

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Pitt vs Michigan State

Monday, December 27, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Pitt Panthers

Israel Abanikanda

Press Conference

Q. As the team's leading rusher heading into next season, what was your initial reaction that all five of your offensive linemen are going to come back next year?

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: I was very happy, very amazed and very shocked, actually, because we talked about it all season about how our O line would be looking next year and what would be the plan.

Q. After the ACC championship game win, when you guys accomplished the goal you guys set out for yourself at the start of the season, what's it been like re-acclimating coming back from that, and also when you have a new quarterback for you guys in the backfield, you, Vincent and Rodney, have shared that backfield all season long and developed that chemistry. And then you kind of get some time off and you have a new quarterback coming back.

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: It's the same plan. Same plan. Whatever it takes to win, you do whatever it takes to win. Kenny left. We respect that decision. He's a great player, great team player.

Q. With Kenny opting out, new quarterback, do you as a running game as a whole feel a little more responsibility now than before to share more of the load on the offense, do you think?

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: Just like I just said, we're just going to do whatever it takes to win, running, passing, blocking, anything it takes for us to win this bowl game.

Q. Nick Patti's presence in the huddle, how has he been and how has the offense responded to him being the leader right now?

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: It's definitely been great. He's definitely a great team player. He's definitely a great



leader. And it feels like the same, just like as Kenny's in the huddle.

Q. Nick was asked a little bit about Michigan State's defense and what he has noticed from them or what jumps out. So I'm just curious along those same lines what maybe you've noticed from Michigan State's defense going into this game?

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: Definitely a lot of similarities to other teams we've played. They blitz. They blitz a lot. They've got good tacklers in the back end of the defense. Just a lot of similarities we played against.

Q. More talking about the offensive line coming back. You talked about how excited you guys are. When you guys started this year, it seemed like it took a couple of weeks to figure out the rhythm and flow of just their playing and you guys playing as a backfield with the way you guys rotate your backs. But what kind of confidence does that set for you guys not just to finish strong in this game but looking forward and saying like, hey, we can really hit the ground running next year because we know everybody who is in the room?

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: Yeah, definitely the connection got better throughout the year between the running backs and the O line. We even talk about it on and off the field and it's a better connection. Just a better connection. I felt it.

Q. What has the season been like for you just overall getting to this point personally being a big part of this offense?

ISRAEL ABANIKANDA: The season has been great for me so far. It's a big improvement from last year, definitely. And I felt that too between me and the running backs as well. And I just hope it improves more next year.

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