

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

Monday, December 27, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Michigan State Spartans

## Coach Scottie Hazelton

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Michigan State defensive coordinator Scottie Hazelton. We'll take an opening statement and talk about how bowl preparations have been going and what your bowl week has been like so far.

COACH HAZELTON: It's been great. The Peach Bowl people have been great so far and the players are having a good time, working hard. We have another practice this morning which would be the third practice here on the bowl site. And we're excited to get the game going and put on a good show.

**Q. How difficult has it been for you guys to prepare for a quarterback who hasn't played -- at least very little in the past two years? And how useful was that 2019 game he played against Delaware?**

COACH HAZELTON: I think that you see a lot of the same things out of him that you saw out of Kenny. You know what I mean? He's a decent sized guy. Moves around similar. He still breaks -- we try to work to find his scrambling patterns, to see what he does and how he moves around in the pocket and stuff like that. It was good.

He's got some time in the games this year too. And he throws a good ball and has a strong arm. And so we're really excited about playing him and see how it works. But it was a real deal to be able to say, okay, who is this guy. And he's very similar. So we're excited to see how it goes.

**Q. Strength and conditioning has been a serious focus for Michigan State since Mel Tucker arrived. When you looked back at the season you guys have had what are some of the spaces you see the real work that strength and conditioning in your program did show up on the field?**

COACH HAZELTON: You know, it's a great question,

because I don't think those guys get enough credit for the things that they do in the weight room, our strength staff. There are guys who have the ability to make guys work. And the way they do it, they compete in every little thing from every lift to every rep of every lift to every set of every rep and they go out and run.

The ability to teach guys how to strain to finish and they see the automatic results with all the things that the strength staff are doing or if you're videoing just as they finish running through the line. And the guy's learning, hey, your shoulder came up here.

Those little things that people don't always notice, I think that that really helped us understand how to finish, how to finish the rep, how to finish the sprint, how to finish the play.

And I think that those things are the things that go back into your culture. When you look at it you say, the guys play hard. We might not always be in the right place, but the guys will fight to get off a block and they'll run like crazy and they'll get to the ball. When they get there, they're trying to finish and cap things off and do all those things.

And I don't know that -- that's the things that you really see in the end to say, OK, that's made us better. That hard work and work ethic made us a lot better. On top of -- guys are going to get stronger and they're going to get more powerful, and you can see the difference in the explosion. But really when it comes down to it, the thing that we were most excited about when we got on the field is seeing how well the guys finished and how hard they worked when they got out there. It was already ingrained in them by the time we took the field.

It was a great thing for us, that offseason program, to have it, for not being able to have it for years, has really helped us.

**Q. Wanted to get your opinion on Jordan Addison as a receiver, what kind of things you've seen with him. Obviously the connection without Pickett is different, but how do you guys rebuild, maybe, the secondary to kind of stop one guy or they have a bunch more**

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
sports

## **weapons you can focus on?**

COACH HAZELTON: I think that Addison, he's an outstanding player. Man, the guy can do it all. When you watch -- that's how we always start off, right, as a staff. We always look at the scary things. You go through watch the explosives and you say are there things certain guys do and that's all they do.

He's not really -- he'll catch an under route and go and he'll catch a deep ball. And he's really -- a lot of their design is to be able to get the ball to him whether it's short and let him use his athleticism, which he's very good at, or take shots on you.

And, yes, we're going to try to do some things to help take him away and put people over the top of him or do whatever we can. He's an outstanding player. You don't win the Biletnikoff without being an outstanding player. And he's a guy, we need to know where he is and where he's at. Because they'll put him everywhere.

They'll put him in the back field and out wide and everything in between. So, we're trying to have some awareness where he is. And definitely try to get a situation where we can, hey, the safety knows and who ever is on him knows and we kind of build a package and really started with him.

**Q. How important is it to have a successful game for that secondary for your defense? You were beat up in a couple of games in November and kind of hanging on the edge there. And going into the offseason, to have a good taste in your mouth about the way this finishes up.**

COACH HAZELTON: No doubt. I think that it's not just the secondary, though. You know what I mean? Defense is a team thing. I think it has to go all together. Yes, the secondary, we love them to finish strong and be able to say, OK, we've got something to hang our hat on. We played the best receiver in the country and we did a great job with him and we limited some of his explosives and we tackled him and drove him, understood the thing.

But really it comes back to the D line too. It's about them, too. It's not just a one-part thing. We have to be able to get pressure on the quarterback. When we blitz our backers or DBs or whoever is blitzing has to get home. And it's the thing that we all have to work together.

It's not the guys in the back -- we're not playing seven-on-seven. It's a deal that our front guys have to understand they're involved in this too. The backers, whether they get depth or matching up, they're involved in

this, too, where we say, hey, listen, we need to all work, all three levels of the defense have to work together. And that's really how you continue to stop the pass. If you have that opportunity.

And really we'll see how the game goes, too. If we get up on them for whatever reason and they're throwing the ball well, hey, that's a different game. And you can hang your hat on really when you look at the end how many yards per completion, how many yards per attempt did we give up, more so than the total. Because you don't ever know how the flow of the game is going to go.

