

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference

JAMES FRANKLIN: So first of all, like always, appreciate everybody that's here in person, in town, and obviously everybody that's on Zoom as well, covering Penn State football. We appreciate it.

I'll make a couple statements, then obviously take questions.

NBC will be broadcasting its first game ever in Beaver Stadium, which is cool and kind of shocking when I saw that, to be honest with you.

Guys had asked about the red, yellow, green list. I wanted to follow back up on that.

The guys that right now have been green lighted, I'll keep it to that, is Tony Rojas, King Mack, Zion Tracy and Elliot Washington, just to answer that question. I wanted to follow back up because I didn't have that information the other day when you asked.

Excited about having Tom Bradley, Scrap, and Allen Robinson being the honorary captains. Obviously getting a guy like Allen Robinson back is always important, but having a guy like Scrap, who I've been able to develop a relationship since I came into town, obviously with his history and connections to the program is awesome, as well. I'm glad we're doing that.

When you get into West Virginia, obviously Neal Brown, I got a ton of respect for Neal, his background as an offensive coordinator and as a head coach. Got a lot of respect. Obviously this is a regional game which I think makes sense. I know college football has gotten away from the regional-type games and the regional conferences, but I think it makes sense for both schools from a travel perspective, as well.

From my understanding, Neal will be calling the plays this year, which is really his background. They return 16 starters. They ended the year with a really good win on the road at Oklahoma State, which is a tough place to play.



Got a bunch of starters back. Got a transfer. You guys probably remember a receiver named Devin Carter that we were involved in that process as well. They've got some offensive linemen that we recruited heavily and didn't get those young men to come to the Penn State, are playing and playing well for them, especially up front.

They're predominantly an 11 personnel spread team RPO-based offense. If you look at statistically what they do best, at least from last year, is the red zone. They were first in the Big 12 and 12th overall in FBS. Fourth down conversions, 68%. They were first in the Big 12 and 10th nationally.

So I would anticipate in this type of game that they're going to go for it on fourth down. That's something they have confidence in doing. I think that's going to play a factor in this game.

Obviously Garrett Greene, the quarterback, who I would anticipate is going to be the starter in this game, that will be a big storyline. Got a ton of respect for their running back, C.J. Donaldson. Interesting story. Came in as a tight end, got moved to running back, has played very well for them.

Back to the offensive line with those young men that we just got done talking about.

Defensively, Jordan Lesley has been there now for a couple years as the defensive coordinator. Six returning starters. The middle linebacker No. 1, extremely, extremely productive, Kpogba. He's an impressive player, has made a ton of plays for them. Young man out of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The safety No. 2, Aubrey Burks. No. Jared Bartlett. Another young man we recruited, No. 91, Sean Martin is a very productive defensive lineman that we're very familiar with.

Special teams, Jeff Koonz. Five starters. They're really the complete opposite of us. They got everybody back. Long snapper, punter, kicker, return men, they're all back. So experienced in that area.

Preston Fox, the punt returner, he was third in the Big 12

and 24th nationally in punt returns, so that will be a challenge.

They have an Australian punter, No. 41, Oliver Straw, who has the ability to do the variety of Australian-style kicks that can be challenging and problematic.

We're excited to be in game week. We obviously went on Sunday. Yesterday was the players' off day. We're back into practice today. Today's a workday for us.

Appreciate you guys being here and happy to answer any questions that you may have.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

Q. Can you please evaluate the pre-season performance of Drew Aller.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think you guys know this. This is something that I probably drive everybody crazy about. But we basically keep a record of everything. So every throw, completion percentage, touchdown to interception ratio, explosive plays. We even track what we would say.

I guess what I'm saying is you have interceptions which are easy to track. Well, if there were interception decisions in terms of he threw the ball and he was fortunate that the DB dropped it, but that was an intercepted or an intercepted-type throw, then we track that, as well, to make sure that we're able to kind of have an understanding of decision making, as well.

He's been really, really good. His decision making has been good. His completion percentage has been really good. Then another thing that's really cool is having all this data, then you're able to go back and compare to historical data. You're able to compare is to Trace McSorley, to Sean Clifford, so on and so forth.

I think there's a ton of value in that in terms of trying to get an idea of how you are in camp. We're different in college football obviously than the NFL where you have a pre-season and you kind of got a pretty good understanding of how you are. When you're going against yourself, sometimes that's hard to tell. Are you going against a really good defense? Are you going against a poor defense?

Obviously you guys know I don't feel that way about our defense, but my point is sometimes it's really hard to kind of have an idea of how good you are or what some of the challenges may be.

I thought he had a great camp. All his numbers were really good. There's been some great situations that have come up in terms of how we cover situational football, whether it's two minute, four minute, how to manage all those types of things.

Again, I think going against a really good defense and a really good defensive back unit, has been a ton of value in that. I think what we do defensively, testing protections in terms of pressures and disguising coverages, it's challenging for a young quarterback. I think all those things have been really valuable, and hopefully will put our QBs in the best position to be successful.

But I think Drew has had I would say a good camp, a camp that's given himself, his coaches and teammates a bunch of confidence.

I hope that answers your question.

Q. The weekly release this week noted Mike Yurcich moving to the booth this season. What prompted that decision? What role did Danny O'Brien play with that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think two things. I think it's a good question and I think it's a good follow-up question, as well.

I think Danny has been a big part of that. Danny now spending over a year with Mike, knowing how Mike wants to do things. Danny playing for me, coaching for me. There's a lot of alignment there. Built a ton of respect with our quarterbacks. So I think that's played a big part in it.

It's probably one of the things I'm most excited about. As an offensive coordinator specifically, there's no better place to call the game than in the booth. Controlled environment. You got your notes out. You can see it all. You're not relying on somebody else to echo information to you that maybe you can't see across the field. The corners' alignment, the far safeties' alignment. You're able to rely on your vision and your information. Still going to be people up there helping him.

I also think it's Mike's respect for our staff and our assistant coaches that there are strong voices, including Danny on the sideline, to manage that.

But I think it's ultimately Mike saying, Where can I be the best offensive coordinator? Where can I call the best game? It's from the booth.

It's not like we talked about it and then he came back to me. He came to visit with me about it. He said, This is what I'm thinking, what are your thoughts? I was onboard

because as an offensive play-caller, I don't think it's even close. I think it's the best place to call the game from.

Q. You mentioned about Drew's camp being good. Is he your official starter for the season, the beginning of the season? Is that a decision you're going with publicly? How close is the competition with him and Beau?

JAMES FRANKLIN: He's had a really good camp. I'm not making any announcements at this time. But, yeah, he's had a really good camp.

I do think it's been good competition. Like I've told you guys all camp, not only has Beau done some nice things, and Beau brings an element that maybe Drew doesn't have. Maybe even factoring those things in.

I think sometimes as a running back like Trace was and like Beau is, sometimes those things are hard to evaluate in practice because you don't really see them. It's not like he's out there making people miss and break tackles and practice, which I think is a little bit of his style. He really reminds me of a bigger Trace.

Also like I've told you all camp, I think Jaxon Smolik has had a good camp, too, which is nice, because we think we have three quarterbacks that have all shown signs that we can win with.

I think the game would be different, and I think that is challenging as an offensive coordinator, is how do you have enough within your system to take advantage of the strengths of all your quarterbacks.

We want to make sure that we have game plans that play to all three of their strengths. That's challenging.

Q. Last week there was a report about the NCAA academic progress rate numbers for '21, '22, and they were not good relative to the Big Ten. Also I think relative to other years in your time here. So with that in mind, do you have any reaction to that? Is that in any way deceptive? What is your take on that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think first of all everybody knows how important academics are to Penn State, the university as a whole. When I'm saying that, I'm talking about obviously in the athletic department, then with our football program, both present day and from a historical perspective. Something that we take tremendous pride in and is very, very serious to us.

To your point, we've historically been really good in that. I think the year before COVID we had a perfect thousand

APR. It's something that we take a lot of pride in. Obviously we're going to spend a lot of energy and resources on getting it back where we want it to be.

Pat is aligned on that. I'm aligned on that. So is our staff. We take a lot of pride in it, and we'll get it right.

I think the last thing I'd say, though, is ultimately if you look at our graduation rates, our graduation rates have really been good, the actual graduation rates, not the predictor of graduation.

Q. How comfortable are you with where the specialists are at after camp? Kind of what you're talking about earlier with metrics, when you're replacing an entire staff of specialists, does metrics make that a lot easier or is there some factors that make it a little more difficult to tell with crowds and pressure and stuff like that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: You said 'staff'? Did you misspeak right there?

Q. I kind of meant players, staff players, kicker, punter.

JAMES FRANKLIN: We're not at that stage yet in terms of, yeah, how you're defining them.

But yeah, I think your point is a good one. Yeah, I think the metrics help in terms of being able to say, Okay, what was your kick percentage last year in games? What was it in practice? What are these guys doing right now? I think you guys have seen, we try to make practice really challenging and difficult on those guys, as well. A lot of times the games are easy.

As you know, whether it's music or horns or whistles or whether it's wet, whatever it may be, try to make it really challenging in practice. So I think that helps.

At the end of the day you never truly know at any of these positions, whether it's offense, defense or special teams, until they get out there and do it in games.

But I think they have done and we've done everything we possibly can to get them prepared for it. I think the competition that we have had in terms of going out and bringing in some veteran guys, not necessarily to take the jobs, but to come in and create a true competition between some veterans from the outside and then some guys within our program that were growing and maturing and developing, I think that's really helped.

There's been legitimate competitions at kicker, punter,

snapper and kickoff. All of them there's been legitimate competition, which I think brings the best out in everybody and elevates the room.

We've been pleased with it. And to your point, I think the numbers compare favorably to years past from practice.

Q. With college football changing the rule about no stoppage of the clock after first downs, there's an expectation there will be fewer plays in the game. Maybe eight, nine...

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's being anticipated to be about six on either side of the ball. I think the last, if you look at the last game that was played, I think it was about five. If you look at the last game that was played, I think it was five plays on offense, so 10 plays overall. But your point is accurate.

Q. Does that impact everything in terms of your rotations? You play with a lot of depth, especially on defense. Does that come into play if there's fewer plays?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, because again it's outside of our control. We're going to do whatever it is to win the game and continue to develop our roster, stay fresh for a fourth quarter and a long season.

But yeah, it makes it more difficult, right? You're going to have less opportunities, less plays. I know we'd like to fit the football game into a tight, neat box. The NFL is fascinating that it's almost exactly the same time every single game, which I think helps.

But I also don't hear anybody complaining about football and watching football and enjoying football. So I think there's reasons why we're doing it other than maybe specifically what we're stating we're doing it for.

Q. At the top you mentioned four true freshmen already getting that green light. We've heard things about them throughout the off-season. What has Rojas, Washington, Tracy and Mack done at this point before a game is even played to earn that green light?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think because there's another group, as you guys know, another group of yellow guys that you hope by game five, game four, somewhere around there, that they're going to be ready to be green lighted, as well.

What these guys I would say, these guys have shown that they're the closest not just to play on defense but also have significant roles on special teams. I think that's one of the

big things out there for recruits and players, whether it's in college or even in the NFL.

There's so much value in that in terms of, okay, here's a guy that's in the two deep on special teams, and here's a guy in the three deep on offense or defense. He's going to play enough that it makes sense to green light him and go from game one. He's going to get enough reps between the combination of his offensive responsibility and his special teams responsibility or his defensive responsibility, that everybody is comfortable with it. The coaches are comfortable with it. The players are comfortable with it. It makes sense.

That's where those guys have been able to get the green light, is being in what I would consider the three deep on defense and being within the two deep on enough special teams units that it makes sense.

Q. The Big Ten has a new rule about reporting participation before games. You've always been somebody who has played it close to the vest with injuries. What are your thoughts? Did you kind of see this coming?

JAMES FRANKLIN: To be honest with you, I don't really care what the rules are, just as long as everybody's following the same rules. Whether that is reporting injuries or whether that's playing a nine conference game schedule or an eight conference game schedule, there should be more consistency across the board.

This has been something that's been talked about for a long time. I think one of the reasons that I'm fine with it, too, is we don't really get into the specifics of the injury, it's just who's available and who's not for the most part.

I think you're going to see that happen to some degree across college football. I do think it's important, like most things, again it should be consistent. Everybody should be doing it the same way.

But, no, this has been something that's been discussed for a long time in the Big Ten. I even remember my days back in the SEC this being discussed.

I think you're going to see this year in the next couple years be more of a standard across college football for a lot of reasons that I think you guys are aware of.

Q. You mentioned in your opening statement about the history between these two teams. Have you taken time in the last couple weeks to really learn the history of Penn State-West Virginia rivalry? Have you taken time to teach the players about the rivalry?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, again, when you talk about history, recent history, I don't think there's been a game played while these guys were alive. It's like this is very similar to another game that we played here recently that there was a ton of questions. We talk about the history of the game. That's what it is, it's history.

Again, that history, although it would be nice to take some time and talk about the history of college football and the history of this region and some of these games, there's just not a whole lot of value in that in terms of getting our guys ready to play this game and be successful. There's not a whole lot of storylines that would make sense for them.

Besides, there's a lot of guys on their team that they know through the recruiting process or from the region, guys that they played with in high school that went there or came here. There's a little bit of that.

But, no, we don't spend a whole lot of time on it because I don't think there's a whole lot of relevant information that will impact winning.

Q. A lot of people talk about alen King and Johnny Dixon. What do you expect out of Cam Miller this year? How much does he allow you to rotate at that outside corner spot?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Cam is a young man that I just have so much respect for. We just got done talking about him as a coaching staff and adding him to our leadership council. He's just a very driven, motivated, high-production, low-maintenance young man that is maximizing his Penn State experience.

He's a guy that I think is going to probably start on four units on special teams, which I think is very telling. I think he's a young man that's going to play a bunch for us on defense, as well.

So just he's a guy that's really earned everybody's respect within the program, enough that he was able to play as a true freshman last year. Then I think there's a ton of confidence within his teammates and within the coaches that he's done all the right things and taken all the necessary steps to build on what he did last year. I think he's confident. I think his teammates are confident in him. I think the coaches are, as well.

But I'm proud of him. I'm proud of him. I'm really glad that we were able to go to Florida and get him. I'm very appreciative that his mom and dad had the confidence in us to send him here. I may even try to - you've heard me say this before with certain guys - I might try to convince

mom and dad to have a few more because we love him that much. Send them up to the Poconos to one of those romantic vacation spots in the Poconos. They're watching right now trying to figure out what the Poconos is, but what we know.

Q. You talking about East Stroudsburg?

JAMES FRANKLIN: The resorts that were thriving in the '70s and '80s. I'll leave it at that. I won't go any further.

Q. You're opening under the lights, 7:30 helmet strike. How do you manage the expectations for your guys playing in that environment after six, eight months without it? Is that a good thing? Can it be challenging playing in that environment for yourselves?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, this is kind of like the sneaky whiteout. It will be a great environment. Literally the place will be filled to capacity with Penn State fans and a few West Virginia fans as well. We know they'll travel well. There will be great tailgating.

This will be a really good example on week one why college football is so special, right? All of the things that go with it, the tailgating, what it does for the town and the community and the hotels and the restaurants, all of it. It's really cool.

There's really no way to prepare our guys for that, especially the guys that haven't experienced it before, except for going into the stadium and playing in the stadium under the lights with the music playing and the crowd noise. We've done that more this camp than we've done in the past. We've had a ton of 7:30 p.m. practices so we could get used to the sun setting and the challenges that may come from that and the lights and all of it. Try to create as much of that atmosphere as we possibly can.

But it's hard to replicate it. There are programs and schools all over the country that are trying to replicate what we do. It's hard to do. So we are fortunate and blessed to have the type of support that we have from our alumni and from our lettermen and from the state of Pennsylvania and really from the region. We don't take that for granted.

But it will be a great environment for college football, let alone specifically for Penn State and the Big Ten. I think we've done all the things we can do. Now we just got to go do it.

Q. From your experience, are there advantages, especially with a young quarterback, to not disclose publicly who the starter is? Or you guys really don't know yet for the next couple days?



JAMES FRANKLIN: No, we've got a pretty good idea of who we're starting pretty much everywhere. Like I've told you before, when we practice, we send some guys out with the first team, we send some guys out with the second time, we send some guys out with the third team. And most of the depth chart and roster is set.

But I think more times than not, we try not to put that information out there 'cause I don't necessarily see the value in it.

For me, the most important thing is the guys in our locker room, whether it's from a leadership or a chemistry standpoint. We got that. So all the other stuff out there in the universe or in the Internet or wherever else, I don't think that has a huge factor for us, so...

That's why we typically try not to do it.

Q. Whoever your starting quarterback is, first-time starter against a Big 12 defense, which typically Big 12 defense is very different from some of the things you see in the Big Ten from a coverage perspective especially, how do you prepare those guys when it's so vastly different, especially from what your defense has shown under Manny Diaz?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's what this week is about. Really we had a couple bonus practices during training camp, as well, is getting them ready for West Virginia.

The good-on-good work is great from a speed perspective. It's hard to replace that. But then that's why the D squad is so valuable, right?

It's interesting, you look at our staff, and the number of guys that played in the NFL, that redshirted and were on the scout team as freshmen, it's the majority of them. So making sure that our players in our locker room embrace that role and kind of get over it, right? You get over the fact that you may redshirt. Get over the fact that you may be on the scout team or the D squad this year and give us the best look you possibly can. So play as competitive and play as fast and play as aggressive as you have been playing all training camp, but now try to do it replicating West Virginia's defense or West Virginia's offense.

That's how we prepare 'em, between that and film, as much film study as we possibly can. That's how we're preparing 'em.

Q. You mentioned some of the numbers earlier with Drew, historically how you have the data. Are there

any numbers with either quarterback that you'd like to share that maybe they impressed you in that regard?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think I would say touchdown-to-interception ratio, or just interceptions in general. I want to say that we got to like practice 13 or 14 I think before we had a turnover, an interception, specifically with Drew.

That's valuable in terms of evaluating the quarterbacks, especially with the type of defense that we're going against every single day, then also just the style of defense that we play, not just the personnel but the style of defense we play.

We're not an access defense in terms of we're not playing quarters, we're not playing off coverage, off man, we're not playing off coverage three where there's access, gimme yards that are sitting out there to take a hitch or something like that. We're not really constructed that way. So it makes it challenging.

You have to compete for every completion, every completion as a contested catch. I think that's good for our receivers and quarterbacks. A lot of value from it.

But yeah, all those metrics are really valuable, again, to be able to say, Okay, this is what my gut is telling me, but then the numbers back it up. Or this is what my gut is telling me, and the numbers don't back that up. Let's challenge ourselves.

Where it's most valuable is no different than in your industry or in any industry, there are a certain number of players in any industry that are not self aware. Awareness is one of the most important traits and skills that we must have to grow and evolve.

If you're not self aware, that's where the data is really valuable, right? You're able to show the data and say, Okay, you think you should be starting or you think you should be playing, but here's the data that backs it up.

That's really valuable to have honest conversations and be able to provide feedback really for all of us, right, to study and look at, be able to challenge ourselves.

There's a ton of value in it.

Q. I know you get asked a lot about your defensive tackle rotation this off-season. What did you see from them in August? I'm curious about guys like Coziah and Devin. You've talked about Zane in spring, your rotation in general and those two guys.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think when you go back to that conversation about like two and a half deep or three deep at every position, I think D tackles are really good examples of that.

When you look at Zane Durant, (indiscernible), Kaleb Artis, Hakeem Beamon and Jordan van den Berg and Coziah, that's six guys there, and there's others, that there's confidence in, that we are bigger at that position. I think we're more confident in fundamentals and techniques. I think we have a much better understanding of the defense and how Manny wants it executed and played.

I think van den Berg may be one of the most improved guys on our roster let alone at the defensive tackle position. Then Coziah, I think you guys have talked about this a little bit, he missed some of camp with some bumps and bruises, but miraculously he came back last week. I don't know if it was a vet move or not where you miss most of camp, then you're running around with fresh legs looking great. But he's ready to go. I think Coziah has a really bright future, as well.

We got a group that is bigger. You look at Hakeem and Zane Durant, they're two guys that are significantly bigger than they were last year. It's good weight. It's real good weight. They don't look that much bigger, but they are 'cause they put on lean mass.

I just think we're in a good position there where we got five to six guys that we feel like can all rotate and play to stay fresh, like you hear me say all the time, in the fourth quarter and late in the season.

Q. Last year you went into the season with two rotations on the offensive line, right guard and left tackle. What did you learn from carrying those rotations into a season and maybe carrying forward and how that impaction your train of thought when Phil tries to get seven or eight guys involved come Saturday night?

JAMES FRANKLIN: It really just totally based on your roster. I think when you have seven or eight guys that you feel like are ready both mentally and physically to play at a high level, you want to get them on the field as much as you possibly can.

I think that will be important for us moving forward. Drew Shelton's ability to play both left and right tackle, which he's made dramatic improvements at right tackle from the spring, which was really important for us.

(Indiscernible) is a guy that we were able to redshirt last year, but we're going to need him to factor in for us, as

well.

Then we got some young true freshmen that we hope that can be similar to what Shelton was last year. Again, maybe not in game one, but try to speed that maturation process up as much as we possibly can, hopefully by the middle of the season, game four or five, whatever it may be. I think that's going to be important for us, as well.

Then we got some guys that create position flexibility like J.B. and others. That's going to be important, too.

Q. Roster management, the transfer portal, not to say that you're not being straightforward with guys over the course of the off-season. Used to be the pragmatism you could tell a guy in January, I'm not sure you're going to play, and there were a few things they could do in terms of wandering off. Now February you say, Not sure what the plans are for you in terms of starting, is that different now? I'm not saying you would be misleading, smoke and mirrors here, but how does roster management change when guys can go out the door in a different way than they used to be able to?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, that's where to me, though, what I would say is it's not really, again from my perspective, I know we all have different lenses on this stuff, and you guys have a very specific lens that's different to ours, but that's to me where the conversations with our guys is important.

I would also say one of the areas we have changed is conversations with the parents. We would never talk to the parents before. Now we're willing to have those conversations because if you don't, they're having their conversations and maybe making plans. Maybe they don't have all the information.

Just being as transparent as you can be with the guys in the locker room. That really hasn't changed. But I do think there are people that may be approaching it publicly different.

But for us, ultimately it's about the young man having all of the information and seeing where he's at.

I had a conversation with a young man last week about the topic that you're bringing up, and his dad. A very clear conversation about it. I had it, then had it with the position coach, as well, followed back up and say, Hey, let's get together because I've talked to the freshmen, all of the position coaches have talked to their guys, and then I said, Well, I think there needs to be a follow-up conversation because if you're saying that you don't completely know

why you're not playing, starting or in the two deep, that shouldn't happen, it should have been stated. So let me have a follow-up meeting with myself, the position coach and the young man to make sure there's no (indiscernible) and everybody sees it the same way.

Neal is getting feedback, I'd be shocked if he didn't, because I've asked my assistant coaches to give very specific feedback so they know where they're at.

I guess to answer your question, internal to our program it really hasn't changed. We're still giving the information that we have. But to your point, for me to have the conversation in January and December, I'm not going to tell anybody that. We lost a quarterback before this new transfer portal because I wouldn't make guarantees.

That really hasn't changed.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, coach.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Thanks, guys.

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