

Penn State University Football Media Conference

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Coach Terry M. Smith

Press Conference



TERRY M. SMITH: Hello, everyone. I'll read my statement then we'll get to the questions.

We just wrapped up a really productive week. We were able to reset and take a good look at where we were and how we want to continue to grow as a football team.

I'm extremely happy with our players and how we approached the bye week. The energy in the building has been very positive. Proud of our leadership in the locker room and how connected this group is right now.

We have a tremendous opportunity here on Saturday to go to Ohio State. They're a very well-coached team, very talented. Coach Day that is done an amazing job with those guys.

This is why you come to Penn State, to play this game like this and be able to compete against the No. 1 team in the country and have an opportunity to beat those guys.

The staff is confident the way we've prepared so far. We had a really good week last week. We're looking forward to having a good week this week. Everyone is positive and ready to go.

Thank you.

Q. Good afternoon, Terry. How are you today?

TERRY M. SMITH: Very well, thanks.

Q. Can you give us any medical update on Jaxon Smolik Zuriah Fisher? Can you tell us anything?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, Jaxon Smolik, there is no update right now. We do know Bakkem Critz will be available if Jaxon isn't around.

Zuriah should be back this week.

Q. Wondering on the field, being the cornerback's coach, you know, they've just had so many great

receivers these last few years. Can you frame up the challenge of where it starts and trying to get a handle on those guys?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, this week will be an extreme challenge. Ohio State has a long history of great receivers. Arguably these two are two of the better ones in that list.

Jeremiah Smith is as good as they come. We were hoping he would go through the sophomore slump but obviously he's not. He's just got everything. He's big, strong, fast, runs great routes, competes. You know, we have our hands full.

So our job on the back end is to make those guys earn it. We have to limit their explosive plays, keep the ball in front of us, and make them earn their way down the field and not give up one-play scores.

Q. You talk a little bit about it, but keeping this team together after a lot of the struggles you've had, could you talk specifically to the challenge of that and what makes you specifically position coming out of this bye week that this team is ready, will be prepared for the No. 1 team in the country coming up on Saturday?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, it's challenging to keep us together. Obviously it starts with my title. I'm the interim head coach. You know, that could be portrayed as the substitute teacher. You know, there is just someone that's different at the helm. You know, our routines are the same but I've tweaked the schedule slightly.

We're going to do things a little bit different in the sense of how I would like to do it. Those guys in the locker room have bought into it, so each day we continue to get more camaraderie. Each day we get closer. Each day we continue to work harder. We have great leadership in the locker room.

Even a guy like Drew Allar, you know, has been around and been very, very present. He actually stopped in to see me this morning and ask how can he help support.

You know, we have that type of leadership. Guys have been great. Worked hard. Had a great bye week. They're

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buying into it. How do we go up and beat Ohio State, the No. 1 team in the country? We have to do it together and be as one. We cannot make mistakes. We have to be efficient with the football.

The most important thing we have to do is be able to run the football. We have to outrush Ohio State to have a chance.

Obviously their defense is elite. They're the No. 1 in the country. They've got a lot of elite talent. They are big up front and fast in the middle and can cover on the back end. We have to be creative on offense, run the football, get Kaytron Allen going again. Have to find way to get Nick Singleton going because they're our two best offensive weapons.

And we just got to continue to play mistake-free football. When we need to make a play we have to be able to come up with some type of scheme to make a play.

Q. You talked about the need to run the football against Ohio State. You were able to run the football at Iowa. Just didn't work out. Wanted to ask you about two of your offensive lineman and their status. You didn't have Venga (sp) at left guard against the Hawkeyes. Do you have an update on him? And where is Cooper Cousins, a second-year guy who at the start of the year I think you guys considered him almost like a starter. Where is he with his health and moving forward?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, both of those guys will be available this week. We're looking forward to getting those guys back out there. That's where it is.

Q. Just going back to the quarterback a little bit, what's the next step now after start one for Ethan Grunkemeyer? And what can you expect from Bekkem Kritza at this point in the season?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, Grunk, the next step for him is obviously we got to put him in position to succeed. We can't ask him to go out there and throw the ball 45 times and be effective and win that way. We got to create the run game and have some pass plays of the run game.

We have to be able to give him some throws that are -- some one- or two-read type throws, and not overcomplicate it for him.

You know, Bekkem Kritza, you know, he's coming off an injury. He's available this week. If he had the opportunity to go into the game, you know, the game plan would be very similar. We would have to keep it simple for him to

have success and not demand a lot from him.

And the other guys have to step up. The offensive line is a veteran crew. We're led by those guys so we have to run the football and continue to focus on Kaytron Allen.

Q. You said you talked last week about the freshman receivers, Koby Howard and Tyseer moving into a bigger role. Any other young guys evolve to the point where they might be able to play a bigger role than they have so far?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, those two guys obviously. You know, we're contemplating Alex Tatsch on the defensive side at linebacker. You know, maybe a kid like Jahmir Joseph at the back end at nickel. But probably those four guys are the ones that come to mind right away.

We're just trying to be creative to get some of the young talent on the field and give them an opportunity.

Q. Three touchdown underdogs. Do you use that as motivation? Do you not care? How do you kind of view that?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, you use it as motivation, but I don't know if we're allowed to because of what these gambling rules. Can I talk about point spreads? I don't know.

Obviously no one is giving us a chance. I'm going to reemphasize that to our team. I don't think we ever been 20 point underdogs since I've been here. But it's motivation. No one believes in us and we're going to come out and fight like we did at Iowa. We're going to fight a little harder.

Q. I know we had asked you previously about wanting to be the head coach after this year, but we haven't asked you about your plans beyond this year. Do you want to be on this staff next year, whether or not that's as head coach? And if so, why or why not?

TERRY M. SMITH: I love Penn State. Any opportunity that will present itself, I would pray on it and would entertain the opportunity to always stay here.

We just don't know what's next. So I'm grounded in my feet right now and my job is to lead this team the rest of this season and just worried about beating Ohio State.

Q. You mentioned Alex just a few moments ago. I was going to ask about the linebacker depth. Going back to August Jim has been pretty distrustful it seems about the younger components of that linebacker



room. Is there a sense of urgency coming out of the bye week to get those guys involved? Why is Alex the name that comes out of your mouth? And are any of those younger linebackers in more play in the next five games?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, Cam Smith is another kid that has an opportunity. You know, Alex has had a good start to his freshman year. Talented kid. He's big, strong, fast. He's learning the system, as they all are.

We just have to create more depth at the linebacker position. When Tony Rojas went down that's a big gap we haven't replaced yet, so we're searching for some answers to be able to help the defensive line to stop the run game, which is critical in this game. If they get going in the run game it will be a long day.

So we got to be able to protect at that front seven.

Q. Was interested on your point about the interim role as substitute teacher. Not only does that mean you're in a new spot, but thinking about substitute teachers, their relationship with the students, in this case your players. How has that dynamic changed for you, not only dealing with players in a new role, but just kind of having an expanded role?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, it's a little bit different. You know, I was always Coach T as cornerbacks coach in my role prior.

I got along with everyone. Everyone saw me as Coach T, the OG coach. I'm one the oldest coaches on staff. Now they see me in a different light. Like the building sees me different. It's kind of like everyone gets quiet when I walk in now. So it's just different. But it's positive in the sense of I'm still Coach T. I'm the guy that still gets along with everyone.

It's my job to rally us together. I want to give the players a voice to how this story ends and how do we write this next chapter. So it's always about those guys.

So I told the staff, you know, there was a video that Urban Meyer was talking about one of his former coaches is now the interim head coach at Florida. The video basically said that we have however many opportunities, games left in the season. We have to put it on film. If we want our next jobs as coaches, we have to coach so that the film shows we're deserving of our next job.

I showed that to our staff and we owe it to these guys to pour into them and give everything we can. So we're going to work our tails off. It's my job to make sure that staff

doesn't come up short. We're going to demand excellence, as we always have here. You know, I promised that when we went to Iowa we were going to play hard. I'm going to double down on that when we go up here to Ohio State.

Effort will never be an issue for any team that I coach. This week we're going to try to figure out how to give that maximum effort with victory.

Q. You said last Wednesday that you were going to spend some time over the bye week recruiting. Curious how that went. What's been the reaction from recruits obviously knowing they don't know who the head coach will be next year?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, all the guys, the committed guys and the guys we were on, they've been great. You know, obviously it's very similar to our staff, right? No one knows what's next. Everyone is trying to figure it out.

