

Penn State Football
Media Day Press Conference – Coach Franklin
August 7, 2021

Opening Statement: Like always, I want to thank the media for coming out and covering us. We appreciate that it's great to be back out at practice on the grass with the guys running around. I think we've had a really productive offseason and summer.

From an offensive perspective, with Coach [Mike] Yurcich. and what we're doing from an installation standpoint, you know, the changes in NCAA rules have helped with that in terms of some of the walkthrough things that you're able to do. So that's been really helpful, the terminology that we were able to keep the same, we were able to keep the same. I think that always helps. So far, so good. I think, obviously, the staff that we got around him has helped too, so excited about what we're going to offer offensively. Excited about, you know, our identity being similar to what it's been for the majority of our time here, back to spreading the field, making people defend 53-and-a-third, creating explosive plays, trying to put as many defenders in conflict as possible. Excited about getting back our identity, who we've been on defense. Now obviously, the consistency that we've had with Brent Pry and our defensive staff has been huge. Brent has, obviously, led the way there for a long time here at Penn State and with me for a long time. So, really, really excited about what we're doing there on the defensive side of the ball, just continuing to build our foundation in what we've been able to do from a fundamental standpoint, from a scheme standpoint, from a technique standpoint over the last eight years, and, obviously, we've recruited well.

The new staff members on offense and defense, with Coach [Anthony] Poindexter, you know, on defense, I guess is the main new guy. John Scott's now been here for two years. And then on offense, obviously, Mike Yurcich is the biggest change. I think those guys are doing really good things and excited about that. And then, you know, Coach [Joe] Lorig one on special teams, having all three of those specialists back and the experience that they have gained. You know, Joe now going into his second season and understanding how we operate, me having a better feel for how he does things. We've had a long history together. I don't know if you guys know this, or if I've mentioned this before, me and Joe were roommates I think in 1998. Don't know if that's accurate or not. Either way, a long time ago at Idaho State, we were roommates. So, we go way back. He has done a great job for us.

I've been really pleased with our leadership. Our strength staff did a great job in terms of preparing our guys. We're bigger, stronger and faster than we've ever been. We're part of the argument pretty much in every category or metric, however you want to put it. I like where we're at with the first day of practice yesterday. Well, you guys will get a chance to see a little bit of it today, but we couldn't be more excited to be out there on the grass, working together.

You know, the plan for having a full Beaver Stadium, competing in the Big Ten, opening up, obviously, week one with Wisconsin, a tremendous challenge. Then being able to get back here at home, you know, in front of our fans, which we haven't been able to do for a long time.

Q: Want to ask about Jesse Luketa. Where will he be practicing within your defense this month?

A: Yeah, so it's not really a monthly deal. You know, we're kind of we're going to split his time. I would say probably more of his time will be spent at defensive end in training camp, just because he has such a foundation and history at the linebacker position, already within the same scheme.

So, we want to get him to the point where he's really comfortable and effective in what we're going to ask him to do at defensive end. Obviously, we still need to keep him sharp at linebacker, as well. I see him playing both roles.

I think there's some things that we can do with packages to take advantage of that, where people aren't sure whether he's playing a linebacker in our scheme or a defensive end and how they're going to account for him in the running game or how they're going to account for him in pass protection. So, there's a number of reasons, you know, that we're doing it. One, to gain an advantage through a guy that's got a unique skill set. Also, to help us with some depth.

Q: Among your defensive ends, is that group developing as you hoped? Where do you think they stand?

A: I guess, I'll lead with Adisa [Isaac] will not be available. Adisa had an offseason injury, not during football training, and will most likely not be available for the season. You guys know, typically, I don't get into injuries unless it's something that is going to keep them out for a significant amount of time. He is doing unbelievably well, so you never know, the way medicine is now. Adisa has been phenomenal in terms of, you know, doing what he needs to do to get back as quickly as he possibly can. So, you never know. But he'll be out for a significant amount of time.

We've talked about [Nick] Tarburton, Luketa and [Amin] Vanover, you know, that group of guys. Tarburton, the guy that we've always been really excited about, you know, since we brought him here, has had some situations in terms of staying healthy consistently that made it difficult for him to have a bigger impact. He is as healthy as he's ever been. He's been able to practice on a really consistent basis now for a long period of time. He's got such a great motor and intelligence and he's physical. So, we're excited about what he's going to do. You're going to see, obviously, an increased amount of playing time and opportunities for him.

