

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

Tuesday, December 28, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Michigan State Spartans

Payton Thorne

Press Conference

Q. Wondering what everything has been like for you guys from the activities, the team building experience, to going to the football Hall of Fame, College Football Hall of Fame. How special has that been for you guys and how does that help motivate from a team perspective this week?

PAYTON THORNE: It's been cool. It's been a good experience in Atlanta so far. Like you said, last night we were at the Hall of Fame. That was cool to see the different things they had there. And we played some family feud there last night and another game that was fun.

It's been good stuff but we're turning our focus now completely to the game in front of us. And we're excited about that.

Q. Wanted to ask you about Kenneth and his decision. I know you guys got pretty close over this last year when he came up. What was your reaction to him making the decision he made? How would you describe the team-wide reaction to that decision?

PAYTON THORNE: My first reaction was I was a little surprised. But not surprised in a bad way. We had talked a couple weeks before. But he got some more information after that, after we talked. It was the best decision for him to forego the bowl game and start training and get his body completely healthy, ready to go for the draft. None of us on this team hold that against him by any means. We're in full support of him. And I definitely am as well.

Q. How would you describe his impact or legacy, I guess, here in one season, and what have you seen from your other running backs over the past month?

PAYTON THORNE: What Ken did this year was pretty special, to win the two awards that he won. And really just he's a unanimous All-American. He'll go down as one of



our best players ever, I would say, at Michigan State. And I think a lot of people would agree with that.

And so he's going to be a really tough guy to replace. But, like you said, our guys behind him, they're playing well right now. They're doing what they're supposed to do in terms of our scheme. And we trust them in the run game and pass protection and catching the ball out of the backfield. So, it will be good to get those guys on the field this week and get a lot of reps this week.

Q. I'm wondering how much this feels like your team differently than it did at the beginning of the year when you were just named the starter when you started at Northwestern, how much, especially somebody like Kenneth Walker exits the stage, does this start to feel like your offense and your team for a little bit here?

PAYTON THORNE: Yeah, I would say so. I think we have a lot of leaders on our team. And we've got a good group and it's been a fun year. And we're looking to close it out the right way.

But definitely feels different than what it did at the start of the year. And I think that's just accumulation of 12 games. A lot of weeks of preparation. A lot of shared experiences throughout the year.

And I think that's what I would attribute that feeling to.

Q. When you go back and watch film of -- you do have early games in the season -- do you see noted progress on what you've seen and where you're going?

PAYTON THORNE: I don't really watch our previous games. Like I wouldn't watch a Northwestern game right now because it's so far back in the season. I watch every game, obviously, after we play. We watched that game a few times. But in terms of looking back to the start of the year, I don't watch that.

I will in the offseason or the out of season. And take a look at those things where I want to improve and kind of chart myself in the areas that I can improve. But right now that's



not something that I've done yet.

Q. When you pop the tape in on the Pitt defense, obviously you see there's a lot of pressure there. They're second in the country in sacks. What jumps out at you when you look at the defense you're getting ready to face on Thursday?

PAYTON THORNE: Like you said, it pops out that they're second in the country in sacks. They've got a lot of good athletes over there. They're really big up front. They do a lot of good things, third down, they do a lot of different stuff.

And they're very disciplined in what they do. And they're a good defense. And they've shown that this year. And obviously they've shown that in the pressure they've gotten on the quarterback as well.

Q. I think a lot of what you'll find with this team this year was character. So can you talk about Jayden and him playing in this game no matter what his decision is going to be after the game? And then also talk about somebody like Matt Allen and what he brought to the table as far as the character of this team this year.

PAYTON THORNE: I would say both those guys are great examples of what it means to play for this team. And for Jayden, he's pushed through injuries this year. Although none major. Knock on wood. He's been in and out in terms of practice, and you see him fighting every day and he's trying to get back.

