

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl

Thursday, January 8, 2026

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Gary Stokan

Press Conference



**PLAYOFF
SEMIFINAL**



GARY STOKAN: Welcome, everybody. Appreciate you coming to Atlanta and the capital of college football to be here for the 58th Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl.

I want to recognize a couple of people to start. We have our chairman, Percy Vaughn. Percy, where are you seated? Welcome, Percy.

Jim Terry, the CEO of the Dodd Foundation, and we have some of the Dodd Coach of the Year winners that have come back to enjoy the game, and we'll talk about that in a little bit.

I'm going to do something a little bit different. This is my last go-around, so my last game after 12 years of volunteering in my corporate life for the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl, and now 28 years as CEO and president. Do a little history lesson here, so indulge me, if you will.

In 1998 when I took the job, Peach Bowl is the ninth oldest bowl game in the country, but the first bowl game founded for charity. And in 1998, we had a net income of \$329,000. We had only to that point been able to give a million dollars since 1968 to 1998 to charity because the bowl wasn't doing all that great.

We only had 1.2 million in reserve. We now have multi-million dollars in reserve, and we were called a third-tier bowl game by our own newspaper, the Atlanta Journal and Constitution. So like the Phoenix from the ashes in Atlanta, we've now generated \$1.6 billion in economic impact since that time and 103 million in tax revenue.

We've paid out \$374 million in team payouts. And as my parents instilled four major things into me, one of them was leave things better than you found them. I think we've left it better than we found it back in 1998.

The other thing that we were able to do as a charitable bowl is we were able to donate after this year, \$75 million to charities in Atlanta, Georgia and throughout the country of teams that have played in our game. And that makes us

the most charitable bowl organization in the country by far out of the 44 bowl organizations.

Some of the things we've donated to, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, we've donated \$25 million to find cures and trials to eradicate childhood cancer. We're using college football for the greater good. We now have 18 trials with 100 kids and everything from trials from neuroblastoma to leukemia hoping that we can find some cure that will give a kid another month, another year, another lifetime to live.

Our trials already have given many of these kids at least six months to a year still to live because these trials have been successful. So we're humbly proud of that.

We've also donated over \$10 million to the universities that have participated in both our kickoff -- our Aflac Kickoff Game and our Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl, where we now have \$10 million in our John Lewis, Legacy of Courage scholarships, and 40 universities throughout the country earmarked for title I kids. And title I kids in Atlanta, Georgia are kids that don't have the money to attend college. And in many cases, they're the first kid in their whole generation of families that are able to attend college.

And then lastly, this building here was a part of what the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl did to make Atlanta the capital of college football by relocating, building and sustaining this building, the College Football Hall of Fame.

So as a second thing that my parents taught me, it's better to give than to receive. I think we have handled that and done that as well.

I think the other thing that was important to us is being a leader in college football. And so we had division to become the capital of college football by not only bringing the College Football Hall of Fame here, but when the twelfth game was legislated to the schedules back in 2007/08, we created the Chick-fil-A kickoff game, now Aflac Kickoff Game, which has changed the face of college football on the front side of the season and become a major data point for the CFP selection committee.

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You now have teams like Miami playing Notre Dame and Ohio State playing Texas in the many games that we've created on the front side of the season that would have never happened before with until we started the kickoff format.

We've created the seven-company Peach Bowl Challenge Golf Tournament, which annually is the preeminent coach golf tournament where we donate over \$3,000,000 to the coaches' charities and foundations that come to play in our golf tournament.

We've managed and operated the Dodd Trophy presented by PNC, which has become the most coveted college Coach of the Year Trophy in the United States, and we'll talk about that in a few minutes, and then obviously we talked about relocating the College Football Hall of Fame here.

So a third tenet my parents taught me is treat people with respect and kindness. You can't do those type of things that we've been able to do without treating people with respect in how you want to be treated.

And then lastly, we've earned our way into the College Football Playoff. As I mentioned, we were looked at as a third-tier bowl game back in 1998. We've sold out 25 of 28 Chick-fil-A bowls. We've hosted four CFP semifinals, and each year we've hosted, we've hosted the number one team in the country.

Over the last seven years, we're second only to the Rose Bowl in viewership and attendance. We've sold out 17 of 23 Aflac kickoff games. We've won best places to work and best employees in sports awards, and the bowl season gives out two awards every year, and we've won each of them the last two years, the best student-athlete experience and the best in community engagement awards.

So the last tenet I was instilled was to work hard, do the right thing all the time, and we think we've done that.

So I guess I would add two other tenets that I've learned throughout my career, and when I announce my retirement, I told people that when I looked in the dictionary with the label of retirement, it said ceasing to work, and I told people I guess I can't retire because I haven't worked a day in my life in 48 years being in sports. So it's been a blessing.

I tell people all the time that the fifth tenet I live by is enjoy the journey. You've gotta enjoy every day because God doesn't promise you another second, minute, hour or day on this earth. And there's four things on your tomb stone;

one is your name, two is the day you were born, three is the day you die, and fourth is a dash in between those dates. And I've tried to fill that dash with a lot of great memories, and I would advise you to do the same because that's what life's all about.

And lastly, in closing, it's to have an attitude of gratitude. Everything you do when you wake up in the morning, you should have an attitude of gratitude because when your feet hit the floor, it's a great day. If your feet don't hit the floor, it's a bad alternative. So getting out of bed and having an attitude of gratitude, if you have that, I guarantee you something good is going to happen.

If you have a bad attitude when you get out of bed, I guarantee you something bad is going to happen. So make sure you have a great attitude of gratitude. And I extend that attitude to gratitude to my staff, who's the best in the business, as you'll find out this week, to my board who have become friends, supporters and partners in helping us achieve the many things we've been able to achieve over the last 28 years and to the many volunteers who have provided, during the holidays, the southern hospitality that Atlanta is known for.

And so I'll close with extending my attitude of gratitude to the media. You've always treated us first class. We appreciate you, and we respect you, and hopefully you have a great time here in Atlanta. God bless you. Thank you.

And the other announcement I have is we being took over managing and operating the Dodd Trophy, and the Dodd Trophy has become the most coveted Coach of the Year Award. And I will tell you that the gentlemen that are sitting to my left are emblematic of what the Dodd Trophy stands for, which is leadership, scholarship and integrity.

There's a lot of Coach of the Year awards, but this is different, and you have to win on the field, sure, to be a Coach of the Year. But what you give back to your community and in leadership and then also the integrity you have of graduating your kids are equally important in giving out this award.

And so I want to tell you a little bit about our winner this year and tell you a little bit about Coach Dodd, if you don't know. Coach Dodd coached at Georgia Tech obviously, played at Tennessee, was an All-American quarterback, and one of only four people that have been inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame as a player and a coach. And he always stood by those tenants of scholarship, leadership and integrity.

He would not run kids off. And back then you had 190 kids

on your team, and if the kid couldn't play, you'd run them off. Secondly, he always made sure that everybody got their education because he finished as a sophomore at Tennessee and never got his degree. So he's going to make sure everybody he coached got their degree, which they did at Georgia Tech, and went onto become CEOs and great productive citizens in our society.

But the winner this year has an impressive 98.2 academic progress rate and a graduation rate of 88. In the community, his players partner with numerous local charities to raise awareness of important causes, while gaining mentorship and leadership experience that will help them shape their life and their experience and service-minded leaders as they graduate college.

Whether it's been Hoosiers for good, the Raleigh Children's Hospital or The Boys and Girls Club of Bloomington, this coach has been instrumental in making Bloomington better because of his leadership.

On the football field, this year's winner was a perfect 14 and 0, and so far this season has the highest ranking in the program history. They're the BIG TEN champs, the Rose Bowl champs, BIG TEN Coach of the Year, number one in the nation, and they came from being preseason ranked number 20.

He also captured last year a lot of the Coach of the Year awards and is 24 and 2 over the last two years, the most wins in BIG TEN history for a coach in the first two seasons of his program. So on behalf of our partner, PNC, Peach Bowl Inc., and the Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year Foundation, we're proud to honor Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti as the recipient of the 2025 Dodd Trophy presented by PNC Bank.

I'm going to ask our coaches to come up here and join me on the stage and collectively together we'll bring Coach Cignetti out to present the Dodd Trophy sitting in front of me right here.

CURT CIGNETTI: Thank you. I'm honored to win this award, the Bobby Dodd Award. I worked for Johnny Majors at pit. He talked about Coach Dodd all the time. Coach Majors played at Tennessee about that time.

It represents scholarship, integrity and leadership. I think our team really exemplifies that, and it's a team award and couldn't do it without the great people in our organization. So it's an honor and I thank you. Thank you very much.

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