

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Ole Miss vs Penn State

Saturday, December 30, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Penn State Nittany Lions

James Franklin

Kevin Winston Jr.

Tyler Warren

Press Conference

Ole Miss - 38, Penn State - 25

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll start with an opening statement and then go right into questions.

JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, I want to thank the fan turnout. We had great turnout and great support, and we're appreciative of that. We don't take that for granted.

I want to thank the Chick-Fil-A and the Peach Bowl. We had a great experience and were treated in a first-class manner.

Specifically to the game, just too many moving parts with the staff and with the players against a good team. Too many moving parts, staff and players, to have the type of success that we wanted to have today.

I won't get into all the details. I thought the officiating was less than desirable. That first drive, we have the field goal, we run a slant, we get turned around, but I'll move on. I could list out a number of examples. That's a big play in that game at a critical moment, starting out with a touchdown rather than a field goal is significant. But I'll move on. But I'll move on.

Lack of turnovers. Again, we had two plays backed up in their area of the field that went to replay, but those two turnovers would have been huge in the game. I'm not even saying that they were judged right or wrong. I didn't get a chance to see it, but they were huge plays in the game.

Then we had a turnover. We've done a great job of creating turnovers on defense and eliminating turnovers on offense, and we didn't win the turnover battle today, which



has been a huge part of our success all year long.

A couple other things I would say is getting off the field on third and fourth down on defense and being able to convert and stay on the field on offense.

We've been great all year long in the third quarter, starting the third quarter with two three and outs on offense when the game was still very, very competitive at that point, that was significant.

Got to give Ole Miss credit. Got to give Lane and his staff credit. But I think ultimately too many moving parts, staff and players, to have the type of success that we want to have.

Q. The decision on fourth and one to punt, what went into that one?

JAMES FRANKLIN: We were backed up on our end of the field, felt like we needed to obviously punt the ball, pin them deep, and make them go the length of the field. We had not been moving the ball the way we needed to offensively. They had been moving the ball. So I felt like I needed to give our defense the best chance.

Obviously that was a big story in the game, them going for it on fourth down and having success. We did go for it on fourth down and scored a touchdown, but we did not go for it in that situation.

Q. From the first half to the second half, obviously the first half you go in with a three-point deficit, looked competitive. The second half, Ole Miss extended their lead.

What was the biggest difference that allowed Ole Miss to extend their lead from the first half to the second half?

JAMES FRANKLIN: A couple things. We had obviously the ability to move the ball in the first half not as consistently and not as explosive as we'd like to be, but in the third quarter, again, starting out with two three and outs. We had some injuries. We had some guys that had limited roles in the second half compared to the first half.



All those things factored into it.

Q. Was Dante Cephas available to play today? If he was, what went into him not seeing the field?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Everything's an open competition every week, and the depth chart reflects that. Then obviously when you're in a bowl situation and you've got three weeks, there's a lot of movement that can occur in three weeks.

Part of that obviously is having Trey Harrison back that we had not had for about five weeks this year.

Q. Going off of that, how would you evaluate the end-to-end development and progression of your receiver room and what would you say sort of lead to it never really getting where you wanted it to be?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I actually thought during the bowl period that those guys had a really good bowl period. I thought that was a big part that we were excited about and we made a big deal about with the team.

It's a combination of things. I think we're really good at tight end. That's part of it. Then we've got to be able to make sure that we translate what we do in practice consistently to the games.

One of the things that I think can be challenging is you may not get an opportunity early in the game, but whenever those opportunities come, you've got to maximize them. You've got to maximize them, and we have not done that consistently enough this year.

Q. For KJ and Tyler, you guys have talked at times throughout the season how you've stuck together through adversity. This is another piece of adversity for you guys here at the end of the season. Coach talked about the transition upcoming.

Why is this a group that sticks together, and why do you think this has been a mark of the season?

KEVIN WINSTON JR.: I'll start it off. We go back to what we've been through together, all the hard work we put in together during the off-season, the workouts, the summer workouts. We reflect on those kinds of things and realize we get limited times, 12, 13 games to play with each other, and we make sure we stay together through it all.

We never break up on each other. That's the main thing, staying together through it all. When we were struggling in the workouts, that's the time we have to stay together. So we'd never let that break in the middle of a game.

TYLER WARREN: I'd agree with KJ on that, and then it kind of starts with our coaching staff and the culture they instill in us. Then as older guys on the team, make sure we keep that going through the highs and lows. So just doing that is important.

Q. James, the pace that they play with, the tempo, how challenging was that with some of the moving parts?

KJ, what was it like playing a team that goes that fast?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So the tempo is challenging early on in the game, where we were able to get negative plays, takes them out of their rhythm. But obviously when they're able to play with tempo and have positive plays and build on it, it is difficult to stop.

That also goes into the -- how the game is managed is also important. When the ball goes out on their sideline, that is a substitution, and we have the ability to match substitution. There was a couple times when we're trying to be able to substitute right there to affect their tempo and also to match personnel, and we weren't given the opportunity to do that a few times.

So tempo is challenging all the time, but you also need to make sure it's being managed correctly and consistently so we know when we can sub and when we can't.

KEVIN WINSTON JR.: I agree with Coach Franklin on that one. The main thing for me, and a lot of guys will say the same. Getting the play and make sure we're on the same page because, when we're doing hurry up, a lot of guys are just getting up from making a tackle or whatever they were doing on the play.

We want to have our cleats set and be on the same page, and sometimes hurry up causes disruption with that. That's the main thing that causes difficulty with that.

Q. James, you mentioned the moving parts. How do you think it affected you like emotionally, energy-wise? Can you comment on your team from that perspective?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I didn't feel like that was an issue from an energy and a focus standpoint. You guys can speak on that. I don't think that was an issue. We had significant players that have played all year long that weren't in that game.

I don't want this to come off the wrong way. I'm not criticizing, but it is what it is. It's the reality. I think about guys that did play in the game and how appreciative we

are, but not only appreciative, there's an opportunity to create value by playing in games as well.

Talking to some people, our guys playing against Ole Miss and playing well was also an opportunity, and these things -- obviously we need to have some discussions as a team in how we're going to handle these things moving forward, but it was different.

You look at last year's game and this year's game, it was different, and we need to have some healthy discussions about that as a staff and as a team and how we want to operate moving forward.

Q. Coach, you mentioned those two turnovers that were overturned on replay. You guys were disruptive early in this game defensively and seemed to do what you wanted to do defensively really early in this game.

What was the adjustment that Ole Miss made that gave you guys trouble kind of midway through the first quarter and in the first half?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Again, I think a couple things that I've mentioned already. I think obviously early on we were able to get some negative plays, whether tackles for loss, whether it's zero gain plays, whether it was sacks. Those things, when you're able to keep a team off schedule and not go tempo, those are powerful. Those are powerful.

Then I think also obviously our offense being able to answer some of those scoring situations and keep the game within a score or within a field goal is significant.

Again, we had some guys in the second half that weren't available, and I think they did a good job. If you watch their game plan, they went after some guys that had not played a ton of football for us this year, and it will be a great learning opportunity for those guys and for us moving forward.

Q. In the second half, specifically the third quarter, anything specific Ole Miss did on defense? I know you weren't able to score any points. Just curious about the Ole Miss defense in the third quarter.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Obviously I think they made some adjustments, but overall we weren't able to stay on schedule. You don't want to be in third and long situations.

So whether it was a drop or an incomplete or whether it was a rush of no gain, you get off schedule against a good team with that type of defensive line.

I think their length at the defensive tackle, they were able to bat down a few balls, which those may not be sexy

plays, but they're significant. That was probably the biggest thing. We weren't able to stay on schedule on third down.

Q. KJ and Tyler, I wanted to ask you, you've obviously had great New Year's Six bowl experiences, being at destinations, that type of thing.

Can you take us to next year when it's an actual playoff game and the result means you continue or you don't continue, how that may adjust or how that may feel differently starting next year?

TYLER WARREN: I think it's really not a huge change because we're coming into every game expecting to play our best game and try to win in the best way we can. I don't think it's going to change a lot.

Obviously it's a different platform, but really the way we approach it and the way we attack it as a team is going to be the same in every game we play in.

KEVIN WINSTON JR.: Like Tyler said, every game, no matter if it's a playoff game or a regular season game, we're coming in the same way, with the same approach no matter what. I feel like it will be nothing new to us. Just the label of the game will be bigger for us, but taking it the same as we always do.

Q. We've seen Drew struggle a little bit in these bigger games that he's had this year. What have you seen from him -- Michigan, Ohio State, today? It seems like he got the consistency late, but what has prevented him from finding that rhythm for a full four quarters, 60 minutes?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's all of it, right? We've got to stay on schedule like we talked about. We've got to make plays for him when we have the opportunity to make plays for him.

I think there's some things that he can do and be more consistent as well, but I think the biggest thing, which I think was a question earlier, is we've got to be able to scare people and be a threat consistently on the perimeter.

That's something I think we've shown flashes of at times, but we need to be able to do that on a consistent basis.

So it's a little bit of Drew. I think it's a little bit of the offensive line. I think it's a little bit of the coaches. I think it's a little bit of the wide receivers. It's a piece of all of it.

We've got to make some plays for him, and he's got to make some plays as well.

