

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

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Pasadena, California, USA

Penn State Nittany Lions

Theo Johnson

Press Conference

Q. This is the first we've talked to you since Brenton, since he announced his decision. What were you surprised at all he's not coming back? I'm sure you're probably in the loop here.

THEO JOHNSON: Yeah, we've had like conversations about it. And I've kind of helped him go through his process a little bit. So it wasn't really a surprise for me just because obviously that's one of my friends and stuff. But I'm happy for him. I think he's going to do great things wherever he ends up.

Q. You technically could it's your third year, you made a decision to come back to Penn State?

THEO JOHNSON: I think right now I'm focusing on the game and stuff and making sure I'm ready for the game.

Q. What kind of things do you weigh with that decision? What are the things that are most important when you make that decision to stay or leave?

THEO JOHNSON: I think really the big thing is where I think I'll end up kind of where I think I am in my development as a player what I need to improve on and stuff like that but like I said really the big thing is just focusing on the game and making sure I'm putting my best foot forward on January 2nd.

Q. The second half of the season that probably has you maybe thinking about it at least how you came on, Tyler Warren came on the second half. How much did this year improvement do you feel improved in the second half. I think you missed the first couple of games. The second half of the season, just your thoughts of how you were able to develop.

THEO JOHNSON: I think really a big thing was second half of the season, when I really started feeling like 100% healthy, I feel like early on I wasn't at 100%, but I think it kind of showed in my play like when I really started to feel



like myself again. So I'm just hoping I can kind of keep that going and make sure I stay healthy this offseason.

Q. What do you think the next step looks like for you? What do you want to improve on next where you want to be?

THEO JOHNSON: I think really just polishing things up and being an elite run blocker. I think I'm pretty good but just being more technical in things that I do and just making sure everything that comes in my hands I catch. But just being like just really just a menace and aggressive in my run blocking as well as my pass protection phase of the game.

Q. Seemed like (indiscernible) took a huge step in that area over the past year. What did you learn from him in terms of run blocking specifically?

THEO JOHNSON: I think it really starts with Coach Hal and just how he's kind of coached us since where we came in and kind of making our room competitive when it comes to that. Like we have finishing awards stuff like that for the Ten room and O line as well. And when you implement some of those things kind of incentivizes you to be a little more aggressive and maybe try and go a little harder all the way to the whistle when it comes to the run game. So I think that really starts with Coach Hal and how he's really coached us in that phase.

Q. A year ago at this time everyone was kind of talking about the run game and what you guys weren't doing right. I think you averaged a little bit more than three yards a carry last year. It's only been a year can you reflect on all the changes and what you were able to accomplish not just with the tight ends but if there were two or three things you could put at the top of the list why you guys were able to pull almost a 180 what do you think they were?

THEO JOHNSON: I think really the big thing is how much it was emphasized the offseason. Like the big thing that the coaches were saying is you gotta be able to run the ball and everyone in the stadium knows you're running the ball. And I think that with some of our short yardage



packages we've been able to do that at will this year. So just how much that was emphasized and worked during practice, really had no choice but to get it right. So I think that was a big thing. And obviously it helps when you have the running backs that we have this year and the things that they're doing was huge for us. And I think like it really comes to a point where you kind of just have to buy in mentally. I think like we all, like when we see that short yardage package we get a little excited to go out there and to do that just because we know that like obviously everyone knows we're doing it and we've been able to do it so well. Like we want to do that and we're looking forward to doing that.

Q. What is it about the T formation that could really cause serious problems, because seems like you guys can do a lot of different things?

THEO JOHNSON: It's really just the versatility of the formation and how well we execute the blocking schemes. I just think when you've got Brenton coming with a full head of steam and Kaytron and Nick. It's hard to stop those guys.

Q. What do you think this couple of weeks means for Khalil and Jerry and their development and their ability to get a little more practice time?

THEO JOHNSON: I think it's been really good for them. Getting these extra practices and a little more reps I think it's been good. I've been impressed with how Jerry's been coming along for sure. I think he's definitely going to do some good things for us. Khalil is very athletic and he's been able to do good things as well. So I think it's been huge for the development. And I've definitely seen them take strides in this short period of bull practice.

Q. How much is how well you guys start come down to inner confidence going out there believing you can do it, how much does it come down to confidence?

THEO JOHNSON: I think starting fast is one thing that we like a point that we make in almost all of our team meetings before practice, everything. So starting fast is huge. We always want to score on that first drive. Just momentum, we know, is a big deal. So when you start fast and you kind of score right off the bat, that helps your team and it kind of puts down the other team as well.

Q. How much does it come down to not just like the Xs and Os but just confidence going out doing what you can do?

THEO JOHNSON: I think that when you're able to start fast, it gives you confidence to keep going and continue

doing that for the rest of the game.

Q. The emphasis on the run game go back to Penn, we heard it all offseason something you guys were going to do what was the moment we can run the ball and run it well and everybody knows, was there a moment we're pretty good at this now?

THEO JOHNSON: I think it was probably in spring ball when I think like we've scenic break one for the first time and we were like, okay, we've got a dude here. We've got someone that can really run downhill. He has a little bit of a different style from the backs we've had in the past. So I think seeing kind of how they came on early, we kind of knew that this is going to be good for us this season.

Q. In this day and age, obviously it's a loaded tight end room, last year at this time were you like, all right, maybe I should be looking to go elsewhere? Why did you not waiver from the outside looking in?

THEO JOHNSON: I think for me it's the relationships I have with the guys in the room, the coaches. I've just always had a lot of faith in my coaches going back to Tyler Bowen and then Ty Howle. I've got a great relationship with him and that's not easy to -- like a lot of guys now you see them moving around place to place, but it's not easy to develop a relationship with a coach that there's trust on both sides and I know he's got a lot of faith in me. So I've got a lot of faith in him and that never wavered.

Q. When you walk around this hotel and your hotel see all the Rose Bowl paraphernalia, what does it mean to realize you're here?

THEO JOHNSON: It's a big deal. And I think every day I've been here I've started to think more and more about how this is a really great opportunity for me to be able to play on this sort of stage. So every day I just think about how grateful I am for this experience.

Q. What was the explosiveness of both running backs, what does it bring to the team because one goes out of the game the other one can (indiscernible)?

THEO JOHNSON: It's been huge. They've been huge for our whole offense this year. I'm really excited for they obviously got two more years here. I'm looking forward to them in the future. But it's just been huge for us because when you need the extra yards and everyone knows you're running we're able to do that almost every time.

Q. What do you tell each other to stay focused and practice --

THEO JOHNSON: I think the big thing that we say is no one remembers the person that loses the bowl game, they only remember you if you win. So that's something that we're telling ourselves and just kind of keeping remembering that you're going to get a bowl ring whether you win or you lose. So you're going to like it a lot more and you're going to cherish it a lot more if it's a winning ring that says champions on it.

Q. Their players were just in here their defensive coordinator talking about how they feel they can get ready for this game and you guys because they have an (indiscernible) so when you look at their defense do you see any similarities in their defense compared to (indiscernible)?

THEO JOHNSON: Yes, I think our defense has a somewhat unique style. There are similarities with some of the pressures they do and also some of the pressures we've seen this year, there are some similarities. But I think that that's one thing, when we go up against our defense in practice and competitive periods, it's a little challenging just because they do some things that are so much different from our opponents that we usually play that you kind of have to shift gears mentally. So there are some similarities. There's some personnel similarities, some guys that play, have similar styles and stuff. But not a ton of overlap in my opinion.

Q. How is the game plan process worked so far for you guys since you got into Utah prep and out here so far and how has that been so far?

THEO JOHNSON: I think it's been good. And I think that we had a plan, a really good plan probably the first week even before we got out here I was pretty confident with our game plan and what we got dialed up. So I think that kind of polishing everything up and putting the icing on the cake has been good since we've been here great with the amount of practices we've got going up. I think by the time the game comes around we'll be ready to go.

Q. Looking at the number of (indiscernible) I think ten guys from the class of 2022 redshirted, who stood out of those guys, Kaytron (indiscernible) what guys came down to you in terms of practice the way they progressed and handled themselves over the course of the season?

THEO JOHNSON: I want to say probably two guys that have stood out to me just from seeing them around the facility, when we have offdays I pretty much see these guys in there doing something. But Cam Miller, the corner, I've been really impressed with how he's handled himself. He handles himself like you wouldn't think he's a freshman

just being from the outside looking in. And that's definitely impressed me and his style of play has been great. And I think he's going to do really good things for us.

K.J., the safety, he's been doing some great things for us as well. And just watching him play, you see he's got a ton of potential. And I think that when it's all said and done he's going to be one of the better safeties to play for us. So those two guys have been really impressive and honestly our whole freshman class has been doing really great things for us. And it's kind of exciting looking forward. I'm a little bit of an older guy on my way out eventually, but for the younger generation, it's exciting to see where this program is headed with these younger guys we have.

Q. In terms of your career so far to date how would you evaluate what you're doing to make more strides since you were a freshman?

THEO JOHNSON: I think I've done a good job. I think that what's kind of hurt me and has made me to the place where I'm not very satisfied is just kind of being injured and stuff. Like dealing with stuff during the offseason. Like I feel like I've had maybe one full offseason dealing with COVID and then this last offseason I was dealing with minor things. So I think that what I need to take the next step is have a full offseason and be healthy for the full offseason and doing that I'll be able to take those strides and those steps that I want to be able to get to the potential that I think that I have.

Q. How does this week and this game and the rest of this season help you springboard that?

THEO JOHNSON: I think just taking this momentum and leading it into next year is going to be huge. Just really making sure I'm kind of leaving it all out there and playing my best. And I think that finishing the season the right way is really big. Just for your mental and also for how you're going to prepare yourself going into the offseason and how you're going to push yourself in those workouts. So I think this week and this game is going to be important for me but not only for me but for our program in general.

Q. The 2020 season, what was it like trying to learn an offense over Zoom?

THEO JOHNSON: I think it was definitely a little unconventional, different. But for me I really didn't have any other way or understanding how it's supposed to be done. Just obviously being a freshman at the time, but offense that year was pretty simple for the most part. So it wasn't terribly hard to learn. But then when we came back in and Coach Yurcich came in that's when I really had to

kind of take away the habits from 2020 and stuff like that and really dial down and figure out how to do things more in person and really make sure I'm learning this offense.

Q. What could you do in terms of weight room training table, just what was that year like?

THEO JOHNSON: It was pretty much nothing was in person. And everything was takeout or to go. And whenever we lifted, it was very spaced out from someone else. So it was a tough year for us as a program. And I think we just couldn't do things as a way that we normally do them. When that happens here, it's very challenging. But I think that we've definitely got it back in our groove for sure.

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