

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

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## James Franklin

### Press Conference

JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, appreciate everybody coming out, and supporting Penn State Football. We truly appreciate it. We're a few days in now so we've got a better feel, kind of where we're at, I think we have had a really good off-season from winter workouts to spring ball to summer training, our strength staff have done a phenomenal job. Our guys have done a phenomenal job. We are bigger, stronger and faster than we've been. I think we have got a bit more of a mature team, and that plays a role in it at some positions.

But it's been good. I thought our practice one was really good. I thought our practice three was excellent, which happened yesterday, which was an extremely competitive first day in shoulder pads and that was good, so a ton to build on.

Obviously having all three coordinators back in their positions, there's a ton of value in that so there's really no new teaching going on except for the young players.

So, so far, so good. Been very competitive. We are looking forward to the open practice that we're having which is something that is new. It's something that we've really wanted to do for a while. I brought it up to the coordinators and we haven't always all been on the same page that everybody wants to do it. I think some of you guys know me and Manny went and visited the Patriots this past off-season, and we think it's going to be a good thing.

One of the reasons I'm excited about it is we like to play in Beaver Stadium. We think being in Beaver Stadium is good for our guys, so they are not experiencing it for the first time. But I also think there's an aspect of playing in front of the fans and playing in front of the media that also prepares our guys.

One of the things I would ask from you guys as a media team that covers Penn State Football, Chris and Greg have gone to that. We have gone to basically the Steelers and the Eagles and we are going to pretty much cover a very similar format, the way they do their open practices and to me, if you guys can follow that, that would be great,



because then we'll be more likely to do it next year. If some people can't follow that, that would be problematic for all of us and I don't think good for all of us. So I think this can be a win/win for everybody but we are excited about it.

We have an exciting season and some interesting matchup. Most importantly we hope up here at night against West Virginia, 7:30, so should be tremendous opening game of the season.

Appreciate everybody being here and look forward to spending the season with you guys, and I open it up to questions.

**Q. You're in a very volatile profession, but you're going into your tenth year, second-most tenured coach in an 18-team conference. Can you wrap your head around that? Given all the things that have changed, is it a long journey?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think your description of the profession is accurate, and I think that's for a lot of different reasons, as we all know. This kind of aligns more with kind of my DNA and kind of who I am as a person. Very loyal person. But I also think it aligns with kind of what the university is used to as well.

So I think those things make a ton of sense. It is also very unusual as well for there to be, I think three different athletic directors during that time and three different presidents, and I want to make sure I'm perfectly clearly on this. I am very, very appreciative and have a ton of respect for all three presidents and athletic directors who all came to Penn State at different times with different challenges and I'm very, very appreciative of all of them.

But yeah, it's somewhat unusual in today's college football which also in some ways is sad, right. I think stability is good for a lot of things and for a lot of people and a lot of organizations, but I don't take it for granted one day. This is a special place in a special community with history and tradition and passion. You know, so it's special. I think you guys know, I think we have 19 alumni working in the last football building, ten former letter men, so we take a lot of pride in that as well.



There's been some challenging days, but many more good days, and I wake up every single day feeling blessed and appreciative.

**Q. You've made it clear what you think of this team and how well you think you can be. Do you feel the window is as open as it's been for you guys to get to the Playoff?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I don't know if I have necessarily said all the things that you just said. Sometimes I think you guys do that to try to trick me to just go along with what you say.

What I have been very clear on in my opinion is I do think this is as much depth we have had. We have a three-deep at pretty much every position and I'd probably describe it a little bit more in more detail as probably a two and a half deep.

What I mean by that is if you talk about the defensive end position, really talking about five guys that we think we can win with. So two-deep at each side, and then a spare, a fifth guy that could swing it, but at some positions, I do think we have a true three-deep. I just don't remember us having that as consistently across the board, and that really even goes to the specialists. I think we have more competition at the specialist positions that we've had in the past, so I think the stability on the staff, the more depth, those things, those things are good, and I think they typically lead to giving yourself a chance to be successful.

Are we excited about it? Yes. Do we still have a lot of work to do and a lot of questions to answer? Yes. Do I think we are arguably in the best conference in college football and specifically the best division? I think we are part of that argument. I think it's hard to say that we're not.

And again, I've been a head coach in both conferences that are a part of that discussion, in my opinion, so I think I've got a pretty good lens on all of this.

So that's how I would describe it.

**Q. What's one story you have wanted to go home and tell your family from the first week? What's one thing that's really jumped off the page?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: (Tapping fingers) I guess after ten years, there's not as many new and exciting things to talk about.

But I try to usually get home at a reasonable hour and sit down and talk with my wife. A lot of times, the girls are in bed.

One of the things that was cool yesterday, Frank Leonard, we were talking about this on our ride home last night, how many wives and kids and families were at practice. I think that's another thing that we take a lot of pride in here at Penn State is it is a family atmosphere, and a lot of places, they say it is, but it's really not. People aren't comfortable coming into the office and being around.

My wife was at practice yesterday with the second dog we've gotten. I actually didn't like the first one. I like the first one now but I'm not going to like the second one no matter what. But it was cool having all the wives at practice, and I think that's important for our players. I think that's important for our culture. So coming home and just kind of filling my wife in on the blanks and things that are going on in the program.

But I feel really good about it. I don't really have anything that's kind of exciting that I'm going home, kind of can't wait to tell my wife about that happened today because we're very routine-oriented. We don't tweak or change a lot of things unless we need to or we found a better way of doing it after off-season studies of best practice.

We are very routine-oriented. This Media Day and this press conference pushed our staff meeting from 7:00 a.m. to 6:30 a.m., so the coaches love you guys for that.

But we are pretty regimented about how we do things, so not a whole lot of that.

What's up, Ricardo? He played for me at University of Maryland. Was a great player and we have stayed in touch and he's doing great things, so it's really cool to see Ricardo here. Welcome to Happy Valley, brother.

**Q. A few days ago, the news that Oregon and Washington will be joining the Big Ten. What are your initial reactions to that and your thoughts of that in the future?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I had some conversations. It's really cool that our president, Dr. Bendapudi, picks up the phone and calls me and includes me in those conversations and those discussions and Pat Kraft, as well. I'm very appreciative of that and don't take that for granted.

I will say that my focus and obviously this press conference is about specifically our football team and getting ready for West Virginia and getting ready for the Big Ten Conference. I do think obviously with what you see that's going on in college football right now, it's not shocking that these things are kind of happening. It's somewhat sad in some ways, not that these people are being added to our



conference because I think obviously there's a lot of strategy that goes into that.

But you know, I do think there's some challenges that come along with it and it's just very different for most of the people in this room, it's very different than the college football that we all grew up with, not really college football; college athletics, where at least for most of the year it was pretty regional.

I do think it's a huge win for USC and UCLA from a travel perspective. I think it's a huge win for them.

**Q. Are you saying you're a cat person, first off, not a dog person?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: No.

**Q. Okay. No animals?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: It's back to the routine thing. I think me and my wife finally had the two daughters figured out and then you're adding another thing to the equation. No cats.

**Q. Got it. As far as year ten goes, conference realignments, one of the changes, but the game itself, you've seen so many unprecedented changes in the game: Transfer portal, NIL, consequences realignment, expanded playoff format, overtime rules. What are easy ones to predict, what are you surprised at, and how has it affected your day-to-day operations with the way you do your job from when you started to now?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, it's been dramatic, and I don't know if COVID has played a part in it as well, but it seems like since COVID, it's sped everything up.

But the last five years, I think you guys have heard me say this before, there's probably been more changes in the last five years than the previous 50, and I don't think it's close. I don't think it's close. I think the game and the rules were the same for probably at least 50 years. And now in the last five, there's been changes and dramatic changes.

I would make the argument, I think we could sit here and have a pretty interesting debate that some of the changes were needed. I would also say in defending the NCAA that nobody seems to be doing any more, I think people see once they try to get involved in it, that a lot of these decisions and a lot of these changes and a lot of these rules are much more sophisticated than people think and much more challenging than people think because they cross over into a lot of different worlds.

But I guess this would probably be the best way to describe it from my lens and my perspective is the transfer portal. I think it's like the pendulum, right. I think the pendulum has overcorrected but I would say, there was a problem. Should head coaches have been able to have the power to deny kids from transferring from ten to ten different schools. They shouldn't have been able to do that. That was not right. That was -- that was unfair.

And to be honest with you, there was really only a handful of people that abused it, and that's probably the same way in any industry, right. There's a few people, maybe 5 percent that abuse the rules. Well, now that happens and now a rule has to be put in place to correct for that.

And I think that's really what happened. Instead of maybe allowing coaches -- I think it would have been much better to have the conferences and the Commissioners come up with a standard rule, whatever it may be, five schools, or you can't transfer within your conference or whatever. But there was people saying anybody on our schedule, five years out, like it just was too much.

I also don't think that just complete open transferring is good, and it's funny, because I think when a lot of people say things like this, it comes off as being anti-student athlete. And that's completely the opposite when it comes to me.

But again, I still believe in the student athlete model, and I still believe that the No. 1 thing we should be doing is educating.

And when I talk about that, what I mean by that is when you look at graduation rates, the data is very strong that every time you transfer, the likelihood of graduating goes down because you lose credits. I think that's a perfect example of what I'm talking about. It's a much more sophisticated issue.

Do I think the players should have options and choices? Yes. Do I think the coaches should have been able to restrict student athletes from transferring anywhere that the coach didn't want them to transfer to? No. But I think we could have gotten to more of a middle ground rather than from one extreme to where we are now.

And then if you take education out of it, you know, just the ability for college athletics and specifically football, to teach people how to overcome adversity.

And then you go to the other end of the spectrum, you come up with rules and guardrails. Well, then the lawyers now what the rules and the guardrails are, so then they use

them to create an exception for every kid.

So you know, in my defense of the NCAA and the model, to a degree, the problems and the challenges are more sophisticated than I think people realize. And I think one of the best things that we can do is get all the Commissioners in the room, in the same room at the same time, and try to do what's best for college athletics as a whole, because they are the most powerful people in college athletics in my opinion.

**Q. Can you talk about what you have seen from the quarterbacks through the first few practices and do you have a timetable for naming a projected starter?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, they have been throwing it, handing it off -- yeah, I was just messing with you. I was just messing with you.

You know, Drew and Beau obviously in year two. They look like guys that are year two in the same system mentally. They look like guys year two physically. They both have gotten stronger. They have both gotten leaner. They have both gotten faster. They have gotten more confident with their reads, their accuracy, their decision-making, those types of things.

So they have been impressive. They really have. I think, you know, you just triggered a thought to a question earlier about a surprise.

I'd say Smolik has been kind of the surprise at camp so far, specifically in the quarterback room. He's one of those guys that although he is still learning the nuances of the position and the nuances of the offense in terms of in the meeting, when asked questions, he's not where Drew and Beau are in terms of being able to answer questions in a meeting, but he's just got a natural feel for the position on the field.

You know, some guys, it's almost like a point guard. You've just got to feel for depth and spacing on the field and how to find open receivers. He throws a really nice ball. So he's doing well. If we can continue to build on this, I think we'll feel good about where he's at.

But Beau and Drew, I think you guys will get a chance to see them obviously here at practices over the next couple weeks, and then the open practice will get you a bigger -- you know, something that you guys have asked for, which is a little bit more time, getting a chance to see the team and evaluate the roster. They look like guys that are year two, more experienced guys, that are confident in how to execute and run the offense, and I think both of them have the team's respect.

In terms of decisions, you know, we are not announcing or making any decisions at this point, really, at any position. It's a competition, and we want to create competition at every position as long as possible, and I think it brings the best out in everyone. As you guys know, that's really kind of how we have operated here for ten years.

**Q. You mentioned having two-and-a-half or three-deep at every position. Is wide receiver one of those positions, and where is Dante Cephas at now that he's had a chance to practice with you guys?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think wide receiver is a position where I wouldn't necessarily say we have a two-deep or three-deep that's defined yet, but I think we have good number of guys that legitimately are competing for that third, fourth, that third spot but really when you talk about the two-deep, the fourth, fifth and sixth, and I think there's probably eight guys that are legitimately in that competition and it kind of goes day-to-day.

The big thing that we're looking for at each position and then really across our team and as our team as a whole is consistency, that's one of the things we talked about earlier today at the end of our walk through and we have to consistently have championship-level practices. And that's really the same thing at the wide receiver position. There's probably eight to nine guys that are showing flashes that they could be the starter for us, but it comes down to consistency after every position and that's magnified at that spot.

And specifically to your question about Dante, he's done some really good things. He's gotten bigger. He's gotten stronger. The guys have got a ton of respect for him. He's shown flashes. I do think there's an adjustment period that he's going through because it's one thing to do it two or three times a season when you're watching him play an opponent like Georgia. It's another thing to do it week-in and week-out in the Big Ten, and I think it's another thing to do it every day at practice. I think he's really embraced that, and I think he recognizes it's going to bring out the best in him as well.

**Q. Your safety competition, you said in Indianapolis that was one of the question marks you had. How do you feel about those guys right now? Is there anybody at that position that's popped out to you?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: So that's a position that we probably have right now two-deep; that I think really the two-deep, you could make the argument is better than the two-deep we had last year.

Now, I'm not necessarily saying that the starters are going to be better because as we all know, Ji'Ayir Brown was a hell of a player and a ton of production, but I don't necessarily expect one person to replace his production. I think he had eight interceptions last year and 16 interceptions over the last two I think; that may be accurate.

And what you hope is, among that group, that we can get that type of production as a group.

But I think an important piece is back to what I was saying is, I do think we've got a two-deep we feel good about. We've got to have at least a fifth guy that we feel good about. In an ideal world, we have a three-deep. We are not there yet. That's one of the positions I think we've got a two-deep but we've got to at least be able to figure out, who is that fifth player going to be; that, as you guys know, will most likely be in the two-deep at some point this season.

**Q. Obviously it's not uncommon --**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Where are you living now?

**Q. I'm still in Minnesota.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: So you just come in for certain.

**Q. I've been on 40 airplanes since last September, so, I love you.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Love you too, man. (Laughter).

**Q. Just kidding. Some message board is very unhappy right now.**

It's not uncommon obviously for guys --

JAMES FRANKLIN: Just so everybody out there, Ben doesn't love me and I don't love Ben. Don't have to go down that rabbit hole.

**Q. Oh, boy. (Laughter) I know it's not uncommon for guys to work with position-specific coaches away from campus.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I like you a lot, though.

**Q. You're fine.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I get fine? Okay.

**Q. No, I like you.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Let's get to your question.

**Q. Guys work away from campus with position-specific coaches and that's not uncommon. When it comes to Drew and his relationship with Brad, obviously you have another guy that you can't talk about that also works with him. How do you get on the same page, especially at a position like quarterback where it matters more that everybody is giving him the sage message and how does that process sort of work to make sure you're on that same page?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it really helps at every position if there's a relationship there, right. I think that's the only way it really works is there must be a relationship there because if your players are going home to work with a trainer that has very strong beliefs on how things should be done and how they operate, and he's really spending time teaching things in a very different way than we are, then it's really in nobody's best interests.

So for there to be a relationship on the front end, maybe while they were in high school and things like that, and even maybe some communication going on, that that trainer saying, listen, I want this young man to be successful, so I want to make sure that I understand what he's being taught on campus, and then try to bridge the gap as much as possible, that's really important. And I would say, really, I'm a believer in the trainers; really, at every position.

But I would say that if you're a high school student athlete or a college student athlete and you're working with a trainer that's not trying to work in cooperation -- and again, I don't want people to misinterpret. It's not like these guys are an extension of my coaching staff. I'm just saying that they understand what we are teaching and how we are teaching it so that everybody is putting this student athlete, this young man, in the best position to be successful, that's important.

And if someone is not trying to do that, then it puts the student athletes in a really tough spot between two worlds, being pulled in two different directions.

So I think it's like anything else. I don't care what business you're in, what industry you're in, how you do about your business, it always starts and end with relationships.

**Q. You talked about quarterback and covered some ground on safety, beyond that, what positions have impressed you thus far early in camp and who is spearheading those efforts at those positions?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think depth on the D-Line and

depth on the O-Line, you know, is impressive. The amount of bodies, the amount of experience that I think are going to impact the team this year and have really good careers here at Penn State, I think that's impressive.

I would say the same thing at the tight end position. I'd say the same thing at the running back position. Those positions stand out. I'd say the same thing at corner.

So the way you're able to practice, sometimes it's difficult to develop the threes because maybe your 3-(deep) O-line is not the same as your 3-(deep) d-line, so now the quarterback and all the other positions suffer because of that. So I think that's back to the original question about depth.

Having a three deep across the board allows you to develop your entire roster when you feel like you've got legitimate guys to put out there, both physically and mentally.

That also impacts your practice, right. A lot of times, you think the practice is going really well with the ones and the twos and the threes go out, and it's just sloppy and it leaves a bad taste in your mouth. There's less of that now. The threes are able to go out now and operate, and I think that's been really valuable.

You guys will probably see this a little bit. I think you saw the other day even for a PAT field goal. Having two units going at the same time, I'm a big believer in that most of these young men learn by doing, not by watching. So being able to get multiple groups out there, getting reps and being coached is really valuable.

**Q. Earlier you mentioned, I want to make I got this straight, about going to New England in the off-season. Was that you and Manny or just Manny?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Me, Manny and Frank, yeah. I think a bunch of you guys covered it. It got out on social media. We didn't put anything out. But somebody there used to be here put something out, and next thing you know, a bunch of people covered it.

And Coach Belichick was awesome. You know, Frank Leonard worked for the Patriots for I think three years. Manny has gone up there the last couple years.

So we went up, and Coach Belichick was phenomenal to us. We were there for about two days. We were in all the meetings, the individual meetings, the unit meetings, the team meetings. We were out at practice. We were at training table with them. They grind pretty good during OTAs, so we were there from early in the morning until late

at night.

Coach Belichick was phenomenal to us. Me and Manny were kind of caught off-guard because he had Manny and myself address the team after practice. I'm like, you know, what the hell does Belichick want us to say to the Patriots? But it was great. We had a phenomenal experience.

What happens a lot of times is even if you pick up two or three things, it's worth it. Two or three things that you saw at practice.

One of the things that we are doing right now that the Patriots did that we're now doing that our players don't like is you jump offsides, you're out. You lose your rep and you've got to run a lap around the field. The Patriots did that, and we are doing it now.

So you pick up two or three things. I also think it shows the players, we are asking them to improve. I want them to understand that we are trying to improve every single day and we're lifelong learners, not only in football but in life, trying to get better and trying to be the best versions of ourselves every single day for our families, for our wives and children, but also for our players.

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