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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: Appreciate you guys coming, both online as well as in person. A couple things just to cover with you guys based on the previous game. We won the turnover battle. We talk about the most important stats that we study each week. We won the penalty battle, not necessarily in the number of penalties but yards, which it didn't necessarily feel that way to me, but it did play out that way.

Drive start battle we won, sack battle, and we won the explosive play battle. We did not reach our goal on offense, but we did win the overall battle.

When you talk about players of the game, on offense we had Kaytron Allen and Nick Singleton as the players of the game. On defense, we went with the defensive line, Coziah Izzard, Beamon, Durant, Alize, Mustipher, Tarburton, Issac, Vanover, Robinson, and Dennis-Sutton. Obviously when you break the all time tackles for loss record at Penn State it's hard not to make sure that you give those guys some love there, and they earned it and deserve it.

On special teams Jake Pinegar. Those were the players of the game.

Then the D squad players of the game, on offense we had Kaden Saunders, Jim Fitzgerald; on defense we had Davon Townly and Keon Wylie; and then on special teams Jace Tutty.

You talk about general positives, I thought the kickoffs and field goals, we were seven of seven when it comes to either extra points or field goals. No. 12 was going to be a factor in the game, so we really were able to limit his impact as a kickoff returner.

I thought we had a ton of guys -- at this time of the year it's just kind of the nature of football -- got a bunch of guys with bumps and bruises or sprains, and we've got a bunch of guys that really have battled through that, and I wanted to make sure that we made a big deal out of that because it's been pretty impressive from the coaching staff.

I thought our next-man-in was really good, which we needed it. We already talked about six sacks and 16 tackles for loss. 1-0 mentality moving on, controlling the things that we can control. Our sudden-change defense has been really impressive all season. I think we're 70 percent. 70 percent -- seven out of ten drives have resulted in zero points, and some of those, as you know, those sudden-change situations have been backed up in our own territory. That's been really big.

Then conversely, our backed up offense has been really good. 67 percent of our drives starting inside the 10-yard line have gone for at least two 1st downs, which has allowed us to flip the field.

Those have been real positives. I thought we made a big improvement on 3rd down. We jumped 11 percent over the last two games in 3rd down efficiency.

Opportunities for growth, we've got to continue to emphasize starting fast, and then we've got to eliminate the pre-snap and post-snap penalties.

One last thing I thought I would share with you because I thought it was interesting, I hope you guys do, from the Indiana game. It was towards the end of the game, and I don't remember it specifically. It may have been during a time-out or something towards the end of the game.

The chain gang guy was talking to me, and typically you guys don't get to know those personalities. They're pretty much the same guys. Just like here at Penn State we've got guys who have probably been doing it for 30 years, and this guy is trying to talk to me, and he's saying, you know what's funny? And I'm kind of giving him that body language demeanor like I don't really want to get into a conversation with you during the game, but he doesn't read my body language and he says it again -- you know what's really funny?

I kind of turned, and he goes, you know, I'm a pastor of a church. So now I have to listen, right? He goes, I'm a pastor at a church, and two years ago you were here and you were talking on the sideline about don't score, don't score, don't score, and I've never heard a coach in 30



years talk about not scoring.

Then you go on the field and you're screaming don't score, don't score, don't score, and then you scored, and obviously you know how it plays out over time and how the game plays out. But I've used that in my sermon I don't know how many times, and I'm like -- I still don't really understand what he's talking about.

What he says is what may look good in this moment may not be the right thing for you down the road. So finally kind of the message kind of comes. But it was just an interesting interaction after all these years. I've never really had that kind of conversation, and during the game.

But it was an interesting interaction that I had with this gentleman on the sideline talking about a situation that I really didn't want to talk about or remember, but he did bring it up and had a message about how he's used it in his church.

Moving on to Maryland, obviously you guys know I've known Mike Locksley for a long time. We have been on the same staff at the University of Maryland for a number of years. He's done a really good job there improving their program and their roster.

Their offensive coordinator, Dan Enos, I don't know Dan as well, but obviously he's got a tremendous resume: Five years of head coaching experience, 11 years of offensive coordinator experience, and has really done a nice job there with their offense.

Obviously it's a combination of him and Mike Locksley, but has done a nice job.

Players on offense, they got a running back that we got a ton of respect for, a redshirt freshman Roman Hemby, who's a local kid for them.

Antwain Littleton is a big back, 6'0", 235 pounds. There's reports out there that at one point he was 290 or 265. He's lost a ton of weight. Has been very productive for them.

Rakim Jarrett is obviously a guy we recruited. Was a highly, highly recruited young man.

And then Taulia. I think everybody kind of knows his story. Transferring from Alabama and seems like he's been playing there for a long time and has done a really good job for them.

We've been impressed with Delmar Glaze, an offensive tackle, right tackle No. 74, and then a tight end from Pennsylvania, CJ Dupree. Those guys jump out.

On defense, Brian Williams is a guy I've known for a long time, their defensive coordinator. I think he's doing a really good job. He was a defensive coordinator at Godby High School. When I was at Vanderbilt we went in there and recruited an awesome young man by the name of Jakarri Thomas who played for Coach Williams at Godby High School, and I think Brian Williams is doing a really good job with their defense right now.

Guys that kind of stand out to us is their defensive tackle, No. 33, Nasili-Kite; cornerback No. 2 Jakorian Bennett, who I actually think played junior college football with Mitch Tinsley, if I'm remembering that correctly.

Middle linebacker No. 1 Jaishawn Barham is a young man we recruited very hard. Is playing really well for them as a true freshman.

And then defensive tackle No. 54 Ami Finau as a defensive tackle.

On special teams, James Thomas. Guys that stand out for us on special teams, James has been on the staff there, was an analyst that got promoted from within, has done a nice job.

Their punt returner Tarheeb Still, who's a local kid from New Jersey.

Kick returner No. 15, Octavian Smith.

And then they have a kicker that I think transferred in, but he's a Pennsylvania kid from Lebanon, Pennsylvania, who transferred in and is doing a really nice job for them.

That's my overall notes. Looking forward to some questions.

Q. I'd like to ask you a two-part question about the offensive line. One, Hunter Nourzad's decision about returning for 2023, what kind of boost is that for next year, and how has he played? Also, can you give us any update on Olu and Landon?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so the first part about Hunter, as you know, I think I may have mentioned it, but I think you know I've been having these meetings on Sundays, especially Sundays home games when a lot of the families are in town anyway, sitting down and talking.

So I had a meeting with Hunter and his mom and his sister a few weeks back and had a really good conversation.

I was sitting in my office, I think it was yesterday, and he

just came walking in and had a couple questions for me, wanted to ask me.

At the end of the conversation he said, I'm staying. I think there's a lot of things that I wanted to do here at Penn State and I want to finish in my career.

I think the other thing is he's going to finish his Master's Degree, which is awesome, and I think he's got really high expectations of what he can do and we can do, so I think that'll be great.

But that's really all it was. Obviously we've had a conversation -- he's been getting asked the questions, so he just kind of wanted to answer the question and be able to move on and not continue to get asked the question for the rest of the season.

Landon, I did speak with Landon. As you guys know, I won't really kind of talk about injuries unless I've talked to the young men first about it. Landon did have surgery and will be out for the remainder of the year.

And Olu is one of those situations where it's week to week, and I won't get into kind of the details and specifics of that. I think especially for the media that has been covering us for a while and consistently and regularly know how we handle those things. But Landon will be done for the year.

Q. A couple of things about Kaytron and Nick. It looks to me like the last couple weeks in particular, Nick has improved in some of the areas that Kaytron was really good at almost from the jump, making people miss and vision and using your blockers, et cetera. Do you agree with that, and if so, is the explanation just more reps or something other than that?

Then the other thing is people talk about freshmen hitting the wall around this time of year. Do you think that's a real thing, and if it is, it doesn't seem to be bothering them. Can you mitigate it? Is there anything you can do about it?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so first of all, I don't know if I would make the comparison the way you did, but to answer part of your question, yeah, I think Nick is getting better every single week. I think both of those guys are running really physical, and Nick had some really good runs where maybe there was three or four yards and he turned them into six or seven-yard runs.

But yeah, he's getting more comfortable and getting more confident every single week, every single practice, every single game. So is Kaytron. They're both getting better in areas that they need to improve, and as you can imagine, there's still a ton of growth for both of them based on the

fact that they're true freshmen and haven't played a whole lot of football.

Back to your other point about young players hitting the wall, I think that's where kind of the rotation is important, so hopefully getting Keyvone back would help with that, but being able to rotate two backs, it kind of limits that.

But yeah, I think it's a factor, there's no doubt about it, but I do think if you're playing with one guy all the time, then the likelihood of that happening kind of increases, and we're not doing that.

Now, I also know if they're not on the field, then you guys are going to be asking me tough questions about why they're not on the field, but then now I can use your hitting the freshman wall example of mitigating that as a reason why. I appreciate you asking.

Q. Kickoffs and kickoff placement were kind of a topic of discussion the first half of the season, and then Jake has obviously settled that down a little bit. Why did you guys put him in when you did on kickoffs? How has he improved there? And is this something -- his percentage is pretty high on touchbacks. Is this something you guys knew he could do for the last couple of years? Or how has he improved there in that regard?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he's doing really well, and I appreciate you bringing it up. Yeah, he's doing really well.

I think, like I mentioned in the beginning, I thought that was a big factor in the game. No. 12, as you guys know, their head coach was talking about him all week long and the impact that he could have on the game and trying to get him touches.

Being able to kick it out -- it was funny. I was talking to Jake a couple times after his kicks when I kind of jogged down to kind of congratulate him on doing a good job. I guess No. 12 was talking trash to him the whole time, like kick it to me, kick it to me, you're scared to kick it to me, they're going back and forth. So I think that was a major factor.

It's interesting, with Jake, early on when he was focused on field goals only he was not great at kickoff, and we were trying to get him to do both. I know he's got aspirations like all these guys do to continue playing, and most of those guys are going to have to do two jobs, whether it's field goal and kickoff or punt and kickoff.

You've got to try to bring a little bit more value there, and he really embraced it and worked like crazy in the

off-season obviously with Stout going, because Stout was elite at that. With Stout moving on there was an opportunity and a need there.

We'd like to specialize whenever we can, but it just was obvious that Jake could handle both and has done a really nice job in both areas.

But would you have not have said that two, three years ago. He's worked hard at it and doing a good job there.

Q. James, you have a chance to go 10-2 and get to a New Year's Six game. A strong case could probably be made that your team is even better than people think; but at the same time, you don't have what people would consider a signature win yet. I'm curious as a coach what you think about the concept of the signature win and how the public latches on to that kind of thing when they're evaluating a team.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, obviously there's value in it. It's interesting because you've got some teams and some programs that have not been consistent but have big-time wins, and then you have others that have been consistent but not the signature win. Obviously what you want is you want both. You want the consistency week in and week out, which I think we've all seen is hard to do, and the signature wins are hard to do, and what you're trying to do is trying to do both. That's what the best programs in college football are able to do.

I don't know if I would necessarily say consistently, but yes, that's what the best programs in college football are attempting to do.

Yeah, I think it's a fair point. Obviously we want the same thing. But most importantly, we've got to be 1-0 this week or people will be complaining about the other part of it, too. We've got to do what we've got to do this week to be 1-0, continue to stack wins and stack days and be positive, give you guys positive things to write about.

And then hopefully at the end of the season we're where we need to be and put ourselves in the best position possibly for the bowl season as well as momentum going into next season.

But yeah, I think obviously you want both.

Q. Christian Veilleux, how has he sort of handled this season? I would say it's sort of unique because I think there's a certain amount of telegraphing about how this all ought to pan out in the end, and certainly maybe the conversations in the Lasch Building are different than the ones going on in front of everybody

else, but how does he handle this? How do you handle that and how do you prepare for whatever happens over the next couple months?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he's been phenomenal. He really has. I think that whole quarterback room has been great. I think Sean has kind of set the tone for that whole room.

But Christian has been phenomenal. Those are tough conversations and tough decisions that have to be made.

It's interesting because I've kind of used this with the players before. You look at some players that may play as a true freshman and play well, and another guy redshirts and they're in the same class. And then you look three years down the road and the guy that redshirted ends up having what people would describe as maybe a better career.

There's a lot of twists and turns along these journeys, but I think Veilleux has been phenomenal. His attitude has been great. He's been great in meetings. He's totally engaged. We've been rotating those guys down to the scout team. They've been awesome down there.

He's been great. His body language, his demeanor, his leadership, his attention to detail, the way he's preparing as if he was the starter has been really good. Those types of things specifically at those positions I think are really important.

We'll see how this all plays out, but I hope he stays at Penn State and continues to chase his dream and gets his degree and see how it all plays out, because again, there's a lot of twists and turns along these journeys.

There's part of me that it breaks me heart a little bit about the conversations and the things that you're having now in college football that you didn't used to have, but I also -- as you guys know, I also understand this is where we're at and kind of embrace it, and there's really -- there's good in both, right?

There's a lot of good things that I believe existed in the old model, and there's a lot of good that exists in the new model. I don't know if they're necessarily the same things, though.

Q. Going back to Landon, before the injury how would you evaluate how he developed from spring into camp and then into those five games that he started at guard?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, he's playing really well. As you



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know, Landon seems like he's been a part of our program forever. He's looked just like he looks right now since like third grade when he first started coming to camp at Penn State. He made it pretty obvious that this is where he always wanted to be. He was great during the recruiting process. He was high production and low maintenance, and you can't have enough of those guys in your organization, whether that's players or staff. He's been productive.

You think about him, he's started and played well at guard, well enough for us to win. He's started and played at tackle well enough for us to win. He's been a great teammate. He's been a great student. He's been a class act both on and off the field, and I think he's got a very, very bright future.

Obviously you hate these types of setbacks and disappointment. It is part of the game. We do seem to have a little bit more of them right now than we've had maybe in other years. Maybe in other years we've had them at certain positions with certain players that have made it maybe a little bit more attention on it, but we seem to have a number of these right now.

Landon's attitude has been phenomenal, and the team's attitude about next-man-in has been really good.

I do remember talking to Trout or Frank Leonard, it happening in pregame right before the game. I do think that was something that we needed to learn from that something like this may happen, and we've got to respond and respond quickly. I don't know if we necessarily did with his initially.

Q. You've been down three starters on the O-line and some guys further down the depth chart have been banged up, as well. Can you address the job that Phil has done kind of juggling all of the different pieces to actually field a line and not only field a line but have a productive line in the last couple games?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it's probably been understated by me, and part of that is strategy a little bit with who we're playing and them knowing exactly what we're doing. That's played a part in it.

But yeah, I think he's done a phenomenal job. Phil has done a great job. Frank has done a great job.

I think Mike has done a really good job in the way he's called the game and understanding there's some things we've got to do going into last week where we're going to have to tweak and change how we call the game to put those guys in the best position as possible, whether that's

running the ball a little bit more, whether that is moving the pocket a little bit more, whether that is chipping with tight ends and running backs to try to help those guys, all those types of things, max protect, whatever it may be.

Yeah, I think we've done a nice job under really challenging circumstances. Starting a true freshman in the Big Ten at left tackle, I think there's a lot of credit to the staff. I think there's a lot of credit to the players.

I thought Olu did a really good job being the left tackle coach last week. I thought Drew Shelton has really prepared all season. He's another one of those freshmen in this class that I've talked to you guys about that has been very intentional about how he's worked, been very mature, and really from a very early point when he arrived on campus, we thought he had a chance to be pretty good.

We'll see how it all plays out. We're hopeful that we'll have Caeden back this week, which would really help, but we'll see how those things play out.

At the end of the day we're going to do whatever we've got to do to be 1-0 this week, but there's still the possibility of us maybe being able to redshirt some of these guys if we can. But that won't trump what we have to do this year and this season to be successful.

Q. You mentioned Landon out for the year. We've seen Hunter get banged up. We've seen Sal get banged up. You just mentioned redshirting. How does Landon's injury and those guys being banged up impact guys like Vega and JB the rest of the way?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so Vega is a guy that we are preparing in practice every single week to play. JB is a guy that we're preparing -- JB is a guy that we're not only preparing at left guard, we're preparing at left tackle. He played left tackle in high school.

So we did that all last week, as well. Obviously getting Caeden back helps.

Then there's also the discussion about how many games left do they have available, so do you play Vega now this week to get him one game and then shut somebody else down to try to manage it as much as you can, again, but not so much so that it limits your ability to be effective and explosive and be 1-0.

We'll see how that plays out this week. We thought we were going to have Caeden back for last week. Didn't play out that way. So you never totally know. What you're trying to do is preparing for worst-case scenario and hoping for slightly above that, if not best-case scenario.

Q. Just wanted to ask you, how did you and the staff this week approach voting with the players, and is there anything that's built in the schedule today to give them the opportunity to do so if they haven't already?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, we promoted it, not just this week but really for the last couple weeks, have talked about the importance of it and getting out and doing it.

I know you know in years past there was some conversation about shutting this day down, and I think once everybody kind of looked at it, it didn't totally make sense. As you know, you have from 7:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night, so there's time to do it.

I'm actually going after this. We have a staff meeting in the morning at 7:00 so it's hard to do it then, but I'm going to go after this and do it. My wife already went this morning.

Just promote it as much as we can, the importance of it, for whatever your beliefs are, for wherever you stand on things, that people have lost their lives and made tremendous sacrifices for you to have the ability to vote and not to take that right for granted.

We talk about it as much as we can, as we do a lot of social issues, and promote it, but at the end of the day you've got to be willing to go do it.

Q. You touched on Drew Shelton a little bit a couple questions ago, but what have you seen from him specifically in practice to kind of know that you have a true freshman who's ready to start at left tackle in the Big Ten? What were you seeing out of him over the past few weeks?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, he's a unique like COVID recruiting story. Literally I think one of the first tape we got on him was him blocking his sister in the backyard. Didn't have tape. He's got a sister who's tall. I think she's actually got a volleyball scholarship. Literally he's in the backyard pass setting with his sister, and she won a few reps, to be honest with you.

But that was just kind of one of those weird COVID deals where you're trying to get information, and it kind of went from there.

But then afterwards he ended up transferring high schools and then transferring back. We had a really strong relationship with his mom and his sister, and we were able to kind of weather that storm of the recruiting process. Then from that point on, he's been phenomenal.

Our strength coaches very early on had identified him as a guy they were really excited about in terms of his work ethic and demeanor and approach. The veteran players were kind of talking about him. The coaches once we were able to get into training camp and start meeting with him and teaching football. He's a smart guy. He's a mature guy.

He's been preparing all season kind of for his opportunity, and there's been a lot of discussions in college football over the years about just going to a five-year model where everybody just has five years, and if he was, he would have played a ton already this year.

We'll see how it all plays out, but he's just a guy that checks a lot of boxes in terms of intelligence and maturity and athleticism and body type. His high school at Downingtown here in Pennsylvania did a great job with him. He spent some time at IMG. They did a nice job with him, as well. He's been a guy that's really been kind of Steady Eddy and consistent the entire time.

I think he's got a really high ceiling and a high floor, to be honest with you.

Q. Going along with all the injuries and the contingency plans that you guys have had, Kobe King played a really nice job on Saturday. How do you think that can help propel him forward, and do you hope you'll have Curtis and Elsdon this week?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so when it comes to Kobe, really good. He's been playing all year long. He's getting more and more consistent each week. He's making a few more splash plays every single week. Then obviously we were in a situation a few times on Saturday, not for the whole game but kind of some spurts of series or time where he was the guy and really did some good things to the point where the staff is really excited about him and his future.

But I do think, to your point, those reps, that experience is valuable. There's always some growing pains with those guys, especially when you're the quarterback of the defense, and typically if you make a mistake at D-tackle, that's one thing, but if you make a mistake at linebacker, whether it's setting the defense or fitting the wrong gap or not playing man coverage or whether we're playing one hole and you're the hole defender on a crossing route or whatever it may be, the issue is magnified because of the position you play.

But each week it seems like those mistakes and those things that he needs to learn to experience, those plays are getting less and less each week. Hopefully last week there

was a ton of growth and opportunity to take the next step, not only from a production standpoint but also just in terms of leading and running the defense.

Excited to see what he does this week.

Q. Chop has been a productive player for you all season, but he didn't have the sack numbers. He got home once and it looked like he could have had a second sack Saturday. Where have you seen him improve over the course of the season, and are those sack numbers always indicative of how well a defensive end is playing?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's funny, not only -- whether it's fans or media, but really even on my staff, right away people want to jump to how many sacks did he have, and there's a lot more to playing defensive end within the system that we run than just sacks.

Don't get me wrong, we want as many sacks as possible, but pressures are also really important, batted down passes are really important, tackles for loss are really important, consistently holding your gap or penetrating your gap is really important.

We've been pleased with him.

I think part of it, too, is he missed some time from an injury, so I think he's one of those guys which we deal with a decent amount, guys that really have never been injured before and how to handle that and be able to come back from it, not only physically but also mentally. So he'll be better for going through these experiences.

We think he's playing really well. We've been very, very pleased with him. I think he's been disruptive in both the run and pass, even when it hasn't always showed up in the stat sheet.

No different than we were talking about, whether it was consistency or signature type wins, it's the same deal. You want both. You want the consistent play and being disruptive with the pressures and tackles for loss, but you also want the sacks, and he's capable of doing that.

Q. You said earlier in the off-season that you guys felt more comfortable with the amount of depth that you had at more positions this year than last year, and as guys have started to get banged up and the season has progressed, how do you feel the depth players have been stepping up and making an impact in the games versus last year?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we've needed that. It was a

point of emphasis. I think we talked about this last week, as well, that not only did I think we did a better job of playing guys and developing guys and getting more depth that was already currently in the roster, but then also there just seems to be more guys in this freshman class that have been ready to play.

When you think about some of the guys and what this freshman class has been able to do, whether it's an Abdul or whether it's a Zane or whether it's a Dani -- Zane is a guy that not a lot of people are talking about, but we think he's doing some really good things, and really excited about him and his future.

Dani obviously, the defensive end has an interception and he's been getting more and more reps and more production. And then obviously a left tackle in terms of what we just got done discussing, two tailbacks, quarterback that's getting significant reps as a backup.

There's just been a bunch of examples of young guys playing.

Then there's another group of guys that are close that you guys don't get to see every single day in practice. I think it's been good, but obviously it's been needed, as well, and I think that's also a major differentiator in college football, is depth, because you're going to deal with it. Everybody is.

Your second-line players and your third-line players better be good enough to win in the Big Ten with and beyond.

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