

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: Like always, want to thank everybody for getting on here and covering Penn State football. We appreciate it.

I guess just a couple things before I get into reviewing our past game. Briefly, I would like to just send a message out to Brandon Short and his family and pass along our love and support and thoughts and prayers for him and his family.

Getting into the summary of our last game against Ball State, I guess the things that really kind of jump out from a positive is offensively ball security and defensive turnovers have been big so far this year. We want that to continue.

We won the field position battle, we won the explosive play battle, and it was great examples of defensive pursuit, and I'm a big believer in, if you want to play great defense, that's a critical ingredient and we're doing that at a pretty high level right now.

Opportunities for growth, we lost the penalty battle. Specifically, we got to eliminate the pre- and post-snap penalties. We got to see what we're hitting consistently, keep our head up and see what we're hitting to keep our guys safe and healthy and keep the people we're hitting safe and healthy as well.

I think we've got to do a little better job and more consistent job of protecting our quarterback. Too many hits on our quarterback. So that's where we are with that.

When you talk about specific to Auburn, obviously excited about the opportunity. Got a lot of respect for Auburn University, history, traditions. It's a pretty cool place. Obviously I got some familiarity with them as well from my time in that conference.

I've known Coach Harsin for a number of years. Got a lot of respect for him and what he's been able to do in his career. Talking about 16 returning starters on that club, a talented club, what you expect to see when you turn on an a SEC football team.

Mike Bobo I've known him for a long time. Got a lot of respect for Mike as a coach and as a man. Does a really good job.

Some of their personnel that jumps out to us is Tank Bigsby. Explosive and fast. Makes a bunch of plays for them. Jarquez Hunter another running back. Then wide receiver Shedrick Jackson, and quarterback Bo Nix does a lot of things well. He's athletic, can extend plays, he's accurate. I been impressed with him.

And then on defense obviously you know I have some history with Derek Mason. Derek was one of the most respected defensive coordinators in all of college football. You talk about guys that we've been impressed with on tape, Owen Pappoe, young man we recruited out of high school. He really jumps off the tape and flashes to you. The other linebackers Zakoby McClain, and then defensive end Derick Hall, No. 29, and corner No. 23, Roger McCreary. Those are the guys that jump out, and not only that, back it up from a statistical standpoint.

And then on special teams, Bert Watts. Demetrius Robertson the punt returner, and the kick returner Donovan Kaufman. They've rotated a number of guys there, but seems like they're the two main guys that they'll be leaning heavily on come Saturday.

Again, appreciate the opportunity and look forward to take questions.

Q. How did it go last week getting recruits back in the stadium for the first time since 2019, and how important will it be this week to have a bunch of guys in town and be able to showcase a lot of the stuff you didn't get to last year?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I thought it was great and I thought it was important and needed. I think you guys know, I've said this before, this is a special place, but it is something that you have to come and see for yourself. I think that's a really important piece to all this, not only for the seniors that are making decisions now, but the seniors that are making decisions now, they weren't able to go anywhere as juniors.



So it's important for these seniors that are finalizing their decisions. It's important for the juniors that are really starting to get hot and heavy in the process, either making decisions or starting to narrow it down in their mind where they're looking at. So really important.

And then obviously, as you know, for a long time this white out game year in and year out goes a long ways towards shaping our future. You think about how many great players that have come to Penn State that talk about the white out game having a big significant impact in their recruiting process and in their decision.

So getting as many of the top players nationally here as possible, as well as getting some of the -- getting all of the regional players here on campus we think is really important.

Q. Eric Wilson, give us a progress report on him through two games. Played a lot as a first teamer for you last week. And Juice Scruggs after the game noted he's had some pretty significant physical changes since he enrolled in May. Can you give us some details there at all?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Could you elaborate a little bit more?

Q. Yeah. So Juice said that Eric Wilson shed some significant weight since he arrived. He didn't want to give me anything too firm, but it was something I had not yet heard.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm not sure about that. There has been other guys that have jumped out dramatically. I'm not sure what Juice is referencing.

It's a little bit like with my wife. I'm not going to necessarily talk about things that I shouldn't be talking about. Eric has done a nice job. He really has. He is big, strong, physical. Talking about 6'4" 307 pound guy. I think probably came in a little bit heavier than that when he first got her, but once he's adjusted to our program and the amount of conditioning and lifting that we do in season, I think he's in a really good place right now.

