

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

Sunday, December 26, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Mel Tucker

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Michigan State coach Mel Tucker.

COACH TUCKER: We're happy to be here in Atlanta. The Peach Bowl is a great bowl. We had a smooth trip down. Everything's been great so far. The weather's great. We've had a couple great practices over at Tech. And they've really rolled out the carpet for us. It's a first-class bowl game. Our players are very excited to be here. And it's going to be a great week of preparation for us.

Q. Question about bowl prep, as you know Coach Saban struggled with bowl prep at Michigan State and Coach Dantonio struggled in his early years. How much has bowl prep changed from your time maybe playing and coaching there in the mid-'90s to when you came back to college football in 2015, and anything beyond that?

COACH TUCKER: Well, I'm not sure how much has changed. It's really about the focus and really keeping the main thing the main thing. In football and preparation during the week we always try to eliminate distractions. So we have to do a really good job compartmentalizing our time here.

We have some great events that are scheduled for us from the Peach Bowl, which we are really enjoying those. Like last night we had a basketball challenge where our guys did very well. But then this morning we had to get up and get right back to football.

And so really that's what it's all about. We had a coach-me-coach Tuesday type practice today. And we'll have a Wednesday practice tomorrow and we'll go through the week. Our guys seem to be really focused. We know why we're here, but we're also going to enjoy everything that the Peach Bowl has for us.

And so that's really what it comes down to, focus and



making sure we keep the main thing the main thing.

Q. We obviously know Kenneth has opted out. Do you have any other players who are opting out of the game, or do you anticipate any others opting out between now and Thursday? And the second part is how do you replace a guy like Kenneth?

COACH TUCKER: Yeah, you know, it's hard to replace a guy like Ken. You really can't do that. But we have other players obviously on our roster at that position that are going to be next man up, and they're going to step up and get the job done and we have a plan for that. And I feel really good about our run game.

And right now in our preparation, we have a few guys that have decided not to play. And so I support that. And then we have some guys that are dealing with injuries that are either out or trying to play.

Q. As a follow to that, you did mention prior you would let us know who those guys were, or do you not plan on letting us know?

COACH TUCKER: Michael Dowell is in the portal. He's not planning to play in the game. And then we have a couple other guys that are doubtful. I would say Crouch is doubtful, Hunt is doubtful, Horst is questionable. And I think everyone else is trying to get to the game, trying to play.

Q. Mel, we've obviously seen some disruptions in sports, some bowl games canceled. I was wondering was there anything you guys have done to revert to protocols or things from anything last year to make sure that you guys are able to play in the game?

COACH TUCKER: We're just handling the protocols and following the ones that are set forth by our medical staff and by the bowl. We're nearly at 100 percent vaccinated. And we haven't had any substantial issues during the season relative to COVID. And, so, so far this week we've been good. So I don't anticipate any disruptions for the rest of the week.

Q. There's been a little bit made up here about your pass defense and some of the stats that aren't that great. Are there any moments during the season this year that maybe indicate that your pass defense is better than what the numbers say?

COACH TUCKER: Well, it's really game to game. And we have to adhere to competitive greatness, be at our best when our best is needed. Our best is going to be needed in this game, absolutely. And, so, really the past is not predictive of the future unless you don't change the behavior.

So we made some adjustments. Our guys have worked really hard with the rush and the coverage working together. And we anticipate playing better pass defense in this game.

Q. Last time you talked to the media you said you hadn't dove too much into Pittsburgh's tape yet. Over the past few weeks what have you seen from them and how are you preparing?

COACH TUCKER: They're a very good football team. They're balanced. They have some really good-looking players, offense, defense, special teams. They're big, they're long. Their defensive is stout. They're really good against the run. They apply a lot of pressure and deny the ball in tight coverage.

Offensively, they're very versatile. They give you different types of tempo and they can throw it and they have balance in the run game as well. Obviously really good skill players.

And special teams, they're very aggressive and they get after it. It's a very well-balanced team. I can see why they've had success this year.

Q. Obviously the goal of this trip is the bowl game. But with events like yesterday, with the basketball event and the stuff you guys are going to be doing the rest of the week, how important is maybe stuff like that for you guys to maybe take off your mind off of football for a few hours to get ready for a bowl game?

COACH TUCKER: I think it's important. Our guys love to have fun. Yesterday was a competition. So the guys lit up a little bit. And that was after Christmas dinner. And then some of the staffers, their young kids got caught up to take pictures with Santa. So I think the players enjoyed that.

And then they had kind of a choir group that was singing Christmas carols for us during dinner. And then our players kind of did a -- kind of shamed a couple of our guys

to go up and sing, Jahz Watts and Nick Samac, they go up and sing with them. They did that.

Then the basketball challenge, guys were hooping and hollering and getting after it there. We've got some guys on our team that were big-time hoopers in high school. They went in there and carried the load for us and did a great job. So it was fun. It was a good way to relax.

It was just a good team, just a very good team atmosphere and family atmosphere. And I think our guys got a lot out of it. And it's important to have some things to kind of break up the monotony and take your mind off of football.

But, like I said, today our guys woke up, they came down to the meeting and they were focused and ready to go.

Q. (Indiscernible) a third-year head coach. What would you say is the difference between you being the head coach when you were the last defensive coordinator, obviously when you were at Georgia? And do you and Kirby Smart still talk to each other? And if so what are those conversations like?

COACH TUCKER: First of all, I like your sweater. Don't leave it behind because I might find it before you lose it.

But usually the communication between Kirby and I is usually text. And as a third-year head coach, it's a little different. This is my first go-around as a head coach in a bowl game. But I just draw on the experiences I've had in the past with bowl trips and there have been quite a few national championship games and playoff games.

And I was here at the Peach Bowl in 2000 with Coach Saban and LSU. Again, it's not a one-man show. We have a great staff, great support staff. Great operations folks. Everything's very organized, efficient. We all know what we need to do.

And really we're just relocated and we're doing what we do. Keep the main thing the main thing. We have a process and we're following a process down here in the A.

Q. I wanted to ask you about, you mentioned your staff, obviously since we've talked to you last, William Peagler ended up going to Florida, and obviously Tillman earlier than that. I'm just wondering the challenge now of (indiscernible) bowl game, knowing these changes are coming but still having William around -- does it change things at all for you? What do you do now? What's your timetable looking forward in terms of those two staff positions?

COACH TUCKER: It doesn't change much at all. The

guys are still coaching hard. Really happy for them. Coach Till gets a chance to go back coach his alma mater. And he's a Georgia native. So that's a great opportunity for him to have the entire back rack.

And then Peags is reuniting with Billy, who has been a great mentor to him. And he's probably about four hours and 15 minutes away from his folks in South Carolina, his dad. So that's really good opportunity for him. But in terms of our preparation it doesn't really change much.

I'm going to take my time with the hires and make sure we get the folks here that will be the right fit for our culture.

Q. On your Georgia experience, one of their players, I think it was a linebacker, came out in the media the other day said he texted you about just some tips about playing Michigan and feedback about obviously having been the only team to beat them. How much of that have you gotten and can you share with us a little bit about what you share about what you saw in that team, obviously playing in the playoffs with Georgia?

COACH TUCKER: I hadn't got a lot of that. And obviously Kirby and those guys, they don't need much for me in terms of preparation in getting ready. They do a great job of game planning. There's a lot of film available on the school down the road. And so they're going to do a great job in preparation, I'm sure.

Obviously I'm a Big Ten guy, first and foremost. And so UGA is -- I can only do so much for them. But they really don't need my help.

Q. Just what you can say reflecting back on the late '90s where you were a defensive graduate assistant for Michigan State all the way to where you are now, just when you look back on those moments and now being at a stage with a New Year's Six bowl and the importance of the Peach Bowl, just what it means to you to reflect on your coaching career?

COACH TUCKER: I haven't had a whole lot of time to reflect. But it's gone fast. I can tell you that much. I can remember going to a bowl game, going to the Aloha Bowl, I think it was, in '97 with Coach Saban and playing Washington. And trying to stay on the same schedule. So I think we were having 4.00 a.m. staff meetings and things like that.

So I just had a lot of experience over the years. And it's gone really quickly. I've learned a lot over the years in terms of bowl preparation and how to maximize our opportunities from a practice standpoint to make sure our guys are healthy and fresh, ready to go in the game.

But I've enjoyed every moment of it. But I'll tell you what, man, the time flies. Someone on social media posted a picture of me back in the day. I had a lot more hair back then. Man, it's like, I don't know, man. It's different.

Q. You mentioned a little bit about Michael Dowell and him not wanting to play. You have a bunch of other guys who have gone into the portal in the past few weeks. What's the dynamic? It seems like some of those guys will play or dress for the game. What's the dynamic as a coach to balance that between guys who are making that determination and keeping them in the mix for the game?

COACH TUCKER: Yeah, those are individual decisions that players are making. And I'm supporting them on the decisions that they do make. And so I just told the guys at the very beginning, at the onset, if you're in, you're in 100 percent. And if you're not in, let's communicate that. And then we'll support you. And that's the way we're handling everything.

Q. The Michigan State football brand has grown quite a bit in the Peach state, as Coach Dantonio began finding a lot of players. What are some of the things that stand out about high school football players from Georgia that make them a good fit for Michigan State and a good fit, really, for major college football all over the country?

COACH TUCKER: It's a huge state. And football is very important in the state of Georgia. And there's a lot of good football players, a lot of Power Five players all throughout the state.

And I have a lot of experience recruiting the state. The other thing about the state of Georgia is that there's a lot of players who are not originally from the state. So they don't necessarily have an allegiance to the state schools, the in-state schools. And they're willing to go anywhere to play. I experienced that when I was at UGA.

It's the same way now. So I mean you're going to some of these high schools in Georgia and they'll have 12, 15 Power Five players on the roster. And that's almost -- that's common. And so it's just, the population is huge. Football is important. There's a lot of great football players, guys with a lot of upside, and they're very, very well-coached. High school coaching in Georgia is extraordinary.

So this is just a great place to recruit. Now, obviously you've got to compete. And everyone around the country is in here trying to get players. But there's not very many

states where you have a better, where you have a more fertile recruiting ground than the state of Georgia.

Q. You said Hunt earlier, Tyler or Jalen?

COACH TUCKER: Yes, Tyler.

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