

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

Monday, December 28, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Kirby Smart

Georgia Bulldogs

THE MODERATOR: Morning, everybody. Appreciate everyone joining in. We'll begin this morning with Coach Smart. We'll begin by asking Coach Smart for a brief opening comment, then go to questions.

KIRBY SMART: First I'd like to open with thanking Gary Stokan and the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl staff. Always done a tremendous job with this bowl. Always near and dear to my heart because I was fortunate enough to play in it twice. It's a special event.

Our team has been working really hard to prepare for Cincinnati. I've spoken on Cincinnati it seems like a lot. They're a tremendous team. Luke has done an incredible job with his staff, their team. I've talked repeatedly about the fact they're one of the winningest teams in all of college football over the last three years. They're a complete team. We've played teams with really good offense, defense. I don't know that we've played anybody with all three, including special teams, areas they're really strong in.

When you have an experienced quarterback, in my time in coaching I found that the more experienced the quarterback, the better the team is. They certainly have that. They have a great player.

With that, we'll open it up.

**Q. We've asked you about Desmond before. Y'all faced dual-threat quarterbacks before. What is different about the way he goes about his business?**

KIRBY SMART: He's really smart. He puts them in the right play a lot. I think they put a lot on him check-wise. You can see he does a great job of getting them in the right play. You very rarely see them in a play that is bad for them, meaning when somebody is doing this, they're doing this. They have an answer for whatever you do. He's done a great job of putting them in the right place.

He's a really good athlete. I think it's deceiving how fast he



is. He has really long legs. When he takes off running, you see him outrunning people all over the place. When you start outrunning linebackers and DBs in college football, says a lot about your speed. There's times where plays have broken down, he's turned them into big-time gains and plays.

A tremendous passer, athlete. When you talk about dual-threat capabilities. He's got really good people around him.

**Q. Ever seen a quarterback with a 91-yard touchdown run?**

KIRBY SMART: Not that I remember (laughter). I'm sure probably somebody has. I don't remember anyone going 91.

**Q. You touched on this yesterday, that you felt Richard LeCounte was making a hard run at trying to play in this game. Since then there's been a good photo on Twitter of him leaping for a ball in practice, him saying, Shh. Can you talk about the ability of him trying to play in this game? What would you say the odds are of him being able to participate?**

KIRBY SMART: I can't put odds on it. It all boils down to the health and safety of that young man. If he's capable of playing winning football, he'll go out there and play. He's never been shy about it. He wants to play. He's a football player. That's the way he's been since he was in ninth grade, and I watched him running around playing spring football down in Liberty County.

That's just who he is. He loves the game, he enjoys the game. He's pushing really hard, he's taking a lot of reps, a lot of reps for the twos. He's working hard to get out there and play. It's going to be conditioning, it's going to be physicality, it's going to be how comfortable he is.

When you go that long without playing, it's not always just straight line speed. It's throwing on the brakes, understanding angles, feeling confident in contact because it's a physical sport.



I don't know what the odds are. I know he's out there doing everything he can to be able to play. We'll have to make a game time decision on whether he's able to or not.

**Q. You mentioned the other day that COVID was one of the opponents. Since then Missouri had to pull out of their bowl game. How are you doing four days before this game?**

KIRBY SMART: Thrill a minute. We've had good information, bad information, information that changed (laughter). It's been a struggle. I can say that. That's really all I can say about it. I'm not going to get into details. We've had our issues.

**Q. You said you're not going to get into details. When you say information changed, are you talking about false positives?**

KIRBY SMART: I mean, you take it for what it's worth. It just changes every day. I'm not saying that's the case. I'm just saying we've dealt with a lot of things, a lot more things here recently, than we have in the past.

**Q. When you look at your defense in 2020, ranked first in the SEC yards per play allowed, but two games stick out. Do you look at it in the big picture as you faced different kind of opponents, especially those two very high-octane offenses, or how do you look at your defense in the context of the whole season?**

KIRBY SMART: I would first say the season's not over. We try to look at it in the context of the entire season. Although we won't have the exact same defense out there for this one that we had most of the season, we'll have some of the same guys. To be honest, we didn't have the whole defense out there after Kentucky the rest of the year in terms of complete and healthy. That's the case all across college football.

We try to go back and look at things from the perspective of an entire season. Be objective about it, try to find areas we can improve in, things we can work on. Won't be any different with this group.

I'm very pleased with our staff, the work they put in, the teaching they do. I'm very pleased with our players, how hard, how conscientious they've been about learning what we want to do defensively. Look, you're not going to play in football in general, but in college football any more, and not give up plays. The risk you have to take to give up negative plays gives you an opportunity to give up explosive plays.