They're all like on stand by. They've all been communicating with us. We've done some FaceTimes, some calls. We're just doing the best we can just keeping an open line of communication and staying in touch until we figure out what's next.

The most important thing is go get victory on Saturday. It'll make everyone feel better.

Q. I'm going tell you what you already know. As a former quarterback and wide receiver and DB coach, you know wide receivers really well. What have you seen out of this group this year, and how much over the last couple weeks have you been a part of what's going on with the passing game and the wide receivers?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, so our receivers, you know, obviously the production isn't where you want it to be, right? That's the truth of the matter.

How do we get it better? You know, part of it is establish the run game so that now we can play-action pass and throw some balls in behind the linebackers into that intermediate zone.

Obviously there is always chatter about we got to throw the ball down the field, and we do want to take calculated risks down the field and throw the ball.

We have got these young receivers. Going to give those guys an opportunity to try to inject some life into the pass group.

You know, Ethan Grunkemeyer, new quarterback at the



helm. There is just a lot of dynamics with the pass game. I do think we'll be able to throw the ball a little bit better this week at Ohio State.

You know, I'm demanding from Coach Kotelnicki that we are creative in the pass game in the sense that we don't want to throw the ball so much horizontally. We want to throw it vertically.

Q. Now that you've had a couple weeks to settle into your new position, I think it was back in training camp James called you the ultimate truth teller in the building. Have you had to have some of those hard truth conversations either with staff or players about what happened the first part of the season and now that you're in charge some of the things you want to have changed to change the results?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, I am known in the building as the truth teller and you guys can probably tell because I tell you the truth as well.

Yeah, we've had some tough conversations. You know it's just the only way I'm built. I would want to know if I was falling short so that I can fix it.

It's how I was raised and brought up. The one thing that I worked very hard on in my truth telling is trying to not be so direct and deliver such a hard message.

Working really hard on that. I'm a work in progress, so please bear with me. We've had those conversations with staff members. They've been great. Everyone is understanding. Everyone is open to it.

We're going to continue to work and push forward in that sense. Just try and figure out how to get the victory. So tough conversations are a part of our business, and they're necessary though.

Q. You talked a few weeks ago saying you were spending more time with the offense learning the playbook. Just wondering if you're spending equal time with the offense and defense and what that process was like?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, I'm more balanced now. The first week of Iowa I didn't do much of any football. Now that we had a bye week since we're settled in and I'm finding my routine and rhythm, I am able to sit in with the offensive coaching staff and the defensive coaching staff and kind of getting a better understanding of what our expectations are for both sides.

Talking with the coordinators as well.

Things are getting better for me personally. I think both units continue to get better. I think defensively we have to get critical stops. That's been our challenge, is can we get those fourth quarter stops.

And then offensively, you know, the same, moving the ball when we need to move the ball and converting on third and fourth down conversions. Scoring touchdowns, not field goals.

So I feel good that we're working toward those goals.

Q. I want to go back to the two quarterbacks. What's made you guys make that a key factor of the offense again? Was it Drew getting hurt? Was it the coaching staff change? Even if Jaxon is out, will you still stick with the two quarterbacks?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, the two quarterbacks came up. The offensive staff and myself, we were in discussion. We thought it would be something more for the opponent to prepare for. We felt like it was successful in how it went down.

You know, going forward, you know, we want to be multiple. We want to be creative. We want to find different ways to make teams prepare for us and get the ball to our guys in space.

So it's still an option and open on the table.

Q. You mentioned just a few minutes ago you're demanding Coach Kotelnicki throwing the ball down the field with more effectiveness. What's the back and forth been like with Andy? How has he responded to that and what was your emphasis?

TERRY M. SMITH: He's been awesome. There is not been any challenging or anything like that. Maybe demanding is probably not the right word. When I go to him I'm saying hey, listen, this is what I'm thinking. He's like, yeah, you know what I was thinking the same thing. We're on the same page. We're thinking alike.

You know, in in profession when you lose four games in a row, we're all humble. We're all trying to find the problem and find the solution.

You know, we're just working toward that and trying to figure out what's the best thing for us to move forward. Coach Kiffin has been awesome with that.

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