

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs Cincinnati

Sunday, December 20, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Kirby Smart

Luke Fickell

Press Conference



MATT GARVEY: Like to welcome everyone to the Selection Sunday press conference for the 2020 Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl. At this time we welcome head coach Kirby Smart of the ninth-ranked Georgia Bulldogs, head coach Luke Fickell of the eighth-ranked Cincinnati Bearcats, and Gary Stokan, CEO and president of Peach Bowl, Inc.

Gary, if you want to make a couple of welcoming remarks from the bowl, please.

GARY STOKAN: Thank you, Matt.

I'm just really impressed that Kirby and Luke are so technologically advanced that they have the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl background (laughter).

KIRBY SMART: We didn't do it by ourselves.

LUKE FICKELL: A lot of good help.

GARY STOKAN: I want to welcome everybody, welcome everybody to a holy, blessed and healthy Christmas this year and congratulate the coaches of both Cincinnati and Georgia.

On behalf of our Board of Trustees, the best staff in the bowl business, the best volunteers in the bowl business as well. We have over 700 people that normally get involved in the bowl. Unfortunately with a scaled-down experience this year, we'll have a little less than that.

We all welcome you. We all congratulate you on a great season. In particular I also want to congratulate the medical staffs, the trainers, all the players. I know we were attempting to put on three Chick-fil-A kickoff games this season. I know all the information and protocols that went into all the planning for those games that had to be canceled.

For those coaches, medical trainers and staffs, as well as

the players, the sacrifices, all they had to do to comply with COVID-19 pandemic protocols, to get all the games in that they got in, is just remarkable. Congratulations to all the players and staffs, medical people with the two universities.

We look forward to kicking off January 1st at noon on New Year's Day, leading into the Rose Bowl and the Sugar Bowl semifinals of the CFP, No. 8 Cincinnati against No. 9 Georgia at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

We're honored to have these two coaches and these two teams, two of the best defenses in the country on both sides, and what I think is two of the hottest quarterbacks in the country with Desmond Ritter and JT Daniels.

We know this is going to be a game that's going to be highly attended. We will have a capacity of 25% in Mercedes-Benz Stadium. That's approximately about 18,000 seats that will be available. They will be seated in pods of two and four. Everybody will be obligated to wear masks. If they don't have a mask, we will provide one. We'll control social distancing, as well.

The field will be very clean. Limited access to the field with no presentations. Our goal is to have the safest environment we can for the coaching staffs, the trainers, the medical people and the players, as well as the media.

We look forward to hosting Cincinnati, which is representing the Group of 5 champion, highest ranked, against the Georgia Bulldogs, representing the SEC.

The Group of 5 is 2-0 in our games, Houston has beaten Florida State from the ACC, and UCF beat Auburn from the SEC in the past. We're looking forward to a great game. We welcome you coaches. Anything we can do for you, your families, your staffs, mainly your players, we want to make sure even in a scaled-down bowl week we take care of the players first.

Congratulations and look forward to hosting you guys.

MATT GARVEY: Thank you, Gary.

We will take comments from the head coaches.



Coach Smart, we'll take an opening statement from you representing the Georgia Bulldogs.

KIRBY SMART: It's an honor to be here. Had the great fortune to be around Gary for a long time. Everything that he says about the Peach Bowl, Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl, is incredibly true. I had the great fortune in the early stages a long time ago to get to play in that bowl game as a player. Gary has taken that bowl game to new heights. It's in a different place than when we played in it. When we played in it, it wasn't near as prestigious as it is now.

I know our guys are excited to get another time to play. We got this last one taken away from us. Our opportunity to play another game against a top 10 opponent fires us up.

Got a lot of respect for Luke, always have. Followed his coaching career. He's done a tremendous job. Share a lot of stories with him with Urban Meyer, who has said a lot of great things about him. He's been a tremendous coach, somebody that I got a lot of respect for.

Their program has done a tremendous job. Since 2018, their record is one of the top five in all of college football. That immediately grabs the attention of our players as we feel like we've had a good program over the last three to four years as well. The history of both programs speaks for itself. Both teams will be fired up to get an opportunity to play on January 1st.

MATT GARVEY: Thank you, coach.

Coach Fickell, go ahead with your opening comments, please.

LUKE FICKELL: Thank you, Matt.

I, too, am really excited. I think our team will be. We haven't had an opportunity to get together with them. That will be tomorrow. Obviously Kirby and them have had a chance to get together, maybe talk a little bit about the bowl. As for us, it was a late night last night, finishing up a tough win. So today we're kind of trying to settle in here to figure out what it is we're doing.

