

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 21, 2021  
University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

## Coach James Franklin

### Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: I guess first of all would like to thank everybody for getting on like always. I don't want to take that for granted. Appreciate everybody being here. That's awesome.

Talking about a summary of the last game, kind of getting into some of my notes here, kind of the main notes before we move on. I know you guys will have some questions. But to me the positives in the game, the overall positives in the game, we won the explosive play battle, we won the penalty battle, we tied the turnover battle. Obviously when you win or tie those you have a chance to be successful.

I thought we were very resilient during the game for a lot of different reasons, which I'll let you guys get into. I thought our mentality and our physical and mental toughness was really good. I thought our overall effort, the effort we played with and the will to win was really good.

Opportunities for growth, I think we can be better situational awareness on offense and defense specifically when it comes to 3rd down. I think we've got to be better in our wrap tackling. There's times where we're throwing shoulder and the better ball carriers we face are going to keep their balance and come out of some of those tackles, so we've got to wrap more consistently, but not only wrap more consistently from a tackling perspective, but the more shoulders that we throw, the more likely you're going to get calls for targeting because of head to head contact when you throw shoulders.

We want to make sure that we're getting that cleaned up.

We've got to protect the football. That's ball security high and tight. That's decision making. We've got to continue to emphasize that.

Then turnover opportunities, we've got to capitalize on. So when we get an opportunity to get a turnover, we've got to capitalize. Our guys have done a great job of investing and getting on the JUGS machine and full speed scoop and scores in practice, and we've got to continue to do that because they are game-changing plays. Could be

season-changing plays. We want to make sure that we're doing everything we possibly can to capitalize on those opportunities.

We talk about Villanova, first of all, one of the things I think is a tremendous statement is we got 1,500 tickets left for this game. It would make a tremendous statement to be able to sell this game out and really go for a sellout for the entire season. I talked about it a few weeks ago starting a sellout streak here at Penn State. I think that would be very, very important for a number of reasons.

I think that's pretty cool, and we're very appreciative of that.

Got a lot of respect for Villanova. Obviously didn't grow up far from Villanova. Mark Ferrante I've known forever. I'm a big fan of Mark's. He's been on the staff there I think for 34 years, which is crazy. Fifth year as the head coach. Then obviously you look at their staff; they've done some really good things.

Right now they're undefeated. They're 3-0. If you talk about returning starters, they've got 20 returning starters.

You look at their history playing FBS opponents, you're talking about beating Temple in 2018; 2017 they lost to Temple 13-16. Villanova lost to Connecticut by five in 2015, and they took Syracuse, I think, to overtime in 2014.

This is a team that's won a National Championship. This is a team that's played these type of opponents really tough. So we have to be prepared.

Then you just look at this year, and this is a long list, but I'm going to go through it. You look at this list, Tulsa losing to UC Davis; UNLV losing to Eastern Washington; Colorado State losing to South Dakota State; UConn losing to Holy Cross; Washington losing to Montana, ranked Washington losing to Montana; Vanderbilt to east Tennessee State; Ohio losing to Duquesne; Florida State losing to Jacksonville State; Texas State losing to UIW; Arizona losing to Northern Arizona this past weekend; FIU losing to Jackson State. Jackson State is having a heck of a year. New Mexico State losing to Tarleton State; Western Kentucky losing to Central Arkansas. And then even other games. You look at Central Michigan's win last



week.

We just got to be prepared. Got a lot of respect for their program and their university as a whole. They've made it to the playoffs 13 times. They've won a National Championship. They're currently ranked No. 11 in 1-AA. Got a ton of respect for them. I think Coach Ferrante does a great job. On offense I really like what they do schematically. We've been very impressed with them. I think Chris Boden does a terrific job for them as an offensive coordinator; Ola Adams is their defensive coordinator a guy I've been tracking for a long time. I think he went to DeMatha High School. Is doing a really job with their defense and has been for the last couple years. He's got an interesting resume.

And then their special teams guy, Ross Pennypacker has been doing it for a while, too. Got a lot of respect for this club. We've got to have a great practice today. Got to have a great week of preparation and make sure that we are preparing consistently week in and week out up to our standards.

I'll open it up to questions.

**Q. I'm curious about what you've learned the most about your team in three weeks, and which players have you seen really step up between preseason camp and now?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think, like I've stated, I think our mental and physical toughness, our will to win, our ability to play complementary football are probably the biggest things to jump out -- that jump out to me.

I think the crowd and the support that we have gotten has factored in in both of our home games.

I think it's great to have college football back the way we expect it to be back in Happy Valley. I think all those things have been tremendous. It's amazing how many emails and text messages I have gotten.

When you talk about guys that maybe are standing out, that's always a tricky question, but obviously Brisker is doing some really good things. I think Ellis Brooks is doing some really good things. Those two guys I think are playing at a really high level.

And then two other guys that probably jump out to me at this point is PJ Mustipher -- three guys -- PJ Mustipher, Jesse Luketa, and AK, Arnold Ebiketie. Those are probably the three guys that jump out to me most on the defensive side of the ball, and then obviously the way Sean played last week I thought he should have been the Big

Ten offensive player of the week based on his numbers as well as the opponent, playing a ranked opponent.

I thought he should have been the Big Ten Player of the Week, but I know I'm biased.

I think the way our O-line is protecting right now, obviously our tight end group and what Jahan Dotson has been able to do, those guys are probably the people that jump out. You could make arguments for a number of others, but those are the people that probably jump out to me the most.

And then I think our special teams, when you talk about kickoff coverage, when you talk about punt coverage, those things I think jump out from a field position standpoint, as well, on special teams.

**Q. Was that the most recruiting visitors you've ever had on the sideline for a game before the game, and how do you go about handling that logistically, you and your staff, given all the things that are kind of in play now?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm not sure. We haven't talked about that as a staff. I think it's probably similar to other white outs in the past. But it probably was close.

One of the things I talked about is I thought we did a tremendous job with not only the number of recruits that we had on campus but high-end priority recruits. I thought we did a great job of getting them here. It's really important to see it because I do think it's a differentiator for us, our game day environment.

I thought our pregame, I thought our administration, our pregame from week one to week two was really strong, and I thought the energy in the stadium and the music and the sound system, just I thought it was really well-organized.

Then I thought our staff did a great job. There's a lot going on, and you want people to feel special and have a great experience, and we work hard at doing that. But there's a lot of moving parts to it. I think some of the expanded staff has helped with that. We have a tremendous group of interns, student interns that work with us that do a fantastic job. It's a great experience for them.

It's amazing how many -- if you look at our staff, it's amazing how many of our full-time staff members are former interns in our office, and that number continues to grow, which is great.

But overall I thought it was really good. Obviously as the

head coach there's a lot of different hats you wear on game weekends, and having a real strong staff like we do behind the scenes kind of help getting all those things organized makes it go.

**Q. You've seemed pretty fired up this year. You are in tune with what people write and what people say and tweet and all of that. I'm curious, is this season personal to you in a way that's different than normal relative to how last year went?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, and again, I hate giving this answer over and over again. I don't mean to do it. I just think we just have to be careful comparing recent history compared to my career. I think most people would say I'm a fiery, passionate, emotional guy throughout my career all the way back to my first year as a head coach at Vanderbilt. I think that's how people would describe me.

I want to be authentic and true to who I am. I think everybody knows last year was a very different year from a lot of different perspectives. It's funny, I was talking to somebody the other day and they had their mask on, and it may have been you guys with the reporters the other day. I'm trying to figure out who's talking. I'm trying to read facial expressions. I think that's a strength of mine, to read people's facial expressions and body language and kind of interpret the gray.

That was challenging. That was challenging for me. I think that's one of my strengths that was taken away.

But yeah, I think I'm probably similar to how I've been throughout my career. I was fiery for a number of reasons last week because I felt like we were fighting more than Auburn. But, again, I'm not going to get into the details of that, but I felt like we were fighting a lot, and I was happy to see our guys battle through it mentally, physically, emotionally. The whole DR staff, our players, we didn't allow anything to become a distraction.

**Q. You mentioned Derrick Tangelo after the game Saturday; how much progress has he made since he arrived, and how did his transfer come about? Was there a connection with somebody on the staff?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think first of all, how it happened, from what I understand, this is where Derrick wanted to come out of high school, so that always helps. I think you know his high school. We've had a number of players that have come from Bullis High School and really thrived here and done extremely well, both on and off the field, so that helps.

So that was probably the biggest thing, the location where

his high school is, the familiarity we have with his high school, the number of players that we've had here. All those things.

I've got tremendous respect for the program that he came from, but I do think there's some things like all programs that are different and that were a huge adjustment for him. Our conditioning test was a huge adjustment for him. It doesn't make it right or wrong, it's just different.

I think he's embraced it all and is playing with a lot of confidence. The thing I'll say about him is Derrick has got -- it's weird for me to say Derrick because we always say Congo, but his personality, I hope you guys get to know him better throughout this year because he's been an unbelievable fit in our locker room.

He's got a bunch of personality, really interacts with the players and the coaches really well, and I think that's been important in our locker room, too.

I think both AK and Congo/Derrick I think have really done a good job of fitting in here culturally to how we do things and been great from that perspective.

I see him continuing to grow physically, mentally each week, and we need him to. I thought last week he played his best football.

**Q. You mentioned your proximity to Villanova; did you ever have any interest in going to Villanova? Did Coach Talley or anyone from his staff try to recruit you, and how well do you know Coach Ferrante?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I know Coach Talley very well; I know Coach Ferrante very well; I know a bunch of guys that have been on that staff and come through there. Dave Clawson was the OC there for a while; I think Bob Shoop was there. There's a number of guys, Coach Trainer. I followed that program closely.

Actually the head coach at my high school the year I was coming into Neshaminy, Dick Bettessom used to be -- used to coach at Villanova. The athletic director at Villanova went to my high school for a number of years.

There's just a lot of connections.

Would I have liked to have been recruited by Villanova? Yes. Villanova gave me the stiff arm just like Penn State did. I wasn't good enough. Had a really good experience where I played and where I went. But yeah, I was interested in all those types of schools. But yeah, was not that type of player.

I've watched them closely. There's a lot of guys that we recruit in the state that end up having an opportunity to go to Villanova. It's a great school, obviously great tradition and history. I remember growing up and they won the National Championship, I think it was the first one when I was growing up, and then obviously to see the success they've had more recently with their basketball program again, which is awesome, and football has got a great history, all the way back to Billy Joe.

If you're a football person, you should know who that is. Howie Long, there's a great history. And it's a really good location. They've got a tremendous location, as well. I'm a big fan of their history and tradition and what they've been able to do in the state of Pennsylvania, and me and Coach Ferrante I think have a pretty good working relationship.

**Q. We got to see John Lovett last week for the first time. On TV they had mentioned him getting a two-game suspension. What happened with that, but also what does he bring to the program?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I didn't know there was an announcement on TV like that, and I don't know where they would have got that from. I'm glad you mentioned that. We're going to check to see if that was stated, because no one has stated that to me. First time I'm hearing that.

So yeah, I'm not sure how to even address that because I don't know where that's coming from or what. But we're glad to have John playing. I think his role will continue to grow.

But I was not aware -- that was said on TV?

**Q. Yeah, during the broadcast. They said a disciplinary action.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Who said that?

**Q. I can't remember which broadcaster but it was during ABC's broadcast.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Okay.

**Q. Of the three games you guys have played, do you think this weekend's game was the biggest step forward for the offense? And what makes you think, if that is the case, what made that happen?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't know. You know, it's hard to say that because obviously there's a lot of things that go into it, the type of defense you're playing, the personnel match-ups. I think we just continue to take steps. I think week one we took a step on the road at

Wisconsin, tough environment, one of the better defenses traditionally, one of the most respected defensive coordinators.

From what I understand he got offered the Green Bay Packers defensive coordinator position, so obviously the guy does a good job.

I thought we took a step in week two and I think we took a step in week three, and we're just going to need to continue to do that.

