

2022 College Football Preview – Penn State Nittany Lions



The Penn State Nittany Lions have not had the greatest of seasons these last two years, with a five-game losing streak to start the COVID shortened 2020 season and then a collapse from 4th in the nation to unranked a season ago. James Franklin's squad had all the possibilities of a dream season with wins at No. 12 Wisconsin, versus No. 22 Auburn, against reigning MAC Champion Ball State, and 2020 Big Ten darling Indiana, but from there it was all downhill, with a tough to watch loss at Iowa in a match-up of 3 versus 4, a 9 OT dredging defeat at the hands of Illinois, and then an Ohio State loss that always felt like one play away from victory. Poor play plagued the Nittany Lions with losses against Michigan, Michigan State, and Arkansas, which

made the highs of the season seem so distant. But so, they return, with new hopes under nine-year coach James Franklin, who just inked a new ten-deal to outlast both the outgoing President and the outgoing Athletic Director that brought him in from Vanderbilt, and long-time quarterback Sean Clifford, who hopes his fourth year at the helm will be his best. The first true dark offseason for Franklin in his tenure did lead to a few key transfers, with likely offensive line starter Des Holmes heading to Arizona State and potential defensive line start Joseph Appiah Darkwa on his way to Temple... though perhaps the biggest loss was in running back Noah Cain, who took his talents to LSU in hopes that his injury and running woes will be left behind in Happy Valley. Meanwhile, fan hopes were high with a tremendous recruiting class, 6th in the nation and 2nd in the Big Ten, with potential future start due Drew Allar and Nick Singleton leading the pack. While most of these recruits will take time to get into the system, many hope that the answers to the big National Championship question will be among them. Maybe the best welcome addition will be on the sidelines, as former Miami Head Coach Manny Diaz takes up the defense, with star players in Joey Porter Jr, Kalen King, Ji'Airy Brown, Nick Tarburton, and PJ Mustipher ready to lead. Still, the Nittany Lions hopes may rest on the shoulders of the offensive line, which has been the bane of the Nittany Lions' existence the last forever years. With constant liability Rasheed Walker gone, younger guys like Olu Fashanu and Landon Tengwall will look to strengthen the line alongside veterans Juice Scruggs and Caedan Wallace. In a Big Ten that keeps getting bigger, stronger, and faster, will Penn State's highest players be enough to take James Franklin to the promise land? Or will it be more of the same – close but no cigar – for the Central PA faithful.

KEY RETURNING STARTERS

QB | Sean Clifford

Penn State's hope rides with the arm of fourth year starter (and sixth year player) Sean Clifford, as he hopes this year is his charm. In his last three years, Clifford has been about the same type of quarterback each year, above average but not elite. His accuracy hasn't gone up, his yards per game has been just above 200, and his yards per play has been a bit less each year. But this is his first real offseason since becoming the full-time starter, with the last two being marred by COVID. Development as a true passer will be key for him to lead the Nittany Lions to success. He needs to get his long ball back into his repertoire, get his accuracy up over 65%, and learn to trust his guys in the middle of the field. Clifford excelled best when being able to hit his tight ends in the middle of the field. If he can distribute the ball more evenly, spreading out to receivers Washington, Meiga, and Lambert-Smith, and to tight end Strange, he has the ability to succeed – but that success will come only if the Nittany Lions can find a way to take pressure off of Clifford with the running game. That's up to what Mike Yurchich decides to chalk up.

WR | Parker Washington

Perhaps a darkhorse for the Biletnikoff, receiver Parker Washington has a lot of upside and is projected by many to be a First Round Pick in the 2023 NFL Draft. But to get to that stature, he will need to live up and to beat the standard he set last year. In his first year with the program, Washington became a the midrange target and the one to take care of business when the pressure needed off of Dotson. He quickly grew into a reliable threat in the midrange game and will only excel more as he commands the slot role. What he lacks in height he has in build, as he easily brushes off defenders, whether tasked with a corner, safety, or even double coverage. And that was all in just his second year. The sky is the limit for the next great receiver to hit Happy Valley.

WR | KeAndre Lambert-Smith

Don't forget about the perennial deep-ball threat, who will be a major weapon downfield for Clifford. Lambert-Smith might not have the athleticism of Washington, but his downfield speed puts him past the defense on almost every play. Give him some deep crosses and he is going to be gone for six.

CB | Joey Porter, Jr.

For many analysts, the star corner is the top player on this team, a project Top 5 Pick in next year's draft, Joey Porter, Jr. has a lot of accolades to live up to. His year's at Penn State have shown his great development, taking on the starting role in 2020 and developing into a leader on the secondary in 2021. Often avoided by other teams, the shutdown corner faced his biggest adversity late in the 2021 season, when deep routes would catch him looking or catch him beat, often putting him in a must-interfere situation or risk giving up the touchdown. Unfortunately for the Nittany Lions, those situations often lead to touchdowns. But a year older, stronger, and wiser shall do him good. His talent on the field is second to very few in college football, and a lot to be excited about entering the 2022 season with a true standout corner like Joey Porter, Jr. If his decision making downfield – especially on deep balls – can improve, and his hands catch up to his reaction time (get those picks!), he will really step up. He is arguably the best corner in the nation inside 15 yards – add in deep ball decisions and hands – watch out!

DT | PJ Mustipher

Shutting down a quarterback early is the name of the game now in college defenses, and having a strong DT like Mustipher holding down the center will be imperative to Penn State's success. Coming off a season-ending injury last year, Mustipher looks to make his fifth season his best, as an impact player and likely second-time team captain. His ability to get in the background and stuff the run while also being able to hurry the QB proved key in wins over the last two seasons, including in the 2021 Auburn game. In a year where the Nittany Lion's defensive line is far younger than normal, Mustipher will be the one looked to as the leader in the trenches, and hopefully the backfield too.

LB | Curtis Jacobs

LBU is about to enter a year without a solid name on the squad, but Jacobs comes in from a year where he just got better each and ever week. His strength is in his vision, being able to read the quarterback and be the reliable tackler in the middle of the field, something PSU missed out on in years past. He was all over the field and should be a defensive leader in 2022.

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UPCOMING/NEW PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB | Christian Veilleux

While most don't expect the second year quarterback from that country up north to take the helm, Veilleux has been one of the big movers and shakers in spring ball, getting high remarks from his teammates (including from Sean Clifford) about his leadership ability on and off the field and his command of the huddle. Anyone who watched Veilleux on the sidelines last season (maybe just me) saw him always as an active participant, with his helmet in hand on every play and his ears at the center of the group huddle during timeouts. His commitment to this team and his progress was prominently shown when the Ontario wonder started his first game against Rutgers, showing off his arm strength and decision making enroute to three touchdowns through the air. Now as he enters year two, Veilleux looks to take a huge leap forward, especially with five-star freshman Drew Allar entering the program. Every word from the practice grounds is that Veilleux has gotten better and better each day, truly understanding the Yurcich offense, learning from his mistakes, and becoming the workhorse on the offensive side. He is the type of quarterback that fits really well into the offensive style that Yurcich likes to run, and one that should be able to keep up with the needs of a high pace and score at-will style offenses needed to get past Ohio State and the other elite programs in the country. Perhaps the biggest upside is his ability to command the respect of other players, even with his youth; this was on display against Rutgers, where the offensive line seemed to step up for Veilleux and offer him some of the best protection shown all year. How will he be in year two? And can he take over this squad and turn Happy Valley into Veilleux Valley? We shall see.

LT | Olu Fashanu

The left tackle position has been a huge liability for Penn State the last many years, with Rasheed Walker leaving the left side of the offensive line vulnerable nearly every play. Now Fashanu takes over, and we had a taste of his ability last season in his three games, which saw Penn State get some of its best rushing numbers of the season. Although only seen in limited action, his physical presence on the field let him to be a major force on the offensive line, not allowing a single pressure or sack during his time on the line. Look for him to be the young anchor, and the player that should help open up more holes for the running game and finally give Clifford the time he needs to make smart throws.

WR | Mitchell Tinsley

Truly a new player here, transferring in from Western Kentucky, Tinsley was a key wide receiver for the Hilltoppers, helping WKU quarterback Bailey Zappe set the all-time passing touchdown record. His 1,402 yards and 14 touchdowns on 87 catches was one of the top ten best receiving lines in the nation, with him being a weekly 100 yard receiver. Now, he enters a system that hopes to mimic the Air Raid style that WKU employed. Every time Tinsley touched the ball last season, he had big play potential, where he combined his speed and big body build to bust through the secondary and break tackles. With Dotson leaving this receiving core, Tinsley looks to keep the norm and ensure this receiving core continues to be a strength for the team. Word from the team is that the goals for Tinsley are to add more muscle and work on his jump, to help add to the intangibles that he owns. While the step up from C-USA defenses to Big Ten defenses will be massive, all signs point to him becoming a potential stand out receiver for the Nittany Lions and may help Clifford take a step up.

DE | Demeioun Robinson

For anyone following the transfer market lately, this key add by the Nittany Lions is no surprise. A highly sought after player during recruiting, with offers from Alabama, Clemson, and Florida, Robinson spent his first year of college at Maryland, becoming a tackling threat in limited action. Penn State loses their main edge rushers in Arnold Ebiketie and Jesse Luketa this year, but gains a top ten transfer with Robinson. While his current level of ability is yet to be seen in major action, he is believed to be a key edge rusher and a huge threat in the backfield. We shall see how he develops in Manny Diaz's offense.

DE | Dani Dennis-Sutton

The defensive line continues to be bolstered by young talent, including this true freshman edge rusher who very well could be a future Top Five Draft Pick. Dennis-Sutton was a highly desired recruit this past year, with both Alabama and Georgia sending a lot of muscle to try and get him. But instead the Nittany Lions won the challenge to get one of their highest rated recruits in history. While it is a lofty expectation to think he will be starting week one, this young summer enrollee has all of the intangibles to be a star right off the bat. Coming in at 6'5" and 250 lbs, Dennis-Sutton carries himself as a reliable edge threat, with abilities to jump off the snap and push pass the offensive line like many of his older peers. His speed and ability to beat down double teams is impressive while his pursuit will ensure he is a constant presence in the backfield and on the sidelines. He shares a lot of similarities 2021 standout Ebiketie, but with a lot more size. His name will be heard around the country and is certain to be an instant impact in the defense. Look for Diaz to put him in key spots out of the gate before working him into a starting role by October.

DT | Jordan van den Berg

The man from Joburg has been an absolute terror in the weight room, building up strength and muscle to contend in the middle of the defensive line. Already expected to be a possible role player in the defensive line this year, the former JUCO lineman and rugby player is a game wrecker when he is on the field. What he lacks in speed he gains in strength, being a strong separator of the offensive line and a force to get in the backfield to make tackles. He proved effective in his JUCO year, with twenty tackles and a sack in a shortened season. He saw some playing time last year for the Nittany Lions, recording a strip sack against Maryland and a five tackle day in limited action against Arkansas. Coaches have loved his development and have seen him take huge steps forward this offseason. With a lack of experience behind Mustipher on the defensive interior, expect van den Berg to get plenty of playing time throughout the season.

DC | Manny Diaz

While not a player, the hiring of Manny Diaz is one to watch. This is one of James Franklin's first splash hires since the hiring of Joe Moorhead. Franklin has tried to shy away from former head coaches on his squad, opting for younger position coaches to help build up his student-athletes. But, with the defensive coordinator spot vacated with the departure of Brent Pry for Virginia Tech, a call to the former Miami man was a must. When Diaz was the DC for the Hurricanes, he brought a sense of madness and development to the defense, especially in the linebacking core, where he showed major development from young linebackers in leading a top ranked defense. Look for him to employ a quick and attacking defensive style and to younger players developed much faster than what we saw under Pry.

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SCHEDULE PREVIEW

Sept 1 | @ Purdue

Penn State once again opens up the season on FOX with a road test, this time with Big Ten West hopeful Purdue. The Nittany Lions enter this game on a nine game win streak over the Boilermakers, including with blowout wins in the last four. But Purdue and Jeff Brohm bring back lots of talent, including one of the better returning QBs in the Big Ten with Aidan O'Connell. His return, plus the strength of Biletnikoff darkhorse Milton Wright give Purdue a fighting chance. However, the veteran Nittany Lions offense gets to face a pretty young Purdue defense, which doesn't bode well for the Boilermakers. *PSU Wins 27-14*

Sept 10 | vs Ohio

Although the Bobcats own the most recent win in the series, Penn State still has a 5-1 record against Ohio. The crew from Athens comes in after a disappointing 3-9 season in Tim Albin's first season as the leader. Their biggest liability was their defense, which was eaten apart by the MAC offenses it face. Should be no challenge for the Nittany Lions. *PSU Wins 51-28*

Sept 17 | @ Auburn

Year two under Bryan Harsin did not start well, with many calling for his head after a not so stellar first year. But he is back on the Plains and ready to get started. With Bo Nix transferring out, Harsin will need to find someone new to command his offense, likely with TJ Finley or former Texas A&M QB Zach Calzada in charge. Tank Bigsby returns – an elite running back that nearly put the Tigers up over the Nittany Lions in their game in Happy Valley last September. Losses on the defensive front and starting a nearly whole new secondary will be major factors in how much success Auburn is able to find in 2022. While experience may be on Penn State's side, this will be a very different matchup from when these two squads last played. *PSU Wins 27-20*

Sept 24 | vs Central Michigan

The Chippewas bring in a sneaky good matchup for the Nittany Lions, with a QB-RB pair of Daniel Richardson and Lew Nichols III. The pair had a 8-2 record together last year, including a win in the Sun Bowl. Central Michigan has a strong running attack with a precision passing game to keep a team on their toes. Expect a close game early, as the young Penn State defense tries to stop the rush. Not a cakewalk. *PSU Wins 17-13*

Oct 1 | vs Northwestern

There were lots of hopes riding on Pat Fitzgerald's crew last year, but Northwestern couldn't live up the expectations. Unfortunately for them, that will likely not change, as major transfer losses of Brandon Joseph and Jordan Mosely stunt any forward momentum they had in turning the team around. A good matchup on paper for the Nittany Lions. *PSU Wins 31-0*

Oct 15 | @ Michigan

Stop if you heard this one before – Penn State brings a 5-0 record and a Top 10 ranking into a road game with another Top 10 opponent. Both these team schools will likely be undefeated heading into this matchup, and lucky for the Nittany Lions they have a bye week before it. The Wolverines will have plenty of change on the defensive side, but will retain much on the offensive side, including one of the oldest offensive lines in the Big Ten. Cade McNamara and star running back Blake Corum will look to lead Michigan back to the Big Ten Title Game. Coaching changes and the loss of major players will pull a wrench into the Wolverines' momentum; Josh Gattis departs leaving a dual-OC system that may or may not work, while another friend of the Harbaugh family, Jesse Minter, steps in as the new DC. Watch for Mike Morris – a defensive end whose name will be heard a lot in 2022 and will be a one-man QB wrecking crew. *Mich Wins 37-34*

Oct 22 | vs Minnesota

Kirk Ciarrocca gets a return to the Golden Gophers, and a return to Happy Valley in 2022, where he gets back together with PJ Fleck to make some magic. This is a veteran team (twenty juniors or above starters), led by the ageless Tanner Morgan, star running back Mohamed Ibrahim, and future first round pick Chris Autman-Bell, Ciarrocca is ready to get the fireworks started. This is perhaps the toughest game on the schedule for Penn State, with a huge mismatch of talent and going against an offense that knows how Penn State ticks. This will require the best gameplan of their lives. *Minn Wins 23-21*

Oct 29 | vs Ohio State

Coming into the matchup with the Buckeyes off two straight losses won't bode well for the Nittany Lions. While Ohio State will look to develop their talented yet inconsistent defensive in 2022, it will be a major turning point for CJ Stroud, who will look to prove that the past year was no fluke. The revenge tour is on for Ohio State, and that will require a stop at Beaver Stadium in likely White Out conditions. The White Out Game has been the slayer of many in recent years, but hasn't always worked on the Buckeyes. Ohio State must replace Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson, but see talented Jaxon Smith-Njigba and Marvin Harrison Jr. to fit right into the mold. If there is any weakness, its on its young offensive line and lack of defensive depth. The young team gives Penn State a chance to sneak a win. *PSU Wins 24-20*

