

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference



HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Big group. Appreciate everybody coming out.

Obviously overall, I felt really good about the recruiting class and how we finished it up.

I thought Chimdy was a really good get for us late. A guy that we think has tremendous upside, has position flexibility, whether it's tackle or guard. Really enjoyed getting to know him and his family. His mom has done a phenomenal job not just with which I am debut really all of her children, all four of her children has done a phenomenal job. His high school, Dundalk High School, really did a good job.

So to me with offensive lineman, it's typically hard to find guys with that type of length and athleticism. You know, Coach Trout got a chance to watch him play basketball. We were very impressed.

And then the other thing was watching his tape. He's got a nasty streak with a lot of times on the offensive line; that's hard to find guys that are trying to finish guys on tape.

So thought it was a really good get for us to really end the class, and then obviously you guys know we've kind of moved on. Pleased with how the season finished up but that's behind us now. Technically in a lot of ways we look at it officially behind us now.

Started winter workouts this morning. I think you guys have probably seen a lot of the position posts by their position coaches this morning in terms of who was the competitor of the day and things like that. So we'll have eight of these winter work out sessions.

The way the calendar fell this year, we usually will try to come back from spring break and have one or two sessions to get the sinning out of them and then get into spring ball but the way the calendar falls this year and when the spring game is, we're not really able to do that, so we'll come back from spring break and get going right away.

Sometimes people break up spring ball into a few days before spring break and finish it afterwards. We have always tried to do it after spring break but still give us enough time to get out on the road recruiting.

So I like where we're at. Obviously we have got a ton of work do. I would say some of the focus of the off-season, probably the biggest one is leadership and really identifying leadership as a staff and players as well being transparent and open about that and then really working hard at trying to resolve that.

I thought our leadership last year was as good as we've had in my 12 years as a head coach, I thought those guys just did a phenomenal job and I think for most everybody in this room -- you probably could have went into the season and you guys probably could have picked out, you know, who the leaders were going to be. It was pretty obvious.

We had really established guys not only from a make perspective but also from a leadership perspective in our program, and I wouldn't say that we have that right now from a leadership standpoint. We have to identify who those guys are. They need to have strong voices. We need to be aligned with the players and the players aligned from a leadership standpoint with the coaching staff. I thought last year that was as good as it's been.

So that needs to be a major emphasis on offense, defense and special teams because we're not going to be one of these teams and one of these programs that you hear early in the season that the coaches is saying, well, we need to develop leadership, it's too late to do it at that point. We have to start working on it and identifying it right away.

Appreciate you guys being here. Looking forward to questions, and again, appreciate everybody showing up.

Q. You obviously covered Chimdy, back in December, you mentioned defensive back and wide receiver as two other priorities positions you still felt you had need to fill. Can you speak about that?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: As you guys know, there will be a second wave after spring ball, which there



will be some opportunities at that point. Our academic calendar starts earlier than most.

So a lot of times when you talk about these championship teams, you know, the National Championship Game, a lot of guys go in the portal after that game, and we're typically pretty far along. So for us, our window to get guys into school, accepted to school, starting classes, we have a smaller window than most from what I've seen.

So we've got to be aggressive there but then I think there's going to be some opportunities as well on the back end. You know, wide receiver, I will tell you that Malik has been impressive so far, Malik McClain. Tested extremely well in our baseline testing when these guys arrive. He's also just always got a huge smile on his face. I know Coach Hagans had him as the Competitor of the Day, and that's been positive and all the feedback from the strength coaches as well as all of the guys has been really good with him.

What was the other position you said?

Q. Defensive back. Storm?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: So Storm is another one. You guys will get to know him. Storm is very businesslike. You know, academically, we got an academic report this morning, he's killing it. To be honest with you, Malik McClain is as well. Doesn't say a whole lot. Is just kind of about his business. It's like that door in the recruiting process, with him, and he's been that way since he's shown up on campus. Everybody has been really impressed.

We've been fortunate (knocking on table) that the guys that have gone into the transfer portal have been really good fits culturally if you look the last couple of years and so far it looks to be the same way with these two guys. And that's hearing from the academic staff, hearing from their peers to players, as well as the strength staff, and then early indication, it's just one day, but today was pretty good. And his testing numbers were really good in the baseline testing, as well.

Q. Two quick ones from me about national impact. When you think about playing in the Rose Bowl, we talked a lot about what a tool this could be for this program getting out to the West Coast and kind of showing off what Penn State is. Are recruits asking about the Rose Bowl experience? Are they interested in that and also this week you have Miles Sanders playing in the Super Bowl. How big is that for the program in terms of being able to point to a guy and say, look, he can go win a Super Bowl?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'm not going to bring up the stat stick you guys love about the Super Bowl. I won't bring that one up. (Laughter).

Yeah, Miles is very awesome and we're proud of him. He's done really well, not just on the field and being an impact player for the Eagles but really how he's represented himself off the field as well. He's been like that the whole way, all the way since we recruited him out of high school. He's just been a phenomenal representative of Penn State and our football program, and I'm not surprised with the type of year that he is having.

He really kind of fits the model of what everybody is looking for specifically now in the NFL. He's a guy that not only can run a ball between the tackles but also get the ball to the edge but also be an impact in the passing game and takes great pride in his pass protection. Really happy for him.

And then your other question was about the Rose Bowl. You know, people don't specifically bring up the Rose Bowl but obviously everybody watched the game, and I think it's impactful and I think it's helpful obviously. We.

Are able to have an open practice when we are out there, so we had some guys come out to practice, although we were not really able to interact with them based on how the rules are. I do think that was helpful. We had a young man that actually just flew out from a junior day that was at the practice. So that helps.

You know, I think the other thing that obviously impacts that is our location. You know, I think you've seen some things over the years with our airport here growing, different flight options and things like that, but that's a big part of it. You know, the more flight options and the more flight opportunities to come right in to State College is helpful and some of the other areas, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg is important, too, but that's probably as big of a thing as anything in terms of national recruiting.

Q. With respect to leadership, you're so young at quarterback, how do you see that developing at that position and do you enter winter workouts with a specific pecking order or is there a clean slate from last season?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think obviously across the board, we would say that there is a clean slate to a degree; that there's going to be competition kind of across the board at all these positions but as you know we are going to have to put somebody out there first based on how the season ended and Drew's role last year,



then that would be him.

But we are going to need both of those guys specifically, Pribula and Allar, too early to speak on Smolik, but we are going to need both of those guys not only competing but taking on a significant leadership role. Again, no one cares that they are young. They are in that position and a big part of that position is leadership. I thought Sean did a great job with that.

For us, I don't want them to go from zero to a hundred. Just kind of start to work into that role and take responsibility and have a plan and be intentional like everything else we do, but I think Drew and Beau are ready for that.

Q. You obviously have talked about the class of 2022 who are going to be available today. What impact, now that I have time to step back, what impact do they have on last season and what impact do you expect them to have on this season?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, I think obviously you know there's a ton of those guys that ended up playing and not just playing but playing in prominent roles. We have had guys play in years past but maybe they were a backup, but there just seemed to be a large number in this class that was able to play and not just play but take on a primary role and be impactful.

Obviously whenever that happens, you go into the next season feeling confident because you have a ton of guys coming back that have been able to make plays and make plays on a significant stage. And if they were really pretty successful as true freshmen, then you would hope that experience would lead them to having even more success in year two.

We felt like it was a good class. It ended up being as good of a class as we thought or maybe even a little bit better. And a lot of those guys just came in with a very mature approach and were willing to do what it took to play and play well. A lot of guys, everybody says they want to play as freshmen but very few people are willing to do the things necessary to get it done and that is mentally and physically. We have 12 guys that came in this class at mid-semester, so that helps to see if those guys would have a chance.

But I would also say to you, you even look at last year, there's a pretty good number of those guys that did not come in early and still were able to make a significant impact. I mean, Dani is obviously a really good example of that. But there's a number of those guys that did not come in early and were still able to impact our program and our

roster.

I think the head start helps but I think we'll also get some guys out of that second wave, too.

Q. What kind of impact would you say that this class will have this year? How important?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: The new class we just signed?

Q. The class of 2022.

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: I thought I answered your question but maybe I didn't. Whenever those guys come in and play as true freshmen and take on prominent roles as true freshmen, you would think that in year two, that they will be able to take on even more of a prominent role and even or of an impactful role learning from the experience the year before and building on it. It's not always the case.

But I think you would like to feel that way and you would like to say that. We had a number of those guys that were able to have prominent roles as true freshmen whether they were starting or not and now hopefully they can take the next step and be a dominant player in the Big Ten and on a national stage and then some of those guys that maybe didn't have prominent roles.

But played now hopefully they can take the next step as well and then there will be some guys that we didn't talk about a whole lot that from year one to year two, the light bulb will come on for and those guys will be interesting stories throughout the spring for us to talk about.

Q. Piggybacking on the question about how young you're going to be at quarterback, you are you comfortable with that? Is the transfer portal door closed in that or can you bring some somebody who at whatever level had had some experience just as an insurance policy with all the parts that you guys have and how highly you'll be ranked this year. Just curious.

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, in a perfect world, you'd love to have obviously a little bit more experience and a little bit more age in that room. But at the end of the day, it's about talent, and I think we are talented in that room.

I think the challenge of the transfer portal, I think you can do it and I think there's some options that we can look at and are still open to.

But I wouldn't say based on how that room looks that maybe it is attractive to a lot of the quarterbacks out there that we would want to bring in, so we'll see how that thing plays out but you never know. We would be open obviously at every single position to try to bring some guys in.

Q. What went into your decision to make a change at receivers coach and what made you make the choice you ultimately did when this was time to make that new hire?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: As you guys know, I try to share as much as I possibly can with you guys that I think is appropriate. I don't necessarily think that is appropriate in this setting.

But I will tell you that our excitement for Marques Hagans is really high. If you look at his resumé, he's got a really good resumé. When you talk to whether it's NFL head coaches; if you talk to college head coaches, if you talk to search firms and things like that, you know, a guy that played quarterback and played quarterback at a high level for really good coaches in a complicated West Coast system, played wide receiver in college and quarterback in college, played five years at wide receiver in the NFL.

And then 11 years at his alma mater and beloved there, I mean, everybody you talk to, just loves Marques. And to be honest with you, very similar in how Coach Poindexter -- how people feel about Coach Poindexter. And then having Coach Poindexter on my staff, and I think you guys know how I feel about him and his family, and for them and for him specifically to vouch for Marques and the family, you know, that carried a lot of weight.

And then you go through the interview process. You go through the interview process. We talked to a good number of guys, and it just became obvious that this was the guy that we needed to bring into our room and kind of within our family, and so far, so good. It's been really good having him around. You know, I think it's going to be exciting getting his family to move here as well.

But I think you guys are going to really enjoy getting to know him. Just ultimately the most important thing you is bring the best people you possibly can into your organization, the most talented people and you help them grow. I think he's pretty far along professionally and there are some areas that I think we can help him as well.

Part of that is just when you've been at the same institution your entire career, just getting out and being in a different environment also helps you because forces you out of your comfort zone.

Q. How has the rest of the wide receiver room responded to you adding Malik, and if you were to hypothetically add a second receiver, what would that player look like?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Really good. Be a really good one. Yeah, I think, you know, we're very transparent. I think that's the other thing is you have conversations and let people know what you're doing and why. You know, we kind of have examples of both.

We've brought some guys into the transfer portal who haven't played significant roles, have been more complimentary pieces to the current room and we've brought some guys in that have come in and started and been able to make an impact.

So I think the biggest thing is being transparent with your guys in your current program because ultimately, you want to do right by the guys in your program.

You know, but to me, we also have responsibility to all of the guys on the team and all of the positions to go out and try to bring as much talent in as we possibly can. Iron sharpens iron; or practice every single day is going to put us in the best position to achieve our goals.

We also talk to those transfers when they come in about how to do that, how to adjust to Penn State, be respectful of the vets in the room, and then start to kind of feel your path. But you don't need to come in with your guns blazing. Gradually work into that role and that position.

Malik is a very mature kid. He's, like I said, earlier, he's always got a smile on his face, so I think he's been received really well both really all four of those guys have been but specifically him and Storm have been received really well.

You know, the two specialists we brought in, that's a little bit different situation, a little bit like the quarterback discussion we had. You're bringing in some veterans in the room that have kicked in games before, and allowed maybe some of the younger players either time to develop or compete with them and take the job. But so far, so good, all the feedback that I've gotten.

Q. Last July, you had that deal where the players brought in the guy to talk to about unionization issues and a person looking at that from the outside could maybe have thought that was potentially divisive. Apparently it wasn't. Why do you think it wasn't and what did you do to sort of manage that situation?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think the biggest thing in anything is communication. You know, having some very honest, thoughtful conversations from both sides and both directions. I think ultimately the way that thing played out I think they were in a little bit better communication only, but once we were able to, I think Sean and others realized that ultimately I want what's best for them. I want what's best for our program. I want what's best for college football and I want what's best for student athletes. I truly do.

And we were able to have some really good conversations. And I think the other thing that became obvious was also that I wanted to make sure that they were protected, too. These things are challenging. They are difficult conversations to have but I think they are important.

And the way I describe it a little bit on a team, whether it's a very challenging morning workout or whether it's a potentially divisive conversation, a team and a family are very similar. Every time you get through some type of adversity, whether it's a challenging physical thing like a winter work out, like a morning workout, or whether it is a tough topic that you need to work through together.

Every time you get through those things as a family, every time you get through those things as a team, it brings you closer together, and we were able to take a challenging topic and subject matter and work through it. I think in a lot of ways it probably helped us.

Q. Going back to Marques Hagans, what's the benefit when you bring in a guy like that in terms of Marques the recruiter with being so well connected in Virginia, his home state and it's a state you guys have done a really nice job in as well.

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that factors in. I've always been a believer all the way back to my first staff. I remember talking to David Williams about this at Vanderbilt, all the way back to my first staff; that everybody has to do both and do both at a high level. You have to be able to coach and you have to be able to recruit.

Some staffs are built where this guy is only going to coach and not recruit or this guy is going to be the recruiter and maybe not the coach. And I've never believed that.

I believe, you know, your staff, you need to put it together where everybody is pulling their weight in both areas and then obviously you know, we have to take advantage of people's strengths and backgrounds.

So obviously we'll have Marques recruiting in Virginia and

that state has been very good to us. So we'll continue to do that but obviously Marques is going to have to take on some other responsibilities too besides Virginia but that factors into it, there's no doubt about it.

I think if we can hire people that are from the footprint, it helps with the transition where if you hire somebody that's got no experience in the footprint and it takes them a year to get comfortable or to build those types of relationships, then you don't get the return on your investment maybe as early as you hope.

Q. Will it be feasible to have an early signing period once we get to 2024 and there's a 12-team playoff? Can you imagine preparing for playoff games in December while you've got to finish up early signing period?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a fair point. I guess I think you guys have heard me say this before. I was a big believer in the first model that we recommended when I was in the SEC and that the early signing period was only that. Like it wasn't official visits. Nothing changed except for an early signing period.

And the philosophy for that was the kid who grew up wanting to go to Penn State his whole life and was going to go to Penn State, let that guy sign. He doesn't need the official visits. He doesn't need any of those types of things.

But once we kind of went to moving everything up, not only early signing period but also -- but also official visits and those types of things it's obviously become challenging. I guess you could make the argument, though, all you're doing is taking the same problems that the two teams that were playing in the National Championship have, and widening that. Those teams have had to deal with that, the four teams that were in the playoffs have had to deal with that the whole time. Now you're going to have 12.

So you could make the argument that you just are causing the same challenges for a few more --

Q. Early in December, too. Game weeks you're preparing for recruiting stuff. Is that even logistically possible?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: Again, that goes back to my conversations that I've had with you guys before about staff sizes and things like that. That's why you've seen staff sizes increases -- increase.

But I think you bring up a good point. I think it's possible what's been discussed and there's a lot of people looking at different models and different things. What I also don't



want to do is every single year, we keep changing the calendar. At some point we've got to stick with what we've got and start to get used to working around the calendar but I think it's a fair conversation point.

Q. You talked about Marques spending a lot of time at one place. What will change for him, do you think, coming from Virginia to Penn State and then on top of that, what is it about him do you think can help elevate this room that you have right now?

HEAD COACH JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that the first thing is you know when you've been in the same place your entire professional career and even personal, you know where to go for everything. Whatever you need, you know where to go. You have a contact or a connection that can help you with whatever you may need, and it makes you extremely efficient. That's where consistency on a staff is so important because everybody knows how things operate and how things work.

He's going to bring some things in from his experience at UVA that is valuable and I'm going to want that feedback from him and we'll ask for that feedback. But there's obviously going to be some things that we do differently that he hasn't experienced before that I think are going to push him outside of his comfort zone.

I will say this: It's not like he's been part of the same staff for all 11 years. He's had a couple different head coaches to work for, a couple different offensive coordinators to work for, different schemes and things like that.

So it won't be as challenging from that perspective and I think the fact that he's got Coach Poindexter and his family here, that will help as well because he'll understand what that transition is going to be like.

In terms of the room, I'm just a big believer that if you look at the NFL and you look at college football, the room and the position that I think can be maybe the most impactful right now is the wide receivers. Those guys at the NFL level as well as college, are able to change the game and change the game quickly. You make one person miss on the perimeter, has a chance to go 80 yards, and if you're a running back, you probably are going to have to make two or three guys miss before you go 80.

So the game has become such a space game that when you have guys on the outside that can go 80 at any moment, that changes defensive coordinators. That puts the fear in people. And honestly the other thing is, it impacts the running game.

You know, when you're able to have guys on the outside

that people don't feel like they can match up with in one-on-one situations, then they have to put a safety over the top or move that safety from the box which now creates more of a balanced defense in terms of what they are trying to defend and what they are trying to stop.

So I actually think it's going to be as impactful as our running game as it will be in our passing game. That, to me, and what I'm looking for. I'm looking for us to very well and recruit a room that people in our conference are fearful of, and also on a national scale as well.

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