

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs Cincinnati

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Ahmad Gardner

Joel Dublanko

Cincinnati Bearcats



THE MODERATOR: We've got linebacker Joel Dublanko and cornerback Ahmad 'Sauce' Gardner.

We'll take questions.

Q. Joel, I just asked Elijah this. The response was interesting. When I say 'attention training', what does that trigger in your brain?

JOEL DUBLANKO: Attention training was probably one of the toughest things I've ever been through (laughter). I mean, the first day you were in, like, the snow/ice. Everybody cut their hands up. I remember doing push-ups in the snow, literally blood being in the snow. Like, some people didn't feel like their fingertips for the next few months.

Then the next day we were out on the soccer field. It was just a huge field. Everybody was throwing up. Then the next day we were out, like, in the middle of campus, like in the green area, rolling around in the mud. It was just the craziest time.

I don't know. You definitely had to evaluate if you still wanted to do this.

Q. Does this make all of that worth it?

JOEL DUBLANKO: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q. Ahmad, the stats show the teams aren't throwing the ball your way as much. Do you see that as a sign of respect?

AHMAD GARDNER: Yes, sir, I most definitely see that as respect. I'm not going to sleep on the side. I don't want them to end up coming my way when I least expect it. I just got to stay focused, take that as a high level of respect. My coach talk to me about that all the time. Yeah, I just got to stay focused.

Q. Ahmad, it's been a little bit different for you than Joel, Coby, and Darrick. You didn't have to go through the attention training. What has it been like from your perspective coming in and having success right away individually but also as a team?

AHMAD GARDNER: It's a blessing to be part of a winning team, it's a team full of leaders. Even the people that don't play for real, they're leaders. I'm just blessed that I chose this school. It was a great decision. I'm blessed to be where I am, around the people that I'm around.

Q. Joel, you waited a long time to get this starting opportunity. What was this off-season like for you knowing this was going to be your shot, that you were going to finally have the chance to make a name for yourself with the ones?

JOEL DUBLANKO: I just think God has put me in an amazing position to be able to be a starting linebacker for a team of this caliber.

I think just continue to do what I've been doing, prepare like I'm the starter even though now I am, prepare my butt off, do the best I can for the team.

Q. Joel, what about collectively, I'm sure you heard there were some unknowns about that linebacker unit, seeing how you and Darrian and Jarell have played, how much pride do you take in what was a question mark to start the year has turned into the strength of the defense?

JOEL DUBLANKO: I definitely got a lot of those questions leading up to the season. I think just through the work we've put in, we knew on the team that was going to be, like, a question mark. That just made the guys in that room just prepare a little bit more, work a little bit harder to answer those questions, leave no doubt, so...

Q. Ahmad, according to PFF, your average rating once targeted is 29.3. Lower than quarterbacks starting into the ground at 36.3. What does that mean to you in your defensive play going into a big game like this with

all the talent Georgia has on their offense?

AHMAD GARDNER: It means a lot. Nothing is going to change this week. I'm going to go out there and do the same thing I've been doing. I'm a competitive guy, I want to play against the best and everything. You know what I'm saying?

That means a lot that I get this opportunity to showcase my talent against an SEC team. Everybody thinks 'we're not ready' because they're SEC, we're in the Group of 5. I'm going to go out there and do the same thing I've been doing.

Q. Ahmad, seeing Second Team All-American from the Associated Press, what does that mean to you? How rewarding is it to accomplish that so early in your career?

AHMAD GARDNER: It means a lot. It shows that, like, my talent isn't going unnoticed and everything. Like I want to be on first team. That's what I'm going to, like, strive to get on next year. It means a lot. That was a real true blessing to see that.

Q. Ahmad, you mentioned the chance to prove yourself against a blue blood team in Georgia. How much have you talked about that, maybe want to prove what you're able to do on your side of things?

AHMAD GARDNER: It's not like we want to prove anything. We know we have what it takes to prove ourselves to everyone else. That isn't our main focus. That's something individually I want to do, prove that we have what it takes. The corner room, this team, it's not something we're pressing to achieve. We know we have what it takes, and that's all that matters.

Q. Ahmad, one of the guys that Georgia has at receiver had a pretty big bowl game last year, George Pickens. When you look at a guy like that, it seems like even when he's covered he catches the ball. Have you gone up against anyone like that? What do you think of him?

AHMAD GARDNER: I don't know if I went up against anyone like that. I think he's a pretty good player. I'm looking forward to competing with him and the rest of their receiver group. See what happens.

Q. Joel, it's been a couple weeks, but can you take us through the fake punt. All the coaches have put the onus on you, you're the one that made the call.

JOEL DUBLANKO: Yeah, so going into the game, if we

had a six-man overload to our punter's foot, that was the check. Before the play, I went to Coach Mason and I asked him if it was still live. He came to me like an unsure 'yeah' because obviously we were up.

I go out there and sure enough we get a six-man overload. I kind of look to the sideline, give Coach Fick a thumbs up. He didn't see me. I think he saw me, but he just kept going, didn't know what I was talking about. I ended up making the check, yeah (laughter).

Q. No regrets on that, I'm assuming?

JOEL DUBLANKO: No (smiling).

Q. You alluded you're playing an SEC team in for the most part an SEC environment. What would it mean if you were able to hold this Georgia defense down and get the win? What would you say people need to know about the Cincinnati defense that maybe a casual football fan may not know?

AHMAD GARDNER: The first thing is I believe we're tougher than a lot of Power 5 teams all around the country. We work very hard. Like, I feel like it would mean a lot to us if we was to beat Georgia. It would put us, like, on the map. You know what I'm saying? All around the country, all the recruiters and scouts and everything, they will know that we have, what it took to beat that team.

JOEL DUBLANKO: Absolutely, I would agree with Ahmad. The style of football that we pride ourself on is tough and nasty. We'll play that brand against a team like Georgia.

I know that the SEC is obviously known for being bigger. I think being able to play that brand of football, offensively, defensively, special teams-wise, then win that game, would mean a lot for the power fives, our school, just putting us on the map.

Q. Joel, you're one of the few guys remaining that was recruited by the previous staff. Have you all talked about sticking around, sticking it out, what it's meant to be a part of this now?

JOEL DUBLANKO: I mean, I haven't talked individually with some guys. I know, like, on the team we've talked about it, especially from our first season even so. The culture was so different with Tuberville. I think having this new coaching staff obviously is a great choice.

It was a complete 180 turn. It's been a huge blessing for me. I'm just extremely thankful for it and blessed to be in this position.

Q. Joel, you've had Coach Freeman as your position coach, defensive coordinator, for all four years. We talked to him about how he deals with some of the attention he's gotten, job interest. How have you seen him grow and change as a coach, position coach and coordinator, during your time with him?

JOEL DUBLANKO: Yeah, I'd say from the aspect -- I mean, after four years you get to know somebody really well. I think that is the aspect that has grown the most. He hasn't stopped at all or even pressed even more to push the guys in this group, me, or even everybody on the defense.

I'm just thankful that he's stuck it out this long. Every year it's like, Oh, my gosh, is he going to leave type thing. Yeah, so I think even with having, like -- sorry, I lost my train of thought.

Like, there's more back and forth than him, like, screaming at you. Well, he doesn't scream (smiling). There's more back and forth. He's able to piggyback off of you and see what you're thinking in the situation rather than just getting on you for something.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thank you.

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