

Penn State University Football Media Conference

Monday, March 21, 2022

University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: I'll keep it brief so we can get into questions, but first of all, obviously I'd like to congratulate Cael and the wrestling program for winning the National Championship as well as five individual National Championships. I texted with Cael over the weekend, which was awesome.

Obviously going into the spring, obviously the biggest adjustment is with Manny Diaz as our defensive coordinator. I think that's gone extremely well. I think the adjustment has been really good.

I think the fact that we were able to spend a lot of time talking on the front end of what the expectations were, what was important to him, what was important to me, I think that's really helped the transition. But that's gone extremely well.

Obviously these 15 practices will be really important, and then obviously year two with Coach Yurcich and cleaning up some things that we wish we would have done better last year as well as just take the next step in general from an offensive perspective. I know Sean is pretty excited about it.

And then obviously on special teams with Coach Stacy being here and building on what we've done in the past, similar philosophy, very similar to what we did on defense, hired someone with similar philosophy, so that's gone extremely well, too.

I think the new rules that the NCAA changed a few years ago in terms of what you're allowed to do in terms of meetings and walk-throughs and things like that have helped, have helped with this stuff. Obviously we're going to have to continue this after spring ball going into the summer, as well. Those things will be really important.

But overall we had a really good winter workout period. Chuck Losey has done a fantastic job taking over for Coach Galt in strength and conditioning. Our winter workouts were very similar to what we've done in the past. Feel like we've got a really good model there.

And then obviously the mid-semester guys, whether they were junior college guys or transfers or high school early grads have hit the ground running. You guys have been able to see a little bit of that in terms of the weight room and testing numbers and things like that.

Guys are excited. Looking forward to getting out on the grass. We'll be outside today, get out in the grass and get going. Obviously we have the indoor facility, as well, when needed, but overall we're looking forward to getting out and getting going.

Appreciate you guys being here. It's great to be back in person, and I'll open it up to questions.

Q. How much will a second straight year working with Mike Yurcich help Sean Clifford, and what are you looking for from the younger quarterbacks this spring?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think your first question or point is I think obviously it's significant. Sean has done some really good things over his career here. His ability to have the same offensive coordinator two years in a row, same scheme, obviously we tweak some things every off-season and make some adjustments when necessary, but I think it could have a big impact, not just in terms of his understanding the offense but really their relationship, him understanding how Mike works, how Mike operates, and vice versa.

When it comes to the young quarterbacks, that's always the challenge in spring ball is how do you get everybody enough reps to be able to be evaluated and also to be developed, because it's not just about the quarterbacks, it's about do you have enough depth on the offensive line, do you have enough depth at wide receiver, tight end, so on and so forth, and then also from a defensive perspective.

We actually have a tryout today from the university, as well, which we do every semester, and that may help us in a few situations where we're a little bit thin. But yeah, I think that'll be a big focus. We'll probably go back and forth with those guys. One day they'll get reps with the threes, one day they'll get reps with the fours, kind of rotate back and forth, and then as this thing adjusts, obviously



there could be some opportunities to take reps with the ones, with Veilleux and with the twos and threes, with Pribula and Allar. We'll see how that whole thing plays out. But right now that's been a big emphasis of spring ball is how do we make sure everybody is getting reps and getting evaluated.

Q. Your running game, but your offensive line in relation to your running game, how do you work on getting that better this spring, particularly the offensive line part of it? We've heard a lot about this year the line is going to be better, this year might be different. Specifically in the spring, who are you looking for? What are you looking for from those guys up front?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So I think a lot of it is us spending time really from the time the season ended to the spring ball starting and just really making sure that we're having detailed conversations about what we're trying to do schematically, who we are, what do we want to emphasize, and then obviously I think it needs to be something that we make sure that we get enough reps on in the spring and the summertime.

You still have an opportunity to work your passing game. You can do those things all summer. It's really difficult to do that with the running game. So making sure that these 15 practices that we're getting enough reps there from a scheme perspective, from a technique perspective, and that we're emphasizing it enough.

But I think there's been really good discussions. Obviously we all know that's an area that we must improve on.

Then I think it's also not just with the offensive line and tight ends, but it's also with our running backs' ability to break tackles and make people miss. That has to be emphasized, as well.

A combination of all those things factoring in together, and Coach Traut and Ty Howle and Ja'Juan Seider really taking a lot of responsibility and ownership in that, as well.

Q. The last couple months it seems like you've made a significant number of hires in the support staff, the analysts and so forth. How close are you to where you want to be in terms of the size of that group, and what do you think they're going to give you? What do you think you're going to have kind of at your disposal that maybe you didn't have a year ago as a result of adding to that group?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think we have made some strides there. Obviously my new contract, that was a big

part of that.

I think it probably seems a little bit more magnified for you guys than maybe it is because not only are you bringing in some new people, but you're also replacing some people that moved on.

Typically these positions, as you could imagine, they're not usually long-term positions. They're either young guys that are transitioning from being a GA to a full-time coach, or they're coaches with tremendous experience that may be out of work that you're able to bring in for a year. Keeps them involved in the game and allows us to gain some experience and some perspective.

Really that's what it's about. It's about manpower in recruiting. It's about manpower in terms of when we're breaking down film and when we're watching tape that we have enough perspectives in the room and enough experience in the room, and then obviously it helps you also -- it also helps you obviously in terms of manpower when it comes to game planning and those types of things.

There's tremendous value in it. We have taken some really good strides. I'm pleased with the strides that we've made.

Obviously my contract was a big part of that. But I'm excited about -- obviously when you get guys like Danny Rocco to be able to join our program, not only his experience in the NFL, his experience as a head coach, his experience as a coordinator, he's also a letterman.

I think that's also been an emphasis that you've seen in our staff, as well, having -- I can go on and on, obviously Dan Connor and so on and so forth. I think that's been really valuable, and it's been exciting having these guys back involved in the program.

But I think to your point, we have made some strides there, but I think it maybe appears a little bit magnified based on replacing some people that left, as well. We had some GAs move on for full-time positions. We had some analysts move on for full-time positions and coordinator positions, so it's a combination of both.

Q. How much do you look forward to seeing the transfer portal guys at this time of year, and what kind of learning curve do you expect with them coming in, a guy like Tinsley, a veteran guy that hasn't been in this system yet? How different is he than a kid coming in from high school who you think is kind of a blank slate?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's very different. As you can imagine, you're talking about a guy who's played a lot of college football, has got a pretty good understanding of not

only offensive scheme but defensive scheme, as well. He's comfortable in his own skin, not only as a person but also as a player.

I think we've done a really good job of identifying these transfer portal guys, maybe taking a little bit more of a detailed approach in making sure we know who these guys are, their backgrounds, talk to their high school coaches, talk to their college coaches, make sure they're going to be the right fit for us, as well, and I think that's challenging.

When you're recruiting these high school prospects, usually you have about two years to develop that relationship and get to know them, and when the transfer happens, it happens fast, and I hate to say this, but more times than not, the guys already know where they're going before they enter the transfer portal. So making sure that we're doing it the right way and bringing the right guys in here.

I think you guys saw not only the type of players that we brought in but also really good guys that are great fits in our locker room and on our campus and in this community. That's a big thing for us, as well.

But Mitch is so mature and obviously so experienced. We haven't had a chance to see him yet as a football player. The feedback from the quarterbacks and the guys, they've been really impressed with him. What we've been able to see with testing numbers, with winter workouts, with those types of things, is about what we anticipated, a mature guy that's had great production that we feel like there's still some areas that we can help him develop and grow.

But I think it's nice. They're nice, complementary pieces, and it also helps you -- every freshman wants to play as a true freshman, but it also helps you for the guys that may not be ready especially at the start of the season. It allows you to feel like you've got a veteran presence for those young guys to learn from, part of the whole developmental strategy.

Q. With Sandy's announcement that she's retiring, new president, how do these things impact the football program going forward with you getting to know whoever the new AD is, the new president, those kinds of things?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it's really important. You guys have heard me talk about alignment for a long time. It's kind of a unique deal where I came in as the football coach with an interim president and an interim AD and then was really fortunate because in a short period of time after that, President Barron and Sandy were hired, and I thought we worked extremely, extremely well together.

But obviously with having two significant positions on a college campus, obviously the president and the athletic director, building those relationships and that rapport is critical as well as the chair of the board in Matt Schuyler. All those positions are really important.

But I'm excited right now in how those things are going. But obviously this athletic director hire is going to be critical for the university as a whole, for the athletic department, and then specifically to the football program.

Very, very important hires and very important that we build strong relationships and that I understand so I can do a great job of building the football program in the vision that they expect it to be run.

Q. A couple guys who didn't play a lot for you or at all last year, Adisa and Hakeem, how important is this spring for both those guys and how big do you see their roles moving forward given some of the kids you lost on the D-line?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think both of those guys have a chance to be impactful and are both special players. I think everybody in this room was really excited about Adisa Isaac and what he was going to do last year. That was a significant loss for different reasons from a physical perspective, so having him back this year, we're approaching this thing slow and conservative to make sure that he's ready to go. We anticipate him being able to do a lot this spring. I wouldn't say 100 percent but close to it. So that will be really important for us because I think Adisa has a chance to be an impact player for us, and I think he's got a very, very bright future and long future.

Then Hakeem, as we all know, we've seen tremendous things from Hakeem. I'm proud of Hakeem. He's really growing up and maturing. I try to hug him and love on him as much as I possibly can, but it's also one of those fine lines, too, because I want to make sure that Hakeem stays on the trajectory that he's on right now.

But both of those guys are super talented. They could have a huge impact for us on the defensive side of the ball, and we're depending on them. Hopefully they continue heading in the right direction, both physically and in other areas. But I'm proud of them, and I think this spring is going to be really important for them. Two really separate discussions, but yes, your point is both guys that can be impactful for our defense and really for our team overall.

Q. To go back to December, you deferred evaluating Yurcich's performance. Can you do that for us now?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so obviously based on Mike's credentials coming in and how the season played out, I think Mike would be the first one to tell you that he had greater and higher expectations than the way things played out.

Obviously there was a lot of factors that went into that, but moving forward, I am comfortable and I am confident and I know he is, as well, that I think we can make significant strides this year.

I think the run game is a big part of that. We have to get the run game going, and that's my job as the head coach is to make sure that we do the things necessary in the off-season and during spring ball so that it can be.

Everybody kind of taking responsibility there. I think if we can get the run game going, which we will, I think that's going to make us much more explosive in our play action pass and our RPO game. And I also think it's going to help our offensive line and take the pressure off them as well as our quarterback and take the pressure off of him, that people feel like they have to defend our entire offense.

I think we're heading in the right direction. There's no doubt about it. Obviously we've had great discussions in the off-season in terms of our personnel and how to play to our strengths, things that we have to develop and improve on, but I think everybody is aligned in the offensive meeting room and what we need to do and where we need to go, but in general offense, defense and special teams was not good enough, not up to our standards.

Q. Going back to the defense for a second, how comfortable are you with Kobe King and the others at middle linebacker?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think that's a good question in terms of one of the big question marks in spring ball. I think the battle between Elsdon and Kobe King at that position, it'll be interesting to see what they both are able to do. They'll get a ton of reps and there will be obviously a tremendous opportunity for them to be evaluated.

Then coming in, obviously we've got Abdul coming in that we're really excited about, as well, what he's going to be able to do. I thought his senior film was as good as any guy we signed last year.

Then obviously we've got some guys in the program, as well, that are going to get evaluated this spring, Dwyer and Chizmar, as well. Elsdon and Kobe will get every rep we can get out of them to evaluate them to see where they're at, and then obviously we'll reconfigure that, as well, after

spring ball, who needs to be moved around, what's the best positions for them to play, and then also with the incoming recruits, as well, with Abdul and Keon.

