

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

Thursday, December 30, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Michigan State Spartans

Payton Thorne

Press Conference

Michigan State - 31, Pitt - 21

Q. Coach talked about the conversation you guys had on the sideline, that you felt like you were missing some things and your footwork was off. First, how do you correct that in game? And, secondly, what started to go right particularly on that long drive you finished with the Connor touchdown?

PAYTON THORNE: Coach Tuck was talking to me on the sidelines. Kind of asked me what I needed or what I wanted to run or anything like that. And I just told him, I like the plays that were being called. They're my favorite plays that we had in.

And I just wasn't being accurate. He asked why. I said probably my feet are messed up because it always starts with your feet.

But, like you say, you can't really focus on that during the game because you're looking at the defense the whole time. So you can't really be thinking about your feet the whole time.

For me, we talked about it on the sideline, just treat it like it's practice. And treat it like you're just playing one play at a time. Coach Johnson talks about that a lot. I feel like in the fourth quarter I was just playing one play at a time, just reading the defense and taking what they give us.

Q. You play for a head coach who often says he wants his team to be at its best when its best is needed. What's the mindset of the team in the fourth quarter to ultimately get the job done there?

PAYTON THORNE: Going into the fourth quarter, I think we were down 11, and the whole game my teammates just kept telling me to stay up and really just keep chopping. That's what we talk about. And we really say that on the



sideline.

And coaches, same thing. I even heard fans saying that from the sideline. And I was telling the guys on the radio that sometimes when you're playing like I was playing, fans are going to start to boo you. And that's warranted. I'm not saying that fans shouldn't do that.

But they didn't. They really didn't. And they kept saying we believe in you, stuff like that, I heard that from the crowd.

But going into the fourth quarter, like I said before, it was just play one play at a time, try to put a good drive together. And our guys made great plays, great catches all around. And the offensive line played well, picking up all the blitzes.

Q. Having Jalen Nailor back and not having thrown to him other than in practice for a couple of months, how difficult was it to try to get back in a rhythm with somebody you used to have as one of your go-to targets?

PAYTON THORNE: I look back to our bowl preparation. I feel I was in great rhythm with him. Hitting him on the deep balls. The timing was right. And tonight he played well and I wasn't putting it on him for second, third quarter. I can't really remember everything that happened the first, but I felt we were playing decent.

But he did his thing and I was telling him on the sideline I'd figure it out here at some point. In fourth quarter, he made a couple of key catches and he's a guy that you can rely on and it was great for him.

Q. Obviously no Kenneth tonight, one of the best in the nation. Going in did you feel there would be, I don't know if "pressure" is the right word, but more emphasis on throwing the ball and the need to step up for your team?

PAYTON THORNE: Yeah, I did. I trust our running backs. And we have good running backs. So that's not why. But we knew they were a good run defense. We knew that



they were second in the country in sacks. And a lot of different reasons for that. But they were a good defense.

And, obviously, like you said, we were missing Ken, but we felt we could get some stuff in the pass game. And we weren't really hitting them for a lot of the game. But in the fourth quarter we were able to string some stuff together and take advantage of the areas that we thought we were going to be able to.

Q. What was it like tonight when you had a defense that had its struggles this year but even when you guys were having trouble moving the ball they kept getting it back for you, getting it back for you, giving you guys a chance to kind of come back like they did? What did it mean to have the defense playing that way for you guys tonight?

PAYTON THORNE: It was amazing. Our defense played their tails off. 21 was on the scoreboard, but they had a scoop and score that I fumbled. So that's seven. And then they went down on the field and scored a touchdown after my interception. That's seven off of turnovers.

So they played great. And they did the same thing. They just kept chopping. They came out today and played their tails off. Coach Haze had a great plan going into this one, and they did a great job.

Q. I was just curious about Connor's performance tonight, what you thought of it. And how important it was to have him as a reliable guy on that first touchdown drive in the fourth quarter.

PAYTON THORNE: Connor's been a guy that has been around here for a long time. He's a guy you can rely on. He does the right stuff. He works his butt off. And he makes plays. And (indiscernible) was on that play to get a little width, because we ran that play earlier in the day to get width from the backside safety, because that's what I was reading.

And he did that. Went up, made the catch, really nice catch. Got smoked in the back. And came down with it. So it was a clutch catch, and it was awesome.

Q. What does it mean if this is the last time you're throwing to Jayden that the game-winning touchdown was to him after all the times you two have done that?

PAYTON THORNE: He was excellent tonight all night. And he was keeping me up the whole game. And he was open all night. And he did a great job. Obviously two great contested catches in the end zone. And he had a pretty amazing game. Obviously he won offensive MVP, as he

should. And it was special. It was cool. It was a cool moment. But I'm hoping I can throw him a few more next year.

Q. Can you tell me, Pittsburgh called time out. There's three minutes to go, third and ten, came out of the timeout. You threw it and completed a comeback, I think, to Jalen Nailor. Could you talk about what you guys were saying on the sidelines and what your approach was to that particular play? And then right after that going to Reed for that touchdown, that key third and 10, what was the process going into that?

PAYTON THORNE: They called timeout. We had a play called. We switched up. And we went with a different play. And O line did their job. I'm not sure if they brought pressure or not, but they picked it up. So I had plenty of time to throw.

And Speedy ran a great route. He stopped, went, threw the guy by. And he was open. I kind of threw the ball to a spot, because I think I might have let go of it before he was out of his break. And sure enough there he was right where he was supposed to be.

And it was a pretty great route and a great catch. And it was great awareness to get the first round. And he set up the touchdown, and it was pretty good.

Q. The first touchdown drive of the quarter, you're down 21-10, cut it to 16, in that drive it looked like you were starting to hit some comebacks along the sideline against bailing coverage, press, bail. Was that a thought in your mindset to take some of those underneath? Was that part of it also or is that just what came open at that time?

PAYTON THORNE: No, I was just kind of reading what they were doing. We ran that play earlier in the game in the flat defender really buzzed hard against the stop route, is what we called it. And so I just kind of kept my eyes down the pipe in the second, or the fourth quarter to kind of use my peripheral to feel which flat defender was kind of inside the box or just tucked in. And just kind of went to that side. And it was the boundary I think every time.

So, again, guys were running the right routes. They secured the catch and they went and got first downs, and it was great.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports