

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

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## James Franklin

### Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon and welcome to 2023 Penn State Football Signing Day press conference.

We'll start with an opening statement from coach and then go to questions.

Coach.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Like always, appreciate you guys coming out and covering Penn State football. There seems to be for whatever reason a lot of red in here. I think you guys are messing with me (smiling). Just a cluster of red. To be honest, my wife had a Christmas sweater on in the facility the other day.

Obviously today is about the future of Penn State, there's a lot of excitement. Obviously I want to take a moment to recognize the past, loss of Franco Harris. We heard some things this morning. Didn't want to be quick to put something out there. Wanted to be respectful of the family and everybody involved in what's going on.

But obviously a huge loss, a huge loss for football in general, college football, NFL, Penn State, really Pennsylvania. For him to have the type of career that he had at Penn State, then go on and do it at the Steelers. But more importantly than that, just an unbelievable human being. Was really an ambassador for the university and the football program. Was a servant leader.

Every time I had a chance to be around him, I was just so impressed with him and his wife. Obviously very involved with a lot of different causes throughout the state of Pennsylvania. Just an amazing, amazing human being.

A huge loss for us. Obviously we want to send our condolences to the family. If there's anything that we can do to support, we'd like to do that. Kind of a weird conversation to have on this day, but obviously that needed to take a priority in terms of just the type of human being that Franco was.

Feels strange to kind of move on to this topic right now, but



I want to make sure that I do this because obviously this is a really, really important day to a bunch of young men and their families, about their futures. But I did want to take a moment and pay respect to our past.

When you talk about this class, we're very, very happy with the class. There's a lot of balance in the class offense and defense as well as early enrollees. I think we have 11 guys that are scheduled right now to be early enrollees, which would be, based on what they all told me today, 16 days when they'll be arriving.

The class is about split from offense to defense, from little guys to big guys. I think we got a really good mix there.

I think the other thing that we've done a good job of, we're going to have to continue to do a good job, is kind of branching out and going to more places. Obviously DaKaari in Selma, Alabama, are a really good example of that.

At the end of the day we're still talking about what I would describe as Penn Staters, Penn State kids and Penn State families. You got a chance to spend some time with DaKaari and his family, his dad is the principal of the school, mom is phenomenal. They've done a great job raising DaKaari.

Obviously doing a great job in the state of Pennsylvania in keeping the best players home, always a priority for us. I think we've done a good job of that. Then also the region, whether it's New York or whether it's New Jersey or Virginia or Maryland, I think we've done a good job of having a presence in those areas as well.

Probably the other thing that jumps out to me is trying to get really good players from really good high schools so they're academically prepared to come in here and be successful, but also really good high school programs as well.

Whenever you can get really good players from great high schools that also know what it takes to win and the sacrifices that need to be made, then you got a chance to be special.



I'm very, very pleased with the class. As you guys know, this is the first signing day, so there will be another signing day. We also have the possibility of some transfer portal options as well. Then we got one guy that we've been recruiting for a long time that still hasn't signed yet. We'll see how that all plays out.

Again, I appreciate you guys being here. I'm happy to open it up to questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. When it came to meeting needs in this class, how do you think you did? Are there some areas that you think you still have some work to do potentially in that late signing period or be it through the transfer portal?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a good question.

I think if you kind of look at us, what we've been able to do, I think overall good. If you look on the offensive side of the ball, we'd like to get another offensive lineman if we could, specifically an offensive tackle, or a guy that's like the guys that we signed in this class that have position flexibility.

I think you look at Birchmeier, J'ven, maybe Donkoh, I think they can play all five positions in terms of the length to play tackle, the girth to play guard and the intelligence to play center. We'll see how that plays out.

I'd like to see us get another offensive lineman and then wide receiver. That's a position where I could see us signing a couple more guys at that position just to make sure that we have the competition at that position on a similar scale that we do at tight end and running back. I think that's going to be important for us moving forward.

Offensive tackles that are still out there, wide receivers that are still out there, we'll be in pursuit.

On the defensive side of the ball, we'd like to get a defensive tackle, possibly another defensive end just from a numbers perspective. Again, depending on how this thing plays out in the back end as defensive back, we could be in the need for one or two more defensive backs.

We'll see how this whole thing plays out. But those would be probably needs that I would say that are still out there that we'd like to try to address either through the second signing day with high school prospects or some transfer portal prospects.

**Q. You had an interesting signee, interesting recruit in Mega Barnwell. Based on his frame, seems like he could grow into any number of positions. What is your**

**plan for him short-term and long-term?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Good question. As you guys know, Mega committed to us like in fourth grade. We tried to convince him not to commit. When he committed, wanted to make sure they were comfortable, truly knew what that was. I think it was actually ninth grade.

His eyes started to wander in 10th grade, then committed back to us, which doesn't always happen. I think obviously we've been able to get to know him and the family really well. We have recruited him to play tight end. We did recruit a number of tight ends in this class.

But to your point he does have position flexibility. He's the tallest guy in this class. We do think he could play defensive end, we do think he could play defensive tackle. We think he can play tight end, for sure. I think there's also a chance he could play on the offensive line.

Now, most high school kids don't want to hear that they're being projected to move to offensive line until you show them how many first-round draft choices on the offensive line started at tight end. That's usually a pretty good story to tell.

At the end of the day we want guys to play the position they want to play. A lot of times guys will kind of see that on their own, that they need to move. But to be honest with you, we just wanted him in our program. He's a really good athlete, great family, really good student, with position flexibility. He may be at tight end for four or five years or another position. We'll see how the genetics play out.

We've been very honest and open with the kid and the family that some of these things are possibility. Again, we wouldn't move him unless him and the family were onboard with the decision.

**Q. Couple players that I heard you refer to as steals during the broadcast. Jaxon Smolik and London Montgomery. Why do you feel that way? What do you think two or three years down the road that may be shown through?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think Smolik, again, if you kind of look at his story, gets invited to the Elite 11 at the last minute. There's no hesitation, there's no hurt feelings that he's getting called at the last minute. Jumps on a plane at the last minute, gets out there, competes, and does really well.

He's hurt his junior year, so there's not a lot of evidence and film out there on him. Then he comes to our camp and

earns a scholarship. Like God forbid that's how this happens any more. Most guys don't go through the process that way. He came to camp, earned a scholarship, did a lot of things really well. Great family. We're excited about him. We're really excited about him.

I thought he had a really good senior year. Got a lot of the traits and intangibles that we look for. Will be here during the spring, so we'll have a chance to evaluate him. Watched him play, a bitter cold day in Iowa, raining. Watching him throw the ball in warmups from the sideline, it didn't even faze him. He's got massive hands, a lot of traits that you look for at that position. We're looking forward to working with him and helping him develop.

London didn't get hurt junior year like Jaxon, but London I think rushed for over 2,300 yards as a junior, I think he would have had a chance to rush for over 3,000 yards as a senior, but gets hurt before the year starts, commits to us.

When you get hurt, don't play your senior year, there's not a lot of people talking about you. You watch his junior year tape, it's really good. I really enjoyed getting to know him and the family, just great people. The more people you talk to about his personality, the more you get to know him, the type of impact he has on others, it's really strong.

We're excited about him. But I think the reason I probably say it is because of the injury and people haven't had a chance to watch him in a long time and get live evaluations. As you guys know, a lot of the rankings are not just based off of film, it's based off of live evaluations, whether game or camp. He just didn't get many opportunities to do that.

**Q. Your linebacker class I think is going to stack up one of the best in the country. Can you go through where they fit positionally, their recruitments, what they bring to the table.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: For us, I think you guys have heard me say this before, we really like to recruit kind of three outside backers, then whoever makes sense at the end to move to Mike, do that. You really don't want to play with an old school true Mike on the field. You'd rather have three outside linebackers that create position flexibility.

All these guys have length, athleticism, can run. You can make a similar argument with Ta'Mere. Ta'Mere was one of the highest recruited guys in the country, then gets hurt.

You may have heard me say this on the broadcast, but I remember being with a game with Terry Smith on the sidelines, one of bra (indiscernible) games, Ohio State was there, Michigan was there Clemson was there, Notre Dame

was there. It was like who's who of college football on the sidelines. We're going to be in for a fight with this one.

Fortunately we were able to convince him to stay home and play at LBU. He's another guy that I think if would have played his senior year would have had a dominant year.

We got three guys that we think could really play all three positions. If I had to kind of put it on the board right now, Ta'Mere probably at Mike. With his size, he's a big, big, big young man, but has the athleticism and movement and leadership qualities. Then obviously you got two guys that could play on the outside to start, but I think could grow into Mike linebackers as well.

Rojas is exactly how we would like them built in terms of his length and athleticism. He's a guy that you watch his tape, you could make the argument he could play running back here. That's the type of athleticism that he has. I could see him starting out to the field based on being a space player.

Kaveion Keys is a guy we were able to flip late. I could see him playing in the boundary, but you could make the argument with him playing to the field, too.

The good thing is we have flexibility with all three of those guys. All three have really good tape. All three of them are really good students. I know they're excited about the opportunity of coming here, coming in and competing in what's going to be one of the better linebacker rooms in the country, especially the way we've been able to get Abdul to develop in his first year on campus.

It's going to be a fun position to watch over the next year.

**Q. With the way that you guys play defense since you've been here, that star position, whether it's the body type, a tweener at the start, safety, outside linebacker, how do you identify them as recruits to start, then how many of them in this class do you think you might have?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I wouldn't say we necessarily at this stage recruit a guy to be a star. We try to recruit enough safeties and corners knowing that in a lot of situations we're going to have the opportunity to play to our strengths and match up with the people that we're playing from an offense perspective, match up with them. You're really talking about the possibility of five DBs on the field.

Sometimes that may come from your third best safety, sometimes that may come from your third best corner, or maybe it's just an argument who is your fifth best DB to get



on the field.

One of the things you have to watch is when you have an undersized star or nickel, however you want to characterize it, that's where people can get into some situations where they're throwing perimeter screens to the running back, and they got a matchup advantage. Maybe you have an advantage from a coverage standpoint, but now they have an advantage from a blocking perspective based on size.

At every position, you'd like to be as big and as long as you possibly can be. But ultimately that guy better be a really good football player. Obviously Daequan Hardy has done a really good job for us in that role and I think will continue to do it, but we needed to kind of develop the next guy, find out who that's going to be.

Again, whether it's one of these incoming guys or whether it is a corner or a safety is really to be determined. It's really about how do we get the next best guy on the field.

You look at some of the safeties in this class that we recruited, I think some of them could actually play corner, which would make you feel like some of those guys could play the nickel corner. I think we got some corners with some length and some football intelligence that they could play that position.

The other thing you don't talk about a whole lot is blitzers, how those guys handle that position for you as well.

We got some pretty good options, but we'll see how that plays out this spring, also see how that plays out obviously going into next fall.

**Q. Your freshman class set a high bar, making an impact. When you look at this class, do you see guys that can make a similar impact? How do you handle those guys in this portal era?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think you guys heard me say multiple times obviously we felt like we had a good recruiting class, we felt like there were more guys in that class that could contribute early. It really played out that way with this freshman class.

Obviously, by the time we got to the midpoint of the season, some of them were playing at a really high level, started to be a buzz not only in the conference but nationally about some of those guys.

Obviously we feel the same way about this class. The fact that we have 11 guys coming in early, I think that helps. Last year I think our number was similar in terms of early

enrollees.

I don't think that's the end all, be all, but it helps. I could also make the argument that a number of these guys, I don't think Abdul came early, Dani came early, they were still able to impact our roster in a pretty immediate way.

We'll see how it plays out. What I always say is I hope that these guys turn out to who we think they are and then I hope we got lucky on two or three.

A really good example of this, I mean this with total respect to the individual and organization, Tom Brady, you could make the argument that maybe the best draft pick in the history of the NFL, you could also make the argument maybe the luckiest draft pick in the history of the NFL.

I think we got a really good class here. A couple of these guys we're really excited about that aren't ranked as some others, be interesting to see how their careers play out. Whether it's the draft or whether it's rankings, once these guys step on campus, it doesn't really matter, those things go out the window, and it's about how you produce, compete, earn the respect of your teammates and the staff.

Hopefully after winter workouts and spring ball, we're having a different discussion and you guys are asking me, and I'm saying here's three or four guys that had great springs that are going into summer camp with a lot of confidence and a lot of momentum.

**Q. Coming off of a couple of tough years, what do you think it says with the program that you were still able to get the class last year and then this year?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Again, I think when people look at Penn State, our history and traditions, the type of fan support that we get, that's a huge selling point for us. But I also would make the argument you look at our staff, what we've been able to do over the last 12 years, we've been pretty consistent.

Obviously the last two years is not indicative of who we've been over the long-term. I think whether it's media nationally or whether it's high school coaches or college coaches that really understand the game, I think people felt like those were outliers, not really our trajectory, if that makes sense.

**Q. I think it's fair to say this is the first full cycle of NIL implications for a recruiting class. What were the conversations like and the feedback, how big of an issue was it? Were you able to up do you feel the structure of NIL from Penn State's side of things?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Good questions.

I would say for speaking for myself and my staff, but then also kind of a general consensus of coaches that I talked to, I don't want to necessarily say nationally, but a lot of the coaches that I talked to.

I think there's major concerns with what's going on in college football right now. There's really no guardrails. There's not a whole lot of guidance and governance. It's concerning. It's concerning.

Again, I think I've been very clear on my beliefs in NIL and my support of the student-athletes and us coming up with some way, whether it's NIL, how it's structured right now, or whether it's a Collective Bargaining Agreement, wherever this goes to.

I don't have an issue with that, but I have an issue right now that there's no guardrails, there's no guidelines. I hate to use the expression the wild, wild west, but it's a little bit of the wild, wild west.

Some of the conversations that are happening, they're crazy to be honest with you. I got down to the 11th hour of this, and it got as crazy as I've seen in my 26 years of doing it. So I think that's important. We're going to have to come up with a solution for college athletics as a whole. We're going to have to come up with a solution specifically for football.

When it comes to Penn State, I think we were way behind. I've been very clear on that, that we were way behind. I think Pat and Dr. Bendapudi, Dr. Kraft, they're both doctors, I think have really come in here and hit the ground running. I think we've made up a lot of ground, but we still have a lot of work to do if we say we want to approach NIL and everything else when it comes to competing at the highest level.

That's not just in football, but that's in all 31 sports, whether it's facilities or whether it is retention of staff or whether that is NIL, whatever it may be, that each coach and each sport feels they need to be successful at the very, very highest level.

We've made up tremendous ground in a short period of time, but we still got a lot of work to do. The reality is we're going to solve this problem like we've solved every other problem in our history, and that's together. That's all of us.

Obviously we have the power of the Penn State brand, but we also have the power of one of the largest living alumni networks. It's going to take all of us to get to where we want to go.

**Q. It came down to late in the stretch for you to get Kaveion Keys. You said if he could have a roller coaster named after him... What was the most surprising or difficult part of trying to get him to the finish line?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think the biggest thing, this probably sounds a little confusing, but he's a really good kid. He had given his word and made a commitment, then came on a visit to us. I think from that point on wanted to make a change but didn't know how to make a change, was really struggling with that whole process.

To be honest with you, we didn't think we were going to get him probably a month ago. Things worked out and we were able to get him onboard and join our class.

He was a guy that we really liked his tape, then obviously with him going to the same high school as Michael Robinson, there was a connection there. Then when he came on his visit, we just kind of fell in love with him. He has an infectious personality. He's got a great support system from his family. His mom has been awesome. We kind of fell in love with him from that point on.

We're just trying to kind of make sense of it for both us and him. I just didn't know if it would play itself out the way it did. We had two really good linebackers committed. We would have liked to have signed three in this class. We were able to get it done.

We went to go do a home visit last week, and then he was, like, literally as soon as we walked in the house and sat down on the couch, he said, I'm coming, I'm committing to Penn State.

We were trying to get excited. He goes, I don't think I'm going to commit in the early signing period.

Oh, my gosh, here we go again.

That was part of the roller coaster.

Kind of just sat there and went through our process, how we go about things, how we felt it was in his and our best interest for him to sign in the early signing period.

I said, If you think it's crazy now, if you hold this thing on to the next signing period, it's going to get even crazier.

For most of these recruits and their parents, although the recruiting process is fun and exciting, by the end of it, they're as done with it as we are. That's obviously probably why we went to an early signing period. They

want it to be over. It's nice to have people at your house and have dinner once or twice, but when people are trying to come in every week, make a sale, it can be pressure.

I think that's one of the things we have to be careful of as coaches, is for us, I've done this 26 times, and it makes sense to me and I understand the process, but most of these kids that we recruit, maybe except for Joey Schlaffer, you look at our class, most of them and their families are going through it for the very first time. It can be an overwhelming experience.

It's interesting, though, I will also say this, it's like anything else in life, you can make the process as simple as you want to make it, and you can make it as difficult as you want to make it.

Alex Birchmeier, one of the most highly recruited guys in our class, he was like total opposite. Literally I've never had a kid and the parents say, Do not come and see us at the school, do not come to games. We're good, we're solid, we're committed. You don't have to worry about us, go recruit other players.

We still did it because we thought it was the right thing to do. Like I said, I tried to tell other recruits, We're stressed out.

He's not. He made his decision. He stuck to his process. He never wavered. The reality is when you leave the door cracked open a little bit, it actually gets worse.

Again, that's easy for me to say and that's different when you're going through the process for the first time. That was kind of the roller coaster. But at the end of the day obviously we're very, very happy and very, very pleased that he's committed to Penn State.

**Q. Speaking of Birchmeier, I'd love to know about where he fits long-term. Where do you see him fitting in? Same with J'ven Williams?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think, to your point, all three of them we think can play all five. We probably are going to leave Donkoh at guard and let him kind of stay there.

I think Birch could play center, guard or tackle based on where our roster is right now. I'm going to sit down and have conversations with them to make sure they're okay with this, but I'd love to be able to start Birchmeier and J'ven at tackle to see if they can do it. Tackles are the hardest guys to find.

They both have the length and athleticism to do it. Birchmeier is bigger than people realize. He's 6'5"-5,

bigger than what people realize. I'd love to start those two guys at tackle to see if they can do it, knowing we know J'ven can move inside, knowing that Birch can move inside to both guard and center.

The more position flexibility that we have, I think a perfect example is Landon Tengwell, as you guys know, we recruited him to be a guard, but he's also started a game for us at tackle and won a game at tackle. I think he played left tackle for one game for us.

J.B. Nelson is a guy we think can play both guard and tackle. The more guys that have position flexibility, it helps. So that's where I'd like to start him. But we'll see. I'm going to have to have a conversation with them first, make sure they're comfortable with it, Coach Trautwein.

To me it's like what we did a little bit with (indiscernible) where we started him at corner thinking he was probably going to be a safety. I actually think the traits of playing corner, being out there on an island, really helped his confidence moving into safety. I actually feel the same way about being a tackle and kind of out there on the edge, a little bit more space, having to deal with those guys coming off the edge at you.

That experience, whether they stay there or not, will be valuable. I think the fact that both of those guys, if I'm correct, are coming in early at mid semester, that gives you some time to work through that and figure that out.

I think actually all three are coming in mid semester, which is great.

**Q. You had a good week last week on the defensive line. Can you talk about sealing the deal with both Joseph and Mason. Different backgrounds. How were you able to get to the finish line with them?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, when you talk about those guys and what we were able to do, especially late, Jameial Lyons had been committed to us at defensive end for a while. You're going to love getting to know Joseph. Just so you know, he goes by Vicky. I guess part of reason is one of his parents wanted to name him Vicky, the other parent wanted to call him Joseph. Even though they named him Joseph, the other parent kept calling him Vicky is the story that I've gotten on it.

He's a really neat, unique kid. Came to this country to play basketball. Ended up changing to football. Has kind of blown up. He really reminds me in some ways of Jayson Oweh. I'm not saying that to be pressure on him because Jayson ended up being a first round draft pick. Similar body type, basketball background. He was a really good

pickup.

One of the things I thought was important with him is one of my challenges that I see right now in college football is some of the guys you sign in a class, they're developmental guys and there's nothing wrong with being a developmental guy.

We got guys playing in the NFL. You look at Nick Scott, I don't think he started until his senior year at Penn State. After his great story of he had 26 reasons to move from running back to defensive back. Now not only is he starting for the Rams at safety but won a Super Bowl.

I worry a little bit in college football that you'll have less stories like that because guys won't wait to be developed. So I had a very kind of transparent conversation with his lack of experience in football, make sure that his mom and dad understood that and the kid understood that, that that made me feel good about it.

A lot of times by the time it's going to take to develop some of these players, they're going to go in the transfer portal. So I think having those conversations now more than ever are really important.

Don't get me wrong, he may be ready in year one. If he is, awesome. Again, making sure that if he's not, that they understand that there's still time to achieve your dreams.

Then Mason, kind of we were heartbroken this summer, we were shocked out of nowhere he committed to another school. We got so much history with his high school, so many different personalities and body types and athleticism from that high school that have come here and been really successful.

I can't imagine in Penn State's history if there's been that many players from one high school on a roster in a similar amount of time that all are playing and playing well. We just felt like we had a really good story to tell, a track record of success. We were shocked when he didn't commit to us the first time.

Literally he called us late in the year, was thinking about opening it back up and getting started. We thought he was just going to kind of commit to us. He talked about, like, opening the whole recruiting process up again. We're like, You got to be kidding me, we're going to open this whole thing up?

Though that may have been their thought, once he was able to visit, felt comfortable here, at home here, I think Dani had a big part in it as well as other guys from McDonogh, I think in the end it made sense for the family.

That was big for us because I felt like we needed to sign some high school defensive ends in this class. That was big for us.

The guy that nobody's talking about, and I watch his tape, I think he's really good, is Ty Blanding. Watched a guy play linebacker, he is twitchy, quick. You watch him play defensive end, he's twitchy and quick. Watch him play at defensive tackle and he's making plays and he's explosive.

I think sometimes New York is under-recruited. People view it as a basketball state, but there's been a bunch of really good players come out of that state.

He's a guy, watch his tape, I'm like I don't understand why more people are not talking about this guy. I think his tape is really, really good. He's an awesome kid. Love the family. Love everything about him.

He's a skinny 260 pounds right now. I think he's going to end up being a big, powerful, athletic kid. We're excited about him on our roster.

Thanks guys, appreciate it.

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