

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

Tuesday, December 26, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Penn State Nittany Lions

James Franklin

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach, if you would, just start with an opening statement on getting to Atlanta, the team arriving, and getting settled in for bowl week.

JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, I want to thank everybody for getting on and covering Penn State football. Obviously covering the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl. It's been a great opportunity.

I want to thank Chick-Fil-A. I want to thank the Peach Bowl. I want to thank the Marriott Marquis. They've been awesome. We've had a great experience so far.

Also would like to take a minute and thank Georgia Tech. We were able to go over and use their facilities for practice on Sunday, I think it was, and it's been great. We've had a really, really good experience. So appreciate everybody there.

Obviously a great opportunity. First time ever playing Ole Miss, which is unusual in 2023 to say two storied programs like Penn State and Ole Miss have never played each other before. Pretty cool opportunity.

Then for Penn State specifically, an opportunity for to be the first program to win all six New Year's Six bowl games. Never been done before. With the opportunity of doing it, if we do it, it will never be done again based on us going to the playoffs after this anyway. So really cool opportunity.

Our guys have been great. I'm thankful to them. They've done a really good job of knowing when it's time to work and when it's time to enjoy themselves. To me, that's what bowl games are all about.

Again, the city of Atlanta, Chick-Fil-A, the Peach Bowl, Marriott Marquis, everybody's been awesome to us, and we appreciate the opportunity.

Q. We weren't sure what Kalen's situation was. I'm sure you were pretty sure about it, but can you tell us what it means to have him at the bowl site and available for the game.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah. I think you guys have heard me talk about this in the past. These are different times in college football, and we've worked really hard to create a relationship with our players that there can be open and honest dialogue and discussions.

We've tried to create an environment where really there's no reason for any player to opt-out. What I mean by that is all the way back to Saquon Barkley, who was being projected as a top 15 pick, there's a way to do this where the player, the family, the agents, whoever, everybody's comfortable with the plan.

To be able to finish the season with your teammates, I think is important, but I also understand the challenge of it. So just try to have great conversations and discussion. Kalen was great. Kalen's parents were great. I had really good discussions and came up with a plan that everybody was comfortable with. So great to have him here and be part of the program for one more game.

Q. You talked a few weeks ago about guys not needing to announce they're coming back. That should be the expectation. But Tyler Warren did put out, since we talked to you, that he's coming back next year. What does that mean for you and your program as you get ready to springboard from this game to 2024?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, obviously he and Theo both had some decisions to make. Theo made his decision, and we're very, very supportive of that, and Tyler made his. Obviously we're supportive and excited about that.

Now we have a responsibility for all these guys, just like we did with Olu, to make sure that we did everything in our power that it was the right decision. Again, healthy discussions with both Tyler, Tyler's mom and dad, Coach Howle, myself, Chuck Losey, of what that would look like.

We've been fortunate, Andy Frank does a really good job. He and Chuck Losey are working with all of the NFL scouts and GMs and getting really good feedback about where guys are at, but the other thing is not just where you're being anticipated or predicted of being drafted, what are your strengths, and then what are your weaknesses?

If a guy decides to come back, how do we attack those weaknesses over the next seven months so that they're in a much better position next year and so are we as an organization.

We've done a really good job of recruiting and developing the tight end room. I think Tyler really helps us because there's some guys behind him we think are really talented, but it sure is nice to have a veteran back while those guys are gaining some experience.

So a real positive for us in this game and a real positive for us moving into the season.

Q. Talking about, what have your impressions been of Jaxson -- what you've seen of him thus far.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, I think he's asking for your impressions of Jaxson Dart.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I assumed that, but I didn't want to assume. I wanted to make sure.

Obviously you look at his numbers. He put up really good numbers in the passing game in terms of yards per attempt, in terms of completion percentage, touchdown to interception ratio. He's also a guy that can beat you with his mind and decision-making, with his arm and accuracy, but then also with his feet.

They're a challenging offense. You take his athleticism. You take their tempo. They're one of the better offenses that we've seen this year. So it's going to be a challenge. Lane's always done a really good job, specifically on that side of the ball, so it will be a challenge.

Obviously, as we know in college football, or really in any level in football, your quarterback has a major impact and factor in your success. So a ton of respect for him for what we've seen on film so far.

Q. When we talked to Gary Stokan a couple of weeks ago, he said obviously they're excited to welcome you guys to Atlanta, but Mercedes Benz is also hosting a playoff game next year and then the National Championship. So he said he's hoping you guys come back to Atlanta a couple of times. How can this environment prepare you for your future goals -- for

those guys that are coming back for 2024, how much does a Peach Bowl appearance help prepare you for next season and a potential playoff run?

JAMES FRANKLIN: First off, I want to thank Gary. Gary's been awesome. I've known Gary for a long time, and he's a pro. He's a football guy, and he's been doing this a long time, and he's been a pleasure to work with. I've been very impressed with everything from the Peach Bowl, and Gary obviously is leading it from the top. So appreciate that.

Yeah, I think these bowl games in a lot of ways, they are obviously the ending point of your season, that's obvious. But I do think there's a lot of discussion and argument about you can also make the argument they're the first game of next season for you.

