

Penn State University Football Media Conference

Monday, November 24, 2025

University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Terry M. Smith

Press Conference



TERRY M. SMITH: Good afternoon, everyone. First want to say wish everyone happy Thanksgiving this week. Thought we played a complete game on Saturday. Our goal was to attack for 60 minutes and I think we accomplished that. Kids played hard.

On defense we set the tone early with a key fourth down stop inside the five yard line. Then offensively we scored on our first five possessions, including that 98-yard drive to start the game against a top 15 defense who was allowing under 300 yards per game.

We won the battle up front out-gaining them by 100 yards. Nick and Kaytron combined for 35 touches, 255 yards, and four touchdowns. Ethan Grunkemeyer was 11-12 and 181 yards and one TD. Very efficient for the day. We also, in the explosive play battle, had ten offensive explosive plays and under five for the defense which was positives for us.

Offensively for positives, the ten explosive plays, 231 rushing yards and 181 yards in the air. The room for growth for offense, with our offensive line we had a couple gap scheme pulls where our first puller didn't make the block, so get to get that cleaned up.

Defensively positives, key fourth down stops. We stopped them five of six times on fourth down, which is critical in the game and big time for our defense. And that goal line stop that I mentioned earlier. I thought our guys played are great effort and passion on defense.

Areas for improvement, third down we weren't as good as we would like to be, so we got to get that cleaned up for this weekend. Our special teams positives, we set up two scores, we had a 25 yard punt return and then we had a successful fake punt.

Areas for growth, kickoff coverage wasn't as good as it should be, so get that cleaned up. And unfortunately we missed an extra point which we'll obviously get that cleaned up as well.

Offensive player of the week or of the game was Kaytron

Allen and Nick Singleton. Defensive player was game was Zane Durant. Special teams player of the game was Dominic Rulli.

We look forward to our next opportunity at Rutgers this Saturday. They're hungry, fighting for post-season just like us. I'm excited to face Coach Schiano. He was a coach on staff when I played her so I know he was a him very well. Proud of our guys and looking forward to a good week of preparation.

Questions.

Q. You said last week that you had not had an interview for the permanent job. Has anything -- have you talked to Pat since Saturday night? If you haven't, has there been an interview scheduled for this week?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, right now my focus is just trying to beat Rutgers and become bowl eligible. I think there will be an opportunity to sit with Pat and we'll just go from there.

Q. I don't know, you probably may have partially answered, but I'll try anyway. Just wondering, are you keeping all your options open or depending on what happens, or has support and your hopes risen to the point that if it doesn't happen that it won't be as easy to stay?

TERRY M. SMITH: I'm not sure what your question was. Can you repeat that? I'm sorry.

Q. When this started you seemed like you were open to everything, different roles, and just something would happen that you could stay at Penn State in a capacity. Just wondering now with so much support, has that raised your hopes that if it doesn't work out you might have to reevaluate it?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, I'll reiterate I love Penn State. I would be open to any possibilities of staying here. You know, obviously I would like to be the head coach here, but this week I'm worried about Rutgers. My goal is to finish this season off with three victories in a row, get us bowl eligible, and then get prepared for a bowl game after that.

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Q. Happy Thanksgiving to you. Thanks for wishing us as well.

TERRY M. SMITH: Thank you.

Q. Following up on that, you said a bunch of times that you would like to be the head coach here. Why do you think you're the best candidate to be Penn State's next head coach?

TERRY M. SMITH: I think no one knows Penn State better than me of all the candidates out there. I know the history of Penn State. I know the culture, the DNA. I know the locker room. I know administration. I think I'm a good leader. I think I'm a leader of men. You know, that will take care of itself when the time comes.

My focus right now is obviously we have to beat Rutgers. We approach these last couple weeks as do or die, playoff type games, and this is another playoff game for us in our own reality of our world.

Q. Happy Thanksgiving.

TERRY M. SMITH: Thank you. Happy Thanksgiving to you.

Q. I know your focus is on Rutgers, but I'm going to ask you about Michael Robinson. I don't know if you're aware of it, but on national TV he came out and said he supports you as Penn State's next permanent head coach. You're a former captain. He was a captain on that nasty 2005 team that had a really, really good true freshman corner. I'm not going to mention his name. What does that mean to you?

TERRY M. SMITH: It means everything. Obviously the support that the lettermen are giving me, especially Michael Robinson doing that, obviously it means we're doing something right.

Just trying to create a culture for our team to play hard, play tough, and for our fans to get behind us and support us and stay in our corner. They've done that, and hopefully our fans show up this week at Rutgers. That's sometimes tough because of the holiday weekend, but come on out and support us.

Q. Thanksgiving blessings to you and your family this week, Terry.

TERRY M. SMITH: Thanks, Frank.

Q. Sixth win on Saturday. Can you talk about the

importance to you in this moment for that to happen? Describe that. And if it does, do you have a sense for whether your seniors and leaders on this team will play in a bowl game no matter what it is?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, you know, like I mentioned earlier, this is like a playoff game. We're playing to get that extra game. Our guys are excited to finish the year out. So far preparation has gone great. The energy is still in the building. Yesterday was our reset day. Saturday night we enjoyed it, Sunday we come in rehash it, correct it, and Sunday night we reset so the past is the past. Now we move forward.

Rutgers is all that matters. It means everything to us in the building and we're trying to go out and get this victory.

In regards to our guys, I would anticipate that our guys are going to play. I'm sure there may be a one off or a two off here or there with some type of circumstance. We'll just work through that.

I have full anticipation our guys are going to play.

Q. Do you prefer pumpkin pie or sweet potato pie?

TERRY M. SMITH: Sweet potato pie.

Q. That's not my question. That's an inside joke from the Franklin administration. Offensive line on Saturday looked like next level to me. It was a tremendous performance. How do you explain that? A lot of moving parts in the offensive line. You got to have five of them. Are they healthier than they've been? More connected than they've been? How do you explain it?

TERRY M. SMITH: There is a point of emphasis that we're going to run the football. Period.

Q. You talked about bringing the prowler package back. Overall this defense, everyone was talking about how complicated it was. Why it is working now, outside of the prowler outside of words that normal humans like us can understand and maybe coaching geniuses, you know, not that kind of talk.

TERRY M. SMITH: It is working now. We have simplified some things. But it's like experience. The longer you do it, the better it's going to come to you.

So each week there is two hard, heavy practices in there. There is maybe four total practices a week. All that time on the field accumulates.



So over the course of time you're going to get better naturally. But I think we have simplified things and slowed it down and took away some of the third and fourth options to what can happen on the defense, and then just allowed our guys to just pin it back and go. I think Jim has done a really good job minimizing calls in the game plan, and I think it's allowed our guys it really accelerate and play better.

Q. When you first became the interim head coach we asked you about being the next head coach and you said you'd be grateful for it, but wasn't a lot of talk about it. Last week seemed like maybe you were more intentional about advocating for yourself for the position. What has changed in recent weeks that you're more intentional about advocating for yourself?

TERRY M. SMITH: If I don't speak for myself, who will?

Q. Let's try this again. So you did meet with James since he's no longer here and he's told us he connects with you pretty frequently. What's it meant like to have his support and what has he maybe told you about being the head guy at this place?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, I've spoken to James several times, maybe every other day or so, sometimes every day. Just picking his brain as to -- James is a very organized and structured. Just even something as simple as last week when we lost the staff members, how to reorganize. He's been a mentor to me that I can bounce some ideas off, and ultimately I go back and make all the final decisions now.

But he's been great. He's been there, and right after the game Saturday he wished me -- he wished me luck before and then congratulations after.

