

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

Monday, December 28, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Michael Young Jr.

## James Smith

Cincinnati Bearcats

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by punter James Smith and wide receiver Michael Young Jr.

We'll take questions.

**Q. James, you made a heck of a leap coming halfway across the world to a program that was struggling at the time. What has that experience been like for you? You've had a great career, but seeing it kind of culminate with an AAC championship and a chance to play in the Peach Bowl against Georgia for a guy I'm guessing didn't know a lot about the college football world four years ago?**

JAMES SMITH: Yeah, it's definitely fair to say that I knew pretty much not a lot about college football. Sort of from day one during the recruiting process, like Coach Mason and Coach Fick were adamant this program was going to be on the turnaround. Their goal was to get this program back to the highest of highs that it had been. That was something I definitely wanted to get onboard with.

The belief they've had in me in terms of playing ability and leadership role, being a guy that's a little bit older, just to get around the team, try to push the team in the direction we wanted to go, it was definitely something that has been very, like, fortunate for myself because I've developed more so as a player and leader than I have in terms of on-field success.

That drive from within to create more leaders, produce not only on the field but in the locker room as well, it's just been a phenomenal experience.

**Q. Michael, obviously everything with COVID this season has made things weirder than anyone anticipated. When you transferred to come here, the way the season has gone for you individually but also the team, did it meet your expectations? Did it exceed expectations? How do you feel collectively about the**



**whole season?**

MICHAEL YOUNG JR.: Individually, I mean, I wanted to come in to produce, show that I'm capable of helping the team. I think I've done a very good job at that. Obviously there's room for improvement, there's always room for improvement. That just comes with time.

As far as the team, I mean, I wouldn't necessarily say it exceeds my expectation. Like I say, Cincinnati was on my radar before getting in the portal. Obviously they were a winning program, back-to-back 11-1 seasons. It's pretty self-explanatory. I knew they were on the brink of getting a championship in a conference that produced a lot of talent and competing with the best. You see it year in, year out.

For us to come in and win the conference championship, for me it was amazing. Obviously to come from a team that doesn't play in a conference, it was amazing to see that, to be a part of it. At the same time it wasn't anything that was just kind of over the top for me.

Like I said, I knew what this team had. I knew what we were capable of doing. For me, it was like, Okay, now we're finally putting it together.

**Q. James, at what point in your time in Australia did you realize you might be pretty good at this? Have you exceeded what your expectations were with your performance here?**

JAMES SMITH: Yes, so like I've always been gifted, like I had a pretty good leg, was reasonably athletic at most sports I played back home. I knew I had the athleticism and drive factor to want to be good. It didn't really come full circle till probably after that end of 2017 season, into the 2018 season, where I was probably punting and feeling the best I had been. It's been a little bit different the past two years. We've had a very good offense, a lot more situational punts than the first two years.

Yeah, at the start, I probably didn't think I was going to be able to, like, potentially go to the next level or would have the capabilities of going to the next level. That sort of just came as the opportunities and the belief from the coaches,

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then like you start getting a little bit of recognition. People are like, He's probably got the ability to go to the next level or make a career out of this if that's what he wanted to do.

Since that I've been probably taking it very seriously. That's the dream now of course, is to not only have the success with the team, then potentially move into this as a career option for me.

**Q. How aware are you that you haven't had a chance to run a fake yet? Last game in college, are you looking for that opportunity?**

JAMES SMITH: Yeah, well, to be fair, we've had many fakes in for many weeks. It's all about getting the look to be able to run one. Unfortunately the one we ran against TCU was not called off the sideline, Joel made the check in the huddle.

Unfortunately that didn't involve me. I think I lucked out a little bit. There's always fakes and things that we're looking to do. Pretty lucky we have such an athletic and gifted group on the punt team.

To be able to do it in the last game would be pretty unreal. I don't know, we'll see what happens.

**Q. Michael, can you describe the advantage it gives you when you're playing with a quarterback with the size and speed and strength that Des has.**

MICHAEL YOUNG JR.: It's pretty easy. He makes our job 10 times easier because Des, having the ability to be able to be a threat in the run game and also be a threat in the passing game, it makes our job easier. It allows us to go out there and play freely, it allows to go out there and not think so much.

When you have that at quarterback, it makes the flow of the game much smoother. Also it raises the overall morale and the confidence in the group. Glad we have him on our team. Obviously he's played a huge role in our success this year. Hopefully he can keep it going.

**Q. James, not to age you, but being an older player, so far from home, what has that season been like? When was the last time you were able to go home?**

JAMES SMITH: This year definitely has been sort of a challenge. I haven't been home for probably 18 months now, pretty close to two years. Yeah, it was definitely like a bit of an eye-opening thing this year. This isn't how anyone would have envisioned their senior year going, definitely not how my parents envisioned it. They were hoping to be able to get over here, see a few games, be

here for Senior Night. It was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My parents understand. Unfortunately we can't be there, but you have your family there that's going to be able to support you. I'm lucky I've made great connections with other guys on the team, their families. I've been looked after quite well this year. I have my extended family here at UC that's been looking after me, doing things like that.

It hasn't really been any different, but it's always nice to see your family. There's been a lot of FaceTime and phone calls with them each week a few times just to see how everything's going.

Yeah, but other than that, it's been basically just back to work. We know what we're trying to achieve. That's been the driving force to keep us sort of going.

**Q. Michael, what do you think the offense's chances are to make enough plays to win, given their defense has been playing better down the stretch?**

MICHAEL YOUNG JR.: I mean, I think the confidence level in the offensive group is high. I just think for us, we have to go in there and just execute. I mean, I think that's the name of the game. Regardless whether you're playing someone like Georgia or you're playing a low-tier school, the name of the game is to go out there and execute.

I think if we execute our game plan, do what we're supposed to do, I think we have a good chance. I think that will go for anybody who plays against a team that has a really good defense or whoever. I mean, I think that's the main goal. I think that's the focus of the team, is just go out there and put our best foot forward and play the plays to the best of our ability. As long as we do that, we have a pretty good chance.

**Q. Michael, you've been through a week preparing for Georgia at Notre Dame. Does that give you maybe a little bit of an advantage, having studied them before, looked into how they play?**

MICHAEL YOUNG JR.: Yeah, yeah. This will be my third time playing these guys. I played them my freshman year at Notre Dame, then last year I got to prepare, but I was out injured. That was a game before I came back.

Yeah, third time seeing these guys. A lot of familiar faces. But I wouldn't necessarily say it gives me an advantage. I just know the looks. I just know the players. I just know kind of their techniques, things of that nature.

But they do their study, just like we do ours. Players

change year in, year out, game in, game out. It doesn't necessarily give me an advantage because you never know what you're going to get.

**Q. James, you know Cole better than most people. We talked to him after the title game, after the big kick, he was pretty steely and reserved. What is he like normally? What was he like not with the media after that kick?**

JAMES SMITH: Yeah, he's probably definitely not as steely like just around the boys or with the specials group as he can be with the media. He's pretty reserved when he talks to people about his accolades or his success.

I don't know, I'm sure he probably told you, before he lined up for the kick, I said a couple words to him to get him in the right mindset. I knew he was going to knock it home from the get-go. He's one of those people, with some of the adversities and things he's gone through since he's been here, has risen and risen and risen. I have full faith he's able to do whatever is put in front of him.

Like, yeah, I was happy for the win. Pretty happy to see one of your best mates knock one through, that's the game winner, that's how you win a conference championship. That's something I'm going to remember for the rest of my life sort of thing.

**Q. What did you say to him?**

JAMES SMITH: Line up for the kick. I said, whispered in his ear, We're built for that, Bearcats are built different. He went back and slotted it straight through the middle. I'll take as much credit for it as I can (laughter).

**Q. James, take me back to Higher Ground 2019, Pat McAfee shows up. They were doing their video stuff, having some fun with it. He spent an hour with you guys. What did it mean to have a guy, an all-pro NFL guy spend time with you?**

JAMES SMITH: It was definitely something that I've cherished and remembered a lot of the things like I spoke about with him. It's not very often you get to speak to a Pro Bowl NFL player, especially one that's a punter, in a niche position.

I was pretty certain I was going to pick his brain on whatever I wanted to talk to him about with regard to punting. I asked him a bunch of questions, he was more than happy to answer and help me out, give me a few pointers about some certain things about punting what I need to improve, what I need to do if my aspirations are to play at the next level.

You can't stress how important that sort of thing is, just to have someone that is a Pro Bowl punter look at you and think you're pretty good, it's always a nice thing, too.

**Q. Have you been able to keep in touch with him since then? Was that pretty much it for now?**

JAMES SMITH: There's been a couple of messages exchanged back and forth on Twitter here and there, after the first game we played against UCLA, of course. He's a busy man, does a lot of commentating and things these days. It's also lucky we have so many pro Australian guys in the NFL that are playing really well. If I ever need some help or advice, I'll message one of them. They're more than happy to get back to me.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys.

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