

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs Cincinnati

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Marcus Freeman

Darrick Forrest

Cincinnati Bearcats

THE MODERATOR: We've got Cincinnati DC Marcus Freeman and starting safety Darrick Forrest.

We'll open it up with a statement from Coach Freeman.

MARCUS FREEMAN: We're extremely excited to have the opportunity to play in the bowl game. This is obviously a very prestigious bowl game being the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl. I'm excited for our team, specifically our defense, to get a chance to go against one of the best in the country.

We know it's a huge challenge. I think this group of young men look forward to challenges. They usually rise to those challenges. I'm excited to go play against the best and excited to be a part of this group of Bearcat defense, watch them go play, play the game they love.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Coach Freeman, this defense has kind of been building over your four years here. What has been the most enjoyable part of watching this group go out and accomplish an undefeated regular season and get to play in a New Year's six bowl?

MARCUS FREEMAN: The most enjoyable part is knowing where they started. Those guys, like Darrick, that has been here for four years, the four-win season, being maybe the worst defense in the country at one point, to now where they're a consistent top 10 defense, it's great enjoyment for me to watch that because I know the work they've put in, the growth they made.

I love it for them, I love this opportunity. I also love when you think about the journey to where they arrived, I think it's incredibly exciting.

Q. Coach Freeman, as you've looked at the game film of Georgia's offense through the season, what changes have you seen? Specifically since they've



made the switch to JT Daniels at quarterback.

MARCUS FREEMAN: JT brings a different dynamic to their offense. You can tell by over the last three games, they're averaging over 40 points a game. He's got a very strong arm, probably the strongest arm probably in my time being the defensive coordinator here that we've faced.

We know it will be a huge challenge. Being able to go back and not only watch him these past three games, but even watch some USC film, you just see it, he's a dynamic quarterback with an extremely strong arm that understands defense. It's going to be a great challenge for us.

Q. Ahmad and James gained All-American recognition yesterday. Can you describe what they did to earn that and what that means for them?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I've always said with team success comes individual success. It's something you preach to your players, and understand, Guys, continue to be unselfish, continue to work as a team, and understand that with that comes individual success.

You love it for those individuals, you also hate it because at some point somebody has to be pointed out and somebody doesn't get pointed out.

We understand within our walls the strength of this unit is the group. I say that meaning we know every single person on this unit has value. It's a great compliment to Ahmad and Wigs. We know a lot of guys on this unit deserve credit. They'll get the credit from their coaches and the guys they work with. Understand that it takes them all to be successful.

Q. Darrick, under normal circumstances, you would be down at this place all week, have a little bit of a different venue. How has it been on the players' behalf getting in the right mindset?

DARRICK FORREST: I know that me and the rest of the players, we're ready to play. Each and every day when we go out there to practice, we go out there with the mindset we have to work hard, know that when we get to this game

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we're efficient, we play fast, that we can win.

Every day each player is ready to play. I don't think that anyone's really sluggish right now. We're all still motivated because we still have goals to achieve to finish the season.

Q. Marcus, you hear a lot when quarterbacks play each other, this quarterback versus that quarterback. In this particular matchup, these are two tremendous defenses. Do you as a defensive coordinator kind of have some of that mindset, match up our defense against this Georgia defense?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I don't look at it that way. I guess because you spend so much time looking at the opponent's offense, that's to me the biggest challenge for us, is how do we freaking find a way to stop this offense that's extremely explosive, is tough, they run the ball well. Obviously JT Daniels does a great job of throwing the ball. They got really good wide receivers that can create mismatches and big plays.

I know Georgia has always had a really good defense. Obviously I have the utmost respect for Coach Smart and the job he's done over the course of years. I've studied him at Alabama, at Georgia. This will be a battle of two programs to me that probably have the same culture, same values of being tough, running the ball, stopping the run. What a challenge it's going to be.

Q. Darrick, this program has twice been on a similar stage, the Orange Bowl and the Sugar Bowl. They weren't able to get the job done. Does this opportunity, a chance to get the program over that maybe final step mean anything to you guys or is it more focused on getting the 10-0, taking care of yourselves?

DARRICK FORREST: It's a little bit of both. Coach Fick talked to us yesterday in the last hundred years we've only had two opportunities to play in games like this. We have to make the best of our opportunities. I feel like everyone wants to make the best of this opportunity.

There's still things that are like in our back pocket. For sure we need to go out there and get this for our program, for our city, just for everybody.

Q. A team like Georgia has a ton of four- and five-star recruits getting NFL looks. You have a ton of three- and four-star recruits. What has been the difference in creating and developing so many NFL-ready players?

MARCUS FREEMAN: We can't evaluate their recruiting classes. Only thing I think we can do is look at our guys,

man. I wouldn't trade them for the world. I think these are guys that fit our culture. These are guys that have actually helped promote and establish the culture that Coach Fick brought in here.

We're all similar. We're all guys I think that always have chips on our shoulders. We want to go out there and fight.

Darrick said it earlier, but this isn't a charity event for us. We're not here to go out there and enjoy being at the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl. We're here to go out and win a football game. We're preparing. We have a whole bunch of guys with that mentality, are going to prepare their butts off the next two days, go out there on Friday and swing as hard as we can.

Again, I love the guys we have. I can only talk about the guys we have. But I know the guys we have are the reason why we're in this situation we're in. They understand what it takes to be successful. They work at it every day. They push each other. They push their coaches, understanding that at the end of it great results are produced.

Q. Coach, you mentioned it not being a charity event. Past two years you have had really good seasons, gone to what people consider lesser bowls. You treated those the same way. Do you feel stuff like that helped set the stage for what you are going into this year?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we preach it all the time. I think about my four years or five years in college. I think about the bowl games. The games you had the most fun at are the ones you won. That's what we want to tell our guys. You're going to remember this bowl game whether you win or you lose. That's the mentality we have.

We were fortunate in the past two bowl games to have victories. To me those were great experiences. Yes, they were great experiences in Washington, D.C. and down in Birmingham, but also because you came out victorious.

The great experience about going to Atlanta, Georgia, is to be able to come home victorious.

Q. People see the numbers, people see the explosion and success you have had on defense. What are we missing about these guys that maybe the nation doesn't know about?

MARCUS FREEMAN: To me what people don't understand is the leadership. I'm not saying it because he's on this call, but a guy like Darrick Forrest, we had a meeting in the off-season, asked him to change a position.



He's unselfish and understands that the greater good of the group is what's most important.

That's the reason why we've had success. We got some leaders. We got dudes that push each other on and off the field, that sacrifice for each other, but also that continue to sustain the brand and the culture that we're trying to build. That's why we've had success.

Guys like Darrick that have been here for four years when we weren't so successful, but understand they believe in what the culture is. They believe in the brand we talk about on the defensive side of the ball. Now those are guys that continue to uphold the standard. That's how I feel. Darrick might feel differently.

DARRICK FORREST: I was going to piggyback off of that. I was going to say leadership, too. I could just see throughout the years the change and the love that each and every player has for each other. The brotherhood we have on the back end, the front end, with the linebackers. Most of the time we spend time with each other off the field. We spend just as much time off the field as we do on the field with each other.

I feel like each and every guy goes out there and play for one another, each other. I feel like there's something more than football. It holds us together and it keeps us playing.

Q. Darrick, you committed to Coach Fickell very early in his tenure here. You committed to a program that was 4-8 the year before. How rewarding has it been for you to see what you guys have accomplished since then, to bring the program back, to get a championship as a senior?

DARRICK FORREST: It's very rewarding, especially coming in, they told us to have blind faith. We all did. We didn't know what was going to happen after the first year we went 4-8. We never stopped. We kept working, kept grinding. We love one another.

I think the brotherhood aspect, it really changed this program. I want to say that I feel like each and every senior, we're going to go out with a bang. We're just going to make the city of Cincinnati proud.

Q. Coach, Coach Fickell always talks about using things to sell the program, even if the accolades or rewards aren't as important. Do you feel or hope that maybe being up for awards shines a light nationally on what you guys have been able to accomplish, especially you on defense?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think it's the result of

unselfishness, the result of success. I don't think that's why we want those recognitions. Hey, we want people to respect us.

No, I think it's the result of hard work. That's what I want people, more than anybody else within our walls, understand. Hey, with the result of hard work, with the result of unselfishness, of having success, becomes these individual accolations.

As long as the guys in this room, in this place understand that, we're going to have success. Now, it also helps with recruiting. Recruiting is important. With some of these national awards, national recognition that guys are getting, people are understanding what the University of Cincinnati football program is all about. They're starting to understand the name, the people around here. That's to me important because we're going to try to recruit the best players we can find that fit our culture and our brand.

I think all of it helps. All of the pub is good. We have to understand within our walls why we're getting this recognition and why we've had success.

Q. When you look at the way Georgia has run the ball the last couple games, what is the challenge for you? What did your film study tell you about how Tulsa had some success on the ground?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think Tulsa did a great job coming in here. They were tough. They did a good job of kind of executing things that we pride ourselves on: stopping the run, being physical, tough. They came in here with a chip on their shoulder. They kind of pounded on us a little bit.

I think our guys understand in order to have success versus the University of Georgia, we're going to have to stop the run. We're going to have to do some different things. We're going to have to put some different people in different place, make sure we have a chance to stop the run.

They have an extremely good offensive line. Good stable of runningbacks, White is the lead carrier, done an unbelievable job. Cook is in the backfield, they motion him out, run him on pass routes, he's dynamic. Multiple other runningbacks that come in and do a good job.

We have to understand we have to stop the run, do everything in our power to stop the run, or it can be a long day. It's our job, the way we prepare, obviously schematically, we got to do things to make sure we stop the run.

Q. You guys going down to Atlanta, players like Elijah

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Ponder, who are Georgia guys, I don't know if they take anything extra going back home and playing in a game like this? Can you encapsulate something like that? Is that something you can use as an extra bit of fortitude in this game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I'll talk from my point of view. Darrick probably has talked to Elijah, some of those Georgia boys a little bit more in-depth.

Our thing is this. You're going to have emotion going back home, but you can't be emotional. You got to play this game with emotions. You got to go out there and love the opportunity, play with emotions, but don't make it an emotional game, don't get out of your character.

We want those guys to enjoy this opportunity, go back home. Even the guys that aren't going home, the stage that we're on. It still comes back to doing what you do. It comes back to executing, doing the things that's got us to this point that is going to help us be successful.

Darrick, maybe you could talk about Elijah, some of those Georgia boys going back home.

DARRICK FORREST: It gives those guys just a little bit more motivation to go out there and play, and play hard. Also their families are going to be there. I know a lot of those guys want to go out there and they want to make their families proud. I feel like they're going to play with a chip on their shoulder.

Q. Coach, your boss has talked about success breeding things like other jobs being interested, your name coming up in rumors. How much have you leaned on him as your name continues to pop up for head coach openings, defensive coordinator positions? How have you been able to keep dialed in on the task at hand?

MARCUS FREEMAN: To sit here and say you don't enjoy those opportunities, man, that's a lie. Everybody enjoys some reward or accolade or some opportunity. But I know the reason why we've been successful. Sometimes you want to stand in front and say it's because of me. I know it's because of guys like Darrick Forrest, our seniors who have worked their tails off, Coach Fickell who has been an unbelievable leader for me for many, many years.

The thing I've learned about Coach Fickell is loyalty, working where your butt is. Work where your butt is. Don't worry about other things that you don't control. The best thing I can do, the only thing I can do is, is work as hard as I can with my buddies at the University of Cincinnati.

Those opportunities come. At some point, I've always said, I want to be a head coach. Every decision I make is understanding that as long as this doesn't hurt me as a chance to get the opportunity to be a head coach, then I'm good.

So it's awesome. It's great. It's humbling sometimes. But I understand why I'm in this position. I understand that without these players and without the leadership of Coach Fick, I wouldn't be in this position. You have to stay focused on the task at hand. As Coach Fick always says, work where your butt is.

Q. Darrick, this secondary unit specifically got a lot of hype coming into the season. It's safe to say you have lived up to that. Have you talked about that much this season, especially the last couple weeks?

DARRICK FORREST: Not for real. We have talked about going out there and trying to get four, five interceptions a game. Hopefully this weekend we get to put on a show for you guys.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Don't let them lie to you. That's all they do. They talk, talk, talk, you know what I mean (laughter)?

DARRICK FORREST: Practice maybe (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys.

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