

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

Monday, January 2, 2023

Pasadena, California, USA

Penn State Nittany Lions

Coach James Franklin

Ji' Ayir Brown

Sean Clifford

Postgame Press Conference



Our guys just stuck together, made some big plays when we needed to, and we found a way to get a win against a really, really good Utah team.

I do want to take a moment and just make sure that we show enough respect and appreciation for the University of Utah. I've got so much respect for the university as a whole, for Coach Whittingham and what he's done across his entire career. Watching them on tape, for people that know and love football, that's a really good football team.

Just a credit to them and a credit to these guys that are up here.

Q. Sean, can you walk us through the curtain call there at the end, to have that opportunity to go off, and then overall to cap your career in this way here, what does that mean to you right now?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, it means a lot, just being able to see all my teammates on the sideline with smiles on their faces.

I came up with some great leaders when Trace McSorley and Tommy Stevens and Billy Fessler in the QB room and great leaders on that team in 2017, the group that I was a freshman with.

Just being able to see those faces of my teammates, it just means the world.

Just couldn't be prouder to be a Penn Stater.

Q. To start off the game, there was a little bit of a conservative approach in the passing game in the first two drives, then Sean really started to light things up. Coach, can you walk us through what you saw in the game in the air, especially the big plays, and Sean, can you take us through how you felt in your progressions as you got more comfortable in this game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I wouldn't necessarily describe it the way you did. They're two really good defenses. We have a great defense led by Tig, who I think is the best

Penn State 35, Utah 21

THE MODERATOR: I'm joined by Coach James Franklin, defensive player of the game, Ji' Ayir Brown; offensive player of the game, Sean Clifford. I'll ask Coach Franklin to give an opening remark and we'll open up the floor for questions.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so like always, really appreciate everybody coming out and covering Penn State football.

We had a phenomenal experience at the Rose Bowl. I want to thank the Rose Bowl, just the entire -- from the time we stepped off the plane, not even talking about the game, we were just treated first class. We're very, very appreciative of that.

I'm just proud of these guys. I was here in 2016, one of the better Rose Bowl games, and watched somebody else celebrate, and I wanted this for them. I couldn't have wrote the script any better for Sean Clifford to be the offensive MVP, and my man Tig to be the defensive MVP. It's awesome, sending these guys out the right way, in a time in college football that I think it's more challenging than ever.

Just really proud of our guys. Offense, defense and special teams really played a really good, complete game. I thought Kalen King's interception really got us going and got us started. And then we were able to get pressure on their quarterback, which we weren't able to do early in the game and that started changing some things for us. Obviously the big run by Nick Singleton, Barney Amor punted well all night long, because it was a position game, playing Coach Whittingham, is a defensive head coach. And you talk about drive-start battle, they were really winning that.



safety in college --

J'AYIR BROWN: Yes, sir.

SEAN CLIFFORD: It's a fact.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I don't think there's enough people talking about this guy. But two really good defenses, two really good defensive coordinators, we weren't able to sustain drives. I think we would have opened some things up. We were trying to get a first down and we weren't able to do that early in the game.

They were playing extremely aggressive with what we call cover-zero with no safeties and bringing pressure, and once Sean and Coach Yurcich were able to kind of get a feel for what they were doing and how they were doing it, then we were able to mix some things in both run and pass.

I thought Sean's scramble early in the game where he hit KeAndre on the sideline was a huge play in the game for us, as well.

But I think it's just two really good defensive football teams, and then our offense was able to kind of settle down and get going after that.

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, I would pretty much second that. Realistically it's the bowl game, and you have a month to prepare, so there's going to be some things that Utah does. They did a really good job of preparing for us. Just getting that feel the first drive, second drive, and then once we understood, okay, they're going to be coming out in this more, once we saw that defense, it was easier to start to scheme some things up, really hone into specific parts of the game plan. So yeah.

Q. Coach, this could be the final Rose Bowl pitting the Big Ten against the Pac-12. With that in mind, how much does it mean to win this one given the change that could be on the horizon?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, and not only that, I also understand that it's the 100th anniversary of Penn State playing in this in 1923, as well. So much tradition and history with this bowl and then obviously specific to Penn State, and then playing Utah, there's not too many things in 2023 where you can say it's never happened before. Penn State had never played Utah before.

A lot of really cool things. But most importantly, I'm so proud of these guys and how they handled themselves.

I'm talking about it all, the feedback from the Rose Bowl

staff about our players and how they conducted themselves, from LA Live, the JW Marriott, they were phenomenal with us, and the feedback I got about our players, that's very important to us at Penn State, not just winning on the football field but doing it in the classroom and in the community, as well, and these two guys are great examples of that.

Q. What were you guys able to do in the second half to really -- obviously their quarterback came out, but what were you able to do in the second half to really slow down their offense?

J'AYIR BROWN: I think in the second half we had to take a look at ourselves. A lot of emotions happened in this game when guys start to get out of their way of the scheme, and second half we went in the locker room, and everybody got their jitters out, and we just played together, trusted each other a little more, and we was able to execute more on more plays.

Q. Sean, I'm guessing outside of playing in a national title game, the Rose Bowl is the game. Growing up you probably watched it all your life, so now you're in it, and you win it. What's it like for you to have an excellent Rose Bowl Game?

SEAN CLIFFORD: Yeah, it means a lot. I actually posted a picture on my social media of me as a kid. I was in fifth grade or fourth grade, and my dad surprised me with the opportunity to fly out here with a really good friend of mine and his dad.

I just remember really falling in love with football, specifically falling in love with the quarterback position. For it to come full circle and then to be able to just be a spoke in the wheel for this team in the Rose Bowl is just such a blessing.

Q. Coach Franklin, the big run by Nicholas and the big catch by KeAndre, how did it change the dynamics of the game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, when you're playing a defense like that where it's hard to get yards, you're going to have a difficult time going on a 16-play, 80-yard drive against that defense. You're going to have to create some explosive plays.

It's interesting they were in cover zero, and we actually did a fake check where we were looking to the sideline and then snapped the ball. We did something similar with Saquon Barkley in the Fiesta Bowl a few years ago. Caught them in cover zero. And they were in a bear front, which I wouldn't say is the ideal front to run that play into,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

but once you crease them with Nick's speed, you're able to obviously make a huge play and swing the momentum in the game.

Then KeAndre, as well. I think KeAndre is a great story. I think all these players, they come to Penn State and they kind of have in their mind this vision of how it's going to go, and it very rarely goes that way. And KeAndre has just trusted the process and persevered. He's extremely talented.

I just think he has such a bright future. To see him have such a big night is great because there's so many lessons that are being taught through the game of football, and I'm really proud of KeAndre and how far he's growth, both personally and professionally.

Those were two big plays in the game and two guys that I think all of us -- we expect those guys to make those types of plays.

Q. Tig, do you remember telling me at Media Day that you wanted to win this game to make your coach smile. To be able to do that, what does that mean?

JI'AYIR BROWN: Did I make you smile, Coach?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah.

JI'AYIR BROWN: No, since day one, since Coach recruited me, he's been a blessing to me. He's took me in. He's made me a part of this family, and as a player, that's all you can ask for is a coach to treat you just like how he treats his kids.

The only way I know Coach got a lot -- the only way I could give back to Coach is to win him a Rose Bowl, win him a championship, period. I sacrificed everything I possibly could to make that happen for him, and I hope I made him smile.

JAMES FRANKLIN: It made me smile, but I also want to say this. In today's college football where these players are being pulled in a thousand different directions, both Penn State and Utah, we had very few opt-outs in the game. We had great leadership. Tig wanted to stay in the game. I pulled him out, made him come out of the game, him and PJ Mustipher. I wanted Sean to have that opportunity. He kind of hit me on the sideline, we kind of got in an argument, he didn't want to come out of the game, but I wanted to take a moment for him to come out of the game and be recognized because Sean is experienced it all at Penn State, he really has.

There's so many good things about this game, but there's

so many good young men like Tig and Sean and PJ, I can go on and on and on, at a time that it is more challenging than it's ever been. I couldn't be more proud of these guys, how they conducted themselves, not just in this game but really throughout their entire careers, and they've got great stories. They've got great stories.

I look forward to continuing to be a part of their life and watching them go on and do great things.

Q. Sean, what did you see on that 88-yard touchdown pass to No. 1? Also, all three of you, just wondering what you thought about that -- I'll call it a soccer-style celebration.

SEAN CLIFFORD: It was up for debate whether we wanted to take a shot. It was third-down-and-4, and I'd been seeing the same look all game, so I was definitely a proponent for taking that shot, and I know KeAndre wanted it, too.

Great players make great plays, and KeAndre got -- anybody could have thrown that one. Kudos to Dre. He played a great game. For a celly, I have no idea what he's talking about.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I don't know what you're talking about, the celebration. I wanted to kill them because, because literally, Terry Smith said on the headset to me I think KeAndre pulled his hamstring. Whatever he's watching, stop watching it.

Q. Sean, you had a Penn State career with so many ups and downs --

JAMES FRANKLIN: A lot of ups.

Q. To end your career on a day like this.

JAMES FRANKLIN: A lot of ups, a few downs.

SEAN CLIFFORD: Appreciate that, Coach. No, it means a lot just to be in this position. I just think back to all the different teams that I've been a part of, and quarterback is a funny position because it gets all the recognition, but I depend on 10 other guys to get the job done constantly. If one guy messes up, including me, the whole play on offense is kind of wrecked.

I just respect, love and appreciate every single man that has come through Penn State's program and impacted me in whatever way, whether that be coaches, administration, staff, and especially my teammates. Tig and I always talk about it, and I think that in 2020, Coach Franklin, he made a statement about the locker room and culture in the locker

room and how America honestly could even reflect that in the best way.

Tig and I always talk about it, because it doesn't matter race, religion, where you're from, I've got brothers for life in that locker room.

I just can't thank everybody enough for my experience at Penn State. I cherished every minute of it, the ups and the downs. I just couldn't be more thankful.

Q. Coach Franklin, I don't want to catch you off guard. I want to ask you, are you aware of a situation through texting tonight within the NFL game or not at all?

JAMES FRANKLIN: You're talking about with Damar? Yeah, Kris Peterson kind of told me after the game, and I got Terry Smith, and me and Terry recruited Damar. Obviously our thoughts and prayers. It's very personal. He's from Pittsburgh, from Pennsylvania. Terry Smith and myself recruited him, got to know his whole family, unbelievable family, and obviously we're sending our thoughts and prayers to him and the family and hoping and praying that everything is okay.

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