Obviously played rotation -- he rotated in in the first game, and then played I think the majority of the second half. Last week played a much bigger role.

Right now we have him as our starting left guard, but we also think we'll rotate some other guys in there. I think he's playing well and getting comfortable and getting adjusted to the speed, size of the game at this level, and we've been impressed with him.

He is also a guy, as you can imagine, he learns well, he picks up things quickly. Going to continue to get better week in and week out.

Q. Two quick ones, if I may. First, obviously USC came open. Your name has been mentioned. I don't want to take away your focus from this, but just wanted to ask if you have any thoughts on that, and then second I have a recruiting question for you.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I'll let you ask the second question because you only get one question and I'm going to choose which one I want to answer.

Q. Okay. Maybe someone will follow up for me.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I'm kidding. As you guys know, I can't standard any form of distraction, so I'll discuss this today with the leadership council so we can make sure that all of our energy is on our preparation for Auburn. That's how we'll handle it. Going to talk to the leadership council today about it.

Q. You had a chance to get Kenny Beck here in the past year. How important was that for you guys bringing in somebody you had and were able to get back?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, Kenny has been a big part of our program for a long time. We lost him for a couple years and had an opportunity to bring him back. I think a couple things. I think it was important for us to bring somebody back that understands our culture and how we do things.

I think it was also important for Kenny to leave and go experience some different things. I think Kenny loved his time here and appreciated his time here, but also I think as he is gotten older personally and professionally, maybe some things that he values maybe became magnified in his life.

It just was a win-win. We were able to get a guy back that I got a ton of respect for that I think is extremely valuable and does a great job for us and makes sense in this region.

But I also think Kenny has come back and really appreciates how we operate and go about our business. I think it's been a win for both. I hope Kenny feels the same way. I think he does.

And we're happy to have him. Hope he stays for a long time with us.

Q. When you made the change at coordinator, you mentioned wanting the offense to be more explosive as one of the reasons for the change. Where do you think you are at this point and how much room to have to grow?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't think I'm ever going to be satisfied with where we are on offense, defense, and special teams. I think we're always going to be striving for more.

But I think we've shown flashes. I think we can be more consistent there. I think we can be more explosive. There is also some plays that we have missed, whether it's missed a read or overthrew a ball a little bit or maybe a different call. It's a combination of factors of execution. It's all of it.

But I think for kind of where we are in the season, if we just continue to get better and continue to take strides in really every area, running the ball, protection, explosive plays, I think we'll like where we are. Going to have to do that on Saturday.

But I think we're making progress. I think there are some signs of really big plays that we've made, some signs of plays that we should have made that we got to execute.

And then I think there is ways that we're working on every week during the game planning session that Mike does a great job of, and so does the rest of our staff, in finding ways to do it. I think there is also the factor of depending on who you're playing and what their style is.

Last week it was pretty obvious that they felt like they were going to try to keep everything in front of them and not give up the big play to keep the game close, and with as much success that they've had on their win streak, was keep the game close, and they've won a bunch of ball games and hopefully they can find a way to win the game at the end.

Didn't play out that way, but I think that was clearly their plan going into the game is play soft, keep everything in front of them.

Q. What's the biggest reason you've been able to protect the ball on offense the first two games and I guess even dating back it late last season while still being able to take some shots at the big plays and risks on offense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess what I would say first of all is I think that's been who we've been for the majority of my time here and the majority of my time as a head coach. We've done a pretty good job protecting the football. You

have to do that if you want to be successful. Obviously we've done it at a very high level so far this season.

It's a combination of us emphasizing it like we always do. It's explaining it in meetings in a way that the players can relate to and understand the importance and the impact of it.

At the end of the day it's about the players going out and executing the plan and also executing the fundamentals that are coached on a consistent basis. Got to keep it up. Got to do a great job of that today. That will be a major emphasis in today's practice.

But I think it's been a big part of our early success, and we need to keep it going.

Q. How difficult can it be facing someone that you have such close familiarity with when it comes to Derek Mason as defensive coordinator?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I've never worked with Derek, but I know Derek. I know Derek obviously very well, not only personally but also professionally. I think the biggest challenge for us with these guys is the way their first two games have played out and the type of people they have played.

