

# Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs Cincinnati

Monday, December 28, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Luke Fickell

Cincinnati Bearcats

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Coach Fickell has joined us. We'll let him get us started with a statement.

Coach, go right ahead.

LUKE FICKELL: Obviously finally game week. Our guys are excited. It's great to be back. We actually took a quick break for Christmas. Not many guys got a chance to go home, but we got enough local guys that it's kind of a balance between being really smart in what you can do. It is an opportunity for us, some of us had them over at our houses.

Nonetheless, we're back at it. Really excited to get down to Atlanta for the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl on the 1st. We believe this is the best team that we have faced and played since I've been here at the University of Cincinnati. That's no disrespect. Obviously we played Ohio State last year. It was early in the season. They weren't quite maybe what they were by the end of the year. All in all, from what I've told our team, from what I've watched and seen, this is a really, really good football team that I know we got to be at our best and play at our best.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

**Q. Generally having the bowl game, some time to do some extra practices, development of young players, does that get completely thrown out this year, treated like a normal game week because of the different schedule?**

LUKE FICKELL: You say 'extra practices'. You're right. Usually you have a bowl game, you find somewhere, somehow to get the 12, 13 practices in, maybe 14 for a bowl game based on when it is.

Not all those are obviously in game prep. I think we've had about 145 or so practices for this season, which is far more than any season I've ever been associated with. You go all the way back to the beginning where you had some OTAs and things.



It wasn't an opportunity, it wasn't the time to kind of get a lot of that work for young guys. 12 days, we found out when we were playing, where we were playing, who we were playing. Really we kind of had to find a way to lock ourselves in. Didn't take a whole lot of time developing some of those young guys.

As the season goes along, those young guys aren't young guys any more. You have a far greater expectation for them. A lot of those guys maybe didn't play early in the year, maybe didn't play in the middle of the year. They're going to have vital roles as we go into this Peach Bowl.

It's not just the development of them in this bowl practice, it was the development of them the whole time of 140-some practices we've had for nine games.

**Q. How much have you been able to kind of re-find that rhythm that maybe you lost with a month off?**

LUKE FICKELL: You want to explain what you mean by that 'rhythm' we lost. You don't mean like 10 false starts? To the naked eye, I didn't know you guys would notice the rhythm that was probably not there as much.

**Q. Pretty trained eye (smiling).**

LUKE FICKELL: Pretty well done there (laughter).

It's difficult. I'm not going to lie to you. When the emotions start to roll, a lot of things happen. I can tell you this: we're excited to have 18 or 17,000 fans, whatever is going to be in there, 25%. The emotions are going to roll. There's no way we can simulate that. There's no way we can take a true freshman center and add that much more, I don't want to say pressure, but anxiety on top of them, maybe with a couple All-Americans across from him.

It's going to have to be something we have to learn from. It's not like you could say we got back into rhythm, we went and scrimmaged, did this, this, and this before the bowl game. Mature people and mature teams and pros, guys that love and study the game, work the game, learn from those mistakes.



I really hope as coaches we have learned from those and as players have learned from those. We'll be tested, we'll see, we'll find out.

We can't tell you that we know exactly. There's not some magic that we went and did to say we're going to limit all those mistakes, we're going to be right back in rhythm.

**Q. We've seen a lot of development from Desmond Ridder over the past few seasons and this year. Where is he at now in terms of his growth and progression as a quarterback?**

LUKE FICKELL: Leaps and bounds from where he was as a freshman. He's a heck of a lot further from where he was last year. Some would say earlier in the year he wasn't there. I still tend to disagree with them. I think he has really, really continued to develop. I think it's a unique situation when you have a lot of different and new wide receivers. There's as much there as there is the quarterback position.

But I think all in all, you've been able to watch and see his development because he's been playing since he was a freshman. As he starts to look at some of those other things with NFL and different things like that, the great opportunity he's had is to be able to play for three years. The difficult thing is everybody has been able to see the issues that he's had and how he's had to mature past a lot of that because he has been playing for three years.

So I think it's easier for us to watch and see that growth and development. I still think that the ceiling is incredibly high. I still think that there's another level that he will be at. I hope it's now. I hope it's in this game.

But the thing is, he's a worker. He's a pro. He's a student of the game, loves what he does. He has a mind for perfection and he's never going to stop. He has developed a long way. I'm not saying he's got to go much further, but I still think with what his true high-end ability is, I think he's still got a lot more in him.

**Q. I wanted to ask where you are COVID-wise in terms of missing guys. Also, have you had any opt-outs?**

LUKE FICKELL: I don't think we're answering a whole lot of COVID questions. That's kind of for the medical staff. All year we've kind of been, Hey, those guys kind of communicate and talk about that.

I can tell you we're in a good place. We have not had any opt-outs. We obviously had some early in the year when camp started. Very minimal. We were in a good place

with all of those things. But it's still early. You say that, you start trying to find something to knock on and different things like that because it's one of those things you just cannot relax on.

We're continuing to do what we do. I think we're basically going to be testing every single day, still asking our guys to make sacrifices. You just never know. One bad day can lead to a lot of different things. You try to have that balance.

I'm not saying we're quarantining, keeping them in a bubble. We're keeping them as occupied as we possibly can to keep them around just this group of people as much as we can.

**Q. Can you give us a detailed scouting report on the Bulldogs offense and the defense.**

LUKE FICKELL: They're good and they're good. They've got some really good players. I don't know that we're going to have the length of this. I don't think it's hard to pop on and see. I really do believe offensively they've settled in with the quarterback that has to me made them and looked at them rhythm-wise, in my mind, a lot better. Not that they weren't solid at the beginning of the year. I think they were still trying to figure out and find out who they were, what the quarterback was going to be able to do really, really well, coupled with playing great defense.

I think you've seen that maturity, you've seen that ability for them to mature, develop throughout the season, kind of settle into who they are as an offense. I think they're playing a lot better even here the last three, four games than maybe what you'd seen rhythm-wise early on.

**Q. What has been different about the Georgia offense that JT Daniels took over? Who does he remind you of as a quarterback?**

LUKE FICKELL: I hate to do comparisons to say exactly who they remind you of. I know he can spin it. He's got some great weapons. I still don't think he's unleashed all he can do. When you run the ball, you got as good an offensive line as they have, you don't have to kind of sit your quarterback back there and do all those different things.

I can see where they're probably slow in the maturation, and say, Hey, just don't get him everything. We might get away from some of the things we do really well just because he throws it so well, has such a touch, you don't want to lose the nastiness and toughness that those guys up front bring.

When you watch games, you see a rhythm, more consistency, knowing what he can do, as they continue to grow. You're curious to see with 12 days the next step, what will they give him to do to make that offense even more dynamic.

You can tell, he's a future to what they're doing.

**Q. What do you do as a coach to kind of keep your guys a little refreshed? It's been a grind of a season. There's a reason why all these teams have opted out already. What do you do at this point to keep their mindset focused and keep them fresh mentally and physically?**

LUKE FICKELL: We've had a couple meetings on that. I've been racking my brain. It's nice when you have a bowl game because you get a little bit of a change. You go to a bowl site. For us, you run out there, even if it's Birmingham like last year, you go out, practice on some grass, have a new practice site, some different food, different things. The uniqueness of this year is we're going to be coming to the same place, the same locker room. We're going to make the same walk-out to our bubble.

It's very difficult to kind of spice it up. It's very difficult to change the look to some of the guys. It's much more into the challenge of trying to get inside their heads and really, more than anything, getting out of what it is that you do, trying to really work on the mindset to say that we understand, I understand. It's no different for a coach. I don't care if you're 45 years old or 19 years old. It's still the monotony of what we started a long time ago, but you can't allow yourself to do that.

There's not a whole lot of ways for us, maybe Georgia has better ways, maybe with better weather. For us, it's been more just trying to rely on the relationships these guys have, the dedication they've had, really try to challenge them more mentally than anything.

**Q. You talked the past couple years about how the bowl game is kind of a reward for the season you had. This season is a little bit different. You win the conference championship, a higher-profile bowl. Is that still the same? Is it now different considering some of the circumstances?**

LUKE FICKELL: No, it's a reward. There's no doubt. We had a meeting yesterday. There were a hundred guys sitting in this room. I can tell you there's probably about 120 teams that would trade places with you. To have an opportunity to play in the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl, to play on January 1, to play against the Georgia Bulldogs, a historic obviously blue blood team, one of the greatest traditions in

the country. How many people wouldn't trade places with you?

It is that. But it's hard. It's hard to recognize that sometimes with an 18- to 22-year-old. Even as a coach, when you're still in the same grind, the same monotony, the same looks. So the questions go hand-in-hand: How do you try to achieve it? Other than just saying this is a reward, how do you make it a reward?

If you love the game, you love to play the game, you love to compete and challenge yourself, what greater reward do you need than to play against an incredible opponent?

So I think there's different kinds of rewards. Some people would look at a reward as, hey, you get to take a trip, go to Disney, then go play a game. That's a reward. Get to relax.

It's a different reward if you're a competitor, you love the game, you want to compete. The reward is an opportunity to play on a big stage against a great opponent.

**Q. This question, you kind of answered it a little bit just then. The Peach Bowl, one of the premier bowls, playing against an SEC team in a city that hosted the SEC championship, has a lot of SEC fans, from your perspective, maybe from your players' perspectives, how do you embrace the challenge or the idea of playing in the game like this where you are basically kind of like the underdogs in a way, coming into a crazy environment even through COVID?**

LUKE FICKELL: No, we are definitely the visitors. I think that's a part of embracing what the challenge is. I mean, like they said, this is a reward. A reward is, Oh, my gosh, you got to go play against one of the best teams in the country in their home, their land.

