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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, always I want to thank you guys for coming out approximate covering Penn State football. Appreciate you guys being here.

Feel like you blink and we're back. It's gone quickly. I think when you talk about winter workouts, spring ball, summer training, training camp, I think we have maximized it as much as we possibly can. The new rule changes, I think we have done a really good job preparing for some of the technology changes as well, some of the rule changes that have allowed us to make adjustments and make adjustments quickly.

I think the new rule changes in terms of what you're able to do with the players and what you're able to do with the staff over the last couple years I think has really helped. If you're in a position to hire a new coordinator or new position coach you're able to get a lot of work done in that period of time.

So all these things have been valuable. But training camp was good. It was competitive. It was physical. It was tough, like it was designed to be. And now we're in a position I think over the last week and a half we've cut back to make sure that guys feel good, bodies feel good and their legs are back, and now getting into a traditional game week.

As you guys know that have covered us for a while, we have the bonus West Virginia practices at the end of training camp. Now we're in a traditional game week, so looking forward to it. Excited about it. Look forward to answering your questions.

Q. James, with the news this morning, wondering what your reaction was to Pat's contract extension and what does his presence mean to you and the program going forward?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think first of all, I think stability in college athletics and college football has a chance to be differentiator like probably never before. I think it's always been differentiator if you look at certain programs across

the country.

Now, I think it's magnified more with the amount of turnover that you see. So I think that's really important. He knows Penn State. He understands college athletics obviously and the changes that we're under right now.

That stability at the lead position in our athletic department is critical, so I think it was strategically the right thing to do. We had an ICA department meeting this morning and he announced it there. I know a lot of coaches and people are very, very happy about it.

I think the biggest thing is we got a man leading the department that is a competitor. I'm talking about a fierce competitor in everything he does. That's important. You guys have heard me say before about the importance of having people in - I hate using this expression - but having somebody in the foxhole with you. Whether that is women's soccer or whether that's fencing or whether that's college football and wrestling, that's important to have somebody that can relate and understand the challenges and wants to come up with solutions.

One of the things that's stood out to me is Pat and Vinnie's visibility to find solutions for problems or challenges we've had for a number of years. Then I think the other thing is even bringing some ideas to the coaches in the department without the coaches having to come up with those ideas.

So I think it's really good for the university. I think it's really good for the athletic department. I think it's the right thing to do strategically for Penn State moving forward, so I am very, very happy about it.

Q. Looking at your offense from the end of spring to now, what position group do you think you've seen the most improvement, most development? How does that look for you especially going into your opener here?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I'd probably say wide receiver, but I would also say like there is a little bit at other positions that you could make the same argument.

I would say wide receiver. I would say quarterback. I



would say offensive line, specifically obviously with the offensive lineman that we lost to the NFL last year. I would say those three positions.

I think everybody had pretty good idea who we were at tight end, who we were at running back, so I would say those three positions, and really the three positions we needed to, right?

So there has been a lot of energy poured into those positions, a lot of strategy about how do we position those areas to be the most successful.

So far, I think what we've seen in training camp, not just from myself, but really coaches on both sides of the ball, we all feel that way.

Q. The in-helmet communication thing, we've heard you talk about what think of that rule change a couple times. Maybe I missed it. I have not heard you say a whole lot about how implementing it is going. What defensive player, for example, is going to have the helmet? What special teams player will have the helmet? How are you finding -- are there problems with it? Is it working well? Just run down how it's gone.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think we're probably, like most people, you're going to have a quarterback and the Mike linebacker wearing those positions. I think that's how most NFL teams are run. That's how I think most colleges are going to use it.

We started early, which I think has been helpful. DV Sport has been really good working with us. Had them at our last couple scrimmages running it for us, very similar to how will be on game day. I think that's been valuable.

Doing it with crowd noise has been valuable. Deciding how much are you going to continue to signal, because that is still an issue, right? Are you going to huddle on offense? If you're going to huddle, then the quarterback can communicate with everybody. If you're not going to huddle, how do you still get that communication between 53 yards from one receiver to the other essentially. The same thing with the corner.

I'm having a lot of conversations with NFL teams, some trial and error ourselves incorporating noise for our offense when we're on the road and then our defense for when we're at home, all those things.

But I think it's been good. I think it's one of those things the more times we do it the better we are at it. We been doing it at practice even without the DV Sport people here.

That's been good. It's not the same as obviously when DV Sport is here and they're cutting the mics off after 15 seconds left on the clock, those types of things. There is things you got to work through.

It's one-way communication as you guys know, so sometimes you have made the call and how does the Mike linebacker let the coach know that he's got the call? You think he's got the call and he hasn't got the call, those kinds of things. We all know these things aren't going to go perfect, so do you have backup plans in terms of signalling and wristband?

Are you okay? Okay, yes. Since COVID makes everybody uneasy, yeah.

So, Mike, does that answer your question? Awesome.

Funny story. Me and Manny and Frank Leonard went and visited the Patriots. We were there for two days and we're in meetings with their coaches watching film. Frank Leonard got sick and he is coughing and coughing and coughing and coughing. Their coaches are looking at him like, hey, buddy, you want to get out of here?

I'm uncomfortable and trying to make eye contact with Frank, like get out of here. This is Bill Belichick, the whole staff, right? Finally Frank is like, if you guys don't mind, I'm going to go back to the hotel. Everybody is like, do we mind? We want you to.

So you just reminded me of Frank Leonard and the Patriots story. Sorry, Mark. Go ahead.

Q. I hope they invited you back.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Never got an invitation since.

Q. You mentioned a couple times including today how tough camp was. How did the team emerge physically from training camp, and where do you stand in terms of injuries that you would classify as season-ending?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we got so bumps and bruises like you always do. I would say really kind of no different. It's funny, you have the meeting every year with the leadership council and they get to a point where they've had enough and I think they forget we've this meeting every year. They are like, Coach, I think we're at a point. I'm like, we hear this every year.

It's good feedback to hear for myself and Chuck Losey and Andrew Nelson as well running our sports science department. That feedback is really important for me to hear from the players.

We're back in a good place like we have been. You're always going to have a few things linger that we're still waiting to determine, but overall good.

And then when it comes to injuries, the guys that you guys have asked me specifically about that you haven't seen at practice, I'll answer those questions. In terms of big picture, I've told players and parents like always, I don't make announcements unless I'm asked a specific question, and then I talk to them and their families first to make sure they're comfortable with it.

I don't think in 11 years I've just come out and made a blanket statement on who is out. The other thing is it's hard to say anybody has a season-ending injury. I usually term them as long term. Even the guys that do have injuries that are going to keep them out for a while, we have think a lot of those guys we should have back for the playoffs or late in the season, too.

Q. You mentioned the offensive line earlier in terms of groups that improved. Specifically to right tackle, how would you describe the competition in camp went there? You come out of camp going into week one with a guy who you feel comfortable starting or naming a starter?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we feel like the right tackle battle has been healthy and positive in terms of amount of work those two have gotten in.

As you know, that's Dunkoh and that is Rucci. We feel like both of those guys that we can play with and win with, and think both of those guys will play. I know a lot of times you guys are asking for specific answers at this point, but we haven't told the players at this point what the rotation is going to be like.

That's usually a conversation for like yourself and a lot of people that have covered us for a while, we usually have that converse as a staff on Thursday and then have another conversation at the hotel. Obviously the players at that point would be aware of it as well.

At this point, we're still practicing and making evaluations to determine rotation. Typically starters, we're in a pretty good place where we are at. In terms of the rotation, how much guys are going to play, that is really to be determined based on how they practice this week.

But I would expect to see a lot of both Anthony and Rucci.

Q. You talked about the importance of stability when discussing Pat. This is your 11th year. It's kind of the

exception anymore for head coaches. Where do you think the program has made the most progress during your tenure?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you know, I'm proud of really a ton of areas, a ton of areas. In terms of our staff, coaching staff, we're able to hire and retain our staff like we weren't able to before. You know, you don't really see us losing guys for lateral moves anymore. That used to happen in the past. That's problematic for the type of program we want to have.

As you guys know, this was stated early on, facility-wise I didn't think we were in a great place. There was some resistance to that early on. We've been able to get all that done, and thank God, because if you didn't get it done before now you're not going to do it moving forward.

The other thing I would say that's kind of more recent is our training table that we have this year, our football-specific training table we have. I think we're probably the only top 10 program maybe in the country that did not have a football training table. This is our first year for having it, one that's in the facility and part of the football building. I think that's been a huge win for us.

So, yeah, there is a ton of areas. Academically, athletically, I could go on and on. The list I think is significant.

But as everybody knows, all that matters now at this point of the season and of the year is how we play. So our focus now is directly on West Virginia and making sure we're in the best position to go win at a place I got a ton of respect for. Neal Brown has done a great job.

It's a very, very challenging place to play. For an opener that is going to create some challenges and issues for us, and a team that I think is feeling really, really good about themselves and has a ton of confidence.

They won nine games. Really should have won ten. That Houston game was a very, very tough loss. You know, in my mind they played well enough to win ten games. They end the season winning five out of their last six games including the bowl game. They had a lot of positive momentum. The quarterback played really well.

Our focus is totally on that right now.

But things that will impact this season, I think the training table is a significant win. Keeping our guys big and strong throughout a challenging season, through a long season and a longer season and more competitive season with our schedule than maybe Penn State has ever had. That's as



big of a win that I've been fighting for for ten years and we're finally able to get done with Pat and Vinnie.

Q. You guys have mentioned Liam Clifford a lot of times this pre-season as somebody that's turned that corner. What has he done? Along the same position group, Kaden Saunders, what kind of camp dis he have?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Liam, and I know you guys hate when I answer things this way, but it's really not one specific area, it's just overall. He's more confident, more comfortable. He's much more consistent, which is what it's all about for all these guys at this level.

I look at his college career in a lot of ways like his high school career. Just kept getting better every single year. Really had a dominant senior year. Had a really good junior year. And I think his college career is going about the same way.

You know, he's faster than I think people give him credit for. Got a big catch radius. I think he's got a chance to be a play maker for us this year. He's shown flashes of that in the past. He comes from a football family as you guys know very, very well.

His parents were at the parent meeting the other day, and one of the things we try to do is get all the parents to come to the parent meeting. Some of the parents are like, oh, I came last year so I'm not coming this year. The Cliffords have been to eight straight parent meetings, which is crazy. I almost had them get up and run the meeting.

He just is really matured. I think maturity in college football has a chance to win you games probably in a similar way that it's impacted college basketball when you can have an older veteran team or older veteran position.

I think a lot of those things show up with Liam. But it would not surprise me at all, and we are anticipating him having a really good year for us.

Kaden has some bumps and bruises that he has missed some time, and we are working through that right now. Obviously we're hopeful that he'll be able to go this week and be full go and be able to factor in for us.

Q. Staying with the wide receivers, how many wide receivers do you think you have that are ready to play on Saturday and how close is that to where you wanted it to be coming into the season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think at every position, you've guys have heard me mention before, you really would like a two

and a half deep at every position. So if you're talking D-tackles you would like five. I think at wide receiver when you talk about being an 11 personnel set, you know, you're talking about two deep at two of the positions and then a swing guy in some ways.

I think we are close to that. I think if you look at kind of across the board, a guy like Mehki Flowers has really stepped up for us. Tyler Johnson has really stepped up for us. I think Anthony Ivey have really stepped up for us.

That's a critical group for us, right? I would like it to be for game one, but the reality is even if it could be for some of those guys in game three, game four, game five, and that's the big discussion we had this morning as a staff meeting, we got to identify guys we say, okay, they may be not like ready for whatever reason, physically, mentally, emotionally today, but these guys, we need them to be ready by game five of the season.

Okay, it's obvious to pinpoint and be able to single out the guys that are ready right now. Who are the guys we need to make sure we continue to pour into them and develop them that they will be ready come game five the season or somewhere around there.

Those are guys that are going to need to step up for us and have shown enough that year excited about what they're going to be. Tyseer Denmark as a new player is in that conversation as well.

Q. Pat McAfee, a former WVU player. He has a very large platform and he spent time talking last week about this game and Penn State. Curious if you use any of his remarks or anything like that in a locker room setting with players, or how you deal with outside noises from platforms like that who command such an audience?

JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, I love Pat McAfee and his energy and enthusiasm for sports and specifically college football. I think he's been good for college athletics and sports in general.

I think it's fun, right? You know, I think his ability to speak freely is unique and fun in a lot of ways. For us it's a fine line, right? I think it's very similar to the old billboard material. I want to make sure that our guys and staff don't say anything that creates billboard material. For some people that motivates them, right?

I want to make sure I'm not talking out of both sides of my mouth with our staff and our players, because I also strongly recommend our players getting off social media, especially in season. Which is easier said than done. It's

amazing how many of them say it, well, I'm good with it. A year later, yeah, I'm probably going to get off social media this year.

I would like for more of them to take the advice on the front end. No different than me handing my phone over to Destiny during the season and let her manage those things. I think it's the healthy way to go.

But it's funny, KJ Winston came up to me yesterday at practice and said, Coach, you got a couple things up on the monitors -- you're telling us to get off social media, but you got a couple things on the monitors for us to see.

I said, but here is the difference: When you guys are on social media you're reading whatever comes in. There is no filter. What we can do is I can have Destiny or Greg Kincaid or Chris Peterson pull things out to show to me and strategically say, we want to use these things. There is a filter there. He said, that makes sense.

So we do a little bit of it, but not a lot of it, for those very reasons. I want to make sure what we're saying is consistent, but look at it like old bulletin board material. Now, we're a true bulletin board material team in terms of we just cut out what's in the newspaper, where there are some staffs and coaches get on their computer and create stories that never existed to try to motivate their team. We're not going to do that.

There is enough out there you can find it on your own.

Q. Just curious, when Julian committed that created a stir. Have you picked a place kicker?

JAMES FRANKLIN: From one extreme to the other, huh? He's done really well. I think as much as anything, back to that veteran presence that I talked about, he has brought that to our team. He's another veteran guy that knows college football, that knows our conference, and as you guys know, knows Penn State very well and we know him very well.

So I think that's been a real positive. I was telling him yesterday, I was walking across campus and some woman came running up to me. She was checking her son into the dorm as a freshmen and she's best friends with Julian Fleming's mom and we had a nice conversation and took pictures.

It's really cool for him to be back home and playing for Penn State. I think that's a real positive for a lot of reasons. I think you see the same thing in his play. He understands football. He has got a tremendous football IQ. He is a big, strong, physical, tough guy who we think is

going to make the tough catches for us.

Has been throughout his career a very physical blocker. Also very good special teams player. I just think he's one of the guys as a veteran older player, very intentional about what he has to do to be successful in how he practices and approached his off-season on the jugs machine and all those things.

I think he's been really good for our receiver room and our team, and we're happy he's here.

At place kicker, again, kind of very similar to my response about other positions. Got a pretty good idea. We think we got three guys we can win with. We have not made any announcements. This week we'll factor into that. I don't want to say something to you guys that we haven't announced to the team or told the kickers yet.

I will say this: All three of them come within two percentage points on kicks. I want to say it's like 85, 84 and 83% in practice in kicks. It's not like it's slam dunk even my answer to you right now.

We'll still evaluate that this week and then make some decisions.

Q. You mentioned after practice the last two --

JAMES FRANKLIN: We gave you guys a depth chart, too, right?

Q. No.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Oh. There is one coming. I know you guys thought that was coming. That was an honest response. I didn't know if we gave you something.

Q. Is there really one coming from you guys?

JAMES FRANKLIN: On game day, right? Is that when we normally --

Q. When you guys make yours on game day --

JAMES FRANKLIN: Whenever we normally do it.

Q. Okay. Last Tuesday I think you said a little earlier?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I honestly wasn't messing with you.

Q. About green lights, now that you had those conversations we're going to get a look at who is on the scout team tomorrow, are you able to share some of details with us?



JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so there is some -- I guess what I would say is that's kind of like a moving target. I'm going to give you the green lights that we have for today, but there will be guys after game one that become green lights based on how they play or based on some bumps and bruises or whatever it may be.

We're going to try to manage it and be strategic as long as we can and have the flexibility as long as we can, but that will change throughout the year.

Does that make sense?

So the two that are just decided right now, one on offense is Cooper Cousins will get green lighted, and on defense Dejuan Lane will get green lighted. Some of that is based on how they have conducted themselves, that we feel like they're ready, and some of that is also the position.

Like there are other guys that I think if we needed to we can green light and go, but maybe there is more depth at their position or another guy in the position because there is less depth at their position, proven depth.

Right now it's those two guys and could be more. Could be more.

Q. We've talked about your players, talked about your coaching staff. Going into your 11th year at Penn State, how have you prepared for this season and what are some things you do to get ready for the season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so for me, I'm a very curious person just by nature. I think that's an important quality for a leader, because I think curiosity leads to being a lifelong learner and realizing you don't have all the answers and trying to grow and get better whether that's reading leadership books, whether that's going to leadership -- me and Pat typically, been some other people gone with us, and we go to a leadership summit every year. I've been going for nine years. Pat has gone for two or three years. I think I talked to you guys about it before with the special forces leadership from all over the world really.

That's been I think profound for us. I would say going and visiting different coaching staffs like the conversations about going and visiting the New England Patriots, that's valuable. Having conversations with people you can talk to. Gerad Parker is someone that I know very well. Coached for us here at Penn State and now is the head coach at Troy.

We visited this summer and this past week. Having Ricky Rahne, someone you can talk to. Used to be Brent Pry.

There is less of that right now because he's at Virginia Tech, and in some ways we're competing against each other.

Manny Diaz, having someone like that to talk to, but obviously, again, we're competing with one another. There a little bit less of that. And then there are coaches that we've had on the staff that have left that I still talk to.

Ken Whisenhunt, you know, people that have been around us. I always try to take this time of year, and I think gratitude is a really important quality. I try to reach out, whether it's Debby Al (phonetic), whether it's Ralph Friedgen, coaches that I worked for and show gratitude. I have not done it yet this year. I do it every year.

But I think that's important as well to show gratitude. And then we brought some phenomenal speakers into the building to present to our team. The athletic department had a phenomenal speaker this morning.

I guess what I would say is asking questions, learning from Tom Allen, learning from and Andy Kotelnicki, learning from Justin Lustig, learning from people in the building, Pat, Neeli, learning from Matt Schyler. I just try to be a sponge as much as I possibly can.

That is specific to football, but also leadership. So I hope that answered your question. Just being curious and wanting to grow and get better and having people that you can talk to both inside the program and outside the program I think is valuable.

Q. Curious about week one. It always brings curve balls because it's the first time you're seeing the new iteration of your opponent on film. West Virginia brings back on offense a lot of returning faces, starters or guys that played significant time last year. So between the two options, if it were returning starters that you know versus transfer portal or young guys for a team, which one is more of a challenge or beneficial for you in your prep for that particular game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think that's a really good question. I think it's a hard question. Again, I'm going to answer this in way you guys don't like me answering. You can make arguments both ways. A team that's returning a ton of starters and a team that is returning a ton of starters that had success, that creates challenges.

If you look at some of the people that rank teams, that's a big factor in ranking teams, right, how many returning players you got. And then the unknowing of the transfer portal and guys coming in, especially from smaller schools and you don't have as much information on them. That

can create some real challenges. So I think both is challenging. They've done both to be honest with you.

So I think opening with this type of game, that's another argument. I think it's really good because it motivates and prepares everybody that you better have your I's dotted and T's cross and understand and be prepared for what that environment will be like.

From what I understand, like you can't get ticket. You can't find a ticket to this game. Very similar to I think conversations of what our fans have had, what their fans is why playing West Virginia and playing Pitt makes sense for a lot of different reasons.

So I think it's a positive, but I also know there is also reasons people schedule lower level, out-of-conference games, because there is going to be some things that show up in this game that probably won't show up in game two or three.

So that's where I'm losing my hair and sleep, trying to do everything we possibly can to eliminate those things that you know can typically show up on a game one, and doing everything we can to try to eliminate or deter those things from happening.

Q. Diving into that a little bit more, your conversation about West Virginia is it's always been a hostile environment. Tough to go on the road to open a season. Can you dive into the why that presents a little bit of a challenge for your team just coming off camp, not getting a chance to play here at home, having to travel? Are some of the logistics that make that difficult?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think the first thing is I think everybody knows, right, it's proven that the home field advantage is a real thing. It's a real thing. It factors into a lot of things that you guys talk about that I can't ever talk about.

But home field advantage is a real thing. I think that's number one. I think number two, when you talk about the specifics of a home field advantage, it's the noise in the stadium. You can replicate that a little bit.

It's players that are playing for Penn State for the first time. How are they going to handle that? It's one thing to do it at home in front of 100,000 which is challenging; it's another thing to do it on the road with 70,000 people that kind of hate you. You know, your 250 versus their 70,000.

It's traveling for the first time, and we haven't traveled with some of those guys before. The hotel, the bus, you know,

the meals, the sleep, sleeping in a different bed; all these types of things, they factor in.

So just making sure that you're doing everything you can. Some of those things you can prepare them for and other things you can't. It's making sure the freshman doesn't leave one of our tester tip sheets on the floor in the meeting room because everybody that works in that hotel is probably connected to or works for somebody at West Virginia football. That stuff sounds funny and silly, but that happens.

So, you know, making sure we are doing everything we can had to prepare the players. It's magnified in a place that does not have an NFL team. Like everything in that state revolves around West Virginia and Mountaineer football. I think they're seventh winningest program I read in their media guide in college football depending on what metric, how you look at that, whatever it may be.

They're a prideful place. I was looking through their staff. I think all the way back to Don Nehlen and what he was able to do. I noticed there was like six relatives of Don Nehlen working on their staff somewhere in the building. There is a ton of cool things about West Virginia football this game and the historical aspects of this game.

Then you also look at like when was the last time West Virginia beat Penn State and when was the last time Penn State beat West Virginia, and we got somebody on our staff that was there in their stadium the last time West Virginia won at their place. There is value in that; we got to tap into that, what that experience of like and how it happened and so on and so forth.

So I hope that answers your question. There is just some moving parts that you can replicate. There are other moving parts that you can't.

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