

Penn State University Football Media Conference

Tuesday, October 26, 2021

University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: Like always, appreciate everybody coming to cover Penn State football. Appreciate that.

Summarize the Illinois game like I do each week. When you talk about the key statistics, the turnover battle, we won that; three turnovers to zero. Our defense did a great job of creating turnovers our offense did a really good job protecting the football. Should have had four turnovers in the game.

Penalties is an area we have to get better. Have not been strong in that area. Drive start battle, won that. Sack battle, we won that.

I think the big things that probably jump out to me in general, I thought we competed our tails off for 60 Minutes and nine overtimes. I thought special teams did a really good job with field position.

The biggest issue in my mind is we did not capitalize on the turnovers. We had three points off three turnovers. That was probably the biggest factor in the game in my opinion.

So moving on to Ohio State, obviously got tremendous respect for their program and Coach Day and what they've been able to do there. Not just since Ryan has been there, but really before that obviously. Done a really good job.

Obviously Ryan is very involved in the offense with Kevin Wilson. Kevin has got the title, but obviously Ryan is very involved in the offense and they're as explosive as any offense in the country right now.

The quarterback, CJ Stroud, is playing with tremendous confidence. He's getting better every single week. Obviously he's surrounded with a bunch explosive players, and TreVeyon Henderson I think has really changed him since his role has grown in the offense.

Obviously Chris Olave, Garrett Wilson, and Jaxon Smith-Nijigba are all receivers that can catch the short pass and take it the distance or have the ability to beat you

over the top from the beginning. So very, very explosive.

Obviously defensively they made a change with Coach Barnes taking over as the play caller. I think he's done a really good job playing sound, smart defense and allowing their players to play fast and aggressive.

Been impressed with Cody Simon, Haskell Garrett, Denzel Burke, and Ronnie Hickman, so guys that are making big plays for them.

And then on special teams it's very similar what they been going for as long as I can remember, very consistent philosophy on special teams with Parker Fleming, obviously Garrett Wilson, and Emeka also making an impact there as well.

Obviously tremendous challenge going on the road to the big house. We've got to get healthy and go and play smart, and obviously going to have to limit explosive plays and find a way to score some points, because obviously this team has the ability to put points on the board.

So tremendous challenge. Based on yesterday, the amount of guys we had in the building watching tape, I think we'll have a great practice today.

Open up to questions.

Q. James, there was a report last night that you are changing agents. I was wondering if that's true, and if it is, do you think changing agents in the middle of the season could be a distraction?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I'm glad you asked. First of all, as you know, my response, completely focused on our season and our team and finding a way to beat Ohio State and be 1-0 this week.

I'm not going to get into the details, but what I will tell you is this is being reported now, but this is something that happened over the summer.

Obviously I didn't make an announcement. I don't know anybody that ever does when that happens. But this is something what happened over the summer that's just



being reported now, to answer your question.

Q. Good afternoon, James. When you went back and watched film, how did you evaluate what Sean was able to do, and how close is Ta'Quan or Christian to being a guy that gives you a best chance to win, whether it's at Ohio State or wherever, if Sean is limited in some of the ways we talked about after the game on Saturday?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think the good thing -- as you know, last week we weren't sure. We were trying to see where he was going to be at. Sean is much further ahead now to being back to 100%, so that's a positive. We feel really good about that. I know Sean felt great physically on Sunday.

And Ta'Quan and Veilleux have, obviously with Sean's reps being limited last week they've got a lot of opportunities, so that's been helpful. But obviously it's very different what you do in practice and in a game, so these guys continue to develop, grow, and are getting better.

Obviously Christian hasn't been here as long and has gotten a lot more reps, so that's been helpful in his evaluation. But both of those guys obviously we're going to need with Sean's situation, and also just the way college football is in our game in general.

We expect to have 100% Sean Clifford this weekend and those other two guys continue to develop.

Q. Just following up on Greg's question, you talked a lot about how important Sean's ability to run is to what he can do overall. Was he unable to run last week or was he told not to run to protect himself? How much do you think that impacted him in what he was doing and the offense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a good question. That's a big part of Sean and what his game is, his ability to extend plays, his ability to keep the defense honest and be able to make a play or two throughout the game where he picks up a first down with his legs.

He was limited obviously in what he could do, and we tried to limit it as much as we could as well. So obviously that was the challenge. When you got a guy like Sean and that's a big part of what he does and how he plays, that being limited obviously impacted him and us.

Q. Did Ta'Quan get enough reps last week to have been able to play and succeed if he was needed to? How difficult a tight rope is it as the guy that ultimately has to make that decision when you have a banged up

quarterback who needs reps to show he can do it, and a backup quarterback who needs reps in practice to get the system down?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, that's always the challenge, right? How many reps does the two get, how many reps does the three get. And then when you're trying to figure out is the guy going to be available. Sean has played enough football here, no different than a few years back with Trace. Trace had played enough football here to really kind of give him the benefit of the doubt, and I feel like Sean has been in the same situation.

Played a lot of football here. Has done some really good things. So we are going to give him the benefit of the doubt based on what he had done in practice and done over his career.

Q. You coach a hundred 18 to 22 year old men. You've always been consistent with your 1-0 message. Is it realistic to think that none of them would be distracted by all the noise going on about your future? I know you don't want them to be distracted, but is it realistic to think they wouldn't be, some of them?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Again, I think that's fair, Corey. It has not been a discussion or an issue that I've heard from the staff or from the players. I've met with the leadership council. We have kept it very direct. Obviously there is things that we have discussions in great detail in our building with our family and the players and the staff, so we try to do that the best we possibly can.

I think we've done a pretty good job of that over my eight years here, and we'll continue to try to do that. There are things we can control and things we can't from the outside, but this has been kind of a story that's happened on numerous occasions, and we just to keep it as focused as we can.

I think it's a fair question and I understand where it's coming from.

Q. Eric Barron is going to be done soon and Sandy's contract is up. She hasn't said whether she's going to retire or whether she wants it to be renewed or not. How long down the road do you look at Penn State's future when it comes to the people that are ostensibly your peers in the administration?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's -- again, I think that's a fair question. Obviously we're trying to be focused on Illinois and talking about Illinois as much as we possibly can.

And, Ben, you and really a lot of the local guys that have covered us for a long time, there has been a lot of unusual situations. The timing of when I came to Penn State. I took the job here not knowing who the president or the AD was going to be.

They were both interim at the time, which is very unusual. Then obviously when you have a president who's retiring like Eric -- it's actually his birthday today. I sent him a message this morning wishing him happy birthday. Eric has done an unbelievable job. We all came in at a challenging time in Penn State's history and have worked very well together and have battled together.

Yeah, I think obviously you want to have an idea of what the future is going to hold, and I got tremendous faith in our board and our board leader in Matt Schyler that we're going to get somebody great. Eric is going to be difficult to replace.

So, yeah, there is a lot of moving parts, but I got tremendous faith in our leadership on the board. I got tremendous faith in our leadership that's currently on campus now, too.

Q. From watching film and talking to your staff, whatever you do, what have you figured out about why it was such a struggle to stop the run on Saturday?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, a couple things. Obviously they gave us a formation that we had not seen on tape and made some adjustments to it. What I would say, Mike, is at the end of the day we held them to 10 points.

We been a little bit of a bend but don't break defense all year long. We been really good at stopping the run. We did have challenges there. Obviously just like we're dealing with Sean on offense, we've had some injuries on defense, so some guys rep counts have gone up.

But we've done a really good job stopping the run not only this year but historically. They had a nice little wrinkle that caused us some challenges, no doubt about it. We were able to make some adjustments as the game went on. Obviously we have had some thorough discussions since and some things that obviously you look back after the fact and say, We would like to have done this or could have done this.

But, again, at the end of the day, in college football we held them to 10 points. That should have been enough to win the game.

Q. You just mentioned Eric Baron and your

confidence and faith in them getting that right. Are you committed to being the head coach here beyond this season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, obviously I been asked this question multiple times. My focus is completely on Illinois and this team and this program.

I think I've shown over my eight years my commitment to this university and this community. That's kind of my statement.

Q. Few weeks ago we were talking about the 5-0 start. You mentioned that sometimes praise can be just as dangerous as criticism for players and their mentality. Where do you think the team is now that there is a couple losses and they're trying to find their way here? How do you stop the rollercoaster that maybe some of the players are going through?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think that's where obviously our Lasch Building and our practice fields, that's a place where our guys come and it's a family and very supportive of one another and compete like crazy.

I think that's the thing that we have to do a great job, is when our guys come into the building that that's kind of their place, kind of a second home. Because there is a lot of noise out there. There always is. This is college football. When things are going well everybody is patting you on the back. When you have a loss there is challenges that come with that and criticism that comes with that.

I thought we had a really good practice and meetings on Sunday and discussed those things in detail. I think our guys have responded well. Obviously we got a tremendous challenge to go on the road against Ohio State, one of the most explosive teams in the country. We have been in these types of battle before and I know our guys will respond well and so will our staff.

Q. Four of the last five years you guys have followed your first loss with an immediate loss after it. Is there something to that? I know you have your 1-0 mantra, but it seems like these losses are bleeding into the next week when it's the first one of the season.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that's a fair question. We talk a lot about resiliency and being able to bounce back as soon as you can. That's where the 1-0 mantra is so important. I think guys, a lot of times their approach and mentality, especially in the college football playoff era, these things can get magnified. Wins can get magnified, losses can get magnified. So keeping our guys focused as we possibly



can, and that's challenging.

Obviously it's even more important when you play a really challenging schedule like we do on our side of the conference and the out-of-conference games that we play makes it even more challenging.

So that mentality and that approach of 1-0 is really important to help you get through situations like you're describing.

Q. As you studied the run game from the Illinois game and just the rest of the season, what are some of themes that are emerging in terms of getting that particular element of your offense on track here?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yep. Yeah, we got to be more physical up front. I think that's really important. We got to get vertical push with the O-line and the tight ends. I love those guys. I know where their heart is, their mentality, what their approach is like.

I know having some lengthy discussions with Coach Troutline about that as well. Now it's translating it to the practice field and translating it to the games. We got to create more push and play to the echo of the whistle and create space.

Then our running backs have to be decisive and get downhill, and then we got to keep people honest with our perimeter throwing game so people can't overload the box whether it's perimeter throwing game or whether it is the RPO type stuff to put people in conflict.

So obviously that's an area that we have got to get better at, and I understand the question.

Q. The offense has had its share of adversity the last two games with Sean going out in the Iowa game and coming back less than 100%. Is your offense adjusting to the adversity of that do you feel well enough in the last game and a half?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I want to make sure I understand what you're asking, Joe. What do you mean, well enough?

Q. Well, I guess you go into like the Iowa game with a game plan and then Sean gets hurt. Was there enough of an adjustment there to have a chance to win? And the same last week with Sean not being 100%. Is there a way you have to adjust a little bit to allow for that, you know, that adversity?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I understand the question. So I think last week, specifically against Illinois, I mean,

obviously what you would like to do, right, is run the ball to take some of the pressure off whoever the quarterback is.

When you're not doing that effectively, that creates the challenge. It goes back on the quarterback's lap. That's really who we had been the first five games of the year. Been making plays in the passing game, mixing the run in to keep people honest.

But obviously when you have a shift and you have a change or you have some injuries and you have to rely more on other things, then that becomes challenging, especially when you're not running the ball the way you need to.

So I think that was the plan the past week, was to run the ball a little bit more and take some of that pressure, but we weren't able to do it effectively enough to really be able to dictate the terms of the game.

Q. You mentioned Matt Barnes taking over as the play caller for the Ohio State defense. How have you seen that Ohio State defense find its footing or change over the past couple weeks?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think the thing that everybody knows -- obviously this isn't something I'm stating here that everybody isn't already aware of. Ohio State has done a tremendous job of recruiting. They're as talented as any team in the country year in and year out, especially up front. What they been able to do with the defensive line and really throughout.

I think what they're doing a really good job of is getting back to playing base defense, keeping it sound. I don't want use the term simple because I wouldn't say it's simple. They're sound. Not trying to do too much and over-scheme you. They're letting their players line up and be safe, and they're always sound in how they adjust and they're allowing their players to play fast and aggressive and make plays.

I think he's done a really good job creating that as their identity. That's showed up on tape, and they're getting better each week. As you know, they've played really good defense at Ohio State for a long time and have been talented. They're back to playing that way again.

Q. Kind of a big picture question about Jahan Dotson. Seems like you just get used to his spectacular plays and get almost spoiled by it. When you look at the improvements he has made from last year to this season and now some consider him the best in the country, how would you kind of, I guess, encapsulate his career and what he's meant to Penn State and what

he means for you just this season, too?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm really proud of Jahan and how he's developed really in every area. Academically, the type of family he has, and how supportive they've been of him and us. I've got a very close relationship with both mom and dad.

As a football player, you know, he's really come in here and gotten more technical when it comes to his releases. He's gotten stronger. He's always had the ability to catch the ball. Probably got as good a natural ball skills as I've been around, and that's been the case really since his freshman year. He makes really difficult catches look easy.

But he's gotten bigger and stronger, which has helped him in the running game and his blocking. It's helped him in his release work. It's helped him in his contested catches. And I still see him kind of growing in that area as well.

But he's really committed to the whole plan. He's able to beat you vertically, beat you in short games. He understands zone coverage. He's got a really good football IQ and understands zone coverages and where to sit.

He understand how all the nuances to man coverage and how to get open and how to separate. He's made so many big plays for us. I've always been a big believer as a head coach and as an offensive coordinator when you have guys like that you get the ball in their hands as many times as you can. I'm constantly tracking that, targets and touches per game, to make sure that's happening.

So obviously when you got a healthy quarterback makes it a little bit easier, but I'm really proud of him. Really happy for him. He deserves all the success that he's having.

Q. I think I made a change with Juice and Miranda during the game on Saturday. I was wondering if that's something that you think will stick moving forward? And if there has been an impact, if you feel there has been an impact of Saleem Wormley's absence so far this year?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, with Saleem coming into training camp and kind of through training camp before he got injured, he worked himself into a starting role for us. So when we lost him -- when you lose a starter, that's significant.

Then obviously Juice playing center, there will be some games and some times where certain matchups we may feel are better where Juice may make more sense as

center or Mike at guard or vice versa. So that is something we will continue to look at.

We also think it's important to obvious have somebody else that's snapped in games. So we'll work on that this week, kind of both of them, and see what's going to make the most sense, whether it's Mike at guard or center.

And Juice obviously is the complementary piece to that. We're looking for as many things as we can to improve in that area specifically when it comes to the run game.

When I say that area, I'm talking with the offensive line.

Q. Could you assess your defensive end department going into the Ohio State game? It looks you're really just leaning on three guys in Arnold and Nick and Jesse. I think Smith plays a little bit. Is there a concern maybe they're starting to wear down a little bit? Are you happy with the way you're kind of giving them snaps throughout the course of the game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: As you know, losing Adisa Isaac before the season, again, whenever you lose a starter like that it has an impact. There are a lot of guys that we're mentioning like that, so whenever you lose a starter it has an impact and the next guy needs to step up. There will be more reps that are asked of guys that were in backup roles before that.

So Zuriah Fisher's development is going to continue to be important for us. And Smith Vilbert, who is playing, we hope his rep count will continue to grow as he gains confidence and experience.

But I think you're right. We would like to have -- we have typically been five deep at D tackle and we've typically been five deep at defensive end, and that has not been the case this year with injuries, especially when you lose multiple starters like we talked about with PJ Mustipher and Adisa Isaac.

When that happens obviously other guys need to step up and their reps need to increase and their experience and their confidence needs to grow as the season goes on.

So that will be important for us.

Q. You mentioned earlier the conversations you've had with the leadership council. What have those been like early in this week? And following the consecutive losses, how even early in this week how have you seen your team respond to that and their mentality?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, haven't had any leadership council meetings this week. Typically those will happen on Tuesday or Wednesday maybe before practice or after practice, but those haven't happened at this stage. Obviously Monday is their day off. Sunday is for me to get a sense where we are from a health perspective, and then obviously from a mentality perspective as well.

And I was pleased with Sunday. So Monday was important, and from all the reports that I got from Jahan and the guys, bunch of guys in watching tape, and we look at Monday as kind of a culture days where they're coming in on their own doing what they have to do.

Again, it's been good. And I understand. I get it. We have lost two games I think by a total of five points, and had a chance to win both of those games. I've been in this business long enough. I get it. I understand. I know how passionate our people are. There is nobody more passionate than the coaches in our Lasch Building and the players in the locker room.

We're going to put a great week of work together, find a way to get better, and find a way to go 1-0. That's really how we've been doing it for as long as I can remember, and we'll continue to do it that way.

Q. With having a 1-0 mentality, do you believe there are certain weeks going 1-0 has more of an impact on the team and the season? And if so, does this week qualify?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I mean, obviously the way we approach it is one week at a time and try to cut it up into small tasks that I think are attainable and I think are easy to focus on and concentrate rather than looking at the whole season and even in some ways -- even what happens this weekend. Just focus on today to be the best we possibly can.

But I would make the argument that last week was just as big as this week; the week before that was just as big. Whether you win a game in a challenging situation on the road or whether you have some adversity to overcome a game that you didn't win, those are challenging. Those are important.

So to me, every week is really important. Obviously going on the road against an Ohio State team that's thought of as well as they are on offense, defense, and special teams, obviously understand what your question is, but I think they're all important.

Q. Just wondering if you can evaluate some of the defense tackles who kind of stepped up for PJ on

Saturday and what you thought of how they did in your first full game without him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think Coziah Izzard, obviously he went from a backup role to a starting role as a redshirt freshman and thought he battled. Obviously Derrick tangelo was already starting, but now his rep count improved dramatically -- excuse me, increased dramatically.

I thought those two guys battled. And now, like we talked about, having five guys that we can rotate in there, whether it's Amin Vanover and Dvon Ellies who has played a lot of football for us again this year, more of in a rotational backup role, and now kind of looking at Dvon and Coziah as both guys that are rotating in that other starting defensive tackle position.

And then Amin Vanover is a guy that is working in and getting some reps too. Whether it's Fred Hansard or Fatur Momoba (phonetic), we're going to need that depth moving forward with the rest of the season that we have.

Again, that's how we've done it and that's how we've done it since I've been here, had a rotation of five guys, and we're going to need to find that sooner rather than later.

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