

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: Like always, appreciate you guys coming out to cover Penn State football. We don't take that for granted.

Obviously kind of an unusual situation in terms of timing. We've already spoke a few times in different press conferences, whether it was bowl press conference or whatever it may be.

Kind of getting in specifically to SMU. Rhett Lashlee has done a really, really good job. You look at his background as an offensive coordinator and what he's been able to do in a short period of time at SMU is cool.

I think I may have mentioned to you this before, when I was at Vanderbilt we went and visited a bunch of different places about a possible stadium expansion. One of the places we went to was SMU, which was cool for me to visit it and see their facilities, get a feel for the town, the history and traditions.

So to see what Rhett's been able to do there has been really cool for me. And also I think it's good for college football, a place like SMU with a lot of history and traditions and to see them in the playoffs.

The way they're constructed is a little bit different than the way we're constructed. I think they have 48 players from the transfer portal. We have nine. As you guys know, we're a pro-transfer portal. We've just not had a whole lot of guys go into the transfer portal and have only taken about four to six a year. So different.

Obviously when you're taking over a program now in college football, it's a very different build in terms of how you build your roster and sometimes how you have to build your roster. But he's done a really good job.

If you look at their offensive coordinator, Casey Woods, and obviously Rhett's heavily involved with the offense, things that jump out, they're No. 2 in the ACC number and No. 6 in the country in points for game at just under 39 points per game.

Guys that jump out here is quarterback Kevin Jennings. They go as he goes. He's an explosive athlete, can make all the throws, but also can pull it down and run, can really run.

Their running back Brashard Smith, a transfer from Miami, doing a nice job for them, not only rushing but receiving and also as a returner. And No. 13, Roderick Daniels, a local kid for them. Those are things that jump out for us.

Defensively Scott Symons, doing a really nice job. Again, statistically, they're up there with some of the best teams we've played this year.

Scoring defense, they ranked first in the ACC and 28th in the country. Rushing defense, they ranked first in the ACC and fourth in the country -- that's a stat that really jumps out to you -- fourth in the country in rushing defense.

Third down conversion, second in the ACC and 16th in the country.

Guys that jump out to us is D-end, No. 5, Elijah Roberts, who is a Miami transfer; D-end No. 6, Harvey, who is also a Miami transfer; their safety, No. 23, Isaiah Nwokobia; linebacker, No. 24, Kobe Wilson, who is a transfer; and then defensive tackle, No. 81, Jared Harrison-Hunte, who is also also a Miami transfer.

From a special teams perspective, Kyle Cooper, has done a nice job. They're first in the ACC and ninth in the country in kickoff coverage. Kickoff return, they're second in the ACC and 29th in the country.

The guys that jump out to us, again, wide receiver/punt returner No. 13 Roderick Daniels, and then kick returner/running back Brashard Smith. So those are guys who jump out to us.

Obviously it's going to be a challenge and we're looking forward to it and the guys have embraced it. And we're going to need this place rocking on Saturday. Obviously a different situation at this time of the year and having a home game which we appreciate. I think every program in the country was battling to either have a bye week in the



playoffs to start the playoffs or a home game, and we were able to accomplish one of those two. So excited about the opportunity.

Q. How would you describe the impact on your program of Beau leaving and Drew returning for 2025?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Obviously those are two massive questions that I could talk about for the entire press conference, and you hit on both of them in one question. That's a vet move, Rich.

Let me first talk about Beau. Beau Pribula has been a phenomenal teammate, has been a big reason why we are where we are right now. Parents, awesome. High school coach, awesome.

Being a backup quarterback is not an easy thing to do, and he never approached it that way. Had so much confidence on our team based on how he went about his business and prepared like a starter, again, which is something we talk about all the time, but is easier said than done.

He also, in my opinion, he's a man's man. Like, came into my office, had multiple conversations with me about this process. We talked last week, had no intentions of leaving.

But we've got problems in college football. And I can give you my word -- Beau Pribula did not want to leave our program and he did not want to leave our program until the end of the season. But the way the portal is and the timing of it and the way our team is playing -- and when you play the position of quarterback and there's only one spot and those spots are filling up, he felt like he was put in a no-win situation, and I agree with him.

Number one, I hate for it. Number one, most importantly, for Beau Pribula. I don't think it's in the best interests of the student-athlete. I don't think it's in the best interests of college football. But I think that's our challenge right now, right? Who is really running college football and making the best decisions for the student-athletes and for our sport as a whole?

Beau should not be put in this position. Whether we don't play as many games during the season, whether we don't play conference championship games -- which could equal things out for teams not playing them anyway, finish this season so it aligns more with the academic calendar for most institutions because that's part of this pressure as well.

To have a transfer portal/free agency going on right in the middle of the playoffs, there's just a lot of things that don't really make sense.

I know there's been a lot of discussions about maybe a commissioner of college football, but I think it's pretty obvious we need that. We need somebody running college football. We need somebody that is not biased based on a conference and that is out of the financial impacts of it as well, because if you're just making the decisions which are in the best interests of the student-athletes and college football, then I think you can do it. But if you're biased by a specific conference or if you're impacted by making all your decisions based on revenue and earnings, then we're never going to get to a good place.

So I'm concerned for college football right now in general, to be honest with you. And I think a lot of people are. I really wanted this answer to be about Beau Pribula, who is a wonderful young man, and I would recruit him every year. Knowing everything I know right now, I'd go back and recruit the heck out of Beau.

Beau grew you wanting to come to Penn State his whole life. This is his dream school. And had a phenomenal career here. And I just want everybody to understand that, most importantly. And why have we created a system where this guy couldn't finish this season with his team? And there's going to be people who said, well, he could have.

In any situation that I'm in, personally and professionally, I always try to take a deep breath and look at things from both perspectives. And in my mind as the head coach of Penn State, obviously I have a responsibility for Penn State and our football program, but I also feel like I also have a responsibility to Beau Pribula.

So I hate it. I do, I hate it for him and I hate it for Penn State, but I also don't think it's the right thing for college football.

So, long answer. I apologize. Obviously Drew announcing he's coming back is an awesome thing, and we couldn't be more excited about that. As you can imagine, that also factored into the decision.

You asked a great question, but it's hard because I'd love to give both topics and both people the respect and appreciation they deserve. But literally this could have been the entire press conference talking about these two topics. Now that just created a situation where now I'm going to get 13 more questions about it. But it's a hard thing to really put the totality of these things into words in this moment.

Q. Unsurprisingly, a follow-up on that, on Drew, specifically, and his decision to come back. What

were those conversations like with him? And what areas do you feel like he needs to improve or you want to see him improve in terms of why he decided that he's not going to be going to the NFL after this season?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, again, as you guys know -- I'm struggling with this a little bit because I want to be SMU, SMU, SMU, SMU, SMU, SMU, SMU, and I don't really want to talk about all these other things. That's the challenge, again, of the timing of all these things.

Again, Drew has been phenomenal. Mom and dad have been phenomenal. I've had a ton of conversations. And obviously he's doing a ton of really good things and he's developing, and he's getting better and he's playing great, and he's leading. And I think there's a lot of excitement because I think they believe, and we believe, there's still a lot of room for growth and development.

We want to be a part of that. And I think they trust us in that.

And obviously there's been a ton of conversations with NFL GMs and scouts to be able to provide NFL reports and information to our players of where they're at and what their strengths are and what their weaknesses are, and how we take that information, make a decision, and then spend -- once the season is over -- time attacking those things that people consider weaknesses.

But I'm conflicted with this because, again, I answered the first question, but my job is to keep everybody focused on SMU, and with all this information coming out, that's challenging.

I could promise you this, when we meet, what is it, Wednesday? When I meet with you guys after practice, I'm not talking about anything else. And I'm probably not going to be great the rest of this press conference if it's not questions about SMU. But I also understand you guys have a job to do and I'm trying to be respectful of that. But I also have a job to do as well, which is keep our team focused on the task at hand.

Q. Having looked at the film of the Oregon game -- you ran the ball, in terms of planned running plays where you hand the ball to the running backs, I thought by far your most effective running the ball all season. Looking at the film, what went so well, especially because you had a couple of offensive linemen beat up. What went so right against Oregon?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that's for a longer discussion, Mike. I'd ask you to write this down and follow up

offseason because the answer that I'd like to give you is not appropriate in this setting because I think it could impact how people game plan against us and what they do and what they're thinking.

But at the end of the day, the answer for this time, is, first of all, I think Kaytron and Nick are both back healthier than they've been in a while. And I thought our offensive line and tight ends did a really good job of getting a hat on a hat and straining.

I also think some of the quarterback run stuff that we're doing to keep people honest, I think that was a factor in the game. And obviously Tyler Warren's role in that as well.

But I think at the end of the day we did a really good job of getting a hat on a hat and straining and getting our running backs to the second level on a more consistent basis. And that's what you work all week on is trying to make sure that your guys understand their configurations and their movements and how the pictures are going to change and how do you get a hat on a hat on a consistent basis.

If you do that, you've got a chance. That's in the run game as well as in protection. And I thought we did a good job. But I do think this is for a lengthier, longer conversation that we can follow up on in the offseason.

Q. At the risk of bringing up somebody else who announced they're coming back, Andy Kotelnicki mentioned that on social media. What does that mean for the continuity of the offense heading into SMU and moving forward?

JAMES FRANKLIN: As you guys have heard me say, consistency on our staff is really important but hard to do in the current college football landscape.

It's also a compliment and a curse. We keep losing staff to go be head coaches. Or they leave here and then go one other stop and then become a head coach, like Dowell just became the head coach at App State and really happy for him and his family.

So obviously being able to retain staff and specifically in coordinator positions is really important. And I think about how hard we worked this offseason to make sure that having three new coordinators wasn't going to create more challenges and be a setback for us, and I think we've done a good job of that.

But I think there's also an excitement about what we can do moving forward, thinking about what we had to do this offseason. And now we have a foundation to build on. I think there's a lot of excitement about that.

I also think that Andy, like Brent Fry and some others, realized that we're in a great position. We're in a top 10, make argument top 5 program in college football with what we've been able to do here, really over my 11 years but more recently.

And there's power that comes with that. And at the end of the day, are you happy? And are you doing it at a good place with good people and can you win?

I think Andy and his family feel like we're in a really good position and he can wait and take the right job. And there's power in that.

Between myself and Pat Kraft and the administration, we want to do everything we possibly can to keep the staff in place and continue to build and grow.

So that decision was big for a lot of reasons. It's big because you don't want to be dealing with this during a playoff run. You don't want to be dealing with this when you've got players deciding what their futures are. And obviously these men and women impact that too. So for a lot of reasons it's been good. And there was a ton of conversations that went on with that, too.

Q. Wanted to ask a question about this week, SMU preparation, and as it relates to your offensive line, the right side of your offensive line, you have two players kind of at different points in their career. I think Sal Wormley is going to make his 40th start, I think, against SMU. Your thoughts on him? And also Rucci, what he's been able to do after Donkoh had the long-term injury, what those guys have meant to the offensive line this year especially lately?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I put Sal in the category with Terry Smith, Chuck Losey and Kevin Threlkel. I think Sal came with me from Vanderbilt, been with me the whole time.

What I love about Sal is being there, done that, always has a smile on his face. He's had a really nice career. I think he'll have an opportunity to play at the next level.

And I think that's been a big part of when Donkoh was there as a first-year starter, and the same with Rucci. Being able to possibly put Tyler Warren on one side of the tackle and the guard, like Sal Wormley, on the other side of a new tackle, I think that's helpful -- the communication, the combination blocks, all those types of things.

Donkoh did some great things, started last year in the bowl game and grew from there. Rucci showed up here after really not playing a whole lot for three years, if I'm correct

in the numbers there, and really has thrived.

I think he's really happy. He's got really strong relationships in our locker room. Our staff loves him. He's gotten bigger and stronger, dramatically, since he arrived on campus. And his confidence just continues to grow, grow, grow. And he's playing great. His mom and dad have been awesome. They come to practice.

I get messages and information from them as well. So he's thriving right now. And I think he's got a really, really bright future, and we are blessed to have him. He's been not only great on the field, he's been great off the field.

He's also doing really well academically. And maybe the most amazing thing, he's got a beautiful, intelligent girlfriend. I don't know how he pulled that off. He's got the whole package here at Penn State. He's doing great in every area.

