

TransPerfect Music City Bowl: Auburn vs Maryland

Saturday, December 30, 2023

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Nissan Stadium

Auburn Tigers

Hugh Freeze

Austin Keys

Rivaldo Fairweather

Press Conference



Maryland 31, Auburn 13

HUGH FREEZE: I don't need anyone to tell me when we don't measure up. That starts with me. I feel so awful for our incredible fans. It was incredible to see them, their support for us, and to not perform any better in games this year like this. I promise you that -- I don't need someone to tell me I didn't get it done.

I think our staff and our young men, starting with our staff, starting with me, have got to create a standard of the way we consistently work, consistently compete, and figure out how to be a true team. That is my goal in 2024, and I'll need these two to help me and the staff to help me, but it's disappointing today for our incredible fans and our support from our administration that we didn't perform any better.

Congrats to Coach Locksley. They came prepared and certainly outplayed us.

Q. Will you change anything about where Hank Brown sits going into the spring?

HUGH FREEZE: It's wide open. I think Hank has something to him for sure. The guy threw 42 touchdowns, one pick his senior year in high school. There's something to that. I'm constantly evaluating players, staff, everything, and if we see that my evaluation has been wrong, then we have to change gears and reevaluate to make us better, then that's the steps we should make.

That position should be an interesting one certainly in spring practice.

Q. What does a game like today show about the idea of (indiscernible)?

HUGH FREEZE: Well, I love our wide receiver class. I think it's one of the best in the country that we signed, and certainly that's a place we need some depth and some added playmaking ability. So congratulations to Rivaldo, Auburn tight end (indiscernible) on that.

Yes, the receiving corps coming in we were absolutely banking on them helping us and making us better and more diverse so we can do more things, but also we have to play around every position, and I didn't think we protected well in the first half, didn't think we ran the ball well in the first half, either, so it's all of it.

Defensively we played really well defensively the second half, but it goes back to that standard. It's not okay just to play really well and you do your assignment for a half.

But we are excited about the wide receivers coming in for sure.

Q. Talk a little bit more about Hank Brown and the poise he showed for a freshman.

HUGH FREEZE: Hank has incredible poise. I saw it every day when he was running the scout team, and he has very little protection and he stands in there and makes throw after throw after throw. I think he has incredible poise for a freshman for sure.

He has great humility. Wants to be taught. Wants to learn. Has a good IQ for the game. Understands timing. Even the last throw that I thought the receivers should have kept coming, that's kind of what Hank anticipated, but he anticipates throws really well, and he's got great poise for a freshman.

Q. You talked about wanting to maybe solidify the team atmosphere a little bit. What's the biggest disconnect do you think right now?

HUGH FREEZE: I don't know that this is just a case for Auburn, but it's certainly something that we are battling some. It's just the disease of me. I think that's in a lot of areas of life now, and we're not exempt to it in our locker



room.

I think we've got to face it head on.

It's not everybody for sure, but there's just a lot of things that I'm hopeful that can be a part of the Auburn football program that, man, we really do care, love, trust one another to put the team first. I think those are the ones who are going to excel in building sustainable programs that compete at a high level.

We're not the only ones to have to battle that, and you see some that are battling it pretty effectively. We've got to -- particularly when you're disappointed and you're not in the playoffs or you're not in -- what do you do then?

I think it's those challenges that make football the best training ground there is for life, and there's a lot of lessons that we need to learn for sure.

Q. (Indiscernible).

HUGH FREEZE: I'm probably my hardest critic. I don't think I did a very good job in a lot of areas this year with our staff and with our team.

We felt like we competed really, really well in some games and we had some letdowns in others, and we didn't complete some games we could have won, and we weren't consistent in the level of competitiveness that you have to have to win at this level, particularly in our conference or against Big Ten teams.

We can all say we need to improve our roster, and we've said that, and we're working on that, and we're going to do that. But even with the roster we had, I felt like we could have gotten more out of it if I had done a better job.

Q. I know you're not happy with the result, but to set the season record for receptions by a tight end, what does that mean to you?

RIVALDO FAIRWEATHER: I just want to give God the glory for allowing me to play this game and play for this team. But like all the stats and stuff, they don't really mean a lot to me, but I just wish we would have come out with a win here.

Again, I just want to thank God for allowing me to play this game and be a part of Auburn history.

Q. About the game plan coming into this one, what went wrong out there today? Was it execution? How did you feel about the game plan, and did you guys feel like it was an effective game plan?

HUGH FREEZE: Well, obviously I don't feel like it was an effective one. I didn't get too involved in it for most of the part until this week because of recruiting, and really wanted to kind of evaluate everything about our program.

We didn't run the ball. It starts there. We have to go look at the run schemes that we had, and did we not play hard up front? It's really hard for me to tell. But they really dominated the line of scrimmage against us. They did load the box now.

They forced us to -- they had extra hats in the box for sure, and that's when you've got to be able to throw it some.

But we didn't protect the passer real well. It wasn't all the O-line. Sometimes the backs didn't get the protection right.

But anytime you struggle like we did, it's not -- I don't feel like the plan was great.

Q. Austin, you got off to a slow start on defense. They scored 21. But after that you did a really good job holding them down. What does that say about this defense and this team and the guys coming back next year that y'all kept fighting after getting into such a hole like that early?

AUSTIN KEYS: I would just say we started with like a few miscommunications, a few missed tackles, some that we critically need. We need to make up field tackles and stuff like that. But like for our returners, I talked to Freeze not too long ago and told him like we're starting to set a foundation and we really just need a standard for next year.

Q. What do you credit that first quarter to? Did you see that coming? Were you surprised how that went?

HUGH FREEZE: Yeah, I was real surprised. Really thought defensively we had -- I know we were playing some young kids, but really thought we would start faster and could catch up with these guys. They hit us in a big screen on the first drive, and everything just kind of snowballed.

But we had a ton of misalignments and miscommunications right in the early part of the game that really cost us.

We've got to look at ourselves as coaches first to see why we weren't more effective in getting those things communicated with our kids.

Q. What would you have done differently this year?

HUGH FREEZE: Well, every game is different. If you go look at the Georgia game, I wish we would have protected better because we had some shots.

If you go to the Ole Miss game, I wish we would have gone more tempo.

If you go to the Alabama game, I wish we'd have been able to punch better and I wish we'd have taught 4th and 31 defense better.

But ultimately you have to look at yourself as coaches. Our kids are going to make some mistakes sometimes, but in those critical moments, are our kids coached well enough to get it done, and when we don't get it done, you have to look at -- I have to look at myself.

Every game is different as to what you would have done differently, but you certainly don't enjoy having to say that or feel that, but that's the way I feel right now.

We're going to improve the roster and all of that, but we still could have gotten more out of this season, I believe, for our young men and our wonderful fans.

Q. What's your biggest takeaway at the end of this first year about where you guys are at?

HUGH FREEZE: We're incredibly blessed to be at Auburn, incredibly blessed by our administration and fans, and it hurts like heck to let them now and not compete on given days.

But my takeaway is that I'm still as confident as ever that this can be an elite football program again, and it takes great recruiting, but it also takes player-led teams that put team first and the standard of the team every single day first.

We're still learning that, and we've got to demand it as coaches, and we can't waver from it when we get back in January, and I'm looking forward to the leadership of our team doing that.

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