

Penn State University Football Media Conference

Saturday, August 6, 2022

University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



COACH FRANKLIN: I'll keep it brief so you guys can ask questions. But been pleased so far with camp. Obviously, over the last probably three years have been a bunch of rule changes that have affected how we do camp. No two-a-days anymore. Days off. Bunch of rules that have changed, really, kind of the feel of camp.

And then obviously at Penn State, with the academic calendar that we have, our guys typically go to school for most of camp as well. So it's gone well. Manny has done a really good job coming in and getting adjusted. Obviously the time that we spent at the retreat kind of going through how we do things, how we operate, not only from a daily schedule, but also from a philosophical perspective, I think that's been helpful.

Obviously year two with Coach Yurcich has been helpful as well. And continuing to build in the area on special teams with Stacy. I've been pleased with all those things.

Like I said at media days, I think we have more depth than we've had the last two years for a number of different reasons. But overall I'm pleased, obviously, the positions that you guys have written about already that we have some depth or some question marks, that we're working hard, obviously, to build that depth at those positions as well.

So overall really good. You guys will get a chance to see us this afternoon briefly. And then we're also talking about some other opportunities. So we'll see how that all plays out. But appreciate everybody coming out to cover Penn State football.

Q. Parker Washington's entering his third year with the team. What's it been like to see him go from a true freshman to one of the leaders in the wide receiver group and a potential No. 1 option?

COACH FRANKLIN: He's done a nice job, obviously. Being with Jahan I think was helpful for him in his development and seeing the things that Jahan did.

And he's obviously made a number of plays here. Really good ball skills, great body control, and really intelligent guy. So I know Sean has a lot of confidence in him and so does Coach Yurcich and Coach Stubblefield and myself as well. I think he'll have a big year for us. Obviously we need him to have a big year.

I wouldn't necessarily say at this stage that when you have a first-round draft choice at the wide position, that one person -- although I think Jahan could do it, and so could some other guys -- but I do feel like the group has the ability to match or exceed the production from the wide receiver unit last year. Now, whether it's a one-for-one tradeoff, I'm not sure. But if you look at the group last year and where KeAndre I think is going to be this year and then the production that Mitch Tinsley has had in his career, and obviously Parker, we feel really good about that group.

The other thing that I think is important is that next unit. Again, the depth at that position, the depth is not even close compared to last year. There was a significant drop-off if we got into the second-team guys last year. And I don't think that's the case this year. So that will be important. And obviously Parker will provide a huge role there from a leadership and from a production standpoint.

Q. You mentioned question marks. What are your biggest question marks heading into the season? And are you close to filling those at this point?

COACH FRANKLIN: Well, if you start on special teams, Stout did such a good job. Obviously ended up getting drafted. That's a concern. Obviously Pinegar has been a starter here before. I feel like we have some really good options at kickoff.

But punt, on special teams, is probably the biggest question. Barney Amor is leading the pack right now, but Stout did such a good job. The other thing you hope is, obviously, you don't punt as much. That would help solve that problem a little bit too.

And when you talk about on defense, I would say it's at middle linebacker and maybe linebacker in general, but specifically middle linebacker. But I do think right now Elsdon and Kobe have done a really nice job there.

I think that's a legitimate competition. And I think we feel good about how those guys are operating the defense right now. And then the other thing, I'm not sure if you guys are aware of this or not, but we started Wylie there. And wasn't really sure because in a lot of ways he was pretty much a defensive end in high school. But he's super smart and seems to be handling it really well.

So that's probably the biggest question mark that I would say we have on defense. Obviously figuring out who the other safety is going to be, but we feel like we got a number of really good options that are competing there.

On offense, it's been the offensive line for a couple of years. So, again, I'm not going to sit here and pound the table about "this is the year," because that hasn't necessarily played out in a way the last couple of years. So I'm going to take a more measured approach there and let them and let us prove that to you along the offensive line.

And then obviously, based on, again, production between the O line and the running backs, the running game in general will probably be another question mark. But we have different people in that room. We've got some guys returning and some new faces in that room that's created really good competition and depth.

I think the biggest thing is potential for big plays in the running game. That's going to be really important for us. Your numbers are always going to be impacted if you don't have any of those long runs to affect not only field position but also averages.

