

# Penn State University Football Media Conference

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University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

## Coach Terry M. Smith

### Press Conference



TERRY SMITH: Hello everyone. Just starting out, I'm super proud of our effort on Saturday. Not only did we win, but we played with an identity of Penn State football. It was complementary football at its best, and we are going to continue to build off of that.

Last week I gave the team four key points of emphasis. We delivered on all four of those. They were dominating the line of scrimmage, playing with passion and pride, getting Nick and Kaytron a combined 30-plus touches, and then pressuring the quarterback. With the 30-plus touches, Nick and Kaytron have 45 touches for 268 yards. Then the pressure on the quarterback, obviously we had five sacks.

Offensively positives, we had zero turnovers. We were physical and explosive in the run game. We had an explosive pass touchdown, and then we had back-to-back fourth quarter drives. The one drive was 9:05 without throwing the ball. Those were big time for us.

Opportunities for growth on offense, our third down was not good enough. We have to make sure we're better on third down to stay on the field.

Defensively positives, we have a goal. Last week was five or less explosives. We hit that. They only had four explosives against us. Pressure the quarterback, and we ended up with five sacks. Then third and fourth down dominance, I think they were 1 for 12 if I'm not mistaken. So that was good.

Rooms for growth. Obviously the first play of the game, the kid went for the long touchdown run. We've got to get that fixed and take those explosives off the board. Then the roughing the quarterback penalties, we've got to get that cleaned up in how our guys can tackle the quarterback. It's just a different deal nowadays.

Special teams, Coach Lustig continues to do a great job with those guys. We blocked another kick. Then our sky punt hit was good. We pinned them down on the punt as well inside the 5, I think it was.

Opportunities for growth. We did have the one penalty, so we'll get that cleaned up. Our offensive player of the game was Kaytron Allen. Defensive player of the game was Dani Dennis-Sutton. And our special teams player of the game was Dani Dennis-Sutton as well, with his blocked punt.

I'm really excited to be hosting Nebraska Saturday night at Beaver Stadium. I thought our fans were incredible at our last home game. I'm really looking forward to our fans showing up and supporting our team on Saturday night. It's a primetime event. Hoping for the same passion that we had at the last home game.

We're going to recognize 30-plus seniors this Saturday, a group that's done so much for Penn State football. And our community. This is a chance for our fans to celebrate these guys, and I'm really excited to make this a night that Penn State stands for.

**Q. Good afternoon, Terry. You mentioned the seniors and their last home game. What has this class of '22 meant to the Penn State program and the brand?**

TERRY SMITH: They've been incredible for us. There was a three-year stretch that I think we had the most victories in a three-year stretch in our history. These guys have really transformed the expectation for Penn State football, and as we move forward, they've set the standard.

Just a tremendous group of young men and super proud that we can go out here at Beaver Stadium on Saturday night and pay tribute to these guys and hopefully get a victory for them.

**Q. Pat Kraft said you would be considered a candidate for the job. Can you say whether you've had a formal interview or will have? And can you touch on the support that you've received from the Penn State community?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, I haven't had any talks in regards for the head coaching position. The way I see it is my interview is every day that I'm operating in this seat.

In regards to the support from the community, it's been amazing. Every avenue from alumni, lettermen, family,



friends, community -- the support has been amazing.

**Q. You mentioned Nick and Kaytron, a couple of seniors. You mentioned Senior Day. I don't want to be Captain Obvious here, but one of your seniors, Kaytron Allen, is chasing history, the all-time rushing record. Do you want your team, your players and your coaches -- he's got a lot of seniors blocking for him. Do you want your team and your players to embrace his pursuit, or are you worried that might detract from the focus of winning the last two games?**

TERRY SMITH: Obviously the most important goal is to win the game, but we do know in our keys to victory every week is for Kaytron and Nick to touch the ball, and if they're touching the ball, that means we're going to get closer to that goal.

I want nothing more than for him to have the opportunity to break the goal, but it's paramount for us to get him the football for us to have success. So they work hand in hand. Hopefully we can get it.

