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ON FREE SPEECH AT PENN STATE

VERSUS

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RECORD

CHASING

Penn State seeks its fifth consecutive national championship for the first time in program history.

More inside.

NCAA wrestling youth movement

Cael Sanderson talks championships ahead of national weekend

By AJ Piazza
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN



Caleb Craig/Collegian

At 133 pounds, Marcus Blaze wrestles Ben Davino, losing by decision in TB2 2-2 during the Championship Bout at the Big Ten Wrestling Championship on Sunday, March 8, 2026, in University Park, Pa.

practice for the last 15 years. We reflect back and learn. A lot of times you learn by accident and by mistake," Sanderson said. "The way college wrestlers train has kind of changed over the last 15 years. I think for us, peaking, is about enthusiasm."

Youth at top of weight classes

The top of certain weight classes are led by freshmen and sophomores. At 133 pounds, the top-5 wrestlers are all freshmen. At 157, five of the top-seven wrestlers are freshmen and sophomores. At 184, the top four wrestlers are freshmen and sophomore.

Sanderson spoke on the trend of highly touted wrestlers figuring it out early in their collegiate wrestling careers.

"Kids are ready to go now. They're wrestling and training in (regional training centers). There's so many opportunities — coaching, continuing to improve technique. Opportunities are continuing to increase and I think you'll continue to see freshmen (succeed)," Sanderson said.

Penn State has one of the top ranked wrestlers at 133 in Marcus Blaze, who's the No. 3 seed, PJ Duke at 157, who's going into the NCAA Championships as the No. 1 seed, and Rocco Welsh, who's at the top of 184 pounds. Those

"We're excited for our guys and this opportunity they have in front of them, and it's fun to kind of see what they do with those opportunities."

Cael Sanderson

weight classes are full of other young talent throughout each class, including Jax Forrest of Oklahoma State, Kaleb Larkin of Arizona State and Max McEnelly

of Minnesota.

"We're excited for our guys and this opportunity they have in front of them, and it's fun to kind of see what they do with those opportunities," Sanderson said.

Marcus Blaze

Marcus Blaze didn't get the result he looked for in the Big Ten Championships. The freshman took his first loss of the season to Ohio State's Ben Davino. Blaze is listed as the No. 3 seed for the NCAA Championships and could bounce back from his only loss of the season.

"I think Marcus will only be that much hungrier and more willing to go take care of things in regulation with all his matches because he's a competitor. He's as competitive as anyone I've coached," Sanderson said. "We've obviously coached a lot of competitive kids. I think he's gonna get after it."

The Perrysburg, Ohio, native went undefeated during the regular season and had been a top-three wrestler in the class for most of the season. He entered the team as the No. 1 recruit in the 2025 class according to FloWrestling, and has made his mark on the program.

"Obviously we're extremely excited and grateful for Marcus Blaze at 133 as a freshman. Just the character he has and his drive and his competitiveness is a boost for the whole program," Sanderson said.

To email reporter: ajp7192@psu.edu.
Follow him on X @AJ_piazza31

Time to pay taxes

Breaking down the term 'Cael tax'



Matt Cropp/Collegian

Head Coach Cael Sanderson stands during the Penn State wrestling dual against Michigan in the Crisler Arena.

By Andrew Deal
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

It's tax season.

For two Penn State wrestlers, their "taxes" have already been paid this season, but it wasn't the typical taxes. PJ Duke and Marcus Blaze have both paid their dues for the "Cael tax" leading up to the NCAA Championships.

The term "Cael tax" has become popular on the internet, alluding to the idea that each of Cael Sanderson's wrestlers have to metaphorically pay a tax — a loss.

This comes because of Sanderson's historic collegiate wrestling career, where he didn't lose a single match in his four years as a starter at Iowa State. Now, Sanderson leads one of the most historic dynasties in all of sports, which is entering uncharted territory, but one thing that hasn't come yet is an undefeated, four-time champion.

Each of the wrestlers under

Sanderson at Penn State have lost at least one match, with a few only having that single number in the loss column. But, it's continued to remain true through this season with each of the wrestlers having to "pay their tax."

Blaze and Duke were some of the highest regarded high school prospects in recent years, being ranked the No. 1 and No. 2 wrestlers, respectively in the 2025 class, per FloWrestling, and were poised to escape the Cael tax in their first season.

However, Duke fell to Nebraska's Antrell Taylor during the dual season, before quickly getting his redemption in the Big Ten finals, dominating Taylor to take the 157-pound belt.

Blaze avoided his first threat of the tax, when he escaped with a tiebreaker victory over Ohio State's Ben Davino. However, Davino handed Blaze his tax in the Big Ten finals at 133 pounds, when he defeated the Nittany Lion in sudden victory. There's a

chance at immediate redemption in the NCAA Championships if both Blaze and Davino make it to the semifinals.

Sanderson has coached two four-time champions in Carter Starocci and Aaron Brooks, with Starocci winning an illustrious fifth title. But neither wrestler went undefeated. Starocci finished with a 104-4 record, while Brooks ended his career with an 89-3 record, both some of the smallest number of loss totals in a blue and white singlet.

All of the starters have paid the Cael tax, with the most "expensive" being Mitchell Mesenbrink's loss. Mesenbrink fell in the finals of the NCAA Championships against Iowa State's David Carr in 2024. The only loss of Mesenbrink's redshirt freshman season is still the only loss of his career to this date.

Levi Haines has been a unique wrestler under Sanderson. While Haines has not redshirted at all, and has wrestled four straight years in the starting lineup, he still couldn't avoid paying his tax, netting an early loss in his career.

In his second match at Penn State, Haines fell to Northern Colorado's Vincent Zerban, 8-6, in the Bearcat Open at Binghamton. The Arendtsville, Pennsylvania, native has gone 94-4 thus far and has a chance to get to 99 wins in his career if he wins his second title this weekend.

No matter the talent when entering the Penn State wrestling room. No matter the amount of development each wrestler garners. No matter the historic accolades earned, no wrestler has evaded the infamous tax courtesy of Sanderson.

To email reporter: asd5765@psu.edu.
Follow him on X @AndrewDeal22

History at NCAAs

By AJ Piazza
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

The NCAA Championships are coming up and Penn State has another year of high expectations. The Nittany Lions have seven No. 1 seeds and are looking to win their fifth straight national championship.

Here's a look at some history of Penn State's previous performances as the NCAA Championship is approaching.

NCAA Championships

Penn State has won four straight national championships on three separate occasions. The Nittany Lions have won from 2022-25, 2016-19, and 2011-14. This season the squad will look to win it all five times in a row.

The most points Penn State ever put up was with last season's team, and that is the most all time with 177 points. Last season, Penn State had 10 All-Americans, which was the second team to ever do so. Minnesota did it first in 2001.

The biggest point differential was with the 2024 team. Penn State put up 172.5 points meanwhile the next highest team was Cornell, who had 72.5 points in the tournament. The Nittany Lions took home the team title by 100 points, which is the largest-point gap in NCAA history.

Single-season national champions

This season, Penn State will look to break the record that they are tied with Iowa and Oklahoma State for, and that's five national champions in one season.

The Nittany Lions have had this milestone happen twice. The first time was in 2017, with Zain Reatherford capping off an undefeated season with a tech fall victory in the national championship at 149 pounds. At 157, Jason Nolf also ended undefeated, and won by major decision in the finals.

At 165, Vincenzo Joseph took home the national championship with a pin. At 174, Mark Hall had a big upset as the No. 5 and won the national championship. At 184, it was a No. 1 vs No. 2 matchup in Gabe Dean of Cornell vs Bo Nickal. It was a tight match, but Nickal got the win by decision.

The other time the Nittany Lions had five national champions was in 2022. Roman Bravo-Young went undefeated and beat Daton Fix of Oklahoma State in the finals. Bravo-Young wasn't the only wrestler to go undefeated, as now assistant coach Nick Lee also went undefeated and defeated No. 15 Kizhan Clarke of North Carolina in the finals, 10-3.

Carter Starocci took home the title at 174 pounds in tie-



Kate Hildebrand/Collegian file photo

The Penn State wrestling team celebrates after winning its 13th national title at the NCAA D1 Wrestling Championships.

breakers against Mekhi Lewis of Virginia Tech. At 184, Aaron Brooks made his way to the championship and won by decision, 5-3. To make it three in a row for the Nittany Lions, Max Dean took home the championship at 197 over Jacob Warner of Iowa in a close match, 3-2.

Carter Starocci five-time champ

Penn State had the first ever five-time national champion end his collegiate career last season, and that's Carter Starocci. Starocci won national championships at both 174 and 184 pounds during his time in State College. He took home four national championships at 174 pounds and his final national championship was at 184.

The Erie, Pennsylvania, native held a record of 119-4 during his time with the Nittany Lions. For his first national title, Starocci avenged a loss against Michael Kemerer of Iowa, who defeated him in the Big Ten Championship. His first undefeated season was in 2021-22, and he capped it off with a victory in tiebreakers against Mekhi Lewis of Virginia Tech. Starocci continued his reign in dominant fashion. In 2022-23 he defeated Mikey Labriola of Nebraska with a pin early in the match.

In 2023-24, Starocci faced current Nittany Lion Rocco Welsh in the final. The Ohio State transfer couldn't get anything going on the attack, as Starocci controlled the match and got the win 2-0.

To end his collegiate career, Starocci bumped up a weight class and took on the national champion in Parker Keckisen of Northern Iowa. It was one of the closer matches Starocci ever wrestled in, but he came away with the victory by decision, 4-3, and became the first ever five-time national champion.

To email reporter: ajp7192@psu.edu.
Follow him on X @AJ_piazza31

NCAA seedings

By Andrew Deal
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Following seven Penn State titles, the NCAA seedings have been released for the national tournament beginning on March 19.

The Nittany Lions will have seven wrestlers at No. 1 seeds.

Luke Lilledahl, Shayne Van Ness, PJ Duke, Mitchell Mesenbrink, Levi Haines, Rocco Welsh and Josh Barr all earned top spots in their respective weight classes. All seven of those wrestlers became 2026 Big Ten Champions.

At 133 pounds, Marcus Blaze earned the No. 3 seed after finishing second at the Big Ten Championships. Blaze sits behind Oklahoma State's Jax Forrest and

Ohio State's Ben Davino in the weight class. If both wrestlers win out, it'll be a rubber match between Davino and Blaze in the semifinals.

At 141 pounds, Braeden Davis sits at the No. 14 seed. Davis finished seventh at the Big Tens and will face Utah Valley's Haiden Drury in the opening round.

Cole Mirasola is the No. 9 seed. Mirasola ended the Big Ten Championships with a fifth-place finish.

As a team, Penn State will attempt to go for a fifth straight national title beginning on Thursday, March 19, in Cleveland at Rocket Arena.

To email reporter: asd5765@psu.edu.
Follow him on X @AndrewDeal22



Caleb Craig/Collegian

Penn State Wrestling poses with the Big Ten Wrestling Trophy after winning the Big Ten Wrestling Championship on Sunday, March 8, 2026, in University Park, Pa.

NCAA Wrestling predictions

By Wrestling Staff
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Time to bring home some hardware.

Penn State will travel to Cleveland for the NCAA Championships at Rocket Arena this week, with the action kicking off on Thursday.

Lyle Alenstein: 5

**Individual champions/
team title**

Once again, the team title will be a lock for Penn State, as the Nittany Lions will win their fifth national championship in a row, doing so for the first time in program history after winning four consecutive titles on three separate occasions.

As far as the winners for Penn State, it'll be Marcus Blaze, Shayne Van Ness, Mitchell Mesenbrink, Levi Haines and Josh Barr.

Van Ness, Mesenbrink, Haines and Barr, in my eyes, should have an easy time en route to standing at the top of the podium, cruising to a national title victory.

My final pick to win it all will be Blaze, as he'll recover from losing in the Big Ten Championships final and win it all on the national stage.

He suffered a defeat to Ohio State's Ben Davino, who he also beat in the regular season, and very well could see him in the national bracket.

There's the idea that Blaze lost as part of the "Cael tax" in reference to Cael Sanderson, but I believe he'll get over that hump with a win at the national level in his freshman year.

Luke Lilledahl and Rocco Welsh would be next picks to win, but will come up short in talented fields.



Caleb Craig/Collegian

At 165 pounds, Mitchell Mesenbrink poses for a photo after winning 12-3 by major decision during the Championship Bout at the Big Ten Wrestling Championships

**Andrew Deal: 6 Individual
champions/team title**

The team title looks to be a lock for the Nittany Lions, as seven of the wrestlers hold No. 1 spots. Penn State has always performed well, and it's pretty safe to say this team could be the best team yet. For the winners, PJ Duke, Lilledahl, Van Ness, Mesenbrink, Haines and Barr all hold strong chances, and from my perspective, will stand atop the podium Saturday night.

Mesenbrink and Barr seem to be borderline locks, as both have bonused their way through the entire season. This includes bonus-point victories against highly ranked wrestlers in Iowa's Mikey Caliendo and Little Rock's Stephen Little.

Lilledahl seems to be on another level this season and has the confidence, and now the experience to win the title, while Van Ness has his best opportunity to win it all, although the only thing in his way is himself. On multiple

occasions, he's gone down at least by one takedown, but has showcased enough gas to be able to get back in these matches.

For Duke and Haines, they've dealt with tough matchups against Nebraska wrestlers, but have come out victorious against each of them. It could mean some difficulties in the tournament, but the persistence of the two will prevail again.

**AJ Piazza: 7 Individual
champions/team title**

It looks like Penn State will make it five years in a row of winning the NCAA team title. The team has never won five straight, but it has won four in a row three different times. Penn State has seven No. 1 seeds as the championships begin, and I have the Nittany Lions coming home with seven individual champions.

A few of these winners are locks, which includes Mesenbrink, Haines, and Barr. All three of these wrestlers have dominated their opponents and have

shown that they're on a different level compared to the rest of their weight classes.

Lilledahl and Van Ness have been on top of their weight classes for the entire season, but there is some competition that made me hesitant. Lilledahl and Sheldon Seymour from Lehigh could potentially match up again, but Lilledahl seems ready for it. Van Ness doesn't have anyone else in the way, but he's gone down early in a few matches recently, but continues to comeback and show why he's the No. 1 wrestler at 149.

Duke seems to have peaked at the right time. The freshman dominated both Ohio State's Brandon Cannon and Nebraska's Antrell Taylor at the Big Ten Championships — that was all the convincing I needed to believe the freshman would become a national champion in Year 1.

The toughest pick for me is Blaze. The top-three wrestlers at 133 include Blaze, Davino, and Oklahoma State's Jax Forrest. Blaze and Forrest could be the semifinal match, and if Blaze gets

by Forrest, I believe he will have his revenge match against Davino and take home the national championship at 133.

**Evan Smith: 6 Individual
champions/team title**

I'm going to say a shocking sentence. Penn State will win the team national championship. Surprising, I know, but I think this is the year.

I've been going back and forth on so many of these weight classes for the past week, but this feels like a season Penn State can break the five national championship marker.

For me, I have one of Blaze or Duke securing a national title in their freshman year. It's essentially a toss-up, but I'm leaning towards Duke due to the stacked nature of the 133-pound weight class. Duke avenged his only loss to Taylor earlier in the season, and has looked miles ahead of his opponents.

Lilledahl is entering this tournament as confident as he's ever been, giving me confidence to pick him in an interesting weight class. Seymour, who he lost to last year, is also undefeated while defending national champion Vincent Robinson from NC State is all the way down at the 12th seed.

Van Ness and Barr simply have no contenders around them that scare me entering this weekend. Barr, I expect to waltz his way to a national title, while Van Ness I'm slightly more tepid on after his run at last year's tournament.

At 165 pounds, Mesenbrink wins easily. Haines is in the same boat in his final weekend as a Nittany Lion. At 184 pounds, I predict Welsh to win what is arguably the most loaded weight class. Although his run to the Big Ten title was uninspiring, his reaction to it lends me belief he will peak in Cleveland in a field of competitors that he's faced most of the best.

Lightning Luke's confidence

By Evan Smith
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

At last season's NCAA Championships, Luke Lilledahl was upset in the quarterfinals by Lehigh's Sheldon Seymour, ending his chance at a freshman national title.

Since that bout, Lilledahl's only loss came in an unofficial bout against teammate Nate Desmond at the Black Knight Invitational in November. He is the No. 1 seed in the 125-pound weight class for the second straight year entering the national championship, and he's looking to right the wrongs of his loss last season.

Seymour is also undefeated, entering as the No. 4 seed on Lilledahl's side of the bracket. In a chalk bracket, the semifinal would see a rematch with him, one of which Lilledahl is interested in competing in. When Lehigh traveled to Rec Hall this year, Seymour was out due to injury.

"I definitely wanted to get that rematch at the dual, and didn't get it," Lilledahl said. "So I'd be more than happy to wrestle him, and more than excited to wrestle him."

However, the sophomore isn't focused on his one loss — he's

focused on the ultimate goal in taking home his first national championship.

Lilledahl is entering the tour-
"We're going to go
out there and enjoy
everything because
our significance in
life is not determined
by our wins and our
losses, right?"

Luke Lilledahl
125 pounds

named well spoken with confidence. A season recognized as undefeated has him at the top of his game physically and mentally. In Lilledahl's mind, he's the top dog at 125 pounds.

"At the end of the day, my goal is to be a national champion," Lilledahl said. "Nobody in that bracket is on my level, and if I go out there and wrestle the way I want to, that's going to be proven."

Since Lilledahl entered high school, he's been prepared for high pressure events like the NCAA tournament. He wrestled

at Wyoming Seminary High School, just outside of in-state Wilkes-Barre, which is one of the top wrestling schools in the country who wrestle the high school equivalent of a Big Ten schedule.

As a boarding school student, he also got a jump on the brotherhood and living aspect of college, allowing him to be fully prepared to be a one seed in his freshman year.

"I think that (Wyoming Seminary) helped me with wrestling and my personal life," Lilledahl said. "There's really nothing that I would go back and change."

While "Lightning Luke" will be moving at full pace in Rocket Arena, when he's outside of the venue, Lilledahl's goal is to distract himself from wrestling and relax. Lilledahl is hotel roommates with Shayne Van Ness on the trip, and he stated that the pair will likely play the video game Minecraft when they aren't preparing for competition over the weekend.

Lilledahl's perspective on wrestling is that life takes priority over a sport, and a negative result isn't the end of the world. This mindset allows him to wrestle without unneeded pressure on his back. Rather than worry about the results, Lilledahl wants to enjoy the opportunity in front of him, while knowing the results won't have a huge impact on his life.

"We're going to go out there and enjoy everything because our significance in life is not determined by our wins and our losses, right?" Lilledahl said. "Whether we win or lose, our coaches are still going to love us, our families are still going to love us, and that gives us peace."

Even if the results won't stress Lilledahl, he has high hopes for himself and his entire team in Cleveland. Lilledahl wants the Nittany Lions to do the unthinkable and create a record that is currently unbreakable.

"Obviously, we want to have 10 national champions," Lilledahl said.

Column | Welsh's rewarding draw



Caleb Craig/Collegian

At 184 pounds, Rocco Welsh wrestles Max McEnelly, winning by decision in TB1 2-1 during the Championship Bout.

By Andrew Deal
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

One of the biggest questions entering the NCAA Championships seeding process was how 184 pounds would look.

It was relatively unanimous that Rocco Welsh was the top seed after winning the Big Ten Championships over Minnesota's Max McEnelly, maintaining his undefeated record.

But after the seeding controversies for the conference, nothing was fully guaranteed. Welsh had a very tough bracket during the tournament, including three wrestlers in the top 10 of the overall rankings. Now, it's only right to factor in the fact that at 184, the Big Ten is insanely deep, so that shouldn't have come at too much of a surprise.

But for the NCAA Championships, Welsh's draw is rather favorable and that is for basically one reason. Welsh was heavily rewarded for his gauntlet of a Big Ten bracket.

Welsh had to face Iowa's Angelo Ferrari in his opening match, who earned the No. 8 seed. He was dropped that low because of injuries, but a potential Big Ten and national championship matchup shouldn't be happening in the quarterfinals.

After defeating Ferrari for the second time in tiebreakers, Welsh had to face Michigan's Brock Mantanona in the semifinals, another wrestler who's been inside the top 10 in the InterMat rankings all season.

Welsh took on McEnelly in the finals and went to tiebreakers with him, defeating him to re-

main unbeaten and earn his first Big Ten title.

The Ohio State transfer won't have to go through nearly the run he had to in the conference tournament, as the top seed won't likely face a big threat until the quarterfinals, and even then it's not to the level of Ferrari, who he faced in the Big Ten quarterfinals.

If the bracket goes chalk, it'll be Welsh against Nebraska's Silas Allred, a match in which the Nittany Lion earned a major-decision victory in earlier this season. Based on the talents, Welsh would never major decision Ferrari, his Big Ten opponent, because of the defensive wrestling of the Hawk-eye.

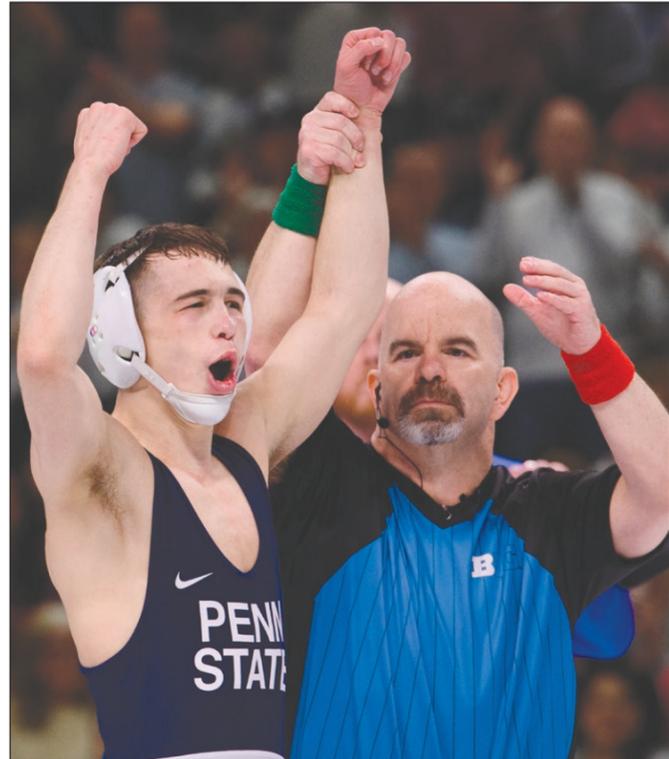
The most notable part of the bracket is the fact Welsh wouldn't have to wrestle any of Ferrari, McEnelly or Missouri's Aeoden Sinclair until the finals if he makes it there. In the semifinals, his biggest threat is Mantanona or Franklin and Marshall's James Conway. Welsh wrestled Conway in 2025, where he came out on top, 4-2, but that was during Welsh's redshirt year at Ohio State.

The Big Ten is the most dominant conference in the country, and Welsh winning one of the deepest classes of the 10 weights deservedly rewards him for still being undefeated.

With the wrestlers he faced in the Big Ten Championships, Welsh's early path is significantly easier, and very favorable for a chance at his first national title.

To email reporter: asd5765@psu.edu.

Follow him on X: [@AndrewDeal22](https://twitter.com/AndrewDeal22)



Caleb Craig/Collegian

At 125 pounds, Luke Lilledahl wrestles Jore Volk, winning by decision 4-1 during the Championship Bout at the Big Ten Wrestling Championships.

To email reporter: evanrgsmith@psu.edu.

Follow him on X: [@evanrgsmith](https://twitter.com/evanrgsmith)

Homecoming for Welsh

By Evan Smith
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN



Caleb Craig/Collegian

At 184 pounds, Rocco Welsh wrestles Max McEnelly, winning by decision in TB1 2-1 during the Championship Bout at the Big Ten Wrestling Championship on Sunday, March 8, 2026, in University Park, Pa.

At the 2024 NCAA Championships, Rocco Welsh stood on the mat, wearing scarlet and gray for Ohio State, for the 174-pound national final. He had completed a tournament run that featured three consecutive sudden-victory wins, shocking the country as the No. 6 seed in his national championship debut.

Across from him stood Carter Starocci in a blue and white Penn State singlet. Cael Sanderson, sitting on the corner of the mat, was already familiar with Welsh, a Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, product.

“We recruited Rocco, but he committed pretty early in the process,” Sanderson said in February. “He’s a hammer-tough PA kid.”

Starocci went on to defeat Welsh, adding credence to Welsh’s decision to spurn Penn State in the recruiting process as he wouldn’t start right away. Starocci’s lock on the Penn State lineup, as a defending national champion, contributed to Welsh’s decision to quickly commit to Ohio State, knowing he was bound to sit for a year.

Despite being a Pennsylvania native and receiving calls from Sanderson, Welsh felt the draw to compete right away. His decision was fruitful, as it led to a 26-4 record as a freshman and a chance to shock the world against Starocci.

“I was young and didn’t really know what I was doing,” Welsh said in February. “I made a quick decision thinking about who was here and if I had to fight for a spot.”

Welsh ended up facing a problem getting back into the lineup his sophomore year. With upper-classman Carson Kharchla being pitted to wrestle Welsh off the spot at 174 pounds, Ohio State coach Tom Ryan gave Welsh the option of competing at 174 pounds, jumping to 184 pounds or utilizing his redshirt.

Not comfortable making the jump, Welsh elected to redshirt, leading to a ripple of rumors he would transfer out of Ohio State midseason. He ended up staying in Columbus throughout the year.

“(Welsh) doesn’t need to stay here,” Ryan told FloWrestling in 2024. “He can go wherever he wants and people would pay a lot of money for him. That’s the day and age we’re in.”

Welsh eventually chose to leave this past offseason, transferring home to Pennsylvania to join the

Nittany Lions. Ryan later insinuated the move came after underground conversations and a financial offer by Penn State. The move has been beneficial for all parties, as Ohio State welcomed Ohio native Dylan Fishback to the team to replace Welsh, while Welsh rose to No. 1 in the country for Penn State.

“If I could go back, I definitely would’ve committed here from the beginning,” Welsh said. “I think God took me in that direction and it’s all part of his plan.”

The redshirt sophomore credits his surge to the coaches and teammates in the room, citing Levi Haines and Josh Barr as supporting his pace on the mat and his top-bottom game in training. Welsh also acknowledged assistant coach Casey Cunningham for having an impact on his

improvement this season.

“(Cunningham) never tries to really change anything like some coaches, he just sees stuff that I need to add,” Welsh said. “He’s been so helpful in helping me progress into the next level.”

The first time Welsh saw his former team was the Bryce Jordan Center dual on Feb. 13, where he faced his replacement in Fishback. The match was a full-circle moment in front of the largest crowd Welsh has ever competed in front of. Welsh treated it like any other dual, not overthinking his opponent or his singlet, but he came out of the gate slow in the moment.

Fishback controlled the first two periods of the match, leading Welsh and acquiring riding time. Welsh needed two quick take-downs to avoid being upset by his former team. As the tension rose

in the arena, Welsh turned it on, completing the comeback with 30 seconds to spare, sparking the loudest ovation from an already ruckus crowd.

“I think the match altogether was a positive, even if the first period wasn’t,” Welsh said. “I overcame adversity and got a victory in a crazy environment against a tough opponent.”

Since his revenge match against the Buckeyes, Welsh has continued to stay dominant, including running through the Big Ten Championships. He defeated Minnesota’s Max McEnelly, last year’s national runner-up, to do so, but wasn’t thrilled with the way the match played out. Welsh had to act defensively to secure his conference title, a departure from his typical style.

“I’m not happy with the way I’m kind of holding back,” Welsh told reporters after the Big Ten Championships. “I won a Big Ten title, but if I want to win a national title, I’ll have to do more.”

Now with the Big Ten season on the back burner, Welsh’s eyes are set on returning to the NCAA Championships, and flipping the script on his title-match loss from 2024.

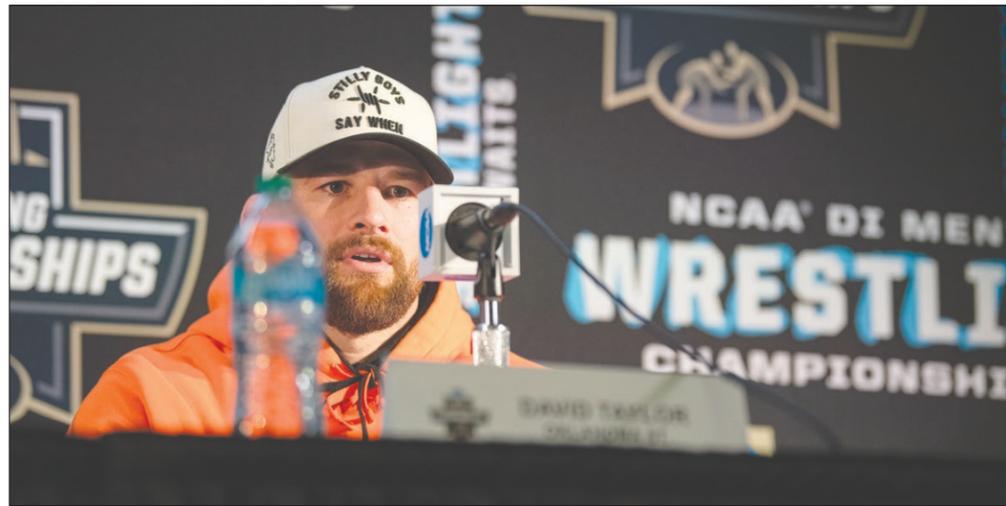
The experience and training staff behind Welsh have him stationed as one of the favorites at 184 pounds entering a highly competitive field in Cleveland.

But for Welsh, he’s already seen it before, and is ready to take home his first national title.

“There’s a lot of confidence having went through and made the finals before,” Welsh said. “Hopefully I can change the result in the final this time.”

To email reporter: ers5828@psu.edu
Follow on X @EvanRGSmith

Money on the mat



Sawyer Hadlum/Collegian

Oklahoma State head coach David Taylor looks on at the crowd of media members before the 2026 NCAA Division I Men’s Wrestling Championships at Rocket Arena on Wednesday, Mar. 18, 2026 in Cleveland, Ohio.

By Evan Smith
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

CLEVELAND — Before the NCAA Championships, four head coaches sat discussing the sport that unites them. They share a similar disgruntledness about the rise of NIL (name, image and likeness) and the lack of regulation disrupting the sport.

Ohio State’s Tom Ryan has been coaching the Buckeyes for two decades. In that time, he has watched the college sports world shift to the current marketplace. Back in the 2000s, college athletes were barely allowed to be paid for any activities, let alone receive the large endorsements they do now.

While Ryan supported allowing athletes to be compensated for work, the system has shifted too far the other way for his liking.

“There was a time when I was fighting for our student athletes to be able to earn more pay at summer camps,” Ryan said. “Now, it’s here, and having a tremendous impact on the sport.”

Each coach at the table had a drastically different view on the subject. Kent State’s Josh Moore hasn’t had to handle much NIL during his coaching tenures at his current school and the now defunct Cleveland State program. His goal for coaching at small schools that will be unable to invest heavily like the programs sitting beside him is to find local kids, and give them the best college experience possible to keep a sustainable system in place.

“These teams are competing for national championships,” Moore said. “I’m competing to get my guys here and set them up for life, to build a relationship and put them in a better spot than when they arrived.”

Oregon State’s Chris Pendleton lies closer to Moore than Ryan or Taylor on the NIL front, coming from a program lacking the resources of either of the aforementioned schools, but still facing the pressures of a larger university

and its athletic department.

“I think a lot of times the stress of winning and performing and producing, appeasing donors, alumni, administration, has ripped bare what we’re here to do,” Pendleton said. Out of the four coaches, the one most inclined to using the transfer portal is Oklahoma State’s David Taylor. The former Nittany Lion wrestler and coach has had two busy offseasons since taking over in Stillwater, utilizing NIL to quickly build up his roster to a contender. While Taylor competed in a different financial landscape prior to coaching, he knows how to play the cards that he’s dealt.

“When I was recruited, schools had their 9.9 scholarships and that’s all it was,” Taylor said. “Time evolves and you have to evolve with the times.”

Even though he is not averse to NIL, Taylor continues emphasizing the importance of real leadership that Moore and Pendleton discussed. Rather than offering a blank check and success, Taylor focuses on teaching as much as coaching.

“What’s really important is preparing kids for life after wrestling and life after college,” Taylor said. “It’s that balance of gratitude and instant gratification and delayed gratification and constantly trying to give them a good path.”

Regardless of how much each coach uses NIL and the transfer portal, they all acknowledge that it is here to stay and success in the NCAA will be defined by how each program handles the formerly underground discussions about pay-to-play.

“The teams and organizations that understand that and work hard to raise money and build up their support base are going to get a better chance at winning,” Ryan said.

Pendleton has had a relatively negative experience dealing with NIL this season. In his opening statement, Pendleton mentioned not expecting to lose an All-American from his roster, an appar-

ent dig at Ohio State that Ryan addressed during his answer.

Ethan Stiles transferred to Ohio State to move closer to home, according to Ryan. Since that time, he went 15-5 en route to the No. 7 seed in this weekend’s tournament.

While addressing the situation, Ryan referenced Rocco Welsh transferring to Penn State under similar circumstances. Ryan described the transfer situations as “unfortunate.”

As the discussion continued, Day emphasized the importance of loyalty, revealing that No. 1 141-pounder Jesse Mendez received multiple transfer offers to leave the Buckeyes, but chose to stay home for his senior season.

“This makes (Mendez) an incredible leader and very loyal, not to behoove anybody because they gave you a lot of money,” Ryan said.

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To email reporter: ers5828@psu.edu
Follow on X @EvanRGSmith

Haines reflects

By Andrew Deal
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

CLEVELAND — Levi Haines will step onto the mat for the final time in his Penn State career, closing a chapter that has flown by in four seasons.

The 174-pounder is Penn State’s lone senior starter, and took more of a team perspective when reflecting on his season and career rather than his individual performance.

“We have a lot of young guys in the lineup, and they’ve been taking care of business, getting better, so it’s been fun to watch those guys get better along with everybody else,” Haines said. “I think we’re right where we need to be headed here into the national championship.”

Penn State has the chance to set more history over the weekend, with seven wrestlers seeded No. 1 in their respective weight classes. Led by Haines as the veteran, the Nittany Lions have that team comradery and leadership needed to hit those marks.

“I think each and every one of us kind of comes in with the goal of being ourselves and staying true to our character throughout these tournaments,” Haines said. “The big moments, it’s easy to stray away from who you are and let that stuff kind of come in a little bit, so that’s our main focus this weekend, just being ourselves and competing hard.”

Not only is Penn State setting high marks, but the state of Pennsylvania continues to exceed any other state in terms of wrestlers’ hometowns. Pennsylvania has 50 wrestlers qualified, almost doubling the next states, New Jersey and Ohio with 28.

Haines, a Pennsylvania native, and some teammates were able to catch some of the PIAA State Wrestling Championships which featured some of the sport’s future stars.

“It’s really cool to be a part of,” Haines said. “I think it’s really neat to see the history and heritage of wrestling in the state of Pennsylvania. It seems like it keeps on getting better and better.”

When Haines made his way to Penn State from Biglerville High School, he had the unique

decision to make with the coaching staff on whether or not to redshirt.

Not only did he not redshirt his first year, Haines wrestled four straight seasons, not using his redshirt at all. In a sport like wrestling, that isn’t usual even for some of the sport’s all-time greats. “My coaches and I decided that at the time, we thought I was ready to go, and I knew they had my best interest in mind,” Haines said. “So just listen to them, and I feel like at Penn State, if you can get in the lineup, you go wrestle.”

Because of wrestling four straight seasons, it led to a quick collegiate career for the Nittany Lion. Haines received some high praise from his coach, Cael Sanderson, who called him “pretty special” and “a guy that we will miss as much as anyone that we’ve ever had come through here” ahead of his final regular season dual at Rec Hall.

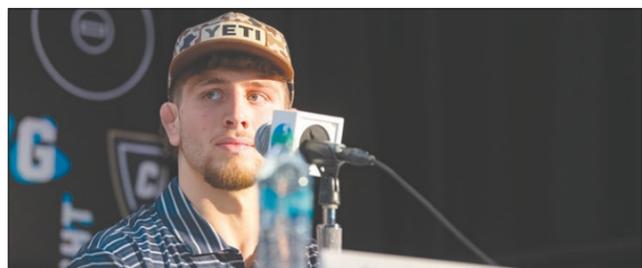
Haines showed appreciation to those sentiments, wanting to return the favor to the coaching staff who has helped him win a national title and put him in a strong position to earn his second one. In doing so, he hinted at sticking around in State College to train with the Nittany Lion Wrestling Club following his graduation, something many wrestlers do to train with some of the top wrestlers in the world.

“It means a lot to me,” Haines said. “It means I was doing my job going through school, and hopefully I can repay (Sanderson) a little bit of what he’s given to me and along with our other coaches. I look forward to hopefully being able to give back to him in some way in the future, and I don’t plan on going anywhere anytime soon.”

As his final NCAA Championships begin, the feelings and belief from the Arendtsville, native remain the same. No matter the stage, no matter the opponent, Haines wants to continue to be himself and let that lead him to success on and off the mat.

“Just getting better each time I stepped on the mat,” Haines said. “It’s what I plan on doing this weekend, not too worried about finishing off my career with the national championship. Hopefully my career is a lot longer than this weekend.”

To email reporter: asd5765@psu.edu
Follow on X @AndrewDeal22



Sawyer Hadlum/Collegian

Levi Haines speaks before the 2026 NCAA Men’s Wrestling Championships on Wednesday, Mar. 18, 2026 in Cleveland, Ohio.

The Daily Collegian

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'IT'S ONLY GOTTEN WORSE'

An in-depth look at Penn State's free speech climate

By Tyler Nolt
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN



Graphic by Tyler Nolt, photo by Geraldine Cruz-Hernandez

How FIRE determines free speech rankings

FIRE's ranking methodology has evolved over the years. The most recent rankings were based on three types of assessments: Student perceptions of their campus' speech climate, campus speech policies and speech controversy outcomes.

The university hasn't earned a passing score since 2021 when they scored 59.63. The closest they've gotten since was in the most recent 2026 College Free Speech Rankings when the university short 1.21 points higher.

Student perceptions — made up of 379 responses from full-time Penn State undergraduate students in 2025 — made up a majority of each overall score. The survey asked about a university's openness, administrative support, comfort expressing ideas, disruptive conduct, self-censorship and political tolerance. On the latter, Penn State scored highest, ranking 8th out of 257.

FIRE also looks at policies that regulate free expression. Penn State policies are currently categorized as code yellow, which FIRE determined means the university has "at least one ambiguous policy that too easily encourages administrative abuse and arbitrary application."

According to FIRE, if Penn State revised two of its speech policies, it could have earned a "green light" rating and moved up in the rankings.

Hear from students and faculty

For some, like Sean Semanko, founder and CEO of Uncensored America, and Amari Saunders, political affairs chair for Penn State College Democrats, the reason for the university's improvement in the FIRE rankings is unclear.

"Penn State, unfortunately, has not gotten better, and it's only gotten worse," said Semanko. Uncensored America sued Penn State in October over a separate free speech issue.

Uncensored America, a non-profit emphasizing freedom of speech through hosting conversations with "controversial figures," was established in 2020 by Semanko while he was a Penn State student. What began as a small on-campus effort has now gone nationwide. Their videos have amassed millions of views on YouTube and the organization has chapters at 11 universities.

Uncensored America alleges in a lawsuit against the university filed on October 29, 2025 that Penn State restricted their free speech via "denials of security and funding, forced relocation of events indoors, and outright cancellations."

Semanko said the university is doing everything in its power to make their lives harder, specifically regarding scheduling on-campus events. Uncensored America has hosted seven on-campus events at Penn State since 2021.

In the filing, the organization claims Penn State's policies are unconstitutional, alleging that without intervention, conservatives will continue to be silenced by the university.

The lawsuit could impact the university's overall score if it reveals an incident demonstrating suppression of free speech that isn't already in FIRE's database, Chief Research Advisor Stevens said in an email.

Saunders agreed that the university's free speech climate hasn't improved since FIRE's letter in 2024.

He said he thinks the university has since placed stricter rules on his and other advocates tabling efforts, echoing complaints FIRE received in 2024 that Penn State restricted students' ability to engage in election-related expressive activities on campus.

FLIP FOR THE REST OF THE STORY

As conversations over free speech intensify in today's political climate, Penn State has become the subject of complaints from free speech advocacy groups over its failure to uphold the First Amendment on campus.

Most recently, the university has come under fire for its ongoing investigation of a poster on campus depicting a U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement officer hanging from a noose. An online image shows the poster on a pole with the caption "Dead ICE agents can't kill."

The nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) sent a letter to the university in February arguing the poster "does not fall into one of the narrow categories of speech unprotected by the First Amendment."

The organization also launched a page on its site where people could send a letter to the university, asking it to drop the investigation. As of March 16, 247 people filled out the form online, according to FIRE.

Jacqueline Sheader, public information officer at Penn State University Police and Public Safety, told the Collegian that the investigation is still ongoing as of Monday. The university did not respond to follow-up questions.

In a statement to the Centre Daily Times, university assistant vice president for strategic communications at Penn State Colleen Mastony said, "Penn State condemns this and any calls for violence or attempts to frighten or intimidate."

FIRE's Chief Research Advisor Sean Stevens said the ongoing

investigation could cause Penn State to drop in the organization's annual College Free Speech Rankings.

Penn State's rankings over the years

FIRE, established in 1999, works to protect free speech on and off college campuses through student and faculty outreach, individual case advocacy, policy reform efforts and more.

In 2024, FIRE placed an ad in The Daily Collegian criticizing Penn State's decision to remove newsstands after the paper placed a paid campaign advertisement for Kamala Harris on three of those newsstands, and

voter registration ads on six. The university said the initial advertisements were in violation of its policy.

One of the organization's most well-known endeavors is its annual ranking of U.S. colleges based on their free speech climate.

Since the first rankings in 2020, the number of surveyed colleges has grown from 55 to 257. Penn State, one of the original 55, has appeared in the rankings annually since its inception.

Penn State placed 25th in the first year, ranking in the top half of colleges. In the second year, the university dropped to 70th place following the addition of 100 new colleges. Still, Penn State advanced two ranks when only in

comparison with the original 55.

Starting with the 2024 report, which reflects on 2023, each report covers the preceding year.

Penn State's rankings have continued to decline over the years, landing it in the bottom 10% of all institutions in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings. The survey has traditionally been conducted by College Pulse, an organization that surveys U.S. college students for businesses and non-profits. For the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings, the survey began in early January 2025 and ended in June 2025. To participate, respondents were required to share their Penn State issued email addresses.

Institutions have occasionally made changes after the release of the College Free Speech Rankings. According to FIRE, their team has helped reformed "more than 30 campus policies" through meetings with a number of institutional leaders in 2025.

In addition to the survey, a college's speech policies and the outcomes of speech-related controversies on campus, impact the final score as well.

In the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings, Penn State ranked 228th out of 251 surveyed universities, and placed 14th out of the 15 Pennsylvania-based colleges, and 15th out of the 18 Big Ten schools.

FIRE and the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania sent a letter to Penn State President Neeli Bendapudi in October 2024 claiming the university was exhibiting a "concerning pattern" of speech suppression leading up to the presidential election.

The letter threatened legal action and asked for a "substantive response" within three days. FIRE's Student Press Counsel Marie McMullan said the organization didn't receive a response. The university did not respond to The Daily Collegian's request for comment on whether the school issued a response to FIRE.

Still, since then Penn State rose 119 places in FIRE's most recent report, making it the most improved college in Pennsylvania and the 3rd most out of the Big Ten schools. It tied with American University for 10th most improved overall. It was ranked 109 out of 257 colleges.

Penn State's one recorded speech controversy in the report is the alleged deplatforming attempt of Turning Point USA speaker Riley Gaines in 2023, which has appeared in the report twice.

The former University of Kentucky swimmer, an activist who has been outspoken against transgender women's participation in women's sports, accused Penn State of canceling her planned speaking engagement. The university issued a statement stating they did not cancel the event and cited a problem with the booking of an indoor space. The statement said Turning Point missed the deadline for submitting the necessary documents. Gaines appeared on campus in a different location.

This is the first time since 2020 that the university had no new deplatforming attempts listed.

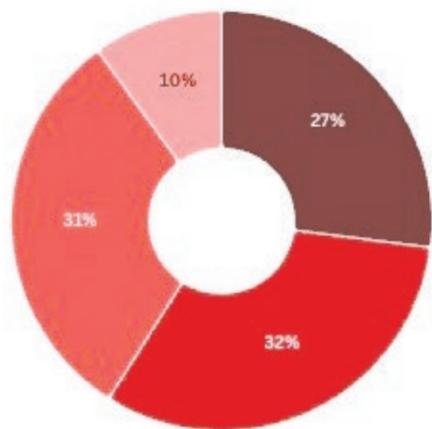
The events behind Penn State's FIRE ranking

| | |
|--|--|
| FIRE releases its 2025 College Free Speech Rankings. September 5, 2024 Penn State ranked in the bottom 10% of colleges — the worst the university has performed since the College Free Speech Rankings began in 2020. | Penn State launches a new free speech website. September 16, 2024 The website was designed to educate students and staff on First Amendment rights and protections. |
| Penn State removes Collegian newsracks and newspapers from campus. September 18, 2024 Penn State removed around 35 newsstands from inside campus buildings due to political advertisements. | FIRE claims to have received reports of Penn State restricting election activities. October 22, 2024 Reportedly, multiple student organizations "that engage in election activities and political advocacy" were restricted from "registering voters and canvassing on campus." |
| FIRE and ACLU sends letter to Penn State threatening legal action. October 22, 2024 They claimed the university was exhibiting a "concerning pattern" of speech suppression leading up to the presidential election and requested a "substantive response." | FIRE begins surveying students for the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. January 3, 2025 FIRE began a five month survey of 68,510 full-time undergraduate students. |
| Cutoff date for a speech controversy to contribute to a college's overall score. June 1, 2025 In order for a speech controversy, such as a deplatforming attempt, to have contributed to a college's overall score in the 2026 rankings, it would have needed to have been evaluated by FIRE's research and legal departments by this date. | FIRE stops surveying students for the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. June 5, 2025 The survey included 379 full-time Penn State undergraduate students, tied with three other colleges for 19th most students surveyed. |
| Uncensored America files a lawsuit against Penn State. October 29, 2025 The suit alleges "systematic suppression of protected speech" on campus, specifically regarding conservative viewpoints. | Fire releases its 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. September 9, 2025 Penn State ranks 109th out of 257 — the most improved college in Pennsylvania, 3rd most out of the Big Ten schools and tied for 10th most overall. |
| FIRE calls upon Penn State to allow first-semester students to join fraternities and sororities. January 14, 2026 The letter to the university claimed its policy violates students' First Amendment right to freedom of association. | A controversial poster appears on a light pole on Penn State's campus. The location is currently unknown. January 29, 2026 The poster read "dead ice agents can't kill" while an ICE agent hanging from a noose. |
| Centre Daily Times reports that Penn State is investigating the poster. February 4, 2026 Centre Daily Times reported they received an email from Colleen Mastony — assistant vice president for strategic communications — claiming the matter was under investigation by University Police and Public Safety. | FIRE urges Penn State to end its investigation. February 5, 2026 The letter, addressed to the Office of the President, claimed that the poster was legally protected speech, and the investigation of such "raises serious constitutional concerns." |
| FIRE visits campus to engage with students. February 19, 2026 FIRE's campus rights advocacy team stood in front of the HUB to hand out pamphlets and educate students about their free speech rights. | College Republicans shared a photo on X showing what seems to be a copy of the poster in a different location. February 28, 2026 The poster was found on a light pole outside the HUB-Robeson Center on the side facing E College Avenue. |
| The Penn State College Republicans and Democrats issue a joint statement about the poster on X. February 28, 2026 College Republicans and Democrats "condemn" depictions of violence against ICE officers on campus, labeling it a "death threat." | Penn State University Police and Public Safety confirms the investigation is ongoing. March 18, 2026 Public Information Officer Jacqueline Sheader told the Collegian in an email that the investigation is still ongoing. |

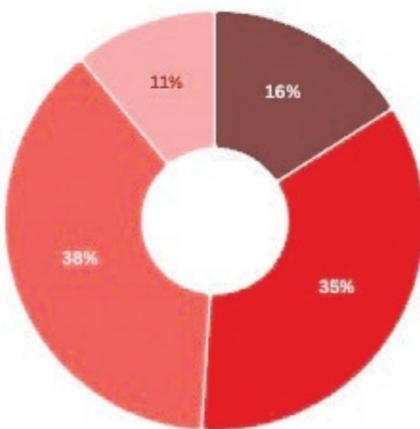
How comfortable do students feel expressing ...

Very Uncomfortable Somewhat Uncomfortable Somewhat Comfortable Very Comfortable

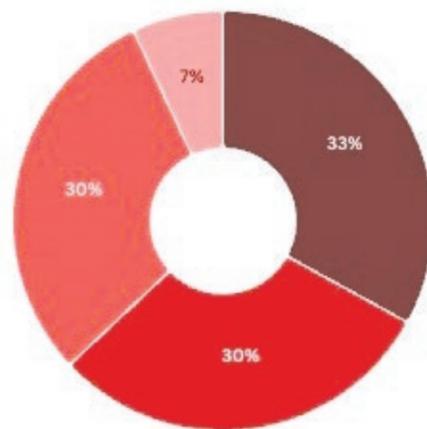
Your disagreement with a professor about a controversial political topic publicly?



Your views on a controversial political topic during a discussion in a common campus space?



An unpopular political opinion to your fellow students on a social media account tied to your name?



Graphic by Tyler Nolt

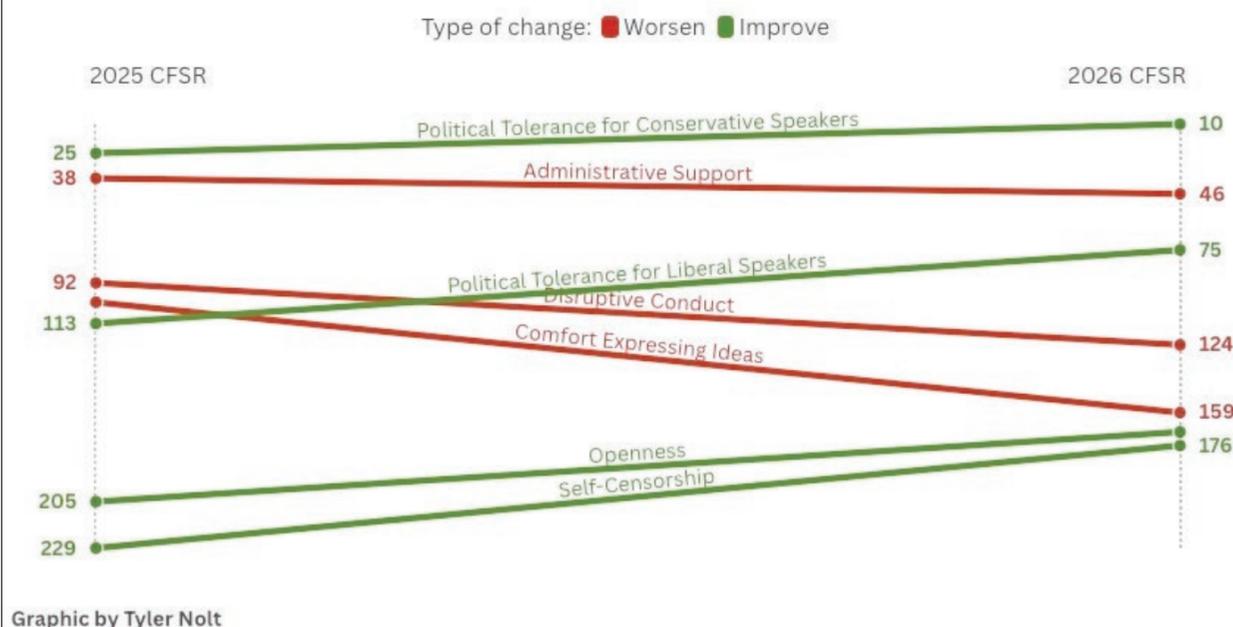
Questions have been adjusted to appear better visually. The exact questions and additional data can be found on FIRE's website.

“Neeli Bendapudi and the administration is very supportive of free speech, and they have been the entire time I’ve been here”

Tristan Kilgore
College Republicans President

How Penn State compares to more than 200 schools in 7 free speech categories over the past two years

For FIRE's annual College Free Speech Rankings (CFSR), it surveys hundreds of students about free speech on their campuses. Survey responses make up the majority of each college or university's score.



Graphic by Tyler Nolt

“For political canvases, or people who are tabling for certain organizations or groups, it’s kind of harder for them to get a table,” Saunders said. “There’s so many rules that you have to follow ... so it’s kind of strict in the sense where you don’t know really how you would advocate ... without getting in trouble, just because the rules are kind of blurred.”

Penn State College Republicans President Tristin Kilgore said he doesn’t share Semanko and Saunders’ concerns. Kilgore said the university is doing what it can to foster a free speech environment.

“Neeli Bendapudi and the administration is very supportive of free speech, and they have been the entire time I’ve been here,” Kilgore, a third-year studying political science and philosophy, said. “If you take care of the stuff you need to do — you reserve the space, you bring the speakers,

licians described the poster as a death threat, calling for an investigation in a statement posted on X.

On Feb. 19, members of FIRE’s campus rights advocacy team came to Penn State to hand out campus protest guides and other

counsel for FIRE’s advocacy team, told the Collegian in an email.

Shortly after, the College Republicans shared a photo on X showing what seems to be a second appearance of the poster, callin copy of the

the case’s status from “active” to “closed” because the university still hadn’t addressed their advocacy efforts, according to Alex Griswold, communications campaign manager for FIRE. However, he specified that FIRE would reexamine the case if they “receive any updates from students involved or the university.”

Earlier this year, FIRE sent another letter to Penn State, calling upon the university to “end its deferred recruitment first-semester students from joining fraternities and sororities.” It claims the university’s policy goes against the First Amendment’s protection of students’ right to freedom of association.

In both of these cases, Stevens said in an email to the Collegian that each of the two cases will constitute “a loss of up to 2 points,” in university free speech rankings, but that the exact penalty value has not yet been determined by their research team.

Surveys for the 2027 College Free Speech Rankings are underway and are likely to be released in September.

Amy Sanders, the John and Ann Curley professor of First Amendment Studies, began working at Penn State in Janu-

ary 2025 in search of a better free speech climate.

“I came to Penn State from Texas,” Sanders said. “I’ve only been here a year, and part of the reason that I left the University of Texas was because of the administration’s response to protests on campus.”

Penn State and The University of Texas at Austin have been ranked against each other since 2020, and Penn State surpassed them each time.

“I think Penn State is doing a pretty good job in terms of freedom of expression,” Sanders said. “What we don’t do well is transparency. If we don’t know what’s happening at our university, that’s going to infringe on our free expression rights because we’re not going to be able to evaluate what’s happening here.”

Editor’s Note: Part of the Collegian’s commitment to transparency is telling our readers when and how AI was used in our reporting. The writer used Microsoft Copilot to help sort and analyze data for this story. Scan the QR code for more details on how it was used and what we did to fact check it.

To email reporter: tjn5430@psu.edu



Penn State in comparison



Graphic by Tyler Nolt

This graph shows Penn State's ranking in comparison to other schools in the Big Ten Conference or based in Pennsylvania. Information displayed is in the context of the national rankings, for which not all data is included.

you do everything the way you’re supposed to do it — they will support you.”

Kilgore cited as an example the vigil for slain political activist Charlie Kirk organized by the College Republicans and Penn State’s Turning Point USA chapter in September 2024.

For Kilgore, it’s the general student body that expresses a lack of support for free speech. Citing the ICE poster as an example, he said there’s a “trend of violence” deterring students from having more honest civic discussions.

Kilgore and the College Republicans described the poster as a death threat, calling for an investigation in a statement posted on X.

FIRE sent a similar letter to the Office of the Chancellor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign the day prior. In this case, however, it was defending an Instagram post made by the College Republicans at that school. The post read, “only traitors help invaders,” and according to FIRE’s description, the post included a “poster depicting the shooting of Alex Pretti.”

Kilgore and the College Repub-

free speech materials. “Penn State has not yet responded to our advocacy efforts, although we hope Penn State will decide to engage and affirm its students’ free speech rights,” Charlotte Arneson, program

poster in a different location.

Both the College Republicans and College Democrats issued a joint statement on the matter through Instagram, condemning the poster.

Not long after, FIRE changed

Speech Rankings are underway and are likely to be released in September.

Amy Sanders, the John and Ann Curley professor of First Amendment Studies, began working at Penn State in Janu-



Matt Cropp/ Collegian

A protester holds a banner reading “drive out ICE” during a protest for Alex Pretti on Monday, Jan. 26, 2026 in State College, Pa. Pretti was killed during Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations in Minneapolis on Saturday, Jan. 24, 2026.

State College Borough, Penn State collaborate on sustainability efforts



Matthew Kemper/Collegian

A sign sits outside the Land and Water Research Building on Monday, April 21, 2025 in University Park, Pa.

By Jonathon Chiu
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Through borough policies and partnerships with Penn State and other organizations, State College has taken several steps to advance sustainability initiatives over the years.

Peter Buck, the director for education for Penn State Sustainability (PSS), said the borough has already passed several resolutions to aid local sustainability efforts, such as Resolution 944, which declared the borough a climate protection community.

Buck said State College and the Sustainable Communities Collaborative (SCC), an outreach and scholarship program within PSS, have worked together on several projects for over a decade from promoting bicycle and pedestrian safety to solar assessments.

Many of the projects are displayed during the Campus and Community Sustainability Expo, held at the end of each semester. This year's expo is on April 30 in the State College Municipal Building. Buck said many of the projects have had a sizable impact on State College residents even if they weren't aware of them.

"The corner of Park Avenue and Atherton Street is notoriously dangerous and part of it has to do with pedestrian and not car traffic and so (the SCC) organized a group of classes, three in a row, that worked on messaging to make sure that pedestrians and bicyclists are safe and you might think, 'Well, why is that sustainability?'" Buck said. "Well, health and well-being are part of sustainability to transportation-related issues."

He said collaborations such as these help maintain good relations between the borough and the university.

"It is great to have this way of bringing a few hundred students a year, actually every semester, in touch with the borough in an incredibly positive, socially, educationally and economically productive way," Buck said.

Buck said the borough also participates in larger sustainability and climate actions in

collaboration with organizations like the Centre Region Council of Governments (CRCOG).

Most notably, State College has worked with the CRCOG on projects like the Centre Region Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, meant to make the borough and other involved municipalities more sustainable through various means such as land management and waste reduction.

The borough also planned on implementing infrastructure as part of the Solar Power Purchase Agreement (SPPA). The SPPA aimed to increase the presence of solar power in Centre County as a way to maintain low energy costs and expand renewable energy sources both in and around the borough.

However, Prospect 14, the company that developed the SPPA, raised concerns of economic inavailability due to the repealing of economic incentives related to solar power by the federal government, alongside tariffs on solar panels. As a result, the borough voted unanimously to terminate its contract with the company set to provide electricity from the SPPA during a council meeting on March 5.

Buck — who contributed to the SPPA as a member of its working group — said he believed the efforts by the federal government in curbing sustainability measures will only inspire local government officials to do more to accomplish sustainability goals.

"If anything, there is more willpower in the State College area because of the challenges brought from Washington," Buck said. "People will find a way forward on sustainability and climate action."

Buck said the SPPA is the only sustainability program affected in the region by federal administrative changes or policies.

According to Ilona Ballreich, SCC's program director, its relationship with State College is mutually beneficial, as the borough gets the resources needed to maintain sustainability and students are given opportunities to get in-the-field experience and gain community connections.

"Let's say community partners are interested in solar but they don't really have the staff in-house, they don't have a solar engineer or a solar expert," Ballreich said. "I can then work with a group of students in a solar design class, who have the technical knowledge."

Ballreich said it's important for the university and the borough to continue to work together on the issue of sustainability in order to best serve both residents and students.

"At the end of the day, I hope that we all want to make the world a better place for everybody, so that's kind of my mantra," Ballreich said. "That's what SCC likes to do and tries to do ... make the world the best it can possibly be for all involved."

State College Borough Council Member Gopal Balachandran, who also represents the borough on the CRCOG's climate action and sustainability committee, said the dialogue between the borough and Penn State is helpful for planning sustainability initiatives.

"We end up talking about various efforts to promote awareness to also be able to gain greater climate and resilience," Balachandran said. "A lot of it is just policy-based work as well as educational work involving things like solar power, so we work with the university on a lot of those things."

Balachandran said one of the borough's current projects is attempting to conduct a greenhouse gas inventory to measure emissions produced in State College.

He said he believes the borough is at an advantage due to Penn State's willingness to assist with sustainability efforts.

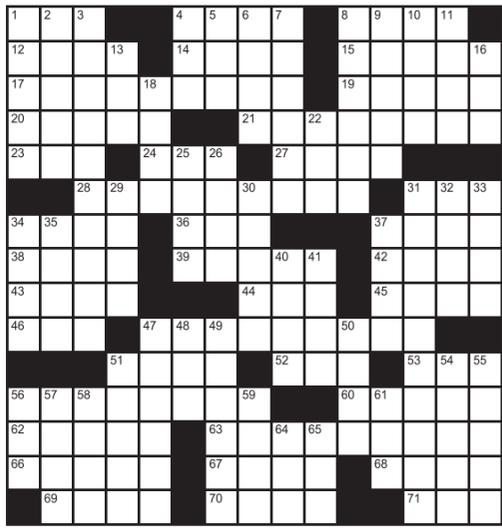
"They have so many experts at the university, and so we're able to draw upon that expertise, especially when we have limited staff resources," Balachandran said. "So many of us are involved in the university in one form or another, and I think we're very lucky to have that."

To email reporter: jwc6496@psu.edu
Follow him on X @JonChiu38880

Crossword

Across

- 1 Manila bean
- 4 Forehead
- 8 Cool drinks
- 12 Small brook
- 14 French Sudan, today
- 15 Sugar portions
- 17 Everything's okay
- 19 Foxy-faced primate
- 20 Flycatcher
- 21 Baseball players at the July classic
- 23 Before, poetically
- 24 Alias
- 27 Fizzles out
- 28 Helpless statement
- 31 Buck dispenser
- 34 Diminutive suffix
- 36 Uncle (Sp.)
- 37 Balm ingredient
- 38 Stadium sounds
- 39 Forest god
- 42 Dour
- 43 Ticks off
- 44 Driver's aid
- 45 *Beetle Bailey* pooch
- 46 ___easter
- 47 Really nervous
- 51 Danish cheese
- 52 Camera type, briefly
- 53 Color TV pioneer
- 56 Over a period of time
- 60 Bitter
- 62 Squirrel away
- 63 Conductor's cry



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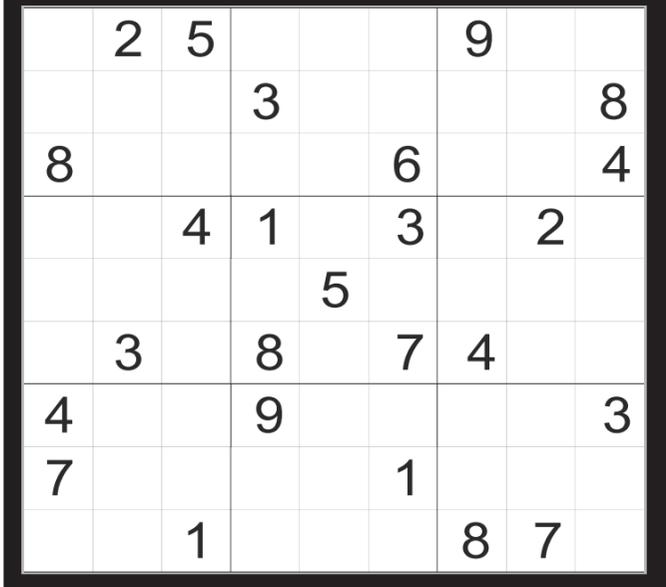
- 66 Sleep disorder
- 67 Hints
- 68 Game equipment
- 69 Small whirlpool
- 70 Slangy assent
- 71 *Waking Devine* (1998 film)
- 8 Good to go
- 9 Pairs
- 10 Mrs. Peel of *The Avengers*
- 11 Cowboy boot attachment
- 13 Fabrication
- 16 12th graders (Abbr.)
- 18 Close, as an envelope
- 22 Fleur-de-___
- 25 Young foxes
- 26 China setting
- 29 More or ___
- 30 Numbers game
- 31 Type of bicycle
- 32 Tipster
- 33 Exec's note
- 34 Hibernia
- 35 Poi source
- 37 In awe
- 40 Cravings
- 41 Casting need
- 47 No restrictions on a ticket
- 48 DiCaprio, to fans
- 49 Madness
- 50 Ho-hum
- 51 Exposed
- 54 *Odyssey* sorceress
- 55 Extra
- 56 Triumphant cry
- 57 Easy gait
- 58 Touch down
- 59 Paste
- 61 Atlantic food fish
- 64 Grassland
- 65 Cigar residue

Down

- 1 Vineyard fruit
- 2 Gulf ship
- 3 Type of outdoor gear
- 4 Upscale wheels
- 5 Actress ___ Dawn Chong
- 6 Cantina cooker
- 7 Command answer

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WORD SEARCH

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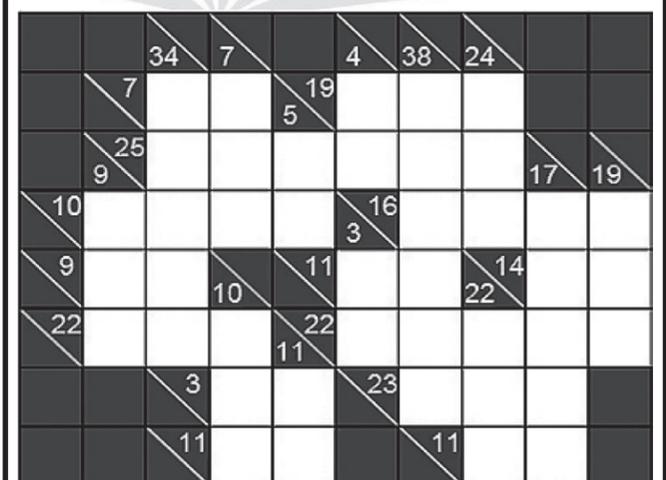
Buildings

K T E G A R A G Y M F S I T S U W I G N
 R H E S T A Z N E F I Z I K W B I H N L
 T E S T A U R A N T J I Q B Y W U I I H
 I A M Q F J A W N S C H U R C H R P J F
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 M Y U R T M M N M W F X M T H Z U X F F
 V H T A B M U I D A T S Y H S A L O O N

- Abbey
- Apartment
- Barn
- Cabin
- Castle
- Chapel
- Church
- Convent
- Duplex
- Farmhouse
- Garage
- Hospital
- Hotel
- Jail
- Library
- Lighthouse
- Lodge
- Mansion
- Motor Inn
- Museum
- Opera House
- Palace
- Pubs
- Restaurant
- Saloon
- Shed
- Stadium
- Tavern
- Temple
- Theater
- Villa
- Yurt

Kakuro (Cross Sums)

The rules are easy to learn: A number above the diagonal line in a black square is the sum of the white squares to the right of it. A number below the diagonal line is the sum of the white squares in the sequence below it. You may only use the digits 1 to 9, and a digit may be used only once in any sequence.



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Emily Metzgar named Bellisario dean

By Mia Debelevich
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

The Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications has named Emily Metzgar as its new dean.

Metzgar, a professor and the director of the School of Journalism and Media at Kent State University, will start July 1.

During her tenure at Kent State, some of Metzgar's efforts included modernizing facilities, directing accreditation and assessment efforts, spearheading fundraising efforts and overseeing the development of new programming "with an emphasis on AI-forward, student-first outcomes," according to a Bellisario news release.

Denise Bortree, who was named interim dean in July, will return to her role as associate dean, in addition to serving as director of the Arthur W. Page Center and professor in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations.



Courtesy of the Bellisario College of Communications

Emily Metzgar poses for a photo.

To email reporter: mfd5887@psu.edu
Follow her on X @miadebelevich

Examining the popularity behind raunchy TV

Just last month, Netflix released the second half of Bridgerton's latest season. Within this book-to-screen adaptation, there's plenty of drama and, of course, a lavish ball or two. However, probably the most commonly associated aspect of the show is its raunchy scenes.

According to Variety, season four amassed 39.7 million views within its first four days of being released. Bridgerton is one of Netflix's most popular shows, with seasons one and three ranked seventh and ninth, respectively, on their most-watched list of all time.

Similar patterns have been seen with other shows that are quite steamy, such as "Heated Rivalry," which chronicles the love story of two closeted male hockey players. By the time the

final episode of the show was released, the amount of streaming minutes grew to 324 million streaming minutes in comparison to its debut week figure of 30 million minutes.

Raunchy television seems to be incredibly popular, but why?

It's clear that sex sells, whether you think that's immoral or not. Shows on the raunchier side get people talking, either through conversations with friends or in social media comment sections.

While perhaps viewers come by these shows by chance, they could also be seeking them out to fill a void — especially Gen Z viewers. Recent data trends show that Gen Z is engaging less in sexual activity and is also dating less.

Roughly 24% of adults 18 to 29 had abstained from sex within the past year, according to USA Today, a figure that's doubled since 2010. While adults under 30 had the highest percentage of a single population at 47%,

according to Forbes.

Perhaps these types of shows act as a way to still engage with sex without having to actually engage with it in their personal lives. The dating world poses many risks, which the supposedly risk-averse Gen Z are

"These shows are an escape from a relationship that's not hitting the bar and into a relationship that the viewer might desire in some aspect."

Emma Strickling

trying to avoid. Therefore, these shows offer a sense of control.

It's acting as an alternative, especially since these shows often depict intimacy more naturally and authentically.

While I can't speak for the shows I haven't seen, from the shows I am familiar with, like "Bridgerton" and "Heated Rivalry," there's more than hot, steamy sex scenes.

Once the passion has cooled down, what's left is a relationship between two people. A relationship of yearning and emotional connection. Which is, unfortunately, something not present in every relationship.

These shows are an escape from a relationship that's not hitting the bar and into a relationship that the viewer might desire in some aspect. In that long duration, it's almost as if the viewer is able to be present in the world in front of them and forget about the problems of their own love life.

Once the show is over, it's back to reality. Which might be why whenever the latest raunchy show comes out, it continues to have a fairly large following until after it ends.

Although it's a place for an escape, these TV shows ultimately can't develop the social skills or the same feelings that real-life relationships do. While it might fill a void temporarily, it's not a successful long-term solution.

If there's an actual desire to date, but fear is overshadowing it, take a deep breath. Consider what is causing that fear. Is it worth not taking your shot or even simply just trying?

Unlike these TV shows that will be available in some form or another, the opportunities to make something happen romantically aren't always going to be. Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith. But even if there's rejection, at least you'll know instead of always wondering "what if."

Emma Strickling is a columnist for The Daily Collegian. She is a fifth-year studying English with minors in film studies and Italian. Email her at eks5726@psu.edu



Cartoon by Nate Campbell

MY VIEW | Miss Behave

Off the record | Sexism in the city

Dearest reader, Welcome back to State College. I hope your spring break was equal parts sunshine, questionable decisions and stories that will live forever in the group chat.

Get the Instagram photo dump post out of your system. Soft-launch the tan. Pretend you didn't just spend half the week horizontal tanning — sleeping or participating in other activities.

This week, I have a special treat. One of you slid into my inbox. So naturally, I'm stepping into my role as your resident guide on all things love and sex to share my perspective.

Samantha says she enjoys dating freely as men do, but is frustrated by the double standard and feels she's judged too harshly for engaging in behavior that would be accepted if she were a man.

First of all, welcome to your Samantha era! For those of you who haven't had the pleasure of meeting Samantha or Carrie from the hit show "Sex and the City," here's the run-down.

The difference between being a Carrie and being a Samantha mostly comes down to time management. Carrie spends three days wondering if she should text him back.

Samantha spends those same three days going on two better dates and forgetting the last name of the guy who couldn't even give a decent answer to her most basic questions.

In a Samantha era, you stop asking "Does he like me?" and start asking, "Do I like him enough to put on jeans for this?" In other words, Samantha has little patience for nonsense. She's the main character, fully in charge of her own love life and exploring all that love, life and sex have to offer.

With that being said, I have a couple of thoughts to share. You're not imagining the double standard. When men date around, it's considered "playing the field" or "being a player," or even "impressive." But when women date around, it's often framed as "desperate" or "slut behavior" or even labeling one as a "whore."

The truth is, a lot of people are very comfortable with women being desirable; that's how we're supposed to present ourselves. But people are far less comfortable when

women choose to act on that desirability.

And here's the funny part: half the people judging you would probably be doing the same thing if they had the opportunity or the confidence you do.

Also, a quick reminder — the same society that labels women harshly for dating freely also produces an entire economy of reality dating shows, romantic comedies and wedding

Pinterest boards. So clearly, everyone is fascinated by the love process. They just get weird when women are honest about participating in it.

So, my advice? Date. Be kind. Be clear about your intentions. And if someone calls you a "whore" for doing exactly what men do, feel free to remind

them that if you were a man, they'd probably be asking for tips or giving you a high five.

The double standard that exists is wild. When a man sleeps around, he's called a player. When a woman behaves in a similar way, she's judged for it. Same behavior, completely different narrative. The difference is in who society decided to hand the trophy to.

Personally, I say the field is wide open. Play the game. There's nothing wrong with letting a few new players step

into tryouts and seeing who you really click with. Take your time, enjoy the tension. And hey, if the opportunity feels right, maybe even switch teams for a night and see if you hit a home run.

Samantha, thank you for writing to me and I hope I was able to offer you some advice, or at least some comedic relief. I sympathize with you and the judgment you're facing. Remember, you have the right to play the field if that's what you wish to do. Just be safe, respectful and responsible while doing it.

After all, every player needs a teammate. Yours truly, Miss Behave

Off the record is a weekly column written by a third-year Collegian staffer writing under an alias. It aims to promote a space for honest conversations about love, sex and relationships. Those interested in sharing their experiences or submitting a topic are invited to do so through this anonymous form.



and solicit advertising for them.

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Daily Collegian

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'We still got a lot of room to grow'

Clarisa Crowell talks home opener against Wisconsin

By **Gianna Dowling**
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Penn State had a tough outing in its opening weekend of Big Ten play, going 0-3 against No. 17 Oregon. This marked the end of the Nittany Lions' six weeks on the road, as they play host for the first time of the season this weekend, welcoming Wisconsin.

In Wednesday's media session, coach Clarisa Crowell discussed the blue and white's effort so far this season and the positive energy the team is taking into its return to Beard Field.

Winless in Eugene

Penn State faced both elite pitching and offense in its opening conference series. The Nittany Lions fell by overwhelming margins in their first two games, but challenged the Ducks in Game 3, eventually falling in walkoff fashion.

"Anytime you could put yourself in a situation to win a game three, especially how that series went, I think it says a lot about your team,"

Clarisa Crowell
Coach

"I think when you're facing an elite-level pitcher, and actually, they just had great pitching all around and great offense, you're forced to find ways to grow as a team and get one percent better," Crowell said. "I think that experience this past weekend certainly just showed us that we still got a



Samantha Oropeza/Collegian

Head coach Clarisa Crowell stands by the dugout during the Penn State softball game against Bucknell at Beard Field at Nittany Lion Softball Park on Tuesday, April 1, 2025 in University Park, Pa.

lot of room to grow."

In the three games combined, the blue and white were out-hit 29-8. The difference in the box score from the first two games to the last was still evident, though.

Penn State combined for just three runs in the first two games, compared to Oregon's 18. However, in the series finale, the Nittany Lions managed five runs, losing by one, and the pitching allowed the lowest amount of hits it had all weekend.

"Anytime you could put yourself in a situation to win a game three, especially how that series went, I think it says a lot about your team," Crowell said. "I was really proud of how our kids played and how well they fought that game."

Return to Beard

For the first time since May 4 of last year, Penn State is set to play on its home dirt.

The Nittany Lions were previously scheduled to host an invita-

tional the first week of March, but it was canceled due to weather.

The blue and white have been traveling every weekend since the season started on Feb. 6.

"Our home tournament got canceled, so that's why I think it felt a little bit longer for them," Crowell said. "This is even better, because now they're even more excited, because we're in Big Ten play."

Home-field advantage is real, especially in a game like softball when it's crucial to know the makeup of a diamond.

Penn State has lost just five games at home in each of its last two seasons.

It's also a plus to be able to play in front of your fans and bring positive energy.

"Anytime you can play at home it's awesome, especially this is our first weekend having an opportunity to play in front of our home crowd," Crowell said. "I think just a lot of positive vibes

that's going to be happening, we're excited, just hoping that the weather holds up for us this weekend, but it's gonna be a great weekend."

Pitching as a backbone

Last season, the Nittany Lions found almost all their success in



Noah Aberegg/Collegian

The Nittany Lion Softball Park, home of the Penn State softball team, sits on Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2025 in University Park, Pa.

To email reporter: gmd5738@psu.edu
To follow her on X: [@giannamd32](https://twitter.com/giannamd32)

Ioane reflects on journey

By **Will Horstman**
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Four years ago, offensive lineman Vega Ioane was a 247Sports composite 3-star recruit out of Graham-Kapowsin High School in Graham, Washington. He then made a jump to the East Coast, signing with Penn State for his collegiate career.

Now, Ioane is garnering buzz as a projected first-round selection in the 2026 NFL draft. He was a two-year starter at left guard for the Nittany Lions and has commanded a ton of attention in the pre-draft process, including during his workout at Penn State Pro Day.

"It feels good," Ioane said. "It's a feeling that I know I put a lot of work into it, knowing that it's all coming together, all connecting, things like that. But knowing that I put my best foot forward to put myself in a position like that, it definitely feels good." Ioane didn't participate in athletic testing during pro day, but he participated in drills alongside fellow offensive linemen Nick Dawkins and Nolan Rucci. As part, Ioane had the chance to showcase his mobility as a blocker and his strength. Additionally, Ioane took some reps as a center in a drill despite only ever playing 17 snaps at that position in four seasons with Penn State, according to PFF. He also did so at the NFL combine on March 1.

"It was just here to reinforce that showing that what I did at the combine wasn't just a one-time thing," Ioane said. "I can do it whenever I need to do it." While he didn't produce any athletic testing numbers at pro day, Ioane recorded a vertical of 31.5 inches and a broad jump of 8-foot-8 at the combine. He's listed at 6-foot-4 and 326 pounds as well. Ioane said he's been training in Dallas throughout the pre-draft process before returning to pro day in Happy Valley, where he earned AP All-America second-team honors following the 2025 season. He spoke on his development with Penn State



Aayan Hamdani/Collegian

Vega Ioane is surrounded by reporters during an interview after Pro Day in Holuba Hall on March 18, 2026 in University Park, Pa.

as he went from redshirting his freshman year to becoming a standout starter. "It was definitely a learning process," Ioane said. "Like I said, my four years here, definitely learning a lot of things, adding to my toolbox, but having a coach like (offensive line coach Phil Trautwein), he taught me a lot as a player. Everything on the field happened from what I did off the field." Moving forward in the pre-draft process, Ioane said his goal while he's back at Penn State is to keep himself ready for whatever team selects him in the draft. He said he's "pretty sure" he has a visit lined up with the Philadelphia Eagles, who have the No. 23 overall pick.

Regardless of where he ends up in April, Ioane thinks he has set himself up well due to his decision to attend Penn State.

"My four years here, the biggest adversity I've ever faced, I was 2,000 miles away from home, took a chance on being here growing up as a man," Ioane said. "It's exactly what Penn State did for me. Came to campus as a kid, left as a man."

To email reporter: wvh5351@psu.edu
To follow him on X: [@WillHorstman](https://twitter.com/WillHorstman)

Penn State goes winless through trio of ranked West Coast clashes

By **Keira Albert**
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

After a West Coast road trip filled with ranked opponents, Penn State's three-match road series ended with a winless 0-3 outcome.

The blue and white opened the week with a 3-0 loss against No. 2 Long Beach State. The second game saw a four-set loss to No. 6 Pepperdine, and the week concluded with a sweep against No. 4 USC.

After falling short against the three teams, the Nittany Lions moved to 11-7 on the year.

Here's a look at what happened during their road trip.

Serving issues

The blue and white left the West Coast with a mere nine service aces across the three games played. The matches against Long Beach State and USC saw one ace each, while the Pepperdine match saw seven.

However, the Nittany Lions tallied a total of 41 service errors across the three games. Gaige Gabriel had two aces against Pepperdine, his only two of the week, but logged a total of nine service errors.

In general, serving has remained a weaker part of the blue and white's game this season. It currently totals 83 ser-

vice aces, while also totaling 274 service errors.

This week was no different. Allowing too many aces for the opposition has also been an issue for the blue and white. Across the three West Coast games, Penn State allowed 29 service aces.

The blue and white's leader in aces this year, Owen Rose, only put up one ace in all three games. Despite leading the team, Rose ranks No. 61 in the NCAA in aces per set. Notably, the redshirt senior is the highest-ranked Nittany Lion in this category.

Ranked No. 27 in the NCAA in aces per set, there's definitely room for improvement for the Penn State squad.

That's not to say it's all negative. Tristan Hassell tallied three service aces against Pepperdine. With 10 aces on the year, and only a freshman, his future with the Nittany Lions looks bright.

Blocking struggles

The Nittany Lions entered the week of West Coast games as the No. 3 team in the NCAA in blocks per set. In fact, the number of blocks they have put up this season has been remarkable.

Most notably, Rose broke a school record earlier this season after tallying 14 blocks in a match against Harvard. The middle blocker currently totals 81 blocks on the year and entered the road trip at No. 2 in the NCAA in blocks per set, eventually claiming the top spot in the nation.

the batter's box, and struggled to find consistency in the circle.

This year is as different as Crowell, with five pitchers that she can regularly rely on, and they're going to be the key to the blue and white's success in Big Ten play.

Penn State's pitching had been pretty much on point this season, but against a high-octane Oregon team, the staff had its struggles.

"This weekend, honestly, when I look at it, maybe it was good for our pitching staff, because we really haven't had this happen," Crowell said.

"We've had so much success in the circle this year that this is a good eye opener for our staff and of the importance of starting fast."

Starting fast and setting the tone of the game in the circle is what the Nittany Lions have a game plan to do against a Wisconsin team batting .343. "It's going to be a series where the pitching is going to have to hold them down," Crowell said. "But we're going to have to out-hit them, and I think we can do that."

