

# CFP First Round: Penn State vs SMU

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

## Penn State Nittany Lions James Franklin

### Postgame Press Conference

SMU - 10, Penn State - 38

JAMES FRANKLIN: Like always I want to thank you guys for covering Penn State football. We appreciate that, and we don't take it for granted. I don't just come in and say that each week. I mean it.

I want to thank the fans. It was phenomenal. The environment was phenomenal. The turnout was unbelievable. We have the second largest stadium in college football, fourth largest stadium in the world, and 99 percent of the stadium was filled up with our fans, and it made a huge difference.

A lot of the other games had some built-in advantages in terms of the distance between the two teams. So the fact that we filled that thing up with 106,000 fans, predominantly all of ours, is significant. I don't want that to come off the wrong way. I've got a ton of respect for SMU. I've got a ton of respect for Coach lash Lee. But it was impactful today, and it's really like that all the time. From the spring game with 75,000-plus all the way through this season, we get tremendous support, and we don't take that for granted.

So fans, alumni, lettermen, the community, phenomenal. Again, we don't take that for granted.

Just so I don't forget this at the end, our women's volleyball program and Katie, they're playing for the championship tomorrow. Wish them all the luck in the world. They've had an unbelievable season obviously, and that game that they played where they were down by two and came back three sets was just crazy.

I think that's one of the special things about being at Penn State, there's so many sports and so many coaches that are thriving. A big part that have is our leadership with Pat Kraft and Neeli Bendapudi, so we don't take that for granted whatsoever. But we'll be screaming and hollering,



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and watching and supporting Katie and our women's volleyball program.

Kind of summarizing the game, maybe the best performance on the defensive side of the ball that I've seen in a half. You talk about three interceptions, two for touchdowns, that's why you recruit linebackers that play running back. That was phenomenal. Took a little bit of time for our offense to get going, but obviously once we did, did some great things. Specifically, got the run game going, which was important for us.

12 wins in a season for the fourth time in school history, joining the 1973, 1986, and 1994 teams. 33 wins over the last three seasons, second time in program history. Last time that was done is 1971 to 1973. So a ton of cool stuff to be proud of.

You look at the stats that we focus on, the takeaway battle was big, three turnovers to one. Explosive play battle, we won that. Third down battle, we won that. We tied the sack battle. The penalty battle, we won. That's a whole nother conversation. Then the middle eight, we won the middle eight.

A ton of cool stuff. I can go on and on and on, but we got a team win led from our defense in the beginning of the game, but at the end of the game, it was a team win: Offense, defense, and special teams.

Look forward to answering your questions, and once again I appreciate the coverage you've given us all year.

**Q. What is it about Dom DeLuca, who seems to have a knack of stepping up at the appropriate time. Is that something that you saw in him when you recruited him?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Dom is just -- he's a baller. You talk about a guy who was Pennsylvania Player of the Year, won a state championship on a torn ACL, gray shirted to be able to come here, came as a walk-on, earned a scholarship.

What a shame that there may not be more stories like this in college football with the 105 rule. Dom DeLuca may not

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happen at Penn State. I love Dom and Mom and Dad. I think he's a tremendous example for all of our players on the team.

He's got a smile on his face. He's appreciative. He works his tail off, trusted us when we talked about the positions that we wanted to play him, and whatever role we've asked him to do, he's done it 100 miles an hour.

There's a ton of changes in college football, but this is one of these that I'm struggling with because there's been so many special stories over the years of walk-ons. Whether they've earned a scholarship or not, they've been just such a significant part of the game and our history. It breaks my heart a little bit that maybe Dom isn't here if these rules were in place.

Just a tremendous young man. He's a captain. He's awesome. He's awesome.

**Q. I also wanted to ask about Dom. I believe after he had surgery on his knee in high school, he called you very emotional. You told him he'd be back bigger, stronger, better than ever. What does it mean for you now to watch him have this kind of moment on this stage?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: It's awesome, right? We talk about the journey a lot in our program, and everybody's journey's different, everybody's race is different. You've got to run your race and maximize the opportunities that you get. I think he's a great example of that.

I think it's obviously also the medical team that we have here. This isn't the old days. You can come back from these things better than ever before. Wayne Sebastianelli does a great job for our student-athletes. I think Dom is a great example of that.

I love the guys in that locker room. I said it to them in there, and I'll say it again. One of the -- in my opinion, one of the few places left where it's a real college football program in there. It's a real college football program in there and a college football program that everybody should be proud of because those guys are doing it the right way. And at a time where it's more challenging than it's ever been.

These guys put the team first, they put their teammates first, they sacrifice. A lot of distractions right now, and these guys could have played for Penn State in the '90s, the '80s, the '70s, and the '60s. No disrespect to the '50s, but they could have played there too. Just I'm proud to be their head football coach.

**Q. On your first defensive series, there seemed to be some miscommunication and some emotions running pretty high. What flipped that you guys were able to kind of rebound from that and then just play so dominantly the rest of the way?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, they're good. They're very, very good on offense. I don't know if he is or not, but that quarterback, I think he's related to Lamar Jackson, like that's how he plays, that's how we felt about him on film. He is a dynamic, scary athlete.

Combine that with the tempo that they were going. They were going extremely fast. One of the things that I think happens sometimes that I don't think necessarily people understand is different conferences, how quickly they spot the ball, the tempo of the game, it's different. That's why when you get to these bowl games and things like that, they can be very, very different in how the game is managed. I don't mean that as a knock on anybody. I'm just telling you it was fast today.

The combination of them and how they run their offense and what they do, did a great job, and we need to get settled down. We didn't face that a whole lot this year. We tried to simulate in practice by going good-on-good, but it's one thing to go six plays doing it. It's another thing to do it against that type of team who does it for a living, and obviously their head coach does a phenomenal job with it, and that's his reputation.

We just had to get the guys settled down, get their cleats in the ground, get the calls in, execute the calls. Then once we did that -- I thought although we didn't get him on the ground as many times as I think we could have, we impacted him dramatically.

I thought like even the one that Smith Vilbert had where he didn't make the sack, but he kept contained. He did not allow the guy to get outside, kept him in the pocket. He just kept running around, running around. Those things were huge. Our pass rush lanes were disciplined and productive today, and we needed that against one of the more dynamic quarterbacks in the country.

**Q. You just mentioned the other generations of Penn State players that have come before.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: And the Generations of Greatness Uniform.

**Q. When it comes to making history at a place like Penn State, it's so difficult. You just got your 100th win. I think, when you think about the magnitude of this moment for pushing this program forward -- can**

**you comment on how big getting your first win in the College Football Playoff is for this program, where you guys are in the recruiting battles, college football in general, the emotion of something like this. This team clearly makes you emotional.**

JAMES FRANKLIN: I can remember in training camp just talking to the guys that I wanted these type of moments for them. I want them to experience what it's like to win a Big Ten Championship and play in that type of game and in that stadium and in that environment.

Obviously talk about -- battling like everybody in the country to try to either get a bye in week 1 or a home game, we were able to do that. To watch Sal leaving the field today like he was taking the moment in. It was his last game at Beaver Stadium. He's played here for 9, 10, 11 years, however long he's been here, and he didn't want to leave the field. Not an emotional guy, he's emotional. It's emotional for all of us.

A lot of college coaches I saw this week talking about, this is a four-game season. It's not. It's a one-game season with an average of 65 plays on offense, 65 plays on defense, and 20 plays on special teams, and how you value those reps and how you prepare for those reps would give you an opportunity to play again. We're in a one-game season, and we just extended our season one more game, 65 more plays.

I think we've got ten days or whatever it may be, and every one of them is like gold. Not only that, I also want them to get some time with their families for Christmas. You're trying to balance all of those things. These guys are going through it for like -- the freshmen for the first time, but even for the vets. Depending on what bowl game we played in, depending on the time of the year, another New Year's Six game, we played in a bunch of them.

Dramatic pause just so everybody can take that in. We played in a bunch of them. My family, we're used to spending Christmas in hotels. Not everybody is.

We've got to do whatever we've got to do to put ourselves in the best position to win this game, but I also want to be respectful and thoughtful of these guys' families and the holidays as well, and we've got a good plan for that.

I appreciate you bringing up the 100 wins and all that kind of stuff, but to me, I'm at a point in my career it's all about the players. It's all about the players, the staff. It's cool Terry Smith has been there for every single one of them. Chuck Losey, every single one of them. So cool.

**Q. Fourth and one from your 19 --**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Kevin Threlkel, Andy Frank, every single one of them. Shocker, this guy (indicating). Is anybody shocked by this?

**Q. What effect do you think that had that you were able to defend that afterwards?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: We fumbled the snap. That's why we didn't pick that up. But that was huge, right? I told the guys we were going to call the game aggressively on offense, defense, and special teams. I wanted them to play aggressively. I wanted Tom Allen and Andy Kotelnicki and Justin Lustig to call the game aggressively. Don't play on your heels, play on your toes.

So we get fourth and one, I can't say that all week long and then not do it. When you pick it up, it's a great call. When you don't pick it up, it's a bad call. I bet you were tweeting your tail off up there.

But the guys had the decisions back, and we were able to get it done. Obviously huge plays in the game. We've got to be able to pick up fourth and one, and I'd call it again. I'd call it again.

**Q. Kaytron and Nick both over six yards a carry again. Do you feel collectively combined they are playing their most effective football of the 2024 season? If that's the case or even just about the case, what does that do for you that they're peaking at this point entering the playoffs?**

JAMES FRANKLIN: Took us a little time to get going on offense, specifically in the run game, but then we got it going. Those two guys are fast, they're big, they're both 220-pound backs, and they're violent.

That one run where Nick scored a touchdown, I don't know if you guys heard it, but it was violent. And he came off, and I said, that was a violent run, and he screamed at me and used some words that I can't use in this setting, and he said, I'm a violent -- man.

(Laughter).

I kind of agreed with him and then backed up. But they're playing behind an offensive line that takes a ton of pride in doing their jobs for them. So it's cool. I love to see all these guys get opportunities to make plays and to win and to have success because they work so hard.

You guys know, this is a grind. We have turned college football into a grind. Used to talk about the difference between college and the NFL, it's essentially the same



now. It's a grind on the coaches. It's a grind on the players. It's a grind on the staff. It's a grind on the wives and the kids.

So to see them have success is to me what it's all about.

