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An Interview With:

COACH DAVID CUTCLIFFE DUKE

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Good afternoon. I first have to say our good friend Stan Wilcox, I think magic follows him wherever he goes apparently as the Director of Athletics at Florida State. Stan, it's great to see you. He's been very close to our program the previous five years, and we're very proud of contributions that Stan has made to Duke football, and I know that the Florida State family is very fortunate to have him there.

Also very honored to play a Florida State team that truly is the No. 1 team in the country. I've had the good fortune through the years to play some No. 1 teams in this profession, some of them looked like No. 1 teams, some of them don't. Florida State certainly is. So a huge challenge.

But I'm also very honored to bring a group of young men that are outstanding football players and outstanding people. There's a reason we're here, and it's the quality of the athlete but also the quality of the person, and very happy to represent the Coastal Division.

Happy to be a part of the ACC Championship Game, and excited about this opportunity. Again, as I said, it's going to be a big challenge, but it's one we're certainly looking forward to, one play at a time.

With that I'll take questions.

Q. Obviously maybe not a lot of people giving you a whole lot of chance to win, 29-point underdogs. What do you say about that and what do you say to your team?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, as long as it's not the people on our team predicting that. That's the key to that, and I don't think any of our guys are putting us down as 29-point underdogs.

We have smart guys, as you might imagine, and they're very aware of the challenge.

What they see is the quality of the team on tape. It's not unrealistic to say that we've got to play extremely well.

The week started off on Sunday with me telling them the truth. I had seen a lot of Florida State by then. I told them the obvious, but I also told them now the only thing we can do is the quality of our preparation has to match what the quality of our play needs to be to compete with a team of this magnitude.

They've done all year what we've asked them to do. I thought our preparation each day this week was special. Hopefully we can follow that up with playing at a high level.

Q. What makes a two-quarterback system the way you're doing it work? It doesn't always work; it probably doesn't work a majority of the time, but what's making it work for you?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, there's two things: The first is the people that Brandon Connette and Anthony Boone are. The second one it was forced on us. They've both been hurt. Our top three guys, Thomas Sirk who was in the process of competing for quarterback playing time, tore his Achilles at the very end of spring, so we came in with Brandon and Anthony healthy and playing, and we had a plan with that, and then both of them have been on the injured list and out of ballgames. And when we came back with Anthony, Brandon gets hurt again. And then Anthony wasn't really well, so you had to take some hits off of him.

We really didn't design it to be the way it is. It's worked because of the quality of the people they are, and it's worked because our offensive staff, Kurt Roper, our quarterback coach and offensive coordinator, has done a great job of blending this and making it work from a schematic standpoint.

Q. Nobody wants a kid to get hurt, but is the way you've played over the last eight games with those two guys, is that the positive

that came out of their injury situation?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, it's been -- that's the way this team is. It is a positive. We have two quarterbacks that are very experienced and very talented. I don't think any team in the country could have had three quarterbacks, their top three quarterbacks, one of them -- excuse me, two of them out all fall at one point or another with the exception of a couple of games and functioned as well as we have. So it's been great for us that both could play some.

Q. Getting back to Stan, he said he got to see the second half of your game against NC State. Did you guys make an appointment for tomorrow? And what's the irony of a guy that helped you build this now is now trying to tear it down?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, we did talk about that there's some destiny involved in this back when. I knew they were holding up their end of it. That was easy. I wasn't so sure that we would be able to.

You know, there's a lot of irony in there, but when you work with special people, and Stan is special, you're not going to break the bond of the friendship we've formed. And I would say that even as the Director of Athletics at Florida State, Stan has to feel some form of a sense of pride with these young men at Duke that he has relationships with and he's happy for them. We all know who he's for in the ballgame, including me, I'm not kidding myself. But I think it's a special circumstance, and that's why I opened with that, because our players are very, very fond of Stan Wilcox.

Q. I feel the need to preface my question. Last year we made a big deal about Duke making a bowl game, and this year you're sitting in front of me, what could be an ACC Championship. First off, congratulations. Secondly, your offense faces arguably one of the best college football defenses in the nation. What's going to be the key offensively for you, specifically to get off to a good start?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, the thing that in my opinion their defense does best among many things is take the ball away from you. They lead this league in takeaways. We can't give the ball away. You've got to protect the football.

The next thing they do is create big plays, sacks, lost yardage, tackles. You have to minimize negative plays before you can even think about

trying to move the ball aggressively forward. We have to play smart football, and we have to play football the way we've been trained to play it.

Q. You've had great success recruiting in Charlotte. Can you talk about that, how it came about, what the challenges are?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, I started recruiting this area for Tennessee back in the early '80s, and had a lot of relationships here. I have a great firm belief in the quality of football here. Jay Graham, who is their running backs coach at Florida State, I recruited out of Concord High School. He played for us at Tennessee. I just have a lot of good friends, so we made an emphasis of certainly in-state, the area itself, because we believe geography is an important part of a decision, but specifically put more than one coach in Charlotte. We tried to recruit it as hard as we possibly could, and it certainly has paid off big for us.

When we came in, I believe we had eight scholarship football players from the whole state of North Carolina. This team has got 13 scholarship players from the Charlotte area to tell you the significance of what it's had on our program.

Q. You guys played a game in this stadium last year, but you guys have not played a game of this magnitude on a stage like this before. We saw the guys earlier in the week and they seemed loose and they seemed to enjoy what happened in Chapel Hill, but how has that progressed as the week has gone on, and how have they kept their heads about them?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, we have been in a playoff, and you've been every step of the way with us, since October 19th. When we were 0-2 in the ACC, we all knew that we had to win every game we had left when we started the ACC stretch at Virginia. And I told them going into that and I told them each week, as you win one, the next one is going to get tougher. The next one is going to be more challenging. They knew what was ahead, but they focused on the business at hand.

We've reached a point where we've won all of those games, passed those tests, and it's this. You're in the championship game now. This should be the supreme test. That's the way it's designed to be. And they certainly are.

So we started Sunday with the process. We didn't change our week. We practiced this morning as we always do, very aggressively on Friday morning, early. They are on the way down or going to be down shortly. It's a process of preparation, and we're going to have to play extremely well to win, but the stage doesn't matter. It's trying to win the seventh ACC game in a row, and that's what we're trying to do.

Q. I'm sure after last year's bowl loss as you walked off this field you thought, you know what, we're going to be back here in December. Now, whether you did or not, that did have a role in getting to this point. What did that bowl loss do to this team to prepare you for this event tomorrow?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: The second part of that statement would be accurate. It played a big role. When I went home after the Belk Bowl, as I always do, that being your final game, I wrote down all of the things I felt about that season and all of the things as we move forward that we needed to address, things we had to get better at quickly, just a big review. The thing that I was most interested in seeing was our first team meeting was an 8:00 a.m. meeting when they arrived back on campus as a team. I really wanted to see if the Belk Bowl had the same effect on them that it had on me. Nobody was happy about having been in a bowl game. We were irritated that we felt like we were the best prepared team in that game and didn't win.

The theme I would call it is hungry. It also started the best player leadership that I've been around. Our captains and other senior and junior football players had a determination that we hadn't seen before at Duke, an expectation that we hadn't seen before, and I think a lot of that -- and I even made this statement, and it hurts me to make this statement, but in the long run in the developing our program, and I don't want to say this because it's going to make our seniors from last year mad, you know did it work out that losing the game had more of a long-term positive effect than having won it and running around strutting around with your chest stuck out like you had done something special? I would much rather have won it for those seniors and all of us, but if you didn't win it, we needed something good to come from it, and I think it did.

Q. You talked about that eight-game winning streak and how things build off that.



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Was there one hallmark game or part of a game that let you know that this team could do what it has done?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, the environment at halftime at Virginia when we're down badly, I loved the attitude in the locker room and certainly loved the product the second half, the way we played. But I would have to go to Blacksburg and the fact that we matched a physicality of a team that we haven't been able to match, and they knew it after the ballgame. We didn't play perfectly. They had out-gained us, they had a lot of things, but we won the football game. We made the plays we had to make when we had to make them and we were really physical. It was a really fine Virginia Tech football team.

I think from that point on, the mission gained some confidence.

Q. I know you love your quarterbacks and you've coached some unbelievable quarterbacks. What impresses you about Jameis Winston.

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, the first thing that all of the special ones have is really special accuracy. He's extremely accurate. He throws the ball on time. He anticipates people open rather than waiting until they get open, and that's difficult for young guys to do. So he's really throwing the ball well on rhythm.

I watched him a year ago in our pregame warm-up, and I was watching him throw it because I had known a lot about him from the recruiting process. I even asked Jimbo about him before the ballgame, and you could just see it was coming out of his hand good. You don't throw a football with your hand, in actuality you throw it with your fingers. When you have the control he's got with his fingers, you're going to be accurate.

So he obviously is well-coached, as well, and knows what to do with the ball, rarely gets himself in trouble.

Q. You guys are fourth-quarter comeback kids, four games coming back in the fourth quarter. You're playing in the stadium that the Panthers like to come back, too, so what's the mindset for tomorrow if you have to get to the fourth quarter?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: First thing would be to get Luke Kuechly and a couple of those guys to play for us. I know Luke, we recruited him hard,

that would help a bunch, believe me. We'd be good in the first quarter.

The thing is that we are a very good team in the fourth quarter. There are a lot of reasons. I think it's mental toughness, et cetera, but we're an extremely conditioned football team. You won't see a lot of extra weight. It's just something that I personally believe in. I want people that can run, move their feet. The way we practice is just constant motion. When they hit the field, they hit it running and they don't quit until it's done. And so we really don't have to do a lot of conditioning because of the way we practice.

But our guys know, they could play -- I really believe this: I think we could play six good quarters of football, and that's always going to help you.

Q. You touched on Jameis earlier. This Florida State offense has explosive weapons all over the field. I've watched Jameis beat blitzes and zone. What's the most important facet for your defense to contain this offense?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: You know, they're going to make plays, and they're going to score points. You've got to remain mentally tough, but you've got to minimize the big explosives, just -- their last ballgame a week ago in Gainesville, when they start hitting explosives, the game gets out of hand. Your offense has to help your defense. You're not going to stop them with a defense. You're going to have to compete with Florida State's offense by playing good in all three phases. They need a long field to deal with. They need an offense playing against them that can stay on the field some. I mean, that's just the facts, and I'm not giving any secrets away. You can't script that. You have to play your way into that.

You'd better be mentally tough because they're going to be good. We can't change that.

Q. Usually as undefeated teams progress, pressure builds, games get tighter. This team it hasn't hardly been challenged. How difficult is that? How impressive is that to you?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: Well, it is impressive. I've been a part of an undefeated National Championship team and been a part of some really good teams that were undefeated late in the year.

I don't think it ends up being pressure. I think that you just have -- you address accountability amongst each other, and I think the

good teams like Florida State, the special teams, they do that. Everybody is expected to do their job, and you just go about doing your job, and the special teams that I've had the good fortune to coach, that's the way you approach it. It seems like pressure to other people, but that's just doing your job.

Q. You're coming into an in-state game here. You're playing with a team that has a lot of ties to the Charlotte area, but at the same time your team is 5-0 on the road this year. Are you trying to approach this more like a home game or a road game?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: It's a road game. It has every flavor of a road game. We practice this morning and load up and come to a motel that we've never stayed in. We'll be in the road-game itinerary, and we have itineraries for every start time that our guys have been under before, and we're not necessarily an 8:00 but a lot of 7:30 games, and so we'll just stay in that normal routine and our normal Friday night routine.

It's not another football game; I'm not saying that. But you want your body and you want somewhat your reflex reaction to the process to be just like it always is.

Q. The BCS for all intents and purposes ends Sunday for the last time. You played in the first game. You're somewhat of an informed guy on this. Could you just talk about what these last 16 years have been like for college football?

COACH CUTCLIFFE: It makes me an old guy, doesn't it?

You know, I've been very fond of what we've done because in 16 years, can you imagine how many times I've heard arguments about the regular season and what we have going on right now? We have the best regular season arguably in all of sport: College football. Maybe not arguably in my opinion, but it's the best regular season, it's the best regular season attendance. It creates arguments during the regular season.

We're not a natural playoff sport anyway. The NFL has a difficult time finding a champion with 32 teams, and that's the truth. You play a playoff, somebody gets somebody hurt, somebody gets hot, you can't tell me a team that went 15-1 in the regular season or whatever they're playing now, 16-1, isn't the best team in their league. But I

like what we've done. I think we can make this work with four.

And the reason I think we'll make it work is I think what we're all going to find out is the arguments are going to get bigger. It's just going to include more people in the argument. We're going to go from a few schools being angry to a lot of schools being angry, and maybe that's going to be a good thing. I just want to be in the argument sometime along the way.

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