

Penn State Football
2021 Weekly Press Conference – Coach Franklin
October 5, 2021

Opening Statement: I want to summarize the Indiana game. We won the turnover battle, which was significant. We've done a pretty good job of that all year. We'll have to continue to do that moving forward. We did not win the penalty battle. Wasn't a lot of penalties in the game. We had five, they had three. But we did not win that battle. The drive start battle, we did win. The sack battle, we did win. And the explosive play battle, you know, we were able to win that. We did not reach our goal on offense of 16 percent. But we did have significantly more explosive plays than they did. So we did win that overall.

When you talk about getting into a few more points about Indiana, you know, positives from the game. I thought we were playing tremendous complementary football in all three phases. I think our situational awareness and situational mentality has been really good. I think about all the situations that came up in that game, and we handled them all very well. So, pleased with that.

First time Indiana's been shut out since 2000, which is strange to me to think that that's 21 years. 2000 doesn't seem that long ago until you say it like that. But in today's day and age, with the way offenses have changed, that's an impressive stat.

You know, Indiana was 0-2 in the red zone. One at the 4 yard-line, one at the 13 yard-line with a blocked field goal. The blocked field goal was impressive. That's our second one of the season. That kind of reinforces my point about situational awareness and situation mentality.

Then, opportunities for growth. We've got to have a complete week of preparation, meetings, weight room, practice, regen and recovery, nutrition, academics, all of it will matter.

Getting into Iowa. Obviously, got a ton of respect for Coach [Kirk] Ferentz. You talk about 23 years as a head coach at Iowa, 31 years overall at Iowa, has just done a great job. The level of consistency that they've had throughout their program, not only from a win and loss record, but from a coaching staff perspective, really all of it. It's impressive.

They have 18 starters returning. Obviously, we're getting into the point of the season where I don't know if those returning starters matter a whole lot anymore because we're deep enough into the season, but they did have 18 starters returning. So that's impressive.

Brian Ferentz, Coach Ferentz's son, is the offensive coordinator. Obviously, spent time in New England, just like his dad did and has done a nice job, is really doing a nice job with their offense playing to their strengths right now. We've been impressed with Tyler Goodson. Seems like he's been playing there forever now, the running back. He's explosive. Tight end Sam LaPorta. They always seem to have a tight end there who is a challenge to deal with. And then their offense lineman, Number 65, Tyler Linderbaum, is really impressive. They do an excellent job with their play action. That's probably the biggest thing. We're going to be working that all week long, play action, play action, play action. They do a really good job in getting four and five guys out into their route, so it's not like they're just going max protect all the time. They do a really good job of getting their guys out. You see their tight ends and running backs are targeted a lot. So that will be the challenge dealing with them.

Talk about defensively. Their defensive coordinator [Phil Parker] is maybe one of the most respected defensive coordinators in college football. There's been consistency there. He's been there for 11 years as the coordinator but was there a lot longer, before that, as a defensive backs coach. But they do a great job. They're consistent.

I would not say that they're simple. But you look on tape and who they are this year for the most part is who they were last year and the years before that and their kids are sound. They line up and they're sound. They're never out of position. They play fast. They play aggressive. They play with great confidence. Because they're allowing them to line up and play.

They've got a really good scheme that is challenging. It's not like a formation that you can turn on or a motion or a shift or empty or formation into the boundary where you feel like, okay, here is a formation or a personnel group that is going to allow us to get some yards just based on a lineman. You know, there's no easy yards out there. They do a great job.

The guys that stand out with us is the defensive end, Number 97, Zach VanValkenburg. Very, very much a Iowa defensive line name. Seems like they always got a guy like that. Linebacker Number 31, Jack Campbell, impressive. Watching him on tape, I didn't realize he's as big as he is listed. But he's active and really productive. Number 44, Seth Benson, linebacker, impressive, impressive on tape, productive as anything. And then Number 33, Riley Moss, the defensive back, who actually went to the same high school as Jake Pinegar.

We're going to need to establish the run. We were able to take a step last week with our run game. That's going to be really important. Not just for our offense's success, but also to help our defense out with time of possession. This is going to be one of those types of games. We're going to have to grind it out and help our defense out based on who they are as an entire organization, but specifically their offense as well.

From a special teams perspective, I think year in and year out, they do a great job on special teams. It is obvious that this is something that Coach Ferentz invests in and respects. Coach [Levar] Woods does a great job with their special teams. They always got a wrinkle or something that you need to be ready for. Their returner, Charlie Jones, is impressive. He makes plays in the punt game as well as in the kick game as a returner.

The other thing is trick plays. We're going to spend a lot of time on those things this week, whether it's on PAT field goal, with shifts and motions and swinging gates as we call them. They ran one a few years ago that we had worked on, but they still were able to be successful with it. They're always going to have a wrinkle in there that you need to be prepared for. So, we're going to be working all those things.

We've gone back and broke down all the tape, really, since they have been there and any trick that they've run and they've run some good ones. They do a great job with motions and shifts. So, we're going to make sure we get all those things covered this week.

Tremendous opportunity that we're excited about. We're going to need to have great practice today and build on it all day long.

Q. Could you take us through, in your mind, what makes Jahan Dotson the kind of the player he's become and with the consistent level that he's been performing?

A: He's smart. He's got elite ball skills, maybe some of the best ball skills that I've ever been around. He is smooth and fluid. Doesn't look like he's running sometimes, but no one can catch him. I think he's added more of a physical presence to his game now. There's times where he just gets the ball and knives and gets north/south and gets an extra two or three yards from that. I think he also has a really good feel, not only in practice, but also in games with [Sean] Clifford. They've just played so much football together. I think that's been valuable for both of them.

But he's a really good athlete, you know. In high school, he was a high-level track guy in the high jump. I think he won the state championship. He was a high-level basketball player and a high-level football player. He's a guy that was thinking about leaving home and going far away. We were able to convince him and, specifically, his parents to stay close to home and it's worked out really well for him and us. I think you guys know how I feel about the players in the state of Pennsylvania staying home and the high school coaches supporting that as well and the community supporting that as well.

I don't know if there's some special water up there, but he's from not far from where Saquon [Barkley] is from. Two guys that came to Penn State that are near each other and both have had fantastic Penn State careers. We're going to need him to have a big game on Saturday too.

Q. How do you evaluate and assess your running backs through five weeks, not just running the ball, but overall?

A: A couple things I would say. I don't know if you can talk about the running game or the running backs on their own. It's all of it. I think in pass protection, we've been good. I think in getting them the ball out of the backfield, I think we can do a little bit more of that. I think there's times where they can get out a little bit quicker so we can get the ball into their hands. I think there's times we would like Sean to check it down a little bit more to the running backs. But in those areas, pretty good.

In the run game, you know, I think I mentioned this maybe last week, I'd like to see, at times, us be more physical and pound it up there and get the four and five yards and trust it and make sure we're inside-out from a mentality in our running. But, no, I think the rotation has probably played out the way I thought it would.

Obviously, you'd love for somebody to really jump out and say I'm going to get the majority of the reps and the other guys are going to rotate in. I wouldn't say that that's necessarily happened yet. And you could have both kind of ends of that. Right? You could have three guys that are playing at a really high level and you want to keep them all involved or you want to have one guy that kind of takes control of the room and other guys are complimentary pieces. Both are fine. But, yeah, it's somewhat similar to how I thought it would play out. I probably thought we'd have a little bit more production, again, but that's not just on them, that's all of us.

Q. A lot of people talk about the environment of Beaver Stadium when they come in, but I've heard a lot of players over the years say that Kinnick Stadium provides maybe the toughest environment that they've played in on the road. Do you agree with that? What makes that such a tough place to play? Do you think getting that road game against Wisconsin out of the way early in the season maybe helped you guys prepare for that a little bit?

A: It's a tough environment. There's no doubt about it. We've got a lot of respect for that school and that community and the support that they give their football program. Obviously, there's special things about it. Obviously, the wave to the children's hospital is, I think, one of the better traditions in college football. You know, whenever you can support people in challenging times, you want to do that. It's

something that I think is very unique to college football and very unique to the University of Iowa. But, yeah, I think obviously what makes it challenging is the size of the crowd. The intensity of the crowd. And then kind of the way their field is set up. The sidelines are tight. They are right on top of you. And it's, I guess probably like our stadium, you have fans that have had season tickets forever. So, we started to kind of build a relationship with these people. You know their names and they know a lot about you. And it's a tough environment. But we're looking forward to it.

I do think your point about going to a place like Wisconsin early in the season helps, but it's not like it solves the issue. We're going to have to work on it all week in practice and it will be challenging.

Q. Wanted to ask you about Noah Cain. How do assess how he's played this season? Specifically last week, it looked like he was trying to play through something or work through something?

A: Yeah. I think, kind of like the question I already answered, you know, I think he's playing well. I think Noah can do even more. We've seen flashes, all of us have seen flashes of Noah doing some really good things. But again, that's all of it. That's the tight ends, that's the O-Line, you know, that's the running backs, that's the coaches, that's the quarterback, not running into looks that we shouldn't be running into, when we have relief throws for extra guys in the box and things like that. Whether it's RPOs and we're putting somebody in conflict and they're more of a run player than they are a pass player. It's all of it. But I think we've all seen what Noah has the ability to do.

Then, in terms of what he's working through, that's part of football. Everybody this time of the year, with the competition that we've played, is working through things. Noah always approaches those things the right way. He lives in the training room, whether he's got a bump or a bruise or not, you know, whether it's rehab or prehab. He's been great. We expect him to be full-go on Saturday and I know he'll do everything he possibly can to make sure that's the case.

Q. Philosophically, what are the benefits and the drawbacks of rotating three backs and sometimes four in a game?

A: I think the benefit is the opportunity to keep three backs fresh and healthy for a complete game and for a complete season. I think that's the benefit.

The drawbacks, obviously, is depending on the type of backs that you have, sometimes they need to get into a rhythm. And I get that as well. But I think there's also the aspect that, until somebody steps up and shows that they are the guy, it's hard for us, based on what we have seen at this stage, to just crown somebody. We'd love for that to happen.

Again, I think you can make both arguments. Three guys just really playing at a high level, that you don't feel like you can take any of them off the field, so you split the reps equally, or somebody taking total control of it and saying, okay, this guy is going to be the number one, and we'll go one to one, you know, starter to this guy, starter to the other guy, you know, type deal, back and forth. And I'm really okay with either scenario.

But I think to your initial point is, it's what I said. You'd like to be able to have three backs that you feel like you can win with because you want to keep them fresh and healthy for four quarters and for a complete season.

Q. In terms of turnovers, you're obviously aware of Iowa, I think they have 16 of them this year. Is there an art to that, that you can stress the same things from year to year? One year you might be really good at it, then the next year you only get a few?

A: I think it's a couple things. I think, obviously, they've done a good job with it over multiple years. Obviously, they do a good job of teaching it. I think their scheme, more times than not, allows them to capitalize on mistakes because they have their eyes on the quarterback, probably as much as anybody in college football, and they obviously do a great job of coaching it and drilling it and teaching it.

I also think the length that they have at defensive tackle and defensive end also plays into that, because they're able to get their hands on some balls. Then, you know, like anything, it's recruiting, right? You want to recruit playmakers. There are some great DBs, that are really productive with PBUs and support. And there's guys that have great ball skills and create turnovers. I mean, you look right now in the NFL with [Trevon] Diggs and the Cowboys. He's the talk of the NFL right now. Why? I have no idea how he's playing on the other 60 plays in their games, I haven't watched their games closely enough and graded it enough, but he's getting a bunch of turnovers.

Turnovers equate to winning as much as anything. Turnovers and explosive plays. When you can do that, you're going to help your team play and you're going to put yourself in a position to play the game for a long time.

I think everybody knows that's the story line in this game. Right? They're doing a lot of things well. That's the thing that they're doing right now that makes them special and it impacts their entire team. It helps defensive statistics, because they get off the field. It helps offensive statistics because they create short fields and scoring opportunities. It's all of it. So that's going to be the story of the game is, us continuing to do a great job of protecting the football and for us to create a few too.

Q. Objectively, for as long as you've been at Penn State, the East Division has been better than the West. Do you like how the divisions are aligned right now?

A: It's interesting because I've been told many times, historically, it all kind of evens its way out. I don't know if that's necessarily true. We're not the only conference that has this challenge. I was in another conference that has a similar challenge.

I do think studying the history of it is important. I think if you look since the beginning of football, what programs have been the most successful, I think you'd like to try to evenly split that up.

Obviously, there's going to be years where one side is better than the other. That's just the nature of it. But you'd love to try it split it up as evenly as you possibly can, you know, and I think that's the right thing for the conference. If we're trying to get as many teams into the playoffs as possible, that's in the conference's best interest as well.

So, you know, I think it really should be, in my opinion, it should be a discussion, an honest, transparent conversation every year that the head coaches, ADs, commissioner have about what's in the conference's best interest long term. And not just study the Big Ten, study other conferences as well. Scheduling philosophies, all of it. And I think that's a healthy thing to do. To get as many different perspectives on these decisions as possible.

As you know, mid-week, Tuesday, and playing Iowa, I don't know if I got this whole thing mapped out or thought out for you. But I do think it's something that every conference, including the Big Ten, should look at. And it should be a healthy, honest discussion. Are we doing what's in the conference's best

interest? Are we doing what's in the school's best interest to give us the best chance to get as many teams into the playoffs as possible?

And it's not just about expanding the playoffs. I think before you can worry about things outside of your bubble, you try to control as many things inside your bubble. And that's us at Penn State doing that. That's the conference doing that. And so on and so forth. I think that's a reasonable, healthy discussion to have every single year.

Q. It seems to me that Sean has gotten better at extending the play in an intelligent way where he looks down the field and he sees how to make a play down the field. Do you agree with that? How much of that is just experience? How much of it is Mike Yurcich having an impact on that?

A: I think, like most things, it's both. Right? You know, it's – Sean has learned a lot in his years of playing of what's worked for him, what hasn't worked. He studies a bunch of tape. And then I think it also comes down to genetics and recruiting. He's got the ability to extend plays. Some guys, you can coach it all you want, and you can play as much football as you want but you don't have the ability to extend plays.

I watched a guy the other night. I think he's played for 22 years and maybe the greatest quarterback to ever play, he ran for a first down. You know, I don't know if it was the prettiest thing to watch, but he picked up the first down by stepping up into the pocket. Sean has done a really good job of that really throughout his career. But I think Mike's had an impact on him as well.

You know, for me, I'm more of a go through your progression, step up in the pocket. If you've gone through your progression and you step up into the pocket and if you've got to check down, take the check down now or stay on the move and go get a few yards, whether it's two yards or whether it's 20 yards.

And then there's the time where the pressure forces you. You're not able to step up in the pocket. You have to escape from the pocket. I worked on drills on that when I was an offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach. But Mike really does a good job of emphasizing the details of that, the sprinting, you know, and extending the play horizontally, behind the line of scrimmage to the sideline and either putting you in a position to be able to reset your feet because you were able to separate from defenders or staying on the move. Then I think the thing that we've really kind of tried to pound home, like we talked about, is those outlet throws on the sideline, that are going to be safe throws more times than not, and create opportunities for big plays. Or Sean being able to run down the sideline and step out of bounds and protect himself.

So, I think it's a combination of Sean's experience and athleticism and Mike doing a really good job of talking about extending plays and keeping your eyes down the field. You know, when they want to drop eight, then you're going to have to create. And Mike does a really good job of drilling these things and hammering them home. And he's got a quarterback that has the ability athletically to take advantage of some of the things we're teaching.

Q. Everybody knows Kirk Ferentz is the longest tenured coach in FBS now. Why do you think he's been able to last so long? And just in college football in general, how tough is it for coaches nowadays to stay someplace 20 years?

A: Yeah, not at all. I think it's, first of all, that he's earned that with the level and the consistency of success. Also, how he represents the university and the athletic department. He's a class act guy. And that obviously helps and goes a long way as well.

And I also think that Iowa has been rewarded for their commitment to him. It's been a nice marriage, so to speak. He's been able to deliver a high-level football program on a consistent basis that aligns with the university and the community. And Iowa has something that they can be proud of on Saturday's as well.

So, I think that is the model. You look at how the game has changed. There's less of that. There should be more people studying Iowa and Coach Ferentz and what he's been able to do. Their administration, their athletic director, it's impressive and it's worked for them.

Obviously, you see coaches getting let go after one year or two years or three years. When I was coming up in the profession yet, you had really four to five years to kind of get it going. So, I also look at coaches at Penn State. I've studied coaches at Penn State's careers. You look at some of the coaches that we've had that have been tenured here for a very long time and been very successful. And a lot of them, the second half of their careers were more successful than the first half. So, there's all of it. There's all of it. But what Iowa has done and what Coach Ferentz has done has been impressive. Especially to your point at a day and age and a time where that's less and less likely.

Q. You mentioned Iowa's center, Tyler Linderbaum. I would imagine he's going to be spending a little time with PJ Mustipher on Saturday night. What have you seen from PJ through five games this year that stands out to you?

A: I think you guys know it's no secret that I'm a huge fan of PJ Mustipher the football player, the student athlete, the young man, and the leader in our program. He does everything right. And their center is as good as I've seen. His athleticism, his ability to pull and run and get out on the edge, the mentality he plays with, it's really impressive. So that's going to be an interesting matchup and battle throughout the game. Got a ton of respect for both of them. So that will be an interesting matchup that I think will play a big part in this game and who's successful and who's not.

But with PJ, it's really the value of knowing what you're going to get. If PJ is supposed to be in the A-gap, he's going to be in the A-gap. And I know that sounds simplistic, but when you have one man trying to hold a responsibility and you have another man -- and a lot of times when you're the nose guard, two men trying to remove you from your gap when everything else in life and society is saying take the path of least resistance. And especially, the interesting thing is, sometimes guys will get out of their gap and make a play. And you have to be careful as a coach and as a player that the success that they had to make in the play that that doesn't become kind of how they play, trying to make a play and jumping out of a gap and not trusting their teammates to do their job. And I think that's where a guy like PJ is so valuable is Brent Pry, John Scott, and myself, we know what we're getting from PJ and not just in terms of his responsibility, but his responsibility done at a very high level.

And then also, he's earned the respect of the coaches and his teammates that he has the ability to call others out. He doesn't do it very often, but there's times that he does. And that's needed. That's needed. So that will be an interesting matchup to watch throughout the game. And we're going to have to do a great job from a preparation standpoint to put PJ in the best position to be successful.

Q. A lot of Big Ten coaches over the years have said, of Iowa's defense, they do what they do, a similar scheme. I'm just curious, as you study them, are there any differences to say what they're doing this year that have maybe led to the turnovers? Is it really what you've seen in years past with different players or more mature players in certain spots?

A: Yeah. And I think you want to be careful because it's funny, when you say, you know, some people describe them as simplistic. I wouldn't necessarily describe them that way. But I would also say that I don't want it ever to come off as a negative or disrespect. I mean, to me, that's

what the smartest people in the world do. Right? They take complex things and are able to present them in a very clear and precise manner and I think that's what they do a great job of. Where the offenses are doing all these different things, shifts and motions and empty and unbalance and formation into the boundary and all of these different things to try to cause conflict and RPOs. And they're going to line up and do what they do. And they're going to know the tendencies. They're spending their time studying you rather than what all their checks are going to be.

So, their players are really confident to go out and they know, okay, here in this down and distance situation in this field zone, here is the plays that they like to run. So, pattern recognition or whatever it may be. These are the blitzes that we're going to run and we're going to rep them so that we can do them in our sleep.

I think that's the method to their success is through repetition and through making sure that they're lined up and sound. And it allows their players to play fast, confident, and aggressive. So, I love it, you know. I truly, truly love it and respect it. But, yeah, they are who they are. You know, they may have a wrinkle that you haven't seen. But for the most part, they are who they are.

Q. I'm guessing that you're not happy with the percentage of conversions on third and short, fourth and short. When you watch the film of the game, what do you see that concerns you the most?

A: You know, I'd like to be better in that area. Third down in general. I think to your point, though, if we'd be a little bit better on third and short, it would help our overall percentage significantly on a situation that you should be pretty high in your success rate. I think more than anything, it's mentality. We have got to be more physical.

There are times that we're on a double team and we're not getting as much movement as we need to get. I think there's some things that we can do to make sure that people know that we will and are going to throw the ball in those situations too. I think that's important, whether it's a drop back quick game, whether it's an RPO, or whether it is play action pass. I think that's important.

But again, at the end of the day, if we are who I think we are, we've got to be able to line up and get a yard or two when we need it. When everybody in the stadium knows you're going to run the ball. So, we're going to keep chipping away at it and stay positive. I do think we took a step in the right direction last week. Maybe not specifically in that area, but in the running game. I believe that will translate over time and we need to take a step this week. That will be part of our emphasis today and tomorrow.

Q. A couple weeks ago, you mentioned not quite having the type of practice you wanted. It seemed that you improved that against Indiana. You also mentioned how sometimes guys can get comfortable with the pats on their back and need adversity. How do you handle all that information going into a top five matchup? How do you emphasize that the game is a big deal without making guys get too caught up in the hype?

A: Yeah. So, for me, you know, if you would spend a week with us, I think you would see our tone, our approach, our demeanor, our process is pretty consistent. You know, it may be a little bit tweaked on Sundays, based on what I think we need to do and the corrections that need to be made. But in general, the process is going to stay the same. And for us, they're going to hear enough of outside noise. I want them to come into Lasch building and know what to expect and know what to expect. I think the routine is important.

You know, so for us, we're just going to be transparent about the things we need to improve on and be very intentional about how we're going to improve in that area, whether it's

fundamentals and techniques or whether it's scheme. This is specifically an area of weakness, and this is specifically an area that we need to work on to improve and here is the steps to get there. And that's pretty consistent.

Whether we're playing Iowa or whether we're playing a previous opponent or whether we're playing a ranked opponent or not, it's really not going to change. They hear that enough from everybody else. And when we don't practice well, I think you've got to stand up in front of them and be honest and tell them that. That wasn't good enough. And when we did that two weeks ago, the response was, hey, we need to - our Thursday needs to be better than the last couple Thursdays to make up for the Wednesday that wasn't good enough. Our Friday needs to be better than our normal Fridays to make up for the Wednesday that wasn't good enough.

And then obviously this Sunday was, just like I told you guys, we have to have a complete week of practice and preparation. And everything matters. When you're talking about two opponents coming together like this, and especially with us being on the road, the margin of error is going to be small. And it all adds up. So just intentional about everything we do and very specific about our process.