

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

Wednesday, December 29, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Coach Mel Tucker

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Pat Narduzzi

Pitt Panthers

Press Conference



For our program, it's a chance to win 11 games for only the sixth time in school history and win a New Year's Six bowl for only the second time.

I know a lot of Spartan fans will be travelling to the game, and we appreciate all of their support. And they've been very supportive all season long.

This is a big stage and an opportunity to send our seniors out on a very positive note and also gain some momentum for next season. Our team is really excited to get on the field tomorrow night.

Q. Obviously we're down here in the host city of the sport, the College Football Hall of Fame is right around the corner. You've all spent some time there. Been around players and coaches that are in there. Some guys like Greg Jones that will probably be considered very soon. But what about Coach Dantonio? What do you make of his candidacy to be a part of the College Football Hall of Fame? What stands out about his attributes that he brought to the sport that would give him consideration?

COACH NARDUZZI: Mark obviously is a great friend and I know a great friend of Mel as well because they worked together.

But to me, the job that Mark Dantonio did at Michigan State, when we first got there, the culture was different. And he came in there, took over a program -- we came in there, took over a program and built it up. Built it up to where Mel took it over and has done an outstanding job as well.

The game's he's won there, bringing them to the playoffs, Rose Bowl victory, Cotton Bowl victory, my last game there. Just watching the build there was incredible. And that to me is what it's all about.

And he did it the right way. He didn't do it the wrong way. He did it with integrity and character. The kids loved him. They still love him to this day. I think that's the most important thing is how he did it, not what he did.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Narduzzi, could you give us an opening statement, talk about how your bowl experience has been in Atlanta this week and how you would compare it to other experiences on bowl trips you've had in the past.

COACH NARDUZZI: That's where I was going to start to begin with. I can't thank Gary Stokan and the entire staff, hospitality people have been incredible here in Atlanta. I can't say enough about the experience that our kids, the coaches, the families, all the children have had here in Atlanta.

Again, it starts with the hospitality. It starts with the people. And, again, Gary's built an incredible thing down here with everybody that he's around. Just have not run into any issues at all. It's just been spectacular. Our kids are safe down here COVID-wise. So, when you rank it up there, it's a New Year's Six bowl that doesn't get any better than this.

THE MODERATOR: Same question to you, Coach Tucker, how has your bowl experience been so far and comparing it to other bowl trips you've had.

COACH TUCKER: It's been great. It's been the best. I want to thank everyone for being here this morning. We've had a great week here in Atlanta. I want to thank Gary Stokan and everyone here at the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl for their incredible hospitality all week. Our players and staff have really enjoyed our time here.

We've also been preparing all week for a great Pitt team. I want to congratulate Coach Narduzzi and his staff on winning the ACC and having an outstanding season. They are a great opponent, and we're really looking forward to playing those guys tomorrow night.

COACH TUCKER: Certainly Coach Dantonio should get strong consideration to be in the hall of fame. He's done a tremendous job his entire career, and especially here as a head coach at Michigan State. He's won a lot of football games. Like Pat said, he's done it the right way. He's beloved by all Spartans in this country and throughout the world.

A tremendous person. He's got a great family. And it was an honor and a pleasure to work with him for five of my 25 years in coaching.

Q. Both of you guys spent a lot of time during the summer and camp with Mark. I'm wondering what those moments were like having him around your programs. I think he was also with Luke Fickell quite a bit as well. That's a lot of wins this year for those three teams.

COACH TUCKER: Having Coach D around is a pleasure. He and I go way back, all the way to 1997. And so he's a friend first and then a colleague and then also a life-long Spartan. So every moment that I'm able to spend with him, I truly cherish those times.

COACH NARDUZZI: Mark has been an incredible friend. He came down for spring ball, came down for fall camp. Actually came down with Jim Bowman, a dear friend as well. Had a chance to go out and share with him some of the good Italian food in Pittsburgh. So that's part of it.

And he just shares his knowledge and shares what he sees on the field. And coaches, players, kind of an evaluation of what you're doing. So it was great to get him for practice.

