said it best when you say live, laugh, and learn. And we've been able to do all of that and practice a little football.

So we're very appreciative of, Gary, your leadership and the organization and the communication that you've given us with the Chick-fil-A Bowl. I'm glad I'm sure like Kevin is, it's time to play football now, but it's been a great week.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach. Coach Sumlin your comments on your experience so far?

COACH SUMLIN: You bet. I just want to echo what Dave just said. I think for us it's been a

unique experience. I have players raise their hand. How many guys have been to Atlanta? And I think we have four or five guys on our team that have ever been here. So everywhere we go has been exciting.

Just like David said, the competition outside of football with Dave & Busters, the children's hospital visit, just the whole bowl experience here has been great.

Gary, thank you for your hospitality and all the Chick-fil-A people. It's been very, very special. Just like David said, we've had the opportunity to practice, and being at the Georgia Dome as soon as you walk in there you can feel the energy level of the team pick up. So many great players, so many great football games that have been played in that building. It's a real honor to be here.

For us in the SEC, as a Coach you're always looking down the road, and it's a pretty important game here that's played at the end of the SEC season with the championship game. And with this bowl game moving and being part of the championship series that's coming up, hopefully this will be a great experience for our young players and it will give us an opportunity to maybe get back here and play a few more times.

It's been a great experience for us. Just like everybody else, our fans are rolling in and we're getting ready to play a great football team in an unopposed time spot which helps both our programs and our universities. Just a great experience.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe, beyond the statistics of Texas A&M's defense, when you watch film, what jumps off as the biggest challenge for those guys?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, their defensive football team has some talented individuals up front. It always start there's. They have size, quickness, and they use their hands really well. The linebacking corps that makes a lot of plays, safeties that are big and will hit you, corners that can run. I mean, they've got the right

ingredients. They play in a league to where they're challenged every week in a huge way. So these are tested, experienced football players.

So the thing that challenges us the most is we've got to be consistent. We've got to manage the down and distance. We can't have a bunch of bad plays and be successful against their defense.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe, what did you learn from the team's first experience with their bowl last year going into the Belk Bowl? How have you been able to apply that going into this year's bowl game?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: I think the thing that our players have been able to do is manage the balance a little better than we could a year ago. It was a first-time experience. We really had no one in the program other than the coaches that could kind of guide them as to what to expect. This year our leadership, our guys talked to our younger players at home about what to expect. What they expected as a team from them. I don't think there is any leadership like peer leadership, so going back-to-back, it gave us that opportunity.

Q. How do you keep your offense from feeling like there is pressure on them to score every time they touch the ball?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: That's a great question. Because the obvious is Texas A&M has created that in a lot of ballgames. They're so dynamic offensively and dominant offensively. You just have to practice and practice properly. Understanding that execution is the key. One play at a time. You can't think out front as to what you're having to do as a player. You have to play that play. So we've worked hard on that mentality. But not just for this ballgame. That's a mentality that we work on when we start spring practice of understanding that we've got to play that play.

Q. Yesterday Johnny and Deshazor Everett said the offense has had a little more swagger the last couple days and gotten back in rhythm. Is that something you've noticed as well with Spavital calling the plays?

COACH SUMLIN: I think it was a taxing year physically and mentally. You know, some really close games. Won a few of them, lost a couple of them, and we just took some time at the end of the year to step away physically and mentally, and I think it's helped us. I like their energy level right now. I like the bounce that we've got. It will be interesting to see.

I think it's pretty well documented where we were physically at the end of the year at a lot of key positions. I think that we're finally healthy again in a lot of those key positions. And because of that, naturally the energy level will go up.

Q. A lot of people write about the long layoff. Could you draw on anything from last year the Cotton Bowl looking forward to this bowl?

COACH SUMLIN: We do things the same way. I mean, what did we play last year? The 6th. So it was a longer layoff than we had right now. In certain ways I think this team needed it. That space, that time after our last ballgame. It was something that this particular team needed. I think it relates back to the question I just answered. The layoff kind of helped us this time from an energy standpoint just to get back and get healthy.

Q. You talked about your experiences this week. How does this bowl week compare with others you've experienced in the past? How well-suited is it to host College Football Playoffs next year?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: We have very experienced people running this bowl game. You can always tell it's all about organization and communication. You've got a great venue in Atlanta as Kevin mentioned. The young people are going to have a good time here. There are a lot of things to do. But if you're not organized well and you don't have a plan, which they have, it can get difficult. Because we're here to play football games. You have to have meetings. You have to have preparation. You have to give a squad and coaches adequate time to work.

They're able to do that. The events were precisely on time, they ended on time. You have an itinerary you like to stay on schedule.

With that said, they are very prepared to handle any magnitude of football game. As the stakes go up in a playoff, obviously, it's a bigger game and preparation is more of the key, and all you would do is alter a little bit of that, but still stay organized and communicate well, which is certainly what the Chick-fil-A Bowl people do.

COACH SUMLIN: I couldn't agree more. The organization, the time management, practice venues, we've been at the Georgia Dome. We've been over to Georgia Tech in their indoor facility, which is very, very nice. The logistics of moving

teams and getting to practice, coming back, being on time, the Chick-fil-A Bowl people have been extremely organized and you can see why. This will be part of the playoff series. The great city this is right here. A lot of things for our players to do. But as David said, the organization has been the key with the events that have been competitive outside. Going to the Hawks game, being in the children's hospital, doing things in the community, but also the organization of the practice sites and the logistics of travel between the hotels. It's been wonderful and that comes with experience and leadership.

You can see why this particular bowl game will be part of a bigger picture down the road.

Q. How much have the players and everybody in your program embraced the opportunity to do something that's never been done at A&M, and you're now on the eve of the game and winning three straight bowl games?

COACH SUMLIN: I think every year you're looking for something different, and I think for our seniors it's a big deal. The many years that we've played football at Texas A&M for any player or any team to do something that's never been done is something that you can always have and something you can talk about forever. Like our seniors last year. Only four teams that won 11 or more games. So for this group to have that opportunity it can really keep setting a standard for this program, and I think it's important.

Q. Last year when you guys got to the Belk Bowl you said you knew they'd play well because they prepared so well. Curious what your assessment is on that front this year? And you've had distractions with injuries or suspensions or things like that?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: We have practiced really, really well. I'm a big believer, obviously, as you well know in that. We've had things that we've had to deal with all season and since we've been at this. And it's been no different in the bowl preparation. We've just picked up and continued to go practice. Our peer leadership, our captains, our seniors, this is important to them, as Kevin just mentioned.

It's the seniors last football game, so it's going to be important to them. They've set the tempo well. We've prepared well in Durham, and we've certainly done the same thing here.

Q. Coach Sumlin, you mentioned it's been a physically taxing year, and some younger players have had to step up particularly in the front seven. Could you talk about how that's helped the team and which players have really stood out?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, this time of year it's pretty much over with being young. They've been playing since the first game. You know, 13 games into this thing and you've got some experience they've been through a little bit more than what they thought they were probably going to be involved in earlier in the season. So we depend on them a lot. This will be a big game for a lot of our younger players. Jordan Mastrogiovanni will have to step in there and play very well for us, because offensively it presents some real challenges with their running attack play action. So for our young guys, we'll have pretty good eye -- not pretty good, really good eye discipline and be ready to play a physical game because that's where all these football games in particular this one, that's where the real match-up's going to be.

Our young guys are going to have to step up and continue to keep playing. I'm trying to get away from the term young guys now. Shoot, 13 games into it, they better be ready to go.

Q. You've been obviously a key part of helping Johnny through a wild ride that really no other college football player has ever been through before. What are your thoughts of how he's handled himself and come out on the other side now?

COACH SUMLIN: You know, it's kind of interesting. We went through the year and I think people were shocked that he's kind of quiet. You've got the off-season part and then we've got the football season. I think he was extremely focused this year. I think he moved from an athlete that was playing quarterback, to a quarterback that's an athlete. I think he's improved as a passer, improved in his knowledge of not only what we're doing, but his knowledge of defenses, and I think that shows.

