

# University of Minnesota Football Media Conference

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## P.J. Fleck

HEAD COACH FLECK: I wish I had more information for all of you at this particular time. I don't have a lot but I can say that individuals are still collecting a lot of information. That's why I'm not able to just say a lot of different things. I do know this: No charges were ever filed. Nobody was injured between Shannon and his male roommate. Shannon is back with our team. His status is evolving each day. And some of you are probably going to ask, was he cleared or not. Our plan all along was to get him back going into things and get him ready for the Nebraska game on Sunday. Obviously those things, as we continue to move forward, evolving and changing. But that's about as much as you can tell you, about as much as I know.

So with that, I will open it up for some questions.

### **Q. Are you waiting for the City Attorney's office to conclude their investigation before you go forward?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Well, I think a lot of people are collecting information. That's what I've been told. One thing we are always going to is make sure that we have every bit of information we possibly can before we make decisions.

Shannon understands that, and I know our administration understands that, as well.

### **Q. Will the final decision be yours?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Mark and I will make decisions collectively. One, I have a tremendous relationship with him. Hope he feels the same way about me and about making the next step and making those choices. We are both going to do that together. As I continue to reiterate, there were no charges and nobody was injured between a male and a male, and so just want to make sure I continue to reiterate that.

### **Q. When would you decide if he would go to Nebraska and play?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Again, I don't know when. I don't know when I would decide that. As more information comes in, then I'll make the decision. I wish I had a better answer for you, I really do. It's just without all the information at this point, it's hard for me to be able to say, yes, I'll tell you by this date. I don't know that.

### **Q. Is there a cutoff point this week where you have to know?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Not necessarily. There comes a time where if a kid doesn't practice, you're not going to play him in games.

### **Q. Have you talked to Shannon since?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Absolutely, yeah. He's back on the team. He's back on the team. He did not practice today, though, if you're asking that. He did not practice.

### **Q. Is that the plan going forward?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: I'm not going to do anything until all the information is in and we can make a decision on that.

### **Q. Looking back at the field, did your offensive line turn a corner?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Here's the thing about like the turn. That's a great question. I loved your question,

because you used a word called the turn, right. When we beat Fresno State, I told them: You got into the turn, because you defeated a culture. Fresno State's a culture, right, and that's a very, very strong culture and they have done a lot of things over a lot of years, and everybody knows when you say Fresno State what type of team you're going to have.

I said, you got into the turn. Now, the hardest part is going out of the turn. Into the turn is one thing, right. Talking about NASCAR and race car driving, not many crashes happen into the turn. It's as you starting to around it and start to come out of it, that's the hardest part to finish that curve. I think our offensive line has made huge strides. Huge strides. And especially you got two freshmen on the right side.

I think Daniel has provided a little spark. That does not mean Sam is not going to continue to play at some point. Daniel has to continue to get better.

There's times you watch the film and you're like, this guy is dominating, and other times, he looks lost, looking around for Coach Callahan, but that's what happens when you play a true freshman lineman.

As I said before, if he is going to make a mistake, at least you've got to run, like literally, around him to get somebody. You can't go through that man, right. And that had helped us a little bit again them; I would say that. I mean, you run for 170-some yards against Ohio State and the Freshman Big 10 Player of the Week in Mohamed Ibrahim, and everybody is like, who?

That's a good thing. You're starting to see all these freshmen and young players step up and become these recognizable players, and you start looking at them and you're thinking they are all young freshmen.

I think we took a step. Do I think we're out of the turn, no. I think our offensive line is in the turn and we went maybe ten feet farther into the turn, but we have a long way to go into developing that, from what my expectations are of a Big 10 offensive line consistently winning at a high level.

**Q. How excited do you get when you look at Daniel and Blaise on the right side and what might be?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: I get way more excited than probably all of you. You see now. You want this. You want that. Why weren't we doing this paragraph par listen, all the results that happened in this program is on me, 100 percent, because I make every decision. I make a decision to get younger before we get older, before we get more experience.

Now, some of the decisions you're forced into, but those are decisions that I've made. I haven't made the decision to bring in 20 junior college players. I made a decision to get younger. I've explained that to our team.

When you have seven scholarship seniors now that are playing for us, you have to explain that to them. But you also have to show, we are doing everything we can to win, now, and that's what I've shown by playing Daniel lately. So as we continue to grow, I see where we're going. That's what I'm excited about.

I get excited for tomorrow. And I know that whatever everybody thinks and has their own opinion, I know where this will be one day. Tomorrow is a big step for that to happen. Every day matters with this team. Everything they do matters. Everything they do in their life has to matter, and academically, athletically, socially, spiritually, it matters to me if you're ten minutes late to your class.

That matters to me because it should matter to you. It should matter if you're in the first two rows. It should matter that you talk to your professors. It should matter that you have a relationship. It should matter that you are walking down the street and actually have conversations with people, instead of just have your headphones on, your hood on and not talking to anybody.

It matters that, you know, that you do the right things on and off the field. It matters that you believe in a culture that's way bigger than yourself. Like all those things matter, and I can see it and I can see where it's going and I can see our team growing. This team is so exciting to coach. Today was unbelievable. I even told Gerrit at practice today, I'm having so much fun at practice. This is a great group to coach.

Now, because you have a lot of coaching to do. Sometimes you're like, all right and you have a team, like my fourth year at Western Michigan, I'm like, what do they do. They don't really need me. They are looking at me like, all right, Coach, we got it. This team needs to be coached, so we're coaching. It's a lot of fun.

**Q. What is the next step for the offensive line?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: As we continue to go, there's no number. There's no result where you say this is -- I just look at: How many mistakes are we making; what are the mistakes; are they -- is it a schematic issue? Is it a coaching issue? Is it a personnel issue? Everything that I look at, I break it down into three categories.

So when I watch film, that's what I'm looking at: Is it a schematic issue we're having an issue with? Is it, we're not teaching at a level that we need to teach at as coaches or is it a personnel issue. Every play is evaluated that way with me, and I think as we continue to grow, our personnel is going to grow. They will play together a lot more. I want to see them be able to execute our offense at a high level. I want to see them play up to their capability and they are doing that.

Now as they play up to their capability, a lot of them are really young, so their capability keeps going higher and higher. A guy like Blaise is a completely different player from last year, completely different person and that's what I want to see from him is that growth as an individual and that will eventually trickle down to the field playing better. Remember we are evaluating and looking at kids that are doing things for the first time, but way ahead of when they are supposed to be doing it.

It's like having a 9-year-old get keys to your car and say, when do we go get our driver's license. You okay at them like, hmmm?

And that's the position we're and they are playing at a high level, up to their capabilities, and our older guys are leading them and making our team even more connected.

So tremendous practice today, and I just want to keep seeing growth.

**Q. How did you and your coaching staff come across Mohamed in the recruiting process?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: That was a whirlwind. We get done with the Cotton Bowl. All of a sudden you're here and you slingshot into recruiting. You take a realize, you take a quick synopsis of the roster of what's happened. You look at the '14, '15, '16 -- or you look at the '13, '14, '15, '16 recruiting classes.

So you get a printout and say what did they have; what's here; what is left, what's the depth look like. And then you just, you do everything you can with no information of what the team is, what their strengths are what their weaknesses are.

You watch film and then you just make guesses. And then you've got to at least bring some people in because you know a lot of people from that last year were leaving, a lot of seniors. It was a senior-dