

# Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Ole Miss vs Penn State

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

**Ole Miss Rebels**

**Pete Golding**

**John Saunders, Jr.**

**Jeremiah Jean-Baptiste**

Press Conference



So like yesterday, go-karting and stuff, it was amazing, like seeing all the guys rolling around, it was so fun. Everybody enjoyed themselves. We were bowling.

Then the first night, putting, as soon as we got in, it was just like jump straight to it and start competing. That was fun too, watching the guys secure those wins. That was great.

**Q. Jeremiah, what about you?**

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: I definitely enjoyed Andretti last night, just being able to bond with my teammates. We bonded all year, but just being able to bowl and watch them go-kart and seeing them crash last night was pretty funny so I have been having a lot of fun.

**Q. Pete, obviously, loss of Cedric choosing to kind of focus on the next step in his career, but keeping the bulk of this defense for the Peach Bowl and not a lot of opt-outs or really any major injuries, what does it speak to the mentality of that side of the ball that you all have created this year?**

PETE GOLDING: I think, number one, it starts up top. I think it's the culture that Coach Kiffin created. I think we've got a really good group of kids that love football. I think a big part of it now is how much do you love football? I think there's some guys who play football for what football can do for them, and there's guys that play football that love football. I think the way you get better at football is to play football.

I think these extra 16 practices that they bought into, I think all of them looked at they can increase their value by playing another game and playing well, whether that's being draft eligible and increasing their value or whether that's being a younger player and playing at their best when their best is needed in a big bowl game.

To be able to add into that into the off-season, I think it speaks to the character of the guys in that room. I think we've got a lot of guys that love football, that love each other, that want to compete. We talked about it in the summer of creating a legacy and what is the legacy of this

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll start with you. Just give us an opening statement on getting to Atlanta, getting settled in, and how bowl preparations have gone so far.

PETE GOLDING: Obviously we're very excited to be here. Very prestigious bowl. We appreciate it, and we're excited to be in the city of Atlanta, and Chick-fil-A and the Peach Bowl Committee making us feel at home.

Really exciting opportunity for our kids. I thought they played their butt off all year. To have the opportunity to compete in a New Year's Six bowl, more importantly, to have the opportunity to win 11 games for the first time in the history of program, I think shows what they've done each year, the legacy they create moving forward and setting a new standard.

They've been working extremely hard. Practices have been going well. The transition from Oxford to Atlanta was very smooth. Coach Kiff has done a great job. We're excited for the opportunity to play a really elite Penn State team in front of a great crowd and a great bowl.

**Q. You guys have taken a commanding 2-0 lead in the battle for bowl week. Congratulations. There's a stat. I think the team that wins the battle for bowl week goes on to win the game like 90 percent of the time. So no pressure or anything. Talk about that and your experiences. What have you enjoyed about the competitions?**

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: That's been amazing. This is my first New Year's Six bowl, so really it's just been eye opening. I never did anything like this.



team going to be.

I think having an opportunity to win 11 games for the first time in the history of this program speaks volumes for a lot of guys who are in the locker room for the first time. They came together and gelled together. That's credit to Coach Kiffin and the guys in the locker room. I think it speaks volume to their character and their competitiveness, to be honest with you.

**Q. Pete, I know it's a little bit down the line, but you guys have gotten a lot of big time commits in the transfer portal, a really big time recruiting class as well. What is your philosophy when it comes to balancing high-level transfers and traditional high school recruiting in team building?**

PETE GOLDING: I think we're in a unique time in college football, to be honest with you. I think now it's more as building teams than programs. Don't take that the wrong way, just because the transition happens so fast. Developmental players that you used to take, to be able to add bulk and size and strength, some of those guys, depending upon their mental makeup, you're not going to have a chance to develop because they're not going to come and play as true freshmen.

Depending upon who's in their circle, December hits and the portal opens, and they might seek other opportunities. You've invested six to ten months, depending if they're mid-semester or summer, that you're not going to get back, that they're not going to get back.

I think it's recruiting the right type of kid, regardless of it's a transfer kid or a high school kid, that goes back to loving football. There has to be a connect of why they want to be at Ole Miss, why they want to play with Coach Kiffin, why they want to be in a scheme that's been successful and being around coaches that produce guys that get them to the next level.

It's a lot of things. Whether you're high school recruiting or portal recruiting, the number one thing is is it a good fit? Ole Miss isn't for everybody. They come in and see our guys. I think our current players do a really good job on official visits of being honest, telling them what it's really like. I think there's no smoke and mirrors of, hey, you're told one thing, and when you get there, it's something different. I appreciate that about Coach Kiffin. Very honest and upfront. We have a great group of guys with great character, a lot of good football players that a lot of people want to be a part of right now.

**Q. Pete, obviously this Penn State offense has done a good job taking care of the football and just being**

**physical on the line of scrimmage. When looking at this team on offense, what's the biggest thing that pops off? In what ways do they compare to some of the other teams on your schedule through 12 games?**

PETE GOLDING: I think they do a great job of being balanced. I think they stay on course. I think the quarterback does a great job of managing the game. I think that Franklin system of getting in and out of plays, based on the looks that they're getting, they do a really good job of.

Obviously 15, their quarterback, he's 80 percent on level 1 throws. To throw for whatever it was 2400 yards with one interception is pretty strong. It was very strong and very smart. A big part of that is the system. They're going to make you show your hand and know what you are in and dictate the run game and the pass game.

They're very solid up front. They're well coached. They're physical. They do a nice job in the run game. They're very complementary based on the fronts and the pressures that you show. They've got two tight ends that are really good players that create extra gaps and isolate from a past standpoint and some mismatches on some backers.

I still think they've got the play action game that they've been successful at of when they want to take shots. So very sound, very well coached. It will be a big challenge.

**Q. Pete, two-fold question, if you don't mind. One, when you got here to Oxford in January, you guys brought in so many transfer guys, especially on the defensive side of the ball. Going into the season, what were your expectations for the defense? The second question is just what were the main differences going from working for Coach Saban to working for Lane?**

PETE GOLDING: I think the first one was, for our players, we've got a spot-the-ball mindset on defense. We don't care if it is practice, the playoffs or the playground, they spot the ball, we're going to play. I think, when you have new guys and you're coming into a new year, it's about competing and about getting better every day.

I don't think at that point like, hey, our goal wasn't to win 11 games. We weren't focused on the outcome. It's, hey, how can we take day by day to learn the system a little better, to learn each other better, to practice harder, to prepare harder on order to play better football.

I think those start stacking and start adding up. You got guys practicing extremely hard, playing hard. We probably rotate 28 guys on any given game on defense, which shows the depth we have on that side of the football. It's

neat to see the buy-in. You want for other guys to play well, and they start pulling for them and coaching them in meetings and all those.

To see the development of that piece that I think correlates to winning and losing instead of focusing on the outcome, focusing on working your butt off and doing little things right. I think obviously towards the end of the year we played our best football because those things started to stack up.

I think the credit goes to the players. I think they bought in. It's a really good group. They played extremely hard. There's some games that we probably want back, but they did some really good things to put ourselves in this position.

The second part of the question. It's very similar from a football standpoint. I think obviously Coach Kiff, the things -- when you're with Coach Saban for so long, both of us, you try to take the things, all right, you're successful because of this. Some places you're successful in spite of certain things. I think he's done a really good job of the discipline of the program, the football specific things that help you win championships by putting his personality on it.

I don't think you have to take the blueprint from A and bring it to B. I don't think it always fits. I think he's done an extremely good job of being himself but still taking a lot of really good things that both of us learned from Coach Saban and implement things that he already knew and learned from other guys. But I think the number one thing is being himself.

**Q. Pete, obviously a lot of discussion about what you've done in the transfer portal. What did you set out to achieve in that regard at the end of the regular season?**

PETE GOLDING: I don't think you look at it like, hey, we're going to do everything in the portal. You look at it as, hey, what are your needs? I think that's ever changing now. Used to be you knew who were seniors, who were draft eligible guys, and you had to replace a certain number per position. That's over. I think your pool is bigger than it's ever been because you just don't know who you're going to have and who you're not going to have.

I think your program starts to recruit itself. Number one, I think winning football games is big. I think now the platform you have on social media and all that, I think Coach Kiff does a really good job of. All of these guys can increase their brand by playing under Coach Kiffin and playing for Ole Miss, which I think is big.

More importantly than that, you have these two guys sitting up there, their first season and a New Year's Six bowl game that are at press conference and two transfers and their first season. The opportunity to go somewhere to go compete immediately to be productive where you're at to be able to produce, to increase your value, I think once guys see guys doing that and making an immediate impact, they want part of that.

There's a lot of programs that take transfers that they go in and they get lost. They're not taking them to be stars. They're taking them for the bottom half of their roster because that's who they're losing. I think it's more of these guys selling it by how they play, how quick they've learned the system, and I think Coach Kiffin has really helped me on that to simplify the defense because it's kind of like more pro right now to where you're taking guys off the streets and they've got to get ready to play.

So that three to four-year system where you have a lot of places and you've got guys there in multiple years, it is not the same. You can't expect a guy to come in in the summer like some of these guys and get that system down before game one September 1st. Simplifying things and allowing things to play and find what they do well, package that and ask them to do that and that is for them to get the success they've had. I think it's more the players than us to be honest with you.

**Q. This question is for John and for Jeremiah. Obviously throughout the season, ebbs and flows, highs and lows. I just wanted to ask both of you is there anyone on the team that you maybe leaned on throughout the time to keep your mind focused and maybe someone else on a different team across the country?**

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: Obviously we're a team. We're a brotherhood. So whenever times did go hard during the season, we went to one another and found ways for us to improve ourselves and be better for the next week.

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: For me, I lean mostly on safeties because that's who I'm with most of the day. Like safeties and corners, we've got a tight bond. We've got a group chat and stuff.

So if anything is a little rocky, we know that we can lean on each other and just call on one another, and they'll always be there for us.

**Q. For all three of you, Pete, you talked about Penn State's offense as a whole, but specifically the two running backs, Nicholas Singleton, No. 10, Kaytron**

**Allen, No. 13, what have you seen from those guys that have stuck out? They've been playing at a high level since pretty much the day they set foot on campus.**

PETE GOLDING: Number one, any good running back will tell you the five guys for them, the six or seven guys based on the personnel group on their end help that. I think both of them run really good balance and body control. I think they have really good contact balance, constant leg drive.

I think they're hard to break down. I also think they really understand schematically what they're trying to do. I think they have really good patience and letting blocks set up. I think they do a good job of reading the second level and knowing when to cut back and knowing when to press certain things.

You can tell they're very well coached. They're very veteran in what they do, and they're really good players. It's going to be a very, very big challenge.

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: Watching the running backs, they're good backs. They run hard. So we've just got to make sure every play to hit, wrap, and run and drive them back and just game tackle as a team. 11 hats to the ball every play just to make sure to polish off the ball carrier every play.

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: Piggy-backing off John, as they said, they do run hard, but we've got guys that do too. So we're going here to too.

**Q. Pete alluded to it. This is not even your full year with this team from when you all transferred in. How would you sum up your season with your game and with the new defense and trying to adapt to all the newness that you've had to so quickly?**

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: I'd say my experience here adapting to the defense, man, breathtaking. Great experience here. I love it here. I love Ole Miss with my whole heart. Life changing. I love it here.

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: Honestly, I'm just thankful and grateful like to have this opportunity because just coming from like a smaller conference and then coming to the best conference in like American football, it's really amazing. So I'm really just appreciative and just trying to make sure that I keep soaking up as much knowledge as I can, just getting better day in and day out honestly.

**Q. Pete, I asked you during the preseason just about recruiting in the state of Mississippi and what separates those Mississippi recruits apart as far as their mentality. When you look at the 2024 signing**

**class, particularly on the defensive side of the ball, is it safe to say they have that common denominator in it all?**

PETE GOLDING: Absolutely. I think they love football. I think they are tough. They are competitive. They've got a little chip on their shoulder. This class set by the guys on this team, I think they can see it that they can do something special here.

I think when you get a lot of good players that are good people and you get them on the same team and the same common goal and you've got the right guy from the top. There's certain places that are aligned correctly, in my opinion, from the chancellor to the athletic director to the head coach. When that's aligned and you get good players, special things happen, and I think they're all seeing that.

I think that's a testament to our team this year making those guys see it. To our staff from a recruiting standpoint, number one, identifying the right guys, evaluating them correctly, making sure they're the right type of kids. For them to take a step of faith, to be honest with you, it's like, hey, we can win a National Championship at Ole Miss.

I think Coach Kiff has set the precedent, like the best players at Mississippi are going to stay and play at Ole Miss. I think that was the emphasis, and for the most part, we got that done.

**Q. Pete, how do you see Suntarine Perkins' positional future playing out? It seems like you used him mostly a certain way this year. I'm curious if that's going to evolve or not.**

PETE GOLDING: I think he's a very versatile player. I think obviously this year, as late as we got him in, I think you've got to simplify it. He's such a good player that you've got to have him on the field. You try to find certain situations, certain packages to put him in to simplify and let him be able to react instead of have to think. Obviously his body type is very multiple to be able to play multiple spots.

I think he has flexibility in the position with the spring and another summer. Obviously you'll see him at different spots. Being that athletic, he's very versatile. He'll give us the ability to play him in multiple spots. With the spring and the summer, I think you'll see that.

**Q. John and Jeremiah, was there a moment or a game or a point in the season where you felt like it all started to click for the defense?**

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: I'd say it basically began in



fall camp really. Once fall camp practice, we realized how good we were going to be, and we just took the opportunity and ran with it and knew we were going to be a damn good defense this year.

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: Honestly, in fall camp, just going against our offense every day, that just was like really eye opening for us. The battles we're having every day at practice for a month straight, it just got us so much better and just prepared us for this regular season.

**Q. So this question is for all three of you. Does sugar go in grits?**

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: No, it doesn't.

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: Yes, it does. What?

**Q. Why doesn't it go in grits?**

JEREMIAH JEAN-BAPTISTE: Cheese grits.

**Q. John, you have thoughts?**

JOHN SAUNDERS JR.: Sugar goes on plain grits for sure. Yeah, it does. Sugar and butter.

**Q. Coach, what about you?**

PETE GOLDING: I'll eat them both ways. It doesn't matter.

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