Q. We heard from a couple of guys yesterday about a message or speech, whatever you want to call it, that Payton Thorne delivered the other day about the significance of this game. Just wondering if you could speak to what you've seen from your guys and the significance of the game, like you mentioned earlier, to get to 11 wins and what it means for the program, and to close out a year that, quite frankly, very few, if anybody, outside the program took from you guys coming in.

COACH TUCKER: Our team has been very focused. And our staff has done a tremendous job in preparation. I've been really impressed with how they've embraced this opportunity, how they've kept the main thing the main thing, which is preparing for the game. But also how they've enjoyed the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl and all the activities and all the hospitality.

They've shown a level of maturity and our leaders have really stepped up. And so it's been a great experience.

Q. Pat, I know a lot has happened since, but in the weeks after the ACC championship, have you allowed yourself to reflect on what attaining that title means for your program, big picture?

COACH NARDUZZI: Not really. I don't know when that happened. I think that happens when you retire as a coach. Maybe Mel could speak to that as well. He's won a lot of football games. But unfortunately, as coaches you move on to the next one. We went from that championship right into recruiting. You kind of forget about it.

The fans enjoy it. I think my family enjoys it. I think they've watched it two or three times on replay. I got a text message with them, kind of a family text message -- they go back and forth, like, how about this play, how about that play. But that's about really the only recall I have of that game; you really don't go back and rewatch it and think about it because there's so much going on. You move on to the next one.

Q. Pat, I know you do, but I was wondering if your young players understand the significance of what a 12th win would be being mentioned in the same breath with Johnny Majors, Tony Dorsett and a national championship?

COACH NARDUZZI: At this point, 36 hours to the game, I hope they do, or they missed the whole message. We talked all year about being 1-0, and we got a great opportunity as well to get No. 12 and be the second team in history to get to 12 wins.

And there's been some good football played at Pitt. Nine national championships. That says a lot about who they are.

Our guys can set it in stone, legacy. You talk about coming back for the rest of your life to the University of Pittsburgh, being that ACC champion, having 12 wins, being Peach Bowl champions. That's the goal. Our guys are locked in. We're going to have a battle on our hands, that's for sure.

Q. As we've seen in some other, a few other bowl games here and there getting canceled with COVID issues, have you guys adjusted at all how you've, I guess, handled your players over the last few days? Is there any concern with that and how you guys have approached it? And I assume you guys are both in good shape heading into tomorrow's game. Is that true?

COACH TUCKER: Yes, we're in good shape headed into the game. We're nearly 100 percent vaccinated. We're following all the protocols set forth by our medical staff. And our players and coaches have done an outstanding job in our preparation, not just on the field but off the field as well. So the game is very important to us. And we're doing everything that we can to get to the game.

COACH NARDUZZI: Yeah, great question. Our guys are vaccinated but as we know, that doesn't really matter anymore. I'm not sure it's going to help you a whole bunch going into the game. But our guys are in great shape. They're locked in.

The hospitality room is where they spent a lot of time which is outstanding. We appreciate it being so big. So our guys can space out and do their thing in there. It's been so enjoyable they're really not out running around. I think they're locked in. I think they know how important it is.

I don't make it mandatory to wear masks in our building. I think our kids are smart enough when they know when they're close to someone to put it on. They've all got one in their pocket. We're in good shape and can't wait for tomorrow night.

Q. Have we come to the point where college football needs a commissioner? And what benefit would a commissioner have to maybe calm some of the transactional chaos around the sport relative to players and coaches moving and shaking, especially after the regular season ends?

COACH NARDUZZI: Yeah, I think for sure. That's not a slam on anybody that's leading college football. I just think it's time. I think it's a time for college football to move on. We've moved on in a lot of different directions as we know in the last 12 to 18 months as far as what we're doing; how we're doing it; recruiting rules; Name, Image and Likeness; the portal. There's so many changes out there that that's got to be the next change.

I think without getting into too many details, there definitely needs to be a commissioner, someone that's in charge of college football, whether it's the Power Five and group of five in two different buckets.

I know no one wants to hear about that, but to me you have to put the money in if you want to play with the big boys, I think. And I think the group of five wants to be -- again, Cincinnati, work there -- they want to be part of it. Some of them are but when they get in those big meetings and it's group of five/Power Five talking and voting for different things they all have different things in mind.

I think until we get that straightened out, I think there's a big difference between what group of five wants to do and the Power Five want to do as far as just rules and regulations. And I don't think we get to a 12-team playoff until that gets organized as well.

COACH TUCKER: I don't have an opinion on it at this point. Our focus is squarely on the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl and putting our best foot forward tomorrow night. And I'm sure there will be a time and a place for us to discuss that at some point. But right now we're just preparing for the game.

Q. I know that you obviously, when you take a new job and move on, there's a chance to go on and play your former school. I guess did you ever -- how have you kind of tried to separate some of that emotion maybe this week and really throughout the whole bowl process? Is there any pangs to that as it progresses, at this point?

COACH NARDUZZI: No, not really. There's no time to think about that. You've got a football team, a staff, everybody to worry about. It's another game.

Again, when you hear that fight song, it becomes different then. But other than that, again, it was seven years ago that I was at Michigan State in East Lansing. A lot of dear friends had a great reception last night at the Capital Club, got to mingle with the rest of the guys and all the doctors and trainers, Sally Nogle -- just everybody, so many friendly faces that we engaged with last night.

But once the game starts, it's like that first hit that our kids make, that first call, the kickoff. All those emotions go away. And, again, it's not like you're playing a team that fired you.

East Lansing, there's only great memories there. Even the losses were great memories, because of the people in East Lansing and at Michigan State.

Q. How much time have you guys got to spend with each other in getting to know each other this week?

COACH TUCKER: Like Pat said, we were together last night. And we had a great dinner. And it was a great time of fellowship for not only Pat and I, but for our staffs as well, our support staffs.

And the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl has done an outstanding job with all of the activities and itineraries. But last night was actually -- was really a special time because at the end of the day we're all in it for the same reason; we're in it

for our young people and to do the best we can to help them in their football careers and also their careers beyond football. And so we're cut from the same cloth, and it's always good to break bread and fellowship with the other team.

COACH NARDUZZI: Same thing. I think the question was like how much time have we spent together. Not a whole lot. The one evening, really, that we've spent together was last night and had a great dinner.

And other than that, it's a football game and maybe we'll see each other at the convention, share scouting reports, because we probably won't play each other for the next 10, 15 years. I think afterwards, staffs are good enough friends that we can share stuff -- hey, what did you know; what did we know; how can we both be better? That's something that in the future you like to be able to do.

Q. Mel, there's reports out there about Effrem Reed being hired as your running backs. Coach could you comment on that?

COACH TUCKER: We're still working through the process. I don't have any new information at this point. But when we do have new information, then I'll be happy to pass that along to you.

Q. Pittsburgh's pass rush, second in the country in sacks per game. What are you doing to prepare against that?

COACH TUCKER: They're a formidable front. They do a great job scheme-wise and they have good front players. So, they apply a lot of pressure to our passing game.

We have to do a great job being coordinated with our pass protections, our run game, our play-action. We're going to have to certainly be at our best.

But they're one of the best fronts, obviously, in the country and one of the of the best fronts that we've played all season.

Q. Coach Narduzzi, Pitt fans are coming from all over the country. They're excited. They went to Charlotte for the ACC championship. They're flooding the Internet. What do you have to say to Pitt alumni and fans who are coming in and very excited about this game?

COACH NARDUZZI: As I walked in this media room this morning for the Zoom, you're fighting through the traffic. The hotel is packed. And I warned our kids last night, as we get closer to game time stay away from the lobby. The

first couple days it's a little empty.

But they're starting to stroll in, the Panther Nation, just come out there and be loud. There's going to be two great fans there, as far as Michigan State and Pitt. And Panther Nation will show up in a big way. And should be a great atmosphere in Mercedes-Benz Stadium tomorrow night.

Q. Pat, your running game has been kind of a complementary piece except in the fourth quarter this year. Would it be something that Nick, as a second-time starter, can really lean on more than another quarterback might?

COACH NARDUZZI: That's something, when you look at Michigan State, comes down to what's Michigan State going to give you. It's weird being on the same call with Coach Tucker talking game plan, but it all comes down to what they're stopping, they have a great front, they do a great job stopping the run.

If they put more people in the pass game, then you run the ball. If they don't, then you throw it. We've got a lot of trust in Kenny -- excuse me, in Nick -- freudian slip there -- in Nick Patti and his ability to throw it.

We've gone into games throwing it 40-plus times with him. And we're going to just take what they give you. And, again, most of the time people are packing the boxes, trying to take your run game away. We'll just play according to that. We're not going to change what we do.

Again, it's a great defense. Ron Burton is the D line coach and Harlan Barnett, two guys I worked with for a long time in this game. I know what they'll do. And I know their philosophy is like ours; they're going to stop the run. We'll have to be able to throw it and that's kind of the name of the game in college football.

Q. Talk about the evolution of the tight ends. You're right in the thick of it. We've seen it at the NFL level and now into the college football level. The evolution of the tight ends. What's next for the tight ends? And what are defenses doing or what can they do to address the mismatches that we see across the sport with the tight ends?

COACH TUCKER: Growing up in Cleveland, Ozzie Newsome was my favorite player, one of the great tight ends in the game. So as long as I have anything to say about it, a tight end is going to be a big part of our offense.

And, so, we use our tight ends, they create mismatches in the pass game but they're also very integral in our run game. So that's something that -- that position is

something that's a big part of what we do.

COACH NARDUZZI: The tight end has gone nowhere. The tight end in college football has been there. It's always been there. And maybe the fullback position is one of those positions that's gone in college football nowadays. You don't see many of those guys.

But the tight end has always been an integral part of college football and will continue to be. Look at Connor Heyward. Their tight end, No. 11, is outstanding. He's a pass threat. He's a deep threat. He's small. He can do it all.

I know he can throw it. He was in our camp. His older brother, Cam, plays for the Steelers. Looking forward to see him on game day. He's an exceptional player.

We've got Lucas Krull and Gavin Bartholomew, two great tight ends as well. They're going to be a big part of it in this game tomorrow night.

Q. Pat, what have you seen in the job Mel's done in the two seasons at Michigan State and the more you've gotten into the film and preparation, anything that stood out in the job they've done, taking over during a COVID year and going 2-5 to be in the New Year's Six game this year?

COACH NARDUZZI: He's done an incredible job. You can throw out the COVID year. I think you can throw it out for everybody. I think we had just as good a football team a year ago, but things don't match -- you're not playing with your guys. It's just not normal throw. You can throw a COVID year out.

But to come in and do the job he's done after the COVID year, he rehailed the rosters just to get guys in that fit his scheme, offensively and defensively. When you look at that and you look at the success he has had, what else can you say except outstanding job?

Q. Pat, you mentioned Connor Heyward. There's obviously the blood lines that go between the programs with him. And I know that Pitt recruited Connor as well. I guess for Pat, how much did you get to know Connor during the whole recruiting process, and with his father being a star there? And to Mel, have you sensed any emotions in this game with Connor going against his dad's alma mater?

COACH NARDUZZI: Let me tell you this: I know that guy's an excellent football player. And obviously Mel knows better than I do because he works with him every day.

But when he came to camp, he came to summer camp with his mom. And that guy was all over the place. I loved him. He played every position in camp. He was at quarterback. He was at running back. He was at linebacker. This kid -- that's what you want in a college football player, a guy that can play everything.

And I just think he's a superb player that is playing his final game, I believe, at Michigan State. So I know he'll be fired up. His dad was an unbelievable -- Ironhead, as everybody knows -- player at Pitt. So there's some tie-ins there. And I'm sure he's excited to play.

COACH TUCKER: Connor has been a very consistent performer for us, very consistent in his preparation day in and day out. You get the same player. He's a leader for us. And like Pat said, he's versatile. On the field he can do a lot of different things.

But in terms of his demeanor and preparation, I haven't really seen much of a change. He's a very mature player, and he understands that we need to keep the main thing the main thing, and that's just preparing for the game and going through our process.

Q. Mel, I know the majority of your focus is on the game, but have you ever, this week, have you thought about kind of your short history here in Georgia and how much it means to you being back in a place that is part of your history as a coach?

