

Transcript

Friday, August 20, 2021

James Franklin



Q. Good afternoon. And welcome to Penn State Big Ten Football Media Day 2021. I was going to say to remember to turn your cell phones on vibrate, off, or mute. But if you are in the press box, please use headphones so -- to help everybody's ability to listen.

So, we'll pass it over to Coach Franklin for opening statement.

Coach?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yes. Like always, I want to thank the media for coming out and -- and covering us. It looks like a lot of you guys are upstairs in the press box and hopefully get a chance to interact with our players outside later on -- later on today.

I think -- you know, a lot of you guys, I got a chance to interact with at Big Ten Media Days. So, once, again, we appreciate that.

It's great to be back out at practice, on the grass, with the guys running around. I think we've had a really productive offseason and -- and summer.

You know, obviously, you know, from an offensive perspective with Coach Yurcich and what we're doing from an installation stand point, you know, the -- the changes in NCAA rules have helped with that in terms of, you know, some of the walk-through things that you're able to do. So that's been -- that's been really helpful.

The terminology that we were able to keep the same, we were able to keep the same. And I think that always helps.

So, so far so good. And I think, obviously, the staff that -- that we got around him has -- has helped, too. So, excited about what we're going to do offensively -- offensively.

Excited about, you know, our identity, being similar to what it's been for the majority of our time here; back to spreading the field, making people defend 53 and a third, creating explosive plays, trying to put as many defenders and conflict as possible. So, excited about, you know, kind of getting back to our identity, to who we've been.

On defense, you know, obviously, the consistency that

we've had with Brent Pry and our defensive staff has been -- has been huge. Brent has, obviously, led the way there for a long time here at Penn State with me for a long time.

So, really -- really excited about what we're doing there. On the defensive side of the ball, just continuing to -- to build our foundation and what we've been able to do from a fundamental standpoint, from a scheme standpoint, from a technique standpoint over the last eight years. And, obviously, we've recruited well, as well.

So, the -- the new staff members on -- on offense and defense with -- with Coach Pointdexter, you know, on defense, I guess, is the main new guy on defense. John Scott's now been here for two years. And then on offense, you know, obviously, Mike Yurcich is the biggest change.

So, I think those guys are doing really good things and excited about that. And then, you know, Coach Lorig on -- on special teams. And having all three of those specialists back and the experience that they have gained. And, you know, Joe now going into his second season and understanding how we operate, we having a better feel for how he does things. We've got a long history together.

I don't know if you guys know this or if I mentioned this before, but me and Joe were roommates, I think, in 19- -- maybe '98. I don't know if that's accurate or not. But it -- either way, a long time ago at Idaho State, we were roommates.

So, we go way back. He's doing a great job for us. And I've been -- I've been really pleased with our leadership.

Our strength staff did a great job in terms of preparing our guys who are -- we're either bigger, stronger, and faster than we've ever been, or we're part of the argument pretty much in every category or metric, however you want to put it.

So, I like where we're at. The first day of practice yesterday went well. You guys will get a chance to see a little bit of it today.

But we couldn't be more excited to be out there on the grass, working together. You know, the -- the plan for having a full Beaver Stadium, competing, you know, in the Big Ten.



Opening up, obviously, week one with Wisconsin, a tremendous challenge. And then being able to get back here at home, you know, in front of our fans, which we haven't been able to do for a long time.

So, again, I appreciate everybody being on here. Looking forward to the opportunity to answer everybody's questions. And, you know, hopefully we'll be back in person sooner rather than later.

Q. We'll start with Tyler Donahue.

Q. Hi, James. How are you?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Good, Tyler. How are you?

Q. I'm great.

I wanted to ask about Jesse Luketa. Where will he be practicing within your defense this month?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so it's not really a monthly deal. You know, we're kind of -- we're going to kind of split his time.

And I would say probably more of his time will be spent at defensive end in training camp, just because he has such a -- you know, foundation and -- and history at the linebacker position already within the same scheme.

So, we want to get him to the point where he's really comfortable and effective in what we're going to ask him to do at defensive end.

Obviously, we still need to keep him sharp at linebacker, as well. I -- I -- I see him playing both roles. And then I think there's some things that we can do with packages to take advantage of that, where people aren't sure whether he's playing a linebacker in our scheme or a defense end, and how they're going to account for him in the running game or how they're going to account for him in pass protection.

So, there's -- there's a number of reasons, you know, that we're doing it. One; to gain the advantage of a guy who's got a unique skill set, and also to help us with some depth.

Q. Audrey Schneider?

Q. Hey, James.

Going off of that one, I wanted to ask you about the rest of your defensive ends; in between, Adisa Isaac, Nick Tarburton, the rest of those guys.

Is that group developing as you had hoped or where do you think they kind of stand?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I guess lead with -- with Adisa. Adisa will not be available. I think you guys are aware of that. I know our local media is usually pretty aware of the pulse of our program, what's going on.

Adisa had an offseason injury, not during football training, but had an offseason injury. And -- and he will be most likely not available for season.

You guys know, typically, I don't get into injuries unless it's something that are going to keep them out for a significant amount of time.

He is doing unbelievably well. So, you'd -- you'd never know, the way medicine is now. And -- and Adisa -- Adisa has been phenomenal in terms of doing what he needs to do to get back as quickly as he possibly can. So, you'd never know. But -- but he'll be out for a significant amount of time.

You know -- so, you talk about Tarburton, kind of Luketa, and Vanover, you know, that -- that group of guys.

Tarburton, the guy that we've always been really excited about, you know, since we brought him here, has had some -- some situations in terms of staying healthy consistently.

That made it difficult for him to have a -- a bigger impact. He's as healthy as he's ever been. He's been able to practice on a, really, consistent basis now for a -- for a long period of time. And he's -- you know, he's got such a great motor, intelligence. And he's physical.

So, we're -- we're excited about what he's going to do. You're going to see, obviously, an increased amount of playing time and opportunities for him.

We already talked about Jesse Luketa. Amin Vanover is a guy that we look as a swing guy that can play defensive end, which he did all last year, or D-tackle.

So, he's got the size and the growth potential to play inside, but he's also got the quickness and -- and the understanding and the scheme at defensive end and what we're asking those guys to do.

On the other side, AK Ebiketie, you know, has -- has always been kind of raved and reviewed since he's showed up on campus. He's tested well, he's gotten bigger and stronger. And, obviously, he's been a very productive football player over his career, and we -- we plan on

continuing that and really taking it to a whole another level.

You know, Smith Vilbert, a guy that there's a lot of excitement about right now. You know, who -- obviously, we've recruited Smith. Ended up having a really strong senior year, came on.

You know, was a fairly high level basketball player out of high school. Has the body-type and athleticism that you're looking for. And, you know, he continues to take strides, and there's -- there's a lot excitement about him.

And then Zuriyah Fisher, you know, a guy -- another guy that -- that we recruited, knowing that he could be a linebacker or transition to defensive end. You know, he -- I think -- I think Zuriyah's, you know, 260 plus pounds right now and still looks somewhat skinny. Really long arms. He's gotten great in the weight room. We're expecting big things from him.

And then there's some other young guys, you know, that I won't list at this time. But after one day of practice, you think maybe some of those guys may be able to factor in.

So, you know, when I go through this for the players and for the media, it's not a -- a foregone conclusion that, you know, somebody can't win a starting job or somebody that didn't mention can't earn a more significant role over the next couple of weeks.

Q. Mark Brennan?

Q. Hey, James. I wonder if you could give us a little heads-up on what's going on with your interior linemen, especially Eric Wilson.

And just on a semi-related note: How much scrambling have you done to keep this thing going, the Media Day, with all the shifting stuff?

And are you looking forward to actually being able to do these things in person sometime soon?

Thank you.

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Thanks, Mark.

Yeah, so when you talk about interior offensive linemen, you know, we think we got a really good group of guys that are competing for those three inside spots at guard, center, and guard.

So, you're talking about, you know, a combination of Whigan, Miranda, Scruggs, Wormley -- who's kind of really come on and factored in -- Zalar, Des Holmes, Eric Wilson,

and Dawkins.

You know, that group, we think there's a -- obviously, there's other guys that could factor in there.

But -- but that's a group that we think there's going to be tremendous competition from. And there's going to be a lot of moving parts there until we figure out how to get the best five on the field.

And then not only that, you know, who's going to be first guy in -- you know, inside? Is it going to be truly a right guard as backed up by another right guard? Or is it -- if you talk about the three interior positions, is it just the next best available who could play either side at guard or center?

We'll see how that kind of plays out. It's not as simple as people think. The footwork is different, the stance is different.

So, some guys will be able to do that and have the flexibility. And some guys, we may feel it's just better off they just stay at one position inside.

So, although the assignments and everything are pretty much the same, it's -- it's still different from a footwork perspective.

So, I think that will be great competition. You know, when you talk about kind of all the hoops and jumps, and -- and things -- hoops that we've had to jump through over the last year to give you guys the information and the access that is needed, you know, obviously -- obviously, we've learned a lot. You know, today's a really good example.

You know -- you know, that we have the ability to use ZOOM if we need to. I think I would love to get back face-to-face with -- with you all, especially the -- the local media that -- that works with us day in and day out, 365 days a year. We want to be able to give you all the access possible. And being face-to-face, I think helps with that.

It could be a combination of, you know, being outside. You know, maybe doing this outside in -- in that type of setting. Or it's -- it's coming to some type of agreement to come inside and -- and have a conversation where we're all willing to share our information.

Obviously, we can't mandate that. But if people are -- want to and are comfortable sharing it, and -- and, you know, the local media all get together and you guys are comfortable doing that, maybe we can work something out.

You know, that's kind of -- that's kind of above my head in

-- in how we would handle that, what we'd do. But I -- I want you to understand from myself, and Chris, and Greg, we just want to do everything we possibly can to give you guys, you know, as much access and as much face time as possible?

Q. Joel Juliano?

Q. Hi, James.

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Hey, Joe.

Q. Two questions I have. One: What is the main difference in Mike Yurcich's offense from what you've been running prior?

And the second one is: How has Sean Clifford adapted to some of the new stuff and concepts that you're working with?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: So, when you say "prior," Joe, are you talking last year or are you talking really since we've been there?

Q. I guess going back to Joe Morton --

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I -- I think it's -- it's -- it's similar to that. You know, I -- you know, I think if you look even when we first got here; at Vanderbilt, we had a lot of spread concepts, then we kind of took it to a whole another level with Joe. So, you know, we're back to that.

And, you know, that's really kind of who we wanted to be the entire time that we've been here. And, you know, with the athletes that we have at receiver and at tight end, and running back, that -- that was another big part of it, is just getting as many guys involved, getting as many guys touches, getting as many guys in space as possible.

You know, but then you -- you still want to make sure you have the ability to run with power and you want to be able to run in situational football.

You want to be able to -- you want to be able to run the ball when everybody in the stadium knows you have to run the ball and need to run the ball; whether that is low-red zone, whether that is short yardage, you know, whether that is coming out.

Or, obviously, when that is forming an offense. You know, we want to make sure that we can kind of serve all those different masters.

Q. Andrew Clay?

Q. My question also about the offense.

You have installed offensive in the last two seasons. Can you kind of compare and contrast the timeline and kind of the -- the level of install at this point this year as compared to last season?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's -- it's really hard for me to compare anything to last season. Because it was -- it was so different. And there was so many, many different limiting factors and rules that didn't allow us to do it.

So, you know, even being in the indoor facility, being able to get the walk-throughs that we want to get in the offseason, the time that we've been able to get with our players face-to-face.

You know, we weren't even practicing as -- as a team, you know, at this point last year. And I'm not even talking about, you know, the cancellation of the season, I'm talking about when we get -- when we got back, they were split practices.

So, it was just very different. So, it's hard to compare anything to how it was last season. I don't think that's necessarily fair, you know, to -- to some of the coaches, you know, that were put in that situation last year.

But -- but I -- I -- I love where we're at. You know, we're way ahead. I think, you know, the conversations that I have had with Brent Pry and Coach Yurcich in terms of how we install, it's -- this isn't just, like, the Wild Wild West where, you know, some programs just kind of roll the ball out and go.

We try to keep it as structured as possible so our defense can be prepared for what they're going to see at practice every single day, so our offense can be prepared for what they're going to see every single day. And do it no different than a -- a teacher with a lesson plan; right?

Part -- part, whole, and build up to it. So, you're getting more base looks early on, and then you get into more of the blitz and exotic looks as -- as you grow.

But I will say this: We're probably more aggressive than we've ever been in terms of the number of defenses we're seeing early in camp.

And the same on offense: Part of that is, I think, just kind of the style that we want to play and how we want to do it. And part of that is -- is how we've been able to maximize the offseason walk-throughs from an NCAA and Big Ten perspective.

Q. Cory Dugger?

Q. Hi, James. This is --

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Hi, Cory.

>>: -- maybe a little -- a little similar to what was just asked. But I'm curious how long you think it could take for the offense to really be what it knew -- it hoped that it would be.

The 2016 offense was great. But it took a few weeks for that to happen. So, what's -- what's your realistic expectation for what this offense can be early versus middle and late in the season?

COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, you know, to -- to your point, you know, based on our schedule, it better be -- it better be early; right? I think everybody's aware of that.

You know, so I think we've approached it that way; right? You know, whether -- whether you -- whether you like to admit it or not, when the players see that game to open the season, it -- it has an impact.

You know, I think the coaches always try to have a sense of urgency, we try to run a program where our players have a sense of urgency, and it's not really dependent on the opponent. It's not our process. But -- but -- but we need to be shooting on all cylinders, you know, come week one.

And that's -- that's how quickly can we learn, how quickly can we gain confidence, how quickly can we execute in really all three faces, and what type of positions can we put our players in -- you know, in Beaver Stadium or over at the Lasch practice facility to -- to give our guys the best chance to be able to walk into Wisconsin stadium and feel prepared and confident for that environment.

I know I'm excited about it. I've never been there. Obviously, you guys know, I lived in Wisconsin when I was with the Green Bay Packers. So, I have a lot of familiarity with the program from that.

And, obviously, now being in the Big Ten and watching what they've been able to do in the few times that we've played them, but I just haven't been there yet. You know, we played them, I think, once at home and one in the Big Ten Championship. So, we're looking forward to the opportunity and -- and seeing the environment, and getting another experience in the Big Ten.