

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

Tuesday, December 28, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Pitt Panthers

Coach Randy Bates

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Pitt defensive coordinator Randy Bates. If you could give us an opening statement and talk about your bowl experience so far and personally what your favorite bowl week event has been to this point.

COACH BATES: I would say, first of all, thank you to the people of Atlanta and to the people of the Peach Bowl. This has been a fantastic week. The hospitality has been incredible. They've certainly treated us like kings. And there's been nothing that we've needed that we haven't gotten. They've certainly gone overboard for us. So we really appreciate it.

And going to the College Football Hall of Fame, by far, for me, the history of college football, and unfortunately now at my age, I'm part of that history, but it was really quite an event last night.

Q. Question about Payton Thorne, what you see from him as a quarterback sort of developing this season as a first-year starter, and what you saw from him early and maybe late and your evaluation of what he brings?

COACH BATES: Well, I believe, being a son of a football coach, that there's no better position for a son of a coach than a quarterback. And I believe you see that in him.

He is a coach on the field. He sees things before they happen. I believe he's a great leader, and he runs that offense efficiently.

I also think he's a very good athlete. He runs very well, way better than you want him to. And he's as accurate as any quarterback we've seen this year. So it doesn't surprise me a lick that they're one of the top 10 teams in the country based on watching him play and lead their offense.

Q. What's it like to coordinate a defense for Pat

Narduzzi, a guy that had a lot of success coordinating defense, has his own thoughts and philosophies? And how important is it that you're on the same page in putting together the defense you want to run?

COACH BATES: The beautiful thing about working with Coach Narduzzi is that I have a mentor that I can rely on to go over and ask questions. He comes in and we talk about the defense and where we want to go, what we want to do.

I specifically came to Pitt to run his defense and learn it. I was at a rival school for 12 years and was able to watch him over the years. Loved the defense.

And so I've embraced the idea of coming, learning the defense. We've probably moved a little farther over the last four years with the defense and evolved it. But it's a fantastic relationship. And we both work together to figure out what we want to do week to week. And Coach is obviously also on offense. So he bounces back and forth. But he's a great mentor to be able to go to, with a lot of experience in the defense.

Q. Walker is not playing for Michigan State but what stands out about defending the run when you play Michigan State?

COACH BATES: Well, I believe they're a big offensive line. They're a typical Big Ten offensive line. They're physical. They're athletic. And I believe they still have plenty of good backs in their system.

I believe it's a good system offense. So I don't see them losing a lick of running ability. Walker was a great running back. But I believe, based on what I see, they'll still run the same offense and run it just as efficiently. And it will be a real challenge to stop them.

Q. Just looking at this defense over the last really three years big picture, second right now in sacks in the country. I believe you guys finished tied for second or third the last two seasons. What has it been really the last three years getting after the quarterback and creating havoc? How have you been able to really do that?



COACH BATES: I think it's a mindset we have as a defense. We talk all the time about going and making big plays. The guy who leads the country in tackles, isn't usually a guy that anybody knows because they're not very good on defense.

The guys that we know that are making big plays -- tackles for loss, sacks, interceptions -- those are guys that move on to the next level.

So we talk as a defense about making big plays. And I love, you said the word "havoc" because that's our mantra with defense, is that we try to create a lot of havoc, affect the quarterback, affect the running back, and really, quite frankly, we try to affect the offense with the way we play.

Q. How impressed have you been with the linebackers specifically this year in doing that, in creating havoc, when obviously your defensive line has gotten after it, too? But losing guys like Patrick Jones and Rashad Weaver, to have Phil Campbell, Cam Bright, Johnnie Petrishen and these guys get after the quarterback this year?

COACH BATES: As we talk about it, we don't talk about a specific player or specific position. If a linebacker makes a sack or a tackle for loss, it's probably because the other ten guys did their job so well.

So when SirVocea Dennis goes and makes a tackle for loss, probably Baldonado did just as good a job and maybe forced it back into him, or Calijah Kancey did the same thing.

Don't get me wrong, I'm very impressed with them. But this is an 11-man operation and the beauty of college football this is the one sport where one guy doesn't make a difference. It's 11 guys. And so as a group that's why we've been good on defense is because we play as a group of 11, not as a group of one playing within a group of 11.

Q. Wondering about this year's defense. You said they played together. How difficult is it for a coach to get kids to play together, when a lot of kids want to get sacks and want to show off for the NFL?

COACH BATES: I believe it's becoming more and more difficult because of social media. Not to put you guys down, but sometimes you guys, you make it even more difficult as a coach because we talk about how great they are, how good this or that is, and ultimately the most important thing for a young person in the game of football to understand, as you just heard me talk about, is this an

11-man game.

So, our mantra this year is "we not me" as you guys know. I'm constantly reminding the one person in the room that we are playing for each other and we're playing together as 11.

And, so, that's kind of my job, quite frankly, I'm reminding everybody that we are being successful because I had a great play but I had a great play because of the other 10 guys are doing their job. And so when you play as one in a group of 11, good things happen.

Q. In your career, have you had a hard time getting that message across to your players, not just maybe at Pitt, but anywhere else?

COACH BATES: There have been years that it's been more and more challenging. I believe this year, this group has come together more than any that I've seen for a long time. And so they've kept focussed. They've kept focused on what's important and that's why we've had success.

Q. Connor Heyward is a guy at Michigan State used in a lot of ways this year, cross formation, running the ball, catching the ball. What kind of challenges does a guy like, who can do a little bit of everything, present for your defense?

COACH BATES: Boy, he's a great athlete. He can run the ball. He can catch it. He makes good moves when he does catch it. He's a good blocker. It's certainly not surprising, since he's got such good blood lines with his family, obviously.

We get to see, I believe, his brother every day out there on the field at practice for the Steelers. So it doesn't surprise me a lick. But, yes, he's a multiple athlete. And he gives you many challenges because of that athleticism.

Q. I know you played a lot of cornerbacks this year and obviously Damarri Mathis is not playing. How have the other guys stepped up this week without him there? And has it been a preview of going into what it's going to look like with life after Damarri?

COACH BATES: Sure. We didn't have Damarri last year either with the injury. But we have played a lot of guys all the way through. I haven't seen a lick of problems at all. We've played all of the guys that will be playing in the game many, many snaps. I don't think you'll notice a great difference.

Damarri was a great athlete and a great football player and certainly will be missed. But the next man up, and we

won't have a bit of trouble, I don't believe. A.J. will step right in and M.J. Devonshire, we've got plenty of depth there. I believe those kids will go out there and play great.

Q. The western Michigan game was a long time ago now when you think about it. But when you look back at that, how your season has progressed from that point, what are some of the lessons from the Western Michigan game that stand out?

COACH BATES: There's many, many of them, and I would say when you talk to our athletes after you talk to me, I've reminded them all along that the most important thing about a setback like that is learning from it and continuing to improve because of it.

And I believe that's something that our athletes have done a great job of is learning from the problems that we had in that game and then moving on from it. And that was the most critical thing. And I believe we've done that.

And I think that's why we've had success, is we've not forgotten that we had that game and we had some issues that we've corrected. And we've moved on from it and gotten to be a better football team because of it.

Q. Throughout the season, has there been a guy or two on the rocks on the scout team for your defense that has impressed you?

COACH BATES: You know, those guys roll in so much, it's hard for me to tell you a specific guy on offense that has really done it. The whole group, though, I will say to you this, we've probably had the best group of rocks, our scout team, that we've ever had. Those guys have embraced their role more than any. And our offensive line, they get beat up every day by Haba and Calijah and all those guys and they keep coming back, doing a great job.

I would say there's certainly kudos to that group, because that group has helped us be better, and as a group probably made us better because it's been the best group we've had.

Q. You were at Northwestern a long time. And you had some success there and had a secure situation. Came to Pitt to be a coordinator, but is there anything beyond the fact that you got to be a coordinator that attracted you to the Pitt job?

COACH BATES: Being a more aggressive defense. We were a very vanilla, more of a base-type defense at Northwestern. And the aggressiveness of the defense that we're running right now is really the thing that attracted me the most.

And I believe to go back to the question that was asked earlier about the sacks and tackles for loss, that's what I embrace as a coach. That's kind of my mentality. So it fits in very well with what I believe as a defensive coordinator.

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