Not that he's been out for an extended period of time or anything like that, but he works hard every day and Matt Allen has given everything that he's got to this program. Obviously both his brothers played for us as well he's kind of carried on that legacy and his brothers have played in some of the biggest games in Michigan State history.

And he's got a ton of experience under his belt. And he's been great for us this year.

Q. With the progress you guys have made offensively after struggles in recent seasons how you view this game and the opportunity to close on a positive note and kind of make this a season of defining progress for you guys on this side of the ball?

PAYTON THORNE: Absolutely. Looking to close the year out the right way and send our seniors out the right way as well. And then also gain momentum moving into next year. I think that we have shown a lot of progress from last year to this year and really from the last few years, honestly, offensively.

And we're looking to build on that this week on Thursday, and finish the year out the right way and then we'll be able to take a look at the season in full in the weeks coming and look at areas we can improve for next year and what kind of players we've got coming back for next year.

Q. Connor was just in here saying that you gave a speech after practice to the freshmen about the importance of the bowl game sending out the seniors the right way. Can you just talk a little bit about what bowl programs mean to a program for the coming years?

PAYTON THORNE: After practice today, we talked a little bit as a team. And I just said that a bowl game like this, it doesn't come around every single year. Not everybody can say they played in a bowl game like this.

To win a bowl game like this is something you can take with you and build on. We're not satisfied with just getting here. We're not just satisfied with winning this in terms of down the road. But to send your seniors out the right way, New Year's Six bowl, and then I was saying to start a freshman legacy. He's got that on his resumé, when you accomplish that.

So bowl games do matter. Although people may think they don't with the playoff now, they still do. I think our team's motivated and we're looking to finish our year out the right way and get rolling into next year on a positive note.

Q. Things went pretty well for you in your first game at Penn State. It was a long time ago. A lot of things have gone really well on offense since. We're here on Zoom. How do you keep your focus on what has to be focused on as things start going well, people start patting you on the back, numbers start rising? How do you keep that focus and reset it each week?

PAYTON THORNE: I would say you really can't get satisfied with any success that you have. You look at the greats. I think a Tom Brady immediately with all the success he's had. And he always says that his favorite ring is the next.

I'm not saying that we've won any rings or accomplish anything Tom Brady has but he's always motivated and that's why he's the greatest. And I think of Michael Jordan, same thing. And those are the greats and those are who you want to look at and you want to learn from those type of people.

And when you look at us, there's always stuff to improve when you watch the film. You can go back, watch the film, it may look like it was a really good offensive day but you

look back you say, man, we could have scored at least two more times. It's frustrating.

There's always areas to improve as a unit, as a team and personally. And for me I'm always trying to improve and I feel like there are a ton of areas for me to improve as a player, as we go to the offseason I know our offense is going to look there's a lot of areas we can improve and build on because you always want to be going upwards and not stagnant or going down. So we'll be looking to get better this offseason.

Q. Jay Johnson told us this morning that you guys are getting Jalen Nailor back. This is probably something that you have known for quite some time. But how important is it to be able to have one of those big weapons offensively back for you guys in a game like this?

PAYTON THORNE: Yeah, it will be great to have him back. Having him back provides another element of big play possibility. Not that our other guys didn't, because we have other guys that are fast as well.

But Speedy has a lot of experience under his belt. He's a really good route runner and hands and good player and having another guy playmaker back is going to be nice. I know he's ready to go and excited to get back out there.

Q. 2019 you would have been on the scout team playing your starting defense that was Coach Dantonio's defense, obviously similar to Coach Narduzzi. When you look at Pitt, what I'm getting at, have you seen flashbacks to your first year at Michigan State and the defense you were playing against in practice at all?

PAYTON THORNE: I do. It's funny you say that. I remember watching the film and listening to a couple of our coaches talk on the previous staff and it did remind me my freshman year I played against that the whole year. And I played with Jayden as well on that scout team. So I do remember that.

And it was fun to go against our defense every day. We had a really good defense that year. And those are experiences that I'll remember and have in my back pocket.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports