

# Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

Friday, December 30, 2022

Pasadena, California, USA

## Penn State Nittany Lions

## PJ Mustipher

### Press Conference



#### **Q. First things first, Beef Bowl, are you looking forward to it?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, man. Anytime I can eat some food, I'm looking forward to it. No, but everybody has been telling me, the staff that's been here in the past years, who came here in 2016, have been telling me how much of a cool event it is. I'm looking forward to it. I'm excited to see what it's all about. Hopefully we can have some fun.

#### **Q. Are you preparing to cut meat in preparation for your big moment tonight?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: No, I haven't been preparing. I eat a lot of steak, so hopefully I'm ready. I know it's going to be a big piece of beef, but hey, it is what it is. I'll be ready.

#### **Q. Can you talk about the job that Manny has done and how the team has improved the second half of the year, just overall about him?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, just a great defensive coordinator. I think you see that in our numbers and the play on the field. But I kind of just try to over emphasize what he means to us as far as our mentality and our approach day-to-day because I think that's the biggest thing.

He lets us know that we can trust him. He trusts us. Just the language he uses in the defensive meeting room, it's almost like inspiring. I know he doesn't mean to come off that way and give them type of speeches, but it just happens.

When you get to listen to Coach Manny Diaz in the defensive meeting room and he's telling you everything he needs to get off his chest, it gets you fired up.

#### **Q. Brent was highly regarded, also --**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, especially by me.

#### **Q. Is there much difference in their style?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: They're the same, but they're different. Their defensive philosophy and everything they do is really similar. They're both really aggressive, and then off the field, Coach Pry, he was a guy that would get you fired up, too. They definitely have some different things, but for me, playing under both of them, I love them so much, so it's kind of like oh, okay, Coach Pry left, I wanted him to come back, but then you get Coach Diaz and you've been with him for a couple months, you see, okay, he's about it, too. Definitely appreciate both of them. They're kind of similar to me. Other guys may say otherwise, but for me it's definitely been a similar experience, an experience I've enjoyed.

#### **Q. Between this upcoming game and the next one, eight months of that voice back on campus, what did that mean for the defense and its continuity?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, any time you are comfortable in a scheme and a system and you have the same guy at the front of you in the meetings, it's good. I think that showed up down the stretch of the season. When everybody was settling in, you understand your responsibility and what he's requiring you to do.

When he came in, we had to adjust, and as the season was in the beginning stages, we had to adjust. But by the time the season ended, we were firing on all cylinders, and that just comes from spending time with him and just gaining that level of trust in everybody.

#### **Q. Utah kind of resembles a Big Ten team in a lot of ways, their physicality and that. I think both you and them take pride in being physical.**

PJ MUSTIPHER: For sure.

#### **Q. Does that make for kind of a challenging game to see who's tougher on the field on Monday?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: For sure. I wouldn't say challenging. I think it's going to make for a great game. When you've got two opponents who love to get gritty in the trenches,



they're not afraid to be in low-scoring games, you've got teams like that, it can turn into a real bloodbath. We're looking forward to it. That's what you prepare for.

I'm sure Utah has been preparing for these type of games, played in these type of games, so have we. I wouldn't say challenging, but I know when you turn on that TV for the Rose Bowl, it's going to be a great game.

**Q. Smith Vilbert is back in his 92 jersey, says he could be back in game action on Monday. What does it mean for Monday, what does it mean for the 2023 defensive line?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, watching it last year, the Outback Bowl, having three sacks, that's something a D-lineman dreams of, and he was able to do it. Smitty provides a ton of talent, a guy who's played football, big-time football. On Monday when we have that rotation for defense and guys need subbed out, we've got a guy who's been there, done that. That definitely will help our defensive line as the game goes on.

Just as far as 2023, like I said, when you have a player who's coming back who's playing big-time football at a high level, it helps the team, helps the defensive line, and you're going to be able to have success just based off that one person. I'm excited for him to be able to play on Monday. I know he's looking forward. He's a hell of a player, so when he lines up, I know he'll be ready.