Nov 5 | @ Indiana

A new look Hoosiers squad will hope to answer the mess of questions left last season. QB Connor Bazalak transfers in from Missou to take over the team, although with not much talent on the offensive side. The defense will be their strength, but the mostly senior led side of the ball can only take them so far in the games. *PSU Wins 23-6*

Nov 12 | vs Maryland

Lots of potential options on where the Terrapins could end up in 2022. Taulia Tagovailoa continues to be near the top of the charts of Big Ten QBs and the senior leads a strong veteran crew on the offensive side. Look for WRs Jarrett and Jones to have huge years. While there are losses on the defensive side to transfers and the draft, the mostly veteran crew should be solid. Expect a good back-and-forth battle between these two teams here. *PSU Wins 23-22*

Nov 19 | @ Rutgers

Greg Schiano has a lot of things going right in Piscataway for the Scarlet Knights, who expect to take a small step forward in 2022. While it is still Noah Vedral's team, future starter Gavin Wimsatt looks to finally make the leap to leading the team – don't be surprised if he has the start come November. Meanwhile, the secondary will be a big strength with impact players Igbinosun and Loyal taking a step up in year two. A mostly freshman defensive line with stunt some of the success the Scarlet Knights will be able to have, but keep an eye on DE Mohamed Toure who will be taking on an expanded role and will play a factor in their pressure defense. *PSU Wins 30-17*

Nov 26 | vs Michigan State

Once again, it all comes down to the Battle for the Land Grant Trophy. Luckily for the Nittany Lions, there is not Kenneth Walker III on the other side, but a strong senior class for Mel Tucker's squad keeps the Spartans as a major threat. Ole Miss transfer Aaron Brule looks to be a game changing LB while Xavier Henderson continues to cement himself as one of the top safeties in college. A low scoring affair here with these defenses putting their abilities on full display. *MSU Wins 14-10*

Projected Record: 9-3

Projected Ranking: #12

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SEASON OUTLOOK

Once again, it seems like it will be a good, not great, season for Penn State, with a huge start to the year before a sizzle out that just seems to disappoint. While the offense under Yurcich should be a scoring machine, Sean Clifford has yet to show that he can lead a high powered offense, with his best games still stuck in the beginning of the 2018 season. Perhaps year two in this scheme will unlock untapped potential, but expectations continue to sit flat until proven otherwise. In a college football landscape where scoring in bunches and quickly means so much, Penn State needs to find a way to do it, and quickly. Clifford has been able to get away with not having the scoring prowess of his predecessor by having a defense that could keep the Nittany Lions close, but 2022 looks to bring one of the youngest defenses of Franklin's tenure. Without that defense to bail them out, Penn State will need to focus on ramping up scoring and finishing drives – something that wasn't easy in 2021. One of the keys there will be getting the running game going, through veteran Keyvone Lee and freshman recruit Nick Singleton; a lot of work this offseason has been at getting the running game going – if Yurcich can find a way to pick up yards on the ground – similar to the Barkley and Sanders days – then that gives Clifford a chance to finish out drives. But if Penn State is to rely on just Clifford's arm to bring them to paydirt, this will be a long and low scoring season for the Blue & White faithful. This is also going to be a critical year for the Nittany Lions to get their younger receivers going – with both Washington and Tinsley out after this year, Lambert-Smith will likely be left with a crew with minimal meaningful snaps. Malick Meiga looks to be the next-man-up, having impressed in limited time last year against Rutgers with Veilleux under center. Penn State has been a receiver factory since Franklin took over and will look to continue that trend in the future. Franklin and Yurcich will need to balance both the success of this coming season and the development for future seasons to be successful – the lack of depth in key offensive positions may serve a lot of bite and limit some of the onfield success. Of course the most important cog in getting the running game going and improving the ability to finish drives will be in the offensive line, which looks to be greatly improved. Led by Juice Scruggs and Sal Wormley, the relatively inexperienced line brings with it a lot more size and physicality than what was seen in years passed. Word

from practices is that this group – Scruggs, Wormley, Wallace, Tengwall, and Fashanu – have strong relationships together and should help pick each other up in key moments. For years, the o-line had been the glaring weakness for the Nittany Lions, and while depth will be an issue for them all year, the strength of this new crew is one to keep an eye on. As for the defense, losing seven starters – especially key ones in Castro-Fields, Brisker, Luketa, Brooks, and Ebiketie – will be hard to overcome. Veterans PJ Mustipher, Curtis Jacobs, Charlie Katshir, and Jonathan Sutherland will be called on a lot keep the front seven going, while Joey Porter Jr and Ji'Ayir Brown will be the key leaders in the secondary. The linebacking core will continue to have a lot of different looks all year, with Curtis Jacobs the only guaranteed starter, and a rotation of Katshir, Elsdon, Sutherland, King, and Robinson to be expected. So much of this defense is built on Franklin recruits that he loved coming into college, but ones that just haven't had the opportunities to shine. Perhaps this is finally going to be their time. And let's not forget one of the biggest losses for this team – kicker Jordan Stout. While field goals have not been Penn State's strongest area the last couple seasons, Stout was one of the nation's best kickoff artists and punters, ensuring Penn State could always swap field position when needed. The veteran Jake Pinegar is the likely stand-in for Stout, but remember Stout replaced Pinegar just a year back on field goals, so don't be surprised if some of the younger kickers – Sahaydak or Groh – step in to the role. Meanwhile punting could be in Pinegar's wheelhouse, or perhaps Franklin will opt for redshirt senior transfer from Colgate Barney Amor, who has quite a leg, or redshirt freshman Gabriel Nwosu, who is expected to be quite a punting freak himself (and played with Veilleux in high school). With a lot of these key decisions still up in the air, it is very difficult to predict Penn State's trajectory in 2022. The sky could be the limit, if they are able to figure out their offensive woes, or a pretty average season could be on the way if the mixed level of experiences gets calling. For the first time in quite some time, Penn State is at a major crossroads with not a lot of answers for the many questions that it has. With holes across the board and minimal younger players having seen meaningful snaps a year prior, there are still lots of unknowns regarding some of the future starters. And that doesn't necessarily bode well for the Nittany Lions and their

seemingly difficult schedule that doesn't give them much of a breather. While they have a great chance to start the season 5-0, games at Purdue, at Auburn, and versus Central Michigan are far from cakewalks. And with a gauntlet of an October (Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio State), Penn State will need all the momentum they can muster to get into November with minimal damage. At least they don't have Iowa on the schedule. Their strongest contenders on the Big Ten East side are the usual company – Ohio State, Michigan, and Michigan State, with Mel Tucker's crew perhaps the toughest of the trio. While the Buckeyes have their questions to answer on defense and Michigan has a changing of the guard seemingly everywhere, Michigan State retains a lot of talent and spend last season developing a lot of their depth – the Spartans stand to be the toughest opponent for the Nittany Lions. The final piece of the puzzle will be the head coach himself, James Franklin. After inking a ten year extension to keep him in Happy Valley for a long while, he is also facing a lot of questions on how high he can take this team. After years and years of great recruiting classes, amazing moments, and flat second halves to seasons, Franklin now needs to show that he can navigate through rough waters. As recruiting gets more difficult and the transfer portal becomes a bigger key for schools to develop through, Franklin cannot be left behind by other Big Ten coaches. Franklin has been known to be extra loyal to his long-time starters – can he navigate a potential quarterback battle if Sean Clifford cannot live up to the improvement so many hope he makes? And off the field, Franklin has now needed to make two key coaching switches in two years, with Yurcich entering in last year and now Manny Diaz this year. Franklin was with long time friends and coaches Ricky Rahne and Brent Pry for so long – how will losing these long term relationships change the way Franklin coaches throughout a game? The Head Coach has been known to push his opinions on offenses time and time again – especially with Rahne and Ciarrocca. He showed a bit less of that with Yurcich in year one, but was more than willing to slow down a successful offense and kill much of the offensive momentum. James Franklin learning from his past errors is as much a place that needs fixing as any other part of this team. Can 2022 finally be the year Penn State breaks through to the ranks of the elite? Or will they continue to stay level and be really good?