COACH TUCKER: Yeah, of course. I love the state of Georgia. We recruit heavily here in the state. Football is huge here in the state. And I have a lot of fond memories here in Georgia with UGA. And I've actually run into quite a few of the Dog fans down here. And they've shown me the love and I've shown it back. It's been a pleasure to get back down here.

Q. On the Georgia piece, you've both recruited a lot in Georgia, you both have players from Georgia on your roster. How much does playing in a game like this and on a stage like this help with recruiting and getting your brand out there, especially in a place like Atlanta?

COACH NARDUZZI: Obviously we've got two coaches, and we recruit Atlanta heavily. We did when we were in East Lansing as well. I think it's an unbelievable area to come down, to be able to play in this backyard around all the high school coaches, and not only players that we recruited last year, which I can speak about, Ryland Gandy over at Buford High School. But for anybody in the future.

We hope they get a chance to go to the game.

Unfortunately with COVID we couldn't have them come over to practice this week. So we hope they take that opportunity, come watch a super game tomorrow night.

COACH TUCKER: In terms of recruiting, it's great exposure for us. It gives us an opportunity for us to show the players and the high school coaches what type of program we have, our culture, the way we play the game of football, and the way we conduct ourselves on a day-to-day basis.

Pressers like this and just really give us an opportunity to be open and transparent about who we are and what we're all about. And it can only help recruiting.

Q. Mel, I wanted to ask about some of these guys that have been around for a while that are going to play their last game -- guys like Connor Heyward, Beesley, Matt Allen, Arcuri -- guys like that that have been around the program, were here before you and have stuck around and become key parts of this team. What have they meant to this program and what is it like for these guys to kind of go out in their final game -- and what they've meant to you even though you kind of came in towards the end of their career?

COACH TUCKER: It's everything. We're playing this game for those seniors. They've done a lot for our program -- blood, sweat, tears. They're outstanding young men. They're great Spartans. They're going to do great things beyond Michigan State, and they've been very special to me.

Not only have they done a great job in terms of production on the field and in the classroom, but they've really embraced our culture, embraced me, and have really helped me turn this program, help me shift this culture, and have really been the drivers to help us get to where we are today.

Q. Pat, have you ever thought about how long you'd like to coach? And also what drives you every day after all these years?

COACH NARDUZZI: No, I've never thought about how long I'll coach. And I'm not going to think about that for a while. I think when you know it's the end, it's the end. I'm going to coach as long as I feel the energy to continue to do this game that I think everybody loves.

It's a game, you better love it. You put too many hours into the preparation, mental and physical preparation in this game that if you aren't all in, you're going to have a problem. And I'll definitely hang it up before it ever gets to that point.

There will be energy and I better enjoy walking into the office every day until that time comes. So I'm never going to put a date on it. But I would say 65 is probably about the end. So I'm going to spend time with my family and hopefully have some grandchildren.

And maybe when the first grandchild comes. Maybe that's it, I don't know. But until that point comes, coaching football.

Q. I've got to ask about John Madden. The sport lost a tremendous coach and a true icon. Curious any reflections, thoughts about his contribution to the great game of football?

COACH NARDUZZI: Our kids probably know him from video games. But John Madden, as a kid growing up in a coach's world, your dad being a coach and when you were at home, you were sitting on a couch next to dad watching John Madden coach the Raiders, that's what I remember, and then listening to his commentation during games.

His commentary was incredible. Just a legend in the game. His personality, again, never meeting him, just knowing him from watching him on TV, his personality was what you loved about him. Just seemed like a real guy.

And the stories you just remember. He didn't like flying around and taking the Madden bus everywhere he went. Just an incredible coach, legend that we lost yesterday, I guess. And our thoughts and our prayers go with him and his family.

COACH TUCKER: I can't say enough about Coach Madden. A giant in the sport. Just for many, many years, as far back as I can remember, just being extremely impressed by, obviously, his ability to coach and teach and motivate and then also his career beyond coaching was just outstanding. And we lost a great one.

Q. This is obviously your first time preparing for the bowl game or a bowl game as a head coach. What's the difference for you in terms of going from being an assistant and kind of following and helping to create a plan to being the head coach and kind of installing that plan for the month?

COACH TUCKER: It's not that much different for me. And we have a process. We have a plan. I have a great coaching staff. And, like I've said before, I'm not a one-man show. So we all work together to put together the best plan that we can for our players and then we execute that plan.

And so we've had tremendous preparation up until to this point. And we'll continue on with our process all the way up until the game.

Q. Is some of that just the delegation you have throughout the year, the responsibilities for other people on your staff?

COACH TUCKER: Yes, everyone has clear and defined roles. A lot of the change is really with our operations staff and Cody Cox and Ben Mathers and Simone Proulx. And they've done a tremendous job with the organization and the travel and everything that comes with moving a large organization to a bowl site and making sure that we can create as much normalcy as possible.

We've been extremely organized and efficient. And that's really helped us keep the main thing the main thing and focus and prepare for the game.

Q. What are some of the keys for both coaches, absolute keys to defensive line play? What are some of the fundamentals that separate an average defensive line from some of those guys who have played very well for you and gone on to the next level?

COACH NARDUZZI: D line play. It starts up front, as we all know, with your O line and your D line. When you talk about defensive linemen, we lost two good ones a year ago, one to the Titans and one to the Minnesota Vikings. So we've done a great job rebuilding those guys.

But the first thing I'd say is it comes down to athletic ability. And I know you probably don't want to hear that. Then it comes down to coaching. But those guys up front, we try to give them a lot of freedom in what they do.

And again being an old D line coach and old defensive coordinator, to me I don't want a bunch of robots up front. I want those guys to get off the ball and cause havoc in the backfield. That's what we do at Pitt, is just try to cause havoc. Not so much you're in the C gap or D gap. We try not to be as much gap-oriented. Let our linebackers fix the defensive line since they're nose to nose with an offensive lineman. So there's going to be some gap issues.

One thing I don't want to do is go sideways trying to stay in a gap, if that makes any sense to everybody out there. We're going to be aggressive up front and we're going to take our shots. We're going to take inside moves in the pass rush and we're going to take what someone gives us. And again, it comes down to instincts.

When you talk about great D linemen, it comes down to instincts. We want players to go make plays. I don't want

to handcuff defensive linemen and make them just kind of stay on an edge and contain a quarterback, if that makes sense.

Charlie Partridge, our defensive line coach, does an outstanding job in our scheme, coaching our defensive line, and we'll see what happens tomorrow with that defensive line, but it's critical up front.

COACH TUCKER: It all starts up front. D line play is about mental and physical toughness. We like to rotate a lot of guys and keep our guys fresh. We want guys to play with great technique and fundamentals. We want them to do their job first and they can help out.

We never want to give up one for one. So we're going to play blocks. We're going to come off the ball, lead with our hands, and have great pad level. Want to butt guys in the throat. Lock out and separate, find the ball, and be relentless in our pursuit, keep guys fresh and play 60 minutes, four quarters in a game, as hard as we can.

Q. For the fans in Atlanta who maybe aren't as familiar with the two programs as those who support the team are, what kind of game is it going to be tomorrow night, especially without Pickett and Walker? It had the potential to be high scoring. Now I'm not sure. I was hoping to get your opinions.

COACH NARDUZZI: What kind of a game? I think it's going to be a heck of a game because Mel Tucker is a defensive guy and I'm a defensive guy. I think what you're going to see is a lot of contact.

I think you're going to see two teams who are tough. When you put on a reel of Michigan State or Pitt, you're going to see two tough football teams that are well-coached that are going to battle until the end.

As I told our guys, it's going to be four quarters. Don't think it's going to be over in two or three. It's going to be 60 minutes. We're going to have to be relentless in our pursuit to get a victory.

But I think it's going to be two teams that believe in their coaches, believe in the culture and believe in their teammates. And I see this game going down to the wire. And I see a tough football team on both sides of the ball coming out there at game time tomorrow.

COACH TUCKER: It's going to be an exciting game. It's going to be a hard-nosed, physical football game; players playing with tremendous mental and physical toughness; great effort; extreme effort; coaches coaching hard; and teams that are in great condition and ready to play four

quarters, 60 minutes in the game and both teams playing to win.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