And I'm just so glad he's home and back in Pennsylvania. All these high-profile guys who have decided to stay at home or come back home are thriving. It's been pretty cool to see. And obviously he would have played a ton this year anyway. But with Donkoh's injury, we couldn't be more thankful and appreciative that he's here and I think it's a win-win for everybody.

Q. Considering, just combined a couple of things here, considering that Beau did have a role on this team, how does that impact game planning for Saturday against SMU now that he won't be here?

JAMES FRANKLIN: So obviously that was something that people had to plan for that we could use, that we could be creative in. And we're going to continue to do that with different pieces of the puzzle. So I think it's been too important to what we've been doing. We don't want to go away from that.

And whether it's guys that have been playing already and put a little bit more on their plate with those specific roles, or whether it's guys that haven't played to this point, like in games and things like that.

One of the things we're talking about is our Sunday developmental squad scrimmages have been critical, and specifically for times and moments like this. We've gone live in those, not a lot, but we have for all positions, including the quarterbacks. So there's been a ton of reps that guys have been able to get. That's been important from a development standpoint as well as from an evaluation standpoint.

And we think we have answers that we've got a ton of

confidence in. But it's going to take a little bit more time and a little bit more creativity to get where we want to be. But we feel like the pieces are there we've just got to use some different pieces than we've been using up to this point.

Q. Sticking with the quarterbacks, who at this point do you think is your backup? Is it Ethan or Jaxon? And how have both of those guys kind of progressed this year? Obviously Jaxon's situation was a little bit different.

JAMES FRANKLIN: So both of them will be part of the equation and part of the discussion. The difference is Jaxon's been out all year and really has only been cleared for about the last week. So obviously those things impact it, right?

You're talking about a guy that's -- I don't know what the numbers are; we were actually running the numbers before I left and haven't gotten them yet -- but if I had to guess, I'll bet you Grunk's probably got about 350 reps in practice. And Jaxon, who we love and think has a very, very bright future, wasn't able to get those reps. So all those things will be factored in before we make those decisions.

Q. Can you clarify with Beau, is he allowed to stay? Is that a mutual decision between you guys? I mean obviously the stakes are high here, and to keep him around, to use him especially if necessary?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so a couple of things. We have a standard operating procedure, SOP, that the way we operate is if you go into the transfer portal, at that point you've made a decision to move on that we're moving on, they're moving on and we're moving on.

But as you also know, we're not going to have a standard rule for how we operate dictate everything. There's got to be flexibility within everything to put the program in the best position to be successful.

We talked through a ton of different scenarios. And I think the more we talked about it and the more we went through it, a couple of things. I think, number one, I think Beau felt like he was going to have a hard time finishing school, finding a place that he wanted to go to, and still preparing like the starter, like he had been doing all year long.

Then the other thing was he was getting pressure to go on visits and go see these places. So I think it's one of these things, like a lot of things, in theory, that sounds good. But when you actually talk through how it's actually going to work, it's hard to do that. It's hard to say you're preparing to be the starter -- when I say the starter, you guys

understand our approach at every position, starters and backups approaching it that way -- and I feel like at the end of the day I don't feel like Beau felt like he could do those things to the level he needed to. He was out at practice yesterday and I could tell he was distracted by all of this.

So, yeah, do we have a rule and a policy? Yes. With every rule and policy, are there times where you have to revisit the policy and you have to, at times, make exceptions or be flexible to different solutions? We were open to different solutions and coming up with some scenarios that could work for everybody, and we just couldn't get to a point where everybody felt like it was going to work out in everybody's best interests.

So, yes, do we have an overall policy? Yes. Do we have flexibility and the ability to make some changes? I talked to some other players on the team and got their feedback as well because I think you also realize, too, you make a decision for one and it doesn't just stay to that one. There's a trickle-down effect to everything you do. You're setting precedent one way or the other. So all those things factored in.

But, again, that goes back to my point that I made in the very beginning. That's why I got so much respect for Beau Pribula, not just how he handled himself for the last four years during the recruiting process and since he's been on campus, but he came into my office, and we had multiple man-to-man conversations trying to find a solution that was in Penn State's best interests and Beau's best interests.

And I think outside of both of our control, things outside of our control from a calendar standpoint, from an NCAA perspective, made that almost impossible to do.

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