

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Georgia vs. Ohio State

Sunday, December 4, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Ryan Day

Kirby Smart

Gary Stokan

Press Conference



MATT GARVEY: I'd like to welcome everyone to the Selection Sunday press conference for the 2022 College Football Playoff Semifinal at the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl. Today we'll be joined by two head coaches and Chick-Fil-A CEO Gary Stokan.

After opening statement, we'll move right into questions from the media.

At this time, we'll go ahead and welcome head coach Ryan Day of the 4th ranked Ohio State Buckeyes and head coach Kirby Smart of the No. 1 ranked Georgia Bulldogs. We also have Gary Stokan, president and CEO of Peach Bowl, Inc.

Gary, why don't you kick us off. I'm sure you have opening remarks for us.

GARY STOKAN: Thanks, Matt. I want to take the time to congratulate and welcome Coach Smart and Coach Day on making it into the College Football Playoff Semifinals at the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl. Kirby and Ryan, we look forward to hosting you, your family, your team, the administration, the coaches, as well as the Buckeye and Bulldog families.

We will play December 31st at 8:00 in Mercedes Benz Stadium. We'll be nationally televised on ESPN. The roof will be closed unless we open it around midnight and drop the peach, which is a tradition in Atlanta.

We do want to welcome -- we're really ecstatic to have No. 1 against No. 4. This is the third time we've hosted the CFP Semifinal, and each year we've been rewarded with the No. 1 team in the country in 2016 as well as 2019 and now in 2022.

To have Georgia, the No. 2 scoring defense in the country, and Ohio State, the No. 2 scoring offense in the country, it will be a lot of fireworks on New Year's Eve in Atlanta.

Thanks so much coaches. We look forward to hosting you. We take great pride in our bowl game to make sure that our bowl week is a reward for the players. We use the theme live, laugh, and learn, and it's very important to us to take care of the players. We'll have a great time for both teams as they descend upon Atlanta either Christmas or the day afterwards.

On behalf of our board, staff, volunteers, our partners, stakeholders, we look forward to hosting in Atlanta, the capital of college football for this year's CFP National Semifinal Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl. Thanks, Matt.

MATT GARVEY: At this time, we'll go ahead and take an opening comment from Coach Day representing Ohio State. Go ahead, Coach.

RYAN DAY: Thanks, guys. Gary, the board, everybody at the Peach Bowl, an honor for us to come down. It will be my first time being at the Peach Bowl, and we're really excited about heading to Atlanta for a week.

Tremendous amount of respect for Kirby and his staff and team and what they've done here and really certainly winning last year and then going undefeated this season, playing at a high level. Congrats on winning the SEC Championship.

I can just tell you that our team is very excited to be in this position, to be in the CFP. It's been an emotional week here, but in our facility today, going to see our name pop up there, a lot of juice, a lot of energy. We're looking for a great month of preparation and a great week down in Atlanta.

MATT GARVEY: Thank you, Coach.



Coach Smart, an opening statement from you as well, please.

KIRBY SMART: It's an honor to see a lot of familiar faces. Spent a lot of time with Gary, having played as a player in the Peach Bowl twice and coached in it multiple times throughout my career. They do as good a job as anybody at entertaining the players and putting on a first class event.

So thanks to the Peach Bowl. We look forward to being there. It's always an awesome event. It's grown from a long time ago being small to being one of the best there is in the business. So a lot of connection to the people and the organization and the Peach Bowl.

A lot of respect for Ryan and Ohio State University. What a tremendous job he has consistently done year in and year out with that program. Just a lot of respect for the way they play the game. We've watched them, studied them in years past, off-seasons spoken to their staff members. Just always knew that an opportunity to play them would probably come along but not knowing when it would happen, and it came to fruition this year.

Got a lot of respect for a lot of their players we recruited and tried to sign, and I've enjoyed watching them mature and play for him and become really good football players.

But it should be an electric matchup, electric atmosphere. What a great venue to play it in. It's really what college football is all about, these kids having an opportunity to play in a game like this.

Q. This is for Kirby Smart. Just curious, what you just said studying Ohio State in the off-season, why is that? Is it part of studying a lot of teams in the off-season? And what were the impressions that you came away with, the main ones that you're going to try to convey to your team this week?

KIRBY SMART: I haven't studied them this season. In off-seasons we try to go out and watch the best teams in the country and what they do and try to get better at it.

Especially when you watch your own conference all year, you get to watch all your opponents, you see what they do, you want to go out of your league when you go in the off-season to study. We've always looked at Clemson, Ohio State, looked across the country to find out how are people doing it really well and what are they doing it differently.

In the past we've seen they have elite players and tough, physical guys across the NFL, and it's littered with Ohio

State players. That's been in the past. I haven't been able to look at Ohio State so far this year.

Q. This is also for Kirby. Ohio State hasn't played Georgia in almost 30 years, but you did when you were at Alabama in 2014 with Cardale Jones and that team. What are your memories of that experience and that game?

KIRBY SMART: Long day. It was a long day, and it was physical. I think it was Ezekiel Elliott, right? He shredded what was a pretty talented Alabama defense.

I just remember a lot of explosive plays back and forth. I can't remember all the particulars, but I know they were very talented and very physical and played with a very obvious purpose.

Q. Kirby, you brought this up a couple times, whether here or on ESPN, you talked about how Ohio State has had players on its roster in the past that you recruited. When you get on these stages and get an opportunity to play against those players in playoff moments, how much of an impact have you seen them have, whether you're at Georgia or Alabama or other spots, when you're playing against an Ohio State team that does have like minded talent?

KIRBY SMART: It's just a great game. It's a great opportunity. Most of these kids, they all know each other. They got recruited by the same schools. They went to the same All-Star games. They're very familiar with each other.

We recruit across the country. Ohio State recruits across the country. So we both have players from all different areas. They've got players from the state of Georgia. We've got players from all over. It makes for a great talent matchup. I know NFL teams really enjoy watching these kids go against each other.

Just a lot of respect for the program and the way they play the game.

Q. This is for both coaches. I know the portal is opening, quote, unquote, tomorrow. How are you all handling the balance of that not being a distraction over the next few weeks versus you don't want to fall behind in that process?

RYAN DAY: Well, certainly this is an unprecedented time in college football with the portal and all that going on, and there's a lot of dynamics at play with that. I think our culture is such that there's a lot of guys on our team that want to be Buckeyes moving forward.



So we have those conversations and try to do the best we can to make sure that we're recruiting great high school players and developing them and keeping them in the program.

That being said, there's going to be situations that occur where guys feel maybe they have an opportunity to go play more at another school, and we understand that. It's something that certainly wasn't the case very long ago, but it's become a reality. So I think communication is the most important thing.

But we still focus most of our time on recruiting high school players and develop them while they're here.

KIRBY SMART: I echo a lot of the same sentiments as Ryan. We try to build it where they want to be part of our program. If they don't, then I certainly acknowledge that it's an opportunity.

I think you're asking also about I guess maybe evaluating kids in the portal. We went a year where we didn't take one. So you're always going to look, and people try to reach out once they go in the portal. It's there. They have people on staff at Ohio State, and we've got people on our staff that are going to be constantly looking through there and watching tape, evaluating it.

But the focus is on our team. It wouldn't be fair to all the guys playing if you weren't focused on your team. So you can't put a ton of focus and attention to looking for kids in the portal and things like that.

For us, it's really about who do we know? Who do we trust? Who do we think fits our culture? And find the right people. But our focus will be on ourselves.

Q. Ryan, obviously a big whirlwind of emotions for your locker room over the last weekend. Now a chance for you guys to rewrite your season and rewrite a lot of these guys' legacy, like C.J. Stroud. How important is it for you guys to get that chance and not only stay focused just in the task at hand and not necessarily look forward to a potential rematch against Michigan?

RYAN DAY: First off, you're playing the defending national champions in their backyard. So it's going to take everything we have to go on the road to go win this game. I just think that we wanted to be in this situation at CFP at the end of the year. It took a different road to get here, but we're here. So now we've got to just do an unbelievable job this month of preparing and maximizing every day.

That's in the end what's going to happen. It's going to be a great matchup. I've got so much respect for what they do in all three phases. So coaches, players, staff members. We've just got to do everything we can to maximize this month and get ready to play a really hard fought game on the 31st.

That's where our focus is going. How we got here, at this point, I guess, doesn't really matter. Now that we're here, it's time to go play.

Q. For Coach Day, just wondering how much, as you sit here today, do you truly know about Georgia? Has there been any kind of cram yet, or is there plenty of time for that? For those of us that haven't followed you super close, that you maybe didn't have everybody at your disposal in the Michigan game that you will have in this game. So can you talk about those two elements?

RYAN DAY: Like Kirby said, we always look at Georgia and look at how they do things in the off-season, sometimes during the season. So to say that we're knee deep in a game plan, I can't tell you that. We watch them from afar, and they have very, very good players and a good scheme.

Certainly on offense Stetson does a great job in all areas. Got a lot of respect for the way he plays. Certainly they put a lot of stress on you with multiple tight ends and really good offensive line and skill players on the outside. Then on defense excellent scheme and really good players across the board.

We're not that far into it, but at the same time, the focus has got to be here the next couple weeks of working on fundamentals but start getting going with the game plan and put all that stuff together because they challenge you in all three phases.

During this time, it's going to be great to get guys healthy. We really have been fighting that a little bit. But we've also developed some depth in certain areas too, which is important.

I think if we can push forward and get to just about 100 percent here in terms of our health, that gives us the best chance on the 31st.

Q. If I may, I'd like to ask each coach a question. Ryan, first off, starting with you, you just mentioned this is basically a home game for Georgia. Last year, unfortunately, Buckeye nation didn't seem overly eager to want to make the trip out to Pasadena. So how important is it for Buckeye nation to be willing to

make the trip down to Atlanta? And then for you, Kirby, you just played there last night and you're going to be returning less than a month later. You've played there a handful of times before. Does this feel kind of like a home game for you guys? And is there a certain comfort level in returning to a place that's a little more than an hour away?

RYAN DAY: I would just say excited to play and what a great venue. It's going to be an electric atmosphere. Looking forward to playing in it.

Certainly I know that it's kind of in Georgia's backyard, but what an unbelievable opportunity for us to go down there and play in an electric atmosphere.

When you get to this point of the season, this is what you're going to do. You're going to be in these type of environments. If you said at the beginning of the year you get a chance to be in the CFP and play in Atlanta against Georgia down there, defending national champs, of course you'd cut off your right arm for this opportunity.

So we'll do everything we can to prepare to play our best football.

KIRBY SMART: I certainly think it's great to be in Atlanta. It fell that way because in the rotation it was Atlanta's year. We certainly have gone and played in the Rose Bowl out in California, and we've also been to Miami to play in semifinals. I know Ohio State has been all over as well.

Once you get to the venue, it's different than when you're coming in for a game and kids have been in classes and they just fly in for the game. It's different when you're there for a whole week. We'll practice at Mercedes Benz. They'll practice at Mercedes Benz. It's not like you're going to walk in there and not have seen the place.

The field is the exact same length as any other field we play them on. The ticket sales, Ohio State, as I understand it, has never had a shortage of alumni base or money because I go against Ryan all the time in recruiting. I know how strong their alumni base is and how proud they are of it.

So I don't look for it as -- it's home as in the state of Georgia, but the fan bases both turn out. They both have great fan bases, and I think that's great for the Peach Bowl and great for the state of Georgia and Gary's staff to have two programs of this magnitude playing in this game.

Q. Question for Kirby. We got to see A.D. yesterday more than we have since the opener. What stood out to you about how he played and specifically how he

was able to hold up physically?

KIRBY SMART: He's got to work on his conditioning level. He hasn't played consecutive snaps as much as we'd like, and he's really got to work hard on that. It was good to get him back in there and get him into rhythm. I don't think he was 100 percent last night, but it's important to get his confidence back and get him back rolling.

He's worked so hard to get back and tried so hard to have a role. I thought he did a really good job emotionally last night, not being up and down, because he's a kid that wants to do -- he's so energetic, he wants to do well, and sometimes he pressed. Last night he settled into the flow of the game nice, and it was nice to get him out there.

Q. This is for Kirby and Coach Day. I know the next three, four weeks is good to get guys healthy again, but what kind of challenges can it present as well when it comes to kind of finding the balance between practice and days off and making sure your guys don't cool off too much going into this playoff game?

RYAN DAY: I think going through this before, certainly Kirby would agree, the first couple times you do it, you learn and grow and try to find the right balance you're talking about of working on fundamentals, keeping your edge, but also game planning and making sure the guys are fresh and ready to roll for the game.

The more you do it, I think the more prepared you are. You learn every year. You evaluate in the off-season, how'd you do? What was the preparation like? Every year's a little bit different because of the recruiting calendar, where you play, how does Christmas fall into these type of things, and the COVID year. Every year has its own set of circumstances, and you do the best you can to find that balance.

But having been in these situations before, you take your past experiences and try to do the best you can to make sure your team is playing at maximum strength on the 31st.

KIRBY SMART: A lot of the same things Ryan just reiterated. The management of the schedule is critical. I think having been a part of it and done it multiple years at Alabama and now at Georgia, it is so critical to your success how you manage that time. Not us as coaches, but how these players manage this time.

I also think the mindset and the framework you approach it with, there's certainly a mindset to it. I told our team today that last year's team in that same meeting had a different frame of mind than maybe our team right now does. That's so critical, how you manage the next month and how we as

coaches manage it and how the players manage it.

With Ohio State, there's a breath of fresh air of opportunity. We've never had the fortune of saying, all right, we were out, and then we got back in. There was a couple times we got really close to getting in, but the excitement that provides and the energy, it's like it's a kick of momentum that we have to understand that and we have to be able to match that and understand that there's a piece of that that you've got to know.

But managing the 27 days is just critical. Sometimes your guys think 27 days is a long time, and then it's right up on you before you know it.

Q. This is for both coaches. Ryan, you touched on this earlier. Kirby, you obviously mentioned how you guys don't take any players in the transfer portal. Why is it important for your programs to continue to build through the high school ranks and recruit guys and try to develop them over the course of multiple years as opposed to getting portal guys for one, maybe two seasons max?

RYAN DAY: I think it has to do with your culture. I think there's nothing more important than the culture of your team. All the work that gets done in the off-season in the weight room, spring practice and the summers, and that's how you build your program is through culture.

That's a shared behavior through leaders, and when you start to move those pieces around every year, it becomes harder and harder to maintain that. So through the recruiting process you want to identify those that we think fit the culture best. Certainly you want to identify talent. That's important. But as the head coach, I think it's important to make sure you're bringing the right people that fit what you do.

When you're taking guys in from the portal, not that they can't be a fit. We added guys we felt were good fits but they didn't work out. There's a lot of dynamics at play there.

When you have a lot of pride in programs, as Kirby would say, I'm sure, at Georgia and here at Ohio State, it's hard to walk in and demand playing time. Most people in the portal are coming to play right away. That's why it's important to make sure you're really careful about who to bring into your program.

KIRBY SMART: A lot of the same sentiments. There's kids on that team last night that they earned it and it was hard. Stetson talked about it. He's like it's hard to play here. Chris Smith, it's hard to play here. Kenny McIntosh,

the amount of time he waited, it's hard.

We've had successful guys come from the portal, and we'll continue to utilize the portal. It would be foolish to think that you could be successful in college football and not evaluate and look through the portal. But you have to be smart what you bring into your program, especially if you want to keep a dynamic, the culture we like to keep.

I want to be sure you understand I'm not saying that we don't recruit the portal. I'm saying that we just did not have anyone last year that we got. We certainly are always going to look and shape it and make sure kids fit our culture.

That's why to me it's so critical now in recruiting to evaluate more players because you may get the guy on rebound, and you'd better know a better history than just what somebody calls and tells you about him. I want to know when they came on the visit. I want to know when we talked to them. I want to know when they came to our camp.

I'm a lot more likely to take a kid that I think is wired the right way even though he's coming from the portal, but I'd better have known about him coming out of high school.

Q. For Coach Day, talking about culture and program, you had a pretty important transfer from Georgia named Justin Fields. Can you talk about how he fit into your culture and how important it was for you to get Justin Fields from Georgia as you were building Ohio State?

RYAN DAY: It goes without saying. He obviously was unbelievable here. Had a major impact here. Again, I just -- again, I have so much respect for the way that Kirby handled that because Justin had nothing but unbelievable things to say about his staff and Kirby on the way out, and those are not easy situations. They just aren't. We've all been through it.

We went through the same thing with Joe Burrow and Jameson Williams. This is kind of the way things have gone here in college football, and the way that everybody handled it was with class.

But Justin had just an amazing impact here. He's doing a really good job in the NFL now, and I'm glad to see him having success. He certainly left a legacy here.

MATT GARVEY: With that, Coaches, we thank you very much for your time. Members of the media, we thank you for being on the call. Coaches, welcome to the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl Semifinal.



We can't wait to get you into town and give you both a first class experience, not only for you but for your players and your fans as well. We're all looking forward to it, and we can't wait for you to get here.

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