And then I think that also plays a role in taking some pressure off the passing game and should create some more big-play potential off of play-action pass as well. So those are the things that probably jump out to me as the most, if that makes sense.

Q. It occurred to me, you guys are known for self-analyzing and being a big fan of self-study, reverse engineering problems. And it occurred to me that every single -- in eight years, every single one of your position groups has not been just at a good level but at one time or another a superior level, except for one, which is the offensive line, as you said. Why? Why do you think that is? Is it development? Coaching? Recruiting? Why?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think you've got to say all of that, right? I think you get to an elite level or superior level through all of those things. And when it doesn't work out the way you want it to, then all those areas factor in as

well.

So that's where some of the changes that we've made, from a staff perspective, I think are going to impact that. Philosophically, how we've kind of gone about our business in terms of offseason development, strength and conditioning, some of the things that we're doing scheme-wise as well that I've been adamant about that I think are going to help that position as well.

It's all of it -- scheme, it's fundamentals, it's coaching, it's recruiting. It's all of it. I think all of it is impacted. And when we're successful, it's for the very same reasons.

To your point, it's hard to say when you win a Big Ten Championship that you didn't play well. So I don't know if I completely agree with your analysis. But I think it's a fair point.

Q. (Question off microphone)?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think, again, I think it's a fair question, right? One of the things that I've noticed right away with Manny is we are emphasizing turnovers like crazy. And because of that, you see it -- I literally just said that at a staff meeting this morning. We're getting our hands on so many more balls, fumbles, turnover. So I think your point is a good one.

I will tell you this year, it's been emphasized. I've felt like that in the past as well. But it's been emphasized enough that we have a chance to take a step in the right direction this year. But I do think there's some things we've done off the field as well from a staffing perspective that I think can impact it.

And I think you have to be willing to call the game in a certain way as well. There's things that you can do to help with the offensive line. There's things that you can do in terms of, again, the running game, being able to wear people down on normal downs, on first and second down, take some of those shots off your quarterback. But also to wear down the defensive line so they're not as effective on third down. Being able to move the pocket so you don't have a consistent launch point, doing things with your cadences. All those things.

But, again, I think it's a more than fair question. I am confident that it has been emphasized this training camp and offseason.

Q. You mentioned Manny. I'm wondering, how much of a different philosophy are you going to have defensively this year compared to working with Brent for all those years? I know you wouldn't want to get

into specific things but is it a dramatic change or is it more subtle?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think it's more subtle. Again, that's why we went in that direction, right? At the end of the day, we were going to try to go out and hire the best defensive coordinator we possibly could. But being able to find someone that comes from a similar background, similar philosophy, I think, is helpful.

You just don't want the start all over again. Especially when you think about it, the majority of the players are back and the majority of the staff were back. So who is going to take on that learning? Is it all the players? Or is it the coordinator?

So I think we've done a pretty good blend there. But at the end of the day you've also hired Manny for a reason, and you want him to be comfortable in what he's doing what he's calling and how he operates.

But I think we're in a good place. I've been pleased with how we've played defensively. I love what Manny is doing in terms of what I just talked about in terms of how he's emphasizing getting your hands on balls, in terms of causing fumbles, interceptions, true interceptions or tipped balls that turn into interceptions, getting guys to run to the ball.

I've been very pleased, and I think our guys are confident. And there's some subtle changes that I think fit who we are.

Q. With regards to Mike Yurcich, you mentioned a couple of minutes ago you have to call the game in a certain way. What do you think Mike learned last year in terms of his development, calling games in the Big Ten, what will work, what won't work, those kinds of things?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think one of the biggest things is him knowing our personnel and what those guys do well and where we need to help them.

And, again, that's in the running game. That's specifically with Sean. I think Sean and Mike know each other better. And I think that's useful. Obviously, like we've talked about, having the same offensive coordinator and the same offensive system for multiple years, I think there's a ton of value in that.

And then I think the other thing is just the familiarity with the league, with the defensive coordinators, with the venues. All those things, I think, are helpful. So obviously Mike's got a long track record of success.

And again I think we have the ability to do some pretty good things on offense this year with the returning starting quarterback, the personnel and the coordinator.

Q. You received substantial production from the transfer portal last year. What do you expect from Mitchell, Chop and Hunter, from the Division I transfers? And how have they acclimated themselves here?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think Mitch has already had so much production in college, and he's super mature. And he also understands some of the things that maybe the young guys don't understand.

He's roommates with Sean. Smart move. You know? They've been able to really build a rapport together on and off the field, which I think is really helpful.

So I think he's got a chance to have a really, really productive year. Kind of all the things we've talked about is kind of how he is as a player. He's dependable. He's got really good ball skills and toughness and maturity. So I think he's one of those guys that you're going to know what you're getting pretty much week in, week out from him.

If you talk about Hunter, obviously the closer you get to the ball, just like if you're a freshman coming in -- the transfer situation, especially when you're transferring from, whether it's Ivy League or I-AA or whatever it may be, it's a big difference.

Blocking PJ Mustipher and Hakeem Beamon is very different than the Ivy League. So, that transition has gone well. I will say, you look at his testing numbers, he's tested extremely well. He is fast, like really fast, explosive and strong, and obviously intelligent.

So we have better depth up front than we have had the last couple of years. So whether it's game one or game four, we'll see, but he's going to have a significant role. But it's too early to say right now who and how it's going to play out.

And then the other one is Chop, at defensive end. That was something that was going to be important to us, obviously with the guys that we lost, A.K. and then obviously what we did with Jesse last year, we needed to make sure that we got somebody that could come in as well as developing the guys who were on our roster that could take the next step, getting Adisa back helps, too. He was a significant loss for us last year.

But we've been pleased with them. I think the way we

practice, the type of physicality that we have at practice every single day and also the way we were using him he was a 3-4 outside linebacker, there's a lot of similarities between 3-4 outside linebacker and 4-3 defensive end, depending on how you operate your scheme and how you're using that outside linebacker.

But it is a little bit different for him, having his hand in the ground pretty much every single play and having to go against the offensive tackles pretty much every single play.

But he's quick, explosive, fast, and has flashed several times, not only sitting in the defensive meetings but the offensive coaches talking about him as well.

We feel really good about all three of those guys having a role for us. We'll see how significant that role is as camp and the season progresses.

Q. Is that a new watch you have?

COACH FRANKLIN: No, my daughter, Addison, gets me a watch -- she got me that maybe a year or two ago -- every couple of years for the season.

Q. With regards to USC and UCLA joining the Big Ten, do you recall when you first heard of that or what you were doing, and do you think there could be any benefit recruiting-wise for you guys with that expansion down the road?

COACH FRANKLIN: Yeah, Pat gave me a call. It was either a day or two before it was announced publicly. So that was good to kind of have that conversation. And I read some things and heard some things at Big Ten media days and other things where, I don't know if that was the case everywhere in the league. So that was great to be able to have that conversation and be prepared for it.

And then the other thing, when you ask about recruiting, yeah, I think obviously when you're able to add two teams from California to your conference, that should allow you to maybe get into some conversations that maybe you haven't been able to get into before from that region.

Obviously not having an international airport here in town has somewhat of an impact on that. But I think you look at this recruiting class, I think we're recruiting more nationally. We've talked about some of those things specific to the state of Pennsylvania and specifically to the northeast, that you're going to have to take that approach.

But also your point is when you add two universities and two schools like that to a conference, it should create some more opportunities for kids that, obviously we're going to go out there for a couple of games. They're going to be

obviously coming to us a lot. So I think it's going to have to.

Q. Has there been much ongoing discussion with Sean and the leadership team about what came up about a month ago concerning improved benefits at Penn State and Big Ten college football? And have you had to address the overall focus with the team? Are you satisfied with where the focus is?

COACH FRANKLIN: No, I think obviously there was a ton of conversations, but once training camp had started, no. And we obviously addressed this at Big Ten media days, obviously we knew that was going to be a topic and a conversation piece.

But, no, we had a bunch of conversations but now that training camp has started, I've seen everybody locked in, loaded and focused, very similar to responses we had at Big Ten media days.

Q. I was talking to Ji' Ayir at Indianapolis about the defensive back field and he was really impressed with the amount of guys, the skill set and that type of thing. But he also said how physically ready the players are to get on the field and get going. Could you talk about what that competition has looked like in the defensive backfield? It's obviously been a position you've recruited heavily. Is it where you want it to be? And what does it allow you to do schematically to have a lot of big bodies or just a lot of bodies in the backfield defensively?

COACH FRANKLIN: I do think, if you look at Penn State historically -- I don't know if you guys have been in the facility in a while, but outside of each one of our rooms, meeting rooms, we kind of have all the players that were All-Americans or first-round draft choices, whatever it was, and Coach Poindexter, but really specifically Terry Smith, you look at the number of guys that have made all-conference, All-American, been drafted out of the defensive back room, I think that's been a real emphasis and probably a shift historically in what we've been able to do there. And Terry gets a lot of credit for that.

But when you look at where we're at right now, you talk about depth at the corner position, we're really in a pretty good spot there. One of the guys that's really come on for us right now is having a great camp is Johnny Dixon. He's had a really good camp, which is really important for us, not only in creating depth, but also guys that maybe people have pegged in as the starters are either being pushed to improve their game, to keep their starting job, or could be replaced. And that's kind of across the board.

But when you talk about Marquis Wilson's played a lot of football, Johnny Dixon has played a lot of football, Kalen King has played a lot of football, Porter and Hardy have played a lot of football. And then the young guys that you add to that, that helps, especially as much nickel as we may play.

Hardy as any done a tremendous job in that role. And I could see him taking the next step there, but has made some big plays and has really taken ownership of that spot.

Then in the back end, it's kind of similar. Obviously Tig is a guy, Ji'Ayir, Tig is a guy that obviously established himself last year, tied for the league -- excuse me, tied for the lead in interceptions nationally.

But there's three other guys that we feel really good about that are competing for that other spot. When you talk about Ellis, who has played a lot of football for us; Jaylen Reed, who played for us last year as a true freshman; and Zakee Wheatley, who last year we redshirted at the corner position and moved to safety in the spring. Let alone the guys that are coming in.

So that's been really good competition. And seeing those guys work on the back end and gain confidence -- and again I think the way Manny and Dex and Terry are emphasizing the turnovers and the tipped passes and the caused fumbles, the interesting thing is that I think that's really going to help our defense.

But that ball security also impacts our offense every single day. If that ball is not high and tight and put to the sideline, there's somebody going after it every single day and that's in the air as well. I think it helps our defense but also has an impact on helping our offense.

Q. Athletic department has a finite number of people around it at any given moment that has the resources you need to make the advances from a business perspective, from the infrastructure perspective. When you've been around for a long time, you start to have relationships with these people that go one way or the other. What are the challenges that you face at this point almost, I'll round up and say 10 years, being at the same place when it comes to NIL and when it comes to the business perspective in sort of cultivating the things that you need from those people?

COACH FRANKLIN: From the people, you're saying that have been here for 10 years and those types of relationships, you're talking about?

Q. Yes, outside of the program. We're talking about

money, basically.

COACH FRANKLIN: Gotcha. Yeah, I think those things really matter. And I think those things really help to have those type of relationships that you can pick up the phone, that you can explain a topic that maybe is new to college football, new to college athletics and get people not only to understand but to buy into it.

And then I think also, to your point, when you talk about facilities, really specifically to how Penn State, how we do facilities here in terms of raising the money, the majority of the money before the project happens, those things are important as well.

Whether it's being able to use a letterman or a donor's house in town for recruiting purposes, whether it's people donating to the university for scholarships, whether it's donating to the university for facilities -- that's not only athletics, that's across the board, at the university -- or whether it's people getting behind the NIL initiatives that are obviously all over college athletics and specifically college football, I think those relationships are critical.

The thing that's also fascinating at a place like Penn State is -- I think some of the NIL conversations that are going on is at a school as big as Penn State and with the number of alumni and lettermen we have there's still plenty of opportunities out there.

That's one of the things that's been interesting. I think you have to be careful when you talk about fundraising, of going back to the same donors over and over again. Those people are critical. And we're super appreciative of them.

But what this has done, it's really opened some opportunities and avenues to maybe people that hadn't been giving to Penn State for whatever reason that now are.

We've taken an active role in this as well. I've been pleased. But I do think your point is a good one. I went and met with a bunch of gentlemen in the Wilkes-Barre area, ladies and gentlemen in the Wilkes-Barre area. That's one of the things they talked about.

I remember at the end of the meeting, one of the gentlemen made the statement, we like consistency at Penn State. I do think your point is a good one. Those relationships in anything are critical, but in the area you asked about, it's very important.