That being said, we ran him a lot more last year and he didn't get hurt. And this year he didn't run as much and you get a hand on a helmet or couple little things here and there, so, that's just kind of how it bounces. As I said, the last couple of weeks and the layoff in a certain respect helps us,

not just for him, but a number of players on our team, as you said because we kind of limped into the end of the year.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe, we're talking about Johnny Manziel. What do you think about him and trying to contain him? I mean, that's going to be a big part of keeping these guys at bay.

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, I don't think contained is maybe a word we could use. It might be slow down. Being a quarterback guy, I agree with what Kevin just said. You see growth even as the season went along. He's an outstanding quarterback. He's not just an athlete. He beats you in a lot of different ways. Certainly he's got a great receiving corps. His ability to create plays is second to none. In my lengthy career I really haven't seen a player that creates and ad-libs as well. It's certainly in part to his athleticism. But there is coaching involved in that.

He stays alive in the pocket, but his receivers move with him well. It's not an accident that they're completing a high percentage of passes when he starts to create. So Kevin mentioned eye discipline. It's going to take eye discipline and technique to compete at any level against what they do offensively. And Johnny Manziel is a great football player.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe, what would an 11th win mean for your program?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Kevin just mentioned, we've reached a milestone of 10. That's never happened before. 11 just ups the ante. Certainly it would be meaningful not just to our seniors, but the reason it's most meaningful is to our players. It would be an accomplishment that's never been done, but an accomplishment they'd remember for a lifetime.

These guys have worked hard to get to this point, and certainly there is a lot on the line for this one. But I'm anxious to see how our guys approach that challenge.

Q. Coach Sumlin, can you talk about what you've seen on tape as far as the strengths that Duke will bring to the football field on offense and defense?

COACH SUMLIN: We have a lot of respect for Coach Cutcliffe. We've talked about that a bunch. You look at this football team we're going to play, and they've been in big games. You don't beat Miami and Virginia Tech, and North Carolina, and N.C. State by just kind of going

out there. They're a well-coached, physical football team, talented players on the perimeter. Offensively they play extremely hard, I think, across the board. Don't make very many mistakes.

I think when you see a team that plays that way that's given them the opportunity in the fourth quarter to be in those football games. When you win close games the way they've done this year, you gain confidence. That's what I see. I see a team that's well-coached, well-disciplined, and very, very confident and poised at the end of the game, which means it's a really difficult challenge for us.

You know, you look through the year and what they've been able to do across the board and to represent their side and their division to get to the ACC Championship game, and it's going to be a real challenge for us New Year's Eve.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe, I know a lot of the focus on Texas A&M is on Johnny Manziel. Can you talk about their running game and how ferocious at times it can be when he hands the ball off?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, first of all, it starts, and Kevin mentioned this, up front. They've got an All-American at tackle and they've got outstanding people up front. They have the ability to run zone read, which means certainly the ball is going to go to the back. They can dictate power. They can dictate just giving the ball off on zones, stretch, and their backs all have great ability.

So, again, it goes back to we've got a big-time difficult job to match up up front. You can't let those backs get started. People get too focused on Johnny Manziel. There are a lot of ways that Texas A&M is going to beat you outside of Johnny Manziel throwing or running the football.

Q. How much different do you think it is for Matthews that he came back? What do you think? Would he have been a Top 10? I don't know what his valuation was, but what was the difference for him returning this year?

COACH SUMLIN: I think you've got a couple different scenarios. Meeting with those guys after the Cotton Bowl last year, the evaluation that we got from the NFL, and some of the people we had the ability to talk to in the National Football League gave us the information to help the families make a decision. Obviously, Luke leaving, that

was the best thing for him being the number two overall pick.

Jake was a little bit different. The information we got was that he was a later first round maybe 25 to 32 or early second round. I think there is a real lesson there. I think he's played his way this year probably into the Top 10. There is a significant difference financially between 32 and 1 through 10. I think there is a lesson there for a lot of guys.

That's the kind of information that we try to share with individual players. Try to share with families and help them make an educated decision based on the information that we can obtain. I think in Jake's situation, him coming back and playing his way -- playing the way he's played, as increased his value. I think there is a lesson to be learned from that for a lot of players.

