

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach James Franklin

Press Conference



JAMES FRANKLIN: So as always, appreciate you guys coming out and continued coverage of Penn State football. Obviously looking forward to beginning my 12th year here at Penn State and 139th year overall as a football program this Saturday.

Just left the stadium. Obviously it's pretty cool, all the work that's gone on to get West Shore Home Field at Beaver Stadium ready to welcome the fans back. I think from inside the stadium looking up, it looks and feels a lot better probably than what I anticipated considering we're in the middle of a stadium project.

I think that's a really positive. It's been impressive what they've been able to do, so excited about the environment we'll have in the stadium.

And then wanted to give a shoutout to Gary Danielson who will be here with CBS this Saturday, his 36th and final season. So pretty cool to be able to have him come back, and we're excited about the season.

Obviously getting into Nevada and Coach Choate, he's done a nice job there. These games I think for everybody in college football now, they're a little concerning. What I mean by that is when you have 54 new players, it's hard to really have a good understanding and a feel of who you're going to play. This could be a team that could go on and have a phenomenal year. It's hard to really project when there is that amount of turnover.

Obviously we see this across college football. We're not a huge transfer portal team, although we do go into the transfer portal and do what we need to do. There are some programs out there. I saw something the other day, 84 new players in a program in one year, so it is crazy.

54 players that we got to get familiar with, which is hard to do in a week one game. So when you talk about their offense and David Gilbertson, comes from a football family.

If you look a little him, there is some crossover with our staff as well and kind of the history of our Penn State football staff. Was at Akron with Coach Moorehead and

was at Oregon with Moorehead, so familiarity there and understanding of how he was brought up in the profession.

Chubba Purdy, the quarterback, obviously a name everybody is familiar with, Nebraska and FSU transfer at the quarterback position, and then wide receiver Marcus Bellon, who's a UTEP transfer. They're guys we've heard and seen good things from.

And then defense, the coordinator Kane Ione, second year at Nevada. The head coach has got a defensive background. Was at the University of Texas before that; these guys have some history together at Montana State, Nevada, a number of plays. Obviously at Boise as well.

We been impressed with Stone Combs, No. 33; Thomas Witte, No. 99, defensive tackle from Anchorage, Alaska; defensive end No. 32, Dylan Labarbera if I said that right, excuse me; D-end No. 9 Jonathan Maldonado, and DB No. 5 and Murvin Kenion, a transfer as well from Idaho and Sacramento State.

And then on special teams, Parker Henry is the special teams coordinator. Again they have history together. Have been at Portland State with my buddy Coach Barney over there at Portland State.

Been impressed with the punt returner Marcus Bellon, a UTEP transfer; kick returner No. 25 Ky Woods, a Texas transfer. That's kind of a fairly common theme. When Coach first got there they brought a number of guys from Texas. And then also kick returner No. 7, Marquis Ashley.

So still learning a lot. Obviously done summer studies on these guys as well. Still learning a lot. 54 transfers makes this more difficult early in the season.

Open up to questions.

Q. I wanted to get your assessment of Devonte Ross so far in training camp. How has he looked and progressed and what do you think his role will be this week in offense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so he had some bumps and bruises this summer that we were dealing with that



impacted how involved he could be late in the summer and then also early in training camp, but he's ready to go.

You know, we'll probably rotate him a little bit more just because he hasn't had the full training camp and hasn't had the full summer, but he's ready to go and has looked really good the last week or so.

So we're expecting good things out of him. I think him and Liam Clifford will rotate and play significant reps.

Q. Couple weeks ago in practice you said after practice, we got everything pretty much installed now. We're making too many mental errors. Got to get those cleaned up and start refining things. Wonder what sort of markers you've seen since then that indicate that you have gotten those things straightened out, I guess especially on defense where you're learning a new defense?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, to be honest I think you could probably take that comment, quote, for probably 12 years. Everybody goes through that during training camp. You put a ton of stuff in. That's magnified by what the other side of the ball is doing as well, formations, motions, shifts, all those things.

I like where we are, but there is also a difference in training camp when you're putting everything on their plate. When you get into a game week it's not like that. You narrow down the package of what you're doing to do on defense. Narrow, down the package on offense and special teams.

Also, it's a narrowed package of what you're going against, you know, again depending on who you're playing. A lot of teams you're going to play and they're going to be primarily 11 personnel team and one back team and that's what you're facing.

Then same thing on defense.

So both things I think help with that. You get in the game week and you narrow what you're doing and try to narrow down what you think you'll get from your opponent. Again, those things are challenging week one, so I feel like we're in a good place, Mike. I don't think that's a whole lot different than probably most years.

I guess to your point specifically about your defense, year one that's been the focus and the challenge, is how do we streamline this process as much as we possibly can.

We put a ton on their plate, see how they handle it, and go into each week saying, okay, these are the things we need to emphasize and focus on to put our defense and team in

the best position to be successful.

Q. Drew Allar, can you detail, talk about his preseason camp? I'm asking that in regards to in the spring you said Drew has to improve a little bit on everything. Do you see him at all as a different, improved quarterback now, say, from the end of last season, from spring practice? Anything specific? Is there an anecdote or image from preseason camp you can point to or share with us to talk about his growth or improvement?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess I don't like the first quote you said because those are the things that kind of -- I'll say something and all of a sudden it that will be in the article or headlines, James Franklin says that Drew Allar needs to improve in everything. I don't think I said that.

The question I've gotten a lot is what specifically does Drew need to improve on to get better. I said I don't think he's got one glaring area of weakness. I think he needs to do what he's done over his time here at Penn State, which is get a little bit better in this ever area.

So those are two very different statements in my mind. Yeah, I see him. His body has changed. He's more athletic. He's faster. More explosive. He's done that every single year since he's gotten here.

Same thing from a leadership standpoint. He's gotten a stronger and stronger voice and more comfortable doing that. I think most guys in year one they don't necessarily come in doing that. They just want to focus on doing their job. I think that's a natural evolution.

In terms of completion percentage and touchdown-to-interception ratio, been as good as anybody in the country in those areas and really in Penn State's history. He's part of those arguments.

So he's just kind of kept chipping away at it. I think a big thing for him and us this year is building the chemistry with the receiver and tight end group, whether that's Khalil and Luke and Rapp or whether that's the freshman wideouts that we just got on campus or whether that's the year-two guys or whether that is obviously the transfers at the wide receiver position that we brought in as well, building that chemistry.

All those things I think have been really important, whether that's Peña, Hudson, Ross, whatever it is. Year two with Andy, I think those things have allowed him to be more comfortable. We're putting a ton on his plate. I think his greatest superpower is just how football smart he is, especially when you talk about protections, being able to readjust our protections and put our offensive line in the



best position, allowing us to get or running back out as often as possible to stress the defense.

So I have seen him getting better in all those areas, and I think he took another step. Until we get out on the field and do it, it's just me talking about the gains that I have seen in the offseason and really over his three years.

It's not one specific area. It's a little bit in every area.

In terms of an anecdote that would show that or illustrate that, I'm not sure if I have one. He just is very Steady Eddie in his approach. He's got a very workmanlike approach in the weight room, film room. One of the things I think is an interesting piece for you guys is we got a number of guys, probably about ten guys this year, and Drew is one of them, there is an NCAA rule that if you only need nine credits to graduate, then you can be under full time status.

So if you only need six credits to graduate, only need to take two classes; three credits to graduate, only need to take one class, and that's fine from an NCAA rules; been that way for a long time.

But Drew and a number of our guys are under full time status, so I think Drew has one class left to graduate at Penn State, so that creates a really good situation for him in terms of being the best player he can possibly be and graduate from Penn State. I think he's only in a situation where he only has to take one class.

