

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

Tuesday, December 28, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Pitt Panthers

Habakkuk Baldonado

Press Conference

Q. Michigan State centered around Kenneth Walker. Obviously he's not playing, but what challenges do you see from them just playing without Walker?

HABAKKUK BALDONADO: I think he was a huge part of their offense, but they still have great players. Their quarterbacks, their O line and I'm sure they have a lot of running backs that are ready to step up and take his spot. So it's still going to be a tough game but we're going to stop them.

Q. Coach Bates talked about the Western Michigan game a bit I know it's a long time. But when you look at the season as it's progressed what are the lessons you took out of that Western Michigan game early?

HABAKKUK BALDONADO: As you said it was a long time ago but seems like it was yesterday. It was a tough loss. I think we've learned a lot from that game. It's been a huge moment in our season. We changed a lot of things in our defense. In my opinion that's what allowed us to have the season that we had after that game.

Q. You mentioned Payton Thorne. When you put on tape of him, what jumps out about his game and trying to stop him?

HABAKKUK BALDONADO: I think he's a really good quarterback. He leads his offense in a great way. He's good at throwing the ball. But I feel like he's not an ACC quarterback. He's not a double threat like all the quarterbacks we faced throughout the year. So we're going to get after him for sure.

Q. Obviously you're on the defensive side of the ball, but what's the vibe been around the team without Kenny there kind of leading you guys?

HABAKKUK BALDONADO: I would say nothing has really changed. Nick Patti has stepped up. He took Kenny's



spot. He's working hard. He's getting ready to play and playing to the best of his abilities. And I'm sure he's going to have a great game.

Other than Kenny, we haven't lost anybody. We still have Jordan. We still have our O line. So I don't think that much is going to change.

Q. For the last three seasons now you guys have ranked near the top or tied for the top of the country in sacks. Does that surprise you at all, given the mentality and the talent in the room that you guys have?

HABAKKUK BALDONADO: Not at all. One of our main focuses is to, as Coach Bates said, create havoc, to destroy their offense. We're really aggressive with our D line, with our linebackers. We got after the quarterback. We get TFLs. We're always in the backfield, as we always say "party in the backfield."

So I'm not impressed that we, almost every year, lead the country in sacks. And I think that's going to keep happening because that's what our defense is.

Q. Wondering, when you walk down the street it's hard to tell you if you're an NFL or college defensive end, you've been at Pitt for four seasons. How eager are you to test yourself at the next level?

HABAKKUK BALDONADO: Surely that time is going to come. It's not my main focus at the moment. I'm just taking it game by game. Right now I'm focused on Michigan State. But surely I always think about the next step, about taking that leap and just going to the next level.

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