It makes it a little bit challenging on tape to evaluate the tape. And, again, with a new head coach and new coordinators, are we watching Boise State film, Vanderbilt film, Georgia film, Colorado State film, South Carolina film? What do you watch to get enough examples of formations of situational football and scenarios that you want get covered.

You just don't have a whole lot to work with. When you get into a game and it's a blowout early on, those late game reps are not as important in your breakdown because I don't know if they are as realistic as information as you would get under different scenario.

So that's probably the biggest challenge. I wouldn't say it's necessarily the familiarity with me and Derek.

Q. You guys faced two different kind of defenses the first two weeks with Wisconsin seemingly playing a lot of man and blitzing a lot and Ball State backing off a little bit more. How does that help prepare a new offense and how do you use that in going into the matchup against Auburn?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a good question. Two very different styles. Obviously one on the road in a hostile environment and one at home. We were able to

score some more points. Started really fast last week against Ball State. Game one started a little bit slower on the road.

So what you would like to do is a marriage of the two, right? You would like to gain both of those experiences and be able to learn from them and grow from them and evolve and start to formulate your identity, and Mike getting a good feel for what we do well on offense and specifically what Sean does well.

Sean getting a feel for Mike and how Mike calls the game and how he wants to attack the defense. The rhythm of how we go about things. It's me and Mike working together and our communication on the headsets in between plays and series. It's the communication with the offensive staff, all of it.

Every game and practice you go through that, you get more of a comfort level. I get more of a comfort level. Mike does with me; Sean is involved in that as well. It's all of it. It's all those things that factor in in how we operate.

So you can get to a point where Mike is comfortable and knows exactly what a Tuesday is like around here and exactly what a Wednesday is like around here. I think those things are really valuable, and then obviously Mike has pushed back and challenged on some things as well. Anthony Poindexter has pushed back and challenged on some things to think about that maybe they've have done at other places that should we consider adding it to our formula, or do we stick with our formula the way we been doing to practice.

So you do that every year. You're tweaking. When you get people inside the program and they're able to see how you operate and then say, Hey, this is something we did at my previous institution and I thought it was good and may fit here and how. So all those things I think have been really important. I think every day, every practice, every game we get a better feel for each other as a staff.

Q. I wanted to ask you with KeAndre Lambert-Smith, early into the second year in the program, how he's progressed and the development and growth you've seen from him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm really pleased with KeAndre. I think you guys have seen some flashes already early in the season. I think that will continue to grow.

Again, the way we were able to distribute the ball to 10 different receivers in the first half, that makes things really difficult as a defensive coordinator. But I think KeAndre is

-- you're going to see his role continue to grow. I think he's going to have a great career here. He's got a very bright future.

KeAndre, like a lot of aggressive, competitive young men, he wants to be -- if your scale is A through Z, he want to believe at Z right now. He wants to be at Z yesterday. It doesn't work like that.

The most important thing for me and what I want him to recognize is how much progress he's made and how much he's developing weekly and building confidence in himself and earning trust of his teammates and coaches.

I'm super proud of him. I think he's going to play extremely well Saturday night, and you'll see that confidence just continue to grow and the experience that he's gaining. I think you're going to be very pleased with the development of him as the year goes on.

Q. You said a couple weeks ago that as a play caller there is four to six plays a game that can differentiate a guy, and that Mike had statistically done a good job of that over the course of his career. How did you quantify what those plays are and what did you see out of him that led you to believe that and how do you think he's done so far?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think first of all, it's the overall analytics. I think should never be based on one year, right? That's as a program, as a defensive coordinator, special teams coordinator. Should never be about one game, one year. It should be about what has he done over his career as a play caller.

And his credentials as a play caller in many different conferences and many different circumstances is really strong. His resume is as good as there is. I feel the same way about Brent Pry. I think those two guys working together and going against each every single day at practice I think has been really important.

And I think part of it, too, Ben, is it's not always the exciting play that goes for 70 yards and scores a touchdown. It's the first down that somebody may not notice. It's running the ball on third down because we got into a field zone that I told Mike that you got two downs here to get the first down and he runs the ball on third down, which would've put us in a manageable fourth down situation. Or like happened Saturday, Sean ends up running for a first down on it.

