

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

Thursday, December 29, 2022

Pasadena, California, USA

Penn State Nittany Lions

Sean Clifford

Press Conference



Q. Sean, you've done Disney. You're going to eat prime rib tomorrow. Other than the Playoff, is there a better bowl game than the Rose Bowl in terms of like the outside fun and all that stuff?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, no, I don't know. It definitely is a great experience so far. The Rose Bowl, their committee, their staff has been nothing but fantastic to us and our team.

Realistically, it's been first class since we stepped off the plane. So it's been fantastic. Can't wait for Lawry's tomorrow. Sounds like it's going to be a lot of fun too. So just enjoying experiences but at the same time locking in when we know to lock in and having a blast doing it.

Q. I was going to say, I think one of the keys to any bowl game is to balance the fun but knowing you have to get down to work. And this team seems to be pretty good at doing that.

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, no, we definitely are. I think we're experienced. We have that older leadership. Blessings aside, from COVID, having older guys on the team, being able to work around that and be able to really have an extra louder voice on days like this, on games like this, bowl games, just the experience.

You know, Manny Diaz, he asked us to raise our hands of guys who had not only been in bowl games but won bowl games. So it was cool to see the good amount of hands go up, and really lean on that leadership in these days, just to make sure we're locked in, we're getting the work we need but also having fun doing that.

Q. When you look at Utah, do they seem like a Big Ten team?

SEAN CLIFFORD: It's a different style. I think it's definitely a different style. You see it in little nuances here and there. But realistically, football is football. They play

with 11 guys; we play with 11 guys. And then it's just doing some things schematically.

But realistically, they're a really good football team. They've got talented players across the board. Definitely going to be a challenge, but we're really excited to take on that challenge.

Q. Neither one of you fully expected to be in this game, if you go back a month or two months. That kind of makes the matchup a little fascinating, right? You didn't maybe expect to be here a few months ago, but now here you both are, right?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, I mean, we didn't really expect to be anywhere because we were just focusing on the next week. That's really what we've been about all year. You know the motto, you know, 1-and-0. And that's to say that we were looking to bowl season anytime before that last game would be a lie.

Realistically, we do a really good job of staying consistent and not focusing on the future. So it's just a blessing to be here, blessing to be selected as a Rose Bowl team and now working to be Rose Bowl champions.

Q. A lot of people want to say that Utah and Penn State kind of are mirrors of each other in how you approach things. Do you see that on film, and what do you see going up against this Utah team?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Of course. I think Utah has a great core leadership. I think they do a really good job of showing a bunch of different looks, and that's just kudos to not only defensive coordinator but also the guys buying in and realistically saying, hey, we're going to do the extra work, we're going to study a little bit more to get our team to where it needs to be.

You see it on film. They're very rehearsed. They don't show their shell very often. They disguise very well, which means they're a very well-coached football team.

So much respect to them. It just shows who they are as a program. So it's impressive.



Q. Has been it been difficult to kind of balance between knowing this is your last game, also fully enjoying the Rose Bowl experience?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Not really. I think that, you know, maybe just because of how old I am, six years, it's a long time. So realistically, I'm excited for my last game. I'm excited to represent Penn State one more time and do it in a big fashion like the Rose Bowl.

So can't ask for anything more. Realistically, I'm having a blast and enjoying every moment of it.

Q. Is there a defense in the Big Ten that you've played that you can compare?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Hmm. I would say Purdue was similar a little bit just because of some of the looks that they ended up bringing. A little bit more zero. You see that in the last couple games that they played. USC, bringing a little bit more pressure in the conference championship game. I thought they handled that pretty well. So just being prepared for all the looks throughout the whole season that they've given us.

That's the one thing about the bowl game, obviously, you've got a very wide variety of different looks, but you can study them all to kind of be prepared for the general shell, have a really good feeling about, okay, it's second and ten, second and eight, what is the defensive coordinator really thinking on this, what has he be consistent with? Just breaking it down, studying it to the psychological level and being able to then make calls during the game to enhance it.

Q. You play in a conference with a lot of traditional Blue Bloods, including Penn State obviously. But when you look at a team like Utah, what's your perception of them?

SEAN CLIFFORD: I think they're a very talented football team, just like us. You watch them on film, they play extremely hard. They play fast and smart, like I said before.

So that's what jumps off on the tape. Especially when you're going through a year, you don't really get to see the other side of the country that much. You catch a game after you play a noon game here and there, but realistically, you're playing your game, you're trying to get back and get some sleep and you're on to the next one.

So it's been tough to see all these teams, but just watching them on film, they're very similar to us. They run fast, they

play hard, they play aggressive. And that reminds me a lot about Penn State football too.

Q. You guys are kind of similar to Utah in that you utilize the tight ends heavily. Can you just speak to how you guys utilize the tight ends?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, when you have a room like us, Brenton Strange, Theo Johnson, Tyler Warren, all three of those guys really provide a lot of value, and you can't leave them off the field.

So getting out of 11 personnel, getting to 12, 13 even, bringing in big bodies, it just messes with personnel and makes the other team really have to look who's on the field, be strategic about who's going to be on the field, who's going to be off the field, just because they can do everything. They can block. They can run routes. They can catch.

So it presents a lot of challenges for teams, and I'm sure you'll see it soon too.

Q. We've talked to you before about your relationship with Mitchell. You've taken kind of different paths in college. You've been here for a long time. Is it cool to see from your end him grow and develop and having such a big impact in one year?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, Mitch Tinsley came in realistically with one goal in mind, and that was to win football games and to get better as a player. And he did a really good job of that.

Being my roommate, he was in my ear 24/7, asking about the playbook, constantly wanting to get better, when can we run some extra routes, when can we do this, when can we do that.

So it was a great relationship we've had throughout this year. I'm going to definitely miss the guy, but wish him well, and have one more with him now, so it will be a lot of fun.

Q. How has the last couple days been out here, being able to experience this?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, it's been a blast. It's been nothing but fun. We've had a few days to be able to kind of relax, practice a little bit, have some lifts, but at the same time just really focus on being around the team and camaraderie and everything.

Today is going to be our first padded practice, back at it truly. Really excited to get back out there. It's been a

blessing, it really has, just to be able to represent Penn State one more time, be able to do it on such a big stage like the Rose Bowl. It's just so much fun to be here and be with the teammates I love and appreciate.

Q. How important is that camaraderie aspect? It's a big game, big opponent, big occasion. But for you, in your last bowl trip, in your last few days, week around this team and these guys that you've known for so long, how important is that camaraderie aspect of it?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, it's huge. It's half of it right there. Winning the game obviously is the most important, but at the same time it's my last one. Want to be able to see those guys one last time, which is not going to be the same.

And that's probably the one thing I got going for me that I know, I've seen a bunch of guys come in and out of the program, I've heard the stories of once you leave it's just not the same, the NFL is not the same, the work environment is not the same, the locker room, like college ball.

So just being able to take advantage of that and really be excited about the little things. That's the biggest takeaway for me, is just having fun with the littlest moments with my teammates and having a blast.

Q. How has this past month been for you? Have you been able to reflect on your career yet?

SEAN CLIFFORD: I would say a little bit for sure. Just being able to look back, especially during the downtime, during the Christmastime. We were actually going through my parents' TV, it's an old TV, and they recorded all the games, so we just went back and watched a bunch of them.

It was so much fun because we convinced them to get a new TV. So they were getting rid of it, and they were going to lose all the games on the recordings, but we were just going through it, and just all the cool experiences, all the teams I've played on is just fantastic. Couldn't thank Penn State enough to be in the position I've been in. And just a cool little day definitely to spend time with family.

Q. Do you remember any of those games, anything specific that you guys looked over, some memories?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Just looking back, I think the Michigan whiteout in 2019, just being my first whiteout was one that when I turned it on I was like, wow, that was awesome, just the environment, the excitement, the magnitude of that game, going into that year, my first year starting too.

And that one stood out, but the list goes on and on, games from this year, games from 2019, even games from 2018 when I was just getting a snap or two, just being able to be out there, the excitement of just being able to play ball in front of so many people and so many great fans. It's truly been an honor.

Q. Do you remember when you wanted to come to Penn State?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, I definitely do. I was visiting -- I didn't visit a ton of schools. I got offered by a decent amount, but that was before everybody was torn everywhere. I'm here six years, so I've committed almost ten years -- I feel like it was eight -- yeah, 2015, so almost, yeah, eight years ago. So it was a different time in recruiting back then.

But, no, for me, I remember I was driving in the car back home, and it was my dad and my buddy Matt Bockhorst and I, who ended up going to Clemson, but we both got offered that day. And we were talking about it, and he was juiced about getting offered and everything, but I just remember I was like this -- I don't think I can find another place like that.

I was just -- it was just a different feeling when I got offered. I felt like I was really at home. I felt like it was the right fit. And then not too long later I committed. So it's been a long eight years. But it's been the best eight years of my life. Just being able to be committed to a school, to be loved by a school and to just have so many friends through this whole experience has been amazing.

Q. Have you had conversations with Drew, just about the journey itself? Because I feel like you guys had at least similar journeys in the sense that you both got offered by Penn State relatively early, committed.

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, no, Drew and I are similar cats in that regard. I'm not a huge social media guy. I know I run a company off of it, but at the same time that's more the entrepreneurial side. If you look at my social, it's pretty generic for the most part. Try to dress it up. But at the same time, Drew and I are similar on that.

But from telling him stories and everything, yeah, absolutely. Just sharing experiences, sharing the ups and downs, just the little nuances of things that have happened in the past that I wish I could have done better or things I was proud that I handled it a certain way.

Just trying to share as much knowledge as possible because it's really the day-in, day-out that makes the



quarterback. It's not just what you see on Saturday, it's who you are on Monday, on the off day when nobody wants to come in the facility and you've got to bring, you know, all your wideouts in to make sure we've getting extra film in or middle of the summer on a Wednesday, Wednesday night, and you're trying to get guys up just to get some deep ball work in.

Whatever it might be, it's just about those one-off experiences or moments that you've got to take advantage of as a quarterback, and I think that Drew and Beau are both fully capable of doing that in the future, and I'm excited for them.

Q. (Indiscernible) the leadership of the captains, the message they're sending. What do you think that says about your team?

SEAN CLIFFORD: I'm proud of it for sure. I think that it just shows the compassion and the love that this group has for one another. I think it shows the magnitude of the Rose Bowl also. I think it's very important that the guys who were here the whole season, you know, finish this thing off the right way.

I think that we did a really good job of motivating to get to this point, and it's the Rose Bowl. It's The Granddaddy of Them All. So realistically, if you're not excited for this one, I don't know really what else to do for you.

Q. You have that opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl now. What have you seen from Utah's defense on film, any tendencies, anything about Utah that stands out to you?

SEAN CLIFFORD: I think they're very similar to our defense. I see a lot of similarities. Physical, fast, strong. Aggressive at the point of attack. Especially up front. They play relatively low as well just in general just because of how aggressive they are.

I think the conference championship was one that kind of showed truly how aggressive they can be. They brought a lot of heat against USC. So just being able to see all those looks, balance them and have answers, but just to -- them as a defense, very impressed. Can't say enough about how their team is and it just seems like they're very well coached.

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