Q. Curious, we heard from Ethan a couple weeks ago I think on a Zoom. I brought up the fact that do you view this as more than just game by game? Are you auditioning to be the future of position here at Penn State? Curious what you think about his body of work so far? One more start in the regular season. How he's progressed. And you mentioned the word efficient. How important is that when people are looking for splashy at quarterback sometimes when you can just kind of reliable efficiency?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, Ethan has played really, really well. I thought he played outstanding on Saturday. When you talk about 11 for 12, you know, you say, well, 12 pass attempts isn't a lot. But when you look at how the game played out, we completely dominated the line of scrimmage and ran for over 200 yards with the running backs.

When we did throw the ball, it was down the field. It's 11 for 12 for I think 181 yards. Whatever that calculation is per play was bigger than it's been all year. Threw a touchdown. I thought he played outstanding. We had two calls where we threw the ball down the field and got pass interference. Those don't show up in the stats, but they're positive to the offense. We're giving our guys an opportunity to make play and good things happened for us.

So Ethan, he's really progressed. I think between this game and the prior game, Michigan State, I think he really slung-shot a little bit. I'm really looking forward to his week this week and really closing out the season on a high note.

Q. Just to follow up on that, I think six of those 12 completions went to different receivers. How have you been able to spread that throughout a receiving corps that seems like it's how it's supposed to look all season?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, I'm really happy with how the pass game the last two games has evolved. We seem to be able to throw the dig route, flood concept, which is the deep out. We've taken some shots down the field as well.

And just depending on those three calls right there that I just described, those are three different receivers that have opportunities to catch the ball.

And then obviously the play-action, like the touchdown on Saturday to the tight end, you know, we want to be efficient. We want to spread the ball out. The key is to be unpredictable. This past Saturday we were the most unpredictable we've been all season.

Q. Thanks for the time. We heard from Kaytron after Saturday's game that a few years ago you invited him over for Thanksgiving with your family. Curious what you remember from that and what you think it says about the family atmosphere that you've been able to foster?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, that Thanksgiving, you know, if you get to know Kaytron, he's a man of very few words. Up until that point, I would see him in the building and I'm like hey, what's up, Fat. He'd give you one of those (head nod) and he don't really speak, just keep it moving.

And then my nephew Tank was on the team and he's a fellow running back with him. Kaytron didn't have anywhere to go for Thanksgiving, so we all drove him back to Pittsburgh with our family and had Thanksgiving with him.



He saw me in a different light. Saw me with my family, my entire family. And it's really for our young people to be able to see us as role models differently than coach, see us with our kids, see us with our families. He saw me differently from that day forward. Kaytron and I became like that. (Crossed fingers.) We have a different relationship now. I believe in him. He's a fantastic kid. Fantastic player obviously.

But you learn people and it's about relationships and that's the beauty of being a coach. You get to build these amazing relationships with these young people.

Q. You mentioned James and then there is the departure of people like Kevin Threlkel. Who do you go to these days -- you always were the truth teller -- who do you go to to tell you the truth? Who is your inside circle as you're moving forward with these things?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, I have a circle of people inside and outside the building. I'm not going name them specifically, but I have a group of about four, five people that our relationship is built on trust and truth. Even when I talk with Greg and KP, I ask them for the truth, right?

So when I leave here, they're going give me an evaluation of what I said right and wrong. And I don't want them to sugarcoat it to me. That's the way I can fix it. Just like last week I made two mistakes. Didn't answer one question and then I misstated about my hometown.

So it's the only way we can get better, and it's the environment I foster as a leader that we're all going to be told the truth so we can get better, fix it, move on, and get something accomplished.

So I have people every day come tell me, hey, you got to do this. You did this wrong. I encourage that. Just like we are doing to the kids. This can't be a one-way street. I'll tell the kids as well, sometimes we got animated as coaches and sometimes you are yelling at a kid. Sometimes you say some things that are reckless.

We never intend to offend them, but if we do we, need that feedback. Coach, don't talk to me that way. Then I know how I can fix that. If I do it again, then I got a problem; and then we got fix me.

So it's just kind of how we correct each other, and at the end of the day our goal is to get better and be better. That's how we're held accountable.

Q. On Saturday Alex Tatsch and LaVar Arrington both burned their redshirts. What went into the

conversations with those players to make those decisions and why do you think -- feel like that's valuable for both of those guys at this stage of the season to do that?

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, when it comes to those two guys or any guy going to burn their redshirt, we have conversations with their family. We make sure that we're in communication with them. In LaVar's case we talked to Big LaVar and they're totally fine with it. We talked to Alex Tatsch and his family and his high school coach as well to make sure.

So everyone was on the same page that it was the right thing to do. And we had that open communication so we're good with it.

Q. You have been in this seat kind of building things as the season is going long in your image. You take over for James. I'm assuming a lot of this stuff isn't maybe the way you would have done it. So I'm just curious if you were to be the head coach next year, is this the offense you would want to run? What are your philosophies I guess as an offensive mind and as a defensive mind?

TERRY M. SMITH: Well, I'm the head coach right here right now, so this is my offense and this is my defense and special teams. I can't really answer that question. I'm grounded in the moment, and just trying to make sure that team is efficient in what we're doing right now.

I do like how we played Saturday with balance, almost equal passing yards with rushing yards; physical attacking defense just like you saw on Saturday. Those are the type of things you're looking for to be successful.

Q. Under James he had the policy in place that at the end of the year that if a guy announced he was going to enter the portal he was done, locker cleaned out, moved on. Kind of depending on what happens Saturday stuff could happen in a hurry with you guys. Will that be your policy moving forward and have you laid that out yet?

TERRY M. SMITH: We're in a little bit different situation. You know, our guys are -- we're in full support of our locker room. We're encouraging our guys to keep an open mind. We don't know what's next, so the most important thing is that we go play hard Saturday, put on film what you want anybody to know about you on Saturday. We'll cross that bridge when it comes.

The difference I think, too, this year is the transfer portal is later, so they can go in the portal now but you can't really



do anything. We'll just cross that bridge when it comes, but we don't have a policy in place right now.

Q. Last time we asked about Andrew Rappleyea in this setting on a Monday was in nonconference play and it was James talking about him knocking off some of that rust still. Doing the math, five straight games with 30 plus snaps; four straight starts; his first career touchdown. Talk about where he is coming along as a guy who missed pretty much all of his redshirt freshman season.

TERRY M. SMITH: Yeah, Rapp is a rare talent. Big strong, tough. You know, you guys ask the question about what's different about our offensive line. He's one of the difference makers, too.

You know, we run those 12 personnel sets with the two tight ends, sometimes three tight ends. He's a road grader. He's the definition of tough. He's not the guy you want to meet in the alley because he doesn't know the end of the fight, you know.

You see him out there, he's very animated. He's a big talker. But, man, he backs it up. So he gives us an identity. When I say Terry Smith tough, man, that guy is the first guy in the line.

Q. I think we asked you this a few weeks ago, but what have you learned from this process as an interim head coach, and specifically after these two wins? When we last asked you you hadn't gotten experience something like that. So what have you learned about yourself and about the job?

TERRY M. SMITH: I continue to learn patience. I continue to learn new things about this job. I keep getting new gifts, like people send random gifts to my house now.

You know, right now I'm the head coach of Penn State University. It's a big deal. It's crazy. This job is very busy. You know, when I was an assistant I always would make comments like, Imma carry my own bag off the bus. And then next thing I know I'm in that seat and I'm like, hey, I'm not going to my room, I'm going to an interview, so my bag has to disappear somewhere. There is reasons why things are happening that you just don't know.

So it's just a very, very busy role being the head coach. Someone is knocking on your door every five minutes for something that's going on in the program. We have, I don't know, 75, 80, 85 people working in the building. They all need something. You have to be the answer.

It's good. It's busy. I really enjoy it. You have to be very

organized to be successful in this role because a lot of things can go over your head.

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