

# Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl

Monday, December 23, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

**Gary Stokan**

**Steve Sarkisian**

**Kenny Dillingham**

Press Conference



**PLAYOFF  
QUARTERFINAL**



THE MODERATOR: I'd like to welcome everyone to the joint head coach press conference for the 2024 quarterfinal at the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl, featuring the No. 5 seed Texas Longhorns and the No. 4 seed Big 12 champion Arizona State Sun Devils.

My name is Matt Garvey. I'm the VP of communications for the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl. Welcome to all the media. Today we'll be joined by our two head coaches and Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl CEO Gary Stokan.

After opening statements, we'll move to questions from the media.

At this time we'll welcome head coach Steve Sarkisian of the Texas Longhorns, head coach Kenny Dillingham of the Arizona State Sun Devils, and Gary Stokan from the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl.

Gary, let's start with you for some opening remarks and welcome on behalf of the bowl.

GARY STOKAN: Thanks, Matt. Merry Christmas, and thanks for joining us today. The 57th annual Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl will ring in the new year at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta as the first college football game played in 2025.

Our kickoff game is set for 1:10 eastern on New Year's Day, and the game will be nationally televised by ESPN. As part of the newly expanded CFP playoff, the winner of the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl quarterfinal match-up will then advance to play the Rose Bowl Game winner in the Cotton Bowl Classic on January 10th.

This is our first ever CFP quarterfinal as part of the inaugural 12-team College Football Playoff. We've previously hosted CFP semifinal games in 2016, 2019, and 2022.

The winners of our first two CFP semifinal games went on to win the National Championship game with LSU in 2019 and Georgia in 2022.

Arizona State and Texas have only matched up once in the Holiday Bowl, and the Longhorns defeated the Sun Devils in 2007, 52-34.

Both teams are vying to come back to Atlanta January 20th to play in the National Championship game of the College Football Playoff, and next year Atlanta and the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl will host the semifinal game of the CFP playoff.

Basically in one calendar year, Atlanta will have hosted the CFP quarterfinal, the CFP National Championship game, and the CFP semifinal.

A little bit about the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl since we have two teams that haven't been here in the case of Texas, and since 1970, Arizona State hasn't been here. We are the most charitable bowl organization in the country, having given \$64 million back to charity and scholarship since 2002.

We were the organization behind moving the College Football Hall of Fame to Atlanta and invested \$13 million in the move, building and sustaining the College Football Hall of Fame, which we're glad that both teams and the media will be able to enjoy the College Football Hall of Fame on Media Day here in Atlanta.

We've also given \$22 million to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta to find cures to eradicate childhood cancer. We now have 14 trials in four different states, in five different hospitals. Some of those trials are moving to a second phase.

Our goal is to get in the end zone with something that's FDA approved to find a cure to eradicate childhood cancer and give a kid another month, another year or maybe his life.



It's very important to us since we were founded in 1968 as the first bowl game for charity. We've kept that our mission, and we'll do so with this game, as well, endowing \$100,000 scholarships to both Arizona State and Texas, \$50,000 each from the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl and \$50,000 from Chick-Fil-a to endow scholarships at each university. That will make it \$9.5 million that we have endowed at 35 universities throughout the country who have played in our bowl and kickoff games. That's earmarked for Title I students in Atlanta and Georgia, underprivileged kids who in many cases have never had anybody in their family ever attend college, let alone get a degree.

We are basically in the business to use football for the greater good.

To give you a little example of this game and the way we see it, styles make great fights, and with Arizona and Texas, they average 33 and 34 points pretty evenly. Both teams like to rush the ball. Arizona State is 199 yards per game, Texas is 174 yards. Rushing touchdowns, Arizona State has had 28, Texas only gives up 20 rushing yards all season. Rushing yards on average, 4.8 for Arizona State, 4.6 for Texas. So both teams like to run the ball.

Here's the most interesting fact, I think, in researching this game. Arizona State has only given up the ball eight times in turnovers. That's second in the country. Texas is first in the country in forcing turnovers with 29. Both have All-Americans, Skattebo running back, Barron defensive back and Thorpe winner; one on offense, Skattebo, one on defense, Barron. So you can see the offense-versus-defense match-up.

