

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference

JAMES FRANKLIN: Thank you. Appreciate it. Like always, I want to thank everybody for coming out, covering Penn State football whether in person or on Zoom.

Obviously excited about the opportunity. Kind of strange obviously opening on a Thursday. We kind of catch ourselves kind of talking on different days of the week. But it's been our normal routine, which has been nice.

It also allowed us to come into camp a little bit earlier. I like opening on a Thursday. It also gives you some advantages going into week two as well.

Should be a great environment. Really looking forward to this opportunity for our players.

One of the interesting things that's been talked about a lot, but I thought I would hit it one more time, Penn State will open Big Ten action on the road not only for the seventh straight season but the 12th time in 13 years. Wanted to kind of reinforce that.

Again, talking specifically about Purdue, got a ton of respect for Coach Brohm, what he's done in his six years at Purdue, really what he's done overall in his career. Obviously got a ton of respect for what he's done on offense. His offensive mind, what he's been able to do really kind of throughout his entire career.

On offense specifically, Brian Brohm has the title as offensive coordinator. Obviously those two work closely.

Guys that jump out to us obviously is Aidan O'Connell, six-year quarterback there. Broke the Purdue completion percentage record at 72%. I don't care if you're throwing on air, that's impressive.

Tight end Payne Durham I think led them in receivers, led them in receptions. Obviously Broc Thompson had a huge bowl game for them, obviously coming into the season, going to be somebody we're going to have to be aware of.

On defense Ron English. Known him a long time. Like



him a lot, have a ton of respect for him. Has a long career as a defensive coordinator. Now at Purdue. San Jose State, Louisville, Michigan as a defensive coordinator.

Something that we've seen on tape from them, as well as things we've seen last year, we spent a ton of time working on, going to need to be prepared for that, is cover zero. Spent a ton of time on that this training camp. Really in the spring, as well. We're expecting and ready to attack cover zero. I think that will be a big part of what they do.

You talk about personnel. Jalen Graham, their linebacker, No. 6, a guy that really jumps off the tape for us. A young man out of Detroit, Michigan. A senior.

Cam Allen, the safety. Then defensive tackle Branson Deen, as well. Those are the three guys that jump out to us. Obviously other guys as well.

On special teams, Coach Maslowski comes in as a special teams coordinator, but he does have history, coach from Western Kentucky. They got all four starters back. Obviously the one that really jumps out at you in terms of his résumé is Charlie Jones, the transfer from Iowa, who was the Big Ten returner of the year in '21.

A tremendous opportunity, also tremendous challenge, being on the road, to open the season, Big Ten, Thursday night. Blackout, all those types of things. But I've been pleased with our preparation so far. Obviously today's practice will be really important. Do a great job on what we consider Thursday and Friday, then get on the road to travel.

Appreciate you guys being here and I'll open it up to questions.

Q. You always talk about positivity. Why do you think your team will be better this season than they were the last two years?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's been a pretty consistent message I think all pre-season is that I just think we're back in more of a similar role than we've been in terms of depth. We got much more depth than we had in the previous two years for a number of reasons.



Obviously the COVID year we lost some players based on some decisions that were made in the conference. Then obviously this past year, you look at our depth at the quarterback position in terms of proven commodities or guys that we felt were ready to play in Big Ten games. We were just in a much different position, defensive tackle depth, which was a problem last year after losing P.J., then quarterback depth as well. That's probably the biggest thing that jumps out to me.

But again, we got to go out and do it.

Q. You've mentioned a lot about John Clifford in the second year. Where is Sean at this year physically going into the game, arm strength, accuracy, mobility?

JAMES FRANKLIN: He's healthy and 100%. Had a really good off-season. I think him and Mike are really on the same page in terms of first Mike really kind of understands what Sean's strengths are, being able to play to those strengths. Then also Sean being able to anticipate and have a good understanding of what Mike is going to do and why.

He's been really valuable in the quarterback room in terms of their dialogue, questions that are asked, that probably the rest of the quarterbacks in the room have questions about as well, or just things in more depth, in more depth. I think that's been really valuable.

I think their relationship, as well as their familiarity with each other, is going to be valuable. We're going to need it in game one.

Q. Can you explain a little bit now that the season is ready to start exactly how the two freshmen have changed not just the running back room but maybe your running game, your look, what you have to work with, compared to last year?

JAMES FRANKLIN: A couple things. Obviously, again, I don't want to keep saying this...

(Loss of video in recording.)

JAMES FRANKLIN: ...the surprise of training camp is Fat Man. That's what we call him. But Kaytron, probably has the surprise in camp in terms of his production and big-play ability as well. A little bit of a different style than Nick, but both big, strong, powerful backs that can make you miss and break tackles.

Both have seemed to do a really good job with understanding the offense, understand defenses and

pressures, protections, all those types of things. Then Keyvone, a year older and more experienced.

That group, as well as the guy that people aren't talking about that we also have a ton of confidence and faith in, is Devyn Ford, as well, who will also have a significant special teams role, too.

Feel good about the group. I just think we have a chance this year to create some more explosive plays in the running game, which we were lacking last year. That starts up front with how we're able to block and communicate and impact the line of scrimmage. But then that's also having backs prepared and ready to make that defender that is not blocked miss or break tackles and be able to create the big plays, which are obviously needed.

Q. Jeff Brohm, I sort of think of him as one of the group of passing game gurus nationally. What sets him apart for you? What does he do that's so hard to deal with?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think the biggest thing is being able to push the ball down the field. They do a really good job of taking shots. Vertical passing game is going to be a big part of what they do and how they do it. But also obviously having the ability to throw for a high percentage, as well, which is what I kind of opened the press conference up with, with Aidan's statistics.

I think that's probably the biggest thing that I think we're going into this game with, is with the mentality and understanding that we are going to have to be able to stop the vertical passing game and the shots down the field.

Everybody is trying to find ways to be explosive. We'd like to be able to do it both in the run game and in the pass game. I think they would like to do the same thing, as well.

It's obvious, watching him and his programs over the years, that typically it comes in the passing game.

Q. You said when camp opened that you were kind of going to watch the battle, replace Jordan in the kicking game. How did that play out for you? Were you satisfied with what developed?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it played out well. I think obviously most of you guys probably saw with Barney how that played out. But he's earned that. He's our starting punter. He's done a really nice job. I think there's good competition at that position. I do think there's good depth at that position. But Barney will handle our punting.

Then kickoff, the competition there is going to continue. So



we're going to rotate every kick between Sander and Gabe.

Q. Away from your program, Ricky and Brent are coaching against each other on Friday, which is sort of a unique opportunity for you. Are you going to be able to sneak down to that at all? Have you talked to them? Are you going back to a normal game week schedule, just taking Friday off? How is that working?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, no, Friday will be a workday for us. I don't think we're going to get back until about 4 a.m., so our guys will go to afternoon classes. Friday will be our normal Sunday. We're able to get ahead. Saturday will be their off day. Sunday will kind of be a bonus Sunday, which we'll get a little bit further ahead than we normally could on a Sunday. That will be a different type of Sunday.

From that point on, we'll get into a normal workweek from that point. But Friday, we'll practice and we'll be working all day. It kind of reminds me of my days of being in the NFL, you play a Monday Night Football game, you wouldn't get back till 5:00 in the morning. You walked directly into the offices. It will be similar to that.

The night games obviously cause some challenges. We have school the next day. But we'll treat Friday as a Sunday for us, then Saturday will be the off day, then go from there.

And, no, because of that, I won't be going to the game. I think a decent number of the wives are going to show support. Kind of a unique experience, obviously. But, yeah, I think a lot of the wives and kids are going. They all kind of grew up together. Pretty cool opportunity to get everybody together.

Q. Can you share anything about the process you went through with your offensive line during the off-season to improve? Was it personnel, scheme, situational? Anything specifically?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, not really. I think it's been similar how it's been in the past. Obviously, like I mentioned, I think there's some things that we were able to do from an analyst standpoint that we hadn't been able to do in the past where now Traut has somebody to bounce ideas off in the meeting room, kind of go through what we need to do from a skill perspective, from a fundamental perspective.

That O-line position can be a lonely position. To have somebody that's experienced to bounce ideas off I think has been really valuable. A lot of times it's not really anything different, it's kind of to reinforce what you already know.

Then things I've mentioned before that I think we can do to help the O-line. One of the big ones is probably the investment in the running game and the recruitment of the running game with the two freshmen backs. Obviously so far they've shown us they may be able to help with that so you're not one-dimensional and you can take some pressure off your passing game and your pass protection, then be able to do as much of those things as you possibly can, whether it's move the pocket, whether it is the screen game, all these different things that we know obviously can help your offensive line out besides your normal development and fundamentals and technique.

It's been emphasized. Again, I'm going to leave that up to you guys to tell me, which I know you clearly will, how we're playing in that area.

Q. In regards to Purdue's tempo, the number of plays they try to run, how much of a challenge will that be for your defense and defensive line specifically in the two deep?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, a couple things. That's where the depth is important, right? The other thing obviously that we've discussed is having an offense that's able to show all these different things. All the way back to my time at Vanderbilt, that was something that was really important to me, is to be able to have offensive, defensive units that play complementary football. That's not just on game day, that is being able to line up in sets, whether it's spread, four-wides, whether that is two backs.

I say 'two backs' because I know the Fullback Mafia will come alive when I say that. When I say 'two backs' I'm talking about the personnel that can line up in those types of roles for you.

Now your defense, it's not like they're facing an offense all spring and all camp that is really only one-dimensional. Now they're put in a challenging situation, if you play a power-style offense or a true spread-style offense, and they're not getting parts of that.

When it comes to tempo, we do enough of that on offense. We've had some tempo periods, as well, that I think have been valuable. They've been valuable from that perspective.

We understand what they'd like to do. Obviously we've studied a lot. I think one of the things you have to do is be able to watch TV copies, as well, because when you just watch the coaches' copies, those things are all cut up so it doesn't really give you a good understanding of the flow and the speed.

Then there's also some of the analytics stuff that we use where it can tell you on average they're snapping the ball at this amount of time on the clock. So we use all that.

We've also done some good-versus-good during training camp tempo periods where we're really trying to stress that. I think we've done what we need to do to be prepared, but you still got to go out and do it on a game one.

I think we all watched college football last weekend. A lot of things show up that traditionally show up in early games, right? 12 guys on the field or 10 guys on the field, pre-snap and post-snap penalties, ball security, things that you work really hard to try to make sure that those things don't show up in your early games. Poor tackling, things like that, that have become challenging in the way college football is built and structured now.

Q. Have you made decisions on which true freshmen are going to green light, I guess is what you call it? Is that info you're comfortable sharing with us?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so we are, but I don't know if there's a ton of value. I met with those guys last week. I don't know if there's a ton of value in sharing it with you right now. The reason I say that is because I met with them again yesterday. I said, Let's just be perfectly clear, just because you've been given the green light, if you're not showing us you're ready against Purdue, you're not playing, or you've been given a yellow last week but then all of a sudden the lights come on for you and you're doing some really good things, now you're trending towards being a green.

That's really a very fluid kind of conversation throughout the year. Obviously it gets to a point, about mid-season, where you kind of got to make some decisions one way or another. Either you're moving ahead in playing guys or you're going to try to use the four-game model and save guys.

The challenge is for all these guys that are 18 for the most part, they're not really built to see the big picture. They all just want to be able to play so they can say they played as true freshmen. I get that, but we've also had guys that have done that, then at the end they go, If I knew it was going to play out the way it played out, I'd like to have the year back, make a different decision.

I try to keep talking with these guys, if not every week, every other week, to be able to gauge that, monitor that, be on the same page.

But it's fluid. There's some guys that we have tagged at green right now, but I don't know if they're going to see week-one action.

Q. Now that you've had a whole month of August to look at guys, Chop and Hunter, what have you learned about them? Smith Vilbert, the last time we saw him, he had a nice game or nice half in the Outback Bowl. What have you seen from his off-season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So with Chop, we obviously had high expectations of who and what he could be for us. He's really come in and adjusted well. I know the coaches have fallen in love with him. His teammates have, as well. He's just got a good way about him. He's really brought a lot to our team, and specifically for our defense. So he'll play a lot. You'll see him play a lot. Whether it is rotating in, whether it's starting. We'll see how that plays out.

But he's going to play a lot of football for us, there's no doubt about that.

When it comes to Hunter, probably similar situation. A guy that I would say both of those guys, whether they're starters or not, will play starter reps. Right now we look at Hunter being able to play both guards and center. We probably won't ask him to do all those things in game one, but he will play. Our plan is to play him starter reps at both guards.

We'd like to be able to do that a little bit more on the offensive line, is be able to get guys at least a series in the game in the first half, hopefully the second half for a couple things:

To allow those guys to gain experience, but also give our starters a blow that should hopefully help us in the fourth quarter and late in the season keep guys as fresh as we possibly can. A little bit more of a rotation.

I know we haven't done that a lot in the past, but I would also say I don't know if we've been in this position in terms of from the first team to the second team not being as significant of a dropoff. We'll see how that plays out.

Then Smith, you know, there's obviously a lot to be excited about based on your question about how he ended last season. But we'll just see how that plays out as the season goes on.

Q. How many wide receivers can you trust right now to put out on the field? How deep do you want that wide receiver rotation to be this season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, that's a fair question. I'd like to

say that we're at six, but I'm not really necessarily sure on that. Kind of looking at it, see how this week plays out to finalize that. But we'd really like to have a two deep, legitimate two deep, at every position.

I wouldn't necessarily say we're there. I'd say there's probably five guys that we feel comfortable putting out there with maybe the sixth guy being right on the edge that we need to see something over these first couple weeks of the season in practice and in games to feel that way.

But you'll see with our starters most of those guys will be tap guys, not rotational guys. What I mean by that is they will stay in until they need a blow. When they tap their helmet, the backup will come in for them, give them a blow for a few plays.

We got to be organized with that because sometimes that happens when Mike wants to go tempo. We just got to make sure we're organized. That takes some time to try to get that worked out. You call a tempo play, you sub, the official holds you up. Obviously not ideal, not what you're looking for. We'll work through that.

But I think we're in a pretty good place there. We need one more of these young guys to really come on for us.

Q. You've talked in the past about depth and competition. Specifically at the defensive line and the interior positions on offense, do you feel the depth you've had has created competition to raise the level of not just the starters but the players beneath them, finally create that environment you're looking for to raise the overall level of the team?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, and I think that's really what we've had in the past. I think we're back to that, which is kind of the message that I've been trying to kind of get across. I think we're back to that type of depth.

To your point, it does two things: it allows you to have a rotation of getting guys on the field, keeping guys fresh, those types of things, but the other thing it does is it creates some pressure on guys.

If you know you got a legitimate guy behind you that is pushing for your job every single day, that brings out the best in you. For us, what I typically like to do, say we don't have a true two deep, say you got two spots, say they're defensive ends, say you have them ranked one, two, three, four, I want the fourth guy behind the first guy and the third guy behind the second guy. Why? Because if the first is who he should be, he shouldn't need a guy behind him pushing him. Obviously you'd love to have it where you got a legitimate guy pushing everybody at every single

position. But if you don't, I want to make sure that two has the number three right behind him pushing him every single day to be the best and competing for that job, where you hope your one is an established guy and is mature enough to know how to work whether there's somebody behind him or not.

In a perfect world, you basically have two starters and two backups that you feel you can play with and win with, and there's not a dropoff to a four, if that makes sense.

I hope I explained that correctly.

Q. How much did last year going into Wisconsin help you in a week like this where you have a tough Big Ten road opener? Also, is Veilleux solidified as the backup quarterback?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So two good questions.

Yeah, I think last year going to Wisconsin has put us in position to be prepared with our returners to understand what we need to do to be successful.

Obviously going on the road at Wisconsin is a big deal. Going on the road at Purdue is a big deal. Going on the road 12 out of the last 13 years also helps with that.

So, yeah, again, we got to do it this year. But there is experience with our team going on the road.

Then your second question, which I know everybody will start texting right away, stop listening to me, Drew Allar is our backup quarterback for week one. That's not a set-in-stone thing for the entire year. That will continue to be a competition and fluid. But Drew Allar is the backup quarterback.

No other questions matter, everybody's heads are down tweeting, texting (smiling).

Q. We had Sean this morning. He was really complimentary of Harrison Wallace. Speaking of the wide receiver rotation, where does Harrison figure into that? What have you seen from him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: He's one of those guys that I think has earned the coaches' as well as his teammates' trust, a guy that we expect to play and play a lot. He's right on that fringe in terms of viewing him as a starter.

In terms of reps and in terms of rotation, very similar to maybe how we talked about Hunter and Chop. He's done a nice job. He's got a lot of ability. He's a really good kid. I think he's got a chance to be one of those guys where

maybe not a whole lot of people are talking about him right now, but I think he's got a chance to be one of those guys that by the middle of the season or end of the season, not only the fans and media are talking about him, but our opponents are saying, Hey, this is a guy we better be aware of.

Q. I'll bite. Why is Drew the backup this week?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Because when we take all of the information, coaches' opinion, based on their gut and experience, data from everything that we keep track of, that we feel like Drew has earned that opportunity in week one.

But again, I think we all remember last year, as well, just because you know, because I messed this up for a while, it's Veilleux, not Veilleux. I saw your eyebrows go up. He was the third string quarterback last year and ended up being a second team quarterback, came in and did a great job for us.

But taking everything into consideration, the coaching staff felt like this was the right decision. Obviously they are tough conversations to have. We sat down with everybody and did it with each one of the quarterbacks, met with them one on one, and communicated how and why.

Q. What are the challenges with Drew trying to get him up to speed? I asked Sean earlier how do you try to get those young guys ready. Tuesdays, we watch this film, Wednesday... What are some of the things you want to see Drew do this week?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think obviously we did a pretty good job all training camp of getting all four of those guys work. We also had a few days where we held Sean for a number of reasons that allowed all of them to get reps maybe up a spot than where they were on the depth chart.

Again, it's one thing to do it with the fours or the threes or the twos, and it's another thing to do it with the ones. So that was helpful.

But, yeah, I think Sean, where he's at academically, where he's at athletically, I think he told me the other day, literally I'm not just saying this, I think he's a TA in one of his classes. He's 45 years old, experienced, teaching classes, doing the same thing in the last football building, with a lot of our players on offense. I think he embraces that role. It's been really good.

But, yeah, Drew needs to learn from Sean, and so does CV and so does Beau. It's a really good environment with that whole room. We've worked hard at that, but we need

to continue to do that, continue to work hard with the chemistry of that room, and those guys continue to prepare and invest the way they need to be prepared when their number gets called. That's really all of them.

That's one of those coach-speak things that we all say. I talk to the team about it. You better prepare as if you're the starter. That's easier said than done. Obviously the example that we use all the time is Jan Johnson, who went from a scout team tight end to the starting middle linebacker in just a matter of months.

We just try to use that example as much as we can, because if everybody approaches it that way, then it's going to make them better and it's going to make our team better.

Q. You touched on punter and kickoff specialists. Can you share the competitions at kicker, middle linebacker, the guard spots? Any decisions made right now?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Now, when you say 'kicker', are you talking about field goals?

Q. Field goals.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Jake is our field goal kicker. He's had a strong camp. I used him as a example with the team the other day, talking about a guy in today's day and age with the transfer portal, here he is as a guy that is two-year starter for us, ends up losing his starting role, doesn't run to the transfer portal at the first sign of adversity, sticks it out, now a leader on our team. He's had a really good camp. I think he's going to have a big year for us. I'm really proud of him for a lot of reasons.

You asked about guard. We really see all three of those guys as starters in Landon, in Sal and in Hunter, try to play all three of those guys with starter reps.

J.B. was really trending, and we had a lot of confidence with him. He had an injury that kept him out for some time which has kind of set him back. We need to get him going again because we're going to need him at some point this year.

Middle linebacker, nothing's really changed from the last time we talked. Both of those guys will play, but Elsdon will be the starter. But both of those guys will play significant, significant reps in the game, him and Kobe.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

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