Q. I wanted to talk about your offensive line. What were your thoughts the way that Olu played at left tackle against Arkansas in the bowl game? In your mind is he still kind of the guy to beat out at left tackle? Do you still want to have Juice Scruggs move to center, and if you do, what are your thoughts about who's going to contend for spots at both guard spots?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so the way we look at it right now -- the guy you brought up in your original question statement was Olu. I thought Olu and Landon Tengwall both, in not a lot of work but in the work that they did get, both did some really good things. Both did some really good things for us.

Right now the way we have this thing penciled out, you guys will see when you come out to practice, Landon will be the starter at left tackle. Where we're starting out at left guard you've got Landon Tengwall -- what did I say at left tackle? Sorry, I was getting ahead of myself.

Left tackle, Olu Fashanu, left guard Landon Tengwall, we've got Juice Scruggs at center, we've got right guard Sal Wormley and right tackle Caedan Wallace.

And then behind them, at left tackle Jimmy Christ, at left guard J.B. Nelson, at center Dawkins, at right guard, Achumba and Furmanek, and at right tackle Traore. Those are the guys we've got working and then obviously we've got a number of guys coming in this summer, but those guys are going to get a bunch of reps.

We don't have great depth there this spring, so this will be important that we do a great job of how we run practice so they get as many reps as we possibly can, but we've also got to keep those guys healthy.

Then Furmanek, I'm super proud of that kid. We've asked him to come over to the offensive side of the ball for spring ball to allow us to practice, put the team first, and he's going to do that, so he's a guy that will rotate in at both guard and center, as well, to create some depth for us.

That's how it starts. Obviously there will be some moving parts, as well. A lot of those guys we think can play multiple positions. Obviously we saw Landon play tackle, as well. Juice can play guard, as well. So there's going to be some moving parts. Obviously Caedan Wallace is a guy that we think could play either side at either tackle, as well. It will be a very important spring for those guys.

Q. To go back to the running game, you have two big additions obviously in Kaytron Allen, Nick Singleton. How much do you expect them to contribute early and will they get reps with the ones this spring?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so we'll rotate the running backs all spring. Obviously there's guys that have been experienced here and played a lot of football, but obviously we've got two running backs that we're excited about, and winter workouts and testing have only built on that.

For right now for me to say they're going to get reps with the ones before practice, one, I'm unsure, we'll just see how it goes, but they'll have some opportunities in live work to rotate in there, and we'll see how it plays out as the spring goes on. But we're excited about that group.

The guys that are coming back and the experience that they've gained and things that they need to improve on, and then the infusion of two guys coming in at mid-semester that were very well thought of obviously nationally.

Q. I want to ask you about Jonathan Sutherland, still lifted as a safety on the roster. Has he moved to linebacker? I noticed he gained a little bit of weight this off-season. Kind of secondary, Manny Diaz played with three safeties a lot the last couple years at Miami. What is the philosophical difference between playing with a third Sam linebacker and then that star, whatever you want to call that safety that plays in the underneath coverage there?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think you guys have heard me talk about this before. When we were at Vanderbilt we essentially played with three safeties, two deep safeties and a converted corner who went from corner to safety to field backer for us. So that's kind of how this thing got started for us.

Obviously coming to Penn State, we were able to recruit linebackers, obviously being LBU at a very, very high level, so we were able to play probably a little bit more of regular personnel with three true linebackers on the field and be able to get away with it. Not only get away with it, be able to play at a pretty high level and then be able to sub out into a true nickel. In the last couple years it's been Hardy as an undersized corner.

When we kind of looked at Sutherland and kind of looked at his career, he has played his best football when he's been closest to the ball. The bowl game obviously had an interception, and a lot of times when he was playing safety, we were dropping him down into the box, very similar to what we did with Marcus Allen.

I think it's going to be a combination of two things. I think right now Sutherland gives us the best ability to get our best 11 guys on the field, but it also allows us to play with what I think in 2022 more times than not you want to be playing with, which is more of a DB with linebacker traits than the opposite, if that makes sense.

I'll probably look at that. I didn't know it was still list that had way on the roster. That's something for me and Chris to discuss and talk with Manny about, how we want to list him. But at the end of the day that's where he's starting, at that field backer position, which allows us to bump Curtis over, very similar to how we've done here for eight years. A lot of the young guys have come in, gained their experience at that field backer position, which both mentally and physically is a little bit less on your plate. As you gain that experience, then you move over to the boundary backer, so similar in what we're doing with Sutherland and Jacobs.

Q. Sometime between now and next year, Sean is going to throw a bad pass and people are going to go, they should play Drew or they should play Christian, but I think more people would probably say Drew because they're excited, et cetera, et cetera. How do you nip that dynamic in the bud internally and externally and what are the parameters for a guy who's never played college football somehow beating out a guy who started for three years in spring ball? Is this even a conversation that people should be having in the first place, and how do you weigh that somebody is breathing down your neck dynamic that's kind of been different than it's been the rest of his career?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think externally we're not going to waste any time on it externally because I think it's impossible. People are going to talk about what they want to talk about, and obviously when you recruit well, there's excitement, which there should be. So I think that's a positive.

I also think the competition is going to bring out the best in everybody. I think that's going to be a really important part of this. But internally, we want that. We want that type of competition. The external stuff we can't control.

I think we all kind of recognize that, social media, you guys have heard me say before, I think in the old days the coaches could insulate the players from that. You can't anymore.

Is it realistic? Probably not. Probably not. But I think it's going to be good. I've been preaching that since the day I got here. Sean has heard that for a long time.

I think without the transfer portal, I think we would have had a little bit more of that in terms of guys exiting in the other direction, especially at that position it's challenging. But I think the competition Sean embraces. I think Veilleux embraces. I think we all saw Veilleux get in a game last year and play at a really high level, and then we've got two young kids that have done some great things throughout their career and put themselves in position to come to a place like Penn State and compete.

We'll see how it goes. I'll have a better feel probably after practice six or seven than we are now, but obviously based on how we've recruited them and the tools that they have, there's a lot to be excited about, and whether that's in the future or whether that's sooner, that's to be determined.

Q. This is going to be your 12th spring as a Division I head coach, the first one without Brent Pry on your staff. I know you've grown used to assistants leaving, but what's the bond that you've had? How would you say you've been adjusting over the past several months without him, not only on your staff but not being able to see your friend every day, as well?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's different. Him and I would say Dwight Galt. I've had a number of guys that I've been very close with that we lost over the years for a number of reasons, but him and Dwight Galt, those guys have been with me every step of the way for a long period of time. Brent really for, shoot, almost 30 years, all the way back to my playing days, and then Deej all the way back to my days at Maryland.

Now, with Deej I still have the opportunity -- I had a party Friday night for the staff and Deej was there, so that helps. But with Brent, obviously we still text from time to time and run things by each other, and I'm able to see some things on social media, as well. He came back, we had a going-away party for him, as well, him and his family.

But yeah, it's different. There's no doubt about it. I think I'm probably more prepared for it now than earlier in my career. It's the nature of college football now and you have to be prepared for it the best you possibly can. But there's no doubt it's a significant loss. 12 years with me and obviously a number of years as our defensive coordinator and did a tremendous job at that.

I'm happy for him. I'm excited for him and the family and for the Virginia Tech program. I had a number of conversations with their athletic director throughout the entire process with Brent, but he's going to do great things there.

But I miss him and I wish him the best, but obviously my focus and attention is on Penn State.

Q. Getting back to the team, two defensive linemen we've heard quite a bit about, Zane Durant, an early enrollee, and then Zuriah Fisher got some high marks it looked like. Can you shed light on both of their early progress?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so specifically with Zane, he's just really adjusted well in a short period of time. He hasn't shown signs of homesickness. He's hilarious. You guys are going to love getting to know him. He is hilarious. Mom and dad are hilarious.

I don't think the weather has affected him one bit, and as you know, when those guys show up in January, they're right in the middle of it. I've seen him in shorts more times than I've seen him in not, and a kid out of Florida, that's interesting.

Then when it comes to our initial testing numbers, he tested extremely well. In a lot of ways reminds me for the group in here that's covered us for a long time, in a lot of ways he reminds me of Kevin Givens. Maybe not the biggest guy in terms of height, but powerful and strong and explosive. His testing numbers were really good.

Then the other thing he's been able to do is he's been able to put on size already. I think he's above 265 pounds already. I think that's going to continue to trend, and he's carrying it extremely well.

If he keeps trending the way he is right now, I think he's going to have the chance to compete for playing time as a true freshman at D-tackle, which is unusual. Which is unusual.

Zuriah is another guy that's had a really good off-season, really excited about him and the things that he's been able to show. Another guy that carries the weight, has got really good length in terms of not only his height but his arm length and things like that, so he carries weight between 265 and 270 extremely well, still looks skinny.

I think the off-season in terms of another year of playing defensive end since he didn't do that in high school, he was a tight end and linebacker in high school and basketball player, so there were some things about the defensive end position that he still needed to get comfortable with and learn, but he's trending in the right direction.

Really excited about both those young players.

Q. You mentioned Dan Connor. With him being on board, how did that come together, including how much had you talked with him over the years, and what does it mean to have him back with the program?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so for all the lettermen that are out there coaching, whether it's in the NFL or whether it's in college, and in some instances in high school, I try to track those guys, kind of see where they're at and what they're doing.

Then what happens like anything else, you get a guy like Alan Zemaitis back, and Alan has some of these relationships, and either I'm asking him, hey, what's your thoughts on so-and-so or he's coming to me and saying, hey, just so you know, Dan Connor would be interested in coming back. However that information is coming, whether I'm asking or it's coming to me, that's important.

Then I think the next thing is what's the right fit, because sometimes we'd like to be able to bring these people on board but we don't have the right fit for them and their family at the time, whether it's from a financial perspective or maybe from a career perspective in terms of responsibilities and things like that.

So some of these guys it's worked out really well like Dan. Dan was really open to just getting back here in however we could make it work.

To me it was more of an ideal situation because here's a guy that had been coaching high school, now had gotten his foot in the door of coaching and had worked his way up to being a defensive coordinator and had been having success. His college coach spoke very, very highly of him.

I don't think Penn State is necessarily a first-time job, so I think it's great when it plays out like Dan where they're able to go and gain that experience, very similar to Alan Zemaitis. So it's worked out well.

And then some other times, situations just kind of happen like with Coach Rocco, where based on other circumstances he was available.

For me I'm trying to develop these relationships. I'm trying to get to know these guys. Dan I've gotten to know because when he was a high school coach I was stopping into his high school, and it's kind of gone from there. Some of these guys have worked our camps. The camps have created some opportunities to do that, as well. But it's pretty cool.

I think if I'm correct here, we've got nine lettermen on the staff right now in one responsibility or another, which is

pretty cool. I'm really proud of that.

Q. Just wondering, the last couple years, I know there were extenuating circumstances in '20, but have they taken a toll on your confidence on the program's collective confidence, and if so, how do you tinker and rebuild that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't know if I would describe it the way you described it, but yeah, I do think there are aspects of when you're winning like we were 10, 11 games every single year, there is some carryover from that. The younger players that maybe didn't have as significant roles saw the older players and what they were doing, the commitments that they made, how they practice, how they conducted themselves, how you battled, how you believed, how you won those close games.

There's definitely carryover, and the same thing when you don't have success there's carryover from those things, as well.

Making sure that we're identifying the things that were so successful for us for a very, very long period of time and make sure that we are holding that standard and people accountable to that standard, as well, and that's not only the coaches, that's also the players. That's the strength and conditioning staff. All those little wins add up. All those losses add up, as well.

Then I think the other thing I would say to you, as well, is college football has changed dramatically in the last 15 years, in the last 10 years, and maybe in the last three years as much as any other time in the history of college football, and making sure as a football program and as an athletic department and as a university that we are being as aggressive and as urgent as we possibly can in changing with those times, as well.

It's all of it. It's all of it. But I can guarantee you that it's all being looked at. It's all being addressed. That's as a coaching staff, that's with myself specifically and that's with the players.

We know what it looks like. We've had a model that's worked for a long time. We've got to make sure that we're holding everybody up to those standards and holding everybody accountable, including myself.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports