

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

Monday, September 16, 2024  
University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

## Head Coach James Franklin Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Opening statement from Coach.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I appreciate you being here covering Penn State football. I'm looking forward to getting back in Beaver Stadium after a week off.

This time of year it's kind of unusual for this early in the season to not be playing. We're able to get out and get a ton of recruiting done. We're able to take care of our guys from a rest and recovery standpoint, and we're able to get some depth guys some work, some guys that are a little bit further down the depth chart, which was good. Then obviously being on the road recruiting.

Got Kent State this week and Kenni Burns coming to town. Obviously Kenni is very familiar not only with Penn State from what he studied us this year during his time at Kent State, but obviously also from his time at Minnesota with P.J. Fleck.

Tremendous opportunity for both programs. We're excited about having him. Obviously they've had some challenges early in this year, but we've seen some good things on tape that we need to be prepared for, and we need to be ready for.

When you talk about their offense, Mark Carney is their offensive coordinator. They're an RPO, tempo offense trying to base out of the spread mainly out of 11 personnel. Will mix some 12 personnel in as well.

Guys that we've been impressed with is their running back No. 3, Ky Thomas, who is a Kansas transfer and their wide receiver; No. 0, Luke Floriea; and then also their wide receiver, No. 2, Chrishon McCray. Guys that they are trying to get the ball to in a number of different ways, and we're going to need to be prepared for that.

Then defensively, Kody Morgan, he's a North Dakota State guy. A lot of his career was there. Been at Kent State the last two years, but everybody has so much respect for the North Dakota guys. North Dakota State guys, excuse me. They've done a really, really good job.

They're a four down front which we're used to from our defense. Variations and middle of the field opening cover four and cover six. Will also close the middle of the field up with cover three and cover one. Again, things that we're familiar with. Pressure overall about 33%. It spikes up a little bit on third down at 37%.

Then guys that we've been impressed with, their defensive end, No. 6, Stephen Daley; their linebacker, No. 8, Khalib Johns; and then their linebacker, No. 4, Rocco Nicholl. Rocco is from Philadelphia, PA. He's from St. Joe's Prep. Then their defensive end, No. 11, Kameron Olds. Kameron Olds is a big kid, 6'4", 245 pounds, from Richmond, Virginia. We've been impressed with those guys.

Then on special teams CJ Robbins is their special teams coordinator. Again, been with them for the last couple of years. Another South Dakota guy.

From a special teams perspective, this is probably their strength. If you look at them statistically, they're a punt block return unit that's ranked seventh in the country. Their kickoff return team is ranked sixth in the MAC. They do a nice job there, and really a lot of it deals with the receiver that I was talking about us having respect for, punt return, kick returner, No. 0, again, Luke Floriea.

We're excited about that challenge. They have our attention. There's no doubt about it. Kind of looking forward to getting to practice on Tuesday.

We did have -- in a lot of ways our Sunday practice is a bye week Sunday practice because although we're into game week, the Sunday is not a traditional Sunday for us because we don't have corrections to make. We don't have the film to watch.

So we're actually on the field longer than we normally are on a Sunday following a bye week, and we're able to get some good work done.

Open it up to questions.

**Q. James, you mentioned a couple of things about**

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
**sports**

**what you wanted to do last week, but what were some of your top priorities last week for the bye week, and where did decreasing penalties rank among those priorities?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, for me we just literally talked about it again in the staff meeting this morning. That's a major priority for me because we're just making things more difficult than they need to be.

We're either stopping drives after we convert first downs or making more challenging third down situations. Hard to get into a rhythm of offense. And then defensively letting guys off the hook in terms of penalties that extend drives or make more manageable third down situations for their offense against our defense.

So just some things that we've got to get cleaned up. We're giving yards away and making things more challenging. That is a major priority for us. I think we've talked about this in the past.

If you look statistically at where penalties rank in terms of winning and losing, it's nowhere near what the turnover ratio is and what explosive plays are, but it makes for a sloppy game. It makes for a game that as a head coach you're not proud to watch, and it also just makes it difficult to get into a rhythm.

I think it also has impacted time of possession, which has been a problem in our first two games, specifically in the first half. So we need to get those things cleaned up, but that's probably the biggest thing.

And then offensively is third down, and really the same thing for our defense. Getting off the field on defense and then being able to sustain drives on offense. I want to create more touches on offense for more players and more guys. It's difficult to do that when you are not extending drives.

The explosiveness has been great on offense, but we need to be more efficient and specifically on third down too.

**Q. I wanted to ask about KJ Winston. I know just in regards injury-wise, is it a longer-term, significant injury with him, or what can you reveal about his status in regards to that? Then just going with the safeties then, so whenever he can play again, right now your safety room, you know, your top two guys beyond them? Beyond Jaylen Reed and Zakee, who would be the next guy safety-wise? How is that position looking right now behind them two?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so a couple of things. I think

that the first point is I don't really have any new information to share with you guys at this stage. I probably will. I would think probably post-practice when I see you guys later in the week.

Then, obviously, Dejuan Lane is the next guy that we've been trying to get reps for. Obviously when you are talking about Jay Reed and Zakee, those two guys played a ton of football for us and will need to continue. Dejuan is another guy that we've been trying to get more reps and more experience.

That will be important, but we're going to have to develop a few more guys. Especially, hopefully, we'll see timing-wise how this whole thing will play out, but definitely for short-term we're going to have to develop some more guys.

So Dejuan is going to be really important this week and obviously moving forward as well. He's a guy that we've been trying to get more involved. We had planned on playing him more last week. Didn't play out that way, but he's probably the guy that I would say our focus is on the most right now.

**Q. When you went back and looked at the first half defense from Bowling Green over the last week, how did you address that? What did you want to get corrected out of there, and how much of that kind of stuff did you feel might have been just an anomaly in the way that first half played out?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, a couple of things. I think we did not tackle as well in game two as we did in game one, and obviously that's an area that we've got to get that cleaned up because we need to be getting better as the season goes on.

I think there's a lot of reasons that probably factor into that, but we've got to be getting better from a tackling perspective. I thought we tackled really well week one, when that's a concern for most people across the country.

I think the other thing that's a big one for us that we got settled in the second half is the communication. We were trying to rely specifically on the headset communication, and at home that can be a little bit more challenging with the linebacker trying to verbally communicate to all 11 guys on the field. Very similar to what I had explained to you guys about no huddle teams on offense trying to get the quarterback to communicate to everybody. That was still going to be challenging unless you're huddling.

On defense you don't typically huddle. You condense a little bit, but you don't necessarily huddle. That created

some challenges for us and allowed us some opportunities to get those things cleaned up in the second half and really moving forward.

Then just the discipline of playing the defense, of not trying to do more than your job. The more we play great team defense and do their job and be gap accountable, then the plays come to you.

So we just got them settled down and got back to playing the way we're capable of playing in the second half, and we need to build on that obviously going into week three.

**Q. Last year we talked so much about explosive plays and last couple of years really. The first couple of weeks that's been pretty -- it seems like that piece of it has been very good, but now we're talking about third down, and you even mentioned time of possession a couple of minutes ago. I guess, how do you practice third down? Do you have early down package and third down package? Explain a little bit about how you try to coach getting better on third down?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, you do third down periods in practice. Typically your third down calls and the third down defenses that you are going to see are different than normal downs. So you do third down periods.

You do third down periods against your defense. You do third down periods against the D squad or the scout team. That's replicating the look that you're expecting to see in the game.

When I say third down periods, it's third and four. This is what we're running on third and four. This is what we're expecting to see trying to defend us on third and fourth, third and five, third and six, third and seven, third and eight, third and nine, whatever it may be.

Those things are scripted out and practiced. So very similar to how you practice normal downs, how you practice red zone, how you practice third down. You specifically practice those things.

Then when there's opportunities to go against our defense, which we typically do on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, one of those days is always a two-minute period, and then the other day we rotate back and forth between third down and red zone.

Then obviously if we're not doing as well as we want to do on red zone or on third down, then we may double that up, and that could be on the offensive or defensive side of the ball, but if not, we rotate back and forth. That's getting you an extra third down period with speed. That may not be

the specific looks that you're going to see in the game.

Then obviously you're going to do a third down period that scout looks, which are specific looks that you are expecting to see in the game. So that's how you practice them.

Really you break up the entire game like that into segments. Then obviously when you do scrimmages and things like that in the summer, those things also come up organically that way too.

**Q. Got a question a little unrelated to game week, but Bill O'Brien, your predecessor doing some good things at BC early this season. What are your thoughts just on Bill being a head coach again back in college football?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, as you guys know, I've known Bill for a long time. I've known Fitz, his strength coach, for a long time. We were all at the University of Maryland together. Me and Bill lived in the same neighborhood. His wife and my wife were good friends.

Obviously I followed his career in the NFL, and now back obviously at BC. For a short period of time he was also in our conference at Ohio State and now back at BC. For a lot of those guys from that part of the country, BC is like a dream job. It's interesting. I talked to a ton of guys. That BC job is a very desirable job.

If you know Bill, his background, it makes a ton of sense. So when that hire happened, when that whole thing went down, I thought it was a win-win for both BC and Billy.

He's got a really mobile, dynamic quarterback that has done some nice things last year. When he got that piece of the puzzle, you can build from there. Billy has tremendous experience doing that. So it's been cool to watch it, and happy for those guys and not surprised.

**Q. I'm wondering, you had mentioned early in the season how the playoffs are going to lengthen the season now, and you were concerned about that building depth and what not. I'm just wondering, with the changes now, do you still advocate -- I know you guys have a financial consideration -- a 12-game regular season?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Say this again. What are you asking?

**Q. I'm asking if you still advocate a 12-game regular season because of the length of the season? I'm just curious.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, but I don't think that's going

away. I don't think that's changing. It's interesting because whenever anybody wants to get anything done in college football, we say we're doing it for health and wellness to get things passed, rule changes and things like that.

It's hard to say that when we're talking about a regular season as you described it, plus five more games, possible 17-game season depending on how it plays out for the teams that make the national championship.

So, yeah, I don't think that's probably the right thing to do, but that's not changing for all the reasons that you could imagine. You know, it's just like conferences that play nine games or eight games. I don't think that was advantageous either for the Big Ten, but I also would make the argument once you go nine, you're not going to go back to eight. You're hoping other conferences will go to nine. I could actually even see it possibly going to ten conference games.

So I don't see that changing, but I understand why you're asking it, and it's a fair question. Especially if you are basing everything off of student-athlete health and welfare or for a ton of different reasons.

**Q. Would you consider Luke a green light at this point, and can you address the progress he has made since arriving on campus midyear at 215, 220 pounds?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Luke has been transitioned to a green light at this stage. These green, reds, and yellows can change as things go.

I think we always look at things changing in terms of moving up from red to yellow to green, but they also can go in the other direction. Luke is doing really well. He's one of these guys. He showed up on campus. He was very driven and motivated to play. That is both mentally and physically.

He was willing to do the things necessary to play... attack the weight room, attack the summer workouts, attack the playbook. He has the ability to make plays in the passing game where he is somewhat unusual in 2024 for a tight end is he will also stick his nose in there.

For some of these guys that have never really done that at the high school level, that's a challenge. Especially when you are asking them to block Smith Vilbert, who is 280 pounds or whatever he may be. He has shown a willingness, an aggressiveness with that as well.

So I've been a real big fan of Luke's and his approach. You know, we've got a ton of guys that I think could play as true freshmen, but the guys that have played I think are

showing that they're willing to make the type of sacrifices and commitments to actually do it.

Some guys are either not physically ready to play or emotionally ready to play or mentally ready to play. He's a guy that's shown through hard work and development that he is ready to play kind of in all three.

**Q. Andy Kotelnicki has talked in the past about where he will take plays from anywhere to add to his offense. I'm curious, how much do you add to the offense in the season? Obviously coming off a bye week, is there any chance you see something from another program that you want to add, and do you add it during the year?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't think that is specific to Andy. I think everybody is doing that, whether you are watching opponent tape. There's been a ton of times where our defense is going against a team, and they're doing something that is problematic and causes stress and causes issues. You kind of steal that and add it to your game, or you see another college game that you are watching or an NFL game or a high school game.

I think coaches are constantly trying to find things. I think where you have to be careful is that you're not just grabbing a bunch of different things, different concepts that don't necessarily fit what you do and how you are trying to run complementary plays and schemes.

So that's where you have to be careful because if not, you won't have a system. You'll just have a bunch of cute plays from different systems. It needs to be something that complements what we already do. Andy does that, but really I think every coach in America is doing that constantly.

Then to your point, I think it could show up maybe a little bit more on bye weeks, but again, not necessarily because if you're grabbing schemes that already complement what you do, there are slight tweaks that you are adding. A lot of times it's personnel group. A lot of times it may be formation, motion shift. But something we're already kind of doing, just with a little bit different presentation.

**Q. Kaden Saunders is a guy that going back to August we had heard about his potential impact offensively, special teams. The injury in preseason camp, Coach Lustig told us last week that it kind of changed the way they navigated things can Kaden as a punt returner. It seems on offense, I don't think he has played yet on offense. When you look at his room for growth and development coming off of the preseason injury, how much more do you think we can see of Kaden**

**Saunders here in his third year on campus, and what have you seen thus far that maybe has you excited because we haven't seen much of him in game action?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: We haven't either. He's had a lingering injury, and not that he's not able to play, but he's not able to play at 100%.

So he's a guy that I think there was a ton of excitement about and there still is, but he's had a lingering injury that has slowed some of that progress or some of that development down.

**Q. You mentioned a couple of times the helmet communication with the defense. Through two games, what have you kind of learned with regards to that coupled with the iPads? What are maybe some of the things that you didn't expect to be challenges or ways in which maybe it's helped you guys so far?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, probably the biggest thing, like I mentioned, it was going to be an obvious advantage for huddle teams, which we are. So there is a distinct advantage for our offense.

Defensively I think a lot of the challenges that we talked about for offenses with the communication has showed up and then really kind of finding the best ways to do it. Offensively it's being able to literally not have to signal at all and be able to talk to the quarterback and tell them the play and then also maybe a few little coaching points.

Defensively, again, how do you get both corners the information at 53 yards away from each other, possibly up to 53 yards away from each other, and then also I think a linebacker is very comfortable in communicating to the D-line because they've always done that. Strength calls, things like that, setting the front.

But now depending on how you're using it, you're asking that linebacker to turn around and communicate to the safeties. While he's doing that, he's not seeing the formation, he's not seeing the alignment. So it's created some challenges that we've had to work through in the first couple of weeks, specifically on the defensive side of the ball.

Probably a lot of the things that we discussed that were going to be issues for offenses that try to operate from a no huddle.

**Q. Obviously a talking point about the offense this season has been --**

JAMES FRANKLIN: One more thing. I didn't mention the

iPads. I think the iPads have been good, but I think the headset as well as the iPads, you've got to have kind of structure to it because if not, I think they can become a distraction and I also think you can give the players too much information where you are spending the whole time in between series on the iPads and they're not involved in the game.

So I think making sure that there's parameters there and how we're going to use it and not going to use it I think is important to. Sorry.

**Q. Obviously balance has been a talking point about the offense this season. When we talk about wanting to get more guys involved, how do you balance riding a hot hand like Tyler Warren right now versus getting more guys involved in the offense?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it goes back to what I've already addressed multiple times is just plays. We need more plays, which goes hand-in-hand with third down.

You convert a higher percentage of third down and then you're on the field longer, and you're probably talking about 10 to 15 more plays a half, which with more plays creates more opportunities for explosive plays, which I know you guys love, which also creates just being more efficient by converting on third down.

Then obviously the other thing is just the more plays is the more opportunities for touches. I think that just kind of happens organically.

We go in into every single game specifically on the offensive side of the ball trying to get everybody involved, but you can't force the ball to go to certain guys, depending on the defense that you're getting or the pressure you're getting or the look that's presented is going to dictate and determine where the ball goes for that specific play.

So the more plays is really to me the solution.

**Q. You mentioned earlier talking about Kent State and their defense, cover six, but just two high safeties in general it seems is very popular in the NFL in terms of trying to take away the deep pass. I'm thinking specifically of like the Robert Saleh defenses that play a lot of quarters. In that situation of trying to take away the deep pass, how do you think you've done against those particular concepts this year and still generating those yards, and what are the challenges I guess in that kind of idea of still generating explosive plays against defenses that are specifically designed to take that away?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, well, I think they are two very different categories, right? When you talk about the middle field opener, two safety defenses, cover two is a totally different defense than quarters when you are talking about what you're asking specifically.

You know, quarters goes all the way back. People have been running it for a long time now, but it's a way to present a two safety defense and in a lot of ways play a nine-man box in terms of run support because you're getting both of those safeties involved in the run game, which can create challenges for the offense, right?

But it also can create some opportunities because when you have safeties that are so involved in the run game, then that can create opportunities to get the ball thrown over their head.

If it's cover two and you have two defenders designed to play deep halves and depending on whether you are playing some variation of Tampa 2 or where the Mike linebacker is running in the middle of the field, in a lot of ways that's like three deep with double cloud corners on the outside.

So I think they are two different discussions in terms of talking points. I think cover two is called to stop the pass and stop explosive plays in the pass. Quarters is really trying to present middle of the field open, but being able to in a lot of ways end up with a nine-man box and two heavy run support safeties.

Typically you're going to see more explosive plays verse a quarters defense because of the things we just discussed compared to a cover two defense. I think we've done a pretty good job of that, of exposing and attacking quarters defenses in terms of creating explosive plays.

There's obviously ways to do that against cover two as well, but it typically takes a little bit longer to be able to threaten those safeties, high-low the corners, whatever it may be or put those two safeties in a bind with some variation of three verticals sideline and attacking the middle of the field.

So I think overall we've done a nice job of that. I also think the fact that we have been able to run the ball more efficiently and more explosive helps us with the cover two.

Last year that could be challenging where people could line up in cover two, stop the explosive plays, and be able to do some things where they are pinching or gaming the front to take away your run game, and now the ball has to bounce on the perimeter, and now people are playing trap cover two, which is another variation kind of like quarters where

instead of using the safeties for run support, you're using the corners and using some type of defensive front or game or pinch to try to get the ball to bounce to the trap corners or depending on how you want to term trap cover two or run support number two, cover two. However you want to describe it, whatever your terminology may be.

**Q. Kent State, they're 1-14 in their last 15 games. I don't know if you noticed, but they lost 71-0. I know Paul was happy with the St. Francis win they had over Kent State. Knowing all that, what's your message to your players and the fans as far as seeing this as a credible opponent, and is someone like Northern Illinois -- Kent State talent-wise, could they be a comp for Northern Illinois and what they did, so when you point to the underdog message?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: When you say Paul, who is Paul?

**Q. Used to work at St. Francis with the football team.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Sorry. I don't know Paul's résumé. Sorry, Paul. I apologize about that.

I think the first thing I would say is, you know, when you schedule these opponents, typically five and seven years out, you don't know what you're going to get. You schedule a MAC team, and some of the teams that you just mentioned have caused people fits, and then you can get to a year where someone is struggling. So that's unpredictable and challenging.

I think for us it's ultimately about -- and this is the challenge I think in college football. You hear people talk about it all the time, but the challenge is really it's ultimately about us and our focus on Penn State and us getting better and developing and playing up to our standard week in and week out, which is easier said than done.

We see it every Saturday. That's why I always say winning is hard. There's a lot of teams across the country that are sad Saturday night, and you want to do everything you possibly can to make sure you're not one of them.

It doesn't always come from an opponent that the fans and the media and the locker room think it's going to come from. So having a mature football team and approaching it that way on a consistent basis is hard to do. You've heard people talk about it, describe it as rat poison, all types of different things.

Ultimately we're trying to get our staff and our players to approach every week with the same mentality, with the same preparation, with the same approach. When you do that, you give yourself the best chance to be consistent,

and you give yourself the best chance to get better. That's really what our focus is.

**Q. 16 of the top 25 teams in the AP poll right now -- I know it's early, but they're SEC and Big Ten teams. What can you say about conference realignment, how this has been going, the parity maybe in the SEC and the Big Ten right now given that the majority of the conference is ranked in that top 25?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I would say that everybody probably anticipated that, right, with the growth of the SEC and the growth of the Big Ten. Not just their growth in numbers, but the type of programs that were joining both conferences. I think everybody in the country was talking and expecting that the Big Ten and SEC would be in a position to be dominant.

The challenge that you're going to have with that, which I think is what the Commissioners were working on, is you're also going to get to the point where all of the games are going to be SEC verse SEC and Big Ten verse Big Ten, and where does that leave you because you're playing really good teams week in and week out.

I think that's where a lot of the discussions that I think upset a lot of people about the number of Big Ten and SEC teams joining -- excuse me -- getting into the playoffs. I think that was the reason why. Our scheduling looks very different than most other conferences, for what you just mentioned, the number of ranked teams in these two conferences.

We're going to get to the point where we're just going to be playing each other. Probably what I expected and probably what everybody expected. I would also say that's kind of where we're at now, but I would also say if you look at preseason rankings and how many of those teams maybe have some losses earlier in the year than they expected, that kind of goes back to Mike's point. You better approach each team with the right mentality and not look ahead and focus ultimately on yourself and getting better.

But I would say, to your question, I think at this point of the season it's probably about what most people anticipated. We just want to make sure that later in the season you could make an argument for some SEC and Big Ten teams with multiple losses maybe getting in the playoffs over some conferences with maybe single losses just based on the strength of both conferences.

**Q. After each of the first two games you pointed out how the other team game planned to get the ball out quickly and kind of game plan against the pass rush. I**

**was curious if -- I don't obviously know how you expected to be defended or be played against, but does that help steer how you now game plan moving forward knowing that now 2-for-2 teams have specifically played against your pass rush? Does that kind of steer your game planning?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, but I think that's kind of always been the case. We've been as successful in sacking the quarterback and tackles for losses arguably of any program in the country over the last ten years. We're part of that argument.

So I think that is always kind of the plan. What you want to try to do, right, is you want to say, Okay, what is the strength of the defense we're playing this week, and how do we nullify that strength as much as possible? Quick game, screens, move the pocket, run the ball, keep the game close because the other thing that you can do to really throw a curve ball to that game plan is get up by enough points early in the game that they need to get away from that game plan.

So creating three and outs and turnovers and scoring on early drives on offense and get them down by, you know, 17, 21 points where they feel like they're going to have to throw the ball more to get back in the game. Then that obviously leads to opportunities as well.

Then obviously playing at home. Playing at home obviously is a positive for us at Penn State, like it is for a lot of programs across the country, but it's magnified for us.

So now if you can weather whatever their game plan is, if you can play with a lead and do it at home, where now they have to get away from what their original game plan is and throw the ball more than they like, then those things all kind of combined lead to production in that stat of sacks and tackles for loss and things like that.

So a combination of those things. I also think it deals with a little bit the opponents as well. If you look at West Virginia, I think they were one of the best teams in the country last year in not giving up sacks in terms of stylistically how they play. All those things factor in, but at the end of the day we would like more production in that area, and I think it's going to come.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

