

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



COACH FRANKLIN: Statistical summary of the Michigan game, the turnover battle was even. The penalty battle we lost by yards, not actual penalties but did lose that.

Drive/start battle we won. Sack battle we lost. And the explosive-play battle we lost, which I think was as impactful as anything in that game.

Just a few other notes that I would mention. Opportunities for growth. We've got to score points off the turnovers -- obviously touchdowns, especially when our defense gets a big turnover on their end of the field. We've got to do a better job protecting our quarterback, not just sacks, but hits. And we've got to create more explosive plays on offense and obviously eliminate them on defense.

Getting into Rutgers and Coach Schiano. I've known Coach Schiano a long time. Obviously he's done a really good job throughout his career and specifically at Rutgers.

I think they have the second most super seniors in the conference, with 13 that they had return. When you kind of get into them on offense, with Sean Gleeson, his second season, who they hired from Oklahoma State, is really doing a nice job.

He's a creative guy, finding different ways to get the ball on the perimeter. Finding different ways to run inside zone with some eye candy.

Guys that we've been impressed with is Noah Vedral, a young man, playing at a pretty high rate. And also on top of that has got an interesting background. I didn't realize he's been at Central Florida as well as, I think, Nebraska as well. This is his third school.

And then Isaih Pacheco, the running back, seems like he's been playing there forever. Runs extremely hard. Is explosive and fast.

And defensively Robb Smith, their defensive coordinator, has been doing it a long time. Obviously he's got a bunch of history as well at Rutgers, as well as a number of other

places, and in the Big Ten at Minnesota as well. They do a really good job.

We're really impressed by No. 50, Julius Turner, he was an issue last year as well. Their nose guard, who plays the cocknose on the center, really explosive.

Their linebacker No. 3 Fatukasi, and also their safety, Christian Izien, those guys are playing at a high level. And Adam Sheier, who I know well, special teams coordinator, second year, a creative guy. They're doing a bunch of stuff. They run a lot of different fakes and misdirections. If you kind of study them over the last couple of years, they've made some really big plays.

Their punter is maybe the best punter in the country. Best punter in the conference. Is a senior from Australia. Averaging over 46 yards. Does a really good job of using a wide variety, like a lot of the Australian kids do, a wide variety of kicks, whether it's traditional punt. Whether they're trying to pin somebody down with a sky punt. Whether he's doing a low roller. Does a lot of different things, cross-field kicks. We'll have to be prepared for that as well.

Q. How does the way you handle senior day change now with the extra COVID year? How many guys do you expect to go through that ceremony on Saturday? And will you expect to have some guys who go through it and come back like Brisker and Castro-Fields did last season?

COACH FRANKLIN: Again, everything's kind of changed obviously with the COVID deal. It's made it different, as you mentioned.

We had a number of guys that took part in the senior ceremony last year and then still decided to come back. So I think our staff, as well as the players, understand some guys may not walk with the intention on coming back. Some guys may walk and still haven't made that decision yet until we sit down after the season and decide.

So it's very different. It's very different, Greg. And I wish I could have a better answer for you, but it's hard to say right now just based on everybody in the program having

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another year.

Actually Andy Frank, our recruiting coordinator, had a meeting with our compliance department just to kind of go through it all, even from a recruiting perspective. It's just kind of a mess to predict. You can't use any of the old data that you've studied over the last 10 years to make predictions.

It's really challenging, and I think sitting down with our compliance department and going through that in detail, I think, was eye opening to them on how messy it is.

Senior day, we'll make it special for these guys. But, yeah, it's not as clean as I'd like it to be for you guys to be able to know who's coming back and who is not. I don't think senior day necessarily represents that anymore, at least until we get through this COVID period.

Q. After the game on Saturday, you said you don't have enough explosiveness besides Jahan Dotson in the offense. Could you expand on that? There's different ways to look at it -- do you feel you haven't recruited the explosiveness or guys aren't stepping up? Can you expand on that a little bit?

COACH FRANKLIN: Now having kind of time to think about that and kind of watch the film, obviously Parker Washington has had a number of explosive plays right now.

I think right now we just don't have the explosive plays in the running game. That's been our challenge and our issue. I think we've been running the ball a little bit better the last couple of weeks.

But there's been some opportunities for some big plays that we've made in the past and we need to make moving forward. So that will be a focus all week long. That will be a focus this week against Rutgers that does a really good job defending the run.

They do a really good job getting an extra man in the box. But I think we've been fairly explosive in the passing game. We need to be more explosive in the running game and more explosive overall as an offense.

Q. When your defense is as far ahead of your offense as it is, does it add any extra pressure for it to be nearly perfect to earn a win any given week?

COACH FRANKLIN: On the defense?

Q. Yes.

COACH FRANKLIN: I think obviously, to your point, our defense is playing extremely well and really has all season. Making big plays. Playing bend-but-don't-break defense and then getting really stingy in the red zone. The defensive staff, defensive guys, they've done a really good job.

And I think obviously the more points you score, it takes some of that pressure off of the defense. There's no doubt about it. And as you know, in normal seasons, you're going to have a year where the offense scores a bunch of points one week to win and the defense has to hold them to almost nothing another week to win, and it kind of fluctuates kind of throughout the season.

Obviously when you're hitting on all cylinders, that both units on both sides of the ball are scoring a bunch of points and holding people to little. And we've shown flashes of it. We've shown flashes of it on offense and have moved the ball against some of the better defenses in college football statistically in our conference.

But, yeah, I think there's no doubt about it. I think the defense is doing everything they possibly can to put our team in the best position to be successful. And our offense is trying to do everything they possibly can to put our team in the best position to be successful and the same thing on special teams.

Q. The offensive line and the running game have been issues all year. And you've started four guys pretty consistently on the offensive line. How close have you come to making changes there throughout the course of the season? And with two games left in the regular season, will Landon Tengwall see playing time? Is he ready to play yet?

COACH FRANKLIN: We'd like to get Landon some experience these last couple of games. There's no doubt about it. I think you guys have seen Effner has played. We'd like to get him some more experience as well.

Olu is another guy that we're very high on and would like to get him some experiences. Some games we've planned on doing that and an injury has not allowed us to do that.

Whether it's with our starting five or whether it's with one of the backups that we planned to get in. But we'd love to be able to get those guys some experience, especially these last three games.

Q. Going off of Rich's question, because you guys have changed OCs and offensive line coaches more than you would have liked here, do you think that's part of maybe what's showing up this year with the

line, that it's just kind of the meshing of everything?

COACH FRANKLIN: I'm sitting here thinking about the number of O line coaches.

Q. Three.

COACH FRANKLIN: So in eight years in college football, I'm not sure, I don't have the data, I don't know if that is average, above-average, below-average, I'm not sure. I don't have that data.

But, yeah, we've got to be more physical in the running game. There's nobody that works harder at it than coach Trautwein, all offseason, all in season. The players as well.

I think at times we've done some pretty good things against some of the better defenses in college football. But we've got to be better. I get it. I understand the questions. We've got to be better. But I don't know if it is necessarily to the point you've made. I'd have to think about that a little bit more.

But I know those guys are busting their tail to do a great job. We'll do that again this week and try to build on it.

Q. I was curious about punt returning. You look nationally, almost half the country has one or fewer punt returners of 20-plus yards. Has the point of punt return changed to just don't drop the ball, or is something about that just how you guys have schemed it up this year?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think a couple things. I think if you look at what colleges do when it comes to covering punt, when you essentially are not in the pro-style punt anymore, you're a spread punt formation and you're getting gunners down the field. Not just -- bullets, not just two down the field but a lot of times you're getting multiple guys with free releases running down the field in coverage. I think that's part of it.

I think the punters in college football have gotten a lot better over the last 10 years. You look at obviously the number of Australians that are doing the different types of kicks, whether it's cross-field kicks, whether the low rollers, that's been part of it. And guys are punting for hang time and trying to pin people into a third of the field, where in the old days you just saw people punt it down the middle of the field and now you're giving one of the better athletes 53 and a third.

I think that's probably the biggest thing I've noticed is that the punting in college has gotten a lot better. And I think

people are doing a much better job in what we're allowed to do within the college rules to cover kicks. I think that's as much as anything.

Obviously when you have a returner like Jahan Dotson, people are putting a major emphasis on hang time and punt location for our week.

So me and Coach Lorig get together every Monday night and go through everything in great detail. And I think you're right, more times than not I'm watching people not have too many opportunities for returns.

Q. Have you personally felt distracted this season by some of the outside noise? And do you see maybe why some people on the outside might perceive that you've seemed more distracted at times?

COACH FRANKLIN: I get it. We've been in the same situation before and have had really strong seasons. I think you're also in a situation, obviously this year, where we've lost some games that we had a chance to win and our record looks a little bit different. I get that people are trying to connect the dots there.

All the things that I'm able to control I'm controlling. But I get it. I understand the business. I understand people's concerns.

Again, I would just state looking at my track record over my time here, eight years, my actions, my behaviors. I think they've been pretty consistent really since I've been here.

Q. James, after Saturday's game your Penn State teams are 2-13 against top-10 teams. That includes a 1-7 mark in games in which you were also ranked. What, if anything, are you not consistently seeing from your teams in those types of games? And what do you think can realistically or feasibly be done to kind of change things a bit?

COACH FRANKLIN: It's everything, right? It's recruiting. It's development. It's scheme. It's strength and conditioning. It's nutrition. It's everything. We've done some really good things, but I also know there's some things, like you just mentioned, that we have got to get better.

And that goes back to the point that I've made since I got here, this is the most competitive sport in college athletics, and you have to be willing to compete in everything year-round.

The margin of error is very, very small. And you have to be willing to commit. And it's not the Saturdays -- the

Saturdays are a part of it -- but you have to be willing to compete 365 days a year with what everybody is doing in 2021.

Q. Now that you're kind of getting close to the finish line of the season, and given what's happened the last few weeks, are you concerned that the guys are a little down and that motivation could be an issue? I know about 1-0 and this week, but in the big picture of everything, it's hard to put -- I would think it's hard to put all of that out of your mind. And how do you kind of coach that?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think first of all, you've got to be aware of it. And I think to your point, Mike, which is fair, I think you've got to be realistic. We're not robots. We have emotions and feelings and those things as well. So I'm very aware of that -- with the staff and with the coaches and everything that comes with it. There's no doubt about it.

But I would say, I look at how our guys played last week. And I thought -- you watch tape, you watch the film -- our guys played extremely hard. They competed their tails off.

We had a chance to win the game. And that's been the case week in, week out. And that's kind of what I'm looking for at practice. And that's what I'm looking for on Saturdays is how hard are we competing, how hard are we playing?

Are there things we've got to get cleaned up? No doubt about it. But you look at the scores of our games, you look at the type of opponents we have played, I think our guys are motivated, but obviously there's frustration. There's no doubt about it. Our guys want to be successful for the fans. Our guys want to be successful for their families. They want to be successful for themselves as well. It's all of that.

Q. The running game actually felt different, looked different on Saturday against Michigan, more success. Why do you think it will look that way to us after 10 games? Why not sooner? What changes did you see, and how does it bode going forward?

COACH FRANKLIN: We just continue to invest in it. We made some changes about the midpoint of the season in our practice structure. And we've invested in it like crazy. And I try to, on the headsets, try to make sure that we're staying patient with the run game and continuing to mix those things in there.

I think we've been more physical up front with the offensive linemen and the tight ends, and I think our running backs

are running and they're more decisive.

So we're just trying to get better every week, no matter what point of the season that we're in. We're just trying to get better. And we're going to try to do that again on Saturday against a team that does a really good job of defending the run and prides themselves on it.

Q. We didn't get the chance to talk to Sean Clifford after the game on Saturday. Just from your perspective, how would you assess how he played against Michigan? And how did he come out of that game physically with some of the hits that he took?

COACH FRANKLIN: I'm proud of Sean. Sean's a competitor. He's tough. He's given everything he can to this program and this university and his teammates. But he was beat up. He's getting hit too many times. I think we had five hits besides the sacks.

So I'm proud of him. I actually literally got done meeting with him about an hour ago, I guess it was. And he's battling his tail off. And I love him and I'm super proud of him. And I know he's going to have a great week of practice this week. And I know he'll do the same thing and play his tail off on Saturday.

Q. I wanted to ask you about AK. When were you first introduced to him either by film or maybe recruiting or running into him somewhere? And what made you think that he was going to become the player he has become?

COACH FRANKLIN: I guess the first thing is obviously guys go into the portal. And we have people checking the portal and watching tape and seeing if he makes sense for us for what our needs are.

So that's how it starts and then obviously we reach out and make contact. We typically try to call the previous school and find out what's going on there and get their opinion. And they just spoke so highly of him. Me and Coach Galt have known his high school coach for 20 years, I guess. And he really felt good about his fit and coming to us and playing for us. We felt really good about the recommendation he gave.

When you get a chance to know the kid and be around him, he's been awesome. Obviously he's made a huge impact for us on the defensive side of the ball. He always has a smile on his face. Great experience here. He's very close with the guys. Staff loves him.

