

Rose Bowl Game presented by Capital One Venture X: Ohio State vs Utah

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Pasadena, California, USA

Ohio State Buckeyes Jaxon Smith-Njigba

Press Conference

Q. Do you feel like the old man certainly in the wide receiver room? What is your take on everything that's developed here?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It's certainly getting to that point. I've got a lot of experience, more than the others, but they'll be coming along. They'll be up there shortly. So it's fine.

Q. What is it like suddenly sort of be the leader? Is it kind of cool to put into play what you basically learned from Chris and Garrett about leadership?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, definitely I always wanted to be in this position. So it's just great that it's happening. I appreciate Chris and Garrett for allowing me to follow them and them taking me in the right direction. So I appreciate that.

Q. What's the biggest thing you learned from Chris, for example, about leadership, about what's expected there other than just showing up?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Just being there, like everybody got their eyes on you. So you've got to show up every day, and you've got to be a leader. He was more of an I'm going to show you how to do it. So I appreciate that from him for sure.

Q. The fact he's here on this trip and stuff -- I don't think Garrett's here, right? But what are you -- what does him being here mean to you, I guess? Is it a distraction, or is it one last shot with the guys?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, one last shot with the guys for sure. We're rooming together, so it's great to him be there and still be supportive and help me out and still talk to me about like what he sees and what he wants to see. Yeah, it means a lot for sure.



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Q. One more quick follow. You can look at a ballgame as the end of a season or the beginning of another season or the beginning of a new time. This receiver corps has been ballyhooed, not just for you three guys, but for the depth. Are we going to get a good shot at what's coming in 2022 by watching this game? Who's exciting you most, I guess, among those young guys?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, that's definitely how we're looking at it. Just a snowball into next season. So you'll get to see what you'll see into next season.

I'm excited to see Marvin Harrison, Jr., do his thing, Emeka Egbuka do his thing, and Julian Fleming will be out there too. So I'm excited to play with those guys.

Q. You mentioned those names. Have you seen a reenergized energy and practice from those guys that you mentioned knowing they're going to get some playing time for sure?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, they're definitely coming on knowing they've got to step up for this game. I think they're ready for it. I think they're prepared. I know they're ready to have fun out there on Saturday.

Q. This will be the first time you're the de facto number one option primary guy out there. How much does that really pump you up to know you're going to be the number one guy?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It definitely pumps me up. We've got to get the job done first. Yeah, I'm excited. Just got to seize every opportunity. It will be fun.

Q. I'm sure you're going to miss not playing with Garrett and Chris. I was hoping you could address that.

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: They're not going to be out there. We've got some young receivers that have got to step up. It will be fun to watch. Yeah, I appreciate Chris and Garrett



for the time that they've spent here. It's greatly appreciated. I just want to thank them as much as I can for real.

Q. Chris is still practicing with you guys. Has he told you why?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: He just wants to be out there. Love for the brotherhood for real. Not saying Garrett doesn't have that love. He's got some things to figure out for himself, but Chris is able to be here. He got some time. So he's just wants to be one last ride.

Q. Any chance at the last minute he comes in?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: I have no idea. I don't think so, though.

Q. How are you guys going to line up on Saturday? Will you still stay in the slot? I assume you will.

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, I'll still be in the slot.

Q. Is it going to be Emeka and Marvin -- or I'm sorry, Julian?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Julian will be outside, and Marvin will be outside too.

Q. You have watched these guys practice. We haven't seen them a lot. You've seen them some. Give kind of your analysis of the kind of player they are, what do you think they can be.

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Julian is real physical, very fast, very athletic, of course. To make plays, very strong. Marvin Harrison, he's got great feet. He's a great route runner, great hands. He's got some size on him. Yeah, those are two good players.

Emeka, he's just very explosive, kind of a little bit like myself. Great routes, great hands. It's going to be fun.

Q. Can you sense from them how excited they are to have this opportunity to kind of break in with C.J. to get ready for next year?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: I know they're very excited to get this opportunity. I know, when I got my first start, how I felt. You've just got something to prove, ready to prove it. I can see it in those guys' faces. I know they're excited. I'm excited for them. It's going to be a good one.

Q. For those who would say, well, Ohio State's chances just took a major hit, you don't have Wilson or

Olave, in addition to Nicholas and Haskell, what do you say?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Of course we expect them to say that, but it's our job to prove everybody wrong. That's what we're going to do. We expect that. It's fine.

Q. Jaxon, does it feel like just in 48 hours you went from being one of the guys to being the guy? This was your role for next year, but now you're the unquestioned leader in this wide receiver group?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Definitely. It was great to have Chris and Garrett to follow and show me the way. I'm blessed to be in this position.

Q. As far as C.J., how do you feel about his chemistry with some of the other guys? What have you seen in practice?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It's definitely building. Those guys have put in a lot of work in the spring and over the summer. So they got a pretty good connection out on the practice field. I mean, it's going to be different in the game, but we just -- if we stay focused and do what we have to do, it will all work out fine.

Q. You've been here for a couple days in Southern California. Do you feel anything special about this Rose Bowl? Are you starting to soak this in a little bit?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, for sure. Just energy and practice, it seems different out there seeing palm trees and stuff. Yeah, I'm excited to be on that field for real. A lot of greats have come before us. It's going to be exciting for sure.

Q. It's a weird game. You guys don't know much about Utah going in. You've had a few weeks now. What do you know about Utah that you've learned in December?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: When I watched the film, they've got some great players. They play really hard. Yeah, they play really hard. It's going to be fun.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your brother. Is it Canaan?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Canaan, yes.

Q. You guys are both obviously very, very high level athletes. What was that like growing up with someone -- like did you kind of recognize -- was it hard to kind of recognize that you were maybe more athletic than the

average person and you've got an older brother who's probably doing the same kind of crazy stuff?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Sure, it was a very competitive household. We were always focused on really just beating each other at what we were doing. But yeah, like when we would go out and play other people, it would be crazy.

I definitely think that helped us, or helped me having an older brother competitive like that in what he does. Yeah, it was definitely different.

Q. Were your mom or dad like real high-level athletes?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: My dad, he played college football. So he was always working me and my brother out like every day.

Q. Did your brother play football and then just eventually kind of branch off to baseball?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: He played football and baseball when he was really young, played football up to high school, but knew that wasn't his route. He played quarterback and knew it wasn't his route for sure.

Q. Were you a baseball player at any point?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Yeah, I played baseball up to my eighth grade year. It was a little too slow for me, though.

Q. Was he a better football player, or were you a better baseball player?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: I would say I was a better baseball player, but he would definitely not agree with that. But I would say I was a better baseball player.

Q. Do you guys kind of -- what are your conversations like about -- because baseball is a sport where you're going to fail a lot.

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: A lot, yeah.

Q. And you're not going to catch every pass.

You're not going to win every game in football. What are your conversations like in terms of you guys both have an understanding of what it's like to do this at a very high level that most people can't? What is it like to have that kind of support?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It's definitely great to have that perspective because in baseball, like you say, you're going to fail a lot. Like he hit the ball 2 out of 10 times, like that's

great. You've just got to take what's given to you. And patience, patience is a big key. He teaches me that a lot, being out on the baseball field. It's great to have him as my biggest supporter. Probably wouldn't be here without him, so I appreciate him for sure.

Q. What's this week been like for you?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It's been fun. Just chilling with the guys, having fun at practice, competitive. My first time being out in L.A., so I'm definitely enjoying it for sure.

Q. How do you try to balance the fact that this game is a celebration of what you guys did this year while knowing this can also kind of be the launching point for what you want to accomplish next year?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Just having to switch, I guess, just staying focused on the main goal. The main goal is winning. Yeah, that's just what I have in my head right now.

Q. How do you feel like your leadership role is evolving as the season went along?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: I just felt like I knew Chris and Garrett were leaving, and I feel like we needed someone to step up and be more of a vocal person. I've been here for a few years. I played all last season. So I got the most experience. I can talk to those guys, but they're great. They know what to do. I just helped build them up. Yeah, that's really it.

Q. Has that been hard for you, or does it come natural?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: No, natural. I feel like I've been doing it. I mean, it's different of course, but I did it in high school before that. I feel like it's just a natural thing I have.

Q. Jaxon, are you kind of the pick to click on Saturday, or are we going to see Marvin or Emeka or whoever step up in that role like, whoa, I didn't know they had that?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Sure, they'll definitely get those opportunities, and I think they're going to prove that for real. Those are great players' names you mentioned. Julian Fleming too. They'll get the opportunity. They're excited about the opportunity, and I think they'll be great.

Q. What's the team's mindset? Rose Bowl is not a consolation, I don't think. What does this game mean to you?



JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It's a big tradition. Everybody's happy to be here. Everybody wants to win. It's a must win for us. That's what's in our head. We've got to win this game, especially rolling into next year with Notre Dame Game 1. So it's a big game for us. It's a must win for sure.

Q. Jaxon, how great is it having Chris continuing to practice with you guys?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Everything, just that support really. Just being the leader out there also, telling us what he sees. It's great to have him in my ear and stuff, telling me what I'm going to see and stuff, big advantage for sure.

Q. What are the biggest ways in which he's helped you over the past two years and made you a better receiver?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Just the way that he's worked continuously and just been a great leader for our room. I definitely was watching that throughout the years, and I appreciate him for sure.

Q. You mentioned it's your first time in L.A. How's it all been? You've been going to Disneyland and all these events. How are you taking it all in with your brothers?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: It's what I thought it would be, fun. I'm having a great time. Very beautiful site. So I'm happy to be here for sure.

Q. Fans want to know if you were to have one actor cast as you in a movie, who would it be and why?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: I would say Denzel Washington. I just feel like he's the greatest actor, in my opinion. So it would be fun.

Q. One last question for you. Who's in charge of music in the locker room? What do you play? What do you listen to pregame?

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA: Dawand Jones usually has it in control in the locker room just because he loves music. He's very passionate about it. And he's 6'8", 350. So no one's really going to say anything (laughter).

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