We have a number of guys like that. Kind of explained that to the team the other day. Ideally that's what they would all like to do, right? Take enough classes each semester and in the summer to set their last fall on campus up where they're under full time status.

This isn't the first time we've been in this situation, but I think that's one of the things that was important to Drew, and his summer schedule impacted that, too.

Q. James, given the way your offensive line finished last year, given the guys you were able to retain and bring back, given the fact that you were able to add TJ in the portal and always recruited pretty well in recent years with the offensive line, what are your expectations? What's the next step, do you think, for this offensive line if it can stay healthy? And also, how many guys do you think realistically at some point this year can help you on the offensive line? It does seem to be quite a deep group.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so I think we got a number of guys that we're expecting big things from when you talk

about Shelton, Vega, Dawkins, Donkoh, Rucci, Cousins, and Shanahan I would say right now are the seven guys that we view as starters.

Then to your point, there is another group of guys that I think we can win games with in the Big10, and I think there are some guys that are on the cusp that hopefully by game four or five we feel the same way.

I think we view us as having seven starting offensive lineman. Probably use different packages to get those guys on the field, whether it's six offensive lineman or seven offensive lineman. We'll do some things with those guys as well as rotating them as much as we can to keep them fresh and healthy, but not too much that it impacts chemistry of that group working together.

That's always the challenge.

But I think this group has a chance to be one of the better groups in the country. I think one of the better groups that Penn State has had. Goon and the others have showed me the stats and things that they been able to do here at Penn State when they were here in their careers. I think the one year, maybe that year with Goon I think maybe gave up one sack the entire year or two sacks the entire year or something like that. I don't know if that was '94 or whatever that year was. Is that right?

Yeah, so there is a challenge there, right? But with the two running backs that we have and the quarterback, it puts those guys in a really good position to have successful years. It starts up front and Traut has done a really good job and Bill Q has done a really good job as well as Andy Kotelnicki in his background with offensive line play and Ty Howle.

It's a group we take a lot of pride in. We've worked really hard to get to this point, and we expect them to play at a really high level. Yeah, I think you guys have heard me say obviously our focus is on trying to be the best team that we can possibly be and maximizing that.

This unit, just like all the different units, I want them to approach it to be like we're going to win because of the O-line. I want the D-line to say, we're going to win because of the D-line being a strength of the team with all the different positions.

Although it's about the team, team, team, maybe my favorite award in all of college football is the Joe Moore Award because it's not really like an individual award. It's still a group award, which is pretty cool. I think these guys have a chance to be a part of that conversation deep into the season.



Q. Have you deciding on your backup quarterback yet and why?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Actually I wish we didn't go with Rich. Yeah, I think we're at that point. We are planning on sitting down with those guys today and have not had that conversation with them yet, so I would like to do that first.

But, yeah, feel like we're in that position. I don't think it is a clear-cut wide margin, so that I think will be -- continue to be a battle all year long.

And then I think we all have seen, whether it's at Penn State or other places, there is also times where those guys get in the game and play really well or don't play as well as you would like. So this isn't -- I wouldn't describe this as something that's completely decided.

But we have decided for game one kind of where we are at and we'll have that conversation today.

Q. Green lights at this point? Can you take us through the guys and what have they done to earn it?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, as you guys have heard me say before it's about consistency, right? So there is a number of guys that I think could still end up being green lighted by game four or five of the season. But the two that are green lighted right from the beginning is Chaz Coleman and Daryus Dixson. Two guys that have been very, very consistent physically, mentally, and emotionally.

We got some guys that I think could play for us this year physically, but they've shown too much immature tee or mentally have had too many missed assignments and mistakes. So those things have to continue to evolve.

There are other guys that could be in the green situation after these first three games. That will be part of the evaluation process. We got to have some of the yellow guys turn to green, some of the red guys turn to yellow and even some of the green guys could turn to yellow. That will not be kind of finalized until they've gotten to the point that they played in enough games it's been decided by NCAA rules at that point.

The two that we're approaching that way is Chaz Coleman and Daryus Dixson at corner. And then another part that plays a big aspect of this is special teams. For you to burn your redshirt and take that approach from game one, then you have to factor in on special teams as well and some of these guys haven't taken that approach on special teams. That's impacted on why they're maybe yellow or red, too.

Q. We talk about positions you've decided on. Have you chosen a starting safety? How much do you plan on rotating at that spot?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Right now Belgrave-Shorter is the starter from Zakee, but those other two safeties we plan on playing a lot. We feel like we got four safeties we can win with. Belgrave is probably a guy that wasn't a lot of conversations going on outside the Lasch Building, but led us in interceptions and turnovers in training camp. Been very, very consistent about how he's gone about his business.

So he has earned that spot.

But the other two guys will play a lot, and we need them to play a lot.

Q. Quoting Goon, that's a good omen.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Like that?

Q. Yeah. Have you picked returners for punt returns and kickoffs at this point?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, right now we'll -- at kick return we'll rotate Singleton and King Mack. We'll rotate those two guys. At punt returner we got a number of guys that we feel good about. Obviously Zion, Trebor Pena and Devonte Ross, those three guys. See how that goes. But I see all those guys getting touches and opportunities.

Q. Looking at your defensive ends, obviously knew a good bit about Deni, Zuriah, Chaz Coleman. How deep do you think that group can be and how many guys do you see maybe playing in games early on at least?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think it goes back to what I've said to you guys in the past about we really think you have to have a three-deep at a minimum; better have five at a two-position unit. Talk about defensive end, two defensive ends on the field so you better have five; but we really feel like you should have six.

We think we have that. You know, Fisher and Coleman and Dennis-Sutton and Harvey and Williams and the other guy that's right on this bubble of green lighting that most likely will play in these first couple games as if he's going to play all year long is Kemajou. He's really had really, really good spring and then had a really good camp.

So we feel like we got six guys. Mason Robinson is another guy we're very, very high on. But Mason has had a number of bumps and bruises that have really impacted his ability and time to compete. So getting him back with

us kind of full time and over a period of practices, just hasn't practiced consistently enough to be a part of that group.

He's a guy that when he has practiced we've been very high on. That could give us seven guys that we feel good about. Fish is still working through coming back from his injury, so that would give us seven guys that we feel like we can play with.

And then just depending on some of the freshman and development and bumps and bruises will depend whether we have five or six going into each game. We're young there, but we feel like there is a lot of talent in that room and obviously first three games are going to be really important.

Q. I wonder in the opener how much are you trying to establish an identity here? You have so many new pieces in certain positions. Do you balance wanting to test those out while also knowing you have 11 more games and you don't want to show too much right out the gate?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I don't think there is a big approach or mentality around here to save things. It's more about different things will show up against different opponents based on what we've seen on tape and is going to give us an opportunity to make a play or put our guys in the best position to be successful.

So for us, we want to play well. We want to build confidence. We want to do whatever we got to do to get a win. What I would say is that -- and this has been the approach for really 12 years and really 15 years, my time as a head coach -- we want to try to play a lot of guys. I think we have to build and develop depth by playing a bunch of guys.

So that's something I'm pretty adamant about, especially early in the year, is trying to get these guys on the field so we can evaluate them, know what we have, know what the strengths are, know areas we need to work on in a weakness standpoint or deficiency standpoint. So probably approach it like that more than necessarily trying to hide some things or hold some things back.

We want to get these guys on the field and want them to play well. We need to figure out who is ready and who still needs some time developing before we get into the conference play or however you want to look at it.

Q. Curious if it you determined who will be handling in-helmet communication on defense. If you have, why did you have a comfort level in that person, and whose

voice will they hear over the course of the game?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, so it'll be Jim talking to the green dot, and that will be a combination of who is on the field, that will be Campbell and DeLuca. Most likely those two guys, one of them will be on the field. That will be a little bit of the challenge because we think DeLuca and Campbell not only can be Mike linebackers but Deluca can be the Will.

How do we make sure he has a second helmet if he's on the field and we don't have two green dots on the field. That's some the gymnastics we have to do based on the rules to make sure we don't get a silly penalty with two green dots on the field because now Deluca is at Will linebacker. We been working through that in play.

Been using the communication all training camp, but that will be important that we kind of get those gymnastics worked out and how we'll handle it on the sideline.

Q. (No microphone.)

JAMES FRANKLIN: Just Deluca, because he'll be in at Mike or be in at Will. So when he's at Will then Amare will handle it. When he's in at Mike Amare won't be on the field type of deal.

Q. Want to ask you about your nickel position and how it evolved over the offseason. Obviously last year Zion Tracy secured that position for you. Also, according to PFF missed 15 tackles, roughly 39% of his attempts. What did he do this offseason to prove to you to maybe demand more of him from a schematic standpoint to earn that position so far and how all that worked out?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yep. So couple things. Zion, Woseley and Dinkins, those three guys are playing the nickel position. We feel really good about all three of them. I appreciate you bringing up PFF and I know it's a tool for a lot of people including coaches, but sometimes it's difficult for PFF and others to grade players when they don't technically know the responsibilities and things like that.

But I think your point is still a fair one. Zion, like all these guys, are developing players. Did some really good things from a coverage standpoint. Did some really good things from a return standpoint. But he's a young, developing player. He's getting better and better and continues to do that both in the run game and in the pass game.

Experience counts. He's got a full year under his belt. He's bigger, stronger, faster. I also think just schematically



some of the things that we'll be asking not just Zion to do but our whole defense to do is one of the big reasons why Jim is here. How can we put our players in the best position to be successful? How can we break tendencies? How can we be more challenging to the offense and stressful to the offense with different schemes that look the same? How can we be less -- in terms of coverage diversity so that we're not in a situation where people know we're in man coverage, and then are giving us all man beaters?

So all these things, whether it's coverage or whether it's run game, when you play a little bit more zone coverage and you have more defenders with their eyes on the quarterback or eyes on the ball, can allow you to be a better cover ever guy in terms of interceptions because you see the ball, but also trigger the run game more.

But I expect Zion to have a big year for us. Again, I think all these things I mentioned, some of the scheme things we're doing are going to help him. The other thing is we were more of a 4-3 defense last year which played nickel. We're going to be more of a major in nickel personnel now and sub to 4-3 when we need to more matchup reasons.

So I think all those things will go into as well as just Zion having a year under his belt and a lot of confidence and experience.

Q. In the past you've talked about wanting to have a two-deep at each wide receiver spot, essentially six deep. Do you have that right now? If not, what are you looking for out of the competition for guys to step up into those spots?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yep. So combination of Hudson and Howard. Howard is another guy that we look at that we think is going to play. Haven't truly green lighted him yet because we want more out of him on special teams. Pena and Denmark and Ross and Clifford, that's the six guys right now that I would say are part of that conversation.

There are some other guys you can make arguments by the day, but that's probably the two-deep going into week one for us. And feel good about it. Ross and Clifford will play a lot. I could see Pena and Hudson, we'll determine that this week, whether it's a rotation or a tap system. We'll decide that as the week goes on.

And then also do we tag certain plays for certain guys which we'll do that as well. Yeah, feel like we have a two-deep that we think we can win with. Obviously we got one freshman that we're factoring in there who has had a nice spring, really good summer, and really good training camp. Just need him to have a bigger role on special

teams. I think that's one of the challenges culturally that everybody deals with, right, is receivers in high school are pretty much just returning punts. They're not blocking on special teams and tackling on special teams, and getting that group to have a bigger impact on special teams I think is important for their development.

And I also think it will help us in terms of some of these guys that we're trying to decide, a lot of freshmen that we're trying to decide whether to green light or not, whether that's receiver or any other position; special teams will play a major factor in those decisions.

Thanks guys. Have a great day.

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