

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

Thursday, December 30, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Mel Tucker

Press Conference

Michigan State - 31, Pitt - 21

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Michigan State coach Mel Tucker.

COACH TUCKER: It was a great victory for us. I want to thank the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl for just an incredible experience for our football team, our entire organization.

We're forever grateful for the opportunity. Our guys played extremely hard, like they always do. They never flinched. They continued to just keep chopping wood and keep believing.

And we were able to hit our stride there in the second half and play complementary football -- offense, defense, special teams working together. And we were able to take it deep down into the fourth quarter and we got stronger and stronger as the game went. And we went down into the deep water and were able to find a way to get it done.

And really proud of our guys and our seniors. Our fans were incredible. They traveled. They were deep. And they really helped pull us through. And so I know there's going to be a lot of partying in Spartan Nation tonight and it was just a great experience.

And to get to 11 wins in a New Year's Six bowl is quite an accomplishment for this group.

Q. Wanted to talk about that fourth quarter in particular, the job that Payton did. It didn't seem like a lot of panic or impatience there on those final two drives. What did you see from him and really what was the difference maybe between those middle couple quarters where he was missing some targets and when he started to find that rhythm?

COACH TUCKER: He showed tremendous poise. He



showed a level of maturity. We talked throughout the entire game, and we just talked about what do we need to do to get better; what do we need to do to get on track?

We kept communicating. And he said that he was missing some throws and he wasn't accurate. And I asked him why. I said, why is that? And he told me it was his footwork and that he was really just not delivering the ball the way he normally does.

I told him, well, get your feet right. Fix your footwork and cut it loose. Just start slinging it. And he said okay. And he went out and he did that.

And he's got good players around him, a good offensive line, receivers, backs. And the defense stood up for us there and got stops. We kept getting them the ball back. We were solid on special teams. We were able to play field-position football. And we were able to get it done.

But Payton showed a level of maturity and just resiliency that -- and I told him after the game, I said, you know, what you did was really hard to do. And I told him I was proud of him and it was a great experience and the best is ahead for him.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the defense. Obviously they lost a quarterback so they're down to the third guy, also a running back at some point. It's a unit that's caught a lot of grief this year, hasn't played its best at times. But tonight seemed to really kind of step up, forced a lot of punts there, a lot of three-and-outs. Talk about that unit's performance overall tonight.

COACH TUCKER: I'll tell you what, the preparation leading up to this game was outstanding. Scottie and the entire defensive staff put together a great plan. Never wasted a minute in preparation. And our guys were fresh and they were ready to go and they understood what we needed to do.

And so it was all about execution. Guys played extremely hard. They believe in what we're doing. And we had rush and coverage working together. And so it was just a



relentless effort for the defense.

And we were able to get some three-and-outs. And we were able to affect the quarterback and get the ball back to our offense, make some big plays. And that's what defenses do.

And you know, the past is not necessarily predictive of the future unless you don't change the behavior. And we played better. We executed better, played with better fundamentals.

We got better from the end of the Penn State game until tonight. And so it showed on the field. And because of that we got better results.

Q. I was just curious, you talked all season about how this was such a fun group to coach. After the final game, what is your assessment of the team overall and your relationship with them?

COACH TUCKER: Well, I told them in the locker room that -- first I told them before the game that we have a tremendous amount of gratitude for this group, our coaching staff. And we appreciate them and everything that they've done this season, all the hard work that they put in.

And after the game, again, just proud of their performance. Really happy for our seniors that have given us so much, given this university so much. And I told them that this performance was very indicative of how we played all season and our culture.

And we're relentless. We don't flinch. We believe in the process. We keep chopping. We're in great condition. We know that we can go deep into the fourth quarter and wear teams down, take them to the deep water. And that's where we want to be. And we were able to get them to that point and were able to finish.

And so it was a tremendous victory to get to 11 wins. It was quite an accomplishment. And doing it as a team, playing complementary football, it was just tremendous. The best is ahead for us.

Q. I know, Coach, you just said that the best is yet to come. Just kind of -- like you just won your first bowl game. Let's start there. And now that you're moving forward with the team, you're locked in with a great contract and everything to move forward. Talk about what you're looking forward to doing in the next season.

COACH TUCKER: Well, it's going to be a 24-hour rule for

me. And we're going to enjoy this victory and then we're going to get back to work.

Recruiting is extremely important. And the contact period is going to open up here pretty soon. We're going to hit the ground running. And then we're going to have great out-of-season conditioning program leading up to spring ball. And we're going to train like crazy and work to improve our football team. And our goal is to win every game on our schedule.

So there's a lot of hard work that needs to be done between now and when we kick off again next season. But we're going to remain focused and determined to get where we need to go.

And we play in a tough conference. It's very rugged. It's very competitive. But we're in it. We're in it to win it. And, so, I do believe that our best is ahead. But it's going to be about our actions. It's going to be about our behavior as to what's going to create the outcome. So we're going to get back to work. We're going to chop hard to get this football team better so we can go after our goals next season.

Q. Question about the fans. I know it was so exciting to see so many Spartan fans there in Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Just express your gratitude, I guess, in the sense of support of the fans, the alumni, the students that traveled to the city of Atlanta in the midst of COVID and everything, just kind of share your thoughts on that, please.

COACH TUCKER: Well, our fans have been great all season. And Spartan nation is strong, has always been strong. Football is extremely important here at Michigan State.

And we have a tremendous fan base across the country and throughout the world. 500,000 living alumni. And they traveled well all season, and the watch parties and all the different cities and all the alumni clubs. And it's just -- everyone's very excited about the direction of our program and they support us in many, many ways.

So I want to thank our fans for believing in us and supporting our program. And they will continue to do that. And our fans deserve a winning football team. Our fans deserve a championship football team. Our fans deserve to see a brand of football that they can be proud of.

And that's what we're here to do. It means something to us to make our fans proud, and that's something that we talk about all the time and we're going to continue to do that. We're going to do it as a team. Our team on the field and our fans, together we're going to accomplish some great

things here.

Q. You talk about the future and everything, but you've talked also this season about maximizing your potential, reaching your potential. Do you feel like this team did that? Is that one of the things, in terms of foundation, in terms of culture and moving forward on things to build off as a program, what this team did is that?

COACH TUCKER: I felt like our team gave us everything that they had every game and emptied the bucket with extreme effort, played with toughness, was resilient, played to win. And that's all you can ask. And when the fourth quarter starts, most teams put up a 4. We put up a 1. And that 1 basically signifies one minute after the game, what will we be able to say to each other -- coaches, players? Will we be able to say -- win, lose or draw -- that we gave everything that we had on the field for each other? If we can say that, then we can live with that.

And I felt like this football team just really laid it on the line and gave us everything that they had. And so we really have laid the foundation for how we need to play football here and our culture has really shifted. And we're cementing it and we're building upon it every single day.

And the brand of football that we play here at Michigan State is very important. And everyone should be able to look on that field when they see us play and say those guys play hard. Those guys are tough, they're physical. They won't quit. They don't flinch. And that's what Michigan State football has always been about and that's what we see on the field.

Q. With Jalen coming back, seemed to make a big difference in your passing attack. And Jayden Reed in what could have been his final performance. What did you see from those two guys together and how them being on the field at the same time changes your passing attack?

COACH TUCKER: They're both tremendous players, as we all know. They compete. They can win one-on-one. They're dynamic players. And they're team guys. They block hard in the run game. And in the pass game those guys are hard to cover.

And it's not just deep balls but it could be short game, intermediate and also in the deep passing game. They're very, very productive. They're dangerous and they're absolute difference makers.

Q. You guys have won many games sort of like this this year where you've had some late things -- Miami,

Nebraska, you know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. How many times does that have to happen, do you think, until it just becomes part of that identity and part of that culture? And can that carry over into next year when you guys have done it as many times as you have? Or does it just always have to sort of be a constantly renewed things? How do you sustain that and make that long term, you know?

COACH TUCKER: It's part of our mental conditioning. It's part of our culture. It's the way we train. It's the way we practice. It's our mindset.

And that's the way you have to play the game of football. It's a four-quarter game. You have to continue to always play the next play. Just keep chopping, just keep going. Every play has a history and a life of its own.

So you don't look at a scoreboard. You just keep playing the next play with extreme effort and extreme toughness.

And coaching 10 years in the National Football League, I mean, almost all those games go down -- a lot of those games go down to the last drive, two minutes to win the game.

And when you're competing at a very high level, against very good competition, you have to be prepared to win games late in the fourth quarter with conditioning; mental and physical toughness; and a never-stop, never-flinch attitude.

That's how we train and that's how we need to play, because at the top, where the best compete, success is measured in inches. And you have to be at your best when your best is needed.

And oftentimes that's down the stretch late in the fourth. You've got to make plays and you've got to find a way to get it done and find a way to get in the left-hand column, because this is a binary situation. You get a 1 or you get a 0. And our guys understand that. And we're playing to win.

Q. With the struggles this year and past events, what does it mean to you as a career-long secondary coach that you've won or saved five games with late interceptions, key interceptions? And what does it say that you're the only team in the country that's beaten two Power Five champions in 2021?

COACH TUCKER: It's something to build upon. It means that our guys, our coaches and our players believe in what we're doing. And that when we execute, when we have our rush and our coverage working together, and we play



our techniques, we play with great technique and fundamentals, everyone does their job, that we can be efficient in pass defense and we can be stout in the run game.

And when we have success, we need to continue to understand why we have success and build on those things. We're going to keep adding players to our roster, keep adding depth and build on the positives and own the negatives and figure out how we can get better.

But the effort was there tonight and there was an element of competitive greatness and that's being at your best when your best is needed. And that's what we've seen this season, just like you talked about, the several games guys have made plays down the stretch to ice games, because there's something to be said for that. We do have pride in our program. We do have pride in our defense. We're not where we need to be. But we're going to get there.

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