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"I think it's his stature and the demeanor of his voice. It's very terrifying."

Vikings cornerback Patrick Peterson on Za'Darius Smith

With sacks and a smile

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"Other than myself?" he says with a laugh, but only half-jokingly.

"I'd say the one kid from Dallas. He plays all over the field. Similar a little bit to me."

The kid in Dallas is second-year pro Micah Parsons, a do-everything linebacker who won Defensive Rookie of the Year last season. He'll be trying to wreak havoc on Kirk Cousins on Sunday after being held without a quarterback pressure for the first time in his career in last week's overtime loss to the Packers at Lambeau Field.

The gambling site sportsbetting-dime.com lists Parsons as the Defensive Player of the Year front-runner (-250). 49ers edge rusher Nick Bosa is next (+750), followed by Patriots edge rusher Matthew Judon (+1000). Then come Cleveland edge rusher Myles Garrett and Raiders edge rusher Maxx Crosby (+3000), followed by Smith, Buffalo edge rusher Von Miller and Chiefs tackle Chris Jones (+4000).

Judon leads the league in sacks with 11½. Smith and Bosa are next at 9½. Parsons has eight. Smith, however, has a league-leading 55 pressures, according to Pro Football Focus. Bosa is second with 45 followed by Judon with 44. Parsons has 40. Danielle Hunter, the Vikings' other edge rusher, has 38 pressures to go along with six sacks after injuries cost him all of 2020 and all but six games of 2021.

"Z's special, man," said Vikings outside linebackers coach Mike Smith, who also spent the last three years in Green Bay. "So much of his value is his ability to move around, go inside. He's got the size to do it, yeah, but he's also meaner than a rattlesnake."

Hunter thought he was a jerk

Za'Darius Smith was flirting with Cleveland in free agency until the Browns re-signed Jadeveon Clowney. He then agreed to return to Baltimore, which drafted him out of Kentucky in the fourth round in 2015.

A call from Mike Smith changed that. The coach had followed Mike Pettine, former Packers defensive coordinator, to Minnesota.

"Z knows how hard I work for him and obviously what happened in Green Bay and why I'm here and how we play them twice a year," Mike Smith said. "I think that was enough selling. I think it took about two minutes."

That sounds about right, according to Za'Darius, who was part of three 13-win seasons, notching 13½ sacks in 2019 and 12½ in 2020 as the Packers reached back-to-back NFC title games.

"I felt like I was a big part of that success," he said. "When I got there, I was like, 'What can I do to change the vibe in the locker room?'"

"People were telling me about Green Bay, how there's nothing there. There's nothing to do. I was like, 'Man, if I'm going to pour myself into Green Bay, I got to pour into this team, this locker room.' I don't know what changed over there. They got rid of all of us, like your core guys you wanted to get rid of, and I didn't understand that. They said it was my contract. Hell, they could have fixed that."

The two Smiths, as gregarious as ever, picked right up where they left off, closer than ever as they focused on the season opener, which became a rout of the Packers. They noticed how quiet and reserved Hunter was at first.

"We're about two, three weeks in and Danielle just didn't say much," Mike Smith said. "He was kind of standoffish. After he started to kind of open up, I asked him what was going on. He said, 'I really thought Z was a jerk because of how he plays. I thought he was going to come in and order everybody around.'"

"Then D realized Z is nice. Z's just that big red dog. What's the old cartoon? Clifford the Big Red Dog? That's Z."

Today, no two players in the locker room are closer than Z and D.

"D took us to the movies, the new Black Panther movie [last week]," Z said. "I think probably half the team showed up."

"The people behind the desk saw me with my little son getting popcorn and they was like, 'I'm a Packer fan! But I just love you! Can I take a picture?' I was like, 'All right, it's all good.'"

A couple weeks before that, Hunter paid for dinner and tickets to a Timberwolves game for all the outside linebackers and Mike Smith.

"Z definitely brought him out of his shell," Mike Smith said.



Life as a Viking agrees with Smith

Za'Darius Smith is smiling. His 1-year-old son, Zayvion, is smiling. All is right in Smith's first season with the Vikings. The former Packer's play — he is tied for second in the NFL with 9½ sacks — and his locker room presence are big reasons the Vikings take an 8-1 record into today's game against Dallas. "Z's special, man," said Vikings outside linebackers coach Mike Smith.

Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ, ELIZABETH FLORES, ANTHONY SOUFFLÉ and JERRY HOLT
Star Tribune

Locker room leader

Za'Darius Smith was asked to give a scouting report on each of the top candidates for NFL Defensive Player of the Year. Including himself.

"Oh, man, Za'Darius Smith," he said. "Great guy. One of a kind. Family guy. One hell of an athlete. One hell of a football player. Loves to smile. Loves to have people around him that's happy because I'm all about good vibes."

The Vikings' locker room already had several leaders. Most of them are quiet. All of them are quieter than Smith.

"It's important to have a guy like that," said inside linebacker Jordan Hicks. "Especially when he's also one of your best players."

By now, the entire universe has seen the social media footage of how the Vikings celebrate road victories. The nerdy quarterback has suddenly become "Kirko Chainz" because he took the wearing of his teammates' necklaces to another level when he did so shirtless in a video shot on board the team's flight home from Washington.

Who got Cousins to ditch his shirt? Za'Darius Smith, of course.

"The time before that, he had his shirt tucked in," Smith said. "This time, I said, 'All right, let's go, but you got to make it look good. You got to take your shirt off.'"

A week later in Buffalo, it was Smith who decided it was time for Patrick Peterson to don the chains.

"Za'Darius actually bullied me into wearing the chains," Peterson said. "First, I denied him about five or six times. And then I was like, 'All right, I'll do it.'"

So, Pat P, what is it about Smith's personality that he can control the team's quarterback and its potential Hall of Fame-bound cornerback?

"I think it's his stature and the demeanor of his voice," Peterson said. "It's very terrifying. You just can't say no to him. It's like, 'All right, sir, yes, gotcha.'"

It's not just the sacks

Smith had three sacks against the Cardinals three weeks ago. Two weeks ago, he had no sacks at Washington.

"His grade for Washington was higher than Arizona," Mike Smith said. "Don't get me wrong. He played great against the Cardinals. But Washington was one of his best games of the year because of how many times he affected the quarterback. He had like 13, 14, 15 pressures."

Za'Darius also had a season-high two batted passes and helped Hunter get one of his two sacks by lining up just inside Hunter, who was in a three-point stance at left end. Z said he knew by the pre-snap calls that the center was directing the protection away from Z and D, which is rare. That left Z to occupy guard Trai Turner, freeing up D for a more favorable one-on-one matchup with slow-footed right tackle Cornelius Lucas.

"They play off each other's skill sets," Mike Smith said. "If there's a tackle or guard that wants to give up his chest and play on his heels, I'll probably send Z after that guy. If there's a tackle who's a bit slow-footed, can't get out of his kick slide great, I'm going to send Danielle after him."

Za'Darius Smith said he feels like a young 30. He hopes the Vikings agree as he heads toward his 31st birthday on Sept. 8.

Smith's three-year, \$42 million contract came with only \$6.45 million guaranteed. Another \$5 million will be guaranteed if he's still on the roster on March 19. His base salary for next year is \$9.45 million, up from this year's \$1.45 million.

"I only played one year of high school football because I was a basketball guy," Smith said. "So I really only have like 12 years of playing football in me. And I love this game, man."

Even with all the success in Green Bay, Smith has never been on a team that's started 9-1.

"We've been winning, and a lot of people didn't expect us to be the ones doing that," Smith said. "You come to work, you're happy, and that makes a big difference."

"If we continue to stay humble and not let 7-1 or 10-1 or 12-1 get to us, man, we'll be a great football team. I think this team can go all the way."

Of course, the Vikings still have eight regular-season games to take care of first. The Packers can probably imagine how Smith envisions the Jan. 1 game at Lambeau Field unfolding. The smile says it all.