Q. Kevin, can you talk about this senior class and how everything that they've gone through from conference moves to losing seasons, new coach, things like that, and how they've handled it and done what they've been able to do to get to this point?

COACH SUMLIN: It's really amazing. I was just talking with those guys yesterday. They came to Texas A&M, and you look up four years, five years later and you're playing in a new league, you've got a new coach, all kinds of new facility. It's a completely different situation than they entered into. It takes a lot for young people to handle that.

That's why I'm really proud of these guys. We don't have very many, but what they've been through and how they've handled it, I couldn't be prouder of them, number one, because we have had a number of them graduate before we even got here to the bowl site. Ultimately, that's what we're in this for.

These guys have accepted not only the move to the league, they've accepted me and a new coaching staff and have really done things the right way. They've kind of set the tone, not kind of, but have set the tone for where this program is headed, and I've been really appreciative of that.

Q. Kevin, could you talk about Manziel and the Matthews decision on coming back. Mike Evans is going to have to make that decision. Wonder if you could talk about the evolution you've seen from him since you first saw him in Houston to the player he is now as a sophomore?

COACH SUMLIN: Well, he played one year of high school football. By the way, we should have just played the basketball game. Our guys were dunking like crazy in the Atlanta Hawks game the other day. Bunch of basketball guys. He's improved. He's really only played three years. He red-shirted as a freshman and has played two years of college football, continues to get better. Big, strong guy, you know, his best days are ahead of him, I think. Just because of the fact that he continues to get better because he hasn't played a lot of football. But he's got exceptional ability because of his size.

I think as I've said before, the thing that separates him from a lot of people is the fact that he will play as hard without the ball as he plays with the ball, as a blocker, doing things that creates an attitude on the perimeter that we need. He's going to continue to get better.

Q. You've both had some pretty prolific quarterbacks in your time with the Mannings and Kevin with Johnny Manziel and Case Keenum before. What is the main ingredient or key factor in taking that unique talent at quarterback position and getting them to the point where they're in a whole other stratosphere?

COACH SUMLIN: For me to be sitting here and for you to say that with a guy in David that I have a huge amount of respect for, in developing quarterbacks and the approach to the game, a guy that I steal stuff from all the time. I probably watched more video of him as a younger coach and as an assistant coach, with what he's done in training tapes and different things.

We talk about accuracy, poise, and game management. You have a guy that can get two of those three, you've got a chance to win, I think. You have a guy that you get three of those three and you're going to win a lot of games. That is something you continue to work on as a coach.

The thing that is different about Johnny is his ability to make our play call right. Whether it's a really, really bad call or not, he has the ability to change that, not only at the line of scrimmage, but after the ball snap, which is a whole different dimension.

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Kevin just mentioned all of them are different, number one. So I think the most important thing is to recognize their strengths, what they can do to beat people.

Really what he just said is when they call a play, there are two plays that are potentially going to happen. One the one they have called, and the one he's getting ready to execute when everything changes. He does both of those well.

With our guys it's sometimes the same thing. When you train a quarterback, you want them to know everything you know, and then they have to be the functional part. They have to be the decision maker. So the thing that I've always done most is when they step on campus, I'm making them make decisions. I want everything by choice and not by chance. So it's just a mentality.

Certainly we're not supposed to recruit them if they don't have the ability to be accurate with the ball, have command of the football, and be able to have the poise and athleticism to play the position. But I really believe that it's always got to be choice, not chance. You've got to make young people think that way. That is a big, big deal in their lives as they move forward, and it certainly is at quarterback.

Q. How much different -- I know that your offense is a little different than when you had both the Mannings. How has that changed maybe how you evaluate quarterbacks through the recruiting process than 10, 15 years ago?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: First of all, let me say this in their defense, Peyton, Eli, and Heath Shuler and others we've had are much more athletic than people think. They're just big, big guys. But we certainly made a decision as we got involved at Duke trying to find the best way to win football games as to who we could recruit. So we really are a little more involved in looking for dual-threat quarterbacks. We do want the ability to run the football.

