

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

Monday, December 27, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Pitt Panthers

Coach Tim Salem

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Pitt offensive coordinator Tim Salem.

COACH SALEM: Number one, we're here in Atlanta and we had our first practice yesterday -- outdoors, which we've not been outdoors for a couple of weeks. But our players are very inspired, very eager, very business-like which is a bonus. Whenever a coach has players who are business like, it's been a warm welcome for us and we're focused on playing this game on Thursday.

Q. I know that you've got some familiarity with Michigan State with Landon and Brad having been here. I guess, how much do you know about this incarnation and how much have you kind of just kept up with them from those ties?

COACH SALEM: Like you say, it's family ties. My brother was a long-time assistant coach at Michigan State. My son worked there in the recruiting department. I think anytime you've got family ties, relationships with other schools, you like to follow that.

And I do know the fight song. I'm not going to sing it today but I do know the fight song.

I think we're very eager to play a game. I think our players are excited to play a Big Ten opponent and I think Michigan State's had a phenomenal football season. It will be a great game Thursday.

Q. You've been around a long time, a lot of great spots and locations. Are there any hidden fundamentals that produce good quarterback play? If so, could you describe some of those?

COACH SALEM: I told the quarterback the other day, we were wearing white jerseys; throw to the guy in white. That's always somewhere to start with.



I think Nick Patti has done a very good job, very solid job. Players have great trust in him. He's a worker. He understands the offense. The thing he hasn't had, he hasn't had much playing time.

We're losing Kenny Pickett, a kid that we're learning what life is like without Kenny. He had a phenomenal football season. But Nick is ready to take it for him. The players are excited for him. Nick is excited for himself. We're going to go to town 100 miles an hour.

Q. Wanted to ask more about Nick. You said the players have trust in him and they've built this understanding with him. But like you said, he hasn't played much. What are the things he does in the background that we don't get to see every week that make him someone that the players can trust and do believe in so much?

COACH SALEM: I think, number one, Nick is a worker. Nick comes to practice every day prepared. Even though he's not getting many game reps in front of the crowd and in front of the TV audience, he's at practice. He understands reads. He understands the offense. He's able to communicate.

And his workmanship has been there all year long. So now it's his time to go and show what he can do and shine. And I think the players have seen what he is, who he is, and they're just glad that he'll be in the huddle with them.

Q. What kind of possible personal touches could you put on Pitt's offense? And the second part of the question, would you like to be a candidate for the full time OC job?

COACH SALEM: I think number one I'm just focused on the day-to-day activities. We've got practice here shortly. I'm just focused on what we're doing for practice, making sure we're organized. It's been a welcome because we haven't changed -- I've been with Coach Narduzzi for seven years. The practices haven't changed. I'm familiar, players are familiar. Coach Whipple did a marvelous job in the three years kind of organizing.

We're just keeping the car on the track and moving forward and going 100 miles an hour. And the kids have welcomed that. The kids know what to do. They're experienced. They're older. They like to play. They like to practice. I think that showed all season long. So it's just the idea of managing what we do and do it well.

Q. With Kenny, you mentioned him and the decision he made. As someone who recruited him, who has known him for so long, do you kind of just even take a moment and say, hey, it's kind of a cool thing that he had this decision to even make, that he's in this position, draft-wise, and everything to opt out of the bowl? And I guess what did you and your staff, when he made that decision, think of that?

COACH SALEM: Well, obviously we had a chance, like you said, I was kind of firsthand recruited Kenny out of New Jersey, my recruiting territory. But we all had a chance to watch him grow. We all had a chance to watch him do what it did for our football program. Unbelievable person. Unbelievable leader. Great player on top of all that.

And Kenny had a chance to make a decision. He made the decision. I know our team is very happy for him. But we know that we're still playing a game. We're ACC champions. I think our team has had that attitude that we're still practicing and treating ourselves as champions.

I know, yes, we got a new quarterback, but he's been involved, he's been around. We're going to go full speed, 100 miles an hour. It's life without Kenny. That's just the way it is. We're still going to show up and play. And I think our players are very excited about that.

Q. My question more so, what is it like to get opportunity to be the interim OC? Obviously you've been coaching for so long. And what has Lucas Krull meant to the offense, what can you say about him?

COACH SALEM: You mentioned the word "so long," I kind of pause for a moment because my brother reminded me that back when I was the play caller at Purdue in the early '90s, Coach Tucker was a player at Wisconsin. I've been around long enough that I was calling plays against him as a player, which I guess shows our ages.

But I think number one I'm excited to call plays. I think that's always very unique. Of course, maybe when it's fourth down and everybody kind of pauses and you got the big play call coming out of your mouth, it's always very exciting. But that's part of the deal.

Lucas did add a dimension to our team. One of the

dimensions he did add was great leadership, a worker. He's been around before. So at least for some of the younger kids at the tight end position they're able to see what he did, how he acted. He fit into our program very quickly, which was nice.

And I think he was just one of the many, many building blocks we've had for our football team. A lot of guys played a lot of parts this past football season week in, week out to have the season we did. And I think that was why this season was so special because a lot of people were involved and Lucas was one of them.

Q. The question about being the long-term OC. Does that add any additional pressure? I know you said you like calling the plays and making this Peach Bowl almost sort of a tryout for next year. Does that add any sort of extra pressure for this game?

COACH SALEM: Well, now that you mention it, I guess probably there is more pressure. I have not looked at it as such because, to me, right now it's one game, a one-game focus. And we've just got to take care of that business. And there's been a lot to do ever since our season has been completed. Our players, I think, have been a joy to work with.

I appreciate what they have done for our staff on offense, for our entire team. I think we just have had a special year because our players are special. And when that takes place, good things happen. And the good thing that's been happening has been winning. We're going to keep that going because that's what our kids know and who they are.

And I'm just worried about Thursday at 7:00 o'clock playing over here in this Mercedes-Benz Stadium out the back door and having a grand old time playing in the Peach Bowl, which should be for a very exciting football game.

Q. Couple weeks ago Kenny said he would be up in the coach's, upstairs in the coach's box with headsets on. Is that still the plan? And will you be on the field like Mark was?

COACH SALEM: No, my plan is I'll be upstairs. That's where I've had most of my years probably, 15-plus in the press box, only a couple of them on the sideline. We'll just manage it that way. But we're excited.

If Kenny is up there, I hope he's whispering in my ear because Kenny is a player. Kenny sees and Kenny's done it. And I'll take any voice from him. I'll listen. Because he's been part of this process. And we're going to go to town, as mentioned earlier. And like I said, we're eager, I'm eager. I think our players have worked very hard and

we'll get the ball moving around.

Q. You mentioned at the start practicing outside for the first time in a couple of weeks. I'm wondering how your players responded to this warm December we're having in Atlanta and it's probably warmer here than when you guys played at Georgia Tech in the regular season?

COACH SALEM: As a matter of fact, when we played at Georgia Tech back in October it was a warm, humid day here in Atlanta. I think we've played very well in Atlanta. In my seven years here at Pitt, our trips to Atlanta, I think we played, the last three seasons we've down in Atlanta.

Atlanta has been good for the Pitt Panthers. So instead of playing over at Bobby Dodd Stadium, we'll play in the Mercedes-Benz. We're welcoming the trip. We've traveled well as a team this year. It's been one unique part of the season. We've won our road games, which I think, again, we have traveled well as a team. That has showed. And we're just going to do it one more time, that's the focus for Thursday.

Q. With this being Nick's second start of his career, how important is it to get the running game involved with the veteran offensive line and three running backs that made plays this year?

COACH SALEM: That's correct. We do have a veteran offensive line. We've got a number of seasons there. We've got the three running backs who all have contributed this past fall in one game or another, very key parts.

But Nick can throw it to. Nick's got a good -- head's on his shoulders. And I think we've got the Biletnikoff Award winner. The ball has got to go to him, it's got to get to his hands. Nick knows that. Nick knows his jersey number. We'll get him in a position that the ball will get thrown, like we have all year long. That shouldn't change.

But I do think when we do want to run it we've got some confidence people who can run the ball. And running is part of the football game. You'll see both run and pass.

Q. Does Nick possess the same ability to extend plays that Kenny had with his legs? And do you think that will be still a part of the offense?

COACH SALEM: It must and it has to. Any quarterback has to extend plays and that's one thing we do practice, reps of scramble drills, extending plays, trying to extend plays to make them pass plays, not automatically turn the quarterback to run it.

Nick is a headsy football player. By and large, he's not as fast as Kenny, but he still does have a north/south mentality. If he's got to put his shoulder down and run he has scored touchdowns in the past running the ball. So it's not unfamiliar to him.

But when the pass play is called he'll execute a pass play. And if it comes he has to scramble and move forward we trust him making those decisions.

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