Obviously when he got here and we did the testing numbers right away, we were impressed. He's another guy

that was a high school linebacker and was a linebacker when he first got to Temple. And that athleticism and that explosiveness that he has showed up right away in testing and in workouts.

And he just continues to grow within the program. He's gotten bigger and stronger, and has been a tremendous addition. And I'm super happy for him and his family and proud of him and he's been great.

Q. If you can reflect on through your career, how strong of a correlation is there between season-ending success and failure and how a team goes into the offseason, like how it approaches the winter months?

COACH FRANKLIN: I would have to go back and study the data which you probably already have. But I think obviously ending the season on a positive note with wins, whether it's the end of the season or bowl games or whatever it may be, I think that's obviously important going into the offseason.

I think obviously there's times when things don't go well and that's motivation as well. Depending on who you open the season with next year, that's motivation as well.

So I don't know if there's one specific way to look at it or one specific way that it plays out. I think it depends on the personality of your team year to year. But obviously, whenever possible, you want to end on a positive note. You want to start on a positive note. You want in the middle be on a positive note.

From a production on the field standpoint, from a recruiting perspective, to offseason, good vibes and those types of things -- mojo. Obviously that's what we all want. I want the fans and the media and the players and their families and the community all feeling great, which for the most part that's how it's been around here.

Q. You've often talked about wanting guys to return after graduating. In every game there's typically a large crowd of lettermen on the sidelines. When it comes to letting players know that you want them to be part of the program long term, does that come in the recruiting process or does that conversation happen later on?

COACH FRANKLIN: Yeah, it comes up during the recruiting process. It comes up while they're here, obviously. For us, obviously with a coaching staff coming in after the same coaching staff being here for a really long time, we've had to work really hard at building those relationships and getting those guys back because it's just different. It's just different for them to come back after 50

years of it being pretty much the same.

So having a guy like Spice back was great. He came by Sunday morning. He was in my office. Had a chance to spend more time together. I've developed a really strong relationship with Spice, got a ton of respect for him, for what he's been able to do throughout his career.

I think the guys that have come back, obviously having Buzz (phonetic) back this weekend was huge. It was huge for us. Has not been back very often since he got done playing. And he was awesome.

We were able to spend a little bit of time together and then exchange some messages after he left. But what an unbelievable example that guy is of what you can do at Penn State and where Penn State can take you obviously after you get done playing.

Q. When you look back at these last five games, is this a team that's just that close to turning some of these into wins? Is it a team that needs some pieces this offseason to push you guys over the hump? How do you look at this stretch?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think it's a combination of both the things you've said. We've played really good opponents close and had opportunities to win a few plays in either direction. And we have huge wins, huge wins.

And then obviously, always you're trying to recruit and improve your roster and create as much competition as you possibly can to bring out the best in everybody. That's always the case year in, year out.

But, yeah, I think you're talking about a team that has been very, very close and had some significant battles and challenges to work through.

Again, I'm proud of our guys and we'll have a really good practice today and really good meetings today to give us the best chance to be successful on Saturday.

Q. I know at the beginning of the year, even back in July at Big Ten Media Days, you were very excited about the potential of your tight end group and their depth and what they could do. After ten games, have they met your expectations? And where would you like to see them improve?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think probably a couple different things. I think yes, I still feel the same way about the tight ends that I did in the beginning of the year. I think there's been some games that they've played extremely well. I think there's been some games where we've gotten them

really involved and have had an impact.

I think there's been some games where we probably should have got them more involved. Obviously after the fact, looking back at it, number of touches and opportunities and things like that, all three of those guys have done some really good things.

And then obviously there's some games and some plays which will always be the case that you wish you had back. But I think it's a really strong position and a really strong room. I think Ty Howle has done a great job with those guys. I'm very pleased with them. And I think they continue to have a really bright future the rest of the season and moving forward.

Q. On the explosive play topic and explosiveness in general, are there things you can do in season from a practice or strength and conditioning perspective to help achieve that, or is that something that just has to happen based on offseason preparations?

COACH FRANKLIN: I don't think it's something like you can become more explosive dramatically during the season as a specific athlete. But as an offense, obviously there's things you can do to put people in conflict from scheme. There's the ability to strain on blocks to create a little bit more space in the hole to make the safety miss.

It's doing a great job when you do get into the open field on the perimeter of making people miss or breaking tackles and creating the long runs.

It's a combination of all those things. And we're going to continue to work at it, keep coaching those details and find ways to be explosive come Saturday.

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