

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

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## Coach James Franklin

### Press Conference



COACH FRANKLIN: Quick summary of the Maryland game. We won the turnover battle. That was great. Obviously I think everybody knows how much we emphasize that and work on that.

We lost the penalty battle. And then when you talk about drive-start battle, which I think was a major factor in the game, we lost that.

We won the sack battle from a yards perspective. The explosive-play battle, we won that. That was, obviously, a major factor in the game.

And overall we were happy to be able to get a win on the road against, I think, a talented football team.

Couple other kind of summary positives. Obviously, number one, we got the win. We won the turnover battle. The explosive-play battle, when you talk about the specifics, Penn State, we were at 10 percent. Maryland was at 5.88 percent. I think that's the lowest that we've had this year on the defensive side of the ball, which was great.

I thought we played complementary football, which was important. We scored on defense. And I did want to mention, I thought Jesse Luketa and John Sutherland's leadership on the sideline and in the locker room was significant. And we talk all the time about guys having roles and embracing their roles. That was their role on Saturday based on their ability or not ability to play in the game. That had a big factor.

Areas for growth -- we must be better with field position, drive start. The penalties and punting for the first time factored into the game there. And then, again, to reinforce the penalties, we've got to eliminate the penalties. We're giving away too many first downs.

We obviously had a huge turnover in the game. And I'm not sure if you guys know this or not, I'm not sure how it was covered on TV, but they actually called us for two separate penalties. So it went half the distance and then

half the distance again. So it went from a huge momentum play to having the ball backed up. So we've got to get those things cleaned up for sure.

Obviously moving on to Michigan. I think the first thing I'd like to say is we need this place rocking on Saturday. 12:00 start. The breakfast and brunch tailgating will be phenomenal. We need everybody into the stadium as early as possible. And then it's going to create a great opportunity postgame to continue tailgating and enjoying yourself.

So, challenge all the students and all the fans to get into that stadium as early as possible. Obviously it's going to be pretty cool in talking about the most iconic helmet in all of football. It hasn't changed. It doesn't need to change. And having the helmet stripe game in the stadium is something that's new and hopefully can be cool for us.

Obviously Coach Harbaugh and the University of Michigan, got tremendous respect for the university and the history and traditions there -- what Coach Harbaugh has been able to do as a letterman and alumni.

Josh Gaddis, their offensive coordinator, obviously, everybody on this phone call knows that me and Josh go way back from our time at Vanderbilt as well as at Penn State. He's the offensive coordinator.

The guys we've been impressed with are their two running backs, Hassan Haskins and Blake Corum, No. 25 and No. 2, and Cornelius Johnson, No. 6. We know these guys pretty well, not only from what we've studied on tape but in recruiting, specifically Corum and Johnson.

And then Mike Macdonald, the defensive coordinator, came from the Baltimore Ravens. Been impressed with how they're playing on defense.

I think it really starts with their two defensive ends. David Ojabo who we know very well -- went to the same high school as Jayson Oweh. They list him as a linebacker -- linebacker/D end in my mind. And then obviously Aidan Hutchinson, 6'6", 265 pounds, No. 97, for them, playing at a really high level. Both of those guys.



And then their nickel, Daxton Hill, who seems like he's been playing there forever, and their corner Vincent Gray, No. 4. Those guys stand out.

And Jay Harbaugh, the special teams coordinator, they do a good job on special teams. They play aggressive, especially when it comes to punt return and trying to block kicks.

Impressed with No. 13, Jake Moody, their kicker. Has been really efficient. 91 percent field goal percentage. And then returners, A.J. Henning and Blake Corum, one is a punt returner, one kick returner. And their punter, Brad Robbins, doing a nice job as well.

So, talented football team, like Michigan always is. And it's going to be a tremendous challenge and a tremendous opportunity come Saturday. And that's why we need everybody in that stadium to create a challenging environment so we can find a way to be 1-0 together. Open it up to questions.

**Q. Signing day is about a month away. I wonder what your priorities are between now and then and how much of a balancing act is it between keeping the kids you have committed happy, maybe adding a couple pieces and looking ahead to '23 and '24 and beyond?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I'd say the priority for us is keeping the '22 class intact with the guys that are doing what they need to do to come to Penn State.

