

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

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## James Franklin

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to Penn State Media Day 2021. We'll pass it over to Coach Franklin for an opening statement.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yes, like always I want to thank the media for coming out and covering us. Looks like a lot of you guys are upstairs in the press box. Hopefully get a chance to interact with our players outside later on today. I think a lot of you guys I got a chance to interact with at Big Ten Media Days. 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 off-season and summer.

Obviously from an offensive perspective with Coach Yurcich, what we're doing from an installation standpoint, the changes in NCAA rules have helped with that in terms of some of the walk-through things that you're able to do, so that's been really helpful. The terminology we were able to keep the same, we were able to keep the same. I think that always helps. So far so good. I think obviously the staff that we got around him has helped, too.

Excited about what we're going to do offensively. Excited about 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 in conflict as possible. Excited about kind of getting back to our identity and who we've been.

On defense, obviously the consistency that we've had with Brent Pry and our defensive staff has been huge. Brent has obviously led the way 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 build our foundation, what we've been able to do from a fundamentals standpoint, from a schemes standpoint, from a technique standpoint over the last eight years. Obviously we've recruited well, as well.

The new staff members on offense and defense with Coach Poindexter, I guess is the new guy on defensive, main new guy. John Scott has been here for two years. On offense, Mike Yurcich is the biggest change. I think those guys are doing really good things, excited about that.

Coach Lorig on special teams. Having all three of those specialists back, and the experience they have gained, Joe now going into his second season and understanding how we operate, me having a better feel for how he does things.

We have a long history together. I don't know if you guys know this or if I've mentioned this before, me and Joe were roommates I think in 1998 maybe. I don't know if that's accurate or not. Either way, a long time ago at Idaho State. We were roommates. He's doing a great job for us. I've been really pleased with our leadership.

Our strength staff did a great job in terms of preparing our guys. 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. 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. We couldn't be more excited to be out there on the grass, working together.

The plan for having a full Beaver Stadium, competing in the Big Ten, opening up obviously week one with Wisconsin, a tremendous challenge. Then being able to get back here at home in front of our fans, which we haven't been able to do for a long time.

Again, appreciate everybody being on here. Look forward for an opportunity to answer everybody's questions. Hopefully we'll be back in person sooner rather than later.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

**Q. Jesse Luketa, where will he be practicing within your defense this month?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so it's not really a monthly deal.



We're going to kind of split his time. I would say probably more of his time will be spent at defensive end in training camp just because he has such a foundation 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 see him playing both roles. Then I think there's some things that we can do with packaging to take advantage of that where people aren't sure whether he's playing a linebacker in our scheme or a defensive end, how they're going to account for him in the running game or how they're going to account for him in pass protection.

There's a number of reasons that we're doing it: to gain an advantage through a guy that's got a unique skill set and also to help us with some depth.

**Q. Your defensive ends, between Adisa Isaac, Nick, the rest of those guys, is that group developing as you had hoped? Where do you think they stand?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I guess I will lead 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 off-season injury not during football training, but had an off-season injury. He will be most likely not available for the season.

You guys know typically I don't get into injuries unless it's something that is going to keep them out for a significant amount of time. He is doing unbelievably well, so you never know, the way medicine is now...

Adisa has been phenomenal in terms of doing what he needs to do to get back as quickly as he possibly can. So you never know. But he'll be out for a significant amount of time.

Tarburton, kind of Luketa and Vanover, that group of guys. Tarburton, a guy we've always been really excited about since we brought him here. Has had some situations in terms of staying healthy consistently. That made it difficult for him to have 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 long period of time.

He's got such a great motor, intelligence, and he's physical. 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 a Jesse Luketa.

Amin Vanover is a scheme guy that can play defensive end, which he did all last year, or D tackle. He has the size and growth potential to play inside, but he also has the quickness and understanding of the scheme in defensive end, what we're asking those guys to do.

On the other side, A.K. obviously has been kind of rave review since he showed up on campus. Has tested well, gotten bigger and stronger. Obviously he's been a very productive football player over his career. We plan on continuing that and really taking it to a whole 'nother level.