You're probably going to have some situations where you're going to have some players that maybe were playing complementary roles for most of the season are going to have bigger roles in this game. So that's an opportunity for them. It's also an opportunity for the coaches to have them ready to play. That's part of it. That's part of this bowl season.

So, yeah, there's a lot to be said that this is the finishing touches of last season, but I think there's also an opportunity for us to get some momentum from this going into next season, and some of the guys that are going to play bigger roles on Saturday are obviously going to play bigger roles next year.

Besides that, I'll probably leave it at that, but I appreciate the question.

Q. I wanted to ask you the question, we talked to obviously Coach Kiffin earlier. He was very complimentary of you and your team. In my mind, I thought, hey, this must be a really good opportunity to ask about folks kind of behind the scenes, your staff. One of the things Coach Kiffin talked about was your top defense. I'm just wondering, can you talk a little bit about your staff and what you think of the work they've done this season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: It's interesting because, when you first started that question, I was thinking about Kevin Threlkel, and I was thinking about Destiny. I was thinking about Ben Kerr. I was thinking about Will Reimann. That's what I thought you were asking first. These are all our ops people that plan this whole trip, from the hotel to the meetings to the meals and everything, and they do a phenomenal job. We actually talked about that in our staff meeting this morning and not taking all of the organizational stuff that goes into it for granted.

But, yeah, our staff has been phenomenal. We're in a little bit different situation because we've had change at both the offensive and defensive coordinator positions. Obviously Manny Diaz has now become the head coach at Duke, and we wish him nothing but success, did a great job for us for the two years that he was with us.

We've been fortunate we've had a number of coaches leave our program to go be head coaches. So that's also, I think, shined a light on my staff as well because at the end of the season on offense, we made a change as the offensive coordinator and Ja'Juan Seider and Ty Howle stepped up into that role, and really we played well in the last two games of the year on offense.

On defense, we've got Anthony Poindexter and Rob Smith stepping up into that role. We've played as good, if not the best defense in all of college football. Arguably, depending on which metric you're looking at, the number one defense in all of college football. And we're going to need that against the fighting Lane Kiffin over there at Ole Miss. They do a great job, and I've got a ton of respect for them. It should be a heck of a game.

Q. Beyond recruiting, what do you believe can be gained by playing in a new city, a new bowl, and giving some people the opportunity to see Penn State football up close for the first time?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So I think a couple things. I think the amount of time that we're down here and going to the Martin Luther King Museum, there's an opportunity there, right, for our guys to experience some of that?

For them to be able to go into Mercedes Benz Stadium, cool experience. We practiced in there today. I thought that was great.

Some of those venues, I think, help you, whether it's for bowl games, whether it's for conference championship games, whether it's the playoffs. Playing in some of those venues, I think there's value in it as well so you don't have a number of those guys walking into stadiums and kind of looking around and kind of awestruck.

Us playing that last game of the year at Michigan State in the Detroit Lions stadium, I thought there was value in that as well.

But I think also, to your point, Penn State being one of the most storied programs in college football, but being able to come down into SEC country and allow maybe some people to see us that normally wouldn't see us specifically live rather than on TV. No different than us going to

Auburn two years ago and playing well.

I think maybe a portion of the country got a chance to see us live that normally doesn't see us live and say, hey, Big Ten plays good football and Penn State plays really good football, and we got the chance to see that firsthand. I think there's value in that as well.

Even some of the media, you got some of the local media that maybe hasn't had a chance to see us up close and in person, there's some value in that as well.

So there's a ton of reasons for our players to get out in a different part of the country, for our staff, to play an SEC opponent that we've got a ton of respect for and to play in this type of venue, there's a lot of reasons why this makes sense and why I think the bowl experience is still valuable for college football and for our players.

Q. Now that signing day is in the past and you have the two new coordinators for next year, what has this past week kind of looked like for you to kind of get back to football in a way? How have you seen the two new coaches kind of mesh in practices?

JAMES FRANKLIN: A couple things. One of the things I would like to say is I'm very appreciative of the staff and the job they did. I think we take it for granted at Penn State, having a drama-free signing day. That's unusual in college football, and we've been able to do that on a fairly consistent basis, and I think people take that for granted.

On top of that, our recruiting staff did a great job, our assistants did a great job because, again, we had change at both coordinator positions right before signing day. Most people, when that happens, you're going to lose some recruits because of it. Again, we didn't have any of that. So I think there's value in that.

But having both Tom and Andy here, obviously you'd prefer not to have to have changes be made, but if they are made, I think there's a ton of value in doing what we're doing. Tom's ability to be around the staff. Andy's ability to be around the staff. Staff meetings, game planning, watching film, watching the players, how we do things. So Tom's not out there at practice, Andy's not out there at practice during spring ball still trying to get a feel for how we practice and how we go about our business.

So I think there's a ton of value. I think I said it in the past. Joe Moorhead did it this way. Manny Diaz did it this way. I think there's a lot of value in doing it this way, and I think, for more times than not, it has allowed us to springboard the day after the season ends and really hit the ground running.