It's funny because I hear people talk about some of the things that they saw, and I know -- I think Ben mentioned earlier about me being more in tune. I don't know if that's -- I probably read less than I did when I was a young coach. I read stuff, and I probably read less and less. There's things that Kris will give me a heads up on or Greg Kincaid will give me a heads up on different things, but I probably read less than I ever have.

We also have figured out how to mute things and get rid of things on Twitter so I don't get those things coming to me as much. Early on I used to block people. I didn't understand that until the media went to the president of the university and complained. That was a while ago. That was interesting, as well.

But I just probably read less than ever, so I don't know if it's necessarily the way it's described. But I just think we continue to take strides and steps in the right direction. Whether that appeared to be a bigger step in week three, I don't know if I would describe it that way, but I do think we're doing some good things. I do think we're gaining confidence.

Obviously Sean played at a high level, and when your quarterback plays at a high level, it opens everything up for you. I still think we've got to take some strides in the running game. I think we can be better in the running game and have the ability to be better in the running game.

But overall I'm pleased with where we're at as a team most importantly.

But I just think it's time invested, right? Coach Pry has been with me for a long time, and us working together and complementing each other and how we practice and how we prepare, and then the same thing now with Coach Yurcich. Each week we're together I get a better feel for him, he gets a better feel for me, how we want to operate, how we communicate on game day, all those types of things.

It's hard for me to say. I just think we're trying to take a

step each day and each week in getting better.

**Q. After the game I had a chance to speak with Jaquan Brisker and kind of talk to him about Ji'Ayir development. The two guys kind of shared the same path in get being to Penn State. Now they're playing in the secondary together. I wanted to ask you how you've seen Ji'Ayir develop this year and what you've noticed from him three weeks into the season.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think last year he was able to play and have a role. Obviously his confidence in year two is very different. I'm hoping he's going to have an opportunity to be in a similar situation that Jaquan is in next year. I'm hoping that's how it plays out for him. We'll see. There's a lot of football still to be played and a lot of decisions to be made.

I continue to see him grow in his confidence, in his fundamentals and techniques, in his physicality in the run game, and then his ability to play the ball in the air. He's just doing a lot of things well right now.

I think Jaquan Brisker's experience here and his growth here, I think he's learning kind of from Jaquan because Jaquan is a year ahead of him. I think those things have been helpful for Tig. I think to your point, they have a lot of similarities in their backgrounds and how they got here. I think that Lackawanna has done a tremendous job; Coach Duda has done a tremendous job there, and these guys are prepared and ready to compete at a high level.

And everybody's journey is different, but those guys have come in here and really taken it to a whole other level, and I'm proud of them.

I think they've been in a lot of ways a support system for each other, and I think the closer you are as a team and as a family, it helps with the communication and the understanding of how to interact on the field together, too. Those things I think really help those two.

**Q. A couple years ago I remember you talking about the tight end position and saying that a lot of the athletes you were getting to play that position out of high school had never really blocked. They had mostly been essentially wide receivers in high school. Gesicki would be an example. Those guys you have now look like they're natural blockers and it looks like they're really good at it. Do you agree, and what's changed about it?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I don't think anything has changed. From that standpoint and the way you described it, Theo was a high school wide receiver. Warren was a high

school quarterback. Brenton was probably the closest thing to that, but he still was really like a big wide out in a lot of ways.

I think part of it is just where we are as a program we're able to get these guys in here and develop them, and sometimes redshirt them and be on the scout team and be forced to be put into those positions to develop that part of their game where early on from a depth perspective, if you were talented we had to get you on the field maybe before you were ready in some areas.

You think about Mike's journey here early on, not only in the run game but also early on even in the pass game, and partly it's probably because he was out there a little bit earlier than he should have been.

So I think that's probably the biggest difference. But in terms of tight end recruitment and development, I don't think it's really different. Most people are using these really talented guys that we're recruiting in high school as big wide outs. Very few of them are blocking.

I don't think a whole lot has changed. I just think we're at a different point in our program that those guys were able to be brought on a little more slowly and develop some of those areas that may be weaknesses early on.