Smith Vilbert is a guy that there's a lot of excitement about right now. Obviously we've recruited Smith, ended up having a really strong senior year. Came on, was a fairly high-level basketball player out of high school. Has the body type and athleticism that you're looking for. He continues to take strides. There's a lot of excitement about him.

Then Zuriah Fisher, another guy that we recruited knowing he could be a linebacker or transition to defensive end. I think Zuriah is 260-plus pounds right now and still looks somewhat skinny. Really long arms. Gotten great in the weight room. We're expecting big things for him.

There's other young guys that I won't list at this time. After one day of practice, you think some of those guys may be able to factor in.

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

**Q. Could you give us a little heads up on what's going on with your interior linemen, especially Eric Wilson. On a semi-related note, how much scrambling had to be done to keep the media day with all the shifting stuff? Are you looking forward to doing these things in person sometime soon?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: So when you talk about interior offensive linemen, we think we got a really good group of guys that are competing for those three inside spots at guard, center and guard. You're talking about a combination of Whigan, Miranda, Scruggs, Wormley, who has really kind of come on and factored in. Zalar, Des Holmes, Eric Wilson, and Dawkins. That group. Obviously there's other guys that could factor in there. But that's a group that we think there's going to be tremendous competition from.

There's going to be a lot of moving parts there until we figure out how to get the best five on the field. Not only that, who is going to be the first guy inside. Is it going to be truly a right guard backed up by another right guard. Or 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. Some guys will be able to do that and have the flexibility, and some guys may feel it's just better off that you just stay at one position inside. Although the assignments and everything are pretty much the same, it's still different from a footwork perspective. I think that will be great competition.

When you talk about kind of all the hoops and jumps, hoops that we've had to jump through over the last year to give you guys the information and the access that is needed, obviously we've learned a lot. Today is a really good example that we have the ability to use Zoom if we need to.

I think I would love to get back face to face with you all, especially the local media 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. Being face to face helps with that.

It could be a combination of being outside, maybe doing this outside, that type of setting, or it's coming to some type of agreement to come inside and have a conversation where we're all willing to share our information. Obviously we can't mandate that. But if people want to and are comfortable sharing it, the local media all get together, you guys are comfortable doing that, maybe we can work something out. That's kind of above my head in how we would handle that, what we'd do.

I want you to understand from myself and Chris and Greg, we want to do everything we possibly can to give you guys as much access and as much face time as possible.

**Q. What is the main difference in Mike Yurcich's offense from what you've been running prior? How has Sean Clifford adapted to some of the new concepts that you're working with?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: When you say 'prior' are you talking last year or really since we've been here?

**Q. I guess going back to Joe Moorhead, I would think.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's similar to that. I think if you look even when we first got here, at Vanderbilt we had a lot of spread concepts, we kind of took it to a whole 'nother

level with Joe. We're back to that.

That's really kind of who we've wanted to be the entire time that we've been here. With the athletes that we have at receiver, at tight end, at running back, 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 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 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, whether that is coming out, or obviously when that is four-minute offense. We want to make sure we can kind of serve all these different masters.

**Q. About the offense, you've now installed offenses in the last two seasons. Can you compare or contrast the timeline and the level of install at this point this year as it compared to last season?**

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

Even being in the indoor facility, being able to get the walk-throughs that we want to get in the off-season, the time that we've been able to get with our players face to face. We weren't even practicing as a team at this point last year. I'm not even talking about the cancellation of the season, I'm talking about when we got back. There were split practices. It just was very different.

It's hard to compare anything to how it was last season. I don't think that's necessarily fair to some of the coaches that were put in that situation last year.

But I love where we're at. We're way ahead. I think the conversations I've had with Brent Pry and Coach Yurcich in terms of how we install, this isn't just like the wild, wild west where 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, and the offense can be prepared for what they are going to see every single day. Do it no different than a teacher with a lesson plan? Part (indiscernible) and build up to it so you're getting more base looks early on, then you get into more of the blitz and exotic looks as you grow.

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. Part of that is how we've been able to maximize the off-season walk-throughs from an NCAA and Big Ten perspective.

**Q. How long do you think it could take for the offense to really be what you hoped it would be? The 2016 offense was great, but it took a few weeks for that to happen. What is your realistic expectation for what this offense could be early versus middle and late season?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: To your point, based on our schedule, it better be early, right? I think everybody's aware of that (smiling).