To email reporter: gmd5738@psu.edu
To follow her on X: [@giannamd32](https://twitter.com/giannamd32)

SKATERS EARN POSTSEASON ACCOLADES

By **Maggie Hardy**
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Six Penn State skaters were honored with Big Ten post-season accolades on Wednesday. Gavin McKenna led the way, being awarded the Big Ten Freshman of the Year after posting a conference-leading 51 points.

The top 2026 NHL draft prospect also earned the title of Big Ten Scoring Champion, tallying 11 goals and 27 assists in 24 conference games.

The forward's 38 points are the second-most ever by a conference scoring champion, only behind longtime NHL forwards Kyle Connor and Cole Caufield, who each put up 43 points in their respective seasons.

Both of McKenna's accolades made program history, as the first Nittany Lion to be named the top freshman or to earn the conference scoring title.

Both McKenna — being the lone unanimous rookie selection — and defenseman Jackson Smith also earned spots on both the All-Big Ten Second Team and All-Freshman Team.

Smith leads all conference blueliners with 11 goals and 15 assists, helping to earn the blue and white's single-season defenseman goal record earlier this year.

Joining their classmates in the awards, junior forwards Aiden Fink and Matt DiMarsico, alongside freshman goaltender Josh Fleming and alternate captain Jarod Crespo, were named as All-Big Ten Honorable Mentions. Crespo was also awarded Penn State's Big Ten Sportsmanship Award recipient to round out the honors.

To email reporter: mah7305@psu.edu
To follow him on X: [@MaggieHardy22](https://twitter.com/MaggieHardy22)

Frozen in history

By Dominic Megats
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Head coach Jeff Kampersal, joined alongside Maddy Christian and Kendall Butze, entered a full media room for an uncommon weekday conference on Monday.

Although out of the ordinary, the meeting is historic as Penn State prepares to make its first appearance in the Frozen Four. In addition to playing in it, the Nittany Lions are set to host the rest of the final rounds of the tournament for only the second time.

To reach this monumental achievement, it had to be a goal worked towards throughout the years.

“I think (ending the season at home) has been in the back of our minds since freshman year,” Kendall Butze said. “We’ve known we’re going to host the 2026 Frozen Four for quite some time now. So, I think trying to get the program to a position where we can actually make that a realistic goal for ourselves is something that we’ve been talking about for a few years now.”

For Butze and the rest of the senior class, the focus is now turned to finishing this long-term achievement before leaving Penn State.

With eight total players reaching the end of their collegiate careers, an idea of “finality” grows as they head into their practices for the week.

“It could almost be like a starting pitcher in baseball, where next year’s team will be a brand new team,” Kampersal said. “We lose over a third of our players. Randomly, last Monday’s practice never felt like ‘oh my gosh, this could be our last Monday practice’ and this week there is finality to it.”

Before Kampersal filled the role of head coach for Penn State, the program had accomplished only one winning season. Since then, the reputation has grown over the years, culminating in this historic season.

However, Kampersal gives all the credit to his players and believes the steady upward trend the program is on is due to the efforts of his players.

“These women are dedicated. Dedicated in the weight room and dedicated on the ice,” Kampersal said. “When we got here, there was maybe one player on open ice. Now, players ask the coaches to go out and skate on their own, and that’s just a huge difference. There’s way more coaching and way more involvement in those first years. Now, we guide, but do little. The players do all the work, they let us know when they’re tired and they let us know when we need to push them harder.”

With adding history to an already historic season, consistent awareness around the team grows, filling more seats at Pegula Ice Arena than normal.

A heightened significance and

importance weigh on the shoulders of the Nittany Lions as they look to win the first national championship in Penn State hockey history. Additionally, the thought of winning in front of their home crowd adds to the motivation.

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To email reporter: djm7646@psu.edu
Follow him on X @dom_megats7



Noah Aberegg/Collegian

Forward Tessa Janecke (15) points her finger in the air during the 2026 AHA Women’s Championship Game.

Kampersal, players talk Frozen Four

By Andrew Mercer
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

Team culture

No. 3 Penn State women’s hockey’s 2025-26 season continues to make history. After hosting an outdoor game at Beaver Stadium, winning a fourth-consecutive AHA Championship and hosting its first-ever NCAA Regional, the Nittany Lions defeated No. 6 UConn, 3-0, to advance to a program-first Frozen Four appearance.

The blue and white — the hosts of the 2026 Women’s Frozen Four — are set to face No. 2 Wisconsin at Pegula Ice Arena on Friday at 7:30 p.m.

Ahead of the biggest game in Penn State women’s hockey history thus far, coach Jeff Kampersal, forward Maddy Christian and defenseman Kendall Butze took to the podium to discuss the implications of the upcoming weekend.

Frozen Four

Penn State is the lone program to make its debut in this year’s Frozen Four, with Wisconsin, Ohio State and Northeastern all having played in multiple in the past. The Badgers and the Buckeyes have gone all the way to the national championship game together for the past three years, with Wisconsin winning in 2023 and 2025 while Ohio State won in 2024.

This is the second time Pegula Ice Arena has hosted the Frozen Four, having previously hosted it in 2022.

“(Hosting has) been in the back of our heads since freshman year, to be completely honest,” Butze said. “We’ve known we were going to host the 2026 Frozen Four for quite some time now. Trying to get the program to a position where we can actually make that a realistic goal for ourselves was something that we’ve been talking about for a few years now.”

With a graduating class of six seniors and two graduate students, the Nittany Lions’ post-season success began with the freshman season for the Class of 2026. The senior class propelled Penn State into the limelight with conference success and four consecutive national tournament appearances.

Now — with Penn State’s core being mature — Kampersal’s squad found national tournament success as well, winning its first national tournament game in program history.

“Coming in, freshman year, freshman summer, and we all were just best friends,” Christian said. “Instantly. We all clicked. We all connected. Everybody is a different human at different times, but we also are different hockey players and I think that’s what makes us so good, because we appreciate one another so much. We’ve gone through this together.”

When asked about the biggest achievements this season, Christian noted that the “culture” actively aided the on-ice success.

“The women in our locker room are really loud,” Kampersal said. “They get along with each other. And it’s, it’s the loudest team that I’ve ever coached, and that’s been a long time. They’re helpful, academically, socially, whatever it is on the ice, they’re there for one another. That connectivity matters when we hit the ice, too.”

Team chemistry is important. Whether it be on-ice passing or off-ice relationships, that connection is what breeds teamwork. Butze added her experience with the team’s on and off-ice relationship.

“I know that we put a lot of work in,” Butze said. We meet weekly as a team. We really enjoy each other’s company. We hang out off the ice so much, which isn’t different from previous years, but it’s just something that’s built the connection between upperclassmen, freshmen and sophomores, which I think is really important.”

The current home indoor attendance record was set on Oct. 6, 2018, with a crowd of 1,804, when Penn State faced Merrimack. Recently, the Nittany Lions drew a crowd of 1,615 for the regional final game against UConn.

“It’s really special to be able to host the AHA Tournament, NCAA Regionals and the Frozen Four,” Butze said. “We love playing in front of the Roar Zone, in front of Hockey Valley. Having that support and just knowing we’re gonna go out and we’re gonna do everything we can for our fans and for each other has just made it a lot easier.”

Community support

It’s no secret that Penn State doesn’t draw the same crowds that the other programs get. The program record for attendance was set at Beaver Stadium with 1,838 spectators. However, with the Frozen Four coming to Hockey Valley, the Pegula Ice Arena is primed to host an electric crowd for the top four teams in the country.

“We have a really dynamite team, and still struggle to fill Pegula,” Kampersal said. “People go to a women’s volleyball game — deservedly so; they’re amazing athletes — and they fill up 5,000 fans and then maybe (the men’s volleyball team) doesn’t get as much. So I’m not sure why there’s a differential, but hopefully on Friday, Hockey Valley will show up and support because they deserve it.”

To email reporter: asm6548@psu.edu
Follow him on X @amerc0115



Noah Aberegg/Collegian

The team raises the trophy in the air after the 2026 AHA Women’s Championship Game between Penn State women’s hockey and Mercyhurst in Pegula on Saturday, March 7, 2026 in University Park, Pa.

SCOUTING THE BADGERS

By Andrew Mercer
THE DAILY COLLEGIAN

History is in the making in Hockey Valley.

Following a 3-0 victory over No. 6 Connecticut in the University Park Regional Final on Saturday afternoon, No. 3 Penn State is set to make its debut in the NCAA Women’s Frozen Four against the defending national champions, No. 2 Wisconsin, at Pegula Ice Arena at 7:30 p.m. on Friday.

Tale of the tape

The Nittany Lions enter their first Frozen Four as the four-time AHA Tournament Champions, taking down No. 12 Mercyhurst, 3-2, in the AHA Championship game held at Pegula Ice Arena. With a 33-5 overall record, the blue and white earned the right to host the Huskies and No. 9 Princeton for one of the four regionals.

Meanwhile, the Badgers — although holding the No. 1 ranking for the majority of the regular season — lost the spot to conference-rival Ohio State when the Buckeyes claimed a 2-1 victory in the WCHA Final Face-Off.

Wisconsin played in the previous three national championship games, each time facing Ohio State, and won two of the three contests.

Wisconsin has a similar record to Penn State, currently 33-4-2. The Badgers, however, maintain a strong, 9-1 nonconference record. Wisconsin defeated No. 7 Quinnipiac, 6-0, in the Madison Regional Final game to move on to its fourth-consecutive Frozen Four.

Olympic gold medalists

Wisconsin sent five current players to the Olympic Games, four of whom took home the gold medal for Team USA alongside Tessa Janecke. The Nittany Lions sent three players to the 2026 Milano-Cortina Olympic Games: Janecke, Team Sweden’s Nicole Hall and Team Italy’s Matilde Fantin.

Janecke and her Olympic teammate Caroline Harvey are two of the top-three finalists for the 2026 Patty Kazmaier Memorial Award for the nation’s top player.

Harvey has tallied 62 points for the Badgers, split between 18 goals and 44 assists, sitting only behind Lacey Eden — who didn’t travel overseas — who’s accumulated 72 points. Janecke, Penn State’s top offensive producer, scored 24 goals and added 22 assists for 46 points this season.

Fellow skating Olympians, Team USA’s Kirsten Simms, Laila Edwards and Team Czechia’s Adela Sapovalivova rank in the top-seven point producers. Simms sits in third with 56 points while Edwards and Sapovalivova have tallied 42 and 32 points, respectively.

Wisconsin’s starting goaltender, Ava McNaughton, filled Team USA’s third-string role.

McNaughton and Penn State’s Katie DeSa are tied for first in the nation, each with a 1.27 goals-against average, while McNaughton holds a slight edge in save percentage with a .941 compared to DeSa’s .939. However, DeSa leads the nation

with 12 shutouts in 30 games, while McNaughton put up eight shutouts in 30 games.

Underdogs take on blue bloods

Penn State has a short history in the national tournament, previously falling in the Regional Semifinals for the past three seasons. This season, with a mature senior class featuring Janecke, the Nittany Lions won their first NCAA Tournament game to advance to their first Frozen Four appearance.

The blue and white have only faced a single team from the WCHA this year: Ohio State. Inside the OSU Ice Rink in Columbus, Ohio, the Nittany Lions struggled to find their stride and were swept, 5-1 in Game 1 and 4-1 in Game 2, respectively.

While Penn State’s new standard became winning AHA Championships, the national success is a recent occurrence. On the other hand, with eight national championships, Wisconsin is the winningest program in collegiate women’s hockey history.

The Badgers have a history of the world’s top talent, dating back to the 2005-06 season when Wisconsin won its first national championship. The pool of talented alumni includes countless professionals such as Hilary Knight, who helped the Badgers take home the 2011 National Championship in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Penn State’s seeking to become a “blue blood” program, among the likes of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Ohio State, with a senior class that redefined the team’s standard.

To email reporter: asm6548@psu.edu
Follow him on X @amerc0115



Noah Aberegg/Collegian

Forward Maddy Christian (26) defends during the 2026 AHA Women’s Championship Game.