I know our guys are incredibly excited. There is no disappointment over here. We are incredibly happy, excited to be where we are right now. To have a championship, but now to have an incredible challenge with obviously the Georgia Bulldogs, Coach Smart.

I've been fortunate enough to play in a lot of bowl games, then coach in a bunch of bowl games. This is one that I've

never had an opportunity to be a part of. So I'm excited.

I got a little concerned when you said the 25%, they're going to be in groups of two or three. I got a family of quite a bit more. I got six kids. I'm not sure my wife is going to be excited if I have to separate them. I'm sure we can work some of those things out (laughter).

Nonetheless, I know our kids are excited. Our families are going to be really excited to actually be able to go, enjoy an atmosphere, not to mention an incredible team that we're playing from the SEC. I know this, our kids are really going to be fired up and know that this is an incredible challenge for us and our entire program.

MATT GARVEY: We'll now open to questions from the media.

Q. Luke, after completing an undefeated season, after the ceremony last night you said you deserve to be considered for the Playoff. You said there was no disappointment today, but is there any maybe cynicism after UCF won 25 straight games in 2017 and 2018 and you finish undefeated in the AAC and your conference cannot secure a bid?

LUKE FICKELL: First of all, I think it's disappointing, but I'm not disappointed. I know our kids are not disappointed. 'Disappointing' meaning the sheer fact you would love an opportunity for the shot at the title. So would Georgia. So would Texas A&M. The reality is there's only four that are going to get that opportunity. We don't happen to be one of them.

We got to look at it as we're excited about what we have. I'm not overall worried about what happened with UCF, all that. Those are things outside of our control. You say what you say right after the game because you know you want the best for your kids, you want your kids to have every opportunity they've worked for.

This is going to be an incredible opportunity, incredible challenge for us. I think that's what our kids thrive on and enjoy the most.

Q. Luke, do you feel this is an opportunity for your team and your players to make a statement in this game?

LUKE FICKELL: Well, I'm probably no different than Kirby. Every week is an opportunity for us to make a statement. The great thing about college football is it's unlike pro football, unlike basketball that has a tournament. Every week means so much. Most of us can't make any slipups and still have an opportunity to get to the ultimate goal.

The reality is we didn't. We didn't get an opportunity. Georgia doesn't get that opportunity to maybe play for a true championship. But we've got an opportunity for all of us, both of us, to make a statement.

This really takes you into that next phase of your program and how you continue to grow your program. Positive energy and momentum is what grows a program. That's why we've had the success we've had in the last two years. We've been fortunate enough to play well at the end of the year, go to bowl games, win, just carry that momentum on to the next year.

I think for both of us, both programs, I think it's huge not just making statements but really building momentum going into the off-season.

Q. Luke, I think you're top three in one of the weird formulas that technically determines the national champion, the one UCF used a couple years ago. Do you have any interest or would you think at all about believing you should be national champions if you win this game?

LUKE FICKELL: We all do things that try to promote our programs. If it helps in recruiting, there's a lot of things that all of us will do.

I know that we played at UCF this year and saw that posted along their press box. Nobody would take it away. When I was in school, we used to go to Penn State, they would have than on the front of their stadium, I think they were the New York Times national champions at some point.

I know this, that we all promote our programs. We all want what's best for our programs. Recruiting is a huge part of it. We're going to use this just like Georgia will use this as positive momentum whether for our kids now or for our program for the future.

Q. Coach Smart, obviously very disappointed to not have the game this past weekend in Athens. Is this kind of gratifying to get this opportunity in an area that means so much to your program?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'm super excited to be in Atlanta. A lot of our seniors didn't get an opportunity to have a final home game. Ended up with only three home games throughout the year. Didn't get the kind of final wave and sendoff. They'll get an opportunity to play in front of a lot of them's parents and families, fans.

Hope their approach is the right way about the game

because any time you got seniors involved in a bowl game, there's always a concern for you. Our guys have handled it well up until this point. I'm excited to see them go play.

This is the last opportunity this team will have to be together.

Q. Kirby, can you talk a little bit about your defense. You haven't technically said anything about who is in, who is out. You asked us not to ask. Last year I think you played without 11 or 12 starters. Your thoughts on trying to get what looks like it will be a young defense revved up for a good Cincinnati quarterback?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't completely know the answer to that yet. We don't know exactly who's going to be out and who's out. Still water to go under the bridge in terms of kids making decisions.