**Q. Sticking with the tight ends, Tyler Warren is someone who we saw extensively for really the first time on Saturday. When you look at his development from where he came in, how difficult was the adjustment to tight end for him, and how have you seen him make strides during his time at Penn State?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think the guys and the people that have covered us closely I think could tell there's been an excitement about Tyler really since we got him in the recruiting process. You talk about his basketball tape was as impressive as there is. You talk about his transition from the quarterback position to tight end, he was always big and strong and athletic. He's done a great job in the weight room.

And again, being behind those guys, we felt like we had an opportunity to develop him and then take advantage of his skills and talent.

Obviously Theo played as a true freshman and we were able to redshirt Tyler, but now all three of them are playing, and we want that to continue. He's doing a great job. I think he's got a really bright future. We love all three of those guys in that room.

Is that a Mike Schmidt mural behind you right there? Very

nice.

**Q. I'm going to try and avoid that Twitter block. It sounds brutal.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, that was year ago when I was a novice on Twitter and I didn't understand why blocking people with a problem when muting gets the job done. But Kris has educated me. I've grown very much in that area. So yeah, you don't have to worry about that.

**Q. Sean Clifford for a few years has talked about his own confidence in his abilities and what he brings to the team, and I feel like maybe he's proving that, especially against Auburn, a ranked opponent, and what he was able to do. Do you see a new Sean Clifford under Mike Yurcich? Do you see him stepping into this role and earning everyone else's confidence?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, again, I don't necessarily see it that way. Again, I've said this before, two years ago Sean won 11 games. We won the Cotton Bowl, a New Year's Six bowl game, did some really good things. Coming into last year was viewed as one of the top quarterbacks in the Big Ten and one of the top quarterbacks in the country, and my view of him never really changed.

Obviously there's ups and downs and twists and turns in everybody's career, but this is the Sean Clifford that I've always expected and anticipated.

**Q. With adding the blue lights in the tunnel, what dynamic does that add for you and hopefully for the team as you're making your way to the field before kickoff?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I wouldn't say a whole lot. I think a couple things. That shot that you get, whether it's ESPN or ABC or whatever it may be or even just for our Jumbotron, just to kind of clean up those images a little bit -- we painted that whole area, and as you describe, the lighting and things like that.

We just want to make sure that everything we do we're presenting Penn State in a way that everybody looks at and says, You know what, that's first class and that's sharp and that's impressive. That was another opportunity to do it that way just to clean up that whole area so when the eyes the world, specifically the sports world are on us, that everything that people see associated with Penn State is first class and creative and fun and represents our brand the right.

I feel like that does right now.

I think for our players, it's a very short walk, but I think they feel it, too. They sense it, as well. We want a first-class product. We want to make sure that we're treating everybody in a first-class way on the front end, and I think we probably have more alignment with those types of things than we've ever had.

**Q. When you try to put your team in stressful situations in practice, situational football, do you typically see a correlation between a success/failure rate in practice that translates over to the game? Like is that a direct correlation? And then also, just from what you were talking about at the top about mettle and will to win, are those qualities that you see in individual players that branch out to the team, that become a team thing, or does it grow organically within a team?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think it's a combination of all of those things. I think it starts with the players on your team and the leadership that you have and how do your leaders embrace winter workouts. How do your leaders embrace tough workouts right before summer camp? How do your leaders and your staff embrace and promote training camp and the practices? Are you sore? Yes, everybody is sore. So are you going to spend time and energy complaining about it or are you going to embrace this as part of the process to get better and grow?

I think developing mental and physical toughness the way the game has changed and the rules have changed are probably more important than ever, and then when it comes to situational football, I think that's why we try to make it as realistic as possible. Instead of coming up with some arbitrary time and score, we try to use legitimate examples of things that we have experienced, hopefully that our team has experienced.

So take a four-minute situation, take a two-minute situation, take an overtime situation that we've experienced before. Sometimes we'll even show them the TV copy of it, those types of things.

I think when you do that it has a chance to be more meaningful. It also have a great opportunity for us as a staff to have discussions the next day in the staff meeting of how we handled it, what would we do different and why. So there's a lot of reasons.

But yeah, I think obviously the more you do two-minute in practice and everybody finds how we have to operate to be successful in it, the more comfortable you're going to be doing it on Saturday. So we try to do that with all these situations as much as we can.

**Q. I know Lovett was just addressed, but broadcast aside, what did he do behind the scenes to have him ready to roll in a crucial moment? Your staff clearly was willing to trust him in the fourth quarter there.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, you've got to remember, he's played a lot of football. You're talking about a senior who's played a lot of football. We've been excited about him since we got him. We recruited him out of high school, so there's history there, as well.

You're talking about a mature, productive football player. He's an intelligent guy. He's been able to learn the system and the protections and all those types of things.

We have felt that way all along. It was just finding the right time and place to use him. Hopefully that role will continue to grow as the season goes on.

**Q. Following up on that, I think the vast majority of John's usage came from passing situations when you guys threw the ball. Is that something that you see continuing with John, or do you think that might change situationally for you guys?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, these questions like this are hard for me to respond to because I always think about how the opponent is going to listen to the answers. If I tell you that John is going to be used in the passing game, I don't understand how that serves us to answer that question that way.

But we think John has the ability to help us in the run game and the pass game. It just depends on the flow of the game and what's working at the time and what do we have on our call sheet next to attack the defense.

We want to stay away from players that are -- this guy is going to run the ball, this guy is going to pass the ball. Sometimes that happens because where a guy is in his development you have to do it that way, but you'd prefer not to whenever possible.

Just to kind of go over a couple things that did come up in the game that I want to discuss, not from a critical standpoint, but I've done some of my own homework in making sure that we understood some of these things, so I did want to kind of address how we interpreted some of these things that kind of happened during the game.

The one was the intentional grounding penalty that led to the loss of downs, which I think was already addressed publicly with a statement. From the way I understand kind of reading the rule book, talking to other people that study the game and interpret the game, you have to be under

duress to get intentional grounding from the pocket, so studied that one pretty closely, and that was an interesting call.

But I think for you to get intentional grounding from the pocket you have to be under duress. I didn't really feel like we were under duress in this situation.

Just so you guys know, that was an option route, so Sean wasn't throwing it away. We had the choice to go deep or short, and he thought the receiver was going to go deep. I would have agreed with that call if we were in a situation where he was under duress. That was one I just wanted to kind of talk about, make sure we're all on the same page with some of these things.

The other one, we ran a fake punt on 4th and 1. In punting situations, in kicking situations, it is illegal to have the center covered in kicking situations. And looking at that play and studying that play and interpreting that play, I don't think you can cover the center on those plays.

Obviously without somebody over the center I think we would have been in a much more positive situation there.

A couple other things that came up. There was another intentional grounding called; said that they left the pocket. Again, interpreting the rules and trying to learn from what happens in games and educate my staff and educate myself. Again, not being critical, just making sure that we understand these situations.

I think the ball was snapped from just inside the hash and the quarterback threw the ball from the hash, so I would not interpret that as outside of the pocket.

I thought -- I guess the last one I would say is Brandon Smith got called for a hit out of bounds, and I thought, again, going back and watching that tape -- it's one thing to disagree with something during the game; it's another thing to go back and look at some of these things.

I thought Brandon was trying to pull up and hold the player up. That one I guess could go either way. But again, I think if you're trying to pull up on the sideline after running full speed, that's challenging.

I just want to make sure that our staff is interpreting these things the right way. It's one thing to have a feeling during the game about how a certain play plays out. It's another to go back and watch the tape and make sure that we understand the rules correctly and that we're teaching the rules correctly with our team.

I did want to address some of those because obviously

there was a bunch of questions about that after the game. It was difficult for me to answer them after the game because I hadn't watched the tape. But after going and watching the tape and studying and asking a bunch of questions to a bunch of different people, I'm not going to get into how the calls were ruled by the conference. But in terms of my interpretation, the way I understand the rules and reading the rule book again, I wanted to address those questions that were asked to me after the game.

Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports