

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

Tuesday, December 28, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Jay Johnson

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Michigan State offensive coordinator Jay Johnson.

COACH JOHNSON: It's great to be here in Atlanta at the Peach Bowl and a New Year's Six for Michigan State football and our university. It's been a good week. Atlanta has been very welcoming, great hospitable and really enjoyed it. We've had good preparation.

Thankful to Georgia Tech to open their facilities here for a couple of days earlier in the week preparation. And then obviously we had a chance to go over to Mercedes-Benz yesterday. So kids think that was one of their highlights.

I mean, obviously I've had an opportunity to be in there before but some of them it was a first time. And obviously it's an unbelievable venue and really excited about that. So it's been a good week. And obviously need to continue to prep and look forward to a great game against Pitt in a couple of days.

Q. Obviously your offense has had a really good year with a lot of big numbers and big plays from the skill position guys, but how much of the offense's success this year is a result of the development of the offensive line? And how excited are you about the future for that position group?

COACH JOHNSON: Oh, I think you hit it right on the head. Obviously we have been blessed with our skill guys as you mentioned, but the O line and what Coach Kap has done has been really awesome to see. One of the things that I think was a huge benefit for us earlier in the year was we, obviously as the season goes you have certain injuries that have occurred, but earlier in the year we certainly were able to play certain games earlier in the year we were playing nine guys pretty effectively.

And that has really paid dividends for us late in the season. We did have some of those, you hate to say, kind of



normal year-long things happen -- injury, banged up and things like that. So their development has been great and we've had some veteran guys that played a lot of football here at Michigan State. Those guys working with the young guys, it's a spot we put a lot of emphasis on and I think that's showing. And our success really starts there with those guys. And like I said, they've done a nice job.

Q. It seems like from all accounts that Nailor and Reed are both back for you guys. Is that fair to say?

COACH JOHNSON: Yes, that's fair.

Q. What do those two add in terms of the dynamic that maybe was missing the last few weeks? And what do you see from the offense right now as you go into this?

COACH JOHNSON: Right. I think obviously as you mentioned earlier in the year when you have both of those guys they're obviously a couple of our top skilled guys and their play-making ability speaks for itself. I think anytime you can have more than one, you hope that can challenge the defense a little bit by who they have to cover and things like that and put more stresses on them.

So I think that's going to be a huge key for us is having both those guys being active and their play-making abilities.

I like where we're at offensively. We've done some good things. And it's been good here even in the interim after the final game against Penn State. We've had a chance to go back to the basic. And as the program's built upon, and Mel talks about this all the time, is really that fundamentals and techniques.

It was good to kind of reset, so to speak, reset here after the Penn State game and get a lot of good work in there. Now obviously our focus has changed to more of the game prep. But the start of the bowl deal, that was it. And that's one of the benefits of playing in a bowl game. I think our offense has used that to our advantage, and I think we're in a good spot.



Q. This is going to be the first time this year you guys won't have Kenneth in the backfield. How do you go about filling that hole that it created when you lose one of the best rushers in the nation?

COACH JOHNSON: Yeah, that's obviously a huge challenge. Ken, as we all know, a very special player. But one of the things I think I look back at what we've done this year, and I don't know that I've really tried to be -- you always try to be, but you gotta do what you gotta do to do win the game -- but we've been balanced. We've had explosive plays in the run and pass.

And we touched on it. I think the O line has really developed. Yeah, we're going to sorely miss him and he's phenomenal. But I feel good with who we have at that spot and the guys that are coming back. And their development all year behind Ken and with Ken has been very good.

You couple that with the O line and receivers, and hopefully you're in a balanced situation that you can do some productive things. We're still going to start with those guys being a forefront of what we do.

I'm still excited about where we're at and who we have at the spot and particularly coupled with all the pieces of our offensive unit.

Q. A lot of the season obviously with Kenneth Walker being the focal point of the offense, that's where things started at Northwestern. And at various points Payton Thorne and the passing game took a big role. For a guy who has a couple of years left, is this sort of, I don't want to say the beginning of Payton Thorne as the front man of the offense, but do things change without Kenneth a little bit? And your expectations for Peyton now having a year pretty much in your system as the starter, do you start to look at him differently in what you expect from him?

COACH JOHNSON: Yes and no. We've talked all along -- I think one of the key elements to our success this year has been the play of Payton Thorne. Sometimes it goes unseen what we ask him to do. But you've got to run the offense, you've got to manage the offense. And obviously he has been blessed to have some unbelievable supporting cast with Ken and the receivers and the O line.

So I'm excited to see his maturation throughout the year. I've seen it after a game that he maybe didn't play so well. And then I've even seen it after a quarter or so when he didn't play very well in a game. And then he came on and he showed that poise and resiliency did some positive things.

So I'm extremely excited about Payton and where he can go and where he can take this team. I think as the years come along you can see he's starting to get more and more comfortable. He does a tremendous job managing. I see even his leadership and everything that that quarterback is asked to do has even come to a new level.

So the expectations for him are going to be high and they're going to be high for me and high from our organization. But I think that's the way Payton would want it. So I'm really excited about him and where he's at and his involvement as we've come through and developed. There's certainly, like all of us, things I'll challenge him on because there's still some pieces we have to improve.

But I think it's going to be exciting to see him in the future. And I definitely feel he will take on a little bit different role.

Q. With Tyler Hunt being doubtful for the game on Thursday who do you expect to step up as second tight end on the offense? And what have you seen from Maliq Carr throughout bowl practice?

COACH JOHNSON: Obviously Connor Heyward will be the forefront of what we do. And then it's going to be Maliq. And again Maliq was a little banged up earlier in the year which hurt him. But with Coach Gilmore and how he's come along, I've been excited about him. He's obviously a big skill athlete, and we're obviously a little bit of a transition of how he's been used in the past, but I think he's working through that, and I see some really positive things coming from him.

So those are going to be the main two that will carry the load at that position. And, so, excited about that and where Maliq's at. And this extra time has been very positive for him.

Q. Obviously you just mentioned Maliq but some of the other young guys we saw late in the season, maybe a guy like Montorie Foster because of injuries, that leads me toward, how do you approach this in terms of guys who have an opportunity to use this as a springboard forward to next year, maybe some guys we only saw a little bit of who came on late whether it's some guys up front? Is this as important for that springboard sort of into next year as much as winning this particular game is for your offense?

COACH JOHNSON: Yeah, a little bit of both, obviously first and foremost we need to win the game. That we need to be focused on. But I think, you mentioned Montorie and he came up big for us in the Penn State game. Some of the O linemen because we've had to shuffle things around with injury and things of that nature. But I think that's all

part of it.

And you just see even like Montorie played a little bit and how that even springboarded him for the Penn State game. We definitely want to try to do that when the opportunity is right to do that.

If there's some young guys we can get some more time in there because with time comes more experience, confidence and you begin to play at a new level. We'll definitely try to do that when it's appropriate. But obviously we've got to try to do what we can to help our team be successful.

Q. You talked about the players playing in or practicing in the stadium a little bit and said that was one of the highlights. Can you maybe dive in a little bit more on maybe the emotion as they're walking through the tunnel and kind of seeing how big that place is? And for you as well, how great is it to play in such a great spot?

COACH JOHNSON: Yeah, it's a phenomenal venue. I've been blessed to have the opportunity to be in there, some big games before. And so it's awesome. I mean the way that place is and how they've done that is phenomenal.

And you could see our guys. There was definitely, when they got dressed and we were taking the field for practice, there were some guys that you could see they were excited. They were emotional. Kind of got them going a little bit. Helped us to have a good practice.

So definitely know that our guys noticed it right away and it's great that we're able to get in there to practice as we prep for the game and so they can be in there and kind of experience that. So when we get to the game they've already been there and now we've got to go play. But definitely an awesome venue. And we're excited to be here.

Q. Going off that question a little bit, how have they adjusted to the stadium and playing on an NFL turf field like that? I know you've only had one practice so far but what's the adjustment been like?

COACH JOHNSON: I think it's been solid. One of the things you always worry about a little bit playing in a different structure is the lighting, particularly in the special teams area. And obviously it can affect us a little bit offensively in the pass game. But that's why it's been great to be in there.

I think as practice went the guys adjusted to that because we did a lot of special teams emphasis yesterday in the

kick game for returners, punt returners, kick returners because that's a little bit different. It's a little bit different depth perception and the lighting.

I think initially there were some things but then as we got going it was good. And, again, thankful that we could get in there to get that out of the way and get guys used to the environment.

Q. Obviously you were mentioned Payton's progression and what you've been impressed with this year, but he has an opportunity to break a record, a single-season record. He needs two touchdown passes. Could you just go off of -- Kirk Cousins was the last one to do it in 2011. Maybe more on Payton and the opportunity that lies ahead of him in his final game of the season for you guys.

COACH JOHNSON: I'm glad you filled me in on that because I had no idea about that stat. That's interesting.

If that opportunity is there, he's going to put it where it needs to be and do that. What we've been working with Payton the whole year is -- in a certain sense it's simple stupid -- just progress the play. And I've talked with you guys before on that. And I think he's continuing to do that. And when he does that he really plays at a high level.

Again, that will be our focus on Saturday. And if that opportunity presents itself we'll look forward to it.

Q. Question on that illusive "it" factor in a quarterback because Payton has shown it really since the first game at Penn State. And this year it's come quite a bit. How would you describe that illusive "it" factor when it comes to the quarterback position?

COACH JOHNSON: Yeah, it's an interesting piece of it, that's for sure. You want a guy that -- I don't think you have to have a guy that necessarily has to be a dual-threat guy. But obviously I think when the opportunity presents itself, the thing that I always look for on that illiveness is, can he extend the play? And does he have the ability to extend the play in the right fashion?

And that's something that, what I thought was a work in progress with Payton. If you go back to last year of that opportunity had at Penn State and where we're at now, I believe, is light years because he's really worked on that. He's really stressed on that, is how you get to that spot where you can be in that position to extend the play and really not hurting any other guys around you, because sometimes we take that for granted and that becomes a challenge with the O line.

But I think he's really grown in that. And obviously he has the ability. He has that ability to run and make some guys miss and do those things.

It's been very positive for us. And obviously we have to pick our time and places when that comes into play. But definitely always a part of it and we'll continue to work on that as we go.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Pittsburgh's pass rush and the problems that that poses, how good that is and the depth they have in the defensive line?

COACH JOHNSON: Absolutely. I think obviously really, really strong up front. Really, really solid defense overall, because what they do up front obviously they trust the guys in the back end to get it done.

But I believe they're going into the game, what, second in the country in sacks, if I'm not mistaken. And really long athletic guys up there. And one of the things that I see is their interior guys really show a lot of twitch in the pass game and give you fits. They really give you fits.

And then with the different movements that Coach Narduzzi does, it really creates issue. They are very solid and they couple it nicely with what they're doing in the back end to protect them there.

It will be a great challenge for us because they do some good things up front and obviously have shown -- had strong results from it all year.

Q. I'm wondering about putting in a game plan with guys who are in the portal. How have you been able to try and do that, particularly when you have two guys at tight end and you obviously may need that depth with Tyler out?

COACH JOHNSON: Right. It is a challenge a little bit. You look at obviously, first and foremost, what we try to do is what fits our style best versus what you're going to see from the opponent, from the defense. And so that's been the focal point.

And then I have to take -- we have to take into consideration sometimes a little bit of that personnel things if there are some issues. But really it's not much different because you kind of deal with it a little bit throughout the year sometimes with injuries. If you've got a guy that's questionable or whatnot.

But you've got to kind of have -- and a lot of times when you're playing and things, offensively, defensively, teams, you always have backup plans. That's what we've tried to

do as a staff, have kind of what we think is our base things.

Then you have some wrinkles, backup situations because of the things you're mentioning be it a transfer portal, be it a questionable player from an injury perspective, those types of things.

Q. As a follow to that, obviously, Gillison and Ohonba both run extra-point duty. Is this a chance to maybe get some of those younger guys in there in their roles? Or do you think about the future or do you think about the now with that?

COACH JOHNSON: Really right now we're thinking about the now, because obviously we need to put who we think is best to execute whatever play is presented to them. So it would be more on the now on that. Now, if there's a future person that's even with it, then, yeah, I would consider that. But I think that's an issue that we're going to address the now more than we would the future, based upon who we're looking at.

Q. Obviously the game is the main focus here, but leading up to it, obviously, the bowl competition, how fun was that from a team building perspective and how special do you think that was for the guys?

COACH JOHNSON: It was fun. It was really competitive. Obviously starting off with the basketball deal and then the go-kart deal and all that. A lot of fun. And then winning with the trivia deal last night.

I think our guys really enjoyed it. It was kind of a neat deal. I'll be honest, I've never been involved in that. Had a chance to go to a lot of different bowls, but I think it's a neat perspective from the Peach Bowl perspective that they do that.

I think our guys didn't know what to expect with it, but once they got into it it was a lot of fun. And it did, I think, bring it us together in a certain way, and they certainly enjoyed the experience.

THE MODERATOR: We may have to check the stats on this, but I think we've been doing it for about eight or nine years and the first six years we did it the team that won the belt won the game.

COACH JOHNSON: Interesting.

Q. On the "it" factor again with Payton, what are some of the intangibles that make up the "it" factor for a quarterback, the stuff that doesn't show up on a stat sheet or a TV screen?

COACH JOHNSON: Right, I think it's a lot of things. It's, first of all, I think with Payton and where he's at, he has tremendously high football IQ. Kind of has that moxie, that savvy that you can't really write or describe sometimes, but they understand football and they understand the situations.

And I think that is something that is really, really important. And then the next piece, which I think he's really grown in, is that you have to be very poised. You have to be very poised in what situations you are being presented. And a lot of that is reflective of your play and what you're doing playing-wise, and can you separate it and have the poise to go on and play the next play.

You look at, a great example for me, go to the Michigan game. It wasn't very good out of the gates. But then came back and played exceptional, the final three and a half or three quarters or whatever the time was.

That to me was a big step because he was able to overcome that and kind of re-center himself and that sometimes is very challenging in the quarterback position, having played it and been a part of it for so many years, I think that's a huge challenging piece. To me, it's those things, the moxie of football. The other parts, -- the other things people don't realize is how much these guys study. If you're going to be a quarterback at a big-time situation, the time and effort that he puts in and our quarterbacks put in on their own is phenomenal.

But you can see that all shows up because he feels like he's very well prepared once he takes the field.

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