I think we've approached it that way, right? Whether you like to admit it or not, when the players see that game to open the season, it has an impact. 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 really not dependent on the opponent, it's about our process.

But we need to be shooting on all cylinders come week one. That's how quickly can we learn, how quickly can we gain confidence, how quickly can we execute in really all three phases. What type of positions can we put our players in in Beaver Stadium or over at the Lasch practice facility 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. I have a lot of familiarity with the program from that. Now obviously being in the Big Ten, watching what they've been able to do, the few times we played them, I just haven't been there yet. Played them once at home, once in the Big Ten championship. We're looking forward to the opportunity, seeing the environment, getting another experience in the Big Ten.

**Q. My questions is about the way fans are looking at this season as kind of a return to normalcy. What do you think the state of Pennsylvania, the student body, the fans need to do to make sure we can have 107,000 people in the stadium this season?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think the first thing is I hope that everybody understands we're probably not and never will in terms of just turning back to normal. We all should have learned something from this. We all should have grown from this. I know Penn State has. I know Penn State

football has.

We've made some modifications. We've taken advantage of new technology. We want everybody to have an unbelievable experience and we want to get back to sold-out Beaver Stadiums come our first opportunity.

But I think we all have to make some sacrifices, right? Our fourth core value is sacrifice. If that means we all have to give a little something up to do that, I would hope for us to be able to get back together in there in a family reunion, tailgating, an increase of 250,000 people in town, what that means to the state, what that means to the community and the businesses and the restaurants and bars and hotels, just for the experience, right, the experience here in Happy Valley.

This is not a political statement. It's become a political issue. I think I want to make sure that people understand that's not what this is. But the more people that can get vaccination, whether you completely agree with it or not, maybe to protect others. I think you guys know this kind of hits very close to home. My daughter's actually in the hospital right now. These things hit really close to home.

I just think the more people that can say, Look, whether I completely agree with it or not, I'm going to get the vaccination. I'm going to wear a mask when appropriate. It will give us the best opportunity to be in that stadium and as close back to what we describe as normal as possible.

I think we have all seen, we already went through this once, there's some mask mandates out there now that are coming back. There's some variants out there.

Obviously all of us kind of making some choices and sacrificing together is going to give us the best opportunity to fill that stadium up, to have a home-field advantage, be able to bring significant impact to our community and our state.

To be honest with you, I'd love our students and the people in Happy Valley and my players to be able to experience it. Last year was not a true Penn State experience.

I am asking and pleading for everybody to do everything they possibly can to give us the best chance to get back to what you mentioned in the beginning, how we would probably describe normal. Thank you.

**Q. Earlier this spring I talked to Sean about having four different offensive coordinators during his time here. From your perspective, being a former quarterback, what are some of the challenges and benefits that provides for having that much turnover in**

## that amount of time?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm going to kind of hit it from both perspectives.

I think the first thing is obviously you'd love to have as much consistency as you possibly can so that you can just continue to build on the foundation, you can just continue to build and evolve and grow.

Even with the same offense, you're still going to tweak some things and make some changes every single year to grow the package, to expand the package, to maybe emphasize an area that you think you can grow in, and obviously play to your team's strengths, maybe hide some of your deficiencies. I think that's the first thing.

But I do think there's value, I really do. All of the coordinators that we have had here are fantastic people and fantastic coaches. I know myself and our team have learned from all of it. The good Lord don't give you everything, right? All of them have tremendous strengths that Sean has been able to learn from and grow.

Then as much as we can teach using a same-as philosophy where on special teams we're using the same terms that we use on defense when we're talking about coverage, when we're talking about the different tackling techniques that we use. It wouldn't make any sense for Joe Lorig to be using terms on special teams that don't align with what we're teaching and verbalizing on defense, and same thing on offense. So we try to use same-as teaching methods as much as we possibly can so there's carryover. I think that's really important.