Q. Late September, the team was 4-0, 5-0, we had a conversation about complacency and making sure that

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

the guys weren't buying into the hype too much or reading too much of what was out there. College football seems to have more eyes on it than ever, more pressure with NIL and opportunities to go get your own media exposure. How do you avoid that complacency if things start going really well here at the beginning of guys kind of buying in too much to the hype?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think in general, whether it's last year or your point about making sure guys are staying grounded and staying focus, I think that's where depth is really important.

Whether you have an injury or whether you have a guy that is struggling or not playing the way they're capable of playing, having a legitimate option right behind them, tends to solve those problems pretty fast. So working extremely hard. Under the current college football model, you could make the argument that it's maybe harder than it's ever been to manage your roster, unless you're willing to live and die in the transfer portal.

And for us, at this stage of the game, we're looking at the transfer portal probably in a way like a lot of schools 15 years ago used to look at junior college; that you'd go to junior college to solve an immediate issue, to buy some time. You may have a young player who is going to be really good but isn't ready from game one. And for us, that's kind of been our approach.

So I think depth is the most important thing that you can do. You better have a starter that you feel really good about. You better have a backup that you think you can win Big Ten games with. And you better have a young, exciting guy develop at every single position. And that may force you to move some guys to spots that they maybe weren't thinking about playing. Kind of like what we did with Jesse Luketa last year.

But you better have that, because this is obviously a challenging game, maybe even one of the most competitive games in college athletics.

And week to week, you better be ready, especially in our conference, and specifically on our side of the conference. So developing that depth, and then part of developing that depth is playing guys.

One of the things we talked about on the retreat is not being led by ego. You're up 35-0 in the game, and I'm on the headset saying, hey, we need to sub out, get our backups in, whether it's the defensive coordinator or offensive coordinator saying I just want to get one more drive, there's still plenty of time in the fourth quarter, but a

lot of times you're doing that because you want to preserve the shutout. And I want the shutout as much as anybody.

But what's more valuable? The shutout or getting those guys in there and letting them play valuable minutes and gaining experience? On top of that, again, under the new model, guys want to feel like they're being developed and having an opportunity to play. That's where out-of-conference scheduling is as important as it's ever been.

So all those things factor in. But I think back -- we had some opportunities last year to get some guys in to play earlier in some games and we didn't. And sometimes, okay, you're about to make that change, but the drive went longer than you thought and ate up more time off the clock for the defense or the offense.

But maybe if we would have done that earlier in the year, last year, maybe we would have been more prepared when the time came when it was needed, and that could have been preparing guys for a bigger role or being able to evaluate guys and say they can or can't do it and somebody else maybe needs an opportunity. All those things kind of factor into it.

So that was a big discussion this offseason with the staff about we've got to be willing. Because the other thing is, it's not just the experience. It's a late-game injury when the game was pretty much decided already.

Or the targeting penalty. Now you've got a guy with a targeting penalty late in the game. Now he misses the first half of the next game. So all those things factor into it.

Q. Saleem Worley and Adisa Isaac, you seem to be optimistic about their status coming out of spring ball, where they stood. I know they were still a little limited. How did that carry over through the remainder of the offseason, and where are they both in their pursuit of getting back there for game days and playing big roles?

COACH FRANKLIN: I think you remember Adisa and Sal, there was a lot of excitement about them last year. You think about how many guys last year that we lost either before the season or during the season that were significant leaders and players from a production standpoint. For us, Sal, there was a lot of buzz about Sal, how well he was playing.

It's funny, I was saying, I think, last night or two nights ago, in the quarterback meeting, about how well Sal's playing. And Sean quickly reminded me, you know, that we said the same thing last year right before the season, before we lost

him.

So having him back is significant. Obviously having Adisa Isaac back, I think everybody that covers Penn State football closely, or is a fan or a member of our program, was really excited about what Adisa was going to be able to do last year after gaining experience the year before. Having P.J. back. Having Sean back. Having Tig back, having these guys back, as well as the guys that we lost for whatever reason.

It gives us a really good balance of maturity and experience and young talent that hopefully we can learn from each other and play off of each other to start out on the road with a really challenging game on the road.

Went over with the team about Purdue's success in night games and blackout games and things like that. So making sure we have a healthy respect for our opponent and to start the season with a Big Ten game on the road is going to be important. So those guys' leadership and having those guys back is really important and we need to continue to build on it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports