

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: Hey, guys. Great to see everybody. Look forward to the point where we can get back in person, as well, but it is great to see everybody.

Obviously it's been a long off-season, highly motivated team and coaching staff. Obviously we're all still working through some of the challenges that we're dealing with, nationally as well as in our world right now, but I like where we're at.

We've had a really good spring. We had a really good winter period. We've had a great summer, and camp has gone extremely well.

We're in a good place. There's been a lot of competition really throughout all of the positions on our team, and I think the veteran coaches have done a really good job helping and complementing the new coaches, and we're in a good place.

Obviously having Wisconsin as an opening game is different than I think the way college football normally starts out. I think that was a big motivator and driver for us all off-season. We don't typically put a countdown clock up of our first game. We do that usually when we transition to our first opponent, but we thought it was important to put that up in our facility all summer and all training camp. So that's been up there ticking down.

I kept saying to them, it's going to be here before you know it, and every team meeting would end with a slide with how many days we had left, and here we are in game week.

Looking forward -- I've never been to Wisconsin as a coach or as a player, so looking forward to going there. I've heard great things. I know it's going to be a challenging environment.

Got a lot of respect for the university. Got a lot of respect for the athletic department, specifically the football program and what Coach Chryst has been able to do. Obviously he's a great fit there, got a lot of history with the town and the university, and we're looking forward to this opportunity.

We'll open it up to questions.

Q. This is kind of broad, but this time of year obviously you're making personnel decisions, first team, second team, so on. You've been doing this for a long time. Are those stressful for you? Are those conversations something that you agonize over? Have they become easier over time? How do you typically approach those conversations?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, to be honest with you, the position coaches typically handle them. I'll get involved if it's an issue or if it's a problem or if we feel like it's close or sensitive. Really for the most part, our players know based on the rotation at practice, and if there is a change then they're seeing it reflect in their reps in practice.

One of the things that I made sure this past week is that all of our coaches have had clear communication with their players and have a really good understanding kind of where they're at.

But for the most part, the players see it the same way as the coaches. One of the things that we've done that's been pretty interesting, we don't do it at every position, but sometimes we have the players rank themselves. So you have the -- I know Terry Smith does this a lot, so he'll have the corners rank themselves, and then you total them all up, and more times than not, the players see it the same way the coaches do.

It's always interesting, though, is there will be an outlier where a player sees himself really high, but none of the rest of the room, his peers don't see it that way. I think it's really valuable information.

But for the most part, everybody sees it. It's just like with you guys; I know the question is coming about the depth chart from somebody. But the reality is the local media that you guys are here all the time, you know what the depth chart is, and so does our team.

I think it's more from a national perspective, as well, and I might as well cover that while I'm on the subject, so maybe someone can save a question later on.



But for us, we've always released a depth chart. I really don't have a strong opinion either way. There's been multiple schools in the conference that haven't been releasing it for a number of years.

This year we found out that Illinois, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio State, and Purdue either were not releasing it or were thinking about not releasing it, so it just didn't make sense for us to do it if others weren't.

I know on Sundays or even Saturdays when we're breaking down the next opponent, if that's already out there, it saves some work. It saves some time.

For us, I don't really have a strong opinion about it. I want to make sure we take care of the local media as much as we possibly can, and you guys, you're at enough of the practices, you know what's what anyway.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about some of the areas where Mike Yurcich has had the biggest impact on Sean Clifford, and maybe Sean's progression in general from last season where it was kind of up and down for him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think one of the things that's most impressive about Sean is the way he prepares and how he is really from a football IQ standpoint and understanding protections and what we need to do to solve problems and things like that. He does a really good job, and he works at it. He's got a really good football IQ but he also really works at it.

Mike has been different, and I think in a lot of ways I think it's been good for Sean. Mike is aggressive. I think you guys saw on the field the other day, Mike is aggressive in how he coaches. I think that's important because come Saturdays, it's going to be an aggressive game.

You've got to pick and choose your spots, and there's a time for that and a time not, and I think he does a good job of balancing those things and putting pressure on our quarterbacks and really other positions at times during practice so that the games are easy.

That's kind of really been our overall philosophy since I've been a head coach in how we run our programs. I think Mike has done a really good job of that.

