

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference

JAMES FRANKLIN: So like I always appreciate you guys coming out and covering Penn State football. Going back and watching the film from this past game was kind of about what we thought and what we discussed afterwards.

I think you guys have already seen players at a game and all those types of things, so I'm going to move on to our next opponent, which is obviously Illinois and Bret Bielema, who I know very well, was on the Nike trip with him for a long time.

He's done a really nice job. Obviously he's got a ton of history as a head coach. He's been around some really good coaches and some really good programs, did a great job when he was at Wisconsin, is doing a great job now at Illinois. Had some time in the NFL as well. So it's going to be a heck of a game.

Obviously their road win on the road at Nebraska was a really big win for them, so they're coming in here confident, but they're also coming in here already going on the road and finding success in a tough environment. Nebraska is a storied program. They take a lot of pride in their stadium and their game day environment as well. So I think that would give Illinois a ton of confidence coming into our place.

When you talk about their offensive coordinator, Barry Lunney, who I think is doing a really nice job for them, kind of a combination of his background and Bret's background in terms of what they want to do and what he wants to do, it's a really nice mix of the two systems, and they're putting up some really good numbers.

I think the biggest difference is the quarterback. I think he's got ten touchdown passes and zero interceptions. I think he's one of the more improved players right now in college football. So I think that's kind of the big story. A young man that transferred, I think, from Mississippi State, if I remember correctly.

The, running back, No. 3, Feagin, he's a thumper. He's 250 pounds. And they've had really good production out of



wide receiver No. 13, Bryant, and wide receiver No. 4, Franklin. Guys have been very, very productive for them.

So doing a nice job. They do a really good job, again, mixing up personnels, mixing up scheme, mixing up tempo. I think the offensive coordinator's background is tempo. I think, if you look at Bret's background, it's more about runs plus completions and being able to run the ball and being physical, so they've blended the two, I think very nicely.

Then defensively, I think Aaron Henry's done a really nice job as a guy that they promoted, when obviously their defensive coordinator left to go be the head coach of Purdue, and Aaron's done a nice job. Obviously Bret's got a defensive background as well, but they're really playing well. He's done a nice job. He's a defensive back coach by trade, but he's doing some really nice things.

Their defensive end, No. 17, Gabe Jacas, is doing a really nice job. He's a young man that's been playing for him since his true freshman year, kid out of Florida. Their linebacker, No. 28, Rosiek, is a captain for them. Again, another Florida guy. He's playing well. And their cornerback and nickel, No. 14, Xavier Scott, another Florida guy, and their safety, No. 10, Miles Scott.

I think their secondary is really going to be a challenge for us. I think our wide receivers have taken a really nice step and made some really good strides since last season, but we will be challenged. We will be challenged in the secondary this week. These guys do a really good job. They play a decent amount of man coverage, and they're extremely competitive.

Then from a special teams perspective, Robby Discher is their special teams coordinator and has done a good job. We've been impressed with punt returner No. 80, Hank Beatty, and then their kick returner, No. 7, Kenari.

So it should be a good challenge. I don't really have any changes for you guys in terms of the red, yellow, green list. Obviously don't have any significant changes on the depth chart. I open it up to questions.

Q. We saw Cam Wallace and Dom DeLuca with apparent -- with injuries. Can you give us an update



on them? Is either one of them long term?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Again, I understand you guys are going to ask these questions. I typically don't have these answers for you. I hate to see you waste a question, but I typically don't have these answers for you guys in this press conference because, once again, we need time to evaluate the injuries and we need time to have conversations with these kids and their families before I'm going to say something to you guys about it.

I would recommend for you guys to probably save these type of questions till Tuesday, but if you guys want to ask, feel free to ask. I typically won't have this information for you guys on a Monday, again, because we need to totally evaluate the injuries, and sometimes you're talking about MRIs and X rays and a ton of things that go into that, and also me to be able to have time to have conversations with them and possibly their families.

Q. Next year, as I understand it, there's been a rule change where you're going to go to 105 roster limit and all of those guys can be on scholarship, which logically -- and I think a lot of people have said -- could mean the end or the diminishing of walk-ons. Have you -- I guess, what's your opinion of that rule? What have you done to manage that in terms of talking to the kids in your program who are preferred walk-ons? What's your sort of take on that situation?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, a couple things. Probably not going to get into detail with strategy on that. In terms of conversations, those conversations we'll have after the season. I don't think that's a conversation for right now.

The other thing that I would say to you is the rule, the way I understand it, is for the season that doesn't mean in training camp and in spring ball your numbers have to be at 105. So in some ways you're going to create a system where you're going to have almost like tryouts and cuts, like you've had in high school and like you've had a little bit maybe in some colleges, guys fighting to get onto the active roster, the 105.

But it will limit some opportunities, there's no doubt about it. We've had some great stories over my time at Penn State, and really over Penn State's history, there's been some tremendous stories. I don't think there's too many coaches that love it.

You look at some of these programs -- I don't mean to talk about other schools, but you look at programs like Nebraska and others that have a really robust history with walk-ons. This creates challenges. It creates a lot of challenges for all of us, and some programs more than

others. And it reduces opportunities, which you hate to see. I think it's going to help FCS programs. I think it's going to help Division II football.

But it's going to hurt opportunities for the kid that wanted to come to Penn State and chase his dream and see if he could possibly earn a role or even possibly earn a scholarship. So I don't love it, but like most things, this all deals with finances and budgets.

Q. Three games in, is there a point or two about your defense you still really most want to learn about. Is there one or two areas that, to you, still has some proving to go here going into this game and so on?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Before I get into specifically answering your question, I think the Bowling Green game had some people concerned, and then Bowling Green goes to Texas A&M and has a similar type game at Texas A&M. So I think Bowling Green is a really good MAC team.

I think that was helpful for me as well as probably others. But defensively, I thought last week, again, when you hold any Division I football team to 67 yards and you say it's the eighth lowest in Penn State history, I think the previous one may have been -- or maybe that was the yards differential was like against Susquehanna, which I don't -- if I scheduled Susquehanna, I can imagine the comments I would get from you guys and the questions I would get in the press conference. Especially from Mike.

But I think whenever you hold anybody to 67 yards, that's hard to do. It really is. So I thought we took some significant strides last week. It's something for us to build on, but obviously as we all know, when you get into Big Ten play, it's different, and Illinois has done a really good job. They're a physical bunch. The quarterback is playing at a high level. As you guys know, we've lost some significant players, and it's tested our depth.

So we're going to have to continue to develop depth. I'm thankful for the 7:30 game. I know that sounds silly, but with some of the young guys that we're playing, we need every minute we can in preparation, and we're going to take advantage of every minute, in terms of walk-throughs and meetings.

Last week was a nice step. Again, I thought we played really good in week 1. I thought as a team we didn't play as well in week 2, but I have probably better perspective on that now than I did after the game. Then last week I thought we played well.

So we're taking a step in the right direction, but we've got



to get better this week as a defense, as an offense, as a team, on special teams, all of it. I think our guys looking at Sunday's practice, I think our guys are approaching it the right way.

Q. Through three games, how would you assess the offensive line, particularly some of the things that Andy Kotelnicki seems to be asking some of the guys to do, like with the motions and stuff like that? Those guys moving, the offensive linemen moving around.

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think we've been pleased with how the O-line is playing. I think they're playing physical. Again, when you're able to rush the ball for 300 yards, and you're able to protect the quarterback. Drew's done a couple of nice things in terms of extending plays, and his mobility, I think, has been really big for us. I think last year he probably ran better than people thought he would, and I think he's taken it to another level this year. Not necessarily just purely running, but getting a couple of first downs a game with his feet or just keeping plays alive, like the long play down the sideline that he threw to Omari that he extended the play.

So I've been pleased with the O-line. In terms of like the one motion we ran with (indiscernible), I don't know if that's going to screw grades or perception. Or them shifting presnap, I don't really think that's going to have an overall impact on how the O-line plays and their grades, but it's fun. It's cool to see, and it's cool to look at.

Where I think it helps you is it just, again, like we talked about before, it creates time that the defense has to spend working on it. Obviously they've been looking at Kansas film. They've been looking at Penn State film from last year. They're looking at Penn State film now from this year.

Whenever you're able to put some different things on tape that they have to deal with, whether it's motions or shifts or some of the things you brought up, it does two things. It forces them to spend time on it, and then obviously for us it also creates some opportunities to take advantage of leverage and angles and grass.

Q. You mentioned with Illinois' secondary, could be a challenge for you guys. Ahead of that challenge, the wide receiver room, how would you assess how those guys have fared through three games? And how prepared do you believe they are, not only ahead of Illinois, but Big Ten play in general?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I've been pleased with the step that we've taken. I'm kind of surprised that Chris and Greg haven't kind of come to me and showed me a ton of

articles about our wide receivers and the steps that they have taken and what Marques and those guys have done because there sure is a bunch of articles when they didn't play up to people's thoughts and standards.

But overall, I've been pleased with what they've been able to do. We've got to continue to build it, build their confidence and build their production, but I think it's hard to argue that they may be the most improved position on the team right now.

Let's be honest with it, we needed that to happen, so that's fair. I'm not saying some of the things that were written and said in the past were not fair, but again just like his coaches, if we're going to be critical, then they should be praised when they're doing some really good things, which I think they are.

Again, to your question, I think this week we'll be challenged. We've got to put them in the best position we possibly can to be successful, and they've got to continue to get better and compete and be aggressive. I think we're at our best at that wide receiver position when those guys are being aggressive, and I've seen it more consistently in practice. I'm seeing it more consistently in games, and I think you guys are as well.

Q. James, I was wondering, Tom Allen, is that going to be a permanent thing? How do you feel that transition went?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Don't like to say permanent. Don't like to say forever. Don't like to say always. But I thought it went well.

Again, he hadn't been up there for 15 years. We talked about doing it the week before, ended up doing it last week. Thought there was some real advantages to going up there, but we'll see how this week goes, and I could see this being a week-to-week deal where we do what is necessary. With the leadership that we got on the sideline with the staff and the leadership that we have on the sideline with the players, we feel good about that aspect, but we've also lost some guys. So that impacts it as well. As we get younger and start to play some less experienced guys, that could factor into it.

We'll see how this thing goes this week, but last week I do think it was a positive, and I think Tom did as well.

Q. I see Greg didn't get the whiteout energy notification that everybody else seems to have.

JAMES FRANKLIN: That's fair. Paul got it. Chris got it. Greg -- Paul, come on up here. I'm serious, Paul. Greg.

You and your alma mater, come on up here.

Q. James, you had an opportunity to see a lot of your young linebackers on Saturday. Do you think any of those guys have separated themselves to the point where you'd be comfortable playing them in a more competitive game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Ta'Mere is a guy that we've been excited about really since we recruited him. He had some bumps and bruises where he lost some time, which would have been really valuable for him and for us. I think that's going to be really important for us, continue to move forward as his durability and his ability to get in the game and play and play well.

And the same thing for practice. He just needs the reps. He's super talented, but he just needs the reps and the time from a development standpoint.

Dakaari Nelson was a move we weren't necessarily sure how that was going to go. There's a big difference between playing defensive back and playing linebacker. Obviously people do some things to kind of get you in the box, whether that is the position we're trying to play you at or not, and Dakaari has been a really pleasant surprise. He's playing really well on special teams right now. I think you guys saw he was the special teams player of the week and is really growing into the linebacker position. So that's been a real positive for us.

Obviously we're going to have to continue to develop depth there. I thought Specca came in and did some nice things for us this week in terms of running the defense and playing with confidence, and we're going to have to build on that.

Tyler Elsdon continues to be a guy that has played a ton of football around here and we have a lot of confidence in. Rojas continues to develop into a special player. Then obviously we have some flexibility with Abdul as well.

There's some answers there, but we need to continue to develop guys and continue to develop depth.

Q. James, you talked a lot about Luke Altmyer and how he's grown. What specifically have you seen him do to take a step forward, and what kind of challenges does that present for you guys?

JAMES FRANKLIN: It's the same thing with our guys. A lot of times we want to point to a specific reason on why a guy is playing better or certain area a guy is playing better. Sometimes it's just they're a year older, right? They're a year older, more experienced, more comfortable, more

confident, more confident in the system, more confident in their own skin.

He's just doing a really good job of managing the game. He's throwing completions for a high percentage. He's protecting the football. He's getting the ball into the end zone. He's really doing a nice job, and they're doing a great job of mixing the run and the pass so he doesn't feel like he's got to carry the burden himself.

But I just see him, he's really slightly improved kind of across the board. Part of that is his maturation and development. Part of that is the offensive coordinator doing a good job. Part of that may be the offensive coordinator knowing his quarterback better. So it's all of those things. I've been impressed with him.

He's a fairly highly recruited guy out of high school. Again, everybody's path and journey is different. From a maturation process standpoint, he's really taken some nice steps.

Q. When it comes to that receiver room, Liam Clifford and Julian Fleming are two guys, really since Julian got here and throughout the year, we've been told don't focus specifically on the stat sheet with those guys. Look what they do away from the ball. Look what they do day to day. But to get them both rolling, momentum production, on Saturday before Big Ten action, how encouraged are you by that, and what do you think it does for both of them?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it's helpful. As you know, we want to get a ton of guys involved in it. It wasn't specifically just those two guys that don't just focus on statistics because it's going to be somebody different each week that steps up. There's going to be somebody that one week has a big game, and then the next game, all he gets are a few opportunities. Again, we're going to call the plays and run the system, and a lot of times, based on what the defense does -- we use personnel and formation to try to put people in position to make plays, but again, the defense will ultimately dictate where the ball goes.

Back to, I think, my comments after the game, I don't know if I've ever seen a statistic where you have eight different players score a touchdown. I don't know if I've ever seen that before. Whenever you're able to get so many different guys involved, and Illinois isn't sitting over there saying, if we stop this guy, they're going to have a hard time moving the ball -- maybe that was the case after week 1, but after week 2 and after week 3, you've got running backs touching the ball in a ton of different ways. You've got tight ends touching the ball in a ton of different ways and impacting the game. Tyler's done it as a receiver, as a

runner, and as a passer. You've got multiple quarterbacks on the field.

That makes it more difficult as a defensive coordinator, as a head coach, to tell your team, look, we've got to stop these things. Same thing being balanced in terms of being able to run to win games and throw to win games, I think is really important.

So having some more guys, to your point, that Illinois is looking at and saying, hey, this Liam Clifford guy can hurt us if we're not aware of him, and this Julian Fleming guy can hurt us if we're not aware of him, and Khalil Dinkins can hurt us if we're not aware of him, and Luke Reynolds can hurt us if we're not aware of him, and on and on and on with the wide receivers, tight ends, and running backs. There's a lot of value in that. For them and for us.

Q. I wanted to circle back to the Tom Allen in the box thing. What specific feedback did he give you regarding that experience on Saturday?

JAMES FRANKLIN: The hot dogs and the food and the temperature, he wasn't going up until the weather came out. There's supposed to be rain and thunder and lightning, so he said I'm going up into the booth with Dex on the sideline. Let him deal with the rain.

That's not what you wanted. Didn't get a smile or a laugh or nothing out of you.

Yeah, I think the biggest thing is really the things that we talked about before. Again, there's a lot of ways to be right. There's a lot of ways to do things that work. There's a lot of different offenses to run, defenses to run, special teams to run -- there's guys that call it from the sideline that are successful. There's guys that call it from the booth and are successful.

I think, for me, I'm a big believer that, if all things are even, the best place to call the game, just strictly call the game, in terms of calling the plays, calling the defenses, I think the best place to call from is the booth. You can lay out all your call sheets, makes it easy to kind of write down and take notes, makes it easy to be focused on the game and not dealing with the fans and not dealing with the emotions of the players on the sideline and not dealing with weather. It's literally calling the game.

I think he wasn't sure, after not being up there for so long and obviously being a head coach and being on the sideline and all the things that come with that, I'm not sure if he was sure how he was going to feel being up there. Then I think after going up and doing it, I think it became a viable option for him and for us. Like I said, for a ton of

different reasons, we'll take it on a week-to-week basis and see what's best ultimately for our team and ultimately for our defense.

I think he liked it. I think the other thing we did a good job of is Jevin did a really good job as well as Robb Smith and Thomas Allen, who were with him in the booth. We went up there on Friday and did a full dress rehearsal, had Dan Conner on the sideline. We're kind of going through drives and calls and doing the communication, and Dan was able to communicate with the linebacker. So I think that was helpful as well. Feedback was good.

Again obviously when you play well, that has an impact too.

Q. What went into the decision to start Elliot Washington against Kent State, and what have you maybe learned between A.J. Harris, Jalen Kimber, and Elliot through that portion?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Elliot has just been playing really well and practicing really well and earned the opportunity to get more playing time. That's one thing.

And I don't want this to come off the wrong way in terms of Elliot earned that opportunity, but also A.J. had a little bit of a stomach virus on, I think Thursday and Friday, but may have been Friday, which was also affecting him, and we were concerned about that. He missed a little bit of practice time, wasn't able to eat really the day before and even the morning of. Then he ended up bouncing back and playing well. Typically with those type of flus, once you're able to get some medicine in him, within 24 hours they're usually feeling better.

Again, I don't want that to come off the wrong way because Elliot earned the opportunity by the way he's been playing, but that also was a factor with A.J. And Kimber -- we feel that not only those three guys -- Zion is playing really well right now. Cam Miller is playing really well.

I think you guys know we feel like we've got a lot of depth at that corner position, which is also part of the way we're solving some of our depth issues at other positions is some of those corners being able to play the nickel position, play some of the safety positions, doing some of those things has also helped because we do feel like we've got so much depth and talent at that position right now.

Q. You mentioned earlier getting everybody involved. How much does Drew's role in that play as a guy who can see the full field? How hard is it to defend a quarterback who has the vision to see back side progressions and things like that? Then secondarily,

how has he used the tablets on the sidelines to maybe enhance some of those things, if he is?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think the first thing is it kind of goes hand in hand with the question earlier about the O-line. The quarterback can't work through his progression if we're not playing well up front, on the O-line, the ball's got to be out. And our O-line and running backs in protection and Drew's ability to adjust the protection and Nick Dawkins' ability to adjust the protection based on what they're doing defensively, that plays a part in ball distribution as well. That plays a part in the quarterback being able to attack the entire field.

The reality is more times than not, though, you're still better if the ball can come out to the first or second progression as much as possible. That's where scheme and route running is important.

Then also having the ability to attack the field from an arm strength standpoint also factors into that. Yards after the catch is also impacted by that. If the ball is able to get to the receivers in a hurry, where now they're able to catch the ball with cushion or separation, now you're able to get more YAC yards as well.

I think we'll see a little bit more of that in the deep ball too. I think we'll continue to get better on the deep ball. I do not want to overthrow deep balls. I think, if the ball is thrown perfectly in stride, or even underthrown, you still have a chance to make a play on the ball or get the interference call. But I think we'll continue to get in more rhythm and be even more in sync in the deep ball throwing.

To your point about the tablets, I think the tablets have been good, again, in terms of being able to make some coaching points and adjustments. Sometimes you say stuff to the guys during the game and make a correction, and they may have saw it differently than you, and a lot of times you'd have to wait until Sunday -- more times than not, you make a coaching point, they agree with you. Sometimes you make a coaching point, and they felt like they saw it differently than the way you saw it, and they push back on that. Typically, you have to wait till Sunday to resolve that.

You don't have to wait anymore. You can look at the film, and those one or two times where you didn't both see it the same way, it gets it resolved real quickly.

Sometimes the quarterback saw it better than we saw it and we were wrong, and sometimes we're able to make a coaching point, and the quarterback didn't see it that way, and the film shows that the coaches were right. That's where I think it's probably most valuable and important.

Q. James, we saw Abdul and Dani each get their first sacks of the year this weekend. We talked to Dani post-game, and he said, once you get one, they kind of start to flow in. What do you think that performance does for their confidence moving forward?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Again, I think you guys have heard me talk about the sacks already in terms of the type of teams you play impacts that. What the game plan is for those type of opponents impacts that. Not starting fast and playing well early in the game and forcing people outside of their game plan impacts that.

Although it was probably a point of discussion, I don't feel like it was a concern of the coaches in terms of not feeling like we had the guys, the techniques, the fundamentals to create sacks, pressures, and hits on the quarterback.

Obviously it's good when it starts happening and we would love more of it, but there's a lot more that goes into it than just beating your man. Zane Durant, I think, has been as impactful on the quarterback as anybody. If you're just strictly looking at a stat sheet, it wouldn't tell you that. But like I try to talk to our guys all the time -- again, this is the people in this room as well -- but real football people, they know that. The NFL scouts know that. Our coaching staff know it. Our players know that. Our media that covers us closely knows that.

I'm not saying the stats don't matter because the stats tell a story, but, again, I think Zane Durant is a really good example. I think all you guys who have watched our game closely, and I bet almost all of you guys, not only did you watch the game, but you also watched it in replays over and over again, it tells a different story.

I think just like we were talking about the wide receivers earlier, and them saying, okay, if we stop this wideout -- and it's hard to say that based on our guys and the amount of guys that are being productive now on offense -- I think Zane Durant is a guy that they're sitting there talking about right now that, hey, we've better have a plan for this defensive tackle. Again, the film tells you that, not the stat sheets.

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