

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Head Coach James Franklin Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We appreciate everyone joining us for Coach Franklin's spring press conference. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then open it up to questions.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Just brief couple of statements and then get into questions, but obviously really cool seeing Saquon, Gesicki, and Gross-Matos just signed here recently on new contracts. I spoke with Saquon last night and texted with Gesicki just before actually coming in here. Haven't connected with Gross-Matos yet. Great to see all those guys doing well.

As you can imagine, got through winter workouts. I think you guys were able to follow some of that on social media. I thought that went really well. Chuck Losey continues to do a phenomenal job with our guys, and now getting ready for spring ball.

Start today. It's great that the weather has cooperated. Came out to come over here, and it's beautiful outside, so that helps.

Then obviously with three new coordinators we have a ton of work already put in up to this point, but still a lot more work to do between now and West Virginia. We still have a lot of time and a lot of work that needs to be done, but we can't really look at it that way. We've got to approach it one day at a time and be as aggressive as we possibly can.

All three have been awesome. Not just in terms of offense, defense, and special teams, but just staff guys. I think that's been really good. I know Tom is really, really enjoying being a coordinator again. Lustig, obviously, is a vet, as well as Andy being a vet.

Been a lot of work going in. Very appreciative of the entire staff, how it's been handled. The players as well, but we'll have a pretty good idea after today kind of how we've done with this process up to this point, but very, very important that we lay the foundation this spring so we can build on it all summer and be ready to go on the road in a hostile

environment that we know West Virginia will be.

Appreciate everybody being here, and I open it up to questions.

Q. Since we last talked with you Abdul Carter has officially changed positions. What kind of went into the position switch, and why do you think it's going to be beneficial for him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: It's kind of interesting, right? I remember when we recruited Abdul. I thought he was a defensive end, and Abdul and Dad were adamant that he was a linebacker.

The reality is we just wanted him in our program and knew he was going to be a really good player wherever he decided to play, but this wasn't really something from us. This was Abdul really wanted to make this move I think for a number of reasons, and we're excited about it.

Obviously we've lost some defensive ends this past year that were highly productive. We feel really good about the current room, but obviously being able to inject Abdul into that room as well is going to be a positive for us as well.

He was really kind of on the bubble of struggling I think to keep his weight in a linebacker. Him and Kobe. They've been right around 250, above or below, for a while. So I think his body was naturally telling him he could make the move if he needed to and wanted to, and there's an opportunity there. So having depth and talent and the type of length that we want at the defensive end position, I think this is going to be kind of a win-win for everybody.

I think the other thing is with our linebacker situation I think we've created in pretty good depth there, and then obviously the ability to play a little bit more nickel as well. Those things I think help. I think this has a chance to be a win-win for everybody.

I know Abdul is excited about it, and we're looking forward to have an opportunity to work with him, but it is a big change. He's never really done this before, and it is a big change.

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It's not just like you make the decision to move and you snap your fingers and automatically you're a defensive end. It's a different world the closer you get to the ball, just like it's a different world if you move back to the secondary. We're excited about watching his development and growth, and it should be exciting.

Q. You have some pretty big shoes to fill at offensive tackle. Can you take us through some of the options there, and out in public we saw Drew in kind of a sling in the winter. Can you tell us about his availability? I'm sorry, Drew Shelton.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I was, like, really? I'm surprised that hasn't been in the news.

Yeah, so Drew did have surgery at the end of the season. It was one of those surgeries that he could get through the season with, but it probably made the most sense to get it done as soon as the season ended.

Some guys decide to kind of play through those things for a number of years. Some guys decide to get them done right away, and some guys decide to wait until right after the season. He decided to wait until right after the season.

Right now obviously we wish we had him, but I think long-term it will be in his best interest and our best interest as well, but we have a number of guys there that we feel good about.

Obviously not having Shelton or Sexton, our two tackle body types and athletic guys that we probably won't have for spring ball, we would like to be able to get those guys back as soon as we possibly can. As you guys know, JB Nelson has played tackle in the past, so he gives us some flexibility at both tackle and guard.

You have J'ven Williams, who was the backup last year, and was able to get a little bit of time. You have Chimdy Ono, and then we have the young kid, Boyer, that's going to have an opportunity to come in and compete.

Then, obviously, Donkoh was able to play in the bowl game and probably played better than a lot of people probably anticipated. He's a guy that we also think, like JB, has flexibility to play both guard and tackle.

Being able to go out and bring Mr. Rucci back home, which I think was huge for us. A young man that we know very well. Obviously family has strong Penn State ties and was a highly, highly recruited young man. So to have him back, he's already up, I think, to 315 pounds, which has a little bit been his issue. I don't think he had broke 300 pounds the entire time he was at the previous school and looks great.

As you guys know, he's like all of 6'7", if not 6'8", so he is 315 pounds and still looks skinny.

Then we have Boehme and Detisch and a couple of guys as well. So should be some good competition there.

Cooper Cousins is another guy that we think could play multiple positions, but we're going to try to keep these freshmen at one spot, and Cooper will start at center, but try to keep these guys at one spot and allow them to gain some confidence, but obviously your point is a good one. We have two tackles, just like we have two DNs that were at the combine and will be at our pro day, and I think they have bright futures.

So replacing them and having some young guys that have worked up within our program and then to be able to go out and get more of a veteran guy to come in and compete I think is helpful.

Shelton has played a decent amount, although he wasn't necessarily the starter. We kind of viewed him as a starter in a three-tackle rotation. I think the previous year he did start I think four or so games for us. That's helpful too.

Q. In what specific ways do you feel that Andy Kotelnicki can help Drew Allar and the passing game as a whole?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So a couple of things. I think, first of all, I think some of the things that we can do to complement the run game in the play action pass to create explosive plays to open really the field up and make them defend the whole 120 yards and the whole 53 and one-third I think is really important, and I think the play action pass will be a big part of that with Drew, with Andy, with our offense in general.

The other thing is, I think some things that you can do that we did later in the season. I think the last two games, if you look at our explosive play percentage, it dramatically increased. I think there's some things that you can do with the wide receivers in terms of motion, in terms of alignment, like stacks and bunches and things like that, that we can do to help our guys verse man coverage. I think that's going to be really, really important for us as well.

I would say the combination of you look at what they were able to do at Kansas, what we were able to do the last couple of games, play action pass specifically, motions, shifts, formations, bunches, stacks, things like that to make it more challenging for people in man coverage. I think those are probably the biggest things that jump out to us.

Q. As you get ready to start spring practice, how do you feel about the competition and depth and additions you made in that receivers room as you guys get ready to take the field today?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't think we've ever had really a talent issue at wideout. If you look at our guys, athletic numbers, testing numbers, I think it's as good as anywhere in the country.

I think you take that and now you take another year of experience, I think there are some things that we can do offensively to help as well and then I think Marcus having his second year as the receivers coach I think is going to be helpful as well.

Then on top of that I think Julian Fleming, another local guy that we've been able to bring back home, he's brought an element of experience, of maturity that I think has been really good and has approached things really the right way since he stepped on campus.

I didn't really feel like we needed to go out and do a whole lot in the transfer portal, but we needed to make sure we had enough competition at every single position to bring out the best and not only those guys individually, but also us as a team. I think Julian has helped with that as well as the younger players already in our program taking the next step. When I say younger players, that's really all of them, including some of the veteran guys that now have played a decent amount of football that we anticipate and fully expect them to take the next step.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your safeties. You returned two starters, two talented players. What are your expectations for Winston and Reed this year? Also, what went into Mehki Flowers making a position switch I think to wideout?

JAMES FRANKLIN: A combination. I'll start with Mehki. Mehki we recruited like we've recruited a bunch of our guys that we thought could play both sides of the ball. Between his dad had reached out and then Mehki at the end of the season came in and said that he would like to make the move, so that's really kind of how that happened.

We were obviously open to it because, again, recruiting Mehki he was an explosive athlete on both sides of the ball with a ton of talent and ball skills. Really what he wanted to do, but also, we were comfortable with it because we kind of recruited him in a way that we felt like he could help and play either side of the ball.

Then in terms of safety, we have a number of guys that we feel really good about at the safety position. When you

take Winston and Reed, those two guys have played a ton of football for us. They're both experienced guys, are both playmakers, are both big and strong enough to be physical aspects in the run game.

Zakee Wheatley is a guy that we're expecting to take a big step. He's had by far his best offseason. Not even close. That also allows us to maybe use Reed in the nickel position that we're going to call the lion position.

Then when you look at just the guys behind it, Mac we're expecting to take a significant step. Payne has had as good as an offseason as maybe anybody in our program, has had a really nice offseason. DaKaari Nelson is a big, strong, athletic guy that ended up redshirting last year.

There are a number of guys that we could talk about and mention, but we feel really good about that three deep and then specifically you talk about Winston, Reed, Wheatley, and Mac played a decent amount of football last year and should create some flexibility, allow us to get three safeties on the field as we're determining who that nickel is going to be, whether it comes from the corner position or whether it comes from the safety position. Those three guys specifically, but really all four of them we have a ton of confidence in.

Q. You talked about how Andy can help Drew out, but what do you want to see from Drew specifically as he takes the next step in his development?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's consistency. It's amazing. You guys know this better than probably anybody, but you look at his touchdown to interception ratio, I think it's as good as anywhere in the country. Kind of looking at the coverage, I don't know if it necessarily felt that way.

If you are probably evaluating a quarterback, maybe one of the top three to four statistics you study is touchdown-to-interception ratio, and he did a great job there, but I think for him and for all of us I think it's consistency, doing it week-in-and-week-out against all competition and being able to play that way the way we need him to play and the way he wants to play week-in-and-week-out.

As we also know, that's not just Drew. That's how we call the game. That is the complementary pieces around him, the run game, the O-line, the running backs, the tight ends, the receivers making plays for him. It's all those things.

I think he's ready to take the next step. I think he's excited about some of the things that we're doing. He's had a great offseason. He's moving better. He looks better. He looks leaner. His weight is still very similar, but I think he's

changed kind of his body composition in a lot of ways.

Then I think obviously just like we did last year, I think we've got a ton of respect in our program for Beau Pribula as well and what he's going to be able to do not only to make our offense more difficult to defend, but also to be a complementary piece and a competitive piece with Drew.

Q. With three now coordinators, how critical is spring practice, and what would success look like by the spring game for you? What do you need to accomplish in this next month?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's obviously really important. It's always important, but I think when you have different pieces of the puzzle, it magnifies it. I think the most important thing is we have to get through the 15 practices and the coaches and the players feel like we have a really good understanding of how we want to play, who we want to play in terms of our depth, and then on top of that what are our strengths and what are our weaknesses and be able to play to those strengths and be able to work on those weaknesses between now and the start of training camp.

Really the issues are the same as they always are, but it's just magnified. I don't think there's any doubt about that. We need to feel like coming out of spring ball that our players have a bunch of confidence and understanding of how we want to play in really all three phases.

I do want to kind of pat the coaches on their back because it's been painstaking to go through the entire process. There's been a lot of humility I think in those rooms as well. For Tom to be able to compromise and for Andy to be able to compromise and Coach Lustig to be able to compromise where it's appropriate I think has been really good.

Then I think obviously the core staff that we've had that's back, I think they've done a really good job in helping in that process.

Q. You mentioned Saquon at the top and how happy you are for him. Is there any added layer of that happiness for him given that he's coming back to Pennsylvania, and then also the contract that he got in an age where running backs in the NFL are seemingly devalued?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I don't follow it as closely maybe as some people do, but I think to all the points you just made, I didn't know how it was going to play out.

I remember last year me, Saquon, and Fumi having a lengthy conversation when he was going through the

contract negotiation last year and was getting different advice and perspective on it. Then obviously this year comes around again, and to the point you made, you just don't know how it's going to play out based on the market.

So for him to sign this type of deal, I think in a lot of ways it happens and think a lot of running backs are realizing this because you better bring more value than just as a running back. You better be a leader in the locker room.

As we all know, Saquon has handled himself really well and has an influence over the guys in the locker room, but then also in the passing game you've got to be able to make an impact in the passing game as well, and I think he is one of those backs that can be used in a lot of different ways. Very similar to maybe some of the other backs that are talked about within the league. I think he has a chance to do that.

Then, obviously, being a Pennsylvania kid who chose to stay home and come to Penn State. Our hit rate with players that have decided to stay home from the state of Pennsylvania has been really good. I'm talking about the top players in the state that have chose to stay here.

We can go on and on and on whether it is Micah, whether it is Saquon and then some of the guys that we were able to get back on the rebound is also going to be interesting for us as well moving forward. But for him now to come back and be able to play within the state in Philadelphia, he said that was one of the first things that Howie said to him on the phone as part of his sales pitch to him was not only the Philadelphia Eagles and that, but obviously the connection with Penn State and the fan bases as well.

Just a really cool opportunity. Obviously we like our lettermen and our former players, especially the ones that are the guys in the NFL, to try to get back as much as they can to campus to have an influence over our current roster, to be supportive and be on the sideline for games. Obviously his schedule, like most NFL players, is crazy and hectic, but it helps. You look at the guys that we got in San Francisco. It's just not easy for them to get back here.

When you are right down the road in Philadelphia or Pittsburgh or wherever it may be, that helps. That helps with them being around this fan base and around our team, and they're beloved. I also love the fact that they can come and have influence.

One of the things that's happening this weekend is Trace and Grant are coming back to talk to our team about that 2016 Big Ten Championship team and try to get these guys back as much as we possibly can. Selfishly I think there's a ton of value for Penn State football, and I know for

our players.

Q. KJ Winston said that after the Peach Bowl you pulled him and Tyler Warren aside and delivered them a message about kind of setting the tone for the offseason and helping kind of keep the team I guess together coming out of that. I was just curious how you saw those two guys kind of handle that and sort of stepping into a bigger leadership role coming out of that to now?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't know approximate it was described exactly the way you described it right then, but yeah, I think from a leadership standpoint I think really important.

To be honest with you, not just a leadership for this season, but also had some discussions with them just about the nature of college football right now and some of the challenges that a lot of programs and a lot of places are dealing with, but they are two guys, they don't say a whole, those two guys, but they've earned everybody's respect. Really KJ and Tyler are both kind of guys that have really led through their actions.

One of the things we've been talking about this offseason a bunch about guys have to be willing to step outside of their comfort zone as leaders and be vocal leaders. This generation I think most guys want to be leaders through example and don't necessarily want to speak up and challenge and necessarily call out teammates from time to time.

I've even talked about them being comfortable to walk into my office and have honest conversations with me. I want more of that. I want that type of feedback. I think it's really important.

So they're two examples of many that we need to take the next step, and I think they're universally respected from the players and the coaching staff.

Q. This will be the first time you'll see this team on the field this spring. Are there things that you look for in particular on day one, and is there maybe more of a sense of urgency this spring too given the fact that you are breaking in new coordinators, holes to fill, all that stuff?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think there does seem to be a sense of urgency, but the reality is we've got three new coordinators, so for me to compare this first day to the last couple of first days, that probably doesn't make sense, but there does need to be a sense of urgency between now and the end of training camp. I don't think there's any

doubt about that.

I think one of the things that jumps out right away is just our depth. Our depth, we're bigger and stronger and have more competition across positions than I think we've had in the past. Just the number on our roster is greater than it's been in the past.

I think last year we were at 106 or something at this time, and I think we're at 125 right now. That also I think is going to be exciting for practice. I think we're going to be able to practice in terms of reps in a little bit of a different way.

Then the same with the spring game. We're hopeful that we're going to be able to have more of a traditional spring game, which I think has become more and more challenging the last couple of years and to be honest with you in college football it's been more and more challenging. Seeing a lot of people go away from spring games and have kind of had more of a practice or skills type activity in front of the fans.

We're hopeful that we can have more of a traditional spring game, which I think will be really valuable as well. I'm not one of these guys that overly is concerned in hiding too much. The reality is people can watch us last year. They've got all the tape. They can watch Vanderbilt special teams tape. They can watch Kansas's offense's tape and watch a combination of Indiana and our defensive tape from last year. It's not like there's a whole lot of secrets out there.

I think being able to go out there and compete I think in a spring game type setting as well as the next couple of Saturdays hopefully in Beaver Stadium as long as the weather allows us to will be really important for our team.

Q. Just curious, with the expansion of the Big Ten, new schools on your regular season schedule for the first time, has that changed anything in this offseason in terms of your philosophies about team-building, things specifically about defense and the decisions you might make from that aspect and facing different offenses and maybe not the same teams you faced over the years? Has that changed anything from that perspective?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I would say no. I think if this was maybe 15 years ago in the Big Ten and everybody had to under league rules line up with a fullback and run power, then maybe, but I think if you look, most of the offenses in the Big Ten are very similar in a lot of ways to what that other conference looked like.

If you look at the way USC operates and Oregon and



Washington and UCLA, I think the leagues probably look more similar in terms of style of play than maybe ever before. Obviously we're going to have to get into in detail studying those people, but in terms of, again, like we're all lining up and running power-I and they're all spread, I don't really see that as a major challenge or issue.

But I also think that diversity is also what makes the Big Ten kind of special and fun, that you get a combination of all those types of things. So I would say no.

I think the biggest thing that we're probably looking at and was part of the discussions with the Big Ten when we were coming up with scheduling as well is you just can't treat everybody the same. If you look at us and Rutgers, I think the most northeast teams, the travel is very different for us than it would be for maybe a Nebraska. So how are we going to handle that? How are we going to handle the travel?

If you look at whether it's major college football or you look at the NFL, you look at the teams traveling west and what their records have been like compared to the teams that are traveling east and what their records are like and be very honest and thorough about that and what we're going to have to do to put us in the best position to make those trips and be successful.

That's things as a football program that we need to look at. That's things as an athletic department that we need to look at and make sure we're making the right choices that put our players and our program in the best chance to be successful.

I'll never forget when I was at the University of Maryland. I think I may have mentioned this to you guys before. I'm not sure if I did, but I was at the University of Maryland. We scheduled a home and home with Cal. The A.D. had come from Cal.

They came to our place, and I think we played them at 11:00 a.m., and that went very well for the East Coast team, the Maryland Terrapins at this time. Then the next year we went out there, and I think it was a 7:00 p.m. game, and that went very well from the team from California.

So just taking all those things into consideration and having a plan of best practices based on NFL teams and what they do, college teams and what we need to do to be successful, that's probably where a lot of our time is being spent on what is the best way to do this while still making sure that our guys are student-athletes and getting that type of experience.

Q. Obviously I assume schematic install started a couple of months ago or whenever coaches were hired, but can you kind of explain what the install process looked like maybe in January as oppose to do what it will now look like over the next couple of weeks?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So really the install process I wouldn't necessarily term it that way if that makes sense. Again, if we hired these guys and they just came in and dropped their playbooks, then we would start installing with the players and teaching and doing voice-overs or whatever you're able to do at this time of year to get those things done where I think it was I described I think earlier almost painful is sitting in those rooms and grinding for hours about what I kept kind of saying over and over and over again is what is in Penn State's best interest? What is in our players' best interests?

Not what you are comfortable doing at Indiana. Not what you were comfortable doing at Kansas. Not what you were comfortable doing at Vanderbilt, and also not what we were comfortable doing. What is best?

What happens is for all of these offenses and defenses and special teams over time you call things. You have a certain name for it. It really doesn't make sense over time. Maybe that week you called it -- you put in a new play, and you called it the Bruins because you were playing the Bruins that week. Then when you are kind of going back to a system of what fits into each package, it really doesn't fit into that package.

So I think there's an opportunity for, say, Coach Kotelnicki to clean some things up that what's the best way to call this and term this that puts us in the best position to be teachers. That's really what we are, right? We're teachers.

As Frank Leonard would say, we're overpaid phys-ed teachers, right? What can we do to put our players in the best position to be successful and learn the information, and what's the best way that we can teach it? So there's a lot of value I think for the guys that have been running certain systems for a long time to go back and say, hey, what can we clean up that doesn't really make sense and then also for us, and how do we marry those things that's in Penn State's best interests? What's in the student-athletes' best interest to allow us to have the type of spring ball, training camp, and then season we want to have?

That's really what it was, and then here recently obviously to your point, now it's installing to the players, but what you don't want to do is it start installing to the players too early and then you're having to go back and change things

because as a coaching staff you decided that that's really not the best way to do it. We want to do it a different way. So the players were kind of like give it to us, we want this information, we want the playbooks as soon as possible. Once we were able to get things cleaned up, then we were able to kind of send it to them in smaller packages, which is probably the better way anyway.

Q. Over at running back obviously the attention is on Nick and Kaytron, but with Trey moving on, I'm curious. You have three scholarship running backs that we have yet to see in college game action. London Montgomery and Cam Wallace. What have they gained with your program? How have they moved forward since arriving last May, and what are the initial feedback I guess on Quinton Martin since he got to town?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So a number of guys. A number of guys that you mentioned. Cam is an exciting guy. Really did some good things this whole offseason. You know, put some good weight on, some good size on, hasn't lost really any of his quickness and explosive movements. Been very, very pleased with him. Really handled that redshirt process the right way.

London Montgomery, every time he gets on the football field he really does some good things for us, but he has not changed his body a whole lot. I think he's still only 185 pounds, so that's going to make it challenging for him.

But in terms of football, he's pretty good. He's done some really good things for us at practice. He's just got to understand there's some things that he's going to have to do off the field to allow those things to translate on the field. It's just very different. You're trying to block, like we just got done talking about, Kobe King and an Abdul Carter at 250 pounds and you're 185 pounds. I was not a math major, but that usually doesn't go very well.

And then Quinton Martin comes in, like we've been able to do a highly, highly recruited guy at that position and was attracted to come to Penn State and continue kind of on that long line of very, very successful college and NFL tailbacks and a guy that was used a ton of different ways in high school as a receiver and running back. We haven't had a chance to really see any of those things, but already has changed his body. Has already gotten stronger.

We were a little bit surprised when he got here. A really good football player, a really good football program, but was kind of raw in terms of running a 40 and getting in a stance and the weight room and things like that. So we just think he's going to continue to kind of grow and explode dramatically over these next couple of months. He

also has the frame. As you know, he is tall, so he has the frame to carry a lot of weight.

Then there's other guys. Holes worth is a guy that's done a really nice job for us, and Kency and Amiel Davis. There's a number of guys. Then we've still got one more guy we're waiting to get here in the summer.

It's an exciting room. Should be a lot of competition. We kind of have an idea of who Nick singleton and indicate Ron Allen are, just like you guys do. All those guys still need to get better and be developed and get reps. We need to figure out who the other guys are and who is going to be the third and fourth back.

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