

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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James Franklin

Press Conference

JAMES FRANKLIN: Hope everybody's doing good. Appreciate you being here. Just quickly, to kind of hit a couple things, after watching the tape from Purdue, after watching the tape, I thought we got better again last week in a lot of different areas, which is great.

One of the things that obviously you guys have a bunch of questions on early in the year is I think we're playing more disciplined football. We had three penalties for 26 yards.

One was interesting, I've never seen this before. We got a six-yard penalty. So the one we jumped offsides, they gave us a six-yard penalty. I've never seen that before in the stats and on the field. Obviously it was supposed to be five yards.

We got 66 players in the game, which was awesome. Then I thought we started fast, offensively with a touchdown and defense with a five-play drive resulting in a punt. So those things were great.

Areas for growth: Create more turnovers, causing fumbles, recovering fumbles and interceptions would help us in a lot of ways.

Then just I think we take a lot of pride in being a developmental program, and when the threes and fours got in there, the experience, I think, is really good for them and good for us, but we did not play up to the standard. Guys got in there, they've got to be able to execute and play at a high level. It's a tremendous opportunity that they're getting, and they need to approach it that way.

So making sure guys are preparing the right way as if they were the starter every single week so, when their number's called, they're ready.

Getting into Minnesota, P.J. Fleck, who I've known for a long time, came and visited us when we were at Vanderbilt, came and visited us actually here at Penn State when we first got here. I've known P.J. for a long time. He's done a really good job.



You kind of look at their roster, and I'm always interested in looking at how people are building their rosters. They've got 19 players -- I think that's accurate -- from the transfer portal. We have 9. I don't think 19 is a lot. As you guys know, we're not a huge transfer portal team. Not against the transfer portal by any means, but look at kind of filling spots. I even think their number, 19, in college football is always very low, but I think it's an interesting thing to look at each week and study.

When we kind of get into these guys, their offensive coordinator, Greg Harbaugh, which is also an interesting one -- it looks like Harbaugh, but in their pronunciation guide, it's listed out as "Harbow," which is surprising. I'm glad I checked that out before coming on. He's done a really, really good job.

They're an 11 personnel and a 12 personnel team. They mix it up. I describe it as a pro style offense. Their stats that really stand out is fewest turnovers. They're ranked 3rd in the Big Ten and 13th in the country. Third down offense, they're 5th in the Big Ten and 18th in the country. And then red zone offense, they're 7th in the Big Ten and 47th in the country.

The quarterback who transferred from New Hampshire, I think is playing really well: 67 percent, 14 touchdowns, 4 interceptions. On top of that, I think in the last three or four games he's done a really good job of protecting the football.

Their running back, No. 1, Darius Taylor, is a big back and has been playing really well for the last two years.

Then their wide receiver, Daniel Jackson, who's a redshirt senior, is playing well for them as well.

Their defensive coordinator Corey Hetherman, I've been following his career kind of for a while, he was the defensive coordinator at James Madison when they were playing very, very well and winning a bunch of games. Then he went to Rutgers and now has been at Minnesota the last couple years and done a very, very good job.

I would describe them a lot like how we used to be, probably with Bob Shoop and Brent Pry, four down but a



little more of a two high safety shell, quarters and quarter, quarter, half. They kind of remind me a lot of the better defenses in the Big Ten. They remind me kind of the old Michigan State defense, kind of remind me of Iowa. They're going to make you earn it. They're going to line up.

They do a really good job with their run blitzes, but they're going to line up and play hard and play fast and play physical, and that's showing up. They're 5th in the Big Ten and 12th in the country in scoring defense. Total defense, they're 5th in the Big Ten and 11th in the country. Take-aways, their 1st in the Big Ten and 10th in the country. And passing defense, they're 6th in the Big Ten and 17th in the country. So really good stats.

It's also telling that you could be 5th in the Big Ten and in the top 10 in the country in a lot of statistics. So obviously our conference plays really good defense.

A lot of guys stand out to us, their linebacker, No. 45, Cody Lindenberg; their defensive end, No. 17, Jah Joyner; their defensive end, No. 92, Danny Striggow; and their quarterback, No. 5, Justin Walley.

Their true freshman safety, No. 3, Koi Perich, been very impressed with him. I think he's got five interceptions, played really well in high school, was the -- I think was the MVP of the Army All-American game. He's flying around making big plays for them as a true freshman. He's been impressive. He's been impressive. Playing really well on defense.

Then special teams, I've known Bob Ligashesky, their special teams coordinator, for a long time, an old PSAC guy at IUP. Has been all over the place, got an extensive resume both in the NFL and major college football.

Again, Koi Perich as a kick return guy and a punt return guy doing some good things for them. Then their kicker Dragan Kesich is a difference maker for them in our opinion.

It will be a challenge. It's a tough place to go play, beautiful stadium they built a couple years ago. They get really good support. We're going to have to go and play well to find a way to get a win on the road here in the Big Ten.

Appreciate your time. Open it up to questions.

Q. You always make turnover ratio very important. Does it take on the greater importance this week considering Minnesota has 16 interceptions?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think, number one, turnover ratio and explosive plays are the two most important stats in football. It's been that way for a long time. Something that I don't think you can start to preach one week. It's something we talk about all the time.

But obviously when you're playing a team that's doing a really good job at it, not only creating turnovers but also protecting the football, then they're doing a good job. I think, to be honest with you, that's P.J., P.J. and his background at Rutgers with Coach Schiano.

I think a lot of the well-coached teams understand, before you can learn to win, you've got to learn how not to lose, and you put the game in jeopardy by playing sloppy football and turning the ball over and giving up big plays. He's done a really good job of that.

But, yeah, it's always emphasized. We won't emphasize it more this week because it's just one of our staples that we're going to talk about and work on every single week and every single day.

I think you guys have heard me say before, when we hire new coaches, one of the non-negotiables is we're going to work ball security every single day as a period and we're going to work this ball disruption period every single day as a period. A lot of times guys will say, well, we'll get that during practice. I'm a big believer in that. It's not something we're going to do different this week. It's something we constantly are talking about.

Q. Just talking about turnovers. You guys on defense ranked really highly in several categories. Why, though, do you think not creating the turnovers? What can you point to for that, and how does that change?

JAMES FRANKLIN: We were talking about that the other day. It's a couple things, right? I think, first of all, we're playing some of the best defensive football in all of college football right now, number one. And there's always going to be something that is an area that you need to work on and get better and we embrace that.

I think the first thing is shots on goal is what we call it, is making sure the second man in is stripping and punching at the football. A few years ago, we were causing a decent amount of fumbles but not recovering them. So making sure we're doing both at a high level.

Then I think we're doing a pretty good job of PBUs and contested catches, and we've got to come down with a few of those. There's been a couple that are 50-50 balls, and the way the rules are in college football, the tie goes to the offense. We've got to find a way to win a few more of

those, and we've got to get other guys involved rather than Jay Reed. Jay Reed's been the one guy that's really disruptive in terms of turning the ball over.

The next step is not just the confidence of breaking the ball up, but actually going after the ball. Most importantly, I want to continue to play great defense, which I think we are doing. I don't think Tom Allen and the defensive side of the ball is getting enough credit for how good of defense we're playing.

So most importantly, I want to make sure we're doing that and continuing to do that, but when you're looking for areas of improvement and where you can take the next step, I think that's a fair question and an area that we would love to take the next step and improve there because those things change games.

Q. After the Purdue game, you discussed this a little bit about the Big Ten being ready week in and week out. How would you gauge them, the Big Ten, this season and how it's preparing teams like yours for the playoffs?

JAMES FRANKLIN: As you know, I don't love to like kind of talk about a whole lot more than Minnesota and the team that we're playing this week. What that's preparing for us down the future, I'm totally focused, and I want our team to be totally focused on Minnesota.

I guess the question and appreciate the question and understand the question, but if I start talking about things other than Minnesota, then so do our coaches and so do the players, and we lose focus, and then we come out and don't play well. Then my press conference next week is miserable because you guys are all over me because we didn't play the way we should have played.

There will be a time and a place to talk about that in great detail, but right now our focus is on Minnesota completely.

Q. Up until a couple weeks ago, getting off to sluggish starts was supposedly an issue. Then the last couple weeks have been a total exception to that. Is there anything you've done better, let's say scripting the plays early and then executing them, anything like that that explains why you've gotten off to great starts the last couple weeks?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I wouldn't necessarily say that our process has changed, but no different than the question I just got a minute ago about turnovers. Okay, let's discuss this. We're not getting as many as we normally have gotten. Why? Let's go back and study the tape. Let's study the things we're doing in practice. The years that

we've had a bunch, what were we doing? What were we emphasizing, to just make sure that we're turning over every stone and finding ways to improve?

It's the same way with starting games. What are our tendencies? Doing some self-scouts. What are our tendencies in those areas? How can we break those tendencies? Then making sure that the coaches are doing everything in terms of dotting Is and crossing Ts and that we're practicing that way as well.

I would not say that really anything has changed, but when you go a couple weeks and you give up a bunch of yardage on defense and maybe a field goal on offense, you don't score points, whether they're touchdowns or field goals, in opening drives and you want to start faster, then you spend a little bit more time talking about it and looking at it.

But I wouldn't say anything dramatically changed. Just making sure that, again, we're as detail oriented as we can possibly be. Last week's a good example. We're rolling, and we jump offside on a tempo play, which made it harder, which you'd prefer not to put yourself in those situations. But we were able to overcome it and still go down and score.

So nothing dramatic. More just about our process and maybe a little bit more self-scout.

Q. How close did you come to playing Grunk in that game? Can you discuss the balancing act between making sure that somebody like Bo gets the snaps that he deserves against making sure your third teamer is ready to go in case you need him?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that's always the fine line, right? Like Beau needs and deserves as many reps that he can get. He's been an unbelievable teammate. He's been a huge part of our offense and our system, and just like we saw a few weeks back, was able to go in there and win a game for us. That development is critical.

Like I've said to you before, whether it's practice or games, if you're trying to get three guys ready, a lot of times you end up getting no one ready.

The other thing is, you guys don't get to see it, but Grunk is getting pretty much live scrimmage work, about 24 reps every Sunday. Some days are total live, the quarterback included. More days than not, it's live except for the quarterback. But he's getting a ton of those reps that Beau never gets.

So it's a fine line. But I think every rep that Beau can get is

important, and I think when Grunk is in a similar position, he'll want those reps as well, whether it's as the starting quarterback or the backup quarterback, he's going to want every rep he can get too.

Q. You mentioned the threes and fours didn't play up to standard as a group, but were there any individuals out of the twos, threes, and fours that you thought earned more playing time coming out of Purdue?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think it's a combination of not only how they played, but also guys that just have gotten to the point from a redshirt standpoint that they can play now and not burn their year. I think you guys are pretty aware of who those guys are.

Tyseer Denmark is an example of that, both as a punt returner and as a wide receiver. Eagan Boyer now falls into that category. He's doing some good things for us. Both of the running backs, Quinton and Corey, fall into that category. Corey probably a little bit more than Quinton right now, not based on production, but just based on games available.

Quinton has already played in three games. So we really only have one more game with him during the regular season. We just have to decide this week is it this week or next week? We're going to let those two guys compete, and whoever gives us the best chance to win this week will be the guy that's green lighted as the third.

Then defense, Xavier Gilliam, the two defensive ends. Granville now is full go. He can play for us. Harvey is full go. He can play for us. Not having to worry about any of those things. Speca is in the situation like Quinton Martin, he's only got one game to play, so we've got to be strategic about that but having him ready to play. Vaboue, Belgrave-Shorter, and Mitchell fall into that category. Kenny Woseley is another one who's only got one game left to play in those last two games. So we want to be strategic there.

So a combination of how they played in the games but also what they have available. It's both those things.

Q. You mentioned it's a tough place to play. You guys haven't been up there a lot. Can you learn anything from the last trip up there that you can apply this time around, similar time of the year, whatnot?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, a long time ago, different team, a lot of different coaches, things like that. But obviously we understand what the environment will be like. We've got to understand what the stadium will be like, weather that time of year, how this coach builds his roster and how this

coach builds his team and how they want to play their winning style of football -- all those things, yes. But different players, a lot of different coaches in both organizations.

Q. Luke Reynolds, now that you've had a chance to review what he did in a little bit more detail, is he a guy that's showing the ability -- I know he's played each week, but with some expanded work that, come postseason play down the stretch here, you can maybe re-evaluate what he's capable of doing compared to what his initial role was on the field for you guys this fall?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Can you be a little more direct in what you're asking?

Q. Now that he's done some things in games -- made some plays, made some blocks, put some things on film that's a little more tangible for you than what you saw on the practice field -- is his potential role within this offense in 2024 something that you and the staff, despite the presence of Tyler Warren, could see yourselves continuing to evaluate and maybe rethinking on compared to where he was coming into the fall?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, we love Luke's development and what he's been able to do this year, and that will continue to evolve as the season goes on. But again, when you've got Tyler Warren in that room -- and Khalil is a guy that's done some great things for us as well. He was all over the tape that I showed the team on Sunday blocking. He blocked extremely well and is obviously, as you guys know, is a threat in the passing game. So that's a really competitive room.

Coach Howle has done a really good job of developing that room and coaching that room. I don't see anything significantly changing right now based on opportunities and circumstances. There's a lot of things that can go on between now and the end of the season, but I love his approach every single day, how he practices, how he works. I think he's got a very, very, very bright future and we're excited about it.

But I think you are promoting us to take Tyler Warren off the field and probably not going to do that.

Q. You mentioned post-game with Abdul Carter obviously a lot of times it looks like he's playing through potential holding penalties that aren't getting called. Have you maybe had to try to say anything to Abdul or is Deion to get him to kind of keep playing? Is it frustrating for him at all?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Do you see frustration showing up on the field when you watch him?

Q. I don't know, but he did celebrate when he finally got one call, which to me is like hey this guy's --

JAMES FRANKLIN: If to me it's showing up on the field where he's getting frustrated and now his effort changes because he feels like, hey, I can't get a call here. I'm getting held every time. Then that would be a concern. But the guy is playing with phenomenal motor.

I mean, the play he made on the screen was phenomenal. Again, for us, we try to spend a lot of time talking about real football people, studying the tape, NFL scouts, GMs, other college coaches. When you watch the tape, the guy is impactful.

Whether it's sacks, whether it's tackles for loss, whether it's holding calls, whether it is obvious that they have a specific plan in how they're trying to limit his impact, keeping tight ends in, keeping running backs in, always sliding in his direction so there's double-team between the tackle and the guard. Like he is impacting the game in a number of ways, which creates opportunities for other guys on our defensive line and within our defense and causes a lot of headaches.

So he's been great. His attitude's been great. He is coachable. He is becoming more and more of a leader every single day. One of the cool things for me to do is after the game, for some reason, I can always find his dad and his mom in the stands. He has a hard time finding them sometimes, but I always seem to find them, and I've got a great relationship with them.

So, no. I'm more focused on how is he impacting the game, and how is his effort and his motor? Those two things are at a really, really high level. I think a lot of people are noticing it. I love -- my favorite play in the game last week was the screen because the effort and the burst that he played with. And not just him, you watch that clip, and Zane Durant is chasing the ball from behind, a bunch of guys are doing it. Those things lead to good things when you've got all 11 guys running to the ball and playing with great motor and enthusiasm.

I think the other thing I would say is early in the year, as he was transitioning to D-end, he had a few jump offsides penalties and things like that, which all great defensive ends do, so those are limiting. Now I think people are focusing on all the positive things he's doing, not trying to balance the sack and the jump offsides. He's less and less of those things and more and more of just straight out

production.

Q. You talked a couple weeks ago about making sure not to lose after one game, turning that into two or three. What does it say about this team to not just win these past two games but do so in a pretty complete four quarter manner?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it shows maturity. I think it shows growth. I also, at a place that I think is challenging to do it, I think they do a really good job of tuning all the outside noise out. I think that in 2024 has harder to do than I think people realize. It's easier for some more than others. Tyler Warren, I think he's still got a house phone, a rotary house phone, so I think it's easier for him than most.

But I think being able to stay focused and tune out all the other things, I think comes with maturity and growth, and I think this team's doing a really good job of managing.

I also think Chris Petersen and Greg Kincaid and Paul -- where's Paul -- also do a good job of that as well. I know it maybe frustrates you guys sometimes, but like having a plan that guys only get so many interviews a week because they're full-time students, they're playing football, and they have some media obligations as well. So making sure that these things are balanced and they're not getting hammered throughout the week with all these media requests as well, which is also something they have to do and we encourage and embrace.

But balancing all these things, I think, is also important, and I think the staff does a really good job of helping with that too.

Q. You mentioned Ty Howle. I know he inherited some of the prestige that Penn State has in tight ends, guys like Mike Gesicki and Pat Freiermuth predate him, but do you think Ty gets enough credit for the development in guys like Brenton, Theo, and Ty and so forth?

JAMES FRANKLIN: No, I don't think it's talked about enough. There's no school in the country, there's no program in the country that is doing what we're doing with tight ends now and really over the last ten years. Ty Howle has come into that position as a Penn State letterman and I think has taken it to a whole nother level.

We're recruiting the best tight ends in the country. We're developing the best tight ends in the country. It's a competitive room. You've got to embrace that.

Then you just look at what's happening after they get done playing at Penn State. They're all getting their degrees,

and they're all getting drafted, and the majority of them are getting drafted very high.

Then you look at the Tyler Warren situation. Tyler Warren had a pretty high draft grade last year, came back, and I think it's been a win-win. I think he's going to be the first tight end drafted, is having a great year, is having a ton of fun with his teammates, and that's what you want, right? You want it to be a great situation for everybody.

If you're a great tight end in the country and specifically in the state of Pennsylvania, I don't know how you couldn't come here. Like there's just too much history, there's too much data, and there's too many things saying you don't need to go anywhere else. You can stay at home and get everything you want in terms of your college career and also setting you up for your future.

I really appreciate you asking that question.

Q. You mentioned Minnesota's defense. They do have 16 interceptions. When you look at turnover ratio, how do you balance the aggression versus trying to not put yourself at risk? How do you approach that?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, it's interesting. That probably is a good question because it also helps me go back and follow up the other question because part of it is they're a zone team, and when you're playing zone defense, the argument there is you have the ability to have your eyes on the quarterback, which typically can lead to you being in a better position for interceptions.

Playing man coverage, you're going to challenge more routes, but then you have to transition from eyes on the guy you're covering to losing eyes on him and trying to find the ball, where in zone coverages, more times than not, your eyes are on the quarterback the whole time. So I think that's probably one of the big differences and goes with the aggressiveness that you're talking about.

There's a very big difference in my mind between aggressiveness in zone coverage when going after the ball and aggressiveness in man coverage. It is a skill that is hard to develop. It's one of those traits that you either have or you don't, and you have the ability to take your eyes off of the guy you're covering once you're engaged and turn and find the ball. And then also turn and find the ball in a way that the ball is going to be thrown.

I know it sounds simplistic, but where you turn your eyes, the trajectory of the ball. If they're going to make that type of throw, are you looking back, or are you looking up? Little things like that, you'd be amazed, make a huge difference.

That kind of answers -- somebody else had a question earlier about how do you create more turnovers? It kind of goes hand in hand with your question, and they're more of a zone-based team, and we're more of a man-based team.

The thing that they're doing a really good job too is they're one of the better pass defense teams in the country and turnovers, so combination of both.

Q. You look at these past four games for Drew at quarterback, where getting injured at Wisconsin, coming back in a tough game against Ohio State, but then these past two games really playing at a high level. Have you learned anything new about him or seen anything different in how he handled these ups and downs over the past month or so?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think he's played at a very, very high level for two years. I think he's played at a really high level for two years, and I think all the data backs that up.

He continues to get better. He continues to refine his process. He continues to pour into his teammates and getting on the same page with them, whether it's the O-line, who I think he probably spends the most time with both personally and as a player, his approach, his game day demeanor, his ability to run and extend plays.

One of the things I think I've talked to you guys about before, I know me and Danny O'Brien have had a lot of these conversations, is it's not just the touchdown-to-interception ratio because you can get lucky there a little bit. It's also grading interception worthy decisions and interception worthy throws. Like, okay, you made a bad throw and the defender dropped it. Well, that's still graded as an interception type decision and throw.

There's not a whole lot of that on his film, and I think his biggest improvement from last year is his mobility. It's not just okay, here's a guy that can move in the pocket. Here's a guy that can get first downs. I think I've talked to you guys about this before. When you look at the drives where he has picked up a first down with his feet, we've scored on almost every single one of those drives.

I don't think he's getting talked about enough. I don't think he gets enough credit, and I know why. But I just, I'm very, very proud of the young man and how he plays and how he goes about his business. His humility is phenomenal at that position in today's day and age, very, very, very proud of him and his development and how he's handled it all. It's impressive. It's impressive. Very, very pleased with how he's playing.

I think if you, besides yourself, you talk to a lot of football people out there, I think a lot of people would feel the same.

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