**Q. Not saying they're identical experiences, but is there a blueprint laid by what Hakeem Beamon experienced and came out on the other side to achieve?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, I definitely think they're close. They're actually roommates here, so those two guys are close, and I know they definitely learn from each other. Stuff happens, but you've got to move on and you've got to learn and you've got to grow.

I think that's what both of those guys have done. Those are my brothers, so I've got their back regardless, but they definitely transitioned into stepping on college as young men and now turning into men just based off what they have gone through, so I'm really happy for both of them and excited to see what happens next.

**Q. You came in here under Coach Spencer, kind of under the cloud of the COVID darkness. What's the D-line room been like under his leadership?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, we were really close as a defensive line when Coach Spence was here, so close that

I didn't know if I'd be able to play on a defensive line that had that type of camaraderie ever again. But this year, I tell guys all the time how excited -- how grateful I am that I came back, that I can just be a part of something so special in that room. I love them guys. I owe them a lot just because the way we have each other's back in that room, not just on the football field but just in life, it's amazing to see, and I think that's why we're playing so well, because we just had that trust and that bond that runs deep.

That room right now is special, and I hope it continues to take that next step and become even greater than that.

**Q. What's it like with Coach Scott in there?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Oh, it's it'll. It's phenomenal. We love Coach Scott. It's always jokes with him. But at the same time we understand that when it's time to lock in, we lock in. We have our fun, but at the same time we get our work done, as well. Coach Scott emphasizes when you've got a guy who's coming from the NFL, he knows what to expect, and he's gotten us prepared.

I'm fortunate to have played for two great defensive line coaches.

**Q. Deion Barnes, I feel like we forget the role he plays. What has he meant to the growth of the defensive line room and what do you think about his future?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, yeah, his impact has been monumental. The work he's done, he puts in a lot of work with us because the coaches can't work after hours, but he's been able to put in a lot of work with us, our pass rushing. Guys across the board, even myself, I never considered myself the best pass rusher, but I'm starting to really trust my skills and stuff, and that's all from Coach Deion. They play well off one another. I'm hoping Coach Deion is able to find himself his own D-line room here in the near future and he deserves that because he's put in the work. Just blessed to be able to play for two guys who have that passion about the defensive line like we do.

**Q. How have you seen Coach Scott evolve from day one to now? How has he grown into that role?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, it's like when all coaches come in. I've been here for a couple years, so I've seen coaches come and go. When a coach comes in they've got to get that trust, whether it takes a while or it happens right away. You've got to build that.

I think over time Coach Scott has really been able to build that trust in the defensive line room, that he trusts us and

we trust him. When you get that trust, the sky's the limit, and we're able to go out there, fly around and make plays.

We've just grown so much over the last couple years with Coach Scott because he's allowed us to and he's grown himself. Appreciate him for everything he's done.

**Q. On Zane, we heard so much about him back in spring ball and because of the depth you had he didn't get to play a bunch. Where is he now?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Just getting better. He's still so young, man, but he's played a lot of football this year, and I don't want the fans to take that for granted, being able to play defensive tackle as a true freshman is something special. The reps he's gotten this year, even though they're not a lot, they're extremely valuable for him moving forward.

He's going to take off here soon. Not saying that he already hasn't, but that level of confidence is going to grow just based off the in-game reps he's had, the practice reps he's had. Everything is just going to keep moving forward. The sky's the limit for him.

**Q. What are your thoughts on Utah's run game?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: You know, extremely -- they want to run the ball downhill. They want to punch you in the mouth and not run it out of bounds. They're not looking to avoid contact by the front. Their line, the running backs, even when their quarterback runs, they want to run the ball. Like I said, everybody says that they're an extremely physical team. They take pride in that. You see it on film, the way they're blocking downhill, the way they are combo-ing guys and trying to get them their out of their gap. So, physical team, can't wait for that match-up. It's going to be exciting.

**Q. Can you speak to how you guys were able to bounce back from that Michigan game and really dominate the run game going forward?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, you know, we all came in the next day as a defense and we watched the plays. We usually break out into individual meetings with your position coach, but Coach Diaz held us in as a defense and just showed us that it's not a talent thing, it's just having trust in the guys around you.

It wasn't a big thing we had to change, just understand that if we're all in our gap, we're going to be fine. From that day moving forward, that's what we did, and I think it really helped our run defense.

**Q. You've been a part of a bunch of talented defenses. Where does that rank? I feel like there might have**

**been doubts coming into the season, so many guys go to the NFL and the defensive coordinators. How do you think this group has evolved and grown and is just as strong as some of those others?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, man, I think 2019 was one of the best defenses I've played for. I think this defense is close, if not better. We'll see. We'll see. The season is not over yet. I can't wait to look back and compare them.

But this defense is talented, and I think this defense is extremely close, and I know people can't ever see that, but in that locker room, out on the practice field, we just go to work. It's the whole team, it's the offense, as well, but that defense, we're tight. We're hanging out off the field. We're talking trash to one another, but when we step on that field on Saturdays we're all ready to go, ready to rock and roll as one unit.

**Q. What helps you guys just continue to be relentless up front? How do you stay aggressive as the game goes along?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Just discipline, going back to your fundamentals, staying in shape. That's a big part of it, too. We work extremely hard, and if you work hard, you're going to be able to get the results you want. Not always, but most of the time.

We work hard in the film room. We watch a ton of film. When we're lifting, we lift hard. When we're practicing, we practice hard. That's really the bottom line. We just work.

**Q. What's your scouting report on Cam Rising?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Talented, man. Talented. Got a phenomenal arm. His legs, man, I don't know if too many people know about the way he can run, but watching him on film, that guy can take off, and if he doesn't like what he sees down the field, he's going to use his feet, and he can do that extremely well. He's really punished some teams this year that they've played with his feet.

He's a phenomenal player. You can tell he has control of that offense, a leader, and whenever a unit can trust a leader, he's able to take command of everything and really be able to lead that charge. They do a great job. He's a great player.

I can't wait to match up against a guy like that because it's a tremendous challenge and opportunity for us.

**Q. What's made your sudden change defense so good this season?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Just practicing, practicing. Like I say, in practice, putting us in those type of positions where we've got to go on the field, understanding that we have to have the offense's back, and like I said, it's just a mentality thing. Whenever we got a chance to step on that field and play defense, we take pride in that no matter the circumstance, so we love those type of opportunities. We step on that field and go to work.

**Q. What does it mean to be playing in a Rose Bowl Game?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: It means everything, man. This game is legendary. I know everybody has been saying it this week, but it's not really going to hit me until I think we go to the stadium. I've been enjoying my time out here. We've been working hard. But when we step on that field in this game, it's going to be crazy. It's going to be like a dream come true. Everybody watches Rose Bowls, not just in the United States but all across the world, everybody is watching this game. It means a whole lot. I don't take this opportunity for granted. I'm ready to go play.

**Q. What does it mean you're playing in the last traditional one?**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, I guess it's cool. I don't look too deep into that. I guess it's cool. That's all I've got.

**Q. You chose to come back and play one more year. Talking about that unfinished business, you wanted to be with these guys. To now be sitting here in the Rose Bowl, one of the top 10 teams in the country, just that journey must be so emotional on some level.**

PJ MUSTIPHER: Yeah, yeah, it's been a roller coaster. But like I said, the guys in the locker room make the journey worth it because you know when people have your back and people truly love you for you, it makes the hard days not so hard.

I've overcome a lot of adversity, but so has everybody else in that locker room, so they know what it takes. I've just got to turn to the left and right of me, and a guy will be able to help me out with what I'm going through, and I hope they can feel the same way about myself.

The locker room is what makes this place special, and that's why I chose to come back. I wanted to win games, and we did that, and what better way to finish it off than with a Rose Bowl.

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