You could have -- if you get your head beat in, they run the ball, the whole second half or something like that, that would be a fake win in passing yardage, you know? But it's also a deal where you give up some yards in the second half because we're doing well. Well, that could still be a win even if you give up some yards. I think there's a fine balance there where you want everybody to play together and rush and cover together.

And when we do blitz, it hits and when we don't, we get a good four-man rush and we get the quarterback holding the ball and we get some of those things working together. That's really what we want to see.

**Q. You've seen, I think this would be the third top-five offense in the nation you've seen. Anything you've learned from some of those other games that may apply and be helpful in the Peach Bowl?**

COACH HAZELTON: I think that that's just kind of the draw, right? Is you just gotta keep chopping and keep working, you know what I mean? And the guys have to understand, and I think we do that, that are we going to give up a play? Sure. Are we going to get scored on? Sure.

But that's something you have to say you have to be able to put it out of your mind go on to the next play. What's the history of all that? It starts all over. Let's go. I'm going to quick learn what I did and how I can improve me.

And that's how the guys have to think, whether it's a DB or D lineman or whatever the case is, it has to be, okay, this happened to us, okay, take it in, let's get to the next play and we've got to be able to have that short memory because that's what all good defenses do.

You could give up a big play, then come back and get a takeaway the next play. That's a successful drive for you on defense. Or you give up a first down on a third down. Well, then you get a tackle for loss on the next play.

Well, that sets you up to win the next third down. And I think that we have to continue to build on those things. And when we do have a chance to say, okay, we gave up some points or some yards or whatever the case is, and then we scrap back and set up a play to set up the offense so we can score, that's where you get the team model that's why it's the best sport in the world. You can play without the offense, you're not going to win any game. Without the defense you're not going to win any.

You've got to keep that scale and keep fighting and keep battling, and that's what we've done a good job of this year.

**Q. Obviously there could be personnel changes going into next year and lineups shift and all that. But how important is it for this defense as a whole to have a good performance going into the offseason considering how this season has gone? Is that important to you guys heading into the offseason?**

COACH HAZELTON: I think it's always important to be able to go off on a positive note, you know what I mean? Have a good taste in your mouth when you leave and be able to look at -- either way about it, once the season's over, we're going to look at these are the things we did good, these are the things we need to improve on, as we go.

But I think it's always helpful to have a better drive to say, hey, listen, we had a chance to get a little bit more healthy, you know what I mean? We hopefully had some pieces that we could do -- okay, we got a little bit of stuff in, okay, good. Now let's look at it and say, hey, listen if we have an outstanding or good showing this week, well, hey, that helps catapult you in.

If it's an okay showing or if it's been what we've been as we've got later in the year, you say, okay, these are the pieces that we need to help and replace. And the competition piece is the biggest thing for everybody all the time. As we get some pieces back and we get guys that are hurt back, it's going to catapulting us into the offseason anyway because there will be more competition, more bodies on the field. And guys coming back from injury will help us a bunch.

**Q. Curious with the departure of Travares Tillman what's your relationship with him and what kind of a loss is he for the defense?**

COACH HAZELTON: He's really a great man. He's a guy that, when you learn his story and his "why," it's outstanding. He's really there for the guys, you know what I mean? He's a guy that the players love, that he loves the players. He knows all about them. He's a guy that really

connects with those guys.

I'm really excited for him because he has a chance to go back, come back to his alma mater, I guess, since we're here. But he's got a chance to come back here. His family's excited to move here. This is where his kids know as home because this is where he was based out of when he was playing in the league. They have friends and family here.

So I'm really excited for him as a person. I think that he felt like it was the best move for him and him to have a chance to work with the whole secondary and not just take a piece of it like we did it and broke it up. I think all those things are positive and we're going to miss him.

**Q. Coming into this game, the last time you guys played was in November. How much of (indiscernible) do you think it is going into a game like this? And what have you seen from Darius Snow this season as far as progression on defense?**

COACH HAZELTON: Sure. You know, it's always hard especially on defense -- I think everybody has their own unique issues when you do take such a long break. You're excited to get some guys a little bit more healthy because maybe you didn't bang for the first couple of weeks and then you started again.

But the biggest thing you see, and you see it on the bowl games or in the preseason with the NFL and stuff like that, you see the issues with the tackling, the leverage, the full-speed stuff happening. And that's always a concern.

A ball gets to the perimeter, is the guy going to be able to stay outside and keep the edge to the defense where you can use your help? Those are the things that we're really straining the last couple of days and will continue to do until we play because those are the things that you usually have issues with, is just the full-speed tackling, the leverage to the ball, not getting cut back on. If I'm inside, all those things.

And then as for Snow, it's been great to see him. He's such a smart young man, that -- he really started off, he knows a couple different positions. He was battling for playing time early. And he's a guy that he has an ability that when he makes contact, people go backwards. You notice those things.

He's made some good plays for us and he's done a really good job of learning. And he's a guy that's sharp enough that you give him something like, hey, when this happens this is probably going to happen. He's one of those dudes that will be on the field talking about those things and

getting other guys on the same page.

And I think you've seen his growth. You know what I mean? He started off as a backup, battled in where they started going even playing time, and he kept growing. Now he's a full-time starter doing a great job. We're excited about having him a little while longer.

**Q. You talked a lot about the injury factor. You guys had basically injuries at all three levels on your defense. Wondered how much those affected things, and about guys like Barrow and Brantley in particular. I know Coach talked yesterday about Crouch. But can you get those guys back in the mix? Is there more guys that you feel are coming up from a younger perspective that could maybe help out in this game as well?**

COACH HAZELTON: Sure, I think that it's a combination of everything. And trying to get guys back to healthy, to get Sim back, he's a guy that can use his hands and he can create rush and he can do some things up front. I think that's always helpful.

And as guys -- and you'll see it, too -- as guys get healthy, even the guys who are playing, just to be able to say okay, I can actually run close to full speed and I really wasn't there the last two games of the season. Now I'm actually close to back up to where I was when we started this whole deal in August. So we're excited to see some of those guys.

But we're hoping to have, like, the guys who are playing are a little bit more healthy than they were as you get through the bumps and bruises of the season. And the guys that were out we're hoping to gain a couple one or two of them back. But we're going to have who we have when we get into the game. We're going to have who we have. And we're going to play as hard as we can.

And really, all those things I think everybody wants to play. I think everybody's all in. I think everybody's trying to get back. I think it's that kind of way on defense. And we'll see who we have when we get there.

**Q. A question about being multiple as a defense in terms of front formation scheme. For folks that are not super familiar, can you talk a bit about yours and how important is it to be multiple today in major college football?**

COACH HAZELTON: Yeah, I think we're really a 4-3 team that plays nickel almost all the time just because of the way that college football has evolved where it's all speed. It's all -- people are playing with three wide receivers and if

you want to be able to match up you have to play with more defensive backs.

I think you want to give different looks especially with how people are -- there's some teams who don't care, let's be real, there are some teams who don't care because they go so fast they don't care. For those teams you can line up and you can just play whatever you want.

The idea of being multiple and showing multiple looks in different coverages and things like that is more for the game, how it's evolved into being a deal where, hey, I'm going to get up there and I'm going to look, you know what I mean? And now really it's out of the quarterback's hands. You don't necessarily -- you have to fool the guy upstairs in the box who is looking at what you're in, too. And then you have to try to, okay, can you switch the defense, can you do this? Can you show him something, or can you at least fool with the quarterback.

Those are the things that make you stronger on defense as you get your layers in, is to be able to say, okay, in pre-snap you have to be able to say, okay, can the guy upstairs not know what you're in.

If he knows what you're in, can you at least make it look different for the guy who is under center? Because teams do a really good job having you show your hand nowadays because of the different tempos that they go. Hey, we're going to go faster, we're going to go fast, stop, look, and all those things. I think that that makes a big difference.

And we are a four-down team. We're going to rush four guys the majority of the time and we're going to bring pressures off that and do all those kind of things. A lot of times the multiplicity comes from the back end. It's this coverage but it's this coverage. As we get farther into the package we'll layer it even a little bit more as we keep going.

**Q. In bowl practices I was wondering if you had a chance to have a couple of practices where you got a chance to look at some of the younger players that maybe have not been in the playing group. And have any players caught your eye in that category?**

COACH HAZELTON: Sure. We had a couple days like that, especially early where we were going just team on team. It was like being in spring ball and stuff like that. And it was great to see. And I don't know that a bunch of dudes stood out. It was a deal where you'd say it was good to see a guy like Avery Dunn or a guy like Derrick Harmon, or some of those dudes up front. See how they progressed and get them back on the field and let them compete against some of our best, to be able to see, as

you look through the guys in the back end, say, okay, K.J. -- just to be able to put different pieces in and let people see.

Even just to see those guys run and do what you do, you know what I mean? And then even take the old guys and go back do some fundamentals. I think that was a really exciting thing for all of us, to be able to say, okay, here's what we're going to have looking forward.

And then we got some guys who are a little bit banged up, to have them have a chance to rest a little bit was good for us. But it was a good few days of spring football-type stuff and to be able to bang a little bit and rest some of those dudes, and just to be able to see like some of the backups get more reps. Even a VanSumeren, run around, take a bunch of reps, or Ma (phonetic) run around and strike people and you see him and his development keep growing.

I think those are always good things to do for those guys. And the bowl prep helps with those things. It's like having another day of fall camp.

**Q. Xavier Henderson, the first half of the season, maybe first two-thirds of the season did some electric things. I imagine he's the guy that's probably looking forward to getting through some of those tweaks and getting to end the season with some of the things maybe he showed in the first half of the year?**

COACH HAZELTON: No doubt. Love to see him have a big game. X is our best leader and one of the most fun guys to be around. He's a great communicator. And we're excited and hopefully he can make some of those plays too getting healthy.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.