

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: So like always, appreciate everyone jumping on to cover Penn State football. Appreciate that.

Do a brief summary of the Villanova game before getting into Indiana. Positives, obviously 1-0. Defensively we held them to 106 yards through three quarters with our starters. We played a lot of guys who gained valuable experience, which I thought was great.

Opportunities for growth, when your number gets called you got to be ready and you must execute. That's obviously why that yard total was three quarters, because we didn't do that for four quarters once we substituted.

I think we got to get better in the run game on offense. Not that we will necessarily call the game any different, but when we do decide to run or need to run, that we feel like we can be efficient doing so.

Ball security, high and tight, something we've done a good job and emphasized all year long. Again, late in the game, guys go in, get an opportunity, and the ball goes on the ground a couple times.

However it was interpreted by the officials, shouldn't have been on the ground in the first place. And then punt locations. I think we can do a little bit better job with our punt locations to help our coverage units out as much as possible.

Getting into Indiana and Tom Allen. Obviously got a lot of respect for them and what they've been able to do, and specifically what Coach Allen has been able to do. You're talking about a team that's returning 22 starters from the previous season. Obviously they've gotten some momentum as a program and are really doing some nice things.

When you talk about offense, defense, and special teams, Nick Sheridan, the offensive coordinator, I think does a really good job. They got a good system there. They have kept the system the same from when their coordinator left to go to Fresno State as the head coach. Eight returning

starters on offense, and obviously a veteran quarterback who has done some really good things in Michael Penix.

And then we are very familiar with Ty Fryfogle as well as will as Peyton Hendershot who we recruited heavily.

On the defensive side of the ball, Charlton Warren obviously has tremendous experience. You look at his resume, all the places he's been, what he's been able to do. Obviously Tom is a defense guy as well.

Nine starters returning on that side of the ball. Micah McFadden, obviously the all-American linebacker. Jumps out. Tiawan McMullen jumps out at a defensive back and playmaker.

On special teams, Casey Tiergan (phonetic), I hope I said that right. All five returning starters on this unit that's been very, very effective.

Got a tremendous challenge, opportunity, and I thought Sunday we had good meetings and practice. I thought that was a really positive for us. Yesterday was our off day. Obviously today will be really important.

I'll have a better idea of where we are after today's practice from a scheme, from a game plan, from a fundamental technique and mentality after today.

So open up to questions. Thanks, guys.

Q. What do you want to see out of your team today at practice? Yesterday was the off day. What do you want to see different from last week today?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I wouldn't necessarily say specifically different. I just want to see us take another step. I thought we did that, like I said, during training camp, and then week one, week two; I thought we did that in week three. I thought last week we were a little bit inconsistent in our approach, in our mentality.

I guess if you're being specific, it would be that. I just want to take another step. I want us to understand what a tremendous opportunity, but also what a challenge we have come Saturday night. I want to make sure I feel like

everybody within the organization, the players, coaches, trainers, managers, everybody, understands that each one of these days and each one of these meeting sessions or practice sessions are like gold. We need to take advantage of them, because it could be that rep, could be that play, that is the difference in the game.

So I just want to see that. I want to see an attention to detail and a focus, and I want to see us take another step in the right direction.

Q. How would you assess the play of your O-line so far this season? Obviously the passing game has gone real well and you've mentioned a couple times about the running game not being maybe where you would like it to be. Sorry if I am putting words in your mouth, but how would you assess the play of your O-line overall?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think overall I would say good. I think as a full group and full unit, and obviously finding way to be 1-0 each week and putting points on the board, and I think we have protected the quarterback better probably in a four-game stretch to start the season than we have in the past. I still think we can be a little bit better there.

I would like to see us play with a little bit more of an edge. I would like to see us play with a little bit more of an edge specifically in the run game, but in the passing game as well. There are opportunities when you're slide protecting or whatever it may be and you don't have a threat in your gap and you can go kick the defensive end or help the offensive tackle on the defensive end.

I would like to see us play with a little bit more edge, but overall I would give us a positive grade so far as an O-line unit.

Q. I wanted to ask about kind of where you think your pass rush is. Obviously you blitz a lot. When you're not blitzing, how do you think that rush has been?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think, again, you got to look at the whole picture, right? What are people doing to you? How many times are they actually dropping back? Or is it like Villanova's game plan, which was to quick game, RPO, cut, sprint out -- which was the smart plan obviously.

So I think you got to look at it all. I would like for us to get more pressure. I would like for us to get more sacks. That will always be the case.

Because they obviously are momentum and drive -- you know, they're drive-killing plays, they're exact full. There is no doubt about it. I think it has an effect on the drive, an

effect on people's ability to score, and also has an impact on a quarterback's psyche when he's getting hit and pressured a lot.

So there is a lot of reasons it's important. Overall I think we've been solid. I think we can do better in that area, more pressure, more sacks, but I also think, again, you have to factor in what have people been trying to do against us, what was their the game plan going into the game.

I thought specific to Villanova they were smart with what they did.

And I should also say, Audrey, no one knows better about Villanova's plan against us than you. Fair point.

Q. You mentioned I think it was 16% explosive play rate for your offense. What does that represent? It's a number that's at the end of an equation somewhere. How do you balance the analysts and the numbers you get thrown at you with maybe the feel you have for the game itself?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So I didn't -- I don't know if I understood the second part of your question, I'm sorry.

Q. You have a lot of analysts and numbers and information and data. How do you balance that with maybe what your feel for the game is or maybe the things that come more organically versus we have to hit these certain benchmarks?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Got you. Okay. First of all, when you talk about the 16%, we did not run the numbers last year, because, again, I think last year skewed a lot of things for people.

But typically, if you are 16% or higher on offense, that's going to put you at the top third, top quarter of your conference, and the same thing nationally. It will make you one of the more explosive teams in the country.

And then on defense our number is 10% or less. Again, that typically is going to put you in the top two or three in your conference and one of the top in the country as well in terms of limiting explosive plays and creating explosive plays.

But those numbers, to your point, change. The third down numbers ten years ago are very different than what third down numbers are now. Used to be if you were at 40% on third down you were really good, one of the tops probably in your conference, and now it's closer to about 50%. Offensive numbers have changed dramatically in the last

ten years.

So we come up with those numbers and try to do a study in the off season and make push they're still accurate. Again, we did do that this past year because you're not comparing apples to apples.

In terms of the statement you made in terms of having a lot of analysts, we actually don't. We have about average of what most program in the country have at this time. But I think to what your point was, is there is a lot of information, and how do you use it all effectively.

That's one of the things you have to be careful, right? There are the numbers that you're getting from the data and the analytics people, and then there is also the feel of the game, the flow of the game, the momentum of the game, how is your offense playing at that moment, how is the defense playing at that moment, how are the special teams playing at that moment, what is your matchups, okay, what you thought your matchups were going to be, how are they during the game.

So all these things factor in. The you just try to get as much information as you possibly can, and then I think you have to trust your instincts. You have to trust your instincts. When you have time, it's obviously great to get on the headset and talk to Coach Yurcich or Coach Pry or Coach Lorig and get their perspective. Especially if you're thinking about going for it on fourth down, and if we don't pick it up the defense and Coach Pry's unit is going to have to deal with the consequences to that. So making sure he's on the same page with it.

But it's a balance, right? I have a meeting each week to go over kind of game strategy for that game, but based on our opponent how we're going to handle short yardage situations, two-point play situations, and then we have another meeting -- or I guess it's the same meeting, excuse me -- reviewing the previous game.

So how did we do in those situations, what would we do differently now looking back and like I said, planning for the next game based on what the data tells you.

And then I think the other thing, again, that's extremely valuable for me and our staff and really our players is watching situational football that pops up in other college games, situational games that pop-up in the NFL.

The interesting one I literally just got done watching because I was trying to decide whether or not to show the team or not was the 49ers with the Green Bay Packers this week. It's interesting, because the 49ers need to score in a two-minute drive, but then you need to score and you

need to score in a way that's going to lead the least amount of time for that Aaron Rodgers dude on the opposite sideline, who I was with his rookie year when we drafted him.

But it's funny, because if you get too conservative then you may not end up scoring the touchdown. But it's that fine line. We need to score here, which scoring is hard. But then we also need to score and take as much time off the clock as possible, because with that offense and that quarterback on the opposite sideline, you can't afford to leave them any time.

That's always the fine line and the balance of all these situations. Obviously when it works, it's great. When it doesn't, you know, then you leave yourself open to be critiqued and second guessed, which I get. That's part of it.

So we try to use those, whether it's NFL games. I think the current stuff is really valuable because a lot of times the guys have watched it and I got players texting me, Coach, did you see the end the 49ers game, or did you see the end of the Old Dominion game or whatever it may be. I just think it's more impactful when I show them something that's current that they can learn from and can create great dialog and discussion for all of us.

Q. You mentioned that after the game Saturday and earlier today talking about wanting to see your team play with an edge. To you, what does that edge look like? When you say edge, what are you looking for?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I'm looking for fanatical effort, which I think we've done a pretty good job playing with effort. And I'm looking for an amount of aggressiveness that is right up to the edge of what is legal and appropriate from the snap of the ball until the whistle is blown.

So nothing that's going to be viewed or looked at as dirty. Nothing that's going to create penalties after the snap. But when people watch us play, that they see a team that plays with tremendous effort and aggressiveness from the time the ball is snapped until the whistle is blown. I would even say to the echo of the whistle, which I used to say all the time.

What is amazing to me now a lot of times in college football and I think the NFL, is sometimes the whistle never blows, which is whole other discussion. People probably look at me like I'm crazy, but you literally get to the point now where officials don't want to blow the whistle too soon, because if there is a fumble they want to make sure the play is over.

I'm like, Well, how do I tell my guys when the play is done? Well, they should know. What do you mean they should know? We're trained with the whistle. I like our guys to play with tremendous effort and aggressiveness from the time the ball is snapped until the whistle is blown.

Q. James, obviously you guys say you don't believe in revenge games, but you guys have use examples from last year's game against Indiana to help improve your red zone defense, or as far as like to harp on the importance of it. How do you balance using examples from previous years or games with not being too focused on the revenge factor of it?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, because the only people that I ever hear use those terms is when I get a question like this. Yeah, we use examples, like I said, of the 49ers. We go back and watch our tape and learn from it and make corrections.

But our entire focus and energy is on beating Indiana this Saturday, this season. And although previous records I think are interesting to look at, previous records against certain opponents and all these types of things, but at the end of the day, all that real matters is you have to find a way to beat the team that you are playing this Saturday.

When we do our film breakdown, do we look at especially at this point in the year where it's still fairly early where you're looking at the most recent games played, and then do you also probably include our game last year as long as most of the coordinators are the same? Do you factor that in? Yes.

But for us, we're trying to beat Tom Allen and the Indiana football team for this season and this season alone.

Q. Your top three receivers saw 75% of your team's target in the two games against power 5 opponents, which were the only games you guys didn't go deep into the depth chart. Is that the plan moving forward, to lean heavily on that top three, and if not, how do you involve for more guys offensively?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think most people, right, that statistic is probably going to be pretty consistent for most people. Your starters are going to get most of your targets. I would like the number to expand to four guys, and I'm talking about the tight end position, whoever happens to be in and on that time.

But I think that's the important thing, right? You would like to be in a situation where the team you're playing and the defensive coordinator you're playing doesn't really feel comfortable bracketing anybody because there are too

many other guys that can hurt you.

Okay, yeah, if we decide to bracket Jahan Dotson or Parker Washington, these other guys are going to hurt you, whether it's the tight end position or the X or whatever it may be.

KeAndre obviously shows he can make some big plays. Our tight ends have shown they can make some big plays. Then again, we when we choose the run the ball, if you're effective and explosive in that area as well, now you've just become really challenging to defend, especially when people know that Sean has got enough mobility.

Sean had a big time play last year, a big run against them early in the game. But I think that's when you become really difficult to defend and have a chance to be elite on offense.

Q. When people talk about struggling in the run game, I think most people would think your offensive line has to fire off the ball and knock the guy opposite them backwards. But it seems like opposing linebackers have made an awful lot of plays against you so far this year. I thought the kids from Villanova had a great game. Wisconsin, that was the case. Is there anything you can do better in terms of getting the linebacker level blocked or fooling the linebackers or whatever? Am I crazy or is that a thing?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, I think it's fair. It's all of it, right? It starts with getting knocked back on the line of scrimmage, and then it's talking about getting knocked back on the down linemen and then double team into a linebacker.

It's about breaking tackles and making people miss. You know, and then it's how can you create some indecision and hesitation with them with the motions and the shifts and some misdirection stuff to keep them honest so they can't play as fast and as aggressive as they want. The RPOs play into that too.

I would also make the argument is one of the reasons why we are throwing the ball so well is because people are the committing so many people to the box to stop the run. I think like most things, right, it's not one thing. It's easy to talk just about the O-line. Like I said earlier, I think overall O-line is playing pretty good.

But it's a combination of all those things. And again, when we can become just a little bit more efficient in in the run game and a little bit more explosive in the run game, then I think we got a chance to be really difficult to defend.

I think it also helps you a little bit in the low red zone and also helps you a little bit in short yardage situations where people feel like, again, they have to defend both.

Q. James, the last three games against Indiana have been very, very close. What is it about Indiana that they seem to match up well with you guys?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, well, a couple things. I think your point is accurate. First of all, I think Tom has done a really good job. I think they got a good scheme and they play hard. I think they have recruited well. To be honest with you, I don't think it's just Penn State. I think their program has improved, and they're doing that against a lot of people.

I've watched them on tape, on TV on Thursday night games. I think for a couple years, if I remember correctly, getting home from my radio show on a Thursday night watching them play Ohio State real tough one year.

So they improved. That improvement has allowed them to win a few more games and allowed them to play pretty much everybody in a competitive way.

But I think, again, part of it is scheme, part of it is talent, and I think part of it is confidence. They've done a good job in those three areas to allow them not to compete just against Penn State, but with a lot of people.

Q. You said after the game something to the effect of not wanting to have to have setbacks to grow. How do you teach that? Is that an especially difficult thing for young kids who have had a lot of success in their athletic careers to kind of learn as they get into the higher levels?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it's hard for a lot of reasons. I think a lot of times for young people the success sometimes can be more difficult to handle, to navigate than the adversity is sometimes.

You are walking around campus and everybody is patting you on the back and telling you how wonderful you are, and on social media you're reading positive things and it's easy to get caught up in that. We just got to continue to hammer it home that it's a weakness to get caught up in either the praise or the criticism.

So we want our guys to be focused on the task at hand and to use our process and the steps in how we prepare each week and try to tune out as much of that stuff as we can. But it's easier said than done. There is though doubt about it.

But what we just try to do is educate our guys as much as we possibly can, keep hammering the message home. Like I said, like we do in most areas, show them examples of programs and teams that didn't do that, that you lose a game you're not supposed to or just don't play the way you're capable of playing.

Q. I probably have some relatives named Gross. That might be part of that.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Makes sense.

Q. Can you assess the overall tailback play so far? Do you feel like you have a No. 1 tailback, and are you satisfied with the distribution of the carries?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm satisfied. Like we have said since training camp, we're going to rotate three backs in there. We'll continue to do that. I think there is always going to be a sense of wanting more and thinking that we can get more. That's breaking more tackles, that's being physical when you need to be physical, that's bouncing when bouncing is appropriate.

More times than not we want to be downhill and cut back than bounce. Yeah, we would love to get a little bit more explosive plays. Like to be a little bit more physical on short yardage situations. Like to break a few more tackles.

Like I said, I think it's a combination of all of those, the tight ends m, the O-line, the running backs, the coaches, all of us. But I would say solid so far. I think what is probably undervalued sometimes is some of the stuff in the protection game and some of the stuff in the pass game. Noah jumps out in my mind specifically, some of the plays that he made on the perimeter and breaking tackles and making people miss, especially late in that Wisconsin game.

So overall, solid. I think we can get a lot better there and I think we are a lot better there.

Q. Michael Penix threw six picks in his first three games last week, but last week didn't throw any and passed for 373 yards. What have you seen in his development this year, and how much better do you think he has got from last year?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's the point, right? That's the point with all quarterbacks. That's the point with all teams. That turnover ratio is critical. Touchdown to interception ratio is critical. We have done a pretty good job of that on both sides of the ball, protecting and attacking the football on defense.

Obviously Michael did a good job of that last week. I thought he played really well. Played really well.

So, yeah, has he improved. Yeah, he's a veteran that's played a lot of football for them right now. Obviously last year he had a special year. He's had to fight through injuries. I think all this adversity, when handled the right way, helps you.

But that's going to be a key factor in that game, how well he plays and how consistently we can get to him, and I think that's going to be a huge factor in this game.

Q. After Saturday game, Sean Clifford said he feels like this is the best team in the country. In the past you've talked about making the leap from being a great team to an elite team in college football. Where do you think you are on this journey, and do you kind of agree with him that this team has the potential to be the best in the country?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I just want to beat Indiana. I appreciate Sean's confidence and I appreciate Sean's belief in his teammates and the program and the statement.

But as you guys know, and I know you guys hate it because it seems boring, but I just want to beat Indiana. I think if we approach it like that week in and week out, it'll give us the best chance to reach our potential, whatever that may be.

I appreciate Sean and his confidence and his belief in his teammates and our program and the type of support we've gotten from the community and the buzz and excitement that we feel in Happy Valley right now, but what I prefer is that everybody pour their energy into Indiana and our players preparing like they've never prepared before for a game, and our fans packing Beaver Stadium and making Saturday night one of the toughest environments in all of college football.

And then Saturday night we can have another discussion about where we sit in the football hierarchy, and then I'll give you another boring answer. But I just want to find a way to beat Indiana.

Q. I wanted to ask you about team arrival, specifically when the blue busses are pulling up to the stadium and you see the tailgating lots packed and the fans waiting for the team. Do you mind sharing what's going through your mind and what that moment is like for you?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I would say appreciative and

emotional. It's really before that. I'm not sure everybody knows the route we go, but we come from the hotel, and instead of coming out there on the highway, we make a right and go down the street, to the end of that street. It's kind of a cul-de-sac deal, and then we just hop the curb about 70 miles an hour and go through this kind of like a gravel road, and then we kind of weave our way back up, you know, behind the intermural fields.

That's really when you get the first idea as you make a right there. You see the stadium, and there is a family that sits there and they've got a really cool tailgating area right on the edge of the end of the tailgate area, and they're playing corn hole and having a good time. They usually give us a big cheer when we go by.

It starts to kind of fill up from there. And obviously based on those fields and how packed they are and kind of the drive down to the street there -- to be honest, I don't know any names of streets in State College -- but you get down to that street and you make a right.

If you go left it takes you to the stadium. Go right there. Fox Hollow? And before you go under the underpass like you're going back to what's that -- like. Huh? (Indiscernible).

Thank you. Before you go under that underpass we make another left and go back on another gravel road. As you're going you kind of get a sense. There is people walking down the street. The tailgate section is getting packed.

And then we kind of make the left there by the law building and there is like a student section that's chaos back there. Probably shouldn't say that, but it's chaos and they're going crazy.

Then you start to work through campus, and everybody is walking to the stadium or walking to that student tailgate area, and you just kind of -- it starts to build. It starts to build and you get a feel for it.

And then we get up to Lash and the other bus of players is waiting for us, the guys that aren't on the travel squad. They join in, and we continue to weave our way through campus and start to pull up towards the baseball stadium.

That's when you get the complete feel. I think it's a great way to enter a stadium, one of the better entrances to a stadium in college football. Obviously it's another opportunity for our players to see their parents or loved ones before we go in.

They usually have the stage set up there and the band and cheerleaders. It's really cool. Then I do my lap. I think it's



a great way to kind of start the game experience, and you get a pretty good sense pretty early on from the time we leave the hotel what type of environment it's going to be in Beaver Stadium.

Long answer, but I hope it was all right. Sorry I didn't know any of the streets.

Q. I got a two-part question for you. One, anything in particular you can take away from your matchup against Indiana last year? Secondly, I know you don't like distractions, but what do you say to those high school recruits looking to potentially come to Penn State about your name being linked, what is your message to them?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm not sure if you come to the press conferences weekly, but I've already answered and addressed that in detail multiple times. We're excited about playing Indiana. It's a tremendous opportunity, tremendous focus. Got the No. 1 ranked recruiting class in the country right now, so pretty pleased with how we're handling all these things.

But our focus is on Indiana.

Q. Going back to post-game Saturday, you talked about wanting to coach your team hard on Sunday, having an uncomfortable day it sounded like, felt like knowing what you know about the team they would respond. How did you see that response carry over coming out of the game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I guess for me, I want to be strategic and intentional about everything that I do and everything that we do.

I do believe that back to our kind of points earlier about being able to grow and learn through wins, I think coming in on a Sunday I think you can be pretty aggressive in trying to get the things that need to get cleaned up after a win.

I think people are less defensive and more open to hearing the feedback, constructive criticism, whatever it may be. That is as a staff, that's players, all of us.

And I feel like our players kind of bought into that and understand that. I hear the veterans saying that in the young guys in the locker room after the game. Those Sundays are really important.

And to me, there is a big difference between corrections or you just got beat by another really good player. Those things I think we can deal with. It's any signs of effort

issues. That can never be tolerated. Or guys that are doing things outside of the system. Those things cannot be tolerated.

If you have an idea and want to try something, discuss it with the coaching staff ahead of time and we say hey, that's a good idea, we want to incorporate that into the plan, or that does not make sense and that does not fit and this is why. I think those things are all fine and that's part of the process.

The stuff you see on tape specifically late in the game when we had guys in there that aren't normally getting as many reps, it's a great opportunity to kind of address those things and get those things fixed.

And I thought Sunday was really good. I was a little edgy on Sunday, and, again, that was intentional for everybody to make sure that we are not satisfied or complacent with where we are at.

Again, today will be important. Sunday's kind of -- it's one thing to have a tough meeting, but you're out there in your shorts and still the weather is still beautiful and the music is going on at practice and all these things.

But Tuesday is a workday. Full pads. Tuesdays and Wednesday are usually very telling at what your mentality and approach is like and what your culture is like.

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