And then like I mentioned before, for the most part, everybody in college football, and now really the NFL, are all running kind of the same schemes, and it's about how you package them. Mike has obviously had a lot of success in how he packages the plays that pretty much

everybody is running but how he packages them, how he presents them.

Obviously there's also that aspect of a play caller is there's four to six calls a game where that's where you're going to differentiate yourself from others, and obviously statistically Mike has been able to do that over his career.

It's been awesome seeing him and coach Pry go at it at practice every single day. It's been very competitive. I know Mike had a lot of respect for Brent coming in, and I think that was attractive -- that was an attractive aspect of coming to Penn State.

I think it's been really good for Sean. Again, it's another opportunity for him to steal some really strong qualities. He's been able to learn from the best qualities of different offensive coordinators he's had, and Mike is another one for him to do that with.

Q. I don't know if not talking about the depth chart is we don't talk about injuries umbrella, but the working assumption has been that Ta'Quan is going to be your No. 2 guy at the quarterback position. Is that the case, what was that conversation like, and what do you want to see from him moving forward?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, that's fair. Again, there really hasn't been a whole lot of conversation. I sit in the quarterback meetings every single day, and one guy is taking 90 percent of the reps with the ones. Ta'Quan is taking 90 percent of the reps with the twos, and Christian is taking 90 percent of the reps with the threes.

Everybody clearly understands where they're at and where they stand. He's done some really nice things. He's thrown for a high percentage.

For a while there, his attempts without an interception was ridiculously high. He had thrown a bunch of balls without turning the ball over. The ball jumps off his hand. When he's confident pre-snap with what to do, he's very effective post-snap. It's getting him consistently really confident pre-snap with what we're trying to do and why and how.

I think he's opened a lot of eyes this camp. As you guys have asked me before, we'd love to get him some reps where we can, meaningful reps in games.

Q. What has Jahan done to elevate his game even further? And what have you seen from the wide receivers during camp other than him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think with Jahan he's gotten bigger and stronger and more explosive. He's

always been, as you know, silky, smooth, and fluid kind of with his movements, all the way back to high school. He was the guy that whether it's football practice at Penn State, whether it's basketball in high school, whether it's track, he's just that guy that has tremendous body control and made everything look easy.

Sometimes you don't think he's running very fast because he's just so fluid in the way he does it, but no one catches him. He's subtle kind of with his moves.

But now that he's more explosive and stronger and bigger, I think that's got a chance for him to translate into more explosive plays for us, which I think is really important.

With the rest of the receivers, obviously last year we played two true freshmen in Keondre and Parker, and they gained invaluable amount of experience on game days but then also how to practice and how to prepare and how to eat and sleep and just how to be a big-time Division I student-athlete.

They've grown up dramatically over the last year, and that experience that they gained last year will be really valuable.

Then there's a bunch of veterans that we think should and need to have big roles for us, guys that have been with us for a long time. When you look at guys like CSB, Cam Sullivan-Brown, who is a guy that we've been excited about since the day he stepped on campus. But with that, he's kind of battled the injury bug.

Daniel George is another guy, big, strong, athletic. I think he's got the longest reception in Beaver Stadium history.

Those are two guys that we really need to take that step this year, and we think they can. There's a lot of confidence in them and a lot of belief in them, and we're going to need them either to be starters or rotational guys for us this year.

Then on top of that, there's some young promising guys, as well, some of the guys that we've kind of already talked about a little bit in the past, Liam Clifford is a guy that has flashed and done some nice things.

You look at Winston Eubanks as a transfer has really done some nice things for us, as well.

Harrison Wallace is a young guy that's showed some promise in the future.

And then Malick Meiga is as big and strong and as fast as any guy we've got.

So there's a combination, and there's other guys. Weller is a guy I look at a lot like Lutz in the past, a guy that's been in the program and paid his dues and is reliable and can make some big-time plays for us.

I probably have missed somebody, but there's a good group to work with, and there's some experience, as well. That's a group that needs to take a step for us and for Sean this year.

Q. Another depth chart question for you. I wanted to ask about left guard and who's your starter there, and how has Anthony Whigan kind of shaped up this camp? Because he was a guy that a lot of his teammates have commented on as somebody who did well.

JAMES FRANKLIN: You know, it'll be a rotation between right now Whigan and Wilson will be the two guys that we'll probably rotate there. Both have shown some really good things.

Obviously Whigan has been with us for a while and has really had the right attitude and the right approach and has worked his tail off, and Eric is a young man who transferred in and I think it was an adjustment when he first got here but continues to get better.

They will both play. They'll both play on Saturday.

Q. Just wondering, what are you hoping to learn about your offense one way or the other this weekend, especially against a team that typically plays Top 5, Top 10 level defense in Wisconsin?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, obviously it's a tremendous challenge on the road against Wisconsin, and Coach Leonhard does a fantastic job for them and they play hard and they're sound.

But obviously we feel like we're talented and got a really good scheme, as well. That'll be a great challenge for us.

I think with the experience that we have up front, with the experience that we have at tight end, running back, and quarterback, that we have some opportunities to take advantage of some -- whether it's scheme or whether it's some athletic things that we think can be challenging for their defense, it's going to be exciting to watch.

Obviously when you've got playmakers like we do, like Jahan Dotson at wide receiver and two young up-and-coming guys that we talked about already, there's going to be opportunities. There's going to be

opportunities, but it's going to come down to one of those types of games.

They play a lot more man coverage than I think probably people that don't know or study Wisconsin closely. They play a lot of man coverage, with man coverage comes opportunities if your man can beat their man. There's obviously some things scheme-wise that you can do, as well.

Going back and watching that bowl game from last year with Wake Forest, there's a lot to look at there and learn from there.

But again, it starts up front, like it always does, whether it's the O-line or the D-line and their front seven. Us being able to block them effectively -- they do a great job of what football people call green dog, where they add on. If the running back stays in the blitz, they add and add quickly, which causes challenges.

It's interesting that they're not overly high when it comes to sacks, but you feel them. They do a great job of pressuring the quarterback and feeling him in the pocket.

It's going to be a challenge. Jim Leonard does a great job. They've been good on defense for a long time. We're on the road. It'll be a great challenge for our guys, but I know we're excited about the opportunity.

Q. I wanted to ask you about two of your defenders. What have you seen from Curtis Jacobs this off-season and specifically in August camp? I know you talked about him in the spring as somebody who you were ramping up to play some meaningful snaps at outside linebacker. And also Jesse Luketa in his hybrid role, how do you think he's taken to that throughout the off-season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, really good. I'll start with Jesse first. Really good. We've kind of always viewed Jesse like this, and I think his future is probably in this area, as well.

We see him as a guy that's going to play both linebacker and D-end for us. It'll probably be rotation at both positions. There may be a week where he spends most of his time at defensive end, and there may be a week where he spends most of his time at linebacker, but we're going to need him to play both.

He has shown that he's able to handle it. He's extremely smart, extremely football smart. I think Coach Pry does a really good job of teaching concepts, the big picture at the linebacker position, which I think helped his transition to defensive line. He's always been a physical guy anyway.

That's always been a strength of his game in my mind.

He's going to play both, and I think you'll see him kind of rotate at both positions and get a bunch of reps.

When it comes to Curtis Jacobs, obviously Curtis playing as a true freshman and really did some nice things for us, was more of a rotational guy last year and now is going to be a starter for us. His athleticism, I don't know if you guys remember this or not, but early on in Curtis' recruitment, he was a wide receiver. I remember deep into the recruiting process with his dad getting into some pretty heated conversations on what he was and what his future was.

I think all those skills that he learned playing offense in high school and the ball skills and the play making ability really translate to that field backer position for us. He's big and strong and fast and physical, but he also has the ability to cover in space and I think is very comfortable in space.

He's really got some safety qualities, which is really what you want at that field backer position, and we think he's got a chance to have a big year for us. We need him to have a big year for us.

Q. Are there specific examples of things that you've seen to indicate that the team is ready for a game of this magnitude? You've done this forever; certainly there's been false positives where you thought the team was one thing heading into the opener and then it was another.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's fair. I think your point is a good one. It's very different in college football because in most other sports you have a preseason, and some people build their schedule that way where you play some out-of-conference games early on to build up to these type of opponents and maybe work through some of the early season things that you saw.

We saw some of that this weekend watching college football. You see that in the NFL.

I guess starting -- is today Tuesday or Wednesday? Tuesday, excuse me. I guess starting tomorrow night there's like 80 games tomorrow night and like 80 games on Thursday. I guess Wednesday and Thursday night there's a bunch of games, and Friday night, as well. So you'll see a bunch of that.

