

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Michigan State vs Pitt

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Gary Stokan

Pat Narduzzi

Mel Tucker

Press Conference



to laugh, so we have a battle for our WWE belt every night in a competition, and then we want them to learn, so we take the coaches and players into Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, where these kids aren't going to get out of the hospital for Christmas, and they may never get out of that hospital.

To bring some cheer during Christmas to those kids and their families is great for the coaches and the players to give back.

Lastly, we do something that no other bowl does, and you're not supposed to do, but we take both teams together over to Ebenezer Baptist Church where Dr. King preached from here in Atlanta. Coach Curry, Bill Curry, who won two Super Bowls, coached at Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia Tech and Georgia State, has written a book Ten Men in the Huddle, and he's going to give a speech about 10 Men in the Huddle, which is very inspirational, very leadership based, and that'll be a great evening for both teams to enjoy.

With that, we'll look forward from our board, from our staff to welcome you to the capital of college football, Atlanta, Georgia, for the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl. Thanks, Matt.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Gary. After comments from the head coaches we'll jump into Q & A from the media. Coach Narduzzi, if you'll make your opening statement, please.

PAT NARDUZZI: Sure, Matt. It's an honor to be on this call. It's an outstanding thing for Pitt to be here today. Obviously we're coming in after a great win last night against Wake Forest in the ACC Championship game, so it's kind of been a whirlwind the last 24 hours, but we couldn't be happier to be in the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl and play such a great opponent as Michigan State University, who I've got great knowledge of, that university after spending eight seasons there and winning a few ballgames with Coach Dantonio, who I've got an unbelievable relationship with.

Obviously Mel Tucker, outstanding football coach at every level, from the NFL to Michigan State, Colorado and

THE MODERATOR: At this time we'll welcome head coach Pat Narduzzi of the 12th ranked Pitt Panthers and head coach Mel Tucker of the 10th ranked Michigan State Spartans. Also we'll welcome Gary Stokan, president and CEO of Peach Bowl, Inc., and to get us started, Gary, I know you've got some opening comments from everyone.

GARY STOKAN: Sure, thanks, Matt. I just wanted to first off congratulate Coach Tucker and Coach Narduzzi on their seasons and their teams on a successful season. Secondly just congratulate Mel on being Coach of the Year and Pat on being ACC champions.

Congratulations to both your teams and to you and your staff. I want to welcome you to the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl which will be played on December 30th at 7:00 at Mercedes-Benz Stadium and televised on ESPN. We're part of the CFP New Year's Six, so this is a special bowl game to host these two top teams.

It's a great match-up, two of the greatest players in the game right now, Kenny Pickett and Kenneth Walker, both of who should be in New York at the Heisman Trophy dinner, and we're just really excited and pumped to have this game on December 30th with two teams from the North that we're going to be hosting in the South with our great southern hospitality.

We're known for our southern hospitality, and we look forward to hosting you, your families, your football teams and the media, as well.

Everything we do for our bowl game is a reward for the players. They're the ones that play the game. They're the ones that spend the time conditioning, spending the time in the summer and the winter, et cetera, and so we use a theme of live, laugh and learn. That means live great, get great gifts, eat great food like Chick-Fil-a. We want them



Georgia and everywhere else he's been. Just a super coach. This is going to be a heck of a ballgame.

I think you guys picked two great teams, two top whatever, 15 teams, and obviously Michigan State is at No. 10 in the country and maybe should be even higher than that.

It's an honor for our team to be able to go play them down in Atlanta, and we can't wait to get there.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Tucker, we'll take your opening comment, please.

MEL TUCKER: Thanks for having me. We're very excited for our players, our program, all of our fans to be selected to this New Year's Six bowl game. It's a very rewarding accomplishment for a 10-win regular season. Our first-ever appearance in the Peach Bowl, Michigan State, and the third ever appearance in a New Year's Six bowl and the first since 2015.

Our fans will be very excited to be in a big-time bowl game, and they'll show up strong in Atlanta. Thank you so much.

THE MODERATOR: We'll move into Q & A.

Q. Pat, I was wondering just the emotions when you heard the announcement that you would be playing Michigan State, and how do you kind of separate the emotion from the ability to coach a game against Michigan State?

PAT NARDUZZI: Obviously we as coaches don't get to play in the game. However, great question. Good to see your faces. We're excited obviously to be in this game. But it's a football game. It doesn't matter who the opponent is. We've got a great opponent. It doesn't matter that I coached there for a few years. That will not play into any role at all.

Coach Tucker has got a brand new roster there, and I don't think there's any guys on that roster I know or ever coached. A few guys on the staff, but besides that, there will be no emotions, it's just another football game.

Q. Mel, I was wondering, you mentioned the sense of accomplishment. Can you go a little deeper on that as far as what you guys have achieved so far going from two wins last year going to a New Year's Six bowl game, and what was the reaction of the team today upon finding you guys were playing in the Peach Bowl?

MEL TUCKER: I haven't talked to the squad yet, but it is an accomplishment to get to a New Year's Six bowl, to get

to the Peach Bowl. Winning 10 games is an accomplishment. I think it's the ninth time in the history of the school that the program has won 10 games, and we have an opportunity to get to 11. So we're really excited about that. It's a great way to send out our seniors. Our fans have been great all season. It's going to give our fans an opportunity to support us again in a great bowl game. Our fans travel well. We have an exciting football team, and it's just a great way to wrap up the season.

Q. Pat, beyond Michigan State being a place that you coached for many years, I'm sure you're more than well familiar with the challenges that they present running the ball with Walker and everything. You guys have been stout against the run all season, and you guys took down Syracuse, which had the No. 1 rushing offense in the ACC. What's this like for you, like hey, you get to gear up as a guy that's been mentioned with the best in the country?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, we haven't played Kenneth Walker yet. I haven't watched a ton of tape. I've probably watched two or three games. If we have an opportunity to watch Michigan State football game, always going to put that on during the year. He's a great running back. He can run. He's fast. Obviously he's a transfer from Wake Forest, and I know Clawson speaks highly of him, as well.

We know what kind of athlete he is. It'll be a big challenge, and just because you stop one at Syracuse doesn't mean you can stop one at Michigan State. It'll take a lot of work, and it'll be a challenge.

Q. Coach, with the way the fans traveled last night to Charlotte, what do you expect to see in Atlanta from Pitt nation?

PAT NARDUZZI: I expect to see the same thing or more. I think the Pitt faithful will be in strong attendance in Atlanta. I think what you saw last night, you're going to see again in Atlanta. It was outstanding.

Q. Pat, obviously making a bowl game any year is big in terms of those practices you get, but to have a New Year's Six bowl ahead of you guys against a team like Michigan State, what does that do for your team top to bottom, freshmen to seniors, to prepare throughout these 15 or so practices you guys might get, handful of practices looking ahead to that game?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, gives us an opportunity for another ballgame. Gives us an opportunity to win 12. It gives our younger guys an opportunity to get a little bit more practice in, although I think bowl practice nowadays is not much about that as it is just getting prepared for a

game. It seems like there's a lot less time to get prepared. The first thing will be focusing on is trying to regain the week of recruiting we lost last week. So we'll be on the road this evening and we'll get recruiting cranked up this week, and then get started next week after an official visit next weekend on Michigan State.

Q. My question is for Mel, there's some guys, Kenneth in particular, who probably have plans to move to the next level next year. I know Kenneth intended to play in the bowl game. Do you know for sure at this point are all your guys expecting to play in the game that may have that option?

MEL TUCKER: Yeah, I haven't heard from any of the guys that they've decided not to play. At this point I'm assuming everyone is going to play, but if something changes I will certainly make sure everyone knows that.

Q. Mel, I wanted to -- the same question that was asked to Pat about facing Kenneth. You have to face Kenny Pickett, and I wondered how much you've seen of him on tape and what you've seen from that Pitt passing offense this year?

MEL TUCKER: I have not seen any coaches' copy tape on him yet, but I've seen some highlights, and I've seen him a little bit on some -- just in passing. I know he's a great player, so I know we're going to have to do a much better job on our pass defense. We've got to tighten up some areas. We've got to get some guys back healthy in order to be able to have a chance to contain him and slow him down.

Q. Last night when Kenny said that he was planning on playing in the bowl game, does that surprise you at all that he would be up for this opportunity to play in a bowl?

PAT NARDUZZI: Not at all. That's who Kenny Pickett is. That's what our team is all about. It's not about Kenny, it's about our football team. I think they think bigger than that. It's a team-oriented team, and they're unselfish, and they play for each other. I think that's the most impressive part about this football team, and that's why we are where we are today.

Q. Mel, just some general housekeeping here. I'm wondering for the next five to ten days what is next for your team, what will you have your players doing, and what's next on the agenda to get the players ready for whatever is next?

