

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

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Pasadena, California, USA

Penn State Nittany Lions Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



Q. Welcome back to the Rose Bowl. What's this experience been like for this team in this environment?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's been great. It really has. We've had 15 practices in terms of preparation that we get that the NCAA allows us to have. Our first six or seven back in State College were really almost like spring football, just kind of focused on us, good-on-good, getting our young guys getting involved from a developmental standpoint, and then we obviously started to transition and get ready for Utah.

The Rose Bowl is always first-class in every aspect when it comes to facilities, when it comes to the hotel. The traditions, we were at Lawry's last night which was awesome. So it's been a great experience for our players. But we're playing a really good Utah football team that we've got a ton of respect for. Coach Whittingham has had a hell of a career, and offense, defense and special teams, they're really strong in every area. So we understand this is going to be a challenge, but I've been very pleased with how our staff and players have handled it.

Q. When you turn on the film and really start game planning, what do you notice on either side of the ball from Utah?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think one of the things that really stands out that if I would say not only this year but traditionally with Utah and specifically in their conference, I think they're built very much so from an old-school perspective in terms of hard-nosed, physical, sound in everything they do. They've been able to typically dominate the fronts on the O-line and D-line. That's something that really jumped out to me right away.

All the analytics things that you look at that usually determine good football teams, they're pretty much strong in all those areas. But I think it's the physicality, the toughness that really stood out to us.

Q. When you look at Cam, I assume you enjoy watching the way he plays. What do you have to slow down in this offense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I was at Disneyland with him the other day with him. The first thing, I have hair envy. He's got that beautiful hair, which I have none of.

But back to that toughness. I think the play that I think about that really stands out, I think it was USC where his helmet gets knocked off, and that was a legitimate shot, and he popped right up, no hesitation.

When your quarterback has that type of toughness, it resonates through the entire program. I'm a big believer, I think a lot of people that aren't die-hard football people - you get this - but your quarterback really better be your toughest player on your field, and it may not be the pounding every single play, but when you've got to stand in the pocket and there's a free blitz coming and you know he's coming and you've got to stand there in a defenseless position and deliver the ball, that takes a mental and physical toughness that very few people have and very few positions really have to display it in that way.

To me, I've got a ton of respect for him. Obviously always look at touchdown-to-interception ratio. He's great there. I've known Andy Ludwig for a long time. He does a great job. He actually came and visited when I was offensive coordinator at Maryland, we spent some time together, and I know he runs a pro-style system. He puts a lot on the quarterback, so I've just got a ton of respect for how he plays the game.

Q. Do you see a lot of similarities between your program and theirs?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think so. I've known Kyle for a long time, all the way back to when I was at Idaho State.

Q. So was he --

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, exactly right. But yeah, I think old-school, fundamentalist, toughness, sound, offense, defense and special teams, a lot of coaches give special



teams lip service. I don't think he does that. They're doing it really well in all three phases.

It's going to take us to play well in all three phases to find a way to get this win.

Q. Andy likes to use tight ends, you guys clearly like to use tight ends. What is it like with that kind of offense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think a couple things. I think the first thing I would say is if you look at my history and Coach Yurcich's history, we're really 11-personnel teams and 11-personnel guys, but you play to our strengths. Right now our tight end room is as good as any tight end room in the country, and those guys need to be on the field.

They were in a similar position obviously earlier in the year. We'll see how that plays out in this game. They're down some tight ends.

But I think the strength of having tight ends, if they're truly tight ends, which theirs are and ours are, a lot of people are playing with what they call tight ends, but they're really just big wide outs. You don't really gain the advantage there.

If you have a second tight end, your H-back or whatever you want to call him, and he's really just a wide out, then you defend them like an 11-personnel team, and for us and for them, their tight ends can block and can cause match-up problems in the passing game, and that's where tight ends become really valuable because it puts the defensive coordinator in a challenging position; are you going to treat these guys like 12-personnel run blockers, or are you going to treat them like wide receivers.

For our tight ends and theirs, that's where they become match-up problems, because they're well-rounded tight ends.

Q. You both have talented freshman linebackers. Did you guys expect this type of season from Abdul Carter?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, he was a highly recruited guy. He had a dominant senior year, came in very mature, both mentally and physically. Just started to make plays.

He's got tremendous burst towards the football. Yeah, we were hopeful, but you never really truly know until they get on campus and show it in big-time games in big-time atmospheres.

Q. What do you sense the difference is (indiscernible) I'm sure you've learned something from the previous time.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's experience. Obviously 12 years as a head coach and played in this game before, now nine years at Penn State, experience is valuable, whether it's as coaches or whether it's as players. Being able to come here and have a plan of knowing exactly how we did it, what the hotel was like, what the practice venue is going to be like, what the schedule is going to be like, things that we would tweak from the last time we were here, there's value in that, for our players and for our staff.

Q. How do you sense the players and the atmosphere, the practices and all of the events that will going on, how do you sense the players are taking all of it and the excitement of it all?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, they've been great. We've played in big-time bowl games before, but obviously playing in the Rose Bowl is different.

It's been first-class since we arrived and continues to be that way.

For me, I put a lot of importance on our players representing our university the right way. The feedback that I've gotten from the Rose Bowl, the feedback I've gotten from the hotel, the people at the practice site, is that our guys are handling this with class and the right way. That's really important. I want to show our appreciation for being at the Rose Bowl. I want to show our appreciation for playing in this historical and tradition-rich game, and we want to represent the Big Ten and our university in the right way.

Q. What would a championship mean for the university and for yourself?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, obviously being 1-0 and playing well in this game against a great opponent is important to our program.

Q. What's the bar for you personally for what you consider a successful season? Have you already reached it by being here?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't think that's necessarily for me to determine. We just want to be 1-0 in this game. We want to win this game against a really good opponent. That's for other people to discuss and talk about. The things that we talk about inside our program is obviously, again, making sure our guys are handling themselves academically and putting themselves in the best position to

take care of themselves and their families for the next 50 years. It's being great in our community and making a positive impact in our community, and it's going out and playing the game the way it's supposed to be played week in and week out on a consistent basis.

That's what we want to do. We want to be 1-0 this week and play well against a really good opponent, and I'll leave that up to people like yourself to determine what type of season we've had.

Q. (Indiscernible) opt-outs (indiscernible) different situation this year. How do you go about developing young guys this week while trying to put a successful end to 2022?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't really look at it any different. I think last year for a lot of different reasons I think was on outlier. I think if you really look at our program, we haven't had that. Last year was the first opt-out that I've ever had in my career. We spent some time talking about it in the off-season, not only with the staff but also with the players and what our approach was going to be and what our mentality was going to be. Our guys have handled it really well. We've had great practices. We've had very transparent, honest conversations with our players and make sure that we're all on the same page with how they view this bowl experience, and it's been good.

I think the bowl games are always obviously about finishing the season you started, but it also gives you some momentum going into the off-season and gains you very much a spring ball type of experience for at least half of the practices.

Q. How have you handled practices, getting those young guys more experience?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, the first six or seven practices back in State College weren't really Utah specific. It was more about program development. It was more about good-on-good. Then obviously we started to kind of move towards a more game-specific practice like we do week in and week out obviously on Utah.

We were able to get everybody involved, more individual time, more good-on-good where the threes and fours were getting reps, as well, in practice. It's been good.

Q. Just to switch the subject, Parker (indiscernible) what was the conversation like with him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we sit down with the young men and their families and have conversations about what

they think is in their best interest, and then we obviously have the data of the NFL people that we've talked to and make our recommendations, and then ultimately they have all the information to make the best decision, and then there's usually a follow-up meeting or at least conversation about what they want to do.

From that point on, we're just doing whatever we possibly can to support them in them reaching their dreams.

Q. Did you think that the time in the setting in the decision-making process (indiscernible) when he decided to come back and then go to the draft another year later?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's hard for me to say that because obviously Jahan started to come back and Jahan and his family coming back would give him the best chance to get into the first round, and it worked out that way. But every situation is unique and every situation is different.

I love Parker. I love Parker's family. I want nothing but the best for them. I hope he's able to get into the first round, as well, but we'll see how that plays out.

Q. In July Sean (indiscernible) was talking to guys about the College Football Playoff. It seems to me like most people would think there was potential for divisiveness there. Whatever you did, worked. What did you do?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm happy to talk to you about Utah and the Rose Bowl at this time. I don't think this is the time to have that conversation. We can do that in the off-season, but right now I'm happy to talk about Utah and the Rose Bowl.

Q. You are letting your true freshmen talk for the first time today. Do you give them any schooling on how to handle this or is it just, have at it, guys?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so typically the bowl games, depending on the bowl, they'll do a media event like this. We do trainings throughout the year. This is obviously a great opportunity for the media to get with our guys, to have some conversations, for you guys to get to know them on a more significant level, a little bit more intimate level. But yeah, we do some trainings. That's what the first-year players not being available to the media is all about is getting them ready for it and making sure that they're comfortable and confident when it happens.

Q. You've had quite an impact on a lot of first-year guys this year, maybe more than you've had in the past probably. What's it been like?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, we have had a number of first-year guys that have had prominent roles for us this year, probably more so than in years past. It really just comes down that we just for whatever reason a larger number in this class that were physically ready to do it, but also from a maturity and a mental approach, really handled things the right way. Everybody says they want to play as freshmen, but a lot of guys just aren't mature and don't understand what it truly takes, and those guys have done a phenomenal job, and as the year has gone on, their roles have gotten more and more prominent. I'm proud of them.

Q. (Indiscernible) never got top high, never got too low.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he's been really good. Obviously there's a lot of noise on the outside, probably more so than there's ever been with the rule changes in terms of agents being able to talk to players, media, fans being able to reach out on social media. There's a lot of people pulling at these guys from a lot of different directions, NIL, being able to sign with marketing people.

It's more challenging than ever, but he's really a neat young man. He's handled this entire process, the recruiting process the right way, and that has continued on. Same thing with his parents. We've been able to have really honest conversations with the entire family, and then I was able to meet with Drew this week just to kind of see how he was doing and check in on him and make sure that our relationship continues to grow and prosper, as well.

He's been great, and he's gotten a ton of reps this year, not only in games but also in practice.

Q. How have you seen (indiscernible)?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, whenever you're able to be a young player and be able to sit behind a veteran player that's done it on this stage, there's a ton of value in that. I was with the Green Bay Packers when we had Brett Favre and we drafted Aaron Rodgers, Aaron Rodgers' rookie year, and I think there's a ton of value in what Aaron was able to do in being able to sit behind Brett for a few years and learn from that, and when he was able to take over, he was ready. Obviously Aaron has had an unbelievable career.

But that kind of impacted me, and you see a lot of quarterbacks that maybe get thrown into the fire before they're ready, and I think this was an ideal situation for both Sean from a leadership standpoint and all of our young quarterbacks.

Q. We've talked to a half a dozen guys who just left Pennsylvania to come to the Rose Bowl. You've had great success recruiting guys (indiscernible) given with opportunity, what's that say?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's cool. It's been a really unique experience for them. I know they have enjoyed it.

I would not have anticipated that it's warmer in Pennsylvania than it is in California this week with the rain and a little bit of a chilly temperature, but obviously our guys and probably Utah, we're used to this. Hopefully we'll get great weather for the game, but it's been really good. Our guys have handled it the right way. We've had no issues, knock on wood, with curfew and things like that. They've understood this is a time to enjoy themselves and there's a time to work, and our guys have taken a very mature approach to this entire bowl experience, and I'm really proud of them.

Q. The Rose Bowl is such a big stage (indiscernible)?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I do think we've made really good strides. I'm proud of the work that we've done since we got here, and as you know and people that really study football know, when we got to Penn State, it was at a challenging time, and I'm proud of what we did. Obviously there's still a lot more work to do, and I think we're in a really good position to take the next step. But yeah, it's been great.

Playing a game with the history and tradition that the Rose Bowl has and our guys to be able to kind of get a sense for what this is all about, I'm really proud of our program, and more specifically I'm proud of our players.

Q. (Indiscernible).

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he wanted 22, and 22 is retired, and obviously the next number that he wanted was 11, and obviously there's a lot of history at Penn State with the number 11 and Stick City and LeVar Arrington, and I could go on and on with all the great players at Penn State that have worn the number 11.

Q. (Indiscernible).

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, consistency is harder and harder to do in college football, but having consistency on your staff, especially from the coordinators' positions is really valuable, and to your point in both directions. For Sean to have a coordinator for multiple years, for the rest of our quarterbacks to have the same coordinator for multiple years, for our coordinators to have the same middle linebacker for multiple years, which we'll

have with Elsdon and Kobe, and then with the same with Mike and our quarterbacks.

I think that value will show up in this game in the Rose Bowl, but it will also show up with Drew and Beau and our quarterbacks moving forward.

Q. (Indiscernible) what has his development been like?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's unusual, especially when you talk about on the O-line and D-line, and to have guys like Drew Shelton and have guys like Dani Dennis-Sutton and Zane Durant, that's unusual to have offensive and defensive linemen have the opportunity to play and have prominent roles on your team. Specifically we talk about Drew at left tackle, he showed right away that he was one of these freshmen that was taking a mature approach. He was able to put some weight on and get bigger and stronger, and he's been durable.

We're proud of him. Obviously when you get in a position where you lose a projected first-round draft choice in Olu Fashanu and have a guy like Drew Shelton be able to step into that role and play well, depth is important, and I think that's a great example.

Q. (Indiscernible).

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we'll see. I'm not sure if that's been announced yet.

Q. What challenges do you anticipate with the offense and defense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think the biggest thing is they're sound and solid in all three phases, offense and defense and special teams, like we try to build ourselves in a very similar way, so you'd better be solid in all three facets or they're going to be able to take advantage of you.

I think their physicality is probably what they hang their hat on. Their physicality and how sound they are.

It'll be a challenge, and obviously I think it starts and ends with their quarterback that really sets the tone for their whole organization.

Q. How have you seen Kaytron (indiscernible)?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, they've been fortunate to have a guy like Keyvone Lee that was the starter earlier in the year before he got some injuries, and really did a good job of taking those young guys under his wing, and then obviously when the opportunity presented

itself, Nick and Kaytron have really been able to play well, not just as running backs in the traditional manner of carrying the football, but also in protections, on special teams, in route running and being a threat in the passing game, which is important, that we have well-rounded, complete backs. They've just continued to gain confidence and gain production as the year has gone on.

Q. When you look at the week you guys have had, the growth you've had as a team, what are some things that stand out to you in terms of whether it's the young guys, whether it's the veterans, whether it's all of them together, have learned that will help you?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I kind of look at it like spring ball, right, so we probably got six extra spring ball practices where it really had nothing to do with Utah. We were on the road recruiting, weren't really ready to put the game plan together, so kind of put a heavy emphasis on individual, and really as the season goes on, you lose some of that. So put a heavy emphasis on individual, put a heavy emphasis on good-and-good work and typically during the season we're really focused on the first and second team, so it allows you to cut the reps from the first and second team and get the third and sometimes fourth teams some reps as well. That's been really good.

Then some of your veteran players that have played a ton of football for you, really cut them back and take care of those guys. They've earned that and deserve that. That's been really valuable, just getting those guys that maybe once camp ended their reps were cut and reduced, and maybe they weren't able to get opportunities based on injuries that happened during the season, getting them back involved.

You talk about preparing as if you're the starter; very few guys do that, and we were able to see very quickly who did, where they weren't ready in terms of making plays when everybody is watching against really good competition, or they didn't know what they were doing consistently.

I try to kind of reinforce that as much as I can in practice and after practice, hey, here's an example, you guys all want to be the guys next year and you think you are, and some of you guys aren't consistently making plays in practice to earn the trust of your coaches and your teammates, and that can be mentally and physically.

We had some really good examples, and I think we had some kind of wake-up call examples that hey, maybe you're not as ready as you think you need to be, and hopefully we learn that now so that in spring ball we don't waste six practices trying to figure that out.

Q. Any examples that really stand out to you or your staff of guys that were ready for that point?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think some guys that you guys know. Those guys that were right on the bubble that we were able to use the four games that moved to five games, Vega is a guy that we're really excited about, has been able to get a ton of reps in practice and some reps in the game. I think his reps were really valuable. J.D. was another guy that we were able to end up redshirting. He's going to have three years now left of eligibility. I think that's going to be really valuable for us. Kaden Saunders is a guy that was able to get a bunch of reps this year in practice and a ton of reps during this practice time for the bowl game. A guy that probably people don't want to talk about, but Duzansky as our long snapper, we're really excited about him and his future.

Then some other guys on the defensive side of the ball, you look at some of those young safeties, although Winston played a bunch of football for us on special teams, we were able to get him some more reps on the defensive side of the ball, and then Cam Miller, Driver, guys like that. I think it was really valuable for them.

Keon Wylie, so all those guys that you knew were kind of right on the bubble on whether we were going to play them or not this year. I probably missed a few, but all those guys right on the bubble about possibly playing, it was really valuable for them.

Q. (Indiscernible).

JAMES FRANKLIN: We're going to move him to wideout. He came to us after the year and said he's most comfortable on the offensive side of the ball, really feels like he can help there and have a significant role. For us, we're always going to play guys where they want to play. We're not into moving guys to positions.

He trusted us at first and we thought the best position was on the defensive side of the ball, but after a year now or I guess really half a year, going through the fall, he's most comfortable being on the offensive side of the ball, so we asked him during this bowl, we were going to move him. We're a little thin at the corner position, so we asked him to stay there during the bowl, and then he'll transition right when the bowl is over for spring ball to offense.

Q. You played quarterback; is Drew ready for what will happen with him in the next year or two, learning from Sean, having the ups and downs (indiscernible)?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, he's very level. His personality

is very level. I would say in a lot of ways, Sean is probably more emotional. Sean has been more level this year than maybe in years past. I just think that's kind of how Drew is wired in general.

I do think the amount of reps and experience that we were able to get him this year helps.

But until you're truly sitting in that seat, you never truly know. It's like being a head coach. Everybody thinks they know exactly what type of head coach you're going to be until you truly sit in that seat.

Same thing at middle linebacker and so on. I think he's wider for it, but the experience we were able to get him this year has been really valuable, but until he truly sits in that seat, that's when we'll all know.

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