But we try to put as much pressure on our guys as we possibly can in practice. I think you as well as everybody that lives in this community knows that we ramp the music up at practice, as well, because going on the road it's like people coming to Beaver Stadium. If you don't prepare for

that, that's hard. That's challenging, and try to make it louder in practice than we anticipate it to be in games.

Then getting into Beaver Stadium, because it's always different going in there playing night games. We did some night practices at 7:00 under the lights so they get used to that and the Jumbotron.

Last week we scrimmaged at the exact same time as it will be at Wisconsin. So we just try to cover as much as we possibly can. We spend a lot of time talking about situational football, covering all those topics in detail, not only in practice, but also in the meeting room, as well, and explain what the situation means, talk about what our philosophy is.

So we just try to do the best we can to get everybody prepared.

But I think you're right; you don't ever truly know until you step out into that environment. The more veteran players you have helps with that. I think one of the games this past Saturday, I think the one team had 21 super seniors, and that probably helped and showed up in the result.

The experience matters because those guys have been in those types of environments before.

I think all you can do is do everything you possibly can to be as thorough and as detailed as you possibly can and talk about what it's going to be like, show them what it's going to be like and create as much pressure as you possibly can in practice with the fine line of also building confidence so that we can go in there and play well and play aggressive and play fast for four quarters.

Q. We talked last year about riding up to the stadium and getting booed and getting thrown at and how much you missed that. How much are you looking forward to that, particularly at a place in Wisconsin where you haven't been?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I was really more talking about missing the fans. I don't know if I necessarily missed the boos. But yeah, it made the point.

Yeah, obviously I spent some time in Wisconsin, and I'll never forget coming out of the Packers' facility, you walk across the street to get to the practice facility, which is right across the street. They have a couple outdoor fields and the indoor fields.

I remember I want to say it was like a Thursday, and we played on like Sunday obviously in the NFL, and there was like four guys sitting in the parking lot grilling brats and

drinking beers. I'm like, what are you guys doing, and they're like, getting ready for the game.

I think there will be some brats and beers, and I think there will be some boos, but I also think there's going to be a bunch of cheers because people have missed college football. People have missed getting together as a community. I think that's one of the things that's great about college football, is it brings people together I think like nothing else.

I think the Big Ten as well as Wisconsin specifically and I know Penn State has worked really hard to try to do it in a way where we keep everybody as safe as we possibly can. Playing an outdoor sport helps with that, too. I think that's going to be important for us all to be aware of the rest of this year is making sure that we're all making sacrifices so that we can be as close back to normal as we possibly can be.

That's why I appreciate you guys being so understanding about being on Zoom, because for us here at Penn State, just trying to limit as many of those variables, control as many of those variables as we possibly can. Appreciate the question.

Q. I don't know if you've ever had a running back room this deep in your career as a coach, but having said that, one of the guys at the top is Noah Cain, who we haven't had a chance to see for a whole season yet. How good can this kid be? How different is he than other running backs you've had, his impact on the room and the team?

JAMES FRANKLIN: You said he was at the top, the top of what? The depth chart?

Q. Yeah, one of your main guys.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I'm just kidding, it's a depth chart joke. Too soon.

Yeah, you know, obviously Noah played really well as a freshman, and come the end of that season was playing maybe as efficient as maybe any running back in the country. Obviously a lot of excitement coming into last year with him, and then to lose him in the opening drive of the first game.

But I do think all of that has really helped Noah mature, and I know when the game is taken away from you, you appreciate it even more.

He's been phenomenal as a student-athlete since he stepped on campus, both on and off the field. He's done

extremely well. He's killed it in the classroom. Mom and dad have been awesome. They come up to practices and games all the time. He's been the model student-athlete. I'd take more of him.

I think he's going to have a really good game for us but also a really good season. Noah is going to be a success in whatever he decides to do long-term. He's a special young man.

Q. We had two of your players on today, Rasheed Walker and Jahan Dotson, and they mentioned how close they've become going back to winter workouts, spring ball, and now training camp, close relationships, great camaraderie. Have you seen that? Is that the best camaraderie you've seen in your program in quite some time?

JAMES FRANKLIN: It would be easy for me to just say yes. It's just hard. I think we're in a great place, don't get me wrong. I think we're in a really good place. We've worked hard at it. We always work hard at it. We do a lot of things. We try to be creative. We're demanding and challenging and hard out on the practice field.