We already talked about Jesse Luketa. Amin Vanover is a guy that we look as a swing guy that can play defensive end, which he did all last year, or D-tackle. Now he's got the size and the growth potential to play inside, but he's also got the quickness and the understanding and the scheme at defensive and what we're asking those guys to do.

On the other side, [Arnold] Ebiketie, you know, it's been kind of rave review since he showed up on campus. He tested well and has gotten bigger and stronger. Obviously, he's been a very productive football player over his career. We plan on continuing that and really taking it to a whole other level.

Smith Vilbert's the guy that there's a lot of excitement about right now. You know, we recruited Smith, ended up having a really strong senior year, came on, was a fairly high level basketball player out of high school and has the body type and athleticism that you're looking for. He continues to take strides and there's a lot of excitement about him.

Zuriah Fisher, you know, another guy that we recruited, knowing that he could be a linebacker or transition into a defensive end. You know, Zuriah, 260 plus pounds right now and still looks somewhat skinny, really long arms. He's gotten great in the weight room, we're expecting big things from him. There's some other young guys that I won't list at this time.

But after one day of practice, you think maybe some of those guys may be able to factor in. So, when I go through this for the players and for the media, it's not a foregone conclusion

that somebody can't win a starting job or somebody that I didn't mention can't earn a more significant role over the next couple of weeks.

Q: Can you describe what's going on with your interior linemen, especially Eric Wilson?

A: When you talk about interior offensive lineman, we think we've got a really good group of guys that are competing for those three inside spots at guard, center and guard. So, talking about, you know, a combination of [Anthony] Whigan, [Mike] Miranda, [Juice] Scruggs, [Sal] Wormley, who's kind of really come on and factored in. [Blake] Zalar, Des Holmes, Eric Wilson and [Nick] Dawkins, you know, that group, we think there's other guys that could factor in there. But that's a group that we think there's going to be tremendous competition from. There's going to be a lot of moving parts there until we figure out how to get the best five on the field. Not only that, you know, who's going to be the first guy inside, is it going to be truly a right guard is backed up by another right guard? Or is it, if you talk about the three interior positions, is it just the next best available who could play either side at guard or center? We'll see how that kind of plays out. It's not as simple as people think. The footwork is different, the stance is different. So, some guys will be able to do that and have the flexibility and some guys who may feel it's just better off that you just stay at one position inside. Although the assignments and everything are pretty much the same, it's still different from a footwork perspective. So, I think that'll be great competition.

Q: What is the main difference in Mike being here compared to the offense you've been running before? How has Sean Clifford adapted to some of the new concepts you're working with?

A: I guess going back to Joe Moorhead, yeah, I think it's similar to that. I think if you look, even when we first got here at Vanderbilt, we had a lot of spread concepts. Then we kind of took it to a whole other level with Joe. You know, we're back to that. That's really kind of who we wanted to be the entire time that we've been here. With the athletes that we have at receiver and at tight end, at running back, that was another big part of it, is just getting as many guys involved, get as many guys touches, getting as many guys in space as possible. You know, but then, you still want to make sure you have the ability to run with power and you want to be able to run in situational football. You want to be able to run the ball when everybody in the stadium knows you have to run the ball and need to be able to run the ball, whether that is low redzone, whether that is short yardage. When that is four-minute offense, we want to make sure that we can kind of serve all those different masters.

Q: You've now installed offenses in the past two seasons. Can you compare and contrast the timeline and the level of install at this point compared to last year?

A: It's really hard for me to compare anything to last season, because it was so different. There were so many different limiting factors and rules that didn't allow us to do it.

You know, even being in the indoor facility, being able to get the walkthroughs that we want to get in the offseason, the time that we've been able to get with our players face to face. We weren't even practicing as a team, you know, this point last year and I'm not even talking about, you know, the cancelation of the season. I'm talking about when we got back, there were split practices. So it just was very different. It's hard to compare anything to how it was last season. I don't think that's necessarily fair to some of the coaches, you know, that were put in that situation last year.

But I love where we're at, we're way ahead. I think, you know, the conversations that I've had with Brent Pry and Coach Yurcich, in terms of how we install, it's this isn't just like the wild wild west, where you know, some programs just kind of roll the ball out and go. We try to keep it as structured as possible. So, our defense can be prepared for what they're going to see a practice every single day. So, our offense can be prepared for what they're gonna see every single day. We do it no different than a teacher with a lesson plan, right, and build up to

it. So, you're getting more base looks early on and then you get into more of the blitz and exotic looks as you grow.

I will say this. We're probably more aggressive than we've ever been, in terms of the number of defenses we're seeing early in camp and the same on offense. Part of that is, I think, just kind of the style that we want to play and how we want to do it. Part of that is how we've been able to maximize the offseason and walkthroughs from an NCAA and Big Ten perspective.