It's those type of calls that go a long way. It's the discussion that we have on the headset against Wisconsin about on third down with them having one timeout left. Do

you throw the ball here and pick up the first down, or do you run the ball and force them to burn the last timeout?

Based on how the day had gone, how the defense was going, and how they were playing and where they were from a timeout perspective, Mike doing what's best for the program right there in making that call, obviously those are the calls that maybe go unnoticed or unseen that are those four to six calls a game.

I've been impressed so far. He's a creative guy. Fun guy. I think he's been really impressed with the staff we've had here. It's unusual circumstance. You hire a coordinator and he comes in and doesn't bring anybody with him. That's meshed and gelled really well with Taylor and Ja'Juan and Ty and Trout. They're working extremely well together.

So I been impressed, and we just got to keep chipping away at it. Like I mentioned earlier, him getting more comfortable with how we operate here, our personnel and strengths and weaknesses and how do we want to attack our opponents. He's learning every day. I'm learning every day. Sean Clifford is learning every day. The more days and hours we spend together in practice, the games, I think the better we'll all be.

Q. You just mentioned the recruiting and Saturday a little bit. How many recruits, players, families, do you expect to entertain on Saturday?

JAMES FRANKLIN: The white outs are usually somewhere around 300, and you got to remember that's the recruit plus their guests. Some of their guests are teammates that are also recruits. Some are moms, dad's, brothers, sisters, high school teammates. We're usually full. We're fortunate here having 107,000 seat stadium. Our student section is bigger than most. Our allotment of recruiting tickets is bigger than most, so that helps for games like this. You hate to turn people away.

But this is a game where we typically have to turn recruits away. This is a game where we typically have to turn high school coaches away because the demand far outweighs the supply.

Q. This series with Auburn was announced in 2016. Can you share how a nonconference series comes about? Do you tell Sandy I would like to play these guys? Does she tell you? Is it a collaboration?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's a collaboration. I think the Big10 plays a factor in these decisions as well. I think the athletic director plays obviously a factor in it, and the head coach. You're trying to make the best decisions for your

program, for your organization. You're looking at what are your crossover games that year.

If you have the Big10 schedule at that point, what are your crossover games. Who are you playing from the west that year from a strengthened schedule standpoint. What are your other out-of-conference games like.

All those things kind of need to be factored in, not just a number of home and away games. You have to look at it all. So it's a conversation and it's an overall philosophy between the head coach, the athletic director, and also obviously the Big10 plays a role in it.

I'm a big fan of the neutral site games. I think those are things that make a lot of sense. When you can play a neutral site game rather than committing to a two-game series, playing a neutral site game where you have an opportunity for both teams to treat it in some ways like a home contest in terms of the gate and those types of things.

And then it allows you to maybe get into a region of the country where your fan base may enjoy it as well and see a different venue. I think that is something to consider moving forward as well.

Q. You talk a lot about being able to run the ball when everybody in the stadium knows that you're going to run it. Seemed like that was a thing you worked on a lot in the second half last week after you got a lead. Maybe you don't agree with that. How do you feel like you did in that regard, and what are the things you looked at to gauge how well you did?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think we're coming along in that area. I think it really helps as a play caller when you know you can call one of your favorite run plays based on that game plan that week and feel confident you're going to pick up at least three yards.

There is a lot of value in that. I think we're making strides there. I think it's also whether it's short yardage situations, being able to dictate your will on your opponent, whether it's short yardage, four minute, low red zone. Those things are extremely valuable, especially in the low red zone because your playbook shrinks. You just don't have as much field to work with. The high lows are not the same.

Down there the vertical stretches are eliminated so it changes some things. But I think we're making progress, and to me, that's got to be our approach, is we just got to kind of keep chipping away. Want get a little bit better on third down, first down, strike zone, or scoring zone or red zone or low red zone, whatever it may be.

Defensively, same type of things. How can he be better on first and second downs so we get more third and longs. On special teams, we're doing a great job of punting. I think we're No. 1 in the country in punting, but we want to be No. 1 in the country in net punting. It's all those things.