**Q. I wanted to take you back to 2013. It might have been December of 2012. How did that process come about of Matt hiring you on his first staff at Temple? What was Matt Rhule like then? What brought to you Temple to work with him?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, that was kind of an unplanned hiring, I guess. Back then I was the head coach at Gateway High School and an athletic director there. Matt Rhule came in to recruit one of my players, and long story short, I had a past player of mine that went to Ohio State and he came back to visit me. He was going through some life changing decision-making, and so I'm sitting there talking, discussing, blah, blah, blah, whatever.

Matt Rhule is sitting there listening to the conversation, and long story short, Matt appreciated my care for my player at that point. And we just had a discussion, and a day later he offered me the job. It was a tremendous opportunity for me to grow from high school to college, and I'm thankful for that. I appreciate Matt for taking a chance on me. I'm thankful for our relationship.

**Q. Kaytron, all your time at Penn State as a player and coach, what's unique about him? What's special about him from other running backs you've seen, you've coached? And how has he handled the season? Or gotten -- how have you seen him even develop as the season's gone on in his last year?**

TERRY SMITH: Kaytron is, as a person, he has transformed himself. As a freshman, maybe early in his

sophomore year, Kaytron wasn't a very friendly guy in the building. You had to really pull words out of him. He has matured tremendously. Now he's always been an extremely hard worker, and he's always been super talented, but now you just see more personality out of him.

He's a leader. We've got a bunch of young running backs in the room that he leads those guys. And he's stepping into a role that's been a little bit different for him this year. Really since I took over, he's been the focal point. Up until this point, he shared that role. So he's embraced it, he's answered it, and just looking for him to continue to keep getting better and just making self-improvements each week.

**Q. As opposed to like a month ago when you -- roughly a month ago when you became a head coach and it would have been kind of overwhelming for anybody for the circumstances in which you became a head coach. Can you talk about a little bit in the time since then how you've sort of learned how you could do this job and how you could make it work for you and maybe could envision yourself being a head coach down the road?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, each day I'm learning more and more. I'm learning which -- what each department handles, how they go about their business, how it affects us. I think the most important thing that I've learned is keep the main thing the main thing. You guys are all in this room because of what we do on the football field, and so that's the main thing.

I've tried to portray that message to our locker room. We recruit a certain type of kid here. So those guys understand what it means to play for Penn State football. I think in the last few weeks you've really seen a different approach or style of play, and these guys have embraced it.

After the game Saturday, our entire line, O-line came to the presser, and that's our identity now. We're going to run the football, and those guys are embracing that. It's just a mentality that we're going to carry here.

I'm looking forward to us coming out this weekend and establishing the line of scrimmage again. Thanks.

**Q. Daryus played a lot of football for you on Saturday. Could you size up how he did after looking at film? I think we're a little surprised to see him in the media room. That hasn't been the case with true freshmen. Is that a policy change or just something that you're comfortable with with that particular kid?**

TERRY SMITH: Daryus is playing extremely well. He played the most snaps of any corner on the team, which is a tribute to him really coming into his own. Part of our freshmen movement, he's a guy that's going to be important to our future. He continues to make big play after big play. The moment's not too big for him. He's a super mature kid.

As far as the policy, it's just a case by case. He's very mature. He can handle it, and I thought he did a nice job with it.

**Q. Obviously Saturday night was such a big moment. We've seen the videos afterward in the locker room, that kind of thing. Did you hear from -- like who was the most surprising person maybe that reached out to you to congratulate you? Have you had any communication with James, obviously, since taking over and trying to figure this whole thing out in the past month?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, my phone -- I have two phones. Each phone had about 500 text messages on it. Plus direct messages was like another 500 or 600. So it was really busy. I've been reached out to basically every person I've ever known in my entire life.

People are super proud of me. I get -- it's very humbling for me. (Crying). I apologize. It's just humbling sitting in this seat.

There's so many people in my life that speak life into me, and they all reach out. I'm just so blessed. God has been so good to me through everything in my life. I have the opportunity to be the head coach at Penn State. I don't think anything has made me or my family happier than this opportunity. I'm thankful for all my friends, my family, my supporters.

Saturday was -- I can't even tell you how I felt. I've never been lifted off the field in my career. It was just a great moment. I'm sorry. I apologize.

**Q. You mentioned Penn State specifically. Why does this place and this specific job at this school mean so much?**

TERRY SMITH: My dad graduated in '68. That's all we know. I'm from a small town called Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, and it's not a very nice place. My dad through his education at Penn State moved us to the other side of Pittsburgh to Monroeville, Pennsylvania, and he gave us a better life because of his education here.

It taught our entire family about possibilities in life, and you

can be whatever you want to be. This place has done so much for me and my family. I think we have nine or ten family members that have Penn State degrees. I have, I think, three that are students now, family members.

This place is special. It's amazing. I just want to give back to it. I just want to make sure I'm holding my end up of the bargain and putting out a team that everyone can be proud of.

**Q. I don't think Zakee has missed a snap on defense in the last five games. Can you talk about what he's meant as that iron man, and additionally the way you've seen him grab hold of that opportunity as a senior?**

TERRY SMITH: Zakee has been special all year. He's very consistent. We know exactly what we're going to get from him. He's an outstanding tackler, cover guy, can play in the box, can play in the post. He's such a sound football player, and he's an amazing kid. If you get to know him off the field, very humble himself, family guy.

But his stability on the back end has really stabilized us the last few games. I thought the secondary played outstanding this past Saturday. We just continue to look for his guidance and leadership.

**Q. You mentioned being carried off the field was a first for you.**

TERRY SMITH: Did you want me to cry again? (Laughter).

**Q. I was just going to say I think Nick Dawkins gave you a game ball in the locker room afterwards too. As you said, this team could have packed it in a while ago and haven't and got that first win. What has this buy-in be like for you?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, the buy-in has been awesome. I'm going to give you this example, and this speaks volumes for this locker room. One of our older guys has something going on the week of December 5th, 7th, whatever that weekend is. The season's over, right? Maybe possibility of a bowl game hopefully, whatever.

And he's asking me, Coach, when we win these two games, will we have practice that weekend because I have this family event that I don't want the conflict. So he's already speaking that he's going to play when we're in a time of opt-out, we're in a time when guys could easily walk away. This is one of our veteran guys that, if I said his name, you're like whoa. That speaks volumes to this locker room.



Like these guys are dialed in. They're playing their hearts out. There is no dissension. There is no guys looking the other way.

They got their first taste of victory in a long time, and they enjoy it. They want to experience it again.

**Q. You talked about the offensive line and having this identity of running the ball moving forward. You mentioned all five of them coming into the post-game media room. It seemed like Saturday was a bit of a weight off their shoulders, I think, in how they played, how they closed that game. What has stood out about that group and how they've handled, I think, a season that might have fallen short of some expectations and how they're approaching this final stretch?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, obviously we didn't run the ball as well as we wanted the first half of the season, and now we're making points of emphasis every week. It starts up front. Football is -- you know, it hasn't changed. You've got to win in the trenches. You've got to run the football, and you've got to stop the run. Our guys did an outstanding job this past weekend. That nine-minute drive and then followed it up with another drive where we just ran the football and scored.

Those guys are embracing the challenge because I've challenged them. I'm the guy that's putting the bad stuff on film in front of their peers, and they don't want that, but that's the reality of the business we chose. They've embraced everything, and they have embraced their identity. It makes us better as a team.

**Q. Looking back at the last two games, the defense has really come after the quarterback. Do you attribute that more to an adjustment that you and Coach Knowles have made, or is that more of the defense simply becoming more comfortable in Coach Knowles' system, playing more fast and loose, as you alluded to?**

TERRY SMITH: One of the things we've done since I took over is we put our prowler package back in. That is just a more aggressive defense. We just put more pass rushers in.

Manny Diaz brought that years ago, and teams don't have an answer for it. So we brought that back. We're blitzing five a little bit more to create some pressure and havoc. Again, Jim Knowles calls the defense. During the week of prep, we just bounce things off each other, and he's cutting the guys loose now.

**Q. You mentioned the running the ball and the offensive line being the identity of the team, but the quarterback obviously has to be part of the offense. How did you assess Ethan Grunkemeyer's performance in the first half versus the second half, where I think he had six passes, and the decision-making behind some of the play calling there. How do you see him fitting into all this going forward playing the final two teams on your schedule?**

TERRY SMITH: Yeah, Ethan continues to progress. The long touchdown pass, I think, was one of the longest in multiple years. That was big in the sense that it opened the run game up. Those guys realize they can't crowd the box. It was kind of you put them in a situation where they have to pick their poison.

I think Ethan on some of the fourth down calls and third down calls he's got to stand in the pocket just a little bit more, and that's just continuing to grow and develop, and he'll get that with experience.

But I think he each game is managing the game really well. I think he's playing better in the second half. He used his legs, which we need that, so those guys can't just tee off with him in the pocket. Then the most important thing for us is when he's running, we can't afford for him to take a hit. He's got to go down and slide and keep himself healthy so he can play the next snap.

**Q. I think two months ago if we would have said, hey, it's Senior Day and you guys are doing it without James and without Drew Allar, the starting quarterback, we'd think what happened? We probably wouldn't believe it. What has Drew meant to this program? What do you think Saturday night is going to mean to him? And have you had any contact with James?**

TERRY SMITH: Drew means everything to us. Obviously we've won a lot of football games under the helm. He's a tremendous leader, tremendous part of our locker room, our culture.

Again, when we go back to the subject of opt-out and guys could walk away, he's injured. He's done for the year. He could easily detach from this team. He's at every meeting. He's at every practice, and he travels with us on the road. That's true leadership.

He's been very special for us. He's been a great role model and resource to Grunk. He's leaving his mark on us in a different way and is super positive. I'm thankful that he's still around and with us.



**Q. You mentioned early when you got the interim job that one of the hardest parts was not coaching football. Then you said later that you're able to coach more. What is the hardest part of the job right now as the non on the field stuff draws closer in the next few weeks?**

TERRY SMITH: Just continuing to keep these guys close and playing as one. We just live in a world of these guys have agents, these guys have people in their lives that are telling them to be selfish, and my job is to channel that energy to a team.

I showed a video, I think -- I can't remember, a day or two ago -- and it simply said, every kid has or every player has their own agenda. You just got to make your agenda work with the team agenda. That's how we're channeling all our energy. It's okay to have dreams and aspirations for what you want your life to be, but we've just got to put it through the team aspect so that we all can become successful together.

**Q. You mentioned the opt-out culture kind of in college football these days. It's also kind of a transfer culture where, if you don't have the biggest piece of the pie in your position room, you might be looking elsewhere. Can you speak on what you've seen from your position room when looking over at Nick and Kaytron since they came here in 2022? We heard about it from the running backs coach, we heard it from James. But from a different viewpoint in the building, what have you seen of these two collaborating over these four seasons?**

TERRY SMITH: Nick and Kaytron, we've been so fortunate to be able to keep those guys. When do you have two guys, both super successful, stay and compete with each other and one not leave? It's a testament to what James did prior. It's a testament to Penn State. And it's a testament to those two guys.

And it's proof that -- you know, we use a saying in the corner room, everyone can eat together. We don't have to pit against each other. Those guys are true role models of how to get it done. They're buddies. They're friends. They collaborate together. They discuss ball together, and they help each other.

It's kind of cool to watch those guys. They just, they love ball, and they play off of each other. You know certain games it's Nick's style. Certain games it's Kaytron's style. Hopefully Saturday I would like to see both of them get 100 yards, and it would be beautiful.

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