

The Zips Play Hard, Just Not Great

by Captain Kangaroo September 4, 2017 — ZipsNation.org

The sweet, smokey smell of barbeque hung heavy in the air. RV's encircled Beaver Stadium by the hundreds, and tailgating tents stretched across the hillside as far as the eye could see. A driving rain, courtesy of the remnants of hurricane Harvey, could do nothing to dampen the massive celebration of college football's Opening Day in State College Pennsylvania.

Inside Beaver Stadium, the weather had obviously taken a bit of a toll on the attendance. As the rains subsided near kick off, the seats were roughly half full. From the press box high above the field, the Zips gold and white uniforms and accompanying golden helmets made it look like a Notre Dame / Penn State game.

After the Zips' Van Edwards let the opening kickoff roll out of the endzone, Akron lined up for the game's first offensive play, a nice 9 yard run by Warren Ball. Little did the Zips know, that would be their best running play of the day. By a long shot.

The Zips garnered a first down, courtesy of a Woodson to Chapman connection. But the Penn State defense, as it would all day long, wreaked havoc in the Zips backfield and forced the first of Nick Gasser's tale-telling eleven punts.

Penn State drove the ball down the length of the field mostly on the strength of Trace McSorely's nimble feet. The heady Heisman candidate QB mixed a couple pass completions with three nice runs before lobbing an ill-advised endzone interception by the Zips Zach Guiser.



Zach Guiser gets on early interception in the endzone. Photo: ZipsNation.org

In the post game press conference, Guiser spoke on the play: *"The tight end went left, so I had the middle. Sometimes you just happen to be in the right place at the right time. Later on, it (intercepting a ball in Beaver Stadium end zone) will be something I can look back on. My parents both went to Penn State, so it was special. But I wish the outcome was different. We just lost fifty two to nothing, so I'm more focused on rallying the troops right now."*

The Zips offense quickly went 3-and-out, DeAndre Tomkins took the ensuing punt to the house, and the Nittany Lions never looked back. At the end of the first half, the score was 35-0. On the Penn State scoreboard, they phonetically spelled it out: 35 - N-O-T-H-I-N-G. Ouch.

At the half, the Zips were outgained 358 yards to 69. Ouch. The lone first half bright spot for the Zips was the overall play of Zach Guiser, who, in addition to his INT, ended up with 10 tackles on the day. The second half was no more competitive than the first, with the Penn State offensive and defensive lines dominating, and McSorely and Barkley ripping off explosive play after explosive play.

As the 3rd quarter closed, the PA system and Penn State fans belted-out Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer." The Nittany Lions were indeed "halfway there," halfway to 90 points, and halfway to 1,000 total yards. When the 4th quarter came to a merciful end, the teams shook hands, and the wounded Zips returned to their locker room. The dream of upsetting a Top 10 team long since evaporated.

The Penn State players gathered in front of their student section, a few thousand strong, and sang the school alma mater. Afterwards, the players formed a line and each rang the "Victory Bell" before jogging through a tunnel of adoring fans to the locker room. In the Penn State media room, scores of television and newspaper reporters, along with an equal number of cameramen and photographers, assembled for interviews with the Nittany Lion players and staff. The band pounded out the Penn State fight song from the stands above.

In a small, poorly lit cinder block room that is the "Visitors Media Center" sat a dejected Terry Bowden, and an exhausted, downtrodden Zach Guiser and Thomas Woodson. There were no adoring fans. No TV cameras. No radio reporters. No paper media.

While making no excuses, Coach Bowden didn't see this loss as defining the potential of the 2017 Zips football team. *"When you don't play a good game, against a very very good team, this is kind of what happens. Penn State is preseason ranked #6, and looks a lot better this year than they were last year. You look at all the MAC teams that upset Big 10 programs. They aren't upsetting the Top 10 ones, their upsetting the ones at the bottom of their conference. You learn from it. We played a lot of people. Last year we gave up 50+ to Wisconsin, and our only touchdown was on a punt return. When you lose 52-0 like today, there ain't a lot of good that you feel. But how'd we feel after the Wisconsin game? You come off the field disappointed. You come off with that sick feeling. But it's how you respond to something like that. We're going to leave this game expecting to make the very same strides we made in between Wisconsin and Marshall last season. We put up more points on Marshall than anyone in the history of their stadium."* He added – *"Oklahoma beat us 41-3...we didn't score a touchdown, and we won a bowl game that season."*

Unlike the 2016 Wisconsin game, the Zips appeared to have survived this Top 10 battle with only minor injuries. *"We have a couple of guys with sore ankles. But hopefully they're nothing serious. We had about five penalties in that last defensive series. Other than that, we had a pretty good game as far as penalties were concerned. On every one of those penalties I was making notes on what we need to correct. We had 1 turnover. And that was a deep ball on third down...that's as good as a punt. It put them inside the twenty. Also – Austin Wolf is out. Hopefully he's back next week. He's a taller receiver. We'll be better on the deep ball when he's in. Our guys today were shorter, and (Penn State) did a great job of coverage. We didn't have many situations where guys were open deep, and we just didn't get the ball to them."*

As far as Woodson was concerned, Penn State didn't do anything the Zips hadn't seen in their game preparation – *"They just made plays. They didn't do anything crazy that none of us had ever seen before. They just executed with whatever they called and made plays."*

Guiser echoed those sentiments on the defensive side of the ball. *"They ran the personnel we expected the entire game. They're very vanilla with what they do. They have some stud players, and they just get the ball in their hands. They did bring their backup quarterback in and ran some read-option stuff that was different. We hadn't seen that. All in all, they just came out and executed better than we did, and that's the way it went down."*

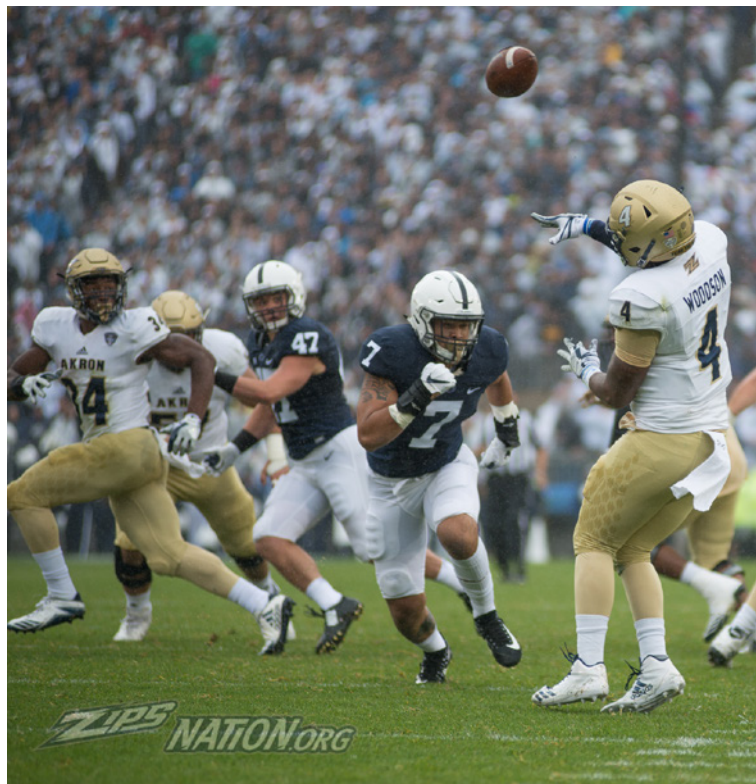
The loss' severity took the joy out of Woodson's return to the playing field – *"I was happy to be out playing again with my brothers. It wasn't any fun last year watching your brothers go through that (season-ending 5 game losing streak) and you can't help them. I'm happy to be playing again. But we lost the game. And that's something I'm not fine with."* When ask how the shoulder feels, he replied *"I'm fine."* Was he feeling rusty? *"You can say 'rust,' but it was more like a reality check that football's here."*

With Lane and Natson now pursuing their NFL dreams, was it difficult throwing to so many new, different wide receivers? *"It's no different, to be honest. The new guys gotta know it's their time to step up. It's their time."* Woodson spoke of the difficulty his line experienced – *"Their front 4 guys, they do a great job. They were coming with different twists. It's something we gotta work on. We gotta pick it up."*

Guiser spoke on where he feels this Penn State team ranks on his list of difficult opponents. *"It's hard to say exactly at this point. Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Penn State – they are all very good football teams. And all very different football teams. Oklahoma went to the final four that year. They tried to beat us with a fast pace. Wisconsin tried to run the ball down our throat. And Penn State just did a little bit of everything. Those three are definitely the best we've seen so far."*

Bowden summed up the day – *"We played hard, we just didn't play great."*

With the Zips million-dollar game check secured, it's back to Akron and Arkansas Pine Bluff. If all goes as expected the tables will turn, and Zips players will have their 50+ point win and gaudy statistics to celebrate while Zips fans hoist \$7 beers InfoCision and dance on their Jumbotron. And the following week, with the mismatch "money game" and the "FCS scrimmage" in the season's rear-view mirror, we'll all get to gauge the true timber of the 2017 Akron Zips.



Thomas Woodson hits Warren Ball on a screen play. Photo: ZipsNation.org