If you're a competitor, if you love to challenge yourself, it is a reward. I think you got to look at it like that.

I know this. I don't want to speak for the players, but I've got a good idea of who they are, what they enjoy. This year, like for everybody, has been a challenge and difficult and different. It's nothing more than a reward to say, Hey, we're going to go play in front of 18,000 people, there is going to be an atmosphere. Maybe they're booing us, maybe they're cheering against us. Whatever it is, there will be a greater atmosphere which gives us that much more excitement and joy to go out and compete.

It's a unique year. I think there's a balance to all that. But the opportunity to play on the stage against who you're going to play against, whether they're cheering for you or

not, an environment and atmosphere is something that a lot of us have missed this entire football season. Maybe the south and the SEC has gotten a little bit more of the atmosphere when you pop on those games. Even on TV you can feel it and see it with 25%.

More up north, we have not had the opportunity to even get some of those atmospheres this year, whether they're positive, for you or against you. I think all those things added together as another way to kind of get yourself motivated.

**Q. We've had whole teams opt out of bowl games. For you to not have a single player opt out, what does that say about the excitement and anticipation of playing in the Peach Bowl?**

LUKE FICKELL: I think that they know that it's a reward. They know what they've sacrificed for. They want to finish. We've always said it, it's not about how you start, it's how you finish. That's easier to say when things don't go well at the beginning of the year, but things have gone well all year. We've done a really good job.

We understand it's about finishing. Whether we started this thing in camp a long time ago, it's been an up-and-down season, just an emotional roller coaster, they still had their eye on that end prize. How are we going to finish? That's how we'll be remembered.

**Q. A couple Georgia guys. No. 1 on offense, No. 99 on defense, how much are these guys marked up in the game plan, game-changer kind of figures?**

LUKE FICKELL: I appreciate you using numbers because I got six kids at home, sometimes I can't remember their names. I remember numbers.

They're definitely ones that you've starred, know where they're going to be. There's no doubt. Sometimes just one on offense, I mean, there's 10, 7, 3. Sometimes when you see a bunch of other guys, it's harder to say you're going to focus on one. But there's no doubt you know where those guys are.

Obviously 99 is a big deal. That's probably the one thing in our league, this year, that we probably haven't faced. We faced really good football teams, good speed, good talent, all the different things. Sometimes you don't quite see those guys up front that are that big of difference makers.

That's why even for our guys, it's an incredible challenge for them, that they get to play against -- how else are you going to measure yourself to see where you are? It's not about winning every battle, it's about winning the war.

When you're playing against guys like that, there's going to be battles that you're going to lose here and there. But hopefully you understand it's a 60-, 70-, 80-play game. You have to keep fighting, battling, and in some ways wear people down.

**Q. Your history as an athlete and wrestler is well-known. How close did you ever come to lose?**

LUKE FICKELL: To losing? I remember every match I lost. I lost four as a freshman. I can probably walk you through every single one. Then I lost one after that. It was the one college match. I could walk you through that. No, I can't. After three and a half minutes, I can't remember anything. Completely worn out (smiling). I don't remember a whole lot after that.

I don't know what that has to do with it. I just know no matter what, you've got to challenge yourself against great competition. You're not going to just go out there and think you're not going to get punched in the mouth, have some ups and downs. You got to be able to fight through it.

**Q. What mentality have you sensed from your seniors wanting to put themselves on this stage and challenge themselves against the talent you've talked about? Those guys have been your driving force all year.**

LUKE FICKELL: Are you saying what seniors?

**Q. Just the seniors in general, how have they taken to this challenge of testing themselves?**

LUKE FICKELL: I don't know that it's any different from senior to a freshman, to be honest with you. Obviously the seniors are the leaders of our team. I'm not saying we all play for just that. They're the guys that we talk about, guys that are examples of a lot of things we do.

I think there's nothing greater than to see what you got from the freshmen to the seniors. Sometimes even the young guys are more motivated.

The hard thing for some of these older guys, senior guys, is they start to think about the end. Sometimes they get distracted from what's really in front of them: the opportunity to compete against the very best. That's what you continue to remind them. You know they want to play, they want to get to the game. It's been a long year. They want to get to Friday, whenever the game is.

I think trying to see what that whole group, every one of them have deep down inside, I mean, I think that's how we're going to measure who we are, what we really want, where this program is going.

I know it's big for the seniors. I think the thing for the seniors is really try to stay focused. I'm sure it's no different for the Georgia seniors, to stay focused about not worrying about what comes after this, whether it could be the end of playing in some situations or what the next journey is going to bring. It's really trying to focus in and saying, Hey, this is an opportunity for us to compete at the highest, highest level, to show what we're made of.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