Q: How long do you think it could take for the offense to really be what you that it will be?

A: The 2016 offense was great, but it took a few weeks for that to happen. So, what's your realistic expectation for what this offense could be early versus middle and late in season? Well, you know, to your point there, based on our schedule, it better be early, right? I think everybody's aware of that. You know, so I think we've approached it that way, right? You know, whether you like to admit it or not, when the players see that game to open the season, it has an impact.

I think the coaches always try to have a sense of urgency, we try to run a program where our players have a sense of urgency, and it's not really dependent on the opponent, it's about our process. But, we need to be shooting on all cylinders, you know, come week one. That's how quickly can we learn? How quickly can we gain confidence? How quickly can we execute, in really all three phases? What type of positions can we put our players in?

Now in Beaver Stadium and we're over at the Lasch practice facility to give our guys the best chance to be able to walk into Wisconsin and feel prepared and confident for that environment. I know I'm excited about it. I've never been there. Obviously, you guys know I lived in Wisconsin when I was with the Green Bay Packers. So, I have a lot of familiarity with the program from that. Obviously, now being in the Big Ten and watching what they've been able to do and a few times that we've played them, but I just haven't been there yet. We played them I think once at home and once in the Big Ten championship. So, we're looking forward to the opportunity and seeing the environment and getting another experience in the Big Ten.

Q: What do you think in your mind, the state of Pennsylvania, the student body the fans need to do to make sure that we can have 107,000 people inside Beaver Stadium this season?

A: I think the first thing, I hope, that everybody understands, is that we were probably not and never will be back to normal. We all should have learned something from this. We all should have grown from this. I know Penn State has. I know Penn State football has. We've made some modifications. We've taken advantage of new technology. We want everybody to have an unbelievable experience and we want to get back to a soldout Beaver Stadium, come our first opportunity.

I think we all have to make some sacrifices right? Our fourth core value is sacrifice and that means we all have to give a little something up to do that. I would hope for us to be able to get back together in there, in a family reunion and tailgating and an increase of 250,000 people in town and what that means to the state, and what that means to the community and the businesses and the restaurants and bars and hotels and just for the experience, right? The experience here in Happy Valley. So, this is not a political statement. It's become a political issue and I think I want to make sure that people understand that's not what this is. But, the more people that that can get vaccination, whether you completely agree with it or not, you know, maybe to protect others. I think you guys know this kind of hits very close to home. My daughter is actually in the hospital right now, so these things hit really close to home. So, I just think the more people that can say, "look, whether I completely agree with it or not, I'm

going to get the vaccination. I'm going to wear a mask when appropriate and give us the best opportunity to be in that stadium and as close back to what we describe as normal as possible."

Because, I think we have all seen, we already went through this once. There are some mask mandates out there now that are coming back. There are some variants out there. So, obviously, all of us kind of making some choices and sacrificing together is going to give us the best opportunity to fill that stadium up to have a home field advantage and be able to bring significant impact to our community and our state. And to be honest with you, I would love for our students and the people in Happy Valley and my players to be able to experience it because last year was not a true Penn State experience. So, I am asking and pleading for everybody to do everything they possibly can to give us the best chance to get back to what you mentioned in the beginning of how we would probably describe normal.

Q: Earlier this spring, I talked to Sean Clifford about having four different offensive coordinators during his time here. From your perspective, being a former quarterback, what are some of the challenges and benefits that provides for having that much turnover in that amount of time?

A: I am going to kind of hit it from both perspectives, I think the first thing is, obviously, you'd love to have as much consistency as possible so that you can just continue to build on the foundation, you just continue to build and evolve and grow. And even with this same offense, you're still going to tweak some things, and make some changes every single year to grow the package, to expand the package, to maybe emphasize an area that you think you could grow in and obviously to play to your team's strengths and maybe hide some of your deficiencies. I think that's the first thing. But I do think there's value. I really do.

All of the coordinators that we have had here are fantastic people and fantastic coaches. And I know myself and our team have learned from all of them. And the Good Lord doesn't give you everything, right? And all of them have tremendous strengths that Sean's been able to learn from and grow. And then as much as we can teach, using a same-as philosophy, where on special teams, we're using the same terms that we use on defense, when we're talking about coverage. When we're talking about the different tackling techniques that we use, it wouldn't make any sense for Joe Lorig to be using terms on special teams that don't align with what we're teaching in, verbalizing on defense and same thing on offense.

So, we try to use same-as teaching methods as much as we possibly can so there's carryover. I think that's really important. I think for Sean, that's similar. In terms of, let's be honest, everybody's running inside zone. Everybody's running some form of gap scheme, whether it's power or counter. Everybody's running outside zone. Everybody's running vertical stretches and horizontal stretches and high-lows, inside triangles, whatever it may be. RPO's. Everybody's doing it. Everybody is getting in spread sets to create space inside. Everybody's getting in bunch of sets or snug sets to create space on the perimeter. There are a lot of ways to obviously do this.

So, it's really more about the fact that we're running most of the same plays that we've always run, but it's the packaging. It's the presentation. Whether it is huddling, whether it's going no huddle. Whether it's lining up in multiple personnel sets, whether it's multiple sets. Whether it's empty, whatever it may be, it's the packaging of how you put it all together. And that's been fun.

That's been fun getting with Mike and learning with Mike. And obviously we have similar backgrounds. We're guys that both played in the PSAC, guys that both coached in the PSAC. His career jumped a little bit more significantly, right? He went from Shippensburg to Oklahoma State. My journey was a little bit different than that. But, he's been great. He's

passionate about what he does, he coaches hard, he loves them hard. So, it's been cool. I've loved working with him. I also think Brent Pry has been a big part of that as well, because I do think Coach Yurcich had a lot of respect watching Coach Pry and our defense and how our defenses played. And I think he understands, he's been in this long enough, that they're going to make each other better. Now, Brent's going to do some things that cause challenges for Mike. And Mike's going to do some things that cause challenges for Brent.

The last thing I'll say is, I've always been a big believer, all the way back to when I was an offense coordinator, and all the way back to when we were running pretty much our system at Vanderbilt, and early on at Penn State the system that I was running as an offensive coordinator, that I was running a system that was best for our team. So, what I mean by that is, it's not about the ego as the offensive coordinator or the ego of the defensive coordinator, to be leading the nation. It's about having complimentary units, right? So, our defense is going to get some power football power formations, power personnel groups and power plays. So, they're so they're going to be prepared to play Wisconsin, but also have elements that if we end up playing Washington State, that they've played that type of offense. So, you'd like enough of that in your offense and in your defensive packages, that you're getting prepared for the different styles that you could get throughout a year, if that makes sense.

Q: How do recruiters and coaches in general discriminate against wide receivers of the size of Parker Washington? What do you have to see in a kid of that size for you to pull the trigger on offering him?

A: I think that's a fair question. I guess the way I would say it is probably no different than any other walk of life, right? If you're deficient in one area, whether it's by no fault of your own or not, you're deficient in a certain area, whether it may be height or whatever it is, then you better have other unique or special qualities to make up for it. I think you know, Parker's an example, KJ Hamler is an example, right? KJ had other elite qualities that made up for the fact that he wasn't six-foot-two. And I think Parker is similar in terms of when you look at Parker's intelligence, his ability to learn a system as a true freshman and play at a pretty high level without a whole lot of mistakes from an assignment standpoint. When you talk about his ball skills, I think he's got elite ball skills. I've always been a believer as a receivers coach as an offensive coach that elite ball skills make you bigger and make you faster than what you are. And what I mean by that is, when your catch radius is similar to someone that's three inches taller and you because your ability to go get the ball and be able to consistently catch the ball on your fingertips. You're faster because some guys are going to have to slow down stop, secure the ball and then regain their speed, where a guy that's got just tremendous confidence in his ball skills can just reach back and contort their body, pluck the ball and not lose much speed. So, other unique qualities like that.

I think the other thing, normally I would say this, but I don't know if you've had the opportunity to, when you see Parker in person, he's not a little guy. He's got big features. He's really built like a running back. You're going to look at his lower half and he is thick and powerful. He literally looks like a running back with the way he's built. I think he's got enough unique other qualities that make up for him not being six-foot-two. I think you know as well as I do, whether it's college or NFL, are they maybe the exception? Yes, but there are still a bunch of them out there that are having very successful careers.

Q: Do you guys have a game plan for getting game speed reps for some of the backup quarterbacks and up to this point, they don't really have that?

A: Well, if your point is they haven't had game speed reps, there's nothing that we're going to be able to do to solve that question or answer your question because they've had game speed reps in practice since they've been here and they'll continue to do that.

Obviously, as guys continue to move up the depth chart, like Ta'Quan [Roberson] has, it creates more of those opportunities. Obviously, these guys have had full speed reps since they've gotten to Penn State, but it's not going to change until they obviously get into games.