We're in for a great game. We're in for an exciting game. We think we're going to be sold out. There are very few tickets left, and we think by the end of the week we'll be sold out.

Last couple things. Texas with a win in this game would be the first team to win all six New Year's Six bowl games.

I have to tell you the Arizona State story. In 1968 we were founded, and in 1970, No. 8 Frank Kush-led Arizona State couldn't get into the big bowls at the time, and the Peach Bowl reached out and brought them east. They played North Carolina, won 46-26. It rained in the first quarter at Bobby Dodd stadium at Georgia Tech, sleeted in the second, snowed in the third, and iced in the fourth.

Vince Dooley, who was the head coach at Georgia, his brother was Bill Dooley, who was the head coach at North Carolina. Vince told me he was so cold -- never so cold in his life that he had to leave his brother at halftime and go

home, and Arizona State won 48-26, and the Arizona State people from the valley said, you know, it's so warm in Arizona, in Phoenix it's 80 degrees today. Why don't we start one of these games.

So the Arizona State people started to meet with the Peach Bowl people, and out of that, in 1971, the Fiesta Bowl was created. Our partners at the Fiesta Bowl and us will host the CFP semifinal next year.

So we've been inextricably involved in the growth of football, whether it's changing the front side of the season with the start of our kickoff games, to now at the end of the season hosting both the CFP quarterfinal and the National Championship game in Atlanta.

Lastly, I just want to congratulate Coach Dillingham and Coach Sarkisian. To move from a conference like the Big 12 to the SEC and the Pac-12 to the Big 12 and in their first year both wind up in the quarterfinal of the CFP playoff, it's been an amazing scouting and preparation job by both coaches and their staffs and their players in executing. I want to congratulate both coaches.

Both coaches, we look forward to welcoming you, your families, your administration, your players, your media into Atlanta, the captain of college football for the 57th annual Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl.

Thanks, Matt.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks very much, Gary. Appreciate that. We'll move into the Q & A portion, but before we do that we'll take opening comments from both head coaches. We'll start first with Texas Coach Steve Sarkisian.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Thank you. First of all, this is a heck of an honor to be participating in the Peach Bowl against Arizona State. Obviously it being the quarterfinals of the College Football Playoff, but to be part of this game is a fantastic honor and one that we're really proud of that we've gotten to this point.

We obviously have a ton of respect for Arizona State and the job Coach Dillingham has done. They're a very good football team. You don't win the Big 12, as we know how hard that is around here to win a Big 12 Championship, and doing it in their first year in the conference, his second year at Arizona State, is a heck of an accomplishment.

We touched on it earlier, they're plus 14 in the turnover margin with only eight turnovers, and they've created, I believe, I think 22 turnovers defensively. They pride themselves on running the ball.



Skattebo is a heck of a player. He's got a ton of fans in our building, I can tell you that. We didn't know we were getting ready to play Arizona State, and we've been watching them here for about the last year and a half, and this guy is a monster, and now we've got to try to figure out a way to stop him.

Like I said, I think Coach Dillingham -- I've followed his career for some time now, and I was kind of in his shoes a while back where I was kind of the hot guy and you're winning and you keep finding your way up the ladder, and the job that he's done at Arizona State from year one to year two in this day and age of college football is extremely impressive.

We're looking forward to the opportunity. It's a heck of a challenge. Appreciate the invitation, and looking forward to seeing everybody in Atlanta.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Dillingham, we'll take your opening comments, please.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: First things first. We're excited as a football program to be going back to the Peach Bowl. Obviously one of eight teams left in college football, that speaks for itself, for everybody who's left playing games when it comes around New Year's time.

In terms of Coach Sarkisian, his program, it's remarkable where he's taken that program. From preseason being picked to win a national title to following up with playing National Championship level football throughout their transition to the SEC, they just had an incredible season.

He's a guy that I think everybody on offense has studied, has watched, has learned from, either having the ability to go meet with him personally or from afar like myself. I don't know many people, so I just kind of have to Google things and find things out different ways.

But I know our staff, our offensive coordinator and Coach Sarkisian have a great relationship, and there's a lot of similarities that they do offensively that they do. I just have a lot of respect for their football program.

When you watch football teams and you see teams that are very creative but also simple, you have a lot of respect for that, and their guys play extremely hard. They have extremely good players that play extremely hard, which is not fun to play. You would like extremely good players to not play hard, but they have the combination of their players are very good and they play hard.

They're very fundamentally sound across the board. This is going to be, like I told our guys this morning, this is going

to be a great challenge for us to compete versus a team that has spent four years preparing to compete for a National Championship.

We're in year two, and we're excited for the opportunity to do it at the Chick-Fil-a Peach Bowl in Atlanta with eight teams left.

Thank you.

**Q. Coach Sarkisian, during the last game against Clemson, Texas only had two penalties. This suggests that you guys are preparing in a physical, a mental way that you never had such low penalties. I'm curious if you would take us into how you guys are preparing. I know you're going to probably say it's just like we always do, but it seems like the bar has been raised. Can you walk us through what's going on inside the locker room?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, we had a real come-to-Jesus meeting after the SEC Championship game when we essentially lost that game because of penalties, and we just said, we're not going to do that anymore, and we're going to play as clean a football as we can play, as fundamentally sound football as we can play, still be aggressive. We never want to lose our stinger and we never want to lose our aggressive, but we can play smarter.

Honestly, I critiqued one of the penalties that we got today. You can't hit the quarterback late, and that was one of our two penalties Saturday. We're continually trying to preach playing smarter football as well as playing hard and playing tough and playing physical.

Quite frankly that just came out of a come-to-Jesus meeting coming out of the SEC Championship game.

**Q. For Kenny, Coach, you mentioned Google. I don't think you needed to use it to remember Frank Kush, but I'm curious, there's things from the Kush era when he started, was at that Peach Bowl in 1970, and if the influences from him at all and the legacy he left, is that something you've embraced a little bit into your own formula of success here as you get started?**

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, obviously Frank Kush, he's all over our walls. He is the history of this program. He's a big piece of the history of this program, and he's a big piece of the present of the program. His toughness that he instilled in the football teams that he coached here are something that those guys still live with. Those guys are better people because of how Frank Kush coached and how challenging it was to play for him and how much his

guys loved him.

I would hope in 10, 15, 20 years from now, our guys have a very similar feeling about myself and my staff that we impacted the guys far beyond the game of football.

**Q. Steve, you said Saturday night that Cam Williams was on his way to have an MRI. How did that go? And then behind that, just now that you've seen some film, what did you think of the way Trevor Goosby played in place of Cam Saturday night?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I'm going to make a joke here that has nothing to do with you. I'm watching "Judge Judy" at the bottom of this Zoom right here. I'm not sure who's got that cooking. But it's kind of -- anyway, sorry. Kenny, I apologize.

Cam, again, not as serious as we thought. That was more of a precautionary MRI, so we feel comfortable about that.

I thought Trevor did a really nice job. I highlighted him this morning with the team. They had an elite defensive end, first-round draft pick defensive end. I thought he held his own, more than held his own, and for a guy -- to think he's been a backup all year and against A&M, seven plays in, he goes and plays left tackle in that game, plays left tackle against Georgia, and then he thinks, okay, I'm back as a backup, and then in this ballgame, in the second quarter he gets thrown in at right tackle against a pretty good pass rush, a couple pretty good defensive ends from Clemson.

He's been kind of thrown to the fire pretty good, and I've got to give him a lot of credit. He's held his own. He's shown not only the physical fortitude but the mental toughness when he's been going against some pretty elite players. So I've been proud of him.

**Q. For Kenny, as you've kind of settled in and navigated for the first time as the head coach an extended season, how has it gone for you with balancing portal, prepping for this game specifically? Where are you at mentally? Obviously you're dialed in and fired up, but mentally how has that been on you?**

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Coach Sark, I too am watching "Judge Judy." I see it as well. So no harm taken.

It's absolute chaos. Anybody who says it's not chaos is lying to you. That's the world we live in right now is chaos, but you're either going to embrace it and respond to what's pitched to you or you're not. Nobody is going to care. Nobody cares what happens to you. They care your response to what happens.

I think we're over here -- I mean, I couldn't imagine playing in a game last week with what we were doing. We had it easy. I really couldn't imagine what Coach Sarkisian had to go through last week with the portal and opening while also preparing for a gigantic football game.

But for us it's been a great challenge balancing it all, and I have no clue if we're doing it right. We'll find out here in about six months, in a year if we did it right. We'll find out in 10 days if we managed this three-and-a-half-week break right.

Regardless if it's good or bad, we'll learn from it, we'll grow, we'll get better, and we'll respond.

**Q. For both Steve and Kenny, you guys would have ran into each other at the Iron Bowl, but what is something you observed about each other's careers? You touched a little bit on it in your opening statements.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think from Kenny's perspective, he's obviously a very bright football coach, and he's been around other really good football coaches. Now, I've been fortunate that same way, as well, in my career as I grew up playing for Norm Chow and then starting my career at SC with him being the coordinator and then going to work for a Norv Turner and still all the while being around a Pete Carroll, and then later in my career getting around Coach Saban. I think Coach Dillingham, same thing. He's been around some really good coaches. But you can see how innovative he's been.

Whether he knows it or not, I've watched his stuff, too. Not only when he's been a coordinator from an offensive perspective but really as a head coach.

People don't know this, that Washington probably should have lost to Arizona State a year ago, and we watched that game very closely because of playing Washington in the playoff, and the way he attacked them not only on offense but on defense, on special teams, that was a head coach that was trying to win the game. So I have a lot of respect for him in that approach.

A lot of guys put on a head coaching hat and then they go find that head coaching manual and they just kind of cookie-cutter it because that's how we're supposed to do it. I give him a lot of credit, and I have a lot of respect for him because he does what he thinks is the best thing to do, and sometimes that's not always what the manual says to do, and in this day and age of college football, we all have to continually evolve.

I think he's blazing a trail for some older coaches to look at



to say, hey, maybe there's a better way. We don't always have to do it the way we've always done it before. I think we've all got to think that way. This is a new era. There's a lot of change going on. We've all got to think outside the box a little bit, and I credit him for doing that. They've done a nice job.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, in regards to Coach Sark, I was a high school coach when he started his career as a head coach, and the way he's evolved offensively. There's a lot of good offensive schemes out there, and then there's offensive coaches who change their scheme and are constantly getting better. I think that's something that he's done as good if not better than anybody in the country is if you turned on his tape from 10 years ago, it's going to be unrecognizable to his tape right now.

That is very challenging to do when you're successful. When you're successful, you want to keep doing what got you successful. It's very challenging to be, in my opinion, to be humble enough to constantly continually adapt to the current landscape to the rules. You can't cut block on the perimeter, to RPOs and how they change the game in terms of substitution patterns, and now you can slow teams down that sub late. You couldn't do that 15 years ago.

He has always adapted with the game and almost been ahead of the curve a little bit, and that's really challenging to do. It's a testament to, one, how hard he works because you can't adapt unless you study. He's always studied and I've always been able to kind of steal a few things from him.

I really remember when he was at Washington way back when, he was a big FIB guy, and he was one of the first people to really dive into FIB and challenge people with how they played the big nickel and what to do, and I was like, what is he doing, this makes no sense. I couldn't process it. I was trying to learn it.

But all of that stuff that he's done, he's just constantly evolved and evolved and evolved to get to where he's at right now, which is one of the best offenses in college football, and I think that same philosophy he carries over as a head coach in terms of there's no stagnant. People aren't stagnant in that program, and I think you can see that.

His offensive philosophy is becoming the program philosophy, which is pretty impressive when you are young, innovative, and you continue to evolve throughout your entire career. Just got a lot of respect for him.

**Q. Steve, you're going to look across and see a lot of guys who were in your building. How does that**

**change, and what's that like, especially in a game like this? Then for Kenny, similar thing, a lot of guys in burnt orange are now playing for your team in Tempe. What will that be like for those players?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: You know, I think this is college football in 2024 and moving forward. It's almost got a little bit of an NFL feel that way.

I'm happy for all those guys, especially the guys that are having some success in Coach Dillingham's program. In this day and age of college football, it's about creating opportunities for our young people, and the way the transfer portal works, when new coaches get jobs and -- half their roster I'm sure when Kenny took over at Arizona State jumped ship and now he's trying to fill his roster, so that creates opportunities for other players and other programs to maybe go there and contribute and find a role that's different than maybe what their role was here, and vice versa for that matter.

I'm happy for all those guys that they had this opportunity. You transfer schools and you never know; am I going to transfer to have an opportunity to get in the College Football Playoff; are those things a reality. And for them to be in the quarterfinals of the CFP, I'm really happy for those guys. I know our players, they were kind of talking about today, so-and-so, oh, yeah, so-and-so, so the names started popping up again today.

But I do think that's the era of college football where we're at right now. It's 2024, the portal is alive and well, and 2025 is going to roll around and there will be more faces moving around.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, I couldn't agree more. That's the nature of the beast right now is people will be moving around. You'll be playing your former teammates.

At the end of the day, we're playing in the Peach Bowl with eight teams left. If that is more energy, then something is wrong with you. If you need external factors to get excited to play in this game, you're at the wrong program here. We want people who are competitive. There's eight teams left in college football. This is about competing versus one of the best teams in the country in the Peach Bowl and all 120 of our guys get to go, all 120 of their guys get to go and experience what college football is about, and that's competing in one of the biggest bowl games.

**Q. Steve, the other night Gunnar Helm set the season record for receptions by a tight end. Talk about Gunnar's role, his ability in your offense as a safety blanket for Quinn, and for Coach Dillingham, just thoughts on Gunnar as a player?**

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STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, so Gunnar, I think we all know the path, his journey, the development that he's had in our program. I'm super proud of him. What I like about Gunnar is he's a really versatile guy. We rely on him to block the C-area. He had some tough match-ups against some of these six techniques that he's blocking. He had a couple tough match-ups the other night when they moved the three technique out to defensive end. It was not a favorable match-up, but he fights for us in the C-area and he does a great job.

He's a really good play action pass tight end where we can find voids for him, but he also has evolved his game now into a down-the-field threat and a guy who can make plays with the ball in his hands with yards after the catch.

I do think his catch radius is a positive of his, and I think Quinn trusts that from him, that he's going to be where he's supposed to be, and that his catch radius is what it is so he can place balls in certain spots where he knows maybe if Gunnar doesn't catch it, it's probably incomplete.

They've just got good rapport. They've been together for three years now, and I think there's a lot of trust there.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, I think he just described his game play pretty good right there. Overall a really good player. They do a good job getting him open in the middle of the field with the play action game, the screen game, and then they use the width of the field so well that the middle of the field opens up for his game, and his length and size and the fact that he is a good C-area blocker sets everything up in between the hashes for him, whether it's vertically down the field, whether it's over-the-ball spacing concepts, or whether it's screens at the line of scrimmage. The way they set up their offense really allows a tight end to dominate in between the hashes on early downs.

I think he does a phenomenal job of that with his catch radius and his physicality. Then he's dynamic. Catching the ball, he has great contact balance when he catches the ball. He's not a tight end that's clumsy and catches it and falls. He catches it and extends completions, which is something that you never like to see when you're going versus a tight end. You want those guys to catch it and fall. You don't want them to catch it and run. That's something that he does really well.

**Q. For Steve, do you guys expect to have Isaiah Bond available for this game? For Kenny, I'm curious, obviously you've got an elite running back going up against an elite defensive line. What's the key to setting him up for success in that match-up?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think, like I said going into last week's game. I think Isaiah continues to make really good progress for us. Obviously we're quite a ways out, so my goal is coming out of Christmas here that that progress continues in a positive direction and we can see where it goes from there.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, and obviously we've got to get Cam going in some way shape or form. Everybody knows that. You've got to get your best players the ball. They know that. It's not a secret.

They do such a good job being fundamentally sound and just defeating blocks. That's going to be a great challenge for us and our offensive staff is creating angles, creating leverage to give our guys an advantage to get Cam started and at least get him to second and third levels of players where he can win one-on-ones and not getting stuck at the line of scrimmage, obviously.

But they do such a good job fundamentally moving D-linemen around, not big tweaks but minor tweaks throughout a game plan to take advantage of your running game, and like I said, I think that's why they do a good job defensively is small changes are what good coordinators do, not big changes, and they're a team that's filled with small changes within a game plan.

We've got to find ways to get into the second and third level. It's going to be a great challenge.

**Q. For both Steve and Kenny, Steve, you kind of started off giving some praise for Cam Skattebo. If you can further expand on what he does well and how that's going to challenge your defense. For Kenny, you've coached some elite quarterbacks in the past. What are your thoughts on Quinn Ewers and the threats he poses as a quarterback?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think this: He's a really versatile player. I think when you first turn on Cam's tape you're thinking you're just going to see Mike Alstott; you're just going to see this bruiser that's just running into the line of scrimmage and bouncing off of people. Then the more you watch him, you're like, man, this guy has got really good feet, this guy has got great contact balance. This guy, right when you think he's getting to run somebody over, he makes them miss. He uses his stiff arm. He's really good in the open field. He can run away from you. Then all of a sudden, you're like, but wait a minute, this guy catches the ball really well out of the backfield. He's got really good initial quickness after the catch to get vertical. So he's a really versatile player.

I was hoping he was going to be kind of a one-dimensional

guy, when you just kind of watch SportsCenter and different things, but all of a sudden, you start looking at the cut-up of him and the explosive plays and how they're happening, his versatility is probably the thing that stands out to me the most.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, and Quinn, obviously I recruited Quinn a little bit out of high school, so I got to watch him. He doesn't even know I recruited him because I had no chance to sign him, so I never really talked to him but I watched him.

He's a phenomenal player. He's accurate, can extend plays, super intelligent. You can tell when he gets to the line of scrimmage -- one of the things that I don't think gets praised enough is smart quarterbacks that get you into good plays. When you watch him play, you see him getting them into good plays consistently, and those are the dangerous guys, the guys that when there's nine seconds left on the clock checks you into a touchdown. He does that consistently.

I know Coach Sark even alluded to it after their game, checked them into two runs, you can see that and you can see that the power and confidence that creates for a quarterback is huge. He throws the ball downfield very accurately, and like I said, he makes people miss. In the pocket he's hard to bring down. His pocket awareness is really high.

Then when you can throw versus one-I teams outside the field numbers as a quarterback, that's a complete eraser. When you can throw the ball and you have confidence throwing the ball outside the numbers of the field in single-I defense, that erases single-I defense for the most part. He has a lot of confidence in that, and they do a lot of things to get the ball out there, which puts stress on the defense, so kudos to him.

**Q. Steve, as well as y'all ran it against Clemson, you did have some runs stuffed in short-yardage situations. I just wondered after looking at the film if there was any trend there.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Some bad planning, some bad execution, without getting into the particulars on which plays were which. Probably could have planned it a little bit better, and we definitely could have in a couple instances executed better.

I hated that because I think a couple of those could have really changed the momentum in the game. The one was after a turnover, and we had an opportunity to go up 28-7. We didn't capitalize on that. Then the other one there I think it was 3rd and goal from the 2 and we lose a couple

yards and we settle for the field goal, which we got three points.

But probably those two instances stand out to me the most. But I think it was a combination of things.

**Q. Sark, this next couple of days you turn the guys loose. How important is it for them to be with family this time of year but also as a coaching staff how tough is it to kind of see them scatter for a couple days at such an important time?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I do think it's important. This has been a long grind for us. We started August 31st, went all the way through the SEC Championship there and had a couple weeks and we took a few days before the Clemson game that first week to get ready for Clemson. We felt like the formula worked pretty good. We felt appreciate. We felt fast. We felt physical. I thought the guys had a good grasp of the game plan.

So coming out of this week's game, coming back to work Sunday and Monday and then giving everybody a couple days for Christmas felt like the right thing to do. We'll get everybody back the 26th and we'll go to work.

You know, part of that is we're in year four, and this is year two, back-to-back years of being in the College Football Playoff. I think we've got people in our organization and players on our team who came here for reasons that this is part of the reason why they came was to be in these moments.

If I can't trust them now, then when can I trust them? There's eight teams left, and we're one of the eight. If I can't trust our guys for a couple days to go home and drink eggnog with their mom, then when am I going to trust them? They'll be ready to go on the 26th.

**Q. It's been mentioned a couple times that the Sun Devil offense has the second fewest turnovers in the country with eight and the Longhorn defense has forced the most turnovers with 29. Kenny, when turning on the tape, what has made the Longhorn defense so effective at creating havoc for opposing offenses, and then for Steve, what has made it so difficult for opposing defenses to turn the Sun Devils over on offense?**

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, it all starts with pass rush. They get pass rush, they get tipped balls. Their defensive line gets in throwing windows. Then their back end, obviously the versatility, they'll drop eight, they'll rush four, they'll rush five, they'll mix it up a little bit, and then the corners are sticky. They're sticky players. There's not

much space. It really sounds like a boring answer, but they're good. They're coached well. When the ball hits their hands, they catch it.

Then the pass rush, like I said, everything starts with impacting the quarterback. When you talk about turnovers, they impact the quarterback enough and they get enough tipped balls to create some bonus turnovers I would call them, which are the tipped-ball turnovers. Those are like additional.

Yeah, they're just well-coached. They're where they're supposed to be. They're talented. Then those guys play hard, so they're around the football. That's a good combination to create takeaways.

STEVE SARKISIAN: On the flipside, when you look at it, when you have a runner carry it as much as Cam carries it and to think as a team they only have three fumbles on the year, to me that tells me they practice ball security. You just don't not fumble the ball. You work at not fumbling the ball. You work on stumble bum. You work on two hands on the ball and contact, not switching the ball. The ball is in their outside arm. That's fundamentally right when they carry the ball.

Secondly, I think the quarterback makes good decisions. I think he only has five interceptions on the year, so he's making good decisions. They've got a great plan. Obviously with Kenny's background and Marcus Arroyo, those guys are really good football coaches, so they put together good schemes, and you can tell the quarterback is really well-coached up. He makes good decisions. They're not forcing throws. He trusts his guys to go make their plays, but at the end of the day, if you're holding on to the ball and then your quarterback makes good decisions, that's about all you can ask for, and they're getting that.

It's a credit to them. On the flipside, we know the issues it's caused us. We've had a strange year when it comes to the turnover bug that we've had, and it's come at odd times, and it can change the impact in games.

They've done a great job of controlling football games by not turning it over.

**Q. For both guys, Coach Sark, you talked about being proud to get to this moment. You've always talked about how much you love this team. How much confidence do you have going into this game? And for Coach Dillingham, you say you're going against one of the best teams. Do you like your chances going into this one?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I'm definitely proud of our guys.

Like I said, it's been a long season, and having gone to the College Football Playoff a year ago and literally being inches away from playing for a National Championship and knowing what the goals were coming into this season, and to be back in the College Football Playoff, when four of us were in the CFP a year ago but we were the only team that made it back into the College Football Playoff in an expanded version of 12 teams, there's a lot to be proud of, but mostly I'm proud of our veterans, our leaders, our seniors, because those guys went from 5-7 in year one, they went through 8-5 in year two, and they didn't jump ship. They hung in there with us. They believed in what they were doing.

Going into last year and not finishing it the way we would have liked and then to get back again this year, I just think, like I said, it's a credit to the leadership on our team.

This is a heck of a challenge. You don't -- you're not a conference championship team, especially in the Big 12 -- I want to remind everybody, we were in that Big 12, what, for 27 years? We won four. This is their first year in and they won a Big 12 Championship. It's a really hard thing to do.

They're playing with a ton of confidence right now. The last two months, I think they're playing as good a football as anybody in the country, and that's a credit to Coach Dillingham and their staff and building their team as they've gotten better and better as the year has gone on, and it's clear as day to see when you watch the tape. This is a heck of a challenge for us.

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, obviously our guys are excited to go be able to compete versus one of the bluebloods and compete versus one of the best teams in the country. Like I said at the start, you turn on the tape, and the way they've recruited, the way they've coached this football team, it's a team that preseason can win a National Championship, last year could have won a National Championship, this year can win a National Championship. All you want is the opportunity to compete versus the best.

I think any competitor regardless of what you do, you want a chance to compete versus the very best, and if you don't want to do that, then you're not a competitor. I think that's what our guys are excited for is that opportunity.

I'm excited to see our guys get out there and be able to do just that. We're 14-point underdogs, and rightfully so. We're playing a really good football team. But at the same token, I'm excited to see our guys go compete as hard as they can compete for as long as they can compete, play smart and tough football, take care of the ball and be about the team for 60 minutes and see what happens.





**Q. Kenny, on the transfer portal, you have so many ex-Longhorns. Is your philosophy just to call Steve and say, hey, I need a D-lineman or safety or wide receiver, or is it just happenstance you target so many Texas players? Steve, do you think Kenny owes you a player like Cam Skattebo for all these loaners?**

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, that is 100 percent or philosophy. He's actually going to give us Quinn and a few other guys this week, so I'm fired up about that. He said he was going to give us about six or seven dudes for this game. He's just going to let me know it on game day. I'm excited for that.

But in all seriousness, we knew we were joining the Big 12, and I had a strategy and we had a strategy as a staff when we were joining the Big 12 that we were going to play games in Texas so we wanted to recruit Texas at a higher rate, and we felt like where we were as a program kind of being in between Hawai'i, Utah, Southern California and then Texas, that within two hours a kid from Dallas or Houston can fly to us and that would kind of be our niche is be a school that recruits both California, Utah, Hawai'i and also have a big state in Texas.

That was kind of our plan all along, and I will say this, the guys we've gotten from Texas and Coach Sark's program have been unbelievable. That may be why we're going back -- we've gone back to the well when some of their guys have hit the portal is we know what we're getting when we're getting a guy from that program, and that's a guy who has worked really hard, competed and been pushed. Those are the things that we like to bring in.

STEVE SARKISIAN: In all reality, I wish I would have discovered Cam when he was transferring the first time around. I was unaware, so kudos to them. They found him, and he's a heck of a player.

**Q. For both of y'all, you look back on the regular season a bit, and what were some of the biggest challenges competing in a new conference, but also what were some of the benefits of being the new kid on the block?**

KENNY DILLINGHAM: I think one of the challenges were the environments. We were not used to getting tortillas thrown at us at Texas Tech. You're not used to some of these environments. When you're in the Pac-12 you're playing in Seattle, you're playing in LA, you're playing in Salt Lake City, you're playing in different environments. We got to face a lot more small college town football with really, really great environments.

Some of the advantages were people didn't know much about us. People hadn't played us in the past, so we were a little bit different, and obviously I think that's part of we have 16 new guys on our team from last year. Even if we would have been in the league, we would have been a different team.

It was definitely fun to join a new league, a league as passionate as the Big 12 is for football, a league whose roots are in the state of Texas, which everybody knows Texas high school football is some of the best high school football in the country, and to be able to create a footprint in the state or try to create a footprint as much as we can in the state is something that I truly believe in.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think the challenges for us were probably very similar to Coach Dillingham's in that we went into some tough environments. We renewed two rivalries with Arkansas and A&M and going on the road to both of those were obviously very challenging.

But again on the flipside, I do think being the new kid on the block, maybe we weren't exposed to them as much, so they had to do a little bit more research on us. When I really felt like in the Big 12 we really had to recreate ourselves every week because so many common opponents, so many similarities from a defensive perspective, especially where you almost had to recreate stuff week in and week out, where this year around in the SEC, a little different style of play that I think was challenging, but probably the most challenging thing for us more than anything was just dealing with some of the unfortunate injuries that we had and managing those things and what that looked like.

Again, I don't think that was a direct correlation with being in the SEC, it just happened to be our first year in the SEC, and managing some of the injury bug that we had, especially on the offensive side of the ball.

THE MODERATOR: Again, thanks to both coaches for the time today. Appreciate you guys taking the time to be with us. We'll let you guys get back to work, and we will see you both in Atlanta really soon.

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