

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 and being supportive of Penn State football. I guess the first thing to do is we had a very productive bye week. We did our normal, basically our normal Sunday practice, then practiced on Tuesday and Wednesday, which was more good on good, some developmental periods, and then obviously got a little bit of a head start on Illinois.

So we did that on Tuesday and Wednesday. Then Thursday the travel squad had lifting and running, and we've always had a Thursday developmental squad scrimmage, and we amped it up even more so this year. We went into the stadium; had a full scrimmage; had coaches and players mic'd up; did some internal media with them after practice; had a really good experts, which I think the guys enjoyed.

So that was something a little bit different than we've done in the past. And then obviously the coaches were on the road Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and got back here, depending on the person, Saturday evening. I went to two games Saturday and got back here Saturday evening.

So very productive, and then starting Sunday we're able to get back into a normal game week, except we don't have the corrections from the previous game. So most of you guys know the routine. I thought I would go over it briefly.

Getting into Illinois, obviously Bret Bielema, got a tremendous resume, has been successful in this conference as head coach, highly successful. Obviously been head coach in the SEC; coached in the NFL. Obviously with a storied organization, and now as a head coach again in the Big 10 at Illinois.

So tremendous respect for him and the university as a whole. Talking about a team that returned 17 starters, six on offense, eight on defense, and three on specialists, and also I think one of the oldest teams in college football. I think they have 22 super seniors, which is the highest in the nation.



And obviously there is some advantages and strengths that come with that. When you talk about offensively you can Tony Petersen and his background. Obviously came from Appalachian State. Everybody has got a ton of respect for what they've done at Appalachian State for a long time.

Everybody was a little bit I think surprised when Bret kind of went out of his normal mode in terms of offensive coordinators and their background and how they are stylistically. Tony has a tremendous amount of experience. He's been coordinating for a very, very long time.

We been impressed on offense with Chase Brown, running back No. 2; No. 1, wide receiver, Isaiah Williams. Obviously he can do a lot of different things both as a wide receiver/running back/quarterback obviously.

And then I've been really impressed with the freshman, No. 0, Josh McCray, the big back out of Alabama. I've been impressed with him.

Defensively, Ryan Walters. This is Bret's backgrounds as well defensively. But Ryan Walters, you look at his background and his experience being at Missouri as a defensive coordinator before coming to Illinois. We been impressed with defensive tackle No. 96 Roderick Perry; No. 99 99, Owen Carney; linebacker No. 35 Jake Hansen. Seems like he's been playing there forever. And then linebacker No. 33, Isaiah, guys that have jumped out on film.

And then they have an experienced special teams coordinator in Ben Miller who came from the Air Force Academy. Been their special teams coordinator for a long time, so we've gone back and researched all their film as well.

Been impressed with the kicker, No. 17, James McCourt. Their punter, No. 14, Blake Hayes, and then their returner, punt returner as well as kickoff returner, Donny Navarro; really flashes on tape.

Tremendous opportunity. Look forward to being here in Beaver Stadium. Look forward to homecoming. Look forward to generations of greatness. I know our players and from what I see, the fan base really enjoys these



throwback uniforms we do, so looking forward to all that.

Open up to questions.

Q. How have you divided up the reps among quarterbacks, the quarterbacks last week, and how are you planning on doing it this week?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so we're going to split the reps between Ta'Quan and Veileux. We'll split the reps, and like I think someone asked me that question the other day about will it be a competition. I think it's always a competition but it's probably magnified a little bit.

Looking at those guys closely in practice and the scrimmage periods and things like that, so we will split those reps between those two evenly. Make it a competition.

Q. Is there any update you can give us on Sean's availability to practice or play in games? When it comes to making a decision on who your starter is, at what point do you have to make that? Not necessarily announce it to us, but within the team.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I respect and understand you got to ask the question. I hope you respect and understand I'm not going to get into a whole lot of detail on a Tuesday.

With that, I haven't talked to the players about that yet. Haven't talked to my team about that yet. We haven't really had a full speed practice to do that.

But obviously no different than any other situation. You would like to make the decision as early as you can. We're not in position to do that right now, so those reps will be divided evenly. Once we know that it's clear, then we'll make the decision and go from there.

So, again, I know you got to ask the question. I know I didn't give you a whole lot of information there, but it's hard to say that on a Tuesday where we are when we haven't had a full speed practice yet.

Q. In terms of pros and cons of splitting the reps, what are those, especially with two guys who unlike maybe in past years with your backup quarterback situation, haven't played as many game reps as some of the guys you've had before?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think obviously the reps in general are gold, right? So I have worked with a coordinator in the past where he's going to pretty much give all the reps to the starter and no reps to the backups,

and the whole reason is you just -- every rep is critical to get them ready to play on Saturday.

I think there has always got to be a developmental aspect, so we've always, in spring ball and summer camp, given reps to all three quarterbacks in the top three spots on your depth chart, and then once the season starts, the emphasis is obviously on your first two.

So, yeah, I think right now we're even just based on where we are with those two guys, but I think when you can decide who your starter is and be able to slant a few more reps to your starters compared to backups, and that's not just at quarterback, that's every position, right? That chemistry, cohesion the group is important.

So that's what you would like to do, but right now I think we're -- our plan is to split it pretty evenly.

Q. You said at the end of camp that it was obvious that Ta'Quan was the No. 2. What has Christian done in the last month and a half to get in that conversation to split those reps?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think what's good about spring ball and summer camp is you kind of have all the practices to look at, and then by day, you look at the numbers, right? Your gut tells you one thing and then do the numbers back it up? Not only by day, but then being able to take cumulative reps and look at that.

There is also growth you're looking for. A player that's been in the program for a couple years should really be widening that gap, and a player that's been in the program less amount of time, he's got to close that gap as much as he possibly can.

But you also have to factor in the number of reps that they been able to get in practice and the number of reps they been able to hopefully get in games. So it's not oranges to oranges. It's not even. That also makes the argument if it's close, it really shouldn't be, right?

The guy that's been in the program for a long time and the guy that's getting the most reps should be able to widen that gap. Right now, it's somewhat close. So I got a meeting with both of those guys today, and kind of challenge both of them and let them know that we're going to be evaluating everything.

The good thing is both of them I'm very impressed with as young men and as competitors and as football players, and this won't be any new information to them, but I still think it's important for me to talk to them face to face and go through some of the stuff with them.

Q. With PJ being out for this year, I know you mentioned last week, Devon and Caziaha have a little bit of work to do to step up to fill that absence. I know it was an idle week, but how were they last week catching onto things and getting up to speed?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, they been good, and we've also amped up the opportunities and the reps for Amin Vanover and talked to him about putting some weight on for the past couple weeks. He's done a good job of that.

So Jordan Vandenberg is another guy we been amping up their reps and opportunities and meeting times as well. So it's all of it. I think Devon has taken some really good strides, and so has Caziaha from the beginning of the year, and so has Caziaha. And we need them to. We need them to.

So it's all about consistency. I think you heard me say that before. All these guys have the talent and the ability to do it, but there is a difference between doing it three out of ten plays compared to eight or nine out of ten plays.

That's the expectation and standard we need. We need to be eight, nine, ten out of ten in terms of their technique, fundamentals, and assignments. So they're trending in the right direction.

Q. Could you just speak to the distasteful nature of now fans booing players who go down just on general principal? No anything specific. That's just something I'm noticed on injuries.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, again, I appreciate and respect the question, but that seems like a discussion that we had a month ago.

Q. Yep.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Seems like something -- literally feels like a month ago. We have moved on. Points have been made about it in detail. I probably gave my longest answer of my career at a press conference about that, so I've gotten it off my chest very clearly.

If you don't have the audio or video we can send it to you, but I made my points very clearly on that and they've been discussed in great detail, so I would like to move on to Illinois and focus on that.

Again, I think I've been pretty clear on my points on that.

Q. In the transfer portal day and age, having a good backup quarterback probably means you have

someone else's starting quarterback. How does that influence roster management, recruiting, development, and especially when you look back at the last two guys you had that were probably set to be in a different position than you envisioned them, how do you manage those things these days?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, and it's tricky, right? Because it impacts so many things, which I think is your point, Ben. I've had two guys in our program that we've had very clear discussions about how things were going to play out and how they were going to be evaluated, and then when you're looking at going into the transfer portal and possibly bringing guys in, most guys want to come in and be guaranteed the starting job, you know, depending on where they are in their careers and why they're leaving.

So you're talking about where your program is, you know, what your situation is. Did your starter just graduate? Makes it a very attractive transfer portal designation. Do you have a returning starter that they're going to compete with?

And then the impact on your current roster as well as the impact on recruiting. So you kind of got to balance all of that and make sure that you're in a good situation. Trying to be as up front as you can and transparent so everybody has all the information that they can make really good decisions with.

So for us, that's the challenge, right? How to balance all of that and do what's right for Penn State, but also do what's right and be fair to these young men. It's a different situation. It really is. It's a different situation, and I'm not in the business, whether it's high school recruits or transfers, I'm not in the business of making promises.

I think that's recruiting talk when -- we had a player at another position that we would have loved to get, another position, not quarterback position, that wanted to be guaranteed they were going to be the starter. I just don't know how you do that. I don't know how you do that. It's like recruiting a kid out of high school and telling him he's going to play as a true freshman.

I don't think that's the right thing to do for your program. I don't think it's the right thing to do for the kid. It's setting up unrealistic expectations, and what happens if they get here and they're not ready and you already made that decision and promise? So we try to underpromise, overdeliver as much as we can.

Probably goes against kind of some people's recruiting models, but I would rather be up front and transparent about it in terms of playing time and things like that than



the opposite.

So we'll continue to be aggressive and use the rules as they currently are built to put Penn State in the best position we possibly can.

Q. James, a few days ago your name was linked to another high profile job, LSU. I was just wondering, do you ever get tired of addressing these kind of reports, especially internally?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so, again, I appreciate you asking, Rich, and I kind of already covered this. I know you're going at it from a different angle, but, yes, you do.

For me, I'm very -- I guess the best way to describe it is I care what people think and I want to handle things the right way all the time, with the players, with the staff, with the administration.

You know, I want to use the golden rule and treat people the way you would want to be treated. So, yeah, I want to come to work every single day and do my job and help these players achieve their dreams and the staff and do right by the University and the community.

So, yeah, I do. I did see Sandy's comments and I do think it's a positive, Rich, from the standpoint there is -- there could be a different conversation going on. If there had to be a choice between two, I would rather it be this conversation than the opposite.

But, yeah, I do.

Q. On Ben's question you mentioned we'll continue to be aggressive, and you used the rules as they currently are in the portal. Looking back over the off-season, were you as aggressive as you possibly could be with quarterbacks in the portal, or do you have any regrets over maybe not being more aggressive at all?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't see how we could have been more aggressive. We were thorough and we evaluated every single guy that was out there. We had some guys come in and actually workout by the rules.

I think you guys heard me say a year ago that we were committed to doing it if we found the right situation and it made sense, but just to sign a guy to sign a guy, you know, we actually think that would've been detrimental. There is no way to get them all reps and develop them.

So for us, we did everything we could, but that goes back to my point a little bit before based on your current situation

and what your quarterback roster and seniority looks like, puts you in a different situation.

That's going to be year to year. That will change year to year. So whether it's a wide receiver or a quarterback or a defensive lineman, we're going to be thorough. I think we've shown the guys we've brought in here have all done a nice job for us and been really good fits for Penn State, you know, are playing pretty well for us right now.

So I think our process is good and it's thorough. Obviously looking back at it, you know, I understand the question.

Q. PJ Mustipher, wondering if he's gone before the team at all either at practice or in meetings and is still participating in everything? Just wondering how his teammates still like having him around.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, I think, Joe, you've gotten to know PJ pretty well over the last couple years. He is just a tremendous young man. I been actually asking a lot of people -- me and my wife were talking about this last night, talking about this with the coaching staff. He's handling it extremely well, like he does everything.

But sometimes when guys are handling things too well that concerns me, too. Kind of try to give him a big hug every day and check on him and ask him how he is and tell him if he needs anything that we're here. My daughter, Shola, made him some cupcakes the other day. Just trying to love on him and support him as much as we possible can.

But he's been at everything. Right now he's on one of those -- kind of like what you see the people in the mall whip around on, little go carts or whatever they're called. He's whipping around at practice, at meetings, everything. Just saw him in the training room and he was on the bike and looked great. Huge smile on his face.

So we keep checking on him and making sure he's doing well. I hope he understands and feels comfortable enough to be totally honest with me and transparent and vulnerable, that if he is struggling that we're all here to support him.

Then I think the other thing is hopefully being able to get him in a position to get him fixed up and then on the road to recovery as soon as we possibly can.

So all those things are moving. We talk about it every morning in our staff meeting, go through our injury report, so everything seems to be going in the right direction.

I always make sure that the parents are informed and involved in the process, and they seem to be as well. So

just continue to support him. His leadership has still been extremely strong on our team, as I expect it would be.

Q. What can you share on Sean's progress to get back to the field, and what stands out to you about how he's handling the situation as a team leader or captain?

JAMES FRANKLIN: You know, as you know with Sean, he has shown his toughness over the years physically and mentally. Literally just walked coming over here to the press conference and saw him in the facility. He kind of lives in there, watching film and obviously getting treatment and doing everything he possibly can to put him in the best possible position to get back as soon as possible whenever that may be.

So we'll see. It won't be because of a lack of effort on his part. He's going to do everything he's supposed to do from the doctors and the trainers and their recommendations, make sure the parents are informed and involved in the process as well.

And then as I've told you guys before, mentally in terms of how he approaches the game, as good as I've been around. He's doing all the right things. Not surprised by that. Hopefully that will put him in the best position to come back as soon as possible.

Q. Can you assess Ta'Quan's cadence and line of scrimmage management, and whether he's improved since Iowa?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah. We've been working on it. I've been informed that's been a conversation in town. It's really no different than what we been doing, that we been doing for my eight years since we been here.

But, yeah, I think obviously Ta'Quan has been able to get more reps with the ones and more reps with Mike Miranda and it's been good. Like I said before, our 6operation has been pretty consistent for my eight years, and had not had an issue back to my time as an offensive coordinator at West Virginia. Either way, it showed up and it was a problem.

We're working on it every single day, and Ta'Quan's reps with the ones in practice with Mike Miranda has been helpful. And I think the thing I've said to you guys before is we have a decibel count for on the sideline, a mic to monitor all of these in each stadium, what they are, and then make sure that our practice decibels are louder than what they get in the stadium.

We will continue to get our guys prepared to handle challenging situations like that, and it won't be the last one.

Q. With losing PJ Mustipher, from a physical standpoint he was a big presence in there. From the intangible standpoint, what kind of changes with the defense without that leadership down there? What does this team lose what beyond what he was doing on the field?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, hopefully we don't lose the leadership in every expect but on the field on game day. Obviously that's impossible to replicate out there on the field because he did have such a presence.

In terms of practice, in the meeting rooms, and those types of things, you know, I expect and hope that that will continue. Then think it's a great opportunity for other guys to step up, and good thing on defense is we do have a lot of veteran leaders.

Jesse has played a lot of football for us. Ellis has played a lot of football for us. Brisker and Castro have played a lot of football for us. Even AK, even though he's a new guy to our program, has now played a lot of football for us. And I think he really has got a good understanding of our culture and standards and expectations.

And there are other guys, too. There is a group of guys that are veteran guys that have played a lot of football for us. Brandon Smith is starting to work into those type of roles. Tig is starting to, Joey Porter, I can go on and on and on.

Obviously two things: Those guys need to bring a little bit more of that to the table, and then we need other guys that maybe weren't providing that type of role on the team to take a little bit as well.

Not going to be one guy that's going to replace them. We need five or six percent to Jesse, ten percent to Ellis, so on and so forth, to make up for what we lost with PJ on the field. Then all the other areas, I expect PJ still to be totally invested and supportive, which I've seen. He's been phenomenal.

Q. I fully anticipate you're not watching a ton of NFL football on Sundays like the rest of us, but both Michael Parsons and Odafe Oweh are in the conversation for defensive rookie of the year. Curious what that says about the strength of your defensive staff and the players that you have been able to turn out in the last few years, if you see the potential for this trend to continue, to have some pretty impressive defensive NFL players coming out Penn State?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's really cool, right? That's

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

part of it for us as well. We want these guys to have an unbelievable academic experience here at Penn State, have a great athletic experience, and achieve all their goals and dreams here at Penn State, both collectively and individually as a team, and as individuals. And then we want to put them in a position to go to the next level and continue to thrive and sometimes take the next step.

To see guys that get there and not only are they physically prepared to do it, but they're also mentally and emotionally prepared to do it, they know what to expect. Micah is here right now. He's here in State College. You know, Micah obviously has really grown to love Happy Valley and State College. He's here all the time. Got great friends. I think you know him and Jesse are like best friends.

Odafe is doing unbelievable, and I'm so proud of all the things that we pounded the table of all the GMs and scouts about him and how we just felt like his best football was ahead of him. To see these guys and other guys thriving, one of the things that been really cool is these jerseys, I been getting jerseys from all these guys. They been sending them back. Got one from a Will Fries yesterday. Micah, got his.

Still waiting on Odafe's, so if anybody talks to Odafe, I'm still waiting on that one.

I'm just super proud of them, and we want to have the highest graduation rates in the country. We want to win every game we can here at Penn State and put a team on the field that our fans and alumni and letterman can be proud of.

Then we want to have as many guys in the NFL as any other program in the United States. We want our guys to go there and be successful both on the field, but off. All the discussions we've had about making really sound, solid financial decisions so that our guys can maximize this experience and set themselves and their families up for a lifetime of success.

Had a lot of conversations about how to handle those situations so that our guys may hopefully avoid some of the problems that other athletes and football players have had. It's really cool and they're two tremendous examples, but there are many others as well. Blake Gillikin. Talked to his dad yesterday. His parents are coming to the game this weekend. Dad called me. I think he's fourth in the NFL right now in punting.

So all these stories and all these examples, I'm super proud of it. I'm also proud of relationships with the families. Like I said, the Gillikins are coming up to the game this weekend. It's pretty cool.

Q. I guess I'm thinking specifically of PJ, but maybe for other guys too, do roster management questions arise during the course of the season as to a guy deciding to come back for a year beyond what's expected based on a situation like that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, great question. That's another thing that we did last week. So we been getting evaluations on guys, feedback, what they're doing well, what they need to do better. Obviously we have that internally in our self-scout, but I'm talking about outside with scouts and GMs. That was part of our meetings last week with our current roster of guys that are in their junior and senior years.

There is a fine line, right? The feedback is important, but the real decisions and conversations are going to happen probably towards the end of the season. But I'm also a little aware and concerned -- once we change this rule at the NCAA level and really more specifically at the NFL Player's Association level in terms of when agents can talk to players and we change that rule that the agents can talk to them their freshman year, if we're not talking to them from one perspective and they're only hearing it from an agent's perspective, then I think that can lead to some bad decisions.

Not that agents are bad people and trying to convince every player to come out early. I don't mean that. But there are different perspectives, right? I want our players to have every perspective to think about so they can make the best decisions for them and their families.

There has been examples we've had at Penn State of guys that have stayed and it's worked out well. Some guys left early and worked out well, and some guys, that if they had to do it all over again, they would've come back.

I just want to make sure the parents and the young men have all the information to make the best decisions and what can we do to support them throughout that.

I think PJ is a really good example. We did have that meeting last week, but I'm hoping to sit down with him again one-on-one -- obviously the scenario has changed a little bit -- and see where him and his parents are at.

At the end of the day, once decisions are made, then we're going to support him every way we possibly can, just like we did with Odafe.

So, yeah, I think that's a good question. Always challenging, because most coaches and people don't want to have those type of conversations during a season

because you want to stay laser focused on the task at hand. Once again, if you're not talking to them and other people are, then you're probably be naive.

Q. I wanted to ask you Curtis Jacobs' development during the first half of the season. I thought he was very disruptive in the Iowa game. Do you see him playing faster and things kind of -- it just looks like he's really starting to really figure things out.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a very fair assessment. Me and Coach Pry were just talking about this. He's always had the athleticism and the skills all the way back to the recruiting process, his ability to impact the game in high school on offense and defense, but to transition to a full time linebacker at this level was an adjustment.

So he's gaining more and more confidence. I think he's getting more and more comfortable of how he fits into the defense and what plays that he needs to make, what plays he should make. You know, I think your point is a great one. Me and Brent have been talking a lot about his growth not only from last year, but really over the last couple weeks. I think you'll see him continue to trend.

I think Brent has done a really good job of this. If you look at his career, all the way back to Mike Hull. We made some changes with Mike Hull and where we were playing him and his production skyrocketed, and we've had some guys came in like Curtis and played as true freshman and took on a starting role the next year, and kind of went from there.

The transition from playing to the field into the box, like Brandon Smith has been able to do, I think Ellis is playing as good as any middle linebacker in the country right now, extremely productive.

So I think Brent has got a really good track record of developing the position, and I think Curtis is a really good example of that right now.

I think sometimes people would like it to go faster, but it doesn't really work like that. It happens when it's supposed to happen, and I think Brent's track record is as good as anywhere in the country.

Q. A few weeks ago you mentioned how the energy of fans helped when you had four straight home games. You said you felt the energy was good for the community. Obviously big week for homecoming. What's the perspective on what it means to have fans back at Beaver Stadium and what it means to the State College area not just economically, but just from a

general morale standpoint?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Obviously I'm the biased football coach, right, but I do think it all matters. I know they impact us in a positive way, you know, whether it is on Saturday afternoons in Beaver Stadium, whether it is the tailgating and driving the busses to the stadium, whether it is having recruiting trips downtown where we're bringing people in on official visits and people are excited, you can feel the energy and the buzz in the town.

Maybe it's when I'm going on my afternoon walk and I'm tired and ready to turn back and somebody kind of gives me a shout and gives me a little bit of energy to finish my walk with the tempo I want it to be.

Then it's obviously the other way, right? It's the impact on the bars and the restaurants and the hotels and the economy, and also for the university, right? What an unbelievable opportunity it is to be the front porch of the university and allow millions of people all over the country and really all over the world to get a glimpse of what Penn State is all about, how our guys play on the field, how our guys present themselves in the media, how are guys are successful at the next level.

We're all in this thing together, and I think that's one of the things that I think last year helped us all recognize, is we can't do it without the community. The community can't do it without us.

I think that's one of the things that makes Happy Valley so special, and I also believe there is still a lot of room left for growth on both fronts. I think if we continue to support and work with one another, then I think the sky is the limit for our community and for our university as a whole.

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