

For STEPHEN A. SMITH, Research, Hot Takes & Loving Sports Pays Off

THE ESPN HOST AND COMMENTATOR EARNS THE PRESS CLUB'S JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

BY JOHN GITTELSOHN

Stephen A. Smith won't shut up. That's a feature, not a bug.

He's built a career delivering opinions, starting as a college sports writer at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, becoming a sports columnist at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and, most prominently, appearing as a commentator at ESPN.

Since he started on ESPN's "First Take" in 2012, he's averaged 3,500 opinions a year. That's more than 42,000 hot takes—often harsh, raw, never boring, never equivocating, without fear or favor, aired live for millions of viewers and passionate fans. Smith is often wrong, but never in doubt.

"I've had to piss off someone *every single day*," he wrote in his 2023 memoir *Straight Shooter*. "I make enemies daily."

Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club is honoring Smith with the Joseph M. Quinn Award for Lifetime Achievement. Previous recipients include Bill Whitaker, Lester Holt, Andrea Mitchell, Seymour Hersh, Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw.

"It means a lot to me because it highlights how passionate and serious I am about my craft, reporting fairness, accuracy and truth, and being fearless in doing so," Smith said of his selection. "These are the attributes of Joseph Quinn, and these are the attributes I want associated with my name. I never thought something like this would ever happen to me."

Smith was born in the Bronx, New York, in October 1967, the youngest of six children of parents originally from the U.S. Virgin Islands. He grew up in Hollis, Queens, in a home with one working bathroom that "often didn't work," he wrote in his memoir. His sisters shared clothing purchased at Goodwill. He was always hungry. He would hide boxes of cereal from his siblings—usually behind the radiator—so he'd have something to eat for breakfast. He put sugar on everything, when he could get it.

Smith was held back two years in elementary school because he struggled to read. He suffered from undiagnosed dyslexia, which he overcame thanks to patient tutoring by his sister. Perhaps because he struggled to read, he compensated by becoming a master of mouthiness.

"From very early on, I just knew how to talk," he wrote. "I didn't try to emulate anybody, didn't try to create a distinctive voice. It all just got slapped together and came out in the form of a sharp tongue and a talent for rapid-fire, informed responses. I always had something to say and always had a comeback for everybody—everybody, that is, except my mom. When she talked, it was the beginning and the end of the conversation."

His mother raised the kids and paid the bills, because his father abandoned the family.

The one thing Smith got from his father was a love of sports. They would watch whatever was on TV, his father cursing, making play-by-play calls, second-guessing the coaches and athletes along with the sportscasters of the 1970s and



Smith at his desk in the studio.

Far left: On the "Real Time with Bill Maher" show with Congressman Adam Schiff.

Left: Is former tight end Shannon Sharpe giving Smith an earful?

Opposite page: Smith is introduced by the Chicago Bulls basketball team mascot.



'80s—Bryant Gumbel, Brent Musburger, Jimmy the Greek, Bob Costas and especially Howard Cosell.

Cosell's Brooklyn accent sounded local to Smith. He admired how the unathletic sportscaster with the bad comb-over and the nasal delivery could match wits with co-hosts on "Monday Night Football" or go into the verbal ring with Muhammad Ali.

"Cosell's success cemented my belief that even a kid from Hollis, Queens, could be a major

player in sports broadcasting," Smith wrote. "I didn't have to play professionally to pull it off."

Smith played college hoops before a disabling injury. He joined the school paper to cover the team, writing a column that Winston-Salem's legendary coach, Clarence "Big House" Gaines, should retire. The piece created an uproar, but Gaines came to Smith's defense, arguing that the student journalist "calls it as he sees it," and, "I have no problem with him doing what he did, because he looked me in the face and told

JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD
STEPHEN A. SMITH



Clockwise from above: Smith hangs with Snoop Dogg and welcomes former NFL safety, Ryan Clark, to his show; Smith sits in for a session on Boston's 98.5 Sports Hub radio station.



me beforehand. That's how you're supposed to handle things in life if you can," Smith recalled in his memoir. "Thus was Stephen A., Mr. Straight Shooter, born."

Smith has worked and lived in Los Angeles part time for much of the last two decades. He is one of the most prominent figures in sports journalism, which doesn't happen by accident.

"For me, this is not a job, it's a livelihood," Smith said. "I don't just work on sports. I live, eat, breathe sports and social commentary. I love to research and learn and know as much as I possibly can, and I love being able to disseminate the information I find out to the masses, in its truest and most accurate form, once the research is done."

His career has been a long climb from his roots, with some major slips along the way. One of his most controversial episodes came in 2014, when Ray Rice of the NFL's Baltimore Ravens was suspended for assaulting his then-fiancée, an altercation captured on security video that showed the running back delivering a knockout blow to a woman.

Smith talked on the air about the importance of looking into, "the elements of provocation. You've got to make sure that you address them because we've got to do what we can to try to prevent the situation from happening in any way." The comments seemed like Smith was blaming the victim. Although he apologized, he was sus-

pending. He called it "the most egregious mistake" of his career.

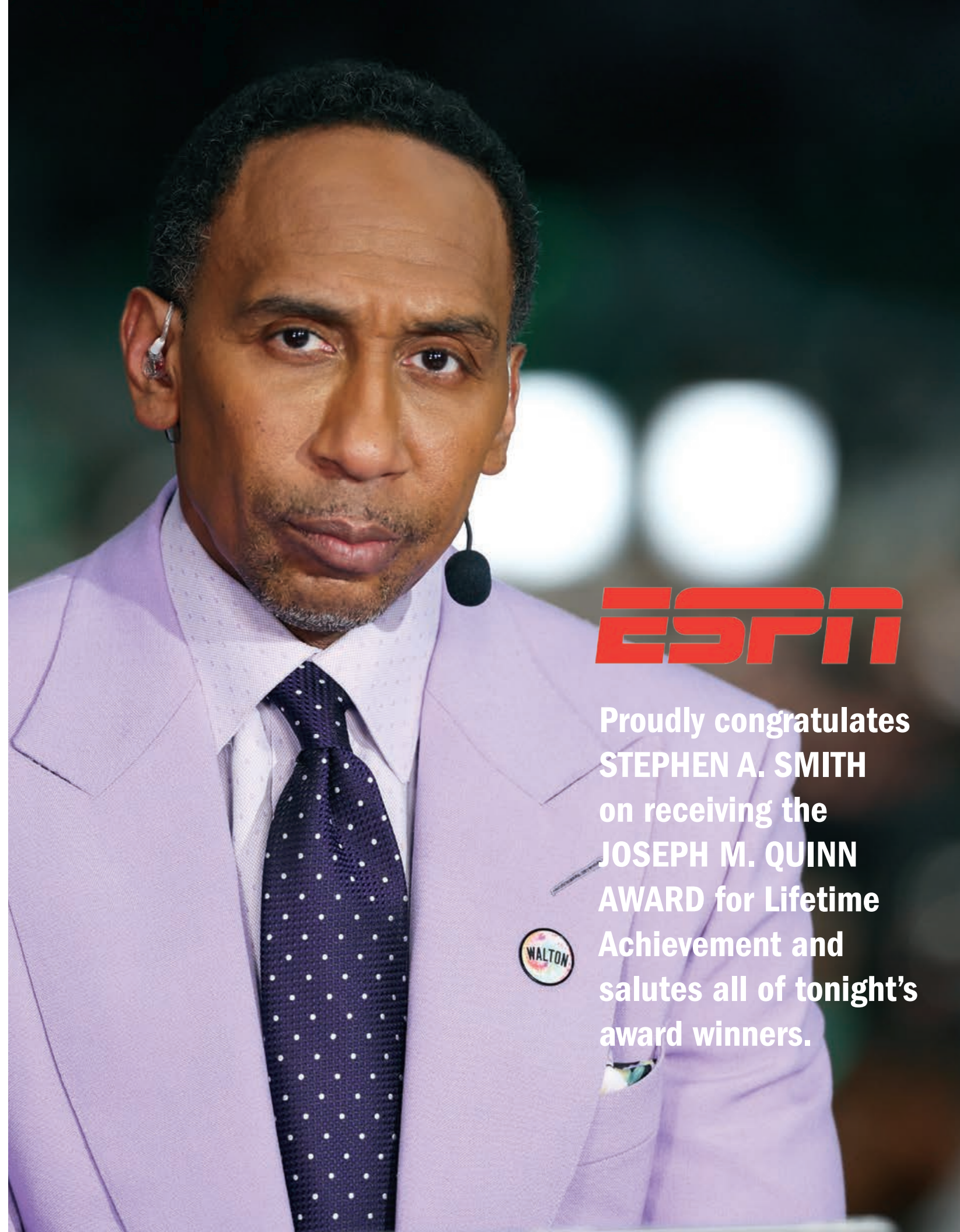
He learns from setbacks, like an athlete recovering from a defeat. The lessons include the importance of picking your partners and picking your fights. He's got bowls full of pearls of wisdom.

After getting let go by ESPN during a contract dispute, he concluded: "I'd forgotten the Golden Rule: those who have the gold make the rules."

On being a Black man in the media spotlight: "I've always said: White people come to work every single day with a job to do. Black folks come to work with a responsibility."

This article is going to print as the Dallas Mavericks play the Boston Celtics in the NBA Finals. A possible game seven is scheduled for the evening of the Press Club Awards. Smith apologizes in advance if that happens and he has to appear via a video speech, but he always puts work first.

"If Game 7 is the same night as the Press Club dinner, unfortunately I won't be able to attend the latter," he said in an email. "To receive such an award is an incredible honor, so one way or another, come hell or high water, whether virtually or in-person, I will be there. The attendees will hear my voice, my commentary, and my utmost gratitude." 🙏



ESPN

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