We obviously have some early enrollees, a large number of early enrollees as well.

And then the '23 class. I think there could be a little bit of movement in the '22 class. But we also want to have a little flexibility for some possible transfers as well.

But our focus is keeping the '22 class intact and those guys have a really strong relationship not only with each other but also with our staff and their parents.

And then obviously doing a great job in the '23 class. And we've got a pretty good start on that already. And we're going to need to continue building this. I think that's obviously a major focus for us is continuing to recruit at a high level.

We've had some really good recruiting classes, but we need to be able to stack them up one after another. So that will be obviously a big focus. We've got to be able to balance finishing the season in the right way and recruiting at the same time.

**Q. At this point I believe Jaylen Reed's played in four games. What's your plan in moving forward in terms of him redshirting or not? Are there any other guys who have either played this season or have not played this year that you might be at a point of being willing to play, that you're now at the point of four games left and able to still redshirt them but also get them some snaps?**

COACH FRANKLIN: Jaylen is probably the main one. We're going to play him. He wants to play. He's ready to play. We need him on special teams. We need him in some of our defensive packages as well. That will help him moving forward next year as well.

Football makes sense to him. He's a football smart guy. He's obviously a physical guy. You guys have seen flashes of that as well. And he can run. So we're very high on Jaylen.

There's other guys that can fall into that category. But they're not right now. He's probably the main one in terms of a conversation that needs to have with you guys.

Obviously we have some injuries. Some of those things could change, but we do try to obviously keep track and be aware of where they're at in terms of number of games.

Like I said in the beginning of the year, we'd love to be able to save one of those games for either a late-season injury or bowl game or when needed. So that's where we're at at this point.

There may be somebody else, if I think about it. After I get off this call, I'll have Chris send you a message. But he's probably the one that stands out the most for me and we discussed it this morning at the staff meeting.

**Q. Wanted to ask about Fred Hansard. Saw his statement last night. Have you heard anything from the conference in terms of disciplinary measures, or do you plan to do anything internally? What was your reaction to that?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I guess the first thing I would say, I didn't know about it until after the game. I was not aware at all. Then I saw the clip. And obviously the optics of it don't look great.

But I do want to say this. Fred Hansard has been here for four years. He has been a model citizen and a model student-athlete. He's a super impressive young man that's going to go on and do great things. Got a great mom and dad.

So, just like in his statement that he put out, I know the optics of it don't look great, but I don't think Fred had any intentions -- I don't think he had any intentions to do anything to hurt another player or anything like that. I think it was a reaction. But at the end of the day, it's not a good look, right?

So, the Big Ten did reach out to us and asked us what we were doing. We're going to suspend Fred for the first half of the game. And obviously Fred wanted to put out a statement to make sure that Maryland, as well as Rasheed Walker, who I guess, Chris told me some people thought it was Rasheed during the game, he wanted to clean those things up as well.

But, again, Fred's been a class act since he got here. But I also understand, when something like that happens and it doesn't look good, there needs to be a reaction. But I hope everybody understands that that's not who Fred Hansard is. And I want everybody to remember the four years and all the great things that he's done, both on and off the field and as a student-athlete.

**Q. Earlier this morning Jahan Dotson said when he watches film, he'll often find 50, 60 yards that he could have, that he left on the field, if he had done something a little bit differently. What's it say about his drive? And how do you think he could improve to actually become a better player than he is right now?**

COACH FRANKLIN: Well, I hope everybody in our program is like that -- the coaches, the players, off-the-field staff, everybody. I hope we're always trying to find ways to get better. That is the right mentality. And that is the right approach.

I think what Jahan is talking about is there's probably some routes in each game that he feels like he could have done a little bit better job on his release. He could have done a little bit better job at the top of his route, selling a corner, when he's running a post or vice versa. I think it's all those types of things.

I think it's opportunities for more YAC yards and being able to break some tackles, pull his feet out, stiff arm, swipe the hands down -- whatever it may be. I think he watches the film and says, if I could just pull my feet out of that tackle, it's man coverage, and I've got an opportunity to make bigger plays.

I think it's that. I also think it's when he runs his routes, when the ball doesn't come to him, to make sure it's opening up opportunities for other guys. I think that's something that we talk about is, I think you can show your love for the program and your teammates with what you do

when the ball's not in your hands. I think that's really important.

So I think that's what Jahan is talking about. I think one of the areas that Jahan has really helped himself since arriving is getting bigger and stronger and more explosive. I think he's done a really good job of that since he's arrived at Penn State. But I don't know if he's getting talked about enough, in my opinion.

**Q. Why do you think your red zone defense has been so effective? And was it an offseason priority with you and Brent?**

COACH FRANKLIN: Yeah, offseason priority for sure. I would say that we do it every single year, but obviously it's probably been a little bit more impactful this year. I think, the other thing is, I think we've done a better job of recruiting and developing length in the back end. We are longer in the secondary. When you talk about the body types of our safeties, the body types of our corners, even the body types of our linebackers -- you think about the play Brandon Smith made where he got his hands up and tipped the ball, it was almost picked off.

We've talked about this in the past. There's a lot of ways to reduce space on defense. Obviously one way is with speed, to be able to close windows or stay in man coverage.

But also the length is important. Having two corners over six-foot, two safeties over six-foot, all of our linebacker over 6-foot and one is at 6'4" -- I think those things help as well. And obviously our sack totals, our numbers may be down, but I think we've done a better job having rush discipline.

So we're not giving up the big plays on screens. We're not giving up the big scrambles by quarterbacks because I think we're more disciplined in the pocket. And that was really a shift when John came in. Had a lot of discussions and that was going to change whether John came in or not. I think that's helped us as well.

I think it's a combination of all those things. And I think we're getting good work, offense versus defense, every single week, good on good, in the red zone as well. I think it's a combination of factors. But I do think the length has been helpful.

**Q. You mentioned Josh Gaddis earlier and obviously you're familiar with him. How similar is the offense he's running at Michigan to the one he sort of learned while he was with you?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I think probably in years past it was

probably similar. This year there's been a change. Obviously early in the season, early in the season, where they were heavy run -- and I think it was probably a blend of what Josh has done both at Penn State and at Alabama -- and then also obviously I think this offseason, with things that Coach Harbaugh had done in his past, specifically, probably, at Stanford. I think there's probably a little bit more of an influence of that than Josh has shown in the past.

I think it's been a good blend for them, especially with the tight ends that they have, the backs that they have and with the offensive line that they have. I think it's been a good blend. It's served them well, specifically early in the year. And I think they've opened it up a little bit since then.

**Q. Michigan, under the previous defensive coordinator, seemed to me to be very man-to-man oriented in terms of coverage. How are they different now? And also in terms of what do you think teams are going to try to do now to negate Jahan a little bit, because he has so much impact on the game?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I still think it's a decent amount of man coverage. I think the thing that probably really differentiates them right now is having two defensive ends that can cause real problems for people. You watch that Michigan State game, both of those defensive ends showed up with huge plays. And when you're able to have a guy on either side, that becomes real challenging. You have to decide how you're going to deal with both of them.

So I think that's a big factor for them. And then I think the other thing I would say when it comes to Jahan, obviously people are going to have a plan for him. And whether that is bracket or whether that is clouding and having a high safety over to his side.

But again the fact that we move them around -- we line them up at No. 3, line him up at No. 2, line him up at number one -- that can be challenging. That makes it difficult. And then when you motion him as well, he's just in a lot of different spots, which make it a little bit more challenging than a guy that always lines up in the slot or a guy that always lines up at the single receiver in a three-by-one set, whatever it may be.

That's obviously intentional on our part as well. I also think there's some concerns when Parker had over a hundred yards the previous game. And KeAndre continues to show growth in flashes as well -- and our tight ends.

So when you have one guy and no other threats, no different than the discussion we're having with the defensive ends, then it becomes a little bit more

manageable. But when you have multiple guys that can hurt you, if they decide to invest that much of their resources into one guy, then it can be challenging.

**Q. I got my booster. I'm a little sore.**

COACH FRANKLIN: I did too, yesterday. I didn't have any issues. But I know a lot of people did, based on how they reacted to the first two shots. But fortunately I didn't have any. But I got mine yesterday.

**Q. I realize that competitively you approach every week the same way, and preparation-wise you approach it the same way. But from an information-gathering standpoint, how do these sorts of games compare to maybe a game that's not against a top-ten team, not against a top-15 -- when it comes to gathering information about your team this year and maybe long-term information about the program at large?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I'm not sure if I'm completely understanding your question. I'm sorry.

**Q. I guess I would say that there's a different benchmarking that comes against comparable programs in the Big Ten compared to maybe playing somebody in out of conference or somebody in the Big Ten. What do you learn in weeks like this.**

COACH FRANKLIN: That's fair. It's interesting. One of the things I was shocked by, to kind of answer your question, one of the things I was shocked by is the amount of times that we had played Michigan.

Me and Chris Petersen were talking about this today. And I was kind of shocked we only played them 24 times. In my mind, that number would have been much larger than that.

And then I try to kind of look at before we arrived what was our record against Michigan, what was our record against Ohio State?

To your point, from a benchmarking standpoint, to have an idea -- because I do think when you're trying to benchmark and you're trying to compare, the data that is specific to the Big Ten, I think, is important.

I think that's fair. Obviously we want to make sure that we put our players and our program into the best position to be successful week in, week out.

Consistency is also really important. But also obviously games against what people would consider the better more

consistent programs in the conference.

And then specifically when you're on the east, in our side of the conference, again, which is different because I think before we got here there was a period of time when you had the legends and the leaders, is that correct, Chris, I think it's what it was called, and that was a very different makeup of how the conference was constructed.

So I think all those things factor in. But I think your point is a fair one. And being able to play well and finding ways to get wins against a program like the University of Michigan, with all their history and tradition, is really important.

**Q. Question about Malick Meiga, first career catch against Maryland, a guy who worked back from injury earlier in this season. How do you see his role unfolding for the second half of the back end of this season here?**

COACH FRANKLIN: We'd love that to continue to grow. He's an awesome kid. He's got a lot of things that we look for in the recruiting process. He's big and strong and fast. One of the faster players we have on the team. One of the tallest receivers we have in the program right now.

And him and Parker are like best friends. They're constantly together. Whether it's on the jugs machine or working in pre-practice or post-practice. They're always together.

It's interesting because they have different skill sets. So I think it's good for them to learn from each other and challenge each other. But I think he has a chance the rest of the season and long term to be that type of home run threat for us, a guy that can really take the top off the coverage and try to get him involved that way.

So I have a lot of faith and very encouraged about Malick and his growth since he's been here and he's one of the more likable, one of the more popular guys on our team.

**Q. You've been pretty complimentary of Ji' Ayir Brown throughout the season, him getting Big Ten Defensive Player of the Week honors. How have you seen his development throughout this season to get to this point with those kind of impact plays on Saturday?**

COACH FRANKLIN: It's interesting. I was talking to Coach Duda last night, and he calls from time to time to check on those guys. I call him to kind of give him updates. And one of the things that really just jumps out about Ji' Ayir, and really also Brisker, those guys, they just love football. They love it. They're committed to being great.

They both have a maturity to them where they're great teammates with their peers. But they also have a really good way with the coaches and know when to have fun and mess around and when it's time to work and lock in.

To me, with Tig, his confidence has really skyrocketed this year. And his ability to make plays, to get his hands on balls, to create turnovers, has been dramatic. And he could have had a few more. Let's be honest. Both of those guys. But I just see his confidence growing as his experience grows and he just continues to make plays and be around the ball.

So I think his future is very bright. I really do. I think him and Brisker have great chemistry together. I think Coach Poindexter, obviously being a guy that played the position at a very high level, both in college and in the NFL and now is coaching the position. I'm not saying that's the end-all, be-all. There's guys that can coach the position without ever playing it. But I do think there's some value there. And they've just worked really well together.

So I also think about some of those young guys that are in backup roles that have two really good examples to learn from in front of them with Ji' Ayir, who we call Tig, and also Brisker.

**Q. Sean has thrown 47 and 52 times the last two games. You gotta do whatever it takes to win. But I'm just curious, that's just not what Penn State football has really ever been, and we ask you all these questions about the running game. Do you really have to run the ball, or are we in a situation now where you're okay throwing it 50 times and that's just maybe what Penn State fans are going to have to get used to?**

COACH FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess for me whatever we have to do to win. And that's going to be different year to year. That's going to be different game to game.

I think the important thing that we've talked about before is I do think we took a positive step, again, in the run game on Saturday. But we have to continue to do that.

And I think the important thing is you can win by throwing it 50 times a game. But I also want us to be in a position that if we need to run the ball 30 times, 40 times in a game, that we can do that and still win.

That's challenging for any offense to be able to do. But that's the ultimate goal. That's the ultimate goal. And I want to make sure we're continuing to take steps in that direction, not only throughout the season but also our time here. That's the ultimate goal, though, is to be able to do

both at a really high level. That's when you're really difficult to stop.

**Q. You were very good in stopping the run against Maryland Saturday. Why were you so sharp and effective against them? And what kind of challenges does the Michigan running game present for you?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I think we've done that pretty much all year except for obviously the Illinois game. I think we've done a pretty good job of defending the run and trying to make people one dimensional. That's something that Brent's done a pretty good job of his entire time with me.

Obviously that's going to be a challenge come Saturday, because I think that's a big part of their identity in who they are. They're massive up front with the O line and the tight ends. They've got a converted O lineman playing tight end as well to serve in that role.

They've got a big back that can hammer it in there. And then they have an undersized quick back that also does a great job of breaking tackles and plays with more power than you would think. So it's going to be a challenge. There's no doubt about it.

But I think we're also going to get some of the heavy-sets. And obviously we've worked on that the last couple of weeks to make sure that we have a plan for that and have got enough reps working on it in practice, because I really expected to see that the last two weeks. And so we've been working on it the last two weeks and we're working on it again this week as well.

I think what it really comes down to is having gap accountability and fighting to keep your gap, and also being willing to get an extra guy into the box to defend the run with one of the safeties or even a corner, whether it's a trap corner or whether you're bringing the corner off the edge, to try to get another hat in the box to defend the run.

Obviously that causes some challenges in the secondary. But I also think we're playing pretty good in the secondary as well. So we're going to have to build on that. And that's something that's going to have to be a focus all week long.

**Q. After the Ohio State game, Joey Porter Jr. talked about Brent Pry and the defensive coaches having trust in him going out there making plays. Joey also mentioned that he feels more comfortable on the field this year. How would you assess the progress he's made up to this point, and what are the next steps for him moving forward?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I think what you see with Joey, he's

got elite length in terms of his body type and how tall he is and how long his arms are and his ability to cover guys man-to-man. He's gotten much better in zone coverage, which I think was an emphasis in the offseason. And he's challenging routes.

I think the next step for him, obviously, is to challenge those routes but also not put himself or the program at risk with some of the pass-interference penalties. That's a fine line, because when you're aggressive and you're challenging, you're going to get a few of them.

So I think it's making sure that we're coaching those things, that we're reinforcing those things in practice every single day, especially with the officials that we have at practice. But also not take that aggressiveness away from him. We want that.

And I think obviously the next step is for our corners to get their hands on some balls and turn them into some interceptions, which I think all of our corners have the ability to do.

So he's done some great things. But I still think there's a lot of room left for growth with him and I think he recognizes that as well. I think Saturday was a really good example. He did some great things. I think there's some plays he'd like to have back.

**Q. How would you assess your fourth-down conversions offensively this season? And does past success or failure impact your decision-making in an area like that?**

COACH FRANKLIN: Yes. Yes, it definitely impacts. It's interesting. So each week on Sunday night, we sit down and we have a situational review where we go through pretty much every situation in the game and discuss, did we handle this the way we should have? What will we do different moving forward? Let's have a discussion about it. And then we also use an outside data analytics company that does that as well.

It's interesting because if you talked to the analytics people, I've said this to you guys before and it's not an exaggeration, they want you to go for it on every fourth down, from one to three, anywhere you are on the field, really.

And I guess the data nationally supports that. But also obviously coaches are impacted by the success that you're having in those areas. And if you've tried it two or three times and haven't had the success, whatever the data tells you, you're less likely to do it moving forward.



That's something that's important to me, especially when you get into the area of the field where if you don't pin them inside the 10-yard line and you punt it into the end zone, like Maryland did a few times on Saturday, then you haven't really netted that many positive yards, when you're just out of field goal range, maybe from the -- you could maybe go from the minus 45 to the plus 36, 38, somewhere in that range. So those things factor in.

And then also how well is your defense playing, because being aggressive on offense and obviously having a chance to score touchdowns rather than punting or field goals have a big impact in the game.

But then also, even if your defense does play well, then you may have put your offense in a backed-up situation. So all these things you kind of have to factor in.

It's interesting because one of the discussions we had, which you guys all were asking me after the game, was the end-of-the-half situation. That's an interesting one, right? It's the end of the half. You haven't played as well as you want to play in the first half. From a time perspective, they still had three timeouts.

So, if you throw the ball two of the three downs there, trying to be aggressive to go down and score in a two-minute drive and they use their timeouts, or you throw the ball and they conserve their timeouts on incompletions, you could put them in a situation where they could get the ball and get some points at the end of the half in the middle eight.

So typically what you do there is you run the ball, hoping that you pop one into a light box, and then you can transition from a four-minute mentality in terms of running the ball back into a two-minute, if you can get a chunk play.

Then obviously, you say, why do you call the timeout? Because we had moved the ball a little bit and now you're in a decision, what do you want to do? Do you want to take a shot to the end zone? Do you do one of those Hail Marys or flea flickers, where you throw the ball around. Typically at the end of the half those aren't the right things to do. But that was the discussions -- although it was received extremely well by the fans and media. That's what went into that.

But I think your point specifically about fourth down, I want to be aggressive in that area but we also have show our ability to pick up short-yard situations more consistently.

**Q. We all made such a big deal about the 5-0 start, but how important is it to stack wins here at the end? And what does that do for the team as you're trying to close**

**out the regular season?**

COACH FRANKLIN: A couple things. Obviously we were to get some guys back from a health perspective, which has been important for us. And we anticipate doing that again on Saturday, being able to get a few guys back, which is really important.

But, yeah, being able to finish this season on a positive note is really important. And obviously the game this weekend, being at home and with a great supporting cast in the stands is going to be really important.

But, yeah, every win is important and when you're able to stack them like we did in the beginning of the year, with five straight wins, we want to try to do that every week. We want to try to do that throughout the entire season.

That's why it all matters. That's where the development matters, the scheme matters, the recruiting matters. It all matters because you're going to have injuries and you better have depth and you better put your players in the best position to be successful consistently week in and week out.

**Q. You had talked about the impact of Michigan's defensive ends in games this year -- two really disruptive players. How would you assess the play of your starting tackles Rasheed and Caedan, especially in pass protection?**

COACH FRANKLIN: I think for the most part, in pass protection pretty good, especially based on the question I got earlier, based on how many times we're throwing the ball a game. I think pretty good.

I think we need to be more consistent and more physical in the run game. I think that's something that will not only help our offense but it will also help them when you can use the physicality of the run game to bang on guys. That maybe makes them less effective in the pass game. And, so, they're not just pinning their ears back and coming off that edge every single down.

But, overall, from a pass protection standpoint, I think pretty well. There's times obviously where we need to be firmer and there's times where we need to be better with our hands or our footwork and finishing and things like that.

But I think about a couple of those plays where Sean was able to step up in the pocket, hold onto the ball, which allowed Jahan those few extra seconds to work his route and come open, which led to obviously a big day. And those things go hand in hand -- the quarterback's accuracy, the timing of the route, the protection -- all of it. All of it goes hand in hand together in the scheme.

So I think for the most part solid, and I think where we really need to take a step is in the run game.

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