

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

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Penn State Nittany Lions Coach Manny Diaz

Press Conference



Q. What do you guys have to do to maintain that same level of relentlessness you've had all season?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, it's a great challenge with this Utah offense. Scoring 40 points a game, conference champions, and it's going to start with -- really they do a great job of just questioning your toughness down for down, the way they pound the football. The one thing you always worry about in bowl games, you haven't played in a month. Kind of got to restart, reestablish your toughness. Tackling is always crucial in bowl games, so I think those will be the big things.

You mentioned the word relentless, we have to run to the football, we have to tackle, all the things that every defensive coordinator is going to say, but when you haven't played in a month, I think to take on an even bigger emphasis.

Q. Regardless of the results you guys have, how do you make sure (indiscernible) confident all season, so regardless of the results, when you blitz, how do you make sure everyone stays confident?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, the blitz doesn't really matter in terms of our confidence. I think what matters is -- look, you have a whole and you have parts, and what you do every week as a coach is you pull apart the whole, you get the parts individually better, and when every player gets better through the course of the season, the unit gets better.

We played well in September, but we were better in October, and we were much, much better in November. I think the reason why is because when you watch the film -- you don't get really caught up as much in the results. You just get caught up in the performance. I think the more we've been able to critique our performances, the things that we like, the things we don't like, and to our players' credit, they've continued to work to be the best version of themselves.

I think they would say that we still probably have our best performance out there. I don't think we've played as good as we can play on defense by a long shot.

Q. How far has Abdul Carter come during the course of the season? Obviously he came into the program tremendously physically gifted, but where has he gotten better?

MANNY DIAZ: I think with Abdul, it's his preparation and understanding his role within the defense. Early in the season, he flashed, and then the next week you could kind of see that maybe he tried to do things his own way, and then the next game he kind of locked in, flashed again, and I think it took him one more game to really understand, okay, I just need to do my job, and if I do my job, then as you mentioned, his physical attributes will be accentuated. That's really what to me helped him in the final six weeks of the season. I think that helped us as a defense in the final six weeks of the season, is that guys sometimes believe they have to put on a cape and do something special, and with his skill set, he just does his job, he will be noticed on the field.

Q. Constructive criticism at practice yesterday, you got on him a couple times. Some players may not be open to that, especially young players who are really good. How has he responded to tough coaching at times?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, Abdul wants to be great, and I've told him my job is to help him achieve greatness.

What happens is when you have success for freshmen, I almost kind of put that in his face, you played well for a freshman, and is that it? Is this as good as it gets? Or is there more?

I think he's got high goals, high aspirations, and generally speaking, high achievers, they don't want to be BS'd, right, they want to be told if it's good, it's good, and if it's not good, it's not good. Truth be told that's the way we coach all of our guys. If we like it we're going to say we like it. If we don't like it, we're going to tell them we don't like it and that's how we coach our guys.



Q. Manny, what have you seen from Cam Rising that's stuck out to you?

MANNY DIAZ: When your quarterback is tough, your entire offense is tough because just by the nature of the game, the guy touches the ball on every play, and everybody on the sideline is watching your quarterback.

When he can demonstrate that he's tough, everybody's level of toughness picks up.

So you see a guy who everyone on the team -- football is not very complicated from the time that we were playing little league, right? The players want to believe. They want to believe they can win, and they believe that they will win -- if they can believe in the guy that touches the ball every play, then they think that they have a better chance, from the left guard, or if I'm the tight end, if I'm the X receiver, whatever.

What you can see that Utah has is Utah has belief. They believe in their leader. Why wouldn't they, because of the way that he plays the game. When they need a play, whether it's a two-point conversion in the first match-up against Southern Cal, they're going to call his number. He's demonstrated with pretty routine effectiveness that he's going to deliver it when it's called to him.

Q. When you prep for Utah and you watch their tape, is there any comps to any team you've played this year in the Big Ten?

MANNY DIAZ: There is to many teams we've played in the Big Ten because I think stylistically they want to huddle, they want to run the football. Their throwing game comes off of running the football. They want to protect their defense. That's the thing you see.

You see a program, I think Coach Whittingham and what he's been able to establish and the stability they've been able to have at Utah, and to understand that they have an elite defense and they're comfortable playing low-scoring games, they're comfortable not putting their defense in bad situations, they don't allow negative plays on offense, they don't get sacked on offense, they do a good job protecting the ball on offense, all things that would put your defense in a bad position.

So yeah, there's certainly a mixture of teams that we've played in our league. You could argue they may have more of a Big Ten style than what you see traditionally out west and you could also argue that might be why they're so successful, because it feels to me from the outside that the tougher team normally wins this league. You could say

that about most leagues, but it feels like in the Pac-12 -- when SC had it rolling there for a while, when Stanford had it rolling there for a while and certainly Utah the last two years have been the toughest team in this league and it's no surprise that it has gotten them to back-to-back Rose Bowls.

Q. What's it like scheming for a team that uses the tight end as much as they do?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, well, you've got to be disciplined because what happens is that the tight ends do a good job of run blocking and if you get your eyes in the wrong place, all of a sudden you leave those guys wide open, which you see in a lot of plays. When you look at the yards, there's one things to have tight ends that catch the ball, but when you look at their yards per completion, those are wide receiver yards per completion. Those tight end shouldn't have 25 yards per catch. It doesn't make any sense. So it shows that they're talented, they can do things after, but it also shows that -- when I say you have to keep your eyes on your luggage, if you don't keep your eyes on your luggage, these guys all of a sudden they're wide open. We're blessed. We feel like we have three great tight ends that we see every day in practice, so we do get a little bit of prep for that, but what you can't simulate is the motioning and the shifting, and that's really what they do a good job of schematically. Everyone has played them has known you've got to stop the tight ends. It wasn't like we needed to take a month of preparation to figure out, aha!, the key is the tight ends in the passing offense, and yet no one has been able to do it.

It's a credit to how they do it schematically and a credit to what type of players these guys are.

Q. This team is without their tight end and top running back --

MANNY DIAZ: Well, the fact that they've played without the tight end -- I don't know who decides on these tight end awards and I haven't watched everybody, but that guy is as good as anybody in the country. He was really, really special.

We feel like we have a corner that's as good as anybody in the country. We feel like our corner is really, really special. This is part of bowl games. You've got to play with the guys that are there.

But I think what you've seen is in the development of how they've been able to rotate many tight ends throughout the course of the season and rely on different types of targets, it's still going to be a major task for us to stop that part of their passing offense.

Q. What's the biggest improvement Johnny has made over the course of the year?

MANNY DIAZ: Johnny Dixon?

Q. Yep.

MANNY DIAZ: I think just in his confidence. I think the key when you go from being a spot guy to really we consider him a co-starter all year then really did start most of November, look, we're going to challenge and we're going to play man coverage and they're going to catch a ball.

Can you line up with that same level of confidence the next play, and I think that started -- we saw it back in spring. We saw it through training camp. I think that had been before I got here maybe the story on Johnny up and down. Everybody says that you've got to have a short memory when you play corner, and I think his confidence has grown as he's had more success through the year.

But your confidence doesn't come from success, your confidence also comes from how do you handle failure. I'm really proud of the strides that Johnny has made, and that's been a big part of the reason why we've been able to play pass defense, even when we had Joey, I don't know if we could have done what we've been able to do without having Johnny's development.

Q. You mentioned Joey there. Can you take us through his decision to declare and opt out and then also the impact he had and the relationship you had in that one year?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, Joey, obviously I think it's fairly obvious that we play more man coverage now, but part of that was when I was watching us in the spring and you see guys like Joey, you see Kalen King, really no one at this time last year knew a lot about -- I said, we're going to be able to lock some people down. When you have a guy like Joey who's got great length, great speed, and then change of direction that's uncanny for a guy his height, those guys want to cover wide receivers. They want to challenge every route.

I think what I'm proud of Joey and the entire corner room -- Terry Smith did a phenomenal job getting those guys to play at an elite level this year, is they wanted it. It didn't matter who we played. They wanted to be there toe to toe with any wide receiver we played against, it'd make everything difficult and allowed their skill set to really come through.

Joey I think set the tone that first game against Purdue.

That was a big -- the season could have gone a different way. That was really a tight one there in the fourth quarter, and I still think back to those five stops we made in a row in the fourth quarter. That really kick-started us and kind of got the whole season going, and Joey was a huge part -- we don't win that game without Joey Porter and we're not here talking in Los Angeles right now.

Q. What's the year been like for you just going from a head coach to now coming to a new school, a coordinator? Has it kind of been refreshing going back and coaching and teaching and everything?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, you could use that word. I mean, it's fun. Let's call it like it is. I loved being a head coach, but I absolutely love coordinating defenses. I've said this before, but coaching a room, to be able to work with Abdul Carter and teach him from -- that guy showed up on August 1st and didn't know anything to now watching him play. That to me is --- what coaching is at its essence, and it's no different when you're a head coach, but when you are a head coach you've got 120 of them. When you're a coordinator you've got half of them, but when you're a position coach you've got 12 to 15 of them. Just watching them go from here to there. And again, what's been rewarding for me this year is that when I think of our defense in the Purdue game to where we were in the Michigan State game, we're a completely different animal. We're a different animal from what we were in the Michigan game. We're different than the Minnesota game. From week to week I felt like we really got better, and the reason why is because Tyler Elsdon got better, Kobe King got better, Curtis Jacobs got better. When you see the guys making the individual improvements, as a coach that's the part that's rewarding because you see their confidence grow, you see them be able to play faster, make more plays.

That's been the fun part of the journey this year.

Q. You mentioned Curtis. From the film that you watched on him when you first got in to the player he is now, where have you seen him grow on and off the field and kind of how he's taken to what you've thrown at him?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, it's funny because now we forget, and I kind of put this in the linebackers' faces all summer but Curtis had never played in the box. Even if you look at his experience in high school, that's a different world in the A-gaps and B-gaps. It's going to be a different world on January 2nd with what Utah does. The first question mark is simply physically can you roll your sleeves up and get down and dirty inside the box.

Now we know the answer is yes. In September we didn't really know the answer to that. The first thing I'm proud of is that Curt's -- his toughness was questioned. Not that he had not been tough on film, but playing out there at Sam is a different universe than coming to Will. So proud of him for that. As the season went on and we needed to create more of a role for Abdul, his ability to play Sam and Will, so those guys can be on the field at the same time, that's no easy thing. That shows you what type of football IQ Curt has. There's not many guys on our field that play two positions, and Curt does -- then what he does in our third-down package.

That's why I think about really the Minnesota game, which is a big game for us psychologically because when you give up a -- when you have a performance like you did against Michigan, and here comes the all-time leading rusher in Minnesota history and this ginormous offensive line and this pounding running attack, Curt was on a different level that night.

All of our guys on defense took a lot of confidence in the way we played the run that night, and I think that propelled us really, barring one screw-up against Ohio State, how we played up front against Ohio State the next week and how we played in November, really I thought that's why that Minnesota game was so important, and Curt was a big part of that.

Q. You talked about Curt's ability to play multiple linebacker positions, Abdul Carter able to do the same thing. What's the importance of having versatile linebackers?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, it allows you as a coach to have more flexibility in what you do defensively. On our third-down package, we had had Curt and Abdul together, I think, starting at the Auburn game. But in our base package, it really probably wasn't until Michigan that those two started playing together, and then just needing more at bats at it.

Look, as a coach our job is to get our best players on the field, and as Abdul was developing, the only way that could happen is if Curt was capable of being able to handle going back out to Sam. Like you mentioned, having some flexibility and having guys be able to play multiple roles just helps out the flexibility we have schematically.

Q. You mentioned the Minnesota game, but after the Michigan game (indiscernible) bigger up front, said the same thing with the offensive line. Do you agree with that? What are your thoughts on that? Do you think you guys have the right size for a team like that?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, here's the way I respond to that. We

wanted to get bigger before we played Minnesota. What the film said was size was not an issue. What the film said against Michigan, it was trust was an issue. We started playing slow because we didn't believe in the guys around us.

That was the hard talk.

Someone mentioned earlier, that's why, look, as a coach, whether you win, lose, play well, don't play well, there's just a performance, and the film we watch doesn't tell us whether we win or lose, it just tells us what our performance is.

We had to be very up front and honest with what happened that day in Ann Arbor, and I think that was actually a very important day in hindsight because it forced us to decide whether we were going to go all in and really believe in each other and what we were doing or not.

Like I said, the leadership of the guys that are in room right now, PJ and Tig and Curt and I could go on, they saw it, and they decided -- look, we had two choices. We could continue to not trust each other and not believe that if you're going to be to my right, then I'm going to be to your left and we'll make it happen, but if we don't then it's going to look the same way.

So I think their personal pride said, okay, we know what it looks like when we stop our feet on contact and play slow.

Now, that being said, in a vacuum, bigger players that trust each other, sure, in theory are better. But we're always going to be -- this predates me even getting here. We're always going to be a dynamic front. We're going to be a movement-based front. This is a game that's about affecting the quarterback.

So I love the guys that we have up front, and I love the way that we have played, and I think once we kind of sort of let go and just really play to the scheme, we've been very hard to run the football against. We don't get a mulligan against Michigan, but look at Michigan's defensive line. Those guys aren't giants, but they're playing their tails off, also.

I think our guys learned a lot that day. Like I said, we don't have mid-season free agency. We had to get better with what we had in the room, and I liked what we had in the room.

Q. How would you evaluate the class of 2023, and are there any needs you still want to fill going forward?

MANNY DIAZ: The group we just signed?

Q. Yeah.

MANNY DIAZ: I think we've got -- I mean, every coach is going to say this coming out of signing day, but I think at all three levels, I think we've got some dynamic playmakers. I really like what we added. I'm starting backwards, forwards in the secondary. A lot of guys that can factor in a lot of different ways in your defense. Just playmakers. I think that's the thing that I would say in the back end.

I hate -- if I start saying guys' names or you start not mentioning other guys' names, I think we signed three elite linebackers. Very pleased at that group.

Then up front, I think we've got some, again, guys that fit our mold of the type of people that we want.

Now, look, we're in an era where as you guys know, signing day -- I mean, you may be adding guys -- you can add guys all the way through mid-May now, so it's not the holiday that it used to be. But I think I will say this, and if you have any follow-up you can ask, but I think what we've done is I think we've laid a foundation still what this program wants to be of getting great high school players into our program, that we get into our strength program, we can develop and become the guys that you see sitting around this room right now, and in the era where it seems like you can go into the store and pick anything off the shelf, there's value in that, and we're in that store, as well.

But Penn State at its best is going to be a developmental program, and I think the guys that we have, we really like and just can't wait to get -- the other thing, double digits guys coming in mid-year, too, so to get those guys in our program and get them rolling will be exciting, too.

Q. (Indiscernible). Before that really became a thing and obviously now, from the outside looking in, it seems like there would be tension in the locker room and things like that bringing guys in when you already have guys in your program. From your perspective how does that work?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, that's a great question, and it's not asked enough. When I was a head coach and we were -- I thought we did a good job at Miami in the portal. Kind of one of the first ones that went that way a little bit. The first thing is always morale. Morale. This is not Fantasy Football. When you drop a guy in Fantasy Football, the other guys on your Fantasy Football team they don't care when you add a new guy. The guy that you drop cares. These are real-live people. What I've always said is when you bring a guy into the room, every guy in that room needs to be happy and know why that guy is there, because most players want to win, and obviously yes,

we're going to play the best players. I think we established that this year. You see what happened with a guy like Chop and the impact he had on our defense, but the players had to understand why we needed Chop. Because it's a luxury? No, everyone saw for us to be great, we needed more help on the edge.

I think if you always go through that of you have the ability to fix your needs, so one, what are our needs, what can be fixed in the short-term that a high school player by developing might not be -- we can't wait that long. But then the players have to know, because if you have an issue morale-wise, you'll have an issue.

I think we will see that more going forward where it just doesn't happen every year. By the way, we've seen that. That's called pro sports. That happens in the pros. They signed this free agent, for whatever reason, it doesn't come off. So I think that will be a part of our game, too.

Q. When might it make sense for your team to add a veteran quarterback?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, I think there's two things, and again, if you look at the pros as a model, where the game is going, is you'd better have some people that can cover, you'd better have some people that can rush the quarterback. For us to do what we want to do coverage-wise, which I think is now obvious 12 games into it, we want to get up in Abdul's face and we want to play man coverage, and that's not something that everybody can do.

Now, we can adjust and we can play more zone and we can do more things and we have this year, but to be great, I will say this, to be at the top of college football, you've got to be able to cover. You just have to be able to cover.

So to me, that's a room that we always have to make sure that we've got guys that we think can do that at an elite level, and I think that's a big part of why we were what we were this year, and like I said, that's sometimes a hard place just to throw a young guy out there, and so yeah, I just think pass rushers and guys that can cover are important.

Q. Can you sum up what this year has meant to you? Has it matched your expectations?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, it's been a very rewarding experience for me. These players that I get to coach every day have been -- they've been a lot of fun, and I've really enjoyed -- like I said, I've really enjoyed being a part of their journey to success. It's been super rewarding to watch them grow and see the fun that they've had as this defense has gotten better and better.

Q. You've talked a lot about Abdul, talked about guys like Zane, Cam Miller. What have you seen out of them this year and how they've earned their way on to --

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, Zane and Dani, again, in terms of their ability to be disruptive up front, Zane Durant, that's hard to be an inside guy and play as a true freshman. For them to fight through the hard part of being a freshman and kind of hitting that wall and expectations and all that, and I've got to give credit to John Scott for two reasons. One, to develop them, which is not so easy to get those guys to play at that spot early on, but two, you talk about morale, keeping that room going. It's hard to roll five ends into a game. It's hard to roll five defensive tackles into a game. But I think our kids up front believe that the way we play is most effective when we all play less snaps.

I think that's why we got better in November because we were putting less mileage on our defense and we were able to roll so many guys on defense. In the back end guys like Cam Miller, really proud of the way that Cam plays, and the guy, again, is KJ Wright who I think has got unlimited potential, is really going to be an outstanding player, and what a great treat for him to be able to watch a guy like Ji' Ayir Brown and just learn and pick his brain and study his habits.

Q. Is there a freshman that matured this year that could have played more but as far as conversations it didn't make sense to burn him in terms of his ability?

MANNY DIAZ: I think by the time that sort of the ship sailed midway throughout the season, I think the five that played the most were the five that made sense. I think everybody else, I think for one way or another, we felt it was best to keep them where they were.

Q. What's it been like working with Coach Scott?

MANNY DIAZ: John really cares about his players, wants to get everything right, wants his guys to play at a high level. Obviously he's got the experience of playing in the NFL.

I think his guys respond. I think it's been obvious the way those guys have played up front. They've gotten better and better as the year has gone on.

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