I think for Sean that's similar. Let's be honest. I mean, everybody's running inside zone. Everybody's running some form of gap scheme, whether it's power or counter. Everybody is running outside zone. Everybody is running vertical stretches and horizontal stretches and high-lows, inside triangles, whatever it may be, RPOs. Everybody is doing it. Everybody is getting in spread sets to create space inside. Everybody is getting in bunch sets or snug sets to create space on the perimeter. There's a lot of ways to obviously do this.

It's really more about we're running most of the same plays that we've always run, but it's the packaging, it is the presentation, whether it is huddling, whether it's going no-huddle. Whether it's lining up in multiple personnel sets, whether it's multiple personnel sets, whether it's empty. It's the acknowledging of how you put it all together.

That's been fun getting with Mike and learning with Mike.

Obviously we have similar backgrounds, the guys that both played in the PSAC, coached in the PSAC. His career jumped a little bit more significantly, right? He went from Shippensburg to Oklahoma State. My journey was a little bit different than that.

But he's been great. He's passionate about what he does. He coaches hard. He loves 'em hard. So it's been cool. I've loved working with him.

I also think Brent Pry has been a big part of that as well because I do think Coach Yurcich had a lot of respect watching Coach Pry and our defense and how our defense is played. He understands, he's been in this long enough, that they're going to make each other better. Brent is going to do some things that cause challenges for Mike, and Mike is going to do some things that cause challenges for Brent.

I've always been a big believer all the way back to when I was an offensive coordinator, all the way back to when we were running our system at Vanderbilt and early on at Penn State, the system I was running as an offensive coordinator, that I was running a system that was best for our team.

What I mean by that it's not about the ego of the offensive coordinator or defensive coordinator to be leading the nation, it's about having complementary units, right? So our defense is going to get some power football, power formations, power personnel groups and power plays so they're going to be prepared to play Wisconsin, but also have elements that if we end up playing Washington State, they've played that type of offense.

You'd like enough of that in your offensive packages, in your defensive packages that you're getting prepared for the different styles you could get throughout a year, if that makes sense.

**Q. How do recruiters and coaches in general discriminate against wide receivers of the size of Parker Washington? What do you have to see in a kid of that size for you to pull the trigger on offering him?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a fair question.

I guess the way I would say, it's probably no different than any other walk of life, right? If you're deficient in one area, whether by no fault of your own or not, you're deficient in an area, whether it be height or whatever it is, then you better have another unique or special qualities to make up for it.

I think Parker is an example. K.J. is an example, right?



K.J. had other elite qualities that made up for the fact that he wasn't 6'2". I think Parker is similar in terms of you look at Parker's intelligence, his ability to learn the system as a true freshman and play at a pretty high level without a whole lot of mistakes from an assignment standpoint.

When you talk about his ball skills, I think he's got elite ball skills. I've always been a believer as a receivers coach, as an offensive coach, elite ball skills make you bigger and make you faster than what you are. What I mean by that is when your catch radius is similar to someone that is three inches taller than you are because of your ability to go and get the ball, consistently catch the ball on your fingertips, you're faster because some guys are going to have to slow down, stop, secure the ball, then regain their speed. Whereas a guy that has tremendous confidence in his ball skills can just reach back and contort their body, pluck the ball and not lose much speed. Other unique qualities like that.

I think the other thing, I don't know if you've had the opportunity to, when you see Parker in person, he's not a little guy. He's got big features. He's really built like a running back. You're going to look at his lower half, and he is thick and powerful. He literally looks like a running back with the way he's built. I think he's got enough unique other qualities that make up for him not being 6'2".

I think you know as well as I do, whether it's college or NFL, they may be the exception, but there's still a bunch of them out there that are having very successful careers.

**Q. Back to the top-heavy early schedule. Do you have a game plan for getting game speed or reps to some of the backup quarterbacks? Up to this point they don't really have that.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, if your point is they haven't had game speed reps, there's nothing that we can do to create it based -- if I am understanding your question correctly, there's nothing that we're going to be able to do to solve that question or answer your question because they've had game speed reps in practice since they've been here, and they'll continue to do that.

Obviously as guys continue to move up the depth chart, like Ta'Quan has, it creates more of those opportunities. Obviously these guys have had full speed reps since they've gotten to Penn State, but it's not going to change until they obviously get into games, if I'm understanding the premise of your question.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, coach.

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