We have several seniors with draft prospects, we got several juniors with the draft prospects, having to make decisions. What I've encouraged them to do is be thorough, get good information, try to make the best decision in a timely manner where we can prepare, get ourselves ready.

We want to start getting ready as soon as we can for Cincinnati. Seeing them play last night let me know right away we got a lot of preparation to do to get ready.

I don't know who will be in and who will be out yet. But the guys that are out there are the ones we're going to coach and get ready to play.

Q. This opportunity, how big it is for your program? UC has been to two New Year's Six bowls before, haven't won them. To go is one thing, but to be competitive, win the game, how big is that for the momentum of this program, maybe being a measuring stick to where you are with the bluebloods you always talk about?

LUKE FICKELL: That's huge for our program. Measuring stick, I think what you said is exactly right. If you want to claim that you should have an opportunity, you should have a shot, well, this is an opportunity, this is a shot.

I told our guys afterwards in the locker room, I said, Yeah, I'll say some things tonight just to try to make sure that whatever is out there, if we got a shot at it, we want that opportunity. But know that by doing that we put ourselves in a position that no matter what the situation we're going to play a really, really good football team.

When you say things like that, you put yourself out there



like that, means you got to turn around and put it up. You say those things, you got to go play the game. That's a big part of it.

It's exciting for those guys, for all of us. But it's a huge measuring stick for me, what we're trying to build here.

Q. Kirby, motivation is always a question. This is your first bowl since you're not coming off an SEC championship appearance. Any analogy there in terms of this is an important period going into next year both in the preparation and in the actual bowl performance?

KIRBY SMART: I think along the lines that Luke mentioned, it's always critical to continue building success. We've had success in bowls, we've had failure in bowls. We lost the Sugar Bowl, we won a Sugar Bowl.

Those two things most stick out in my mind, is the approach each team took to those games. It was so important to so many in terms of the Baylor Sugar Bowl, the way the kids approached it. For the Texas Sugar Bowl, it wasn't that way. Everybody didn't approach the game the same way.

I think we learned a valuable lesson as a staff that it's not necessarily who you play with but what their mindset is when you go play a game in a bowl game.

The fact that we kind of have been out of it for a while, in terms of not being in the SEC championship, that's new territory for us. We've been dealing with that for the last couple games.

So you learn to prepare the right way regardless. When we were preparing Missouri, nobody expected us to play very well because everybody thought our head would be in the wrong place.

We prepare well regardless of who the opponent is. That's the way you have to approach it, so you have a little level of consistency when you get ready to play.

Q. Kirby, when will y'all start practices? How will that maneuver around Christmas?

KIRBY SMART: We're working on a plan right now to put into place as far as when we're going to give the players a break. We're not going to stay here and keep them in a tight bubble over the break. I just think that's tough to do. I know some of the Playoff teams are doing that.

We'll give the guys probably a three- or four-day break, do a little prep here before. When we come back, we'll

basically have a game week type practice. These guys have practiced a long time this year, more than I ever remember. We'll have a little bit of prep before, give them off during Christmas, we'll come back and have a game week to get ready to go to Atlanta.

LUKE FICKELL: I'm glad I got to hear a little bit of that. Same thing. Right after this, I'm sitting down to try to draw up a little schedule. It's kind of tough after playing last night. We were off for 28 days. We were off for 13 days as kind of a pause period in there in those last 28.

Like Kirby, I think we've had 160 practices, or OTA and practices, that started even before camp, and played nine games. It's a unique situation. How much do you give them off? How much do you send them home?

Like everything this year, there's a lot of sacrifices being made. Everybody from the outside says, Yeah, but they still get to play. They're making incredible sacrifices. Some of the greatest things that I remember, I'm sure Kirby remembers, about playing the game is hanging out in that locker room and winding down after a game, hanging out with your buddies. They haven't had the opportunity to do that.

Trying to balance giving them some of that time even to go home and do Christmas is going to be unique. But we don't have an exact schedule just yet. It will be soon.

Q. It's an amazing dynamic the Group of 5 versus Power 5, how you approach these bowls. How much do you feel like motivation is the key ingredient, motivation and participation? Luke, on your side, it's a little bit more historical and special to be in this situation, right? Does that almost give you an advantage coming into the game?

KIRBY SMART: I don't understand what you're asking (laughter).

Q. You guys both recognize what the dynamic of this game is.

KIRBY SMART: Look, I'll be honest. When you're a competitor, you go out on the field, your intention is to win the game. That's not going to change between his guys and our guys. That's not the perspective.

Every coach will try to build their angle, to build it where it gives their guys an edge or competitive advantage, whether that's being ranked ahead of us. Group of 5, Power 5, that's a language for you guys. My language is football. They got a good football team. They haven't been beat. They beat a lot of teams I have a lot of respect

for.

To me the hardest thing to judge this year is nobody really played across conference, right? If you didn't really play across conference, you can't really judge a lot of things because all you know is your conference. They played their conference, we played our conference. Most of the conferences stayed apart.

The bowl is an opportunity to go out and play across conferences. You play for the pride of your conference, the pride of your seniors, sometimes the last game. Sometimes it's for the pride of your team next year. You try to build that as a coach to create an advantage.

At the end of the day it takes the leaders on the team to buy into that. Coaches, it's always important to us. It's our livelihood. But is it going to be important to the players? That's the key ingredient.

LUKE FICKELL: The same way for us. You can say it's easier from the outside looking in to say they're going to be motivated because they're whatever that group or P thing that you say that we don't talk about in our program, we don't take in our program. I don't know anything about those letters or language (smiling).

Obviously we know who Georgia is. We know what the SEC is all about. But in this 2020 year I think everybody has sacrificed so much. I mean that as players included. Anybody that's playing well at the end of the season has the motivation. I don't care what it is.

It is really easy to see I think in this football season anybody that towards the end of the year, this year, the last four or five weeks, six weeks, whatever, if they're playing good football, they've got something within their program that's natural motivation.

Because of this tough and unique year, you've seen a lot of chinks in a lot of different things. I would imagine both teams are going to have to continue to sacrifice, make decisions as an individual player, like everybody does at the end of a year. Both programs have a lot to play for. I can see a motivation from both sides.

Q. Kirby, you might not know this, but usually the excursions, everything about bowl week makes it special. With this era we're in, does that alter your plans knowing there's not going to be much going on? Would you come in the day before, treat it as an extension of a regular season finale?

KIRBY SMART: Due to the protocols, it's the safest environment for the players. We want testing protocols to

remain as close to the same as possible. It will be treated very similar to our road games in the season in terms of traveling over the day before, getting to the hotel, being able to check in, reduce the risk of our guys coming in contact, keeping the coaches and players safe, both teams handling that protocol.

It will be treated more like a road game than a potential bowl game in terms of what the players get to enjoy. I hate that because I know how much Gary, his staff, the people in Atlanta really work and prepare the Peach Bowl to be one of the best. I hate that Cincinnati's team won't get to enjoy all those things, too, because that's one of the rewards of going to a bowl game that's been negated this year due to COVID. We're also very thankful we get to have the game.

Q. Kirby, your plan to give the players two or three days of break, other coaches are trying to impose a quasi bubble around their facilities. What are you telling your guys about days away from Athens?

KIRBY SMART: I'm actually not talking to them about it right now. Our guys can't get like more than one thing at a time. We don't give them a lot of information.

Right now we're here in Athens. We just finished school, getting our grades and things back. We're focused on football for the next couple days, and we'll address that before they get to go home and have a break.

We've had intermittent breaks throughout the year. We've had an off week, two cancellations. We've had these three- and four-day pocket windows where we tested on the front and end of it and the back end of it. We've continued to be successful. We have to continue to do that.

The numbers have risen. We've had more positives in the last two to three weeks than we have all year. We have to continue to do a good job and educate our players.

Q. Coach Smart, can you talk a little bit about maybe your thoughts on Cincinnati quarterback Desmond Ritter?

KIRBY SMART: I'd love to talk about him. My extent is I seen him play last night. Did a tremendous job. Got to see his emotional interview, which tells me a lot about the kid. When you see that, it gives you goosebumps because it matters so much to him and so much to his team. To see that kind of raw emotion like that after a championship game, it makes you know what he's made out of, how he's built.

It's hard to say that because I haven't had a chance to watch anything yet.

Q. Coach Fickell, do you have to get your wife that ring now?

LUKE FICKELL: At 1:30 in the morning I walked in the door, said this might be a good time to take advantage of that. I don't know what it's going to be. At some point in time it's going to cost me, I have a feeling.

MATT GARVEY: Coaches, thank you very much. I will also welcome you guys both, we're excited to have both of you, looking forward to a heck of a ballgame. Can't wait to get you to Atlanta. Hope you guys stay healthy. We'll see you soon.

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