

From the First Alma Mater to the Unexpected Last: Penn State Seniors respond to university's 'Freshmen only' restrictions for modified "Blue and White" game

By Samantha Manuzza

A chicken finger basket, the Blue Band, and a myriad of lion ears. These are just a few of the elements that make up Penn State's football culture. Coincidentally, they're also some of the fan favorites that only first year students will have the opportunity to partake in at this year's unconventional "Blue and White game".

Senior Jayde Jackson (Supply Chain Management) was devastated when she learned that there would be no fans allowed in Beaver Stadium for the football season of her final year. Jackson came to Penn State searching for the same sense of community and tradition she felt in the town she grew up in. She found just that in the stands cheering on the Nittany Lions during the first football game of her freshman year. Since then, Jackson not only has never missed one, but has also remained in the stands for the entirety of every game.

"From the first Alma Mater to the last, my roommates and I have enjoyed every second of our football seasons. The student section, the stadium, the atmosphere. Those are the things I love the most about Penn State. Having them taken away by things we can't control just felt like a massive loss and what's even worse is that there isn't much that can be like done to make up for it. It's a pandemic after all."

During the spring of 2020 in which she was studying abroad in Italy, Jackson was sent home along with the rest of the PSU students overseas as a result of COVID-19 beginning to spread. At the time, the mere thought of losing major Penn State staples like THON or football season seemed too far-fetched to imagine. In March of 2020, Jackson had no way of knowing that her last two semesters were about to look a lot different than her previous.

For the 2021 "Blue and White game", spectators can expect not to watch a game at all, but rather the final practice for the team. Associate Athletic Director of Strategic Communications, Kristina Peterson, revealed what first year students can look forward to on April 17.

Peterson said, "It's a football practice. We'll also have some fun 'guide to football game day' type activities. We'll go through the chants and cheers that they don't know yet. President Baron really just wanted to give freshmen that opportunity to experience Beaver Stadium and Penn State football because they missed out on it in the fall."

Peterson conveyed sympathy for the Seniors too. She said that she could understand their disappointment but the discussion right now is to give freshmen the chance to attend this for the very first time.

Without belittling the level of loss first year students have endured in the past year, some students have responded to the event's guest restrictions and shared their dismay regarding this decision.

Molly Neal (Senior, Public Relations) said, "For me, it's super upsetting and disheartening to think that the school and President Baron care more to give the freshman the only football experience this year. The Senior class didn't even know our last time in Beaver Stadium was going to be our last time there as students. The supposed 'best time' in college was just all taken away so fast and we were given zoom classes, exhaustion, and disappointment to cope with it all."

It is no surprise that some students met this news with passion and fury. Penn State football is an institution and a widely cherished part of the university for many undergraduates and alumni. To the players, the fans are an essential part of every game they play.

Linebacker Jesse Luketa (Master's Program, International Affairs) shared that interacting with the student section, meeting people, taking pictures, and joining in on chants were all previously his favorite parts about the Blue and White game. Luketa said that it felt odd to him when it was announced that only freshmen would grace the student section this year.

"I felt like it was a little unfair. It did suck for everyone not being able to attend the games this season but I think the freshman have time left to gain those experiences. The seniors now have been supporting us throughout their whole collegiate careers and I just feel like they deserved the chance to say goodbye to us before they leave."

For the College of Communication's Assistant Dean of Academic Services, PSU alum Jamey Perry agreed with Luketa's confusion regarding the adapted Blue and White game of 2021.

Since 1983, Perry has only missed three football games. The singular year he did not attend the Blue and White game was 2020 as a result of the pandemic cancelling it. Perry, a former cheerleader for the Nittany Lions, said that during his time at PSU and as an alum, football season and the Blue and White game have held a lot of happy memories for him. The forfeiture of fans excluding freshmen and the athlete's parents conjured feelings of sadness for him as well.

When news of the plan for the student section broke, Perry said, "I was a bit stunned. It didn't even resonate with me that there would be some form of decision made between who would get

in... If I were one of the decision makers, I think Freshmen and Seniors would have been the two audiences that I would have focused on. Not one or the other.”

Perry further went on to commiserate with the Senior class. He expressed how disappointed he was for those students and said that despite the world essentially grinding to a halt for so many, everyone was expected to keep going like normal.

“I wonder, could the university have surveyed students? Or done some sort of lottery system for the tickets. What happens if none of the freshmen even go?”

Perry is not alone in his concerns and inquiries about the event. In addition to the backlash received over the decision to limit fans to first year students, many students stressed that they understood the potential reasoning for it. Some students pondered the financial benefit for the school by favoring the freshmen in this scenario.

One Senior Varsity cheerleading member said, “I think it just comes down to catering to the freshman because they can’t have a bad taste in their mouths after their first year that lingers into the rest of their time in school. Or worse, leads them to want to transfer. I guess they figured we already had some time here. Or at least already paid them for it.”

Other students additionally voiced their feelings about the university’s decision.

Cassidy Doyle (Human Development and Family Studies) is another Senior who prides herself in a perfect attendance record for football games throughout her time at Penn State. She said she actually understands why they wanted to provide this chance to freshmen because football games are a huge reason why she loves her school.

“I don’t think it should be a Freshmen vs Seniors issue though. Penn State should be asking themselves ‘What can we do to make the Freshmen feel like part of the Penn State Family?’ But they should also be asking themselves ‘What can we do for the Seniors to thank them for fulfilling an image that made these freshmen want to come to Penn State?’ Whether it’s Freshmen and Seniors at the game OR two separate days, I think Penn State really has to do something,” Doyle said.

The university has hinted at the potential for a later practice to be filmed and available to watch virtually on another date. But according to some Seniors, it’s not necessarily about the game, it’s about the experience in the stands. An experience they will have to rely only on their memories to relive before they graduate.