

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs Cincinnati

Monday, December 28, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Dan Lanning
Nakobe Dean
Georgia Bulldogs



THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with Dan Lanning, defensive coordinator, and linebacker Nakobe Dean.

We'll go straight to questions.

Q. Dan, your feelings on the performance of the defense this year. You're first in the SEC in yards per play. Statistically still good. Obviously the Alabama and Florida games stick out. Do you look at this as y'all have to spend this off-season looking at some things to see how as a defense you can catch up to these offenses?

DAN LANNING: I think the offensive game, it's changed a lot. I think every season we go through and we say, What can we do better? What can we do different? This off-season, I don't see that being any different. We're going to reassess, evaluate. You have to adapt and change as the offenses adapt and change.

Q. Do you have to huddle up even more this year, to say, What can we do to catch up to these offenses?

DAN LANNING: I think at the end of the day you have to look at 2020 and realize how unique a year it is. This year is different. I wouldn't say we're going to be -- it's not advantageous for us to treat this a lot different from the standpoint we have to do more or have to do less. I just think you have to really take a fine-tooth comb, go through everything you've done this season, evaluate it for what it is. Was it the call, a personnel matchup? How can you improve it?

I wouldn't want to say we're going to be more detailed this year than we were last year. It's more about execution, identifying problems, and adapting.

Q. As far as teams gunning for you, every team has a game plan, studies defenses. What you did last year, everybody had to have Georgia circled. How many

different things did you see that it looked like it was schemed specifically for you?

DAN LANNING: I think every year, as the season goes on, you start to say, These teams are copycatting a game plan that you see, something you've given up.

We know ultimately on defense anything we give up, we're going to see that again. Like you said, teams are looking for a way to attack us. I think that's certainly showed up. That's pretty consistent with each year.

Teams haven't had a lot of success running the ball on us this year. They have to find unique ways to run the ball. What's been successful, what's not? Same thing goes with the passing game.

Q. To the outsider it looks like when 99 is in the middle of your defense, you guys are different. Is it really just that simple? Against Missouri it was like, Wow, this defense looks completely different with him out there.

DAN LANNING: Yeah, there's a difference when 99 is on the field no doubt. Jordan makes us a much better defense. I also think Missouri's scheme was a little bit different in what they did. You'll see we did some different stuff against Missouri as well. Each team you have to assess. Each game is a new game, each Saturday is a new Saturday. You roll out a different plan and are ready to execute.

It definitely helps when we have Jordan inside. I know Nakobe appreciates Jordan being out there right in front of him (smiling).

Q. I'm not sure that I can tell that you've seen a quarterback quite like Desmond Ridder during this season. I wonder about some of the unique aspects that he brings, trying to defend him.

DAN LANNING: Desmond is a player. I'll let Nakobe hit on it here as well. What makes Desmond unique, I don't think he gets enough credit for, is his ability to run. I think he's the second winningest quarterback in Cincinnati's

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history. Has a really strong arm, is up for basically every award for the quarterback. I would put him in the top three quarterbacks we've played this season in my mind as far as execution, understanding of an offense.

They ask him to do a lot. You can tell, he makes a lot of checks at the line. He's obviously a really savvy player from an intelligence standpoint. He can make all the throws, is a dynamic runner as well.

NAKOBÉ DEAN: You can definitely tell by the film that he's a play-maker. He runs that whole offense. The whole offense runs through him. Basically he's the heartbeat of the offense.

Q. Nakobe, explain how Jordan makes your job easier as an inside linebacker.

NAKOBÉ DEAN: Oh, yeah, he makes it a world easier for me. He eat up them double-teams, everything like that. He takes pride in it. Also he just don't do it as his job, he takes pride eating up double-teams, making sure I'm free. He come to the sideline, ask me all the time, What is it looking like? Are they getting in my face, everything like that. It's great to have him back.

Q. What do you see in terms of since the Florida game in improvement with your defense? How much do you look at that as adjustments you have made, in the level of opponent? How does Cincinnati fit in?

DAN LANNING: I think we made a lot of improvements from a standpoint of communication, adapting. This has been the year of adapting. Every week is a new week in a sense. I think our guys have done a really good job of getting prepared to play every Saturday, hoping we get to play every Saturday, every once in a while finding out you're not going to get to play.

We focused on technique, fundamentals more than anything. I think we've tackled really well this year. Our guys have embraced that throughout practice. That's probably the number one way to eliminate explosive plays is to be good tacklers, be really sound there.

Cincinnati's offense is really good. They're a top-20 team on offense and defense. I think that's why they play really complementary football.

For our guys, I think we've seen steady improvement in our communication and our ability to adapt based on somebody being out. I think we've done a better job throughout the season. Our coaches have done a really good job adapting. Our players have done a really good job adapting to who's in, who's not in, putting those pieces

together.

Q. Dan, when y'all start dealing with recruiting and the way y'all have recruited lately, do you and Kirby sit down, the defensive staff, look at the board and say, We need this particular player? Or do you say, We have this spot we have to fill? How do you manage those two things?

DAN LANNING: It's a combination of both. I mean, ultimately Coach Smart has a plan for everything. He's very detailed in everything that he does, whether it be recruiting, practice plan organization, the way we handle our players here. But, yeah, there's a certain roster number that you're looking for kind of at each position, then you have to assess need, position need, over what we utilize.

This defense has changed over time based on the offenses we face as well. How many 300-pounders do you need on your roster as opposed to how many DBs? I think that's all a piece of it.

We're trying to find the right guys that fit within the system we run defensively but enhance what we can do and build upon, if that answers your question.

Q. Coach, when you look at all of the different options, players that you could have that could decide to move on, not to play in this game, declare after the game, is it exciting to get them all back, the ones that are sticking around? Kirby said you guys are excited about the ones playing in this game. Seeing guys like Malik who is bound for the Senior Bowl, Jordan Davis, who probably could go to the NFL after this year if he wanted to, Devonte Wyatt, how exciting is that to see those guys come back and have a chance to coach them once again?

DAN LANNING: I'm thrilled about every single guy we have in our program. The guys you mentioned are guys we're really, really excited about. That certainly doesn't change.

My ultimate goal as a coach is these guys can achieve at the highest level, they reach all their goals here at Georgia, then they have the opportunity to play long careers in the NFL if God is willing. That's exciting for me to have those guys have those opportunities.

Ultimately we talk about the opportunity to come get a first-class education at Georgia, play really elite defense against the best competition. I think that's really appealing for our players to have the opportunity to do that.

I know I'm excited to coach these guys. I'm blessed to be in the situation I'm in every day to coach the players we get to coach here at Georgia.

Q. You mentioned at the start this has been a different year. Do you think there's a direct relationship between COVID and scoring being up nationally?

DAN LANNING: I don't know that I'd say that. Maybe, probably. I don't know the answer to that.

I know ultimately offenses are ahead of the curve right now. You could say it's related to COVID, but I know within our walls we have a standard of defense here we take a lot of pride in. That doesn't change based on situation. We take a lot of pride in our mental agility and our ability to adapt.

If you sat here and said offenses are not scoring more points, you'd be lying. That's obviously happening. We have to continue to adapt and build off of that.

Is some of that related to COVID? Yeah, probably. Is all that? No. I don't think we'll ever use that as an excuse in our program. I know that.

Q. Kirby said a couple nights ago that Monty Rice has not been full strength since the Alabama game. What adjustments has that resulted in for both of you?

DAN LANNING: I'll let Nakobe answer that first.

NAKOBÉ DEAN: Personally we haven't really made much adjustments. I talk to Monty every day about how he feeling, everything, with his foot and everything. He keeps it real with me. If he tells me he need to be pushed or he need me to step up, need me and players to step up, play more, be there for him. In that aspect it has changed, but other than that it hasn't really changed too much.

DAN LANNING: The one thing that's been an adapting piece for us is the multiplicity of each week not knowing necessarily who you have. You probably ask guys to know more positions. In turn, that's going to create a little bit more simplicity on one side of the ball. If you have to learn multiple positions, be able to do multiple things, you need to shrink your package to be able to adapt to that.

Q. Your freshmen defensive backs, could see them in games sometimes, there's a lot of times we don't get to watch practice. Give us a breakdown of your four defensive backs, Branch, Kimber, Burns, and Ringo.

DAN LANNING: Kelee has been able to actually practice with us more and more as the season has gone on. He's

not ready for competition yet. I'm really excited. Sometimes you worry about a guy that has an injury how mentally engaged are they going to be able to be throughout the season. It's tough when you know you're not going to play a game. I've been impressed with Kelee's attention to detail, really picking up some schematic pieces of our defense.

Really all those guys are doing a good job of developing, learning the scheme, and growing. I think every one of them will benefit from an off-season in the weight room, getting stronger. Each one of those guys have done a good job of being engaged, ready for their opportunity. There's a great chance you could see them within some of these games, whether it be this next game or in the near future.

Q. Azeez is speculating on whether he's going to play. How has he improved this year as a player and what does he bring to your defense?

KIRBY SMART: Azeez is a lead-by-example guy. He does exactly what you ask him to do. From a player standpoint, I think he's become more refined each year. You talk about player improvement from where he's come from when he first got here to what he's become this year. His ceiling is really high. I think he's developed a lot of trust within our players. They trust that Azeez is going to do his job.

You talk about players, everybody wants to work on what they're good at. Azeez is a guy that's attacked his weaknesses, and said, Hey, here's the things I want to improve. You see that show up on film.

I think he can pass-rush on anybody in our league. I think he's really good at setting the edge and playing the run, which is something you have to be able to do both in the SEC. You can't be one or the other.

Q. In terms of your defense, how much did everything change when you didn't have Richard after the Kentucky game? How important has he been to your defense, the potential of having him back, how much does that excite y'all?

DAN LANNING: Ultimately you look at Richard's career at Georgia. Richard has been a play-maker. It's exciting when that guy brings a certain level of energy and juice when he's on the field. He finds himself around the ball. That's really exciting.

We don't just completely change our entire scheme because one guy is in or out. When you have experience, there's nothing that replaces experience on the football

field. Richard has a lot of experience suiting up for the Georgia Dawgs. That's a big piece of it for Richard.

Certainly excited if we get an opportunity to see him on the field.

Q. How would you assess the play of Chris Smith this season in replacement of Richard?

KIRBY SMART: I think Chris has done a good job being adaptable and ready. Chris is a guy that has been patient, waited his turn. You always point out guys at the beginning of the season, you don't know when your moment is going to come, but we're going to know when you're ready. You get there out on the field and ready to perform.

I think Chris has done a good job of that, operating within the scheme. The more reps Chris has gotten, the better he's gotten each week.

Q. Dan, was there a time in the season when you realized how bad the pandemic was and how difficult it was for y'all to deal with it?

DAN LANNING: The mental agility piece, really starting all the way back to this summer. I don't know if there's one moment that sticks out over the other. It's just every day you come into work. In the past you said, I have an expectation for what we're going to be able to attack today, what personnel groups we're going to be able to use, what people we have available. We've realized really quickly in 2020 that's not a reality. You have to be ready to change, whether it be five minutes before a meeting, somebody gets dinged, or somebody goes out.

I want to give credit to Ron Courson and Coach Smart for really having a plan. Every single day we've stepped in here, if this happens, here's our reaction. Our trainers have done a really good job, our coaches and players have all done a really good job adapting, whether it's us moving a guy for a position for the day. I don't know if anybody can script it and you anticipate what it's going to look like this season.

Each day has just really taught you you better be able to adjust on the fly. That's been consistent. I don't know if there's one point. It's really been throughout the season we've had to be able to adapt to that.

Q. Nakobe, with everything going on this year with COVID, what does it mean for you guys as a team to be able to get out here and play in a New Year's six bowl?

NAKOBÉ DEAN: I feel it's great. Definitely the year like

we had with everything going on, just everything from not just football aspect of things, but just school academically, mentally going through everything, how everything changed, being adaptable to everything that has been happening. It's just been crazy.

For us to have the opportunity to play in a New Year's six bowl, for me to be able to do it with some of my brothers I might not ever play ball again with because they moving on, but just to be able to do that is great. It's a great feeling.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks.

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