One of the key ingredients is can you give people lost

yardage plays, tackles for loss, get sacks. We've done that at a higher clip than we have in the past. We have to improve in not giving up as many explosives, then you have a recipe for what you want.

**Q. You've told us one of the things you do is look at the opposing defense. Marcus Freeman, the turnover streak Cincinnati has, the number two pass efficiency defense, what are they doing over there? What have you seen from that coach?**

KIRBY SMART: He does a tremendous job. They have some different schemes than we play in our league. They give you different looks. They're very multiple in the three down and four down looks they can give you. They have a couple guys that play hybrid positions. They can be quasi linebacker, quasi safety. They do a good job mixing that up.

It's not like you can say, Oh, they're like them. They're not like really anybody we play. That's unique. They play extremely hard. They're very sound in what they do. They're good at what they do. When you create turnovers like they do, that's probably one of the most amazing stats that I've ever seen in terms of generating that many turnovers or that many games in a row. I've been coaching defensive football for a long time, been around some really good defenses. I don't know that has ever happened.

Number one, it's a credit to them, what they're doing to generate those turnovers. We got to try to avoid them.

**Q. You talked a little bit about Desmond Ridder. What about the other offensive weapons that Cincinnati has, runningbacks, the wide receivers?**

KIRBY SMART: Their backs are really physical. Both get downhill. They complement each other. Really good players. Wideout, they've had the emergence, the Pierce kid has done a great job. He gets the ball vertical, makes a lot of plays down the field. The speed they have out there with Young and Tre Tucker are really exceptional. When you look across the board, the complete group of wideouts probably right there, outside of Alabama, is as good as we've faced in terms of wideouts.

They do a great job using their tight ends. Those two tight ends are huge. They do a great job in the run game of mixing their tight ends in to create run-pass conflicts for players. When you look at their tight ends, they do a tremendous job doing it.

Ridder has a great group of guys there he can use to pass the ball.

**Q. There's been a lot of discussion leading up to this month about teams like Cincinnati who are undefeated not getting a shot of being in the Playoff. From your perspective, what have you seen from them, how they compare against teams you've seen in the Playoff in the past?**

KIRBY SMART: Like I said earlier, they're the most complete. I think the problem this year is not necessarily them being undefeated, it's the not having the cross-conference games. It's hard to compare. If they had had a year, I don't know how many guys they play out of conference in a traditional year, if they were able to go and get a Big Ten, SEC, other opponents, it makes it much easier to compare that.

It's harder this year for us, when you look at stats, résumés, everything within conference, it's within your conference. It's relative to your conference. You don't get to get cross-conference comparisons, which makes it tougher.

Not to say if they had played out-of-conference opponents, they definitely would have got in. I don't know that. I know this: They're a really well-coached, sound, talented football team. When you have a quarterback, a good defense, great special teams, you very rarely beat yourself.

Regardless of who they're playing, they're winning and they're doing it the right way. They're playing really sound football which makes them a high-quality opponent.

**Q. As your guys have come back from their break, have you gotten a feel for their hunger, their morale coming into this game? Does it make a difference, the hunger factor, not having that last senior game, being able to play close to home?**

KIRBY SMART: I think our guys are in a great place. The time away, I noticed that for the Missouri week. The best practices we had were the time away they had the weekend before for the Missouri week. It's been kind of the same way, they got a little time away for Christmas. Since they've come back, not even 48 hours, they've been tremendous in terms of focus, attention to detail, guys being places on time. You don't have school going on, so you have a little more time with your players. What you don't want to do is bog them down with being over here all day. There's a fine balance between too much and not enough. Balancing that as a coach is tough.

We've had morning sessions, everything like that, to help out.

**Q. You just hit on the fact you don't have school right**

**now. You're also not getting to have the traditional bowl experience. Do you try to use some of that time to maybe do new things, keep it fresh? What are some of those things you're doing to have fun, build team stuff, be a family right now?**

KIRBY SMART: Hard in COVID. Opponent number three besides Cincinnati and Cincinnati. There's not a lot you can do. Everything you think about doing that's fun, I mean, put a mask on them, tell them they can't go public place, what are you going to do? Play kickball, wiffle ball in the indoor? They're over here a lot already.

The fun we try to have is in the meetings, in our walk-throughs, our focus for the game. But the fun has always been in winning for me. How do you win the game best? You have practices, you have competitive practices. You try to raise the temperature a little bit to get the competitive nature and the fire with which your opponent is going to play with and say, Match my intensity in practice. If I'm not going to be the guy in the game, can you match my intensity in practice so that you can match his when the game time comes.

I mean, we've had to say, You have four to six, you can go to the bowling alley. But if you go to the bowling alley, you have to wear your mask the whole time, stay in your lane, got to do this, do that, all kinds of stipulations. At the end of the day our guys feel most comfortable being in their own environment, which is here or at home.

**Q. From the standpoint, you as a coach, you have massive aspirations every single year. Obviously this year didn't work that way. You're able to play in the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl as a consolation prize. How does it feel to have this as a prize even though you weren't able to compete for a national championship? How do you embrace this challenge of being able to build and get some guys experiences that may not have been able to get as much playing time throughout the year?**

KIRBY SMART: I look at it as a blessing. Because when you get to a New Year's six bowl, that's an accomplishment. Let's be honest, not everyone gets to go to a New Year's six bowl. I'm not going to diminish that or say it's a disappointment. When you do that, you set yourself up for failure. If every year is a disappointment that you don't get to the Playoffs or the national championship game or you don't win the national championship, what kind of lessons are you teaching your players and your kids in life?

A lot of the goals I set, I set as a young man, as a young player, I didn't necessarily reach them. When I fell short, I



still felt in success. There's a certain barometer, what is success, what is it defined as? For us getting to a New Year's six bowl was one of the expectations we have every year. This is an awesome bowl game. You get to play a top 10 opponent. You're right, you get to play some guys that maybe have not gotten as much of an opportunity this year. They're going to get an opportunity to play. It's a blessing for next year.

The focus is how you finish this year for the seniors and the guys that may be leaving as juniors, this is the last game of their career. You want to send them out on top at Georgia.

**Q. A couple weeks ago Greg Sankey said he hoped 10 years, 20 years from now the teams of 2020 will be brought back for homecoming and honored, given recognition for what they went through. You have pressing business with UC this week. Are you able to step back yet and think, Look at what we've been through, now we're about to finish our season?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I have not had the ability to step back and look at that, but I will (laughter). If you could just write a book on this season, I mean...

It would be hard for me to imagine people being able to handle another year like this year back-to-back. I have no idea what the future holds. I'm not suggesting anything. I don't know. I'm not smart enough to know. I'm not a medical expert, I don't know where it's headed.

When you talk across the board, you don't really know what your pain threshold is for pain until you have pain. I'm not comparing this to pain, but I'd like to be able to say I don't know what the threshold is for what you can deal with in a season and stay sane.

We've stretched that rubber band about as far as you can. The elasticity is ready to break in terms of what you can withstand to have a season and go through. It's really tough because it's competitive. Look at the coaches that lost their jobs during this year. I mean, that to me shows it wasn't a free-pass year. It wasn't that. Sometimes for the kids, it kind of was. But for the guys that are organizing things, trying to stay on top of it, win games, it's extremely competitive. Rightfully so because we're paid a lot of money.

To look back on this year, I definitely think it will be looked upon this group was a special group to endure what they've endured.

**Q. After you guys have gone, I mean, three and a half months without any issues with COVID, you said your**

**team is fortunate, do you have some disappointment for your guys in the fact that you're having issues now, some of them might not be able to play given the fact all that they've sacrificed over the whole year?**

KIRBY SMART: I didn't say anybody wouldn't be able to play. I don't want to say that. I'm not saying that. I'm saying there's always issues and problems. Doesn't matter whether it's contact tracing or other guys having a test and being affected in the organization. Everybody, not just the players. I want to lead with that.

But certainly we'd be disappointed if we lost guys, they weren't able to play in the game but they were able to play all year. You know what I mean? That stinks, especially if it's like the last go-round. Where does the merry-go-round stop? We missed this game, this game got moved, this got adjusted, but none of it was ever on behalf of us; it was on behalf of our opponents.

If it ends up being the case with us, I don't think it will be, but if a guy misses a game because of it, you certainly hate it for that guy. It's tough because he was successful all year. One time out of 12 or 11, you get a situation where somebody has an outbreak and it can affect the whole team.

**Q. This will be configured to seat 15, 16,000, whatever it's going to be. Do you expect some kind of atmosphere in here? If I had to ask, having gone through this season, what has been the best atmosphere y'all have played in? The early game against Auburn? That seemed kind of loud.**

KIRBY SMART: Not really thinking about it, I would probably say the Auburn atmosphere would have been the best, that night at home for us seemed like it had the most crowd noise to it.

I expect it to be great. You would think it might be louder in the dome with that number of people because outside you figure the noise may not be the same. I'm expecting it to be as good as we've played anywhere in the dome because I think it will seem more full than maybe a 93,000-seat stadium with 20,000 as opposed to whatever Mercedes holds with how many we have in it. I'm expecting it to be a great atmosphere.

Again, the players turn that off once the game starts. I know it's hard to believe. You don't hear that whether there's 15, 20, or 90,000, you go out and play the game.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