But we try to make the meetings fun. We try to make football fun. We try to do those things that I think are really important in building a team through blood, sweat, and tears but also through laughter and joy and those types of experiences.

I guess to my point and to your question, it's just hard to compare because we didn't really get any of those things last year. Is it that this team is closer than any team I've been around, or does it just feel magnified after going through what we went through last year? I'm not really sure, and I don't know if it's fair to compare and contrast, but either way I think we have a very close team.

That's not just the players, that's the staff, that's all of us in this thing together. That usually results in good things for you.

I know yesterday is their day off, and I walked down to go to the nutrition bar and there's guys everywhere on their day off in the facility laughing, talking trash to each other, getting rehab or doing regen or watching film on their own.

When the guys want to come in the building and just be around each other and be around us, I think is a really good sign.

Q. I wanted to ask you a follow-up to something you said earlier. You had mentioned about Coach Yurcich and Pry kind of competing in practice, kind of

one-on-one competing as coaches. Is that common for your coordinators to take a pride in competing in practices, not just the players but the coaches doing it?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we've always been that way, whether it's the O-line and the D-line coach going at each other in practice or whether it's receivers and DBs and so on and so forth. We try to make it as competitive as we possibly can, too.

We'll say that this drill -- they're all competitive, but we'll say that this drill today, this drill is for 10 push-ups. The losing group has 10 push-ups, and I'll keep track of it. If it's 3rd down, it's pretty easy, did you pick up the 3rd down or not.

But when it's not, I kind of have a grading system that when it goes in the defense's favor, they think it's good, it's a good grading system and the offense doesn't, and vice versa. As the head coach you can never make everybody happy.

But we try to breed that into our practices as well. There's some days where it'll be the coaches doing push-ups without the players. Usually the coaches are included with the players, depending on which side of the ball you're on.

For us we'll have days, like I said, where it's just the coaches, where the defensive coaches are doing the push-ups or the offensive coaches are doing the push-ups, and because I'm not really offense or defense, I do push-ups with everybody.

I think that's helpful. I think it's fun. I also think it brings out the best in you.

I think having those conversations in the meeting rooms, having those challenges in the practices helps you identify what strengths and weaknesses are, so come game day, you're not figuring out what some of those things are.

Q. Kind of a flowery question, but is there any relief coming off of a mostly normal spring camp, normal summer camp, now looking at your first game with large fans in the crowd for the first time in almost two years, what is that like for you now sitting in a game week, and also on that note, what does college football mean to you?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, it's interesting because I remember last year going to the games and watching the cut-ups and how strange it looked with nobody in the stands.

A year later after watching hours and hours and hours of that film and also experiencing it, it's not strange. It's not strange to see the cardboard cut-outs or the empty stadium.

Getting back to some form of normalcy I think is awesome. There's still some headaches with it. As we're talking about travel parties and planes and busses and roommates and those types of things, there's still a lot to navigate with it.

Personally my family is probably not going to come to the games until an hour after they start to make sure everybody is kind of in and they're not caught up in the crowd, and then they're going to stay an hour after the game so it clears out.

So there's still a lot of things that I think we are all doing to try to navigate this in the best way we possibly can, but I will tell you even with that, there's just so much excitement.

I was excited last Saturday. We practiced early in the morning and were ahead from a game plan perspective, so I was excited. We had the Big Ten game up on the Jumbotron at the end of our practice Saturday, and I just kind of sat in there and watched a little bit of it.

As you can imagine, I'm a big believer in college athletics and what the athletic experience does to accent the overall university and community when done the right way like we do here at Penn State. Obviously I'm biased when it comes to football and what it does for the community.

In a lot of ways you could call it the front porch of the university. For a lot of people, it's their first experience of what the university is all about, and when you see 107,000 fans all singing together, laughing together, cheering together, hopefully all laughing and cheering, it's special.

I say Penn State football games and THON I think are two things that really differentiate Penn State and bring our community together like very few other places.

And I think our country, I think this community, our state, and really across our country, I think we need it.

Now, again, don't misinterpret what I'm saying. We've all got to work really hard to do it as safe as we possibly can do it, and we're all going to have to make sacrifices to make sure that we can keep it. But I do think it's important, and I think with people being thoughtful and caring of others, not just ourselves, I think we can do this.

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