Although I think we're doing some really good things on offensive, defense, and special teams, there is still a lot of opportunity for growth. I'm excited for us to take another step with that today in practice. Hopefully we do that each day this week and that leads to us executing at a higher level on Saturday.

Q. You mentioned a penalties in the opening remarks. You guys have had 13 in two games and 9 of them have been for 10 yards or more. Do you feel that maybe a lack of focus might be one of the reasons, and what steps do you take to reduce the number?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, no, I would not describe it the way you did. Obviously I think you guys have heard me talk before about the most important stats in football. We want to be a disciplined football team, and I think we can be a disciplined football team.

There are a couple penalties that we need to get cleaned up, especially the pre-snap and post-snap penalties. Those are the ones that I think you can't tolerate as head coach. There will be penalties throughout a game that are going to happen, aggressive penalties during a game, but you can't tolerate the pre- and post-snap penalties.

So that's really kind of what we're talking about. No, I think there is a lot of different areas that you would look at our team when you talk about focus and you talk about discipline.

I think I would describe us as that type of team. But this is an area that we can improve. I don't know if we're going to eliminate them all, but there are two or three a game that we need to eliminate that could be significant and could be the difference between extending a drive or not.

Q. Quick one for you. This white out game has had an impact for you guys over the years. For those that have never experienced the white out, can you talk about the impact it has, and also for those fans coming to the game for the first time, what is your message to them?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, couple things. I think first of all, if you're a sports fan, you need to have a white out on your Bucket List. It's something I think everybody should experience. For the fans that are coming for the first time, I

hope you enjoy it. I been doing this for a long time, and in pretty much every major conference, including the NFL, and this is as good as it gets.

I think the impact and the electricity that it provides to our town and for our state and for the hotels and restaurants and bars and local economy, for our students and for our campus and community, I think it's special. I really do.

You talk about putting us in position for our future in recruiting and showing student-athletes the type of environment that they'll be able to play in in one of the most beautiful settings in college football. When it comes to the campus, the town, and the community. All these things matter.

And we're going to need this place rocking. I think one of the things that was great on Saturday is how many of our fans were in the stadium early, how many students. Student section was almost full early. I remember two years ago at the white out the stadium was almost full, maybe 90,000 an hour before kickoff.

To me, that's what we need. We need each week when a visiting team comes into the stadium, that the stadium is already pack and rocking in warmup just with the anticipation of the game.

So we need that on Saturday. We need every seat filled. If you're not using your tickets because you're not comfortable coming to the game for whatever reason, make sure somebody else is. I am willing to buy throat lozenges on Sunday for the entire fan base if that means that we have the most challenging environment in all of sports.

Chris, what's one the most common throat lozenge?

Q. Halls.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Halls. So I'm willing to buy Halls for everybody that loses their voice on Saturday. Halls, we would appreciate your support with this as well.

I think that's what we're looking for come Saturday night. We want this place rocking. I got a ton of respect for Auburn, got a ton of respect for the SEC. I want these fans and staff and coaches to go back to the SEC and say, I know we love our football in the SEC, but what they do up there at Penn State is special, and I don't know if I've ever seen anything like it.

I want them to have that type of experience and that type of impression of our fan base and of our university and our crowd. I also want to make sure, which I know we always

do, that we treat our guests with unbelievable respect and be great hosts.

Q. After Saturdays win, Arnold Ebiketie celebrated with some fans and had a critical blocked field goal and a sack in the opener. What about his approach and personality has allowed him to fit in so well so early?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he's an awesome young man. He's very appreciative of the experience that he's having at Penn State. He's always got a huge smile on his face. He's a mature young man. Great with his teammates, but also got a really good way with the staff.

He understands how to live in both those worlds and do it in a way that's very relatable and respected, and he's obviously a very, very talented football player that has a bright future.

He came here a good football player, but I also think he has really developed in the time he's been on campus as well in the weight room when it comes to body composition and nutrition, you know, how he's practicing and then obviously his play making ability on Saturday.

I've been really pleased. I think John Scott and Deion Barnes have done a very good job with him well. He's very coachable. Coach Pry and the defensive staff have a ton of trust in how he plays. We love him. Been a great pickup. We had victory Monday meal last night he was there with my wife and kids laughing and telling stories.

You know, we're very happy to have him.

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