

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference

JAMES FRANKLIN: I'd like to start by encouraging them to do the same thing this week. It's going to be important that we have a significant home-field advantage, and I'd also like to send my thoughts to the family of former PSU linebacker Bani Gbadyu. Obviously that was traumatic news to find out that we lost Bani, and I send on behalf of our entire football family, university, our thoughts and prayers.

Kind of reviewing the previous game, when you talk about kind of the stats that we talk about every single week, the turnover battle, we were even. The penalty battle, we won, and to me this was significant. There was a bunch of this. I don't feel like it was talked about a whole lot but Minnesota entered the game No. 1 nationally in fewest penalties.

So winning that was important, and again, that would be another kind of opportunity to reinforce the impact that the fans had on the game. Especially when you're playing an offense that is designed to stay on schedule, I think that had a major factor in the game.

Driver/start battle we lost by one yard. The sack battle, we won that. The explosive play battle, our offense was at 22 percent. So we won that on offense. We missed our goal on defense.

And then specifics, players of the game on offense, we had quarterback Sean Clifford. Clifford was also the Big Ten offensive Player of the Week.

On defense, winner was Curtis Jacobs, linebacker on special teams linebacker, Dominic DeLuca.

The D-squad Players of the Week: Ben Hartman, offensive lineman, and then I know these are a lot of names but our coaches really felt that our scout wide receivers really did good a good job and prepared us. That's Jan Mahlert, Jason Estrella, Anthony Ivey, Jake Spencer, Mason Stahl, Tyler Johnson, Kaden Saunders, Patrick Williams and Robert Rossi all did a tremendous job.



And I tried to talk them out of listing so many guys, but they felt strongly about it.

Defensively, Davon Townley and Cristian Driver. And then on special teams, Jason Estrella. So that's kind of reviewing some of the game.

The last few points I would say is I just was pleased with the entire organization and how we responded, players, staff coaches. I thought P.J. Mustipher's leadership and vocal presence all week long in meetings and practice, I think was really important, and I thought he made a huge impact.

I thought we played fast and aggressive. You watched on tape, we were back to playing fast and aggressive. And then a couple other things that, again, I don't know if this was covered much with the media or not.

But Minnesota's offense on third down was ranked No. 1 nationally at 66 percent. We held them to 15 percent, 2 of 13. That was huge. We talked about getting off the field on defense on third down and staying on the field on offense.

And then Minnesota's defense was also ranked No. 1 in the country nationally, holding other offenses to 22 percent, and we were 46 percent on the day.

And then Dom DeLuca's blocked punt was a big play.

Just a few opportunities I'll mention for both: Got to get rid of the pre-snap and post-snap penalties. We had two pre-snap off a false start and defensive offsides, so very similar penalties and then we had an unsportsmanlike conduct post-whistle. So those were the big things

And probably the last thing is we've got to start fast on offense. That's in practice. That's in jog-throughs and obviously that's in games.

You know, when you talk about Ohio State and Ryan Day, obviously a ton of respect for what they have been able to do for a long time. They have been doing it for a long time at Ohio State. But a ton of respect for them and what they do and how they go about their business.



Offensive coordinator Ryan Day/Kevin Wilson, obviously they do a great job, got a ton of weapons. Some people are saying their quarterback is leading. The Heisman votes at this stage. But they are challenging not only through scheme but also the weapons they have. The quarterback, C.J. Stroud, the wide receiver Marvin Harrison and the other wide receiver, Emeka Egbuka, could mention a bunch of guys, running back TreVeyon Henderson, Miyon Williams, and then they have an offensive lineman, one guy that jumps out, Dawand Jones, who we recruited as well, 6-8, 359 pounds and very light on his feet which is kind of crazy to say

Defensive coordinator Jim Knowles who we know very well. Jim actually came and visited us here years ago. I think he was at Duke at the time. He's done a really good job going in there and being aggressive, going in there being aggressive in terms of scheme, taking advantage of their personnel.

You look at Ronny Hickman who we recruited heavily out of New Jersey. It seems like he's been playing there forever. Taron Vincent who we know out of Baltimore. Tommy Eichenberg, the linebacker. J.T. Tuimoloau, hope I pronounce that right, if I don't, I apologize and Denzel Burke, the corner. So they have guys that really each level of the defense

And then on special teams, special teams coordinator Parker Fleming has done a nice job. They play a ton of guys, starters on special teams. They always have. If you look, their punter is an Australian punter, does a really good job. That's something we are going to have to be prepared for is the variety of kicks that a lot of these Australian punters are able to do in terms of spreading the ball all over the field and then their punt returner, Emeka Egbuka who we mentioned earlier

A lot of information. A lot of things that we need to get worked on. Obviously today is our first real day of practice. We did have Sunday. Monday is our off-day from a planning perspective and today, so we'll have a better idea later in the week but that's the start.

Open up for questions.

Q. What did you see from your team during practice last week, and can a performance like Saturday's build momentum going into a week like this?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think so, and it needs to, right. We are playing a really good opponent at home. We did some really good things to build on last week that we should have confidence from and momentum from and we

need to build on it. We need to get better today in practice. We need to get better all week in terms of our preparation and how we practice and how we coach and same thing with the game on Saturday. We are going to have to play better this Saturday than we did this past week.

There's a ton of stuff to build on from last week. There's a bunch of stuff watching that tape to be excited about and to show the team and we've got to build on it for sure.

Q. 2018, after the Ohio State game, you outlined the steps that Penn State had to take to become elite. Where are you on that timeline right now?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think obviously a lot of things have changed since then. We talked a lot this off-season about new president in Dr. Bendapudi and new athletic director in Pat Kraft. That factors into all of this, there's no doubt about it. I think there's things within our program that you look at, whether it's from a development standpoint, whether it's a facility standpoint, whether it's a nutrition standpoint, whether it's recruiting. All the things that you talk about in terms of building a program, I think some areas, we have made significant progress in and others we still have work to do.

So I think in a lot of ways we've taken some steps in the right direction but there's still some areas that we need to get resolved. You know, that's why I think you know, I voiced this over and over again, the excitement I have for the leadership that we have in those two positions, and that's with total respect and appreciation for the past as well.

Q. Could you evaluate your pass rush so far overall? Are you coming up short in any part of that, and if so, how do you think that can get better as we go here?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it really kind of depends. I think things can skew that or if you are just looking at stats and not necessarily basing it off of the film, I think things can skew that. If you're playing a team that's going run the ball 90 percent of the time and how they are built and how they are wired, you know, that's going to impact your stats. You play somebody who is going to throw it every single down, that's going to impact your stats as well.

So I think overall, I think our ability to affect the quarterback, whether it's through sacks, pressures or tight coverage has been good. I think you look at our completion percentage against our defense, that is not just because of our defensive backs. That's also because of pressure and making the quarterback uncomfortable in the pocket.

So would we like more flat-out sacks? Yes. Would we like more tackles for a loss? Yes. But overall, I think when you evaluate the whole picture, pretty good.

Q. When you mentioned that Sean was the Big Ten offensive Player of the Week, there was sort of a long pause there, and I --

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that -- I think that may have just been your wi-fi. (Laughter).

Q. All right. The backup quarterback is all popular with the fans. That's sort of a football cliché. Is there anything about this situation that's a little different? Do the fans, for some reason, whether it's unique to Penn State, why they maybe don't appreciate Sean as much as you do?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm spending my energy, all of my energy on getting ready to play a really good Ohio State team. I'm pouring all my energy into loving and supporting my players and staff, and focusing on things that I can control and impact. That's where all my energy is focused on is supporting my staff, supporting and loving the players, and focusing on getting ready for a really good Ohio State team on offense, defense and special teams.

And those other things, I'm not spending any time on because to be honest with you, unless you have something for me or somebody else, I don't see how I can impact that.

Q. Parker said after the game that you guys -- that he felt that the offense runs its best when it's in its tempo and doing good work in the tempo offense. What are some of the things that kind of lead to that for you guys, lead to you having success there, some of the outside ingredients outside of getting the play fast and snapping quickly?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think when we are in a rhythm in games or in a rhythm in practice going against our defense, we have had a ton of conversation about that and specifically with Sean and the receivers about it. They feel strongly about that.

But that's also a fine line, right. If you go fast and you go three-and-out, then it puts your defense in a more challenging position as well. So there's a balance of that.

I thought one of the things that we did best on Saturday was just mixing, mixing tempo, mixing cadence, mixing scheme, whether it's move the pocket, whether it's run, whether it's play-action pass, whether it's misdirection, you know, whether it's trick plays, I thought we had a really good mix of keeping them kind of off balance and

uncomfortable.

And the funny thing is, what I try to say all the time is say you tweak a run scheme, a counter, or say you run a reverse. We ran a reverse and we got six yards but to me there's a lot more impact than just the six yards. It's like if you run a reverse, people aren't happy with a six-yard play and you think you're running a reverse for an explosive play. But six yards is a pretty good average.

But the other thing it does, it gives the coordinator something to be concerned about, and it gives the defender, specifically the linebacker, when you're playing a team like Minnesota who they are a quarters team and the safeties are really involved in the run support, it gives those guys pause, whether it's reverses, play-action pass.

So now when you go back to your normal runs, they are not fitting it the same way with the same confidence and speed as they would without those plays being run.

So I think there's a ton of value in that, and to me, that's what we did best on Saturday and we need to continue to do.

Q. This is a long-winded question about roster construction. You've always competed well against Ohio State, and they are kind of the team at the top and you have to do things to compete well against them. You said earlier if you play a team that runs 90 percent, stats will be different. Curious how much concerted effort over the years has been, hey, we've got to do what Ohio State does. We've got to be able to stop it. But if you play teams like a Michigan that runs more, is your roster always set up for every other kind of team? How difficult is that when you're constructing a roster?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a fair question and I think that's one of the things that maybe frustrates people, and I'm not talking specific to Penn State. I'm saying in general, there are certain weeks you feel like you match up better whether it's scheme or there's certain weeks whether you match up whether it's personnel better than other weeks. There's no doubt about that.

You may have an injury at a position or two and that position is where their strength is. There's a lot of things that factor into it.

But to your point, that's the challenge, right. You've got to be able to -- you've got to be able to feel like you can line up and match up from a skill and athleticism perspective with an Ohio State one week, and then say you make it to the Big 10 Championship and you play Wisconsin, that's a

very different animal that you're getting ready for, and you have to either have the depth and the diversity within your personnel to do it.

I think you guys remember in the past we would have Kevin Givens playing D-tackle and we would play Wisconsin or someone like that and play Kevin that week at defensive end to get bigger, to get bigger.

So either having the personnel to be able to make some moves like that, or obviously some scheme things that you're going to have to do different to put your players in the best position to be successful. No different than these teams that play from a 4-2-5 shell. They are playing with a nickel almost predominately on the field and then you go play a team that's going to try to play smash-mouth football and you've never played with a three-linebacker on the field.

Like I know that was a big discussion Saturday is we had those three linebackers on the field. Well, that made a ton of sense against Minnesota and what they do.

I think your point is a really good one, and that's one of the complexities or the subtle things that's challenging, especially in a conference like the Big Ten where maybe you have a little bit, maybe more diversity in how people are built throughout our conference where a lot of conferences, pretty much everybody is running a similar style throughout the entire conference.

I think that's a good question and I think it's a fair one. That's what you're trying to do. You're trying to build a team that can do both, which is easier said than done.

Q. Given what you have with Joey, Kalen, Johnny, everyone in the secondary, is this the most confident you've felt in a secondary going into a matchup with Ohio State who historically in your tenure has had really good quarterbacks, wide receivers and a good passing game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm not sure about that because I had not really kind of thought about it. But I think your point is maybe you could make the argument, the strength of our defense is in the secondary if you were ranking kind of all three levels. That's a strength of ours for sure. We have a lot of confidence in those guys, and we are going to need it.

But I also know that these guys are talented enough up front and at tight end and at running back that if you put too much of an emphasis on that, they can beat you the other way, too, by running the ball.

So they do a good job of being balanced. I think at the end of the day, you know, their trigger man is what makes them go. He's the one that distributes the ball to all those different play-makers and does a really good job doing it. He throws on the run as well as he throws from the pocket, which is somewhat unusual.

Again, he's leading the Heisman race for a reason. A talented guy that we have a ton of respect for.

Q. Year and a half ago, not even, when Kaytron and Nick committed to Penn State, you guys had a loaded running back room with guys who had significant eligibility remaining. What did it say about them to be willing to join that room and how fortunate do you feel now that you took two kids when you look out in the game last week and they are your only two healthy scholarship running backs?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, to be honest with you, that's really how we want to be at every position, we want to not only have the depth and talent to compete week-in and week-out.

But we also want to recruit guys that aren't scared based on the room that they are coming into; that they are choosing Penn State because of the academics and the campus and the environment and the culture and they say, look, I'm going to come to Penn State and I'm going to compete. And if I plan on playing at the next level, you know, that's going to prepare me for that and get me used to that.

So yeah, I think that was a factor for sure. I loved how those guys approached it. It never really, you know, impacted them. But to be honest with you, the schools that they were being recruited by, it was pretty much similar at all those places. So that now kind of takes it out of the equation for the most part.

Q. You kind of already touched a little on this with Abdul starting on Saturday, is that a lineup that you think has more long-term legs or does this continue to be a week-to-week decision?

JAMES FRANKLIN: To your point, I think I kind of said that. It really depends on who you play. If you look around college football and the NFL, most people are not playing with three linebackers on the field because they are in 10 or 11 personnel and now, okay, it's great to have a linebacker that's really good at stopping the run but now he's not being asked to stop the run. He's being asked to cover Parker Washington out in space.

So it's all based on what we need to do to not only get our

best players on the field but also our best players in the field based on the matchup and the scheme and the personnel that we are playing.

Q. You needed to do some mixing and matching on the offensive line on Saturday with some guys coming to the sideline, some guys not available. Curious what you felt you learned about that unit over the course of those four quarters, and specifically a couple guys who had to step up in Vega and Bryce.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Bryce, I think you guys know, we love Bryce. We view Bryce as a starter for us. He's getting really starter reps if you look at it at him and the guys playing on Saturday, he's getting starter-type reps. We are very impressed with him, and he's playing both tackle and guard at a high level and also when we get into the heavy sets, he's able to get in there at tight end. So he's doing a lot of things and a lot of things well for us.

You know, Vega, obviously that situation, that's not something we probably anticipated going into the game but it played out that way. He's a guy that we've got -- there's a lot of excitement in our building about. He's got an awesome way about him. He's always got a smile on his face.

I had a meeting, a freshman check-in meeting with all the offensive players yesterday in my office, and he was walking out and kind of dapped me up on the way out and was just talking about how awesome Saturday was. He's just one of those kids, he's super appreciative of being at Penn State. He's very coachable, powerful, strong, athletic. We think he's got a very bright future. We'd like to try to redshirt him if we can but we may not be able to.

And he's also, again, you don't say this very often but he's strong, powerful and he's extremely light on his feet; and he's 340 pounds and look like he's 315, you know. And those guys -- those guys I think are really important to have up front with some of the matchups that we have; back to kind of some of the questions I've gotten.

You play a team that's maybe undersized and athletic compared to a team that's massive. Having those interchangeable parts are important and having somebody with that type of girth and intelligence and power to match up inside is really valuable.

And he's one of those guys that he's not trying to be 340. He's just naturally, that's kind of who he is. I think we have all seen over the years guys that are trying to be something that really their genetics tell them they are not supposed to be. Either they are trying to stay smaller and their body is trying to get bigger and they don't want to embrace that or

vice versa.

Q. Obviously you don't want to have turnovers in any game, but Ohio State had six turnovers last week they capitalized on and last year you guys had that scoop-and-score you lost to them. In big games like this, how much more important is avoiding turnovers?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, I think turnovers are important every single week. It's one of the most important stats in football. That, and explosive plays. I think to your point, obviously the bigger the game that people talk about, the bigger the game, then those stats are magnified. Explosive plays are magnified. Turnovers are magnified because the margin of error is smaller in those types of games.

So it's always important but obviously it's magnified in games like this.

Q. You talked about roster construction, how much value add is a defensive coordinator like Manny Diaz in a matchup like this where you're going to be aggressive and you're going to be chasing the ball more, and it's just going to be available for because it's in the air more?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, give me -- I want to make sure I'm understanding where you're coming from with this question.

Q. What is the value added of his mentality, like the aggressiveness in attacking the ball, trying to force more turnovers rather than maybe sitting back, playing coverage, being comfortable sort of in a complacent situation?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess I don't view it the way you're communicating it. You look at Iowa, you could say Iowa is a team that plays the way you just described, and they have played as good of football as anybody in the country and created as many turnovers as anybody in the country.

So it really just kind of depends on your style and what you like in terms of how it is built and how it is called. But to your point, obviously we are challenging routes more in terms of the balls that are getting broken up. Hopefully forcing the quarterback to hold on to the ball longer, so in theory, we should be able to be more disruptive on the quarterback with sacks and pressures and things like that.

So really, just depends. I think there's a lot of ways to do it. There's a lot of ways to be successful whether it's on offense, defense or special teams. We have done it both

ways and been successful both ways.

So you could make arguments, but it really just comes down to probably preference. I prefer good defense and good offense and good special teams, and however you get to it, you get to it. And that could be based on the coordinator's approach and mentality. It also has to factor in your personnel because there may be a year that our personnel is more suited for this or for that, and you have to be able to have some flexibility within your system to tweak it.

But at the end of the day, what's great is the way Manny wants to play, and the way we want to play, really matches up with our personnel right now, so that helps.

Q. I've never seen you from this side of the room before. I wanted to try something different. Sean was talking this morning about how weeks like this are the sorts of things that can change your season, and as much as we want to know everything every week, there's an inevitability that we all understand that. How do you reconcile the emotions of benchmarking games with the success you can have the rest of the season around them and sort of on the one hand, if I look at your schedule, there are a lot of wins still to be had where somebody else more critical says maybe they don't beat Michigan and who knows what happens this weekend. How do you balance the emotions internally that come with those two different kinds of games?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's that's where our process, we lean into so much, because that's the challenge, right. Everybody is being told from every different source, whether it's friends or family members or social media or sending the players into a press conference, the type of questions they get, their constantly being told whether it's directly or indirectly, what's a big game, what's not, what's a good win, what's not.

We just try to avoid that as much as we possibly can and stay consistent with how we go about things because that can have a huge impact. That can have a huge impact on you making certain games too big based on what you're being told or overlooking someone else.

So we just try to lean into that process as much as we possibly can. Now, that doesn't mean we are putting our head in the sand and we don't recognize. Like we recognize; the players recognize. We talk about it. They know what it is. It's not like we are sitting here trying to -- it's no like we are trying to deceive them. You know, trying to send them on a path that's not real and accurate. Okay, let's recognize what it is and let's get back to our process

and get back to what we need to do to be successful.

Over my time, both as a players and as an assistant, as a coordinator as a head coach, I feel like that's been the best process. And I think it's magnified. I think we have talked about this before. I think it's magnified in today's college football. Specifically, the way the playoffs are structured, and at a place like Penn State, it's different.

So those things are important.

Q. You referenced C.J. Stroud as the trigger man of the offense obviously and he's 70 percent completion, arm strength, all that stuff, release. How challenging on the practice field this week will it be to try and even replicate for your secondary and your linebackers what he can do just to kind of get them up to speed what to expect on Saturday night?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't think you really can. I mean, obviously we do that. Like when we build the scout teams each week, you're literally saying, okay, this guy should play him, and this guy should play him. You know, there's not too many people in the country that have a quarterback like that, let alone a quarterback like that on the scout team.

So that's hard to pull off and that's where trying to replicate it as much as you possibly can in practice but then also doing some of the good-on-good work every single day, so they are getting the speed of it. That's helpful, too.

But there's no way to completely replicate it week-in and week-out.

Q. I want to get your opinion on the phrase "establish the run." It's been in football for as long as football has been around. Analytics have challenged the notion of that, and I wanted to get your idea of maybe where you started, if your thoughts on that have changed over time.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I don't know if I have ever kind of approached it or looked at it as "establish the run."

I've always believed, and I think I have said this in here multiple times too, here, in balance doesn't mean you're going to run the ball 50 percent of the time and throw the ball 50 percent of the times. It means you have the ability to in most situations be able to run or pass effectively. That, to me, is the important thing.

And then that puts you in position to set up -- set up the play-action passes and things like that. So I've never really talked about kind of that as being a philosophy of ours. It's

been more about having enough balance and having enough diversity within our offense that we can do either and be able to play a style that we have to with whatever the game dictates to win.

There's been years where we have been really explosive but we couldn't run the ball when we needed to in four-minute offense. That's the hard part, right. The best ones, the elite ones are able to do all of it. They are able to run when everybody in the stadium knows you're going to run and be able to throw when you need to throw to win.

So that's kind of how I've always looked at it more than necessarily establishing.

Q. I know I have tunnel vision, but did you see the comment or hear about the comment that Harbaugh made yesterday about you and do you have any reaction to it?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, I don't. No. Ohio State.

Q. I wanted to go back to what Mark asked you about --

JAMES FRANKLIN: Just so you know, I was saying no, I don't have a comment.

Q. To the 365-day a year competition, you had said the comment in the off-season that the more yeses you get in those things, the more you tend to see it on Saturdays?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, the more wins is probably a better way to say it.

Q. When you look at that, if you had a wish list of things that you would want, what's at the top of that list in terms of facilities right now?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm happy to talk about -- I think you guys asked me some of these things last week as well. I think Ben may have asked me something similar. I said I'm more than happy to talk about those things in the off-season.

Most of them you know. You've heard them. You've heard them enough and you've heard them before. But again, right now, that does not help us or help our players beat Ohio State on Saturday. We're not going to solve those problems before Saturday.

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