

# CFP First Round: Penn State vs SMU

Saturday, December 21, 2024  
University Park, Pennsylvania, USA  
Beaver Stadium

## SMU Mustangs

### Coach Rhett Lashlee

#### Postgame Press Conference

Penn State 38, SMU 10

MODERATOR: Good afternoon, and welcome to the visiting team media room inside Beaver Stadium for today's postgame press conference with SMU Head Coach Rhett Lashlee. Members of the media, please raise your hand if you have a question and a microphone will be brought to you. Please state your name and outlet you represent, and wait to have the microphone in hand before starting your question. We will begin with an opening statement from Coach Lashlee and then open things up for questions.

RHETT LASHLEE: All right, well, disappointed, you know, disappointed specifically in the second quarter. We let the game get away from us and didn't give ourselves a chance to compete today the way that we know we can, you know. I thought we had a chance to start well early. We deferred, we got a quick stop. Offense started moving the football. We got to fourth and probably half a yard. We decided to be aggressive and had an opportunity to either run for the first down or throw for a touchdown, and either one would have been good if we would have executed it. Chose to throw it. We didn't make the throw and catch. We had a really good chance to go up 7-0 early and that would have been big for the momentum. We didn't.

Defense got another stop and then that's when we kind of started to hurt ourselves and beat ourselves with the pick six on our own end. The ball just sailed on him across the middle and then, still, 7-0 going into the second quarter. Had the ball, I believe, and just, again, second quarter got away from us with another pick six, another pick in the red zone after we got a stop on fourth and one and you just can't do that stuff, so.

Guys did what we asked them to in the second half when it was obviously not good being down the way we were, 28-0 at half. I think it was 10-10 in the second half. We competed well three out of four quarter, just can't have a



## PLAYOFF FIRST ROUND

quarter like that and sad we wasted a defensive performance, I think, that was good enough to win with, but we just didn't. So, disappointed for our team, we don't get to keep playing and that we didn't get to show maybe our best today, even though Penn State deserves a ton of credit. I mean, that's going to be a hard out for Boise and whoever else gets to play them. But wish we would have put our best foot forward a little bit better than we did today. I'll say this: It's a special group of seniors we're losing, a special team. It's going to be sad not getting to come to the building with them. We started this thing on, I think, July 23rd and here we are on December 21st. It's been a found journey with them, and they've raised the standard of SMU football in year one in the ACC this a big way, and so that bar's high now. We're excited to come back and go to work soon and chase that standard.

MODERATOR: Questions on the left.

**Q. Coach, over here. Joe Lester, Onward State. A couple of time-outs, a couple of false starts that the crowd had an impact in. Did you get what you expected out of the Penn State crowd today? A little bit more?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, we got what we expected. I don't think we burned time-outs because of the crowd per se but I thought 95% of the game we handled the crowd great. First half we didn't have any issues. It was that third quarter we got down on the endzone where the student section was and I think we had the ball inside the five two different times. We settled for a field goal on one. We missed a field goal on the other. You know, I think when you couple that with the drive in the first half, we had the ball probably inside the 10 or 15 twice, three time, excuse me, and had an interception, a field goal and a missed field goal. The crowd was definitely a factor there, and, you know, it showed. We can't -- if we just snap the ball and hand it off, we have some good things and we go backwards and now you get to second and third and goal from the 9, the 11, those are low percentage no matter who you're playing. I think that's when it affected us the most, was that third quarter going into the endzone where the student section was, and that's what college football's all about. We got to handle that better.



**Q. Rhett, Chris from The Athletic.**

RHETT LASHLEE: Hey, Chris.

**Q. Was there a point at all where you considered putting Preston in and what did you say to Kevin during the game?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yes, after Kevin threw the last touchdown, felt like that was a good way to finish -- as good a way to finish the day as we could, the way it went, and we talked to Preston. It was his option and, look, I get it. Just like at that point, we didn't want Kevin to go back in and get hurt. You know, we don't want him to go into the offseason hurt. Preston's about to have an opportunity to go play somewhere else and in fairness to him, it would be a shame to roll him out there for a drive or two that doesn't have an impact on the game and him get hurt, so it was a great conversation with he and us and we just decided to let Keldric go with it. Keldric's going to be part of this team next year. It was good to get him out there. So, yeah, it was all positive things as far as that goes, but it's just no reason to put him at risk for his future, either.

**Q. Hey, Rhett, Jeff Gold with Fox Dallas. Piggybacking on that with Kevin, obviously, a really benefit moment that he'll have to move past with this game. You had a huge embrace with him coming off the field. What did you say to him and how can he be better for this game?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, I just told him to hold his head up, you know, and that I'm proud of him. I mean, he's a stud. He's a winner. Everyone believes in him. He had two bad games out of 14. That's pretty good. We were fortunate to win one of them. We weren't fortunate to win one of them. That's what I hate. It is what it is. We didn't play well enough to say anything that isn't going to be written. You know, to say anything against what isn't going to be written, I mean, it's going to be written should we have been in or did we belong? And that's fine. They can -- everyone here, you're welcome to write it. You were here. We didn't play very good today and -- but this team's a quality team. We had a good team. We deserve to be here. We earned the right to be here. Disappointed we didn't play to the level that validates that, but, it's hard right now because that's a really crushed locker room. A lot of seniors who know they're not going to play anymore. This team's not together anymore. The further they get from this moment they'll realize what they did this year and what a special year it was. Only one team's going to hold up the trophy at the end. It's not going to be us, but what they did was special and that's basically what I was trying to make sure Kevin does is hold his head up because one game, four bad passes today doesn't define him. Just like four

touchdown passes necessarily don't either. I think everyone's seen what he's capable of and I think now, just like anyone else in life, he knows we go into the offseason, there's room to improve. If you're going to be a special player, you got to be able to do a lot of special things and value the ball and nobody cares about that more than him, and I have no doubt he'll be better for it next year.

**Q. Hey, Rhett. Seth Angle, statecollege.com. What kind of impact do you think weather made today? It seemed like the field was kind of hard. It was cold out, punters were kind of struggling.**

RHETT LASHLEE: I think none whatsoever. Both teams played in the same weather on the same field. Their punter missed a few punts early. Our punter missed a punt. We have a kicker who has a strong leg, had a short kick because he missed it, you know, both teams played in it. I don't think weather had anything to do with anything, yeah.

**Q. Coach, Jacob Richman, Loan Star Live. With Kevin's interceptions he threw in the first half, when you talked to him, did he say, was it a vision problem? Was it execution? Where does he think things went wrong?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, I can walk you through them all. The first one it was our second drive. We ran a play on the first down that really was blocked well. We just missed the hole -- we hit the hole -- that's the frustrating thing about football that nobody sees. It's probably a 20, 25 gain and that's if the safety tackles him but we missed it so it's second and 10, 11. So we were just running a little bit of a base concept with a little kind of angle option route with Brashard. We ran it several times this year and it's been good and they blitzed from the field. We slid and picked it up but we got beat by the nose inside and the nose got right in his lap and made him rush the throw. And so when he did, he had to throw it a little earlier as Brashard was coming out of his break and the ball was a little bit high and he just went right over him and right to the defender.

And, so, that's what people don't see about football is Kevin's going to take a lot of the beating for three interceptions. That was a -- it all works together, right? I maybe shouldn't have called that play. If we would have been a little solid in protection it's probably completion for a seven-yard gain to Brashard and here we are third and three. But it's not. It's a pick six, it's 7-0. So that's where he's going to have to learn to potentially get a little more depth, either eat that ball. Not let it sail on him when a guy's in his face. That's easy to say, hard to do. But it wasn't like it was a clean pocket and he just threw the ball up for grabs or something.

On the second one, that's one that probably he wants back the most. We scrambled, he fleshed. He had LJ, probably waited a little too long to throw it. When he did, he just short-armed it. He didn't get it over the backer and threw it right to him and then we did a poor job as a team getting him tackled.

And then the third one I think should go to me. We had a run play with a slant. We've repped it a lot. They did a nice job blitzing off the edge. I got to get him more opportunities to see all the various looks they can give. You'd like to just hand that ball off and you're probably going to get -- I mean, we had it blocked up decent, but he tries to pull it and throw it and the guy jumps up and made a great play. That's the one they made a great play on, but it cost us because we were in the red zone. So, that's what happened on all three of them.

**Q. Mike Craven, (indiscernible). For a long time this program was defined by the death penalty. What do you think this season has done to kind of redefine SMU football?**

RHETT LASHLEE: I hope it gives you guys something else to write about. And nothing disrespectful to anybody here, you should have been writing about it. We've been revived. That's over. That chapter is closed. We've moved on. It's a part of our past in history just like everybody's got parts of their past in history, but that's what I mean by this team raised the standard and the expectations for SMU football. They made our entire school prude. They made our entire city proud. We got Tim in here, I see him over here like we've got guys recognizing what they did. Look, if we played the way we did in the second quarter today and throw -- if you throw two pick sixes, a pick in the endzone, or, I'm sorry, in the red zone and do some of the things we did, we would have lost to every single team on our conference schedule probably. You know, we somehow miraculously won one doing that. We didn't do that stuff all year, so it's going to be unfortunate that it happened on this stage in this moment, so it has a different feel, but we've proven we belong. We've proven we can play with the big programs in America, and, you know, we've gotten back to the national stage and we've proven we have a long way to go if we want to get to a National Championship again, but hopefully this is a way to close that chapter on that part of our history and say, okay, SMU is back and back in the standard of we're on the national stage, we're playing with the power coverage schools. We're competing and winning with power coverage schools. Now we have to see can we sustain it? Now we have to see can we take out even further over time?

I think if you would have told anybody going into year one in the ACC that we would go undefeated in conference and play for a championship and be in the College Football Playoff, probably people wouldn't have believed you or said that's a heck of a year, so hopefully the more distance we get from this moment, that's what's remembered and we're disappointed we didn't finish today the way we wanted to, but we'll be back.

**Q. Billy Embody with On The pony Express. Two-parter for you. Can you talk about the seniors and that group a little bit and overall this season to have that type of a leadership group, just kind of your initial thoughts on what their legacy is for the season the last couple of years.**

RHETT LASHLEE: I don't know, I think it's going to be hard to define their legacy. I think their legacy has a lot to do with what I just answered with Mike's question is closing that chapter and starting to write new chapters here at SMU. I don't think I'm going to get emotional. I think I'm good. It's a special senior class. They've won 22 games in the last two years, they played in back-to-back conference championship games. They made the first ever College Football Playoffs. I think they're a special group and we're going to miss a lot of their ability, don't get me wrong, but we're going to miss a lot of their intangibles: Their leadership, the things they brought to the table. They have revived an entire fan base and program and school for what can be here at SMU. To me, that's their legacy, is they have put us back on this stage in a way that is respectable and where we can have high expectations for ourself and so, you know, and like I said before, in some areas, we didn't -- we had good players and we got some guys who just played their last game, they're going to get drafted in the NFL this year and some that aren't going to get drafted but are going to make teams and some that whether they played in NFL or they do for a short amount of time are going to go on and impact this world in a really positive way just because of who they are and what they learned.

So we have really good players, but make no mistake, this team won because they were a team. I've said that a lot. We had some really good -- we doesn't have an Abdul Carter, you know what I mean? But we played some guys like that throughout the course of the year, not today, but really good teams with really good players and beaten them because they've proven to me because the team model still works in this world of NIL, transfer, all those things, it's still the greatest team sport out there.

MODERATOR: Got time for about three more.

**Q. Coach, Mike with The Arbarker and the Sports Now**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**Network. You mentioned the debate that's raging on right now on whether you should have got in the playoff, etc., because of this showing. Do you have any response to that debate beyond what you already said and any concern based on this result, even Indiana's result that the committee may have different thoughts about putting in non-blue bloods to avoid blowout situations, things like that?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, I don't know. I don't. Not right now. Like I said, we earned the right to be in. It's unfortunate that, you know, a bad game is going to maybe make it feel like maybe that's not the case. I can't control the debate. I can't control what people are going to say. We got in. Today we got beat. We got beat soundly by a very good team. Next year's going to be a whole new year, you know. Yeah, maybe in the future if we're on the edge we may not get the nod because of how we performed today so it's our job to do what we should have done a week ago and one the championship and get a bye and be setting in Arizona right now. We didn't do that. So I don't know. There's a lot of things that need to be reformed. I don't know if I'm ready to weigh in on the committee. Like I said, they got a hard job. I do think the playoff is good for college football. Whether you have results like last night and this one a little bit at times or not, it's still good. You got more teams that get in. It's all the first year of doing it, so I don't have a whole lot more to say other than I wish we would have played better because I think our body of work shows we're a better team than how we performed today. Now, whether we would have won the game or not, I don't know, but if you take three of the four quarters, that game's 17-10 and that's with a pick six, you know what I mean? So unfortunately the second quarter exited, so.

**Q. Steve, SB Nation. Hi, Rhett. With the way your offense moved the ball and how well you played with leads all year, do you feel like this game has a completely different complexion or maybe confidence in your players if you convert that fourth and one and just see the 7-0 on the scoreboard?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Who knows what would have happened, but yeah. What's weird is we've been one of the best teams this year in the first quarter in America, one of the best fast-starting teams. In our last two games we didn't do that. Now, we were able to recover from the last one. Yeah, it's fourth and half a yard. If Kevin just keeps it and runs for six, it's a first down. I don't know what happens. Or, again, he didn't make a bad decision, because he can run for a first down or throw for a touch down you know, we just got to make the throw and catch and Matt was open and if we go up 7-0 there, I think you say how our defense played, who knows. This was a tough match-up the way they can rush the passer. You get

behind the way we did, you know, you have to be able to stay balanced. You have to be able to run it and throw it and not be in must-pass situations and when you get to that point where you're down 21-0 or more, it's really hard in this environment against that defense. So, yeah, it may have had a great bearing on the game, but guess what, we had the opportunity to do that and didn't do it so we have no one to blame but ourselves on that.

MODERATOR: Final two questions up front.

**Q. Rhett, Chris. Kind of piggybacking off that, when it's 21-0, even 28-0, a couple of plays you guys may be in the lead if it goes the other way. How frustrating was that in the moment?**

RHETT LASHLEE: I'm glad you said that because that's what's frustrating. People are going to see the scoreboard, that's it, 38-10, or they're going to see the halftime score and some of those things and say things like, well, they shouldn't have been in. They don't belong. But to your point, it was 14-0. We had two pick sixes and some other things we just talked about the fourth and one. We had our opportunities. We don't have anybody to blame but ourselves. We had our opportunities to make it the game it should have been, which to me was going to be a really good defensive struggle that someone in the low 20s won and we didn't do that. We didn't do that because offensively, not only did we turn the ball over, we turned the ball over and let them get on the scoreboard and I don't know what the final number is because I haven't been able to see the stats if they were 21 or 24 points off turnovers but that's a lot.

**Q. Yeah, Rhett. Tim Cowlshaw, Dallas Morning News. You mentioned you could have scored on the first drive, almost did on the pass. As the game went along, were you wondering where that execution, where that offense went or do you just give Penn State credit for keeping you to three points for almost the entire game.**

**Q. Yeah, we had that drive and then the next couple drives were the two pick sixes and that kind of shell shocks you a little bit, and so that put us behind it and we didn't really recover well in the first half. In the second half, we did. We went out and I think our first two drives we drove inside the five. Like I said, we didn't finish those drives, so, yeah, you give them credit. We needed to be able to play with tempo and play with balance. The few drives we did that, we moved the football. Statistically the game's not that lop-sided but those three and ones and the way those turnovers went, it had a huge impact on how the game ended up unfolding. Like I said, when we got behind**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**the way we did, it made it hard for us to play the way we needed to to hang in this kind of game and play good team football. It just did and credit to them for making those plays and like I said, we have no one to blame but us for allowing it to go down that way.**

MODERATOR: Coach Lashlee, thank you for your time.

RHETT LASHLEE: Thanks, everybody. Appreciate you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports....