When we finished at Ole Miss, we had a young man by the name of Robert Lane that we had evolved into that in 2004 and was playing really well at the end of that season. So we've had a lot of that in our system. But it's changed, to be real honest with you, as to what we're looking for. It gets the numbers right for you a little bit. It's another hat they have to defend in the run game. We're not an overly big, dominant, physical football team, so it allows us to be a little faster.

Q. Coach Cutcliffe, how have you used the process of the bowl loss in Charlotte as motivation for your team this time around? What would it mean for them to get the first bowl win for Duke in a really, really long time?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, I really didn't have to use it. I've said this back home, back during the spring. Our first team meeting after the Belk Bowl a year ago, I was really anxious. That would be the first time we'd have the 2013 team together. I had a sick feeling in my stomach for the way we lost the ballgame. I knew we had prepared well and we played well, but we made mistakes that get you beat. I was anxious to see the response of our team in that meeting, and I think that's where the roots of this team were.

I didn't need to say a lot. I saw and felt the same things that I was feeling in that team, in the leadership of that team. The term, finish, is one that the players coined themselves. We didn't finish. We didn't finish the fourth quarter. We didn't finish the season.

It's a big challenge. When you're playing in a bowl game, particularly one of this magnitude, you're playing against a great football team, so to finish is not going to be easy. So we took from that point on, nothing we were going to do was going to be easy. And you hope that's enough.

But the bottom line is it's the process. They've been through the process now. Win or lose, they've been through the process. We're better. We're better for having lost that game. As hard as it is to say that, than maybe if we had found a win late. So we'll see how we finish.

Q. Little holiday humor for you. I don't know if you saw the game yesterday, but the Falcons gave up more sacks than you guys would probably give up combined tomorrow. Coach, you've got a young man Matthews on a lot of the draft boards and the Falcons maybe looking at him. Talk about his skill set and how he fits on the next level with possibly coming here to Atlanta?

COACH SUMLIN: He obviously comes from a great blood line. It starts there. His dad has done a -- was a great player. He's a coach now, and I think Jake approaches this game almost in a professional manner. How he eats, how he works out, how he studies video.

Obviously, moving from right to left tackle was a big deal for him this year. As I said before, I think it's helped his value. It's really a lesson to a lot of players that you can actually make money by staying in school and improving your skills and improving your value.

But he'll be successful. He's been

successful not only on the field, but he is my favorite kind of player. He is a low-maintenance, great player. There are not a whole lot of those left out there anymore. But he's a guy you don't even know he's there until he runs out on the field. He plays extremely hard, and he will be successful at the next level.

Q. How different is this Duke team because of the layoff after the ACC Championship game that you're going to see tomorrow night and what they were with the ACC Championship game? Time-wise, how much better are they going to be?

COACH SUMLIN: I don't know. This time of year how your team responds after a layoff, as a coach, as David said, you prepare. You have a belief in the way that you prepare your team. Then you kind of sit on edge and wait for that opening kickoff to see where they are with their response, because unless you're doing a lot of different things because of that layoff, it's kind of like the first game of the year. I think you watch a lot of bowl games now and critical things, the tackling, ball security, things that happen early in the season become big deals because of the layoff. We try to worry about what we do and how we approach the game.

As I said before, I like how we've prepared, particularly since we've been here in Atlanta. I'm anxious to see how our guys are going to respond New Year's Eve.

Q. How much have you talked about the start of the ACC Championship game? The intensity that your team came out with and being able to sustain that going into this bowl game and how much of an impact that can be if they have that type of intensity for 60 minutes?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: We played well early, as everyone knows, in that ballgame. We couldn't sustain it. Everyone knows to play a team of this magnitude, you have to sustain that intensity level and that level of execution really for 60 minutes, and we can't get ourselves behind in a game like we did. So it goes back to preparation. It goes back to practice.

You can be emotional. You certainly need to be. You need to be intense, but you've got to execute. So our focus has been on execution and sustaining that level of execution all the way from the beginning of practice to the end. That is the best way to learn to play a complete game.

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