

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

Sunday, December 26, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Pitt Panthers

## Coach Pat Narduzzi

### Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Coach, an opening statement. Talk about your trip down to Atlanta. I know it's early in the week, but how are bowl preparations going for you so far?

COACH NARDUZZI: So far so good. We traveled down, I think we had 49 travel from Pittsburgh. Anybody that lived outside about a 100-mile radius, we had them go home for a few days, spent the holiday. Could open up some gifts with their family and fly out that day.

We obviously had some delays with United and Delta, whatever it may be. So we had some guys -- our operations team did a heck of a job getting another flight for our guys.

I think the last one got in early, early this morning on a red eye from out west, Joey Yellen. He was the last man in. But everybody was in for a team meeting last night. So we had everybody except for one, which is good. My hat goes off to Chris LaSala, Dustin Avolio and John Ford for setting up those flights. I'm not sure they had a Christmas Eve because they were busy -- every time a kid's flight got canceled because of some of the things going on in the country right now, as you probably read, if you read the USA TODAY.

But we got them all here and had a great evening last night, Christmas dinner. It was outstanding. The Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl does it right. Had Santa Claus there. Had some guys sitting on Santa Claus's lap last night. And had a little basketball tournament, which Eli Kosanovich put down 38 points last night, was outstanding. And then we had practice this morning at Georgia State and got practice number one in. We'll get out there tomorrow morning as well.

**Q. How have you seen Nick Patti adjusting to everything? You guys have a lot of confidence in him being part of the offense. But now practicing as the guy that's leading the offense, how have you seen him**



**take on those challenges?**

COACH NARDUZZI: Nick is a leader. Nick works his tail off. He's prepared. I think he's watched more tape than anybody last week in the open week that we had, during finals week. He's been really good. Our players trust him even more importantly. Our players love Nick and trust that he's going to go out there and play his best and can get it done.

So I think everything's going great there. And obviously you'd love to have Kenny, but that's not the reality. And, again, our kids didn't blink an eye. They feel real good about Nick.

**Q. The new era here of guys both opting out to prepare for the draft but also guys that go in the portal, how do you try and navigate that as a coach in terms of do you keep guys around the program at that point if they're in the portal, or do you just kind of sever ties and say, good luck, at this time of the year, in particular with the bowl game?**

COACH NARDUZZI: I think it sets a bad precedence. I watched that Florida game the other night and seen that the starting quarterback is already in the portal. What's going on here? I think the portal is bad enough as it is.

But we've been lucky and fortunate. I think we've got a great culture where our guys hang in there. We've got guys coming back for a fifth and sixth year. So we have not had that problem. So we're blessed that way.

But it's a bad deal when you let guys go in the portal and still play for you. I just wonder what it's like in the locker room and you wonder why you lose like that in a game in which maybe you should win. I think once you go in the portal you're in the portal and you can stay in the portal.

**Q. I know we touched base on this last week, I guess earlier in the week, but you said once you get down to Atlanta you'd have an interim offensive coordinator announced. Do you have that for us?**

COACH NARDUZZI: I knew you'd ask that. The hot topic.



Tim Salem is going to run our offense. Anybody on our offense could do it. And our kids could tell you, I'm sure you'll talk to them next here and talk to them tomorrow and so forth, but it's been as smooth a transition as you can imagine.

We've got a bunch of coordinators on our staff. So I trust everybody. But Tim Salem has been with me for seven years. Our players have a lot of trust in him. It's just -- it left right where it took off. We're going to do what we do offensively.

And, again, guys have a lot of faith. So we're going to find out on Thursday night how good it is. And I think we have a great game plan right now and we've just got to get to the game.

**Q. I was wondering, the long break, I think December 4th was the ACC championship game. The 30th is this game. How difficult is it as a coach to keep these guys focused for 26 days?**

COACH NARDUZZI: I don't think it's easy. We've had better practices than we had today. I say it was a good practice. I'd like it to be a great practice, outstanding practice. But I think it's always hard to start and then stop and then go again.

And, again, I think it's important for our kids to go home for the holidays, but today watched practice and it was not as crisp as it was before we left. You've got to get back in that groove. Anytime you have time off it takes time to just get them cranked back up again. And we'll go back out tomorrow and it will look a lot better than it did today.

But I think our kids are excited about playing in a New Year's Six game, playing in the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl. I don't know how you don't get excited about that. They'll be ready to go. We don't have to twist arms to do that. We might have to twist some arms maybe to go play in some other bowl games, but not in the Peach Bowl.

**Q. Question about program building. When you arrived at Michigan State you guys were working out of trailers. By the time you left you had a program being built, facilities. When you reflect on what you've built at Pitt since you've been there, what lessons or experiences from your time at Michigan State stand out in the work you've done at Pitt so far?**

COACH NARDUZZI: There's a lot of things you learn through it. I forgot about the trailers; you didn't have to remind me of sitting in the trailers and the indoor -- our kids have never heard that story here.

We learned things from Michigan State and Cincinnati. We built the Lindner Center when we were at Cincinnati. Michigan State was an overhaul. The old offices there -- God, I can't remember what the name of that building was, Duffy Daugherty Building. That place was a mess when we got there. Coach Dantonio did a heck of a job renovating it.

We did the same thing. My first year at Pitt we didn't really have a team room that was a Division I team room. The locker room had old lockers from old Pitt Stadium in there. We gutted that. Between January when I got hired and when August started those were the two main things for our players and the players lounge. Those are the big things. And our building is totally renovated now. It's a top-notch facility when recruits walk in there and our team walks in there every day they feel they have a home and a place that looks like it's a Power Five, ACC style.

But you learn along the road, I'm kind of a builder to begin with, so I've kind of redone basements. So that that is part of my DNA is making sure things look good and make sure it's the best for our kids.

**Q. Obviously with the quarterback out, you have other guys in the offense able to step up for this game, particularly your running backs such as Vincent Davis. How would you describe his progression since he's been there with you?**

COACH NARDUZZI: Vince has done an outstanding job. We have three good tailbacks back there -- I'm not sure where you're from, location wise. I don't know if you're from South Florida where Vince is from, down in the Fort Lauderdale area. Vince has done an outstanding job. He keeps getting better.

I think all three of those guys have a different tempo back there. You have Israel Abanikanda back there, who's just bigger, faster guy. Vince is a wiggle kind of guy. And Rodney Hammond, who's a young freshman, who is a little bull in that room.

So, all three of those guys have a little different tempo that Michigan State will have to deal with when all three of them are on the field.

**Q. SirVocea Dennis, what could you say about recruiting in the northeast and in the New York area, and just what he's meant to you. He was a quarterback that transitioned to safety and eventually a linebacker. What he's meant to the team?**

COACH NARDUZZI: SirVocea, we got him out of South Jersey, hails out of Syracuse, New York. But obviously the

first thing besides his athletic ability which you guys see on videotape and game tape is his intelligence. I mean he asks coach-like questions on the field. He comes up today about a certain defense that we kind of -- we toyed around with. Like, coach, why don't we put that back in there. I said, because of this. Well, we can fix that, Coach. We can do this. He's really smart.

You'll get a chance to talk to him tomorrow, I'm sure. But he's one of those guys that you just love to coach at that linebacker position because he knows so much. He knows what the secondary is doing. He knows what the D line is doing. And he gets everybody lined up.

**Q. (Indiscernible) question, can you give us any word on guys who have been missing games lately, especially Jaylon Barden and Melquise Stovall, especially with Taysir Mack saying he's not going to play in the Peach Bowl? Have those guys made progress that we might see them on Thursday?**

COACH NARDUZZI: Yeah, I'm always afraid to say yes or no. But Stovall for sure has been good to this point. And Jaylon Barden probably could go if we wanted him to. We'll probably make a game-time decision with him. But he could probably go. But we wanted to make sure.

He's down here. He's from this area. He's begging to go. But I don't make those decisions. Our doctors and trainers will. We'll see as we go. But he's still questionable at this point, I would say, just because I don't make that decision.

**Q. Along those similar wave lengths, you mentioned your guys getting into town some traveling not from Pittsburgh, any COVID issues with your guys or are you guys all healthy in that regard after practice?**

COACH NARDUZZI: I'll make the sign of the cross. Right now, we're good. You get scared. You hear of other people having problems. And we're following the advice from our medical people and what to do, how to do it. And right now this football team is as good as you're going to get. We're good. And we've got to get through Thursday.

Sounds like things change quickly out there. Hear what happened at Boston College and Virginia. So we'll keep our fingers crossed and just try to make sure our guys are doing the right things.

**Q. Sometimes bowl games are as much about the next season as they are the present season. What young guys have shown something in practice the last couple of weeks that maybe we haven't seen much, we may see a little bit more of on Thursday?**

COACH NARDUZZI: Well, I think some bowl games you're working towards next season and maybe some young guys are doing that. But this is about 2021. We're still in '21. This is to get win No. 12. And I think that's important to our seniors. I don't know anybody wants to hear we're working on next year, because I'm not.

We've got plenty of time. We've got spring ball. I think we've had maybe two showtimes at the end of practice for those young guys. But we're focused on the task at hand on Thursday night. That is the focus. We didn't do any showtime today. And we're locked into that.

So to say there's some young guys that are going to get opportunities, I can't tell you there's any. We're playing our best guys. We're playing to win. We're not, hey, let's get this guy some reps for next season. That's not going to happen.

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