MEL TUCKER: Yeah, well, the staff will be out on the road recruiting this week, and our players will get three lifts in

and running sessions and also they'll get some scheme work in and some things like that, some X's and O's work and some walk-throughs, some self-directed things, as well. That's what we're going to do this week.

Q. I know Kenny Pickett said he's going to play, and it may not be such a problem with a high-profile game with high-profile teams, but do you think this will become a problem throughout college football if a couple guys start doing it and then a couple other guys go, hey, that's not such a bad idea?

PAT NARDUZZI: I mean, I think that's something that's already happened. We're already into that. That's been happening for about seven, eight years now it seems like. So that's the nature of the game we've created, I think going from the old BCS to being a four-team playoff sometimes makes some of these bowl games insignificant, which the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl is not.

I think the bowl system is one of the greatest things ever. I've never been to a bad bowl game. I cannot wait to go to the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl. Everyone that I've ever been to I've enjoyed, and I know we'll enjoy this one. Our team will enjoy this one. I can't help guys that end up opting out. Everybody has got to make a decision on their own. But bowl games are outstanding for the team, for the coaches and families, and I think it's a part of the game that everybody should enjoy.

MEL TUCKER: Yeah, it's really the individual decisions for the players typically as they're guys that may be dealing with some type of injuries or that may be deciding whether they're going to come back for another year or leave, and if they're going to leave, then they have to make a decision, well, does it help me to play in this game or not, and what is the risk, what is the reward. So those are decisions that they make. They're business decisions, and whatever decisions our players make, I will support them 100 percent.

Q. Mel, I'm wondering the location, placement of the bowl game. I know Georgia is a big recruiting area for your program and a lot of others, as well. It's an area you're familiar with. Does showing your face down there as a program, playing in that game in Atlanta, in your experience does the bowl game site have much of an effect in recruiting, or is it just kind of the result maybe the brand name of the bowl, but physically being down there, do you see any kind of recruiting benefit down there?

MEL TUCKER: Yes, it's going to help us quite a bit. We recruit heavily in the state of Georgia, and all the way down to south Georgia. We're going to be very visible, and it's

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

going to be great for our program, great exposure for recruiting.

We saw that when we played down at Miami earlier this season. We had a very good showing, and there was a lot of excitement generated in South Florida about the Spartans and Spartan football.

We got a very good response and made a lot of good connections because of that game. This will be very, very similar.

Q. Coach Narduzzi, I know the players are different, but does your experience, all that experience you have in the Big Ten, do you think that's any kind of advantage going into this?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think it is. I kind of know Big Ten football a little bit. But football is football. Different players, different colored jerseys, different logos, but football is football. But just kind of where they come from, I think it helps a little bit.

Q. Pat and Mel, I know you guys have some similar overlap in terms of mentors with Coach Dantonio. How much have you guys known each other over the years, and do you have any shared stories or meetings of each other?

PAT NARDUZZI: You know, I've admired Coach Tucker from afar. We've not been fortunate enough to work with each other, but just admired his work. I know he's been a defensive coordinator and DBs coach throughout his career, and I know Mark Dantonio spoke very, very highly of him in the days that he worked with him. That's my knowledge of Mel.

MEL TUCKER: Yeah, I've just gotten to know Pat over the years, particularly with him being with Coach Dantonio and just seeing him at some camps and things like that. I know that they visited us here down at Georgia when I was down in Georgia in the summer, and so I've heard nothing but great things about Pat as a coach and as a mentor, and then obviously met him several times over the years. Had really good conversations. He's a really good ball coach, really good pedigree. Did a really good job here defensively at Michigan State. They were very aggressive in coverage and pressures, and I really had a lot of respect for what he did here as a coordinator and obviously as a head coach he's done a great job.

Q. Pat, when Michigan State fans watch the Pitt Panthers in this game, when they watch your defense, will they recognize any similarities in structure to your defense today compared to what they saw out of your

defense in 2014? Will it look familiar?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think so. Yeah, I think they'll see -- they'll kind of know what it looks like. It's the same aggressive style of defense that we had up in East Lansing, and it's kind of what we do. Randy Bates, our defensive coordinator, does a nice job.

I want to say one last thing. I appreciate you having us on today. I can't thank you enough for inviting us to the bowl game, you and the rest of the crew. Thanks, and hail to Pitt.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Tucker, final comment from you?

MEL TUCKER: Thank you so much. We're very excited about this opportunity. Look forward to seeing you soon. Go Green.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.