

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, I'd like to lead with sending our thoughts and prayers to Mike Hart and his family. Obviously Big Ten through and through as a player and a coach both at Indiana and Michigan.

Obviously you don't ever like to see anything like that. We truly wish his family, Mike, as well as the running backs and players at the University of Michigan, our thoughts. Hopefully he'll be healthy enough to be involved in the game on Saturday. I hope I get a chance to see him before the game. If not, wish him nothing but the best.

Kind of moving on, obviously not going to backtrack too much. We met last week. But getting into the Michigan game and Coach Harbaugh, obviously got a ton of respect for Coach Harbaugh, for the university, for the program, for the venue.

Obviously I think they got a lot of things planned for the game, as well. Should be a great atmosphere. I know our guys are looking forward to it and preparing for it. This is why you come to a place like Penn State, to play in these types of games.

Kind of when you get into them specifically, you talk about their offense. They have co-offensive coordinators in Coach Moore and Coach Weiss. Coach Moore has been on staff, been promoted. Coach Weiss has come from the Ravens. They've obviously had a unique situation with the Ravens and his brother being the head coach there. Been a bunch of staff kind of back and forth between those two organizations.

Got a ton of respect for what they're doing, how they're doing it. Extremely efficient. I think they do a great job of staying on schedule. First down is obviously a huge factor for them in their offense. It's going to be a challenge.

They're able to run it. They're able to throw it. Obviously their offensive line was considered to be the best offensive line in all of college football last year. On top of that, they've got maybe the most productive back in college football over the last couple years.

They got wide receivers that can make plays, tight ends that can make plays, and a young and talented quarterback that's leading the nation in completion percentage.

We have know all about Blake Corum, not only from what he's done at Michigan but also obviously right down the street here. Played his high school ball in the Baltimore, Maryland area. Ronnie bell has been doing it for a while and been successful for a while at wide receiver there. J.J. McCarthy is obviously the new face, but extremely talented. Kind of already talked about him.

They're similar to us. Got a deep and talented tight end room. Although they've had some injuries there, No. 86, Schoonmaker, is playing really well for them.

On the defense side of the ball, Jesse Minter, comes from a football family. I've known his dad for a long time as well. Another guy that spent time with the Ravens. Last year was at Vanderbilt. Now is at Michigan as the defensive coordinator.

Also got a situation there. When you look at what they're able to do defensively, it starts up front with Mazi Smith, who is a guy we recruited extremely hard. Kind of to me anchors their defense.

Their middle linebacker, No. 25, we're really impressed with the production of Mike Morris, defensive end, playing at a high level. Then their corner, DJ Turner.

Maybe I don't know if 'surprising' is the right term, with the departure of the two defensive ends last year that were so well thought of, for them to be able to pressure and sack the quarterback at the rate they've been able to do it after losing those guys has been impressive.

It will be a challenge. Multiple fronts. Talented secondary as well. They do a really good job scheme-wise of putting their players in position to be successful.

Then on special teams, again, consistency. Jay Harbaugh running the special teams has moved over to the defensive side of the ball this year. Was tight ends last year.



They have pretty good personnel as well. A.J. Henning is a man we recruited heavily. Their punt returner, kick returner, been successful. Their kicker Jake Moody and their punter Brad Robbins are all playing at a really high level. Their punter is punting as well as any punter in the country right now.

Really in all three units you're going to have to be prepared and ready to play. We're going to have to deal with their personnel, their scheme and the venue. Looking forward to the opportunity.

Open it up to questions.

Q. You mentioned Michigan's pass-rush. What makes that effective? Do you feel like you're better equipped to handle that pass-rush this year and why?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think we're better equipped. But I also think they've done a good job of making people one-dimensional, so then you're getting in maybe not obvious passing downs, but maybe a situation where people -- I don't know if the score has always mandated that. Some of their games it has.

But people have gotten away from the run game because they've gotten down by too many points. Whenever you're up by a certain margin, then you're going to get more passing opportunities, which also creates more opportunities to rush the quarterback and pin your ears back. So that plays a factor into it, how the score goes.

Very similar to their offense and how they've been able to manage their offense over the last couple of years and be able to stay on schedule. If you're in third-and-short situations or getting a bunch of yards on first down, it helps manage that for their offense and for their defense in what they're trying to do.

Yeah, I think we're better equipped to do it from a personnel standpoint, but I also think we're better equipped to do it in terms of not getting away from the run and being one-dimensional. Kind of sticking with the plan.

Q. With the offense this year, do you feel like you have a number one receiver this season? If not, are you comfortable not having that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think we got three guys that we feel are that. Obviously Parker Washington, obviously KeAndre, who is coming back, then Mitch. Then there are some other guys that are coming on.

Now what we see in practice, what we've seen all summer

is one thing. I understand the question. The production, doing it consistently in games. That's at the quarterback position, that's at the wideout position, at tight end, protection, all of it. Consistently making the tough catches or consistently creating separation or consistently making the throw, all those things kind of factor in.

We think we have three guys, and possibly more, that have the ability to be what you're describing. But obviously we got to get it done on Saturdays.

Q. Do you think you are a better football team now than you were two weeks ago with the bye week? If so how specifically?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think so. I think we've done a good job of doing self scout and really kind of having a good idea of who we are, what we are, what are the areas that we need to work on, what are the areas we need to build on.

Obviously been able to take some time going good on good at practice. Then being able to take some time and get a head start on Michigan. I think all those things are valuable.

Also the time off for the players, not so much for the coaches. I wish we could get a little bit more time off for the coaches because also being rested physically and mentally is important as well. The timing of it is pretty good. We haven't always had great timing of the bye weeks. This one has been pretty good for us.

Managing that, one of the things we did this year that's a little bit different is our third practice. We practiced Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. That Thursday practice in the past had been more of a GA and non-travel practice from a developmental standpoint. This year we did that, but we had everybody out there, all the players were able to get a head start on Michigan, with the coordinators and GAs and things like that. We did add an extra day of meetings and extra day of practice, although it was a jog-through, more from a mental perspective than anything.

I think on top of that, I think how we have played our guys since the beginning of the season. Our depth is in a better position, not only that it's been in the past but also how it's been from the beginning of the season. I think there's less question marks that you guys have as media and we have as coaches of our depth overall and at specific positions that you guys had a ton of questions about in the beginning of the season.

Q. My colleagues have anticipated my questions

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

perfectly. But let's go with this. Michigan has kind of settled on one quarterback now. It doesn't make them easier to prepare for because he's played so well, but talk about the challenge of playing against him and what he brings to the table.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it would be different in they were playing both quarterbacks all the time. It was really one game, the guy played the majority of the reps, then the next game the guy played the majority of the reps. You had a good sample size of who those guys were, especially the other quarterback who played an entire season.

I think the biggest thing for us and the biggest challenge for us is what I've been talking about. They've been great on first down. When you're able to run the ball and be as efficient as they've been on first down, they're able to stay ahead of the sticks, takes the pressure off of their quarterback, takes the pressure off of their offensive coordinator because they're in favorable down and distance situations a lot.

That's a credit to their players, to their coaches. I think a big part of it is obviously not only Blake Corum but really their running back room. They've had a lot of production out of those guys. It will be a real challenge for us.

But this quarterback, I've been impressed with his poise. He is very poised back there. Obviously he's been very accurate. He can make all the throws on the field. He's got a very strong arm. He's got real good what people describe as arm talent.

I think part of his poise is his confidence in his athleticism. He feels like he can stand in there. If he gets pressure, he runs well enough to run away from most people and avoid hits. Able to run for a first down on the sideline, step out of bounds, but keep people on their heels.

That confidence that comes from his accuracy, that confidence that comes from his athleticism, and that confidence that comes from staying ahead of the sticks is I think what makes him and their offense challenging.

Q. How do you evaluate the play of the offensive line in the first five games? What do you want to see them do in the next seven or so to get themselves to another level?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it's like every position. It's consistency. There's been flashes of really good things that everybody has been excited about. Our staff, our team, the fans.

I think there's been times where we've been really happy with how it's looked and how productive we've been. There's other times where we got to be more consistent and clean some things up, whether we're getting different looks or different fronts or pressures or run-throughs.

It's like I've talked about before, those are opportunities for big plays as long as we can identify those things, communicate those things, get a hat on a hat. I think that's one of the things when I look at Michigan, last year and this year, it's their ability to get a hat on a hat consistently. There's a lot of things that go into that: obviously your players on the field, your personnel, some of the things you're doing scheme-wise, some of the things you're doing at the quarterback position. It's all of it.

For me it's consistency, making the big block, getting a hat on a hat, but also now blocking with a mentality and trying to finish people so guys can't fall off the block for a run of four yards, we're finishing a block, so now a ball carrier can turn a four-yard run into an explosive run.

But overall I've been pleased. I think we're taking steps in the right direction. I think that group is starting to play with some confidence. I think we're doing a good job of, again, staying balanced for as long as we possibly can and being a little bit more unpredictable.

I think sometimes there's some calls that happen and people may question why you're doing it. At the end of the day it's about execution, but it's also about keeping people on their toes.

If you can run in predictable passing situations and be efficient and effective, that's what you want to do, and vice versa. Try to be able to mix those things in as much as we can to keep people honest.

Q. I'm going to test your psychology degree a little bit here I think. We talk about the goals that you want to accomplish at Penn State. You guys have established over the years that you can beat the teams that you 'should' more often than not based on talent, programs. When it comes to these games that you say this is why you come to Penn State, these are the same sorts of opponents getting in the way of what you want to do long-term. What is your relationship like after being years at the same place where you go, kind of know it might come down to these two or three weeks every single year? How do you grapple with that knowledge knowing you take every week seriously?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that's a good question. I think that's where it's not just the art or the science. It's also kind

of the art. I think your point is a good one. We know that these types of game each year are critical. We're not the only program in this conference or in this country that is in this situation.

But I think your point that you made is also a good one, is if you put all your eggs in these games' baskets, then you can put yourself in a situation where you don't handle the ones before that you need to, that everybody wants to look past.

That's kind of the fine line of managing those two things, doing everything you possibly can to get yourself to this position, and then also being strategic as you possibly can to take advantage of these opportunities when they come.

That is one of the things that I think you guys have heard me talk about for a long time. That's where not only is this Saturday critical in terms of how we manage the game, how our players go out there with the confidence and swagger to make the plays when they're needed, but it's also the thing that we've talked about in the past.

It's all of the progress that you can make the other 364 days a year that add up. All those little wins add up all year long to put your team in the best position to be successful consistently on Saturdays, in both games that you've described.

That's where I'm pretty excited, which I think you guys know. Pat has been great with those types of things. He's been really good at recognizing those things without me even having to say anything about it. That's been great.

I would say even all the way up to the president and the chair of the board, as well. Whether it's Matt Schuyler, the chair of the board, or whether that's Dr. Bendapudi. I think that alignment you heard about is critical.

Now, again, that's all great. Nobody wants to talk about that. Want to talk about Saturday. So at the end of the day we got to do everything we possibly can to put ourself in a position to get to this point where we are 5-0 with a top 10 match up on the road in a tough venue.

We got to have an unbelievable week of preparation. We got to make sure that our players are approaching it the right way. I got to make sure that the staff is approaching it the right way to put ourselves in the best position to be successful on Saturday.

It's going to be a challenge. But to your point, this is why you come to a place like Penn State, to play in these types of games. But we got to find a way to be successful, there's no doubt about it.

Q. How would you evaluate your linebackers so far? How important are those guys going up against a team that you know is going to run the ball a lot?

JAMES FRANKLIN: As you guys know, we felt pretty good from an experience and production standpoint about the two outside linebacker positions. But I think we probably feel even better because the depth that we've been able to create with Abdul behind Curtis I think has helped us.

I think everybody in the room would agree - I don't mean to speak for everybody in the room - but most people would agree we're in a better position from that standpoint than we were coming into the season based on what we've been able to see and know up to this point.

The biggest question mark was at Mike linebacker. Both Elsdon and Kobe have played a lot of football now. They're no longer first-time starters. When you get to this point of the season, that's no longer something that is discussed or accepted to be talking about, Well, it's your first year starting. We're past that point in the season.

They will be challenged in this game when you talk about the run game, the variety of the run game, the diversity of the run game, the play-action pass off of it, and the talent as well. Their talent on their offensive line, running back positions have done a really good job.

I think we're in a much different position, a much better position than we were to start the season. Those guys continue to gain confidence and gain experience. We're going to need those guys to play really well on Saturday based on what we've all seen on film.

Q. How would you evaluate Sean Clifford's play through five games? Can you speak to the importance of having the best version of him going against this caliber of opponent?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think obviously a fair question. I think kind of like we talked about the offensive line, Sean has done some really good things. I think there's some plays that he would like back. There's no doubt about it.

But I think overall the way he has managed our offense, whether it's the passing game and the protections, whether it's the run game and getting everybody on the same page in terms of how we're IDing the front, then it's making those four to six plays a game that you need your quarterback to make, that the media or the fan or the coach would watch the game and say, That was a critical play in the game that Sean was able to make for us.

I think his entire career and his entire season kind of keeps building up and leading up to moments like this and opportunities like this.

But, yeah, I don't think there's any doubt that there are some plays he would like back, there's some plays that we would like back.

Him going out and playing well on Saturday, really all of our positions and all of our players, to win on the road against this type of opponent, we're going to have to play well. I don't think there's any doubt about that. That also includes our quarterback.

Q. Saleem Wormley was on the Zoom with us today. Looking back at missing all of last year, what has his return brought to your offensive line? What has he proven in the five games?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think the biggest thing is for us, essentially the way we view him is we got a starter back. I know on paper it may not necessarily say that. But my point is, going into last year, we had him penciled in based on how he had played in camp as a starting offensive lineman, offensive guard for us. So to lose him for the entire year was significant.

To get him back as a year older, a year wiser, a year more experienced, and for him to gain the confidence in how he's played up to this point, is extremely valuable.

I think whenever you're getting a guy that your team views as a starter, your coaches, the players view as a starter back, it's extremely important.

He's smart. He's powerful. He's played at a pretty high and consistent level. So these games specifically against teams like Michigan, these types of opponents, obviously we're going to have to make plays on the perimeter on both sides of the ball. To be able to battle, compete, win up front is going to be really important on both sides of the ball.

Q. Is there a mentality shift that has to take place when you play a really physical team out of the bye week when you haven't taken the field in 13 days, you kind of know they want to run the ball, punch you in the mouth?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that's where having a mature football team is really important. That's also where having a Tuesday and Wednesday practice in pads where you're banging is important.

There's a fine line, right, because you want to make sure

during the bye week that you do enough to get their legs back so that we can be as fresh as we possibly can be on Saturday. If you're not careful, you got to take care of those guys that bang every play as well and get them feeling good and their bodies feeling good. It's all of that.

Having a mature football team, doing enough of that stuff on Tuesdays and Wednesdays is really important. There's that fine line between understanding how physical we're going to have to be to win this game, but also putting our players in the best position to be as fresh as they possibly can be so we can be explosive and fast and violent as well.

That's where the experience matters and that's where having some experts on our staff that can weigh in on those kinds of things are important, too.

Q. You mentioned when you were talking about the wide receivers, KeAndre is coming back. Will you have him Saturday at Michigan? Coming out of the bye, how do you feel this team has done with its health, avoiding some of those injuries?

JAMES FRANKLIN: As you guys know, I don't get into a whole lot of specifics and details with injuries. I know or I've learned over nine years that you're going to ask anyway. But we're hopeful to have KeAndre for Saturday. We'll see how this works out. Sometimes it's challenging even if I wanted to answer the question on a Tuesday, because it's still very early in the week.

Overall health, I think, knock on wood, we're in a pretty good place. I think part of that is how we have managed practice. I think that is part of how our guys have done a really good job of taking care of their body. Hydration, nutrition, all those things have helped. As you know, we've had a bunch of discussions about nutrition as well, how that factors in.

Then our ability and our willingness to play guys. The amount of reps that our two deep has gotten this year, it's significant. There's value in that. There's value in those guys gaining experience to create depth, but there's also value in getting your ones out, putting them in the best position to be as recovered and ready to go the following week.

Q. You made your point clear about opening on the road in the Big Ten, also the Auburn game. Do you think those two experiences will serve you well this weekend?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it helps obviously because we've been on the road before in tough environments. I mean, obviously this is going to be one of

them. The experience matters. The understanding kind of what it takes to win on the road, there's value in that.

But at the end of the day all that matters is what we do Saturday. Having our guys ready and prepared for what that moment is going to be like is important.

I do think all your past experiences as an individual and as a player have a factor in that. But again, at the end of the day, we can't take any of the points or any of the interceptions that our defense got or any of those things to the game on Saturday.

We'll take those experiences with it and the confidence that comes from it. At the end of the day we got to go execute at a high level on this Saturday and in this environment against these players and against this scheme.

Q. Hakeem is somebody you thought was going to be a starter the last year. What are your thoughts on how he's played thus far?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he's playing well. He's a guy we've had a lot of confidence in for a long time. Hakeem has grown in a lot of ways. I've gotten I think very close with Hakeem and his mom. We've been through a lot of experiences together.

Ultimately I want what's best for Hakeem. I want what's best for our program. I think those two things can be complementary pieces.

When you're talking about a team like this, and you're talking about winning up front on the offensive side of the ball with the O-line and the tight ends, and with the defensive side of the ball, with your D-line and linebackers, having depth and having talent and having the skill up front necessary is going to be critical.

Hakeem is a perfect example of that. So just like we talked about the quarterback and other positions, we're going to need Hakeem to play well on Saturday. I can say that about pretty much every position and every player on our team.

Q. You talk a lot about balance on offense.

JAMES FRANKLIN: It's really been a theme every year, we're just doing it a little bit more right now.

Q. That's the ideal, is to have balance on offense. Usually we talk about it run versus pass. Balance within one of those facets, especially passing, how do you feel you've been there in terms of balance of attacking different parts of the field and being able to

threaten a defense in multiple ways? How do you feel you're balanced in that sense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think we have to be more productive in the explosive plays in the passing game. If you kind of look at us historically, we've done a pretty good job of that. We probably wish at this stage we had a little more production. We're going to need that on Saturday. We're going to need more production down the field in the passing game. That could be shots thrown down the field or that could be making somebody miss and breaking a tackle and creating the explosive play that way.

We lacked the explosive play in the run game last year. We were able to get that back. We were extremely explosive in the pass game this past season. We need a little bit more of that on Saturday. That will be this Saturday. That will be moving forward. That's going to be important for us.

To your point, I think that's what you were asking. Obviously you'd like to throw for a higher percentage, all those types of things as well. But being able to create explosive plays in the passing game is going to be really important for us this Saturday and moving forward.

Q. You guys since you've taken over are 2-5 after the bye week. What kind of challenges can the bye week present that includes the Illinois game last year and also what are you doing to make sure you don't come out flat Saturday against Michigan?

JAMES FRANKLIN: The kind of things we've already talked about. There's been discussion about studies that we've done in the off-season. We added an extra day of practice. Staffing-wise we're able to be in a position where we have analysts and people that are able to get ahead for us and stay ahead. I think that's helped.

Also, like we talked about, this point of the season, about how we rotated and played guys to be as healthy and fresh as we possibly can be. Depth has played a part in that in the past. So all those things.

Spend a lot of time talking about it and studying it in the off-season, talking to different programs, different coaches, different sports scientists, strength coaches, all those types of things to put ourselves in the best position to go win this Saturday.

For me to sit here and say that we didn't spend time studying it, looking at it, that wouldn't be accurate. We spent a ton of time in the off-season looking at it.

Obviously the opponent factors into it. But we spent a ton



of time on it. The things we've already covered and addressed in this press conference as well as all season kind of answers most of that question.

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