

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

Sunday, January 1, 2023

Pasadena, California, USA

## Coach James Franklin

Penn State Nittany Lions

## Coach Kyle Whittingham

Utah Utes

### Coaches Press Conference



It's been great spending a little bit of time with Coach Whittingham, who I have a ton of respect for, and the University of Utah, what he's been able to do there.

To echo a lot of the things that he already stated, I think there's a lot of similarities between our programs and how they're built, fundamentalist program, tough, sound. We're playing really well on defense and have been all year long. I think they've been built with his background on the defensive side of the ball, as well.

But I think their quarterback really makes them go. I've got a ton of respect for him.

I think sometimes when you think about quarterbacks, you don't think about toughness, but really that position, that guy better be the toughest guy in your program. You've got to stand there and deliver a ball with an unblocked blitz, and you know you're going to get hit and you're in a defenseless position and deliver the ball, and he's done it time and time again.

Obviously the play against USC, the big hit where his helmet comes off and how he pops up, I think really just kind of illustrates who they are as a program.

I've got a ton of respect for him.

Offense, defense and special teams, there's really no weakness, not only on film but also when you look at the analytics and the data, it backs it up. Like Coach talked about, being able to win the Pac-12 Championship two years in a row is a really, really impressive accomplishment.

We expect to have a great football game. I think it's going to be a four-quarter game. There's been great games already during this bowl season, especially the last couple days, and I expect this to be another one. We appreciate being here. Got a ton of respect for University of Utah and Coach Whittingham.

**Q. Coach Franklin, with the games yesterday, you could see how close some of these games are. How**

THE MODERATOR: Good morning, and welcome to the head coach press conference for the 109th Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential. The run of show for today, we are going to start with the coaches giving an opening statement followed by about 25 minutes of questions.

We'll start with Coach Whittingham.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We're elated to be here, to be back here. Second time in a row. Honored to play Penn State, a storied tradition, a steeped-in-tradition program, I should say. Absolutely a complete football team.

You watch them on tape, strong at every position group. Without question the best defense we've played this year. Very impressed -- I'm a former linebacker so I'm looking at those guys, very impressed with their linebacker corps, got to be one of the best in the country without a doubt.

We've got our hands full in that respect, but proud of our guys for working their way back into this game.

We had some adversity that we had to handle throughout the course of the season. They responded and answered the bell each and every time, and for our program to get back-to-back Pac-12 championships was a huge step in the evolution of our program, and like I said, very proud of our coaches and players for what they accomplished, and now we get the opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl Game, so we're excited about that.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Franklin?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so we've had a phenomenal experience. I want to thank the Rose Bowl. We really have had a great experience. They've treated us first class from the time we stepped off of the airplane, practice facilities, hotel. It's just been first class. We've had a great experience.



**prepared is your team if this game comes down to the wire? What intangibles do they have that shows you they can pull off another close one again?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, and I think the end of your question there is the point. Coach's program has been tested this year and responded. Our program has been tested and responded. Our two losses are two losses to top-5 programs. As I think everybody in this room understands our conference and especially our side of the conference, you could make an argument may be the toughest in college football.

We've been in these situations before all the way back to the opening game against Purdue.

I think the best thing to answer your question is experience. We've had some games like this. We've won a ton of different ways, and I think that's what good teams do. They find different ways to win throughout the season, and their program has done that, as well.

**Q. Coach Whittingham, the tight end position has been so great for you guys all season, but now you're not going to have Dalton Kincaid or Kuithe this game. How are you planning to adjust?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, that's obviously a position that has had a lot of production for us this year, but like everyone else in the country, we've got injuries and guys that opted out. It's almost like this isn't the team you played with during the regular season. It's a transitional team, transitioning into next year where you don't have your recruits yet for next year but you're missing a bunch of guys from the regular season, and everyone in the country is in the same boat.

We've got a couple more tight ends we feel really good about, Thomas Yassmin is the guy who really is going to be picking up a slot of the slack for what those two guys that we're missing; Logan Kendall, more of a blocking tight end that's invaluable to us. What he brings to the table in the run game, and he can also catch, as well, but he's a guy that does the dirty work for us.

Then Taniela Pututau, so we've still got some guys there, but obviously it's tough to be missing guys the caliber of those two tight ends. We thought we had maybe the best tandem in the country, but they're out, so we move on, next man up mentality, and away you go.

**Q. We saw the two playoff games yesterday played in the 80s and the 90s. What defines defensive success in this era of college football?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Defensive coordinator. Go ahead.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Okay. First of all, winning the game. If they score 50, you've got to score 51, so whatever you've got to do to win the game.

Our philosophy, and it appears Penn State is very similar, is to be tough against the run. If you take away the run, if you can tell a team they can't run the football and turn them one dimensional and get them to third down, third-and-long ideally and get after the quarterback, that's really the simple formula in its most simplistic terms for us is take away the run, get after the quarterback on third down, and that's what we strive for.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think your question is a good one. You have to look at it different. The scores and the yards are much different than they were probably even 10 years ago.

We were watching those games last night, a good friend of mine is the defensive coordinator for the Rams, and he was in town last night. He's actually my daughter's godfather, Raheem Morris, and we were watching those games, and that's exactly what we were discussing.

I think Coach Whittingham is exactly right. At the end of the day, all that really matters is winning, and your defense has a responsibility to keep them from scoring one less point than your offense has produced, and your offense has the responsibility of trying to score one more points.

There's going to be some games that are defensive battles, and there's going to be some games that are offensive battles, and special teams are always going to have an impact, as well. But at the end of the day, it's about winning and making the stop when you need it, whether it's third down, whether it's goal line, whatever it may be.

There's going to be four to six of those plays in this game, and who finds a way to make those four to six plays at critical moments is going to be the team that probably has the best chance to be successful.

**Q. Question for both of you. Kyle, regarding the running backs you've seen from Penn State, the freshman tandem, what stands out? And James, finishing off their season, where are they now versus where they were when you took the road to Purdue the first game of the year?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: As far as the running backs, two tremendous backs. One is closing in on 1,000 yards, the other is closing in on 900 yards. They've got exceptional vision. They're tough. They've got size. They can run

inside or outside.

Obviously no running backs can have great success without an absolutely phenomenal front, and these guys have a great front. They play well together. They're efficient. They're physical. They do a great job committing to the run game, much like us. There's so many similarities between these two teams would be my opinion.

It's very intriguing.

But they're committed to the run like we are, and throw the play-action pass scheme off of that, and that's really the formula for success, and those guys have done a great job running the football for them this year, and again, the offensive line moving people around is really where it starts.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm proud of them. True freshmen in today's college football, there's a ton on their plate. They're being pulled in a bunch of different directions. Both are very different personalities but have handled it extremely well. They have a very good relationship, which I think is good. They challenge each other, hold each other accountable.

Like Coach mentioned, we've made a commitment to the running game, and not just from a mentality standpoint but diversity in what we do, which can make it difficult to defend.

I think when you're playing a really good defense like they have, if you really only have one or two ways to run the ball, they're really good on the defensive side of the ball, and Coach's background, they're going to find a way to defend those. So having multiple ways to get the ball into the running backs' hands. We've got two playmakers that need to touch the ball.

But they've handled everything really well. They both have the ability to go the distance. Nick has had a few longer runs. But they can also run with a toughness and get those gritty yards.

I think the thing that probably no one is talking about that I think as coaches, we've got a ton of respect for, is we've been running this goal-line package that you guys -- especially our local media have been wanting to talk about all year long. The thing I think that's so impressive and the reason that package has worked is the ability of both those guys to block, and a lot of college running backs I wouldn't necessarily say want to be lead blockers in short-yardage situations, and both of those guys have done that. They've taken a very unselfish approach, that now you have to defend it in either direction, and that's been important for

us.

Then like Coach mentioned, the play-action pass coming off of it has the ability to be a little bit more explosive when people have a true concern for stopping the run.

**Q. James, you mentioned watching the games last night with Raheem Morris; are those working kind of nights when you do something like that? Ultimately what were your impressions of the playoff games?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I wouldn't say this one was a working night, to be honest with you, and I've got to be honest because there are probably pictures on social media. My wife and all of our friends were at a little sports bar. I thought I could go over, and that really didn't work out well, went over and saw those guys for about 15, 20 minutes and then left.

But yeah, I think as coaches, to be honest with you, it's hard to really turn that off and just watch the game and enjoy it. You're looking at it, I'm sending text messages to my DC, to my OC, to my special teams coordinators about things that I saw in the game.

A lot of times when we're watching the games, too, there's things that I want to show the team the next day, whether it's situational football, because I know they were watching it, too, and it's something that we can reinforce.

So you never really turn it off, but then it's also interesting just talking about the differences between the NFL and college football, but I would say those two games are probably more similar than they've ever been in terms of the offenses that are being run and the mobility at the quarterback position.

I wish I could tell you that it was just kind of a watching and enjoying the game, but I think as coaches it's kind of hard to do that. You're just trained to look at the game a little bit differently.

**Q. You guys talked about how you guys both have kind of similar teams, similar offenses. In terms of preparation, is it maybe easier to prepare for a team that is similar to the offense you run, or can you go a little bit in depth? What is preparation like?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess what I would say is early in the season, I do think that is true because when you're in training camp and you're doing good-on-good, playing a team that's similar helps because you've got so many of those reps.

But at this point of the season, both their conference and

ours, there's enough diversity in the schemes that you see that you cover it all.

But I think the other thing when I look at Coach and their program, similar to ours, is we have an offense that does a little bit of everything, which as a head coach has been important for me for that very reason. If you're just lining up and running two backs all the time, it's hard to get your defense ready for some spread.

So having diversity in your offensive package is not just important for your offense, but it's also important to prepare your defense. Tempo, being able to have some tempo into your offense, not that we do it all the time or they do it all the time, but if you never see it and then you're playing a team that's going really fast all the time, then that can be challenging, as well.

Part of the head coach's responsibility is to make sure that you have enough things in your packages on offense, defense and special teams that prepares your team year-round, not just week to week.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I would say as a general statement, it does help you prepare to a certain degree. There's certainly enough differences in what we do that you've got to make sure you cover all your bases and expose your players to what they're going to -- all the things they're going to see.

We do good-on-good, as Coach mentioned, all season long. That's our MO. We did it just the other day. That does help us when you're playing a team where the offenses are so similar.

We've had a lot of time to prepare. I think we've had 15 practices. I'm sure we're going to see some things that they haven't shown on tape, as will they from us. Get ready for their core offense and their core runs and what they do, and like I said, being as similar as we are to each other, that does help a little bit.

**Q. For both coaches, Coach Whittingham, in talking with some of your offensive players a few days ago, No. 11, Abdul Carter, for Penn State is somebody that really jumps out at the tape. What have you seen from him on film, and then Coach Franklin, what do you think is the biggest stride Abdul has made from the time he got on campus to where he is now?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, first of all, their entire defense, as I mentioned is phenomenal. He's a great player, great motor, very skilled, obviously. But we've got respect for every single level of their defense. As I mentioned, no question this is the best defense we've

faced all year long, so we can't really focus on one particular position group or one particular guy. We've got to be ready to try to move the ball somehow, some way against what they do.

But got a lot of respect for him, obviously, and he's a tremendous player.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, he came in, for a freshman, very mature, very focused and very driven. All the freshmen say they want to play, but not all of them really understand what it takes. He had a very mature approach from the time he stepped on campus. He was not a guy that came in early, which sometimes can make that even more challenging.

He already was kind of college ready in terms of his body. He came in already kind of put together. I think the local media know that -- I talked about earlier in the year, when I went to do the home visit, he literally had a bench press and a power clean in the living room as soon as you walked in the house, which I think mom was happy when he came to Penn State, that she could get her living room back.

But then once he got on campus he was able to pick up the system quickly. He's got the ability to find the ball, which at the linebacker position you can teach those things, but obviously some guys kind of naturally have it and some guys got to work at it, and he's got the ability to find the ball.

He's gotten better at that as the year has gone on, and then what he just has, he's got the ability to burst. Once he makes his mind up, he's got a burst towards the ball which is unlike many that I've had and many that I've seen.

He's got a lot of -- when you kind of list out all the traits and attributes that you're looking for at the linebacker position, he's got a lot of them, and I think he's only going to get better, and I think he'll take a step in this game and will continue to grow throughout his career.

I'm really proud of how he's kind of handled all of it. He really has. We're going to need him to play well -- I keep wanting to say Saturday because to me all the games in my mind are Saturdays. The way we do our schedule, it is a Saturday, so I'm not even sure what day of the week the game is on, but we expect him to play well.

**Q. James, will you be Olu Fashanu and Keyvone Lee available Monday, and if so, what would that mean to your team?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so Keyvone will be available.





Obviously he's been out for a number of weeks, so we'll see how that rotation will go. Those two running backs obviously have played and played really well. But having Keyvone available is I think really, really important. He's practiced extremely well, so that's been great.

Then Olu is going to be a game-time decision. We've had conversations with him and his family. Part of Olu making the decision to come back was also about him being physically ready to play but also mentally ready to play. He does not want to rush back from this injury, and that was really what was discussed.

That will be a game-time decision. We've had really good conversations with Olu and his family, and he's been awesome out at practice, not only in terms of the reps he's been able to get but also really coaching Drew Shelton, who depending on how this thing plays out, could be in a position to be a five-game starter for a guy that we were planning on redshirting. We'll see how it plays out.

**Q. Kyle, this is kind of off topic, but George Kliavkoff a few days ago said that he's considering instituting injury reports; my question is do you think that's a good idea on a weekly basis, and would you be in favor of it?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, I really have no strong opinion either way as long as it's a level playing field and everyone is doing the same thing. If the Pac-12 has that and no other conferences do that, I'm against it, but if the NCAA as a whole goes that direction, like the NFL, and the NFL system seems to work very well, then it's not a problem at all.

Right now our stance is with no injury report requirement or anything, why would you tip your hand at all, the guys that are available and not available.

I guess the short answer is if it's universal, across the board, no problem at all with it. But if it's just the Pac-12, that wouldn't make sense because that's a strategic disadvantage in my opinion.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I know you didn't ask me the question, but I feel exactly the same way, and I know the media is all looking at me shaking their head.

**Q. For both coaches, this is your second opportunity in this game. What would winning a Rose Bowl mean for your programs moving forward?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, first of all, going to the Rose Bowl has been phenomenal. They treat you right. We've been to a lot of bowl games, and it's a great experience for

our players.

Second time around, we came up short last year against a very good Ohio State team, lost by one or two points there, last drive of the game decided the outcome. But if we were able to get a win, that would obviously be another step in the right direction for our program.

But I can tell you right now, the season is a success regardless, for our program to be able to go back-to-back from where we started when we joined this conference 11 or 12 years ago was a big step in the right direction, and we talked about that all season that getting to the top is one thing but staying on top is another. It's a bigger challenge and it's harder to sustain success than get there the first time, and I think our guys did a great job of taking that to heart. So here we are back again.

But yeah, if we were able to pull out a win, that would be another big step in the right direction for us.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we agree. Both of our teams, I don't want to speak for Coach, but we played in really unbelievable Rose Bowl games the last time we were both in it. We had a great game.

I seem to always run into USC fans and they talk about what an unbelievable game it was, and I say, yeah, it was unbelievable. Could have been a little better. Could have been a little bit better.

But getting here is one thing, and it takes a tremendous amount of hard work and perseverance and a plan and really doing it from the time the season ended last year. But obviously both of our programs want to try to finish this thing the right way.

We both are going to have momentum going into next year based on what we did and what we have on our current roster, but obviously being able to get a win to end the season, there's not too many programs that are able to end their season with a win. We'd like to be one of them, and obviously being able to do it against a really good opponent, I think that's important, too.

**Q. For both of you, you've got one more game with this full roster of gentlemen that you guys have; what is it that you are most confident in about your team?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, I've just been so impressed with our leadership. Obviously everybody spends a lot of time talking about culture, and I'm just really proud of our veteran leaders on our team in a day in college football where I think it's more challenging than it's ever been.

So to have those strong voices in our locker room, the way our guys have handled the entire season, the way our guys have handled opt-outs compared to programs nationally, compared to our program last year. We had a number of opt-outs last year. We have had very honest, transparent conversations, not only from Penn State's perspective and our football program's perspective but also their perspective and their futures.

I think that's really important.

I'm proud of our leadership, and not only what they've done this year but really the legacy that they're going to leave with the locker room and the right way to do it.

I'm surprised we haven't gotten any questions about our similar pass in Pocatello, Idaho, and Idaho State. I don't know if you guys have ever been to Pocatello, Idaho --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Wind never stops blowing there.

You know, proud of our football team. Showed a lot of resiliency this year. As I mentioned, we got off to a horrible start down in The Swamp against Florida, dropped that ballgame, dropped a couple Pac-12 games along the way, but they just kept fighting, kept persevering. There's no quit in our football team. They're a bunch of warriors. I love being around them.

We only have seven seniors, so what you see with us is going to be very similar next year. We will have some guys that move on to the next level, underclassmen, but we also have those conversations and give our guys advice when they seek it.

You've got to be careful when you have those conversations because it's got to be their decision. You can't be too forceful one way or the other because ultimately it's their careers, their lives. Our stance has always been during the season, it's all about the team. After the season, it's always about what's best for the individual. That's our approach. We'll see what happens here with some of our underclassmen, but I think we're going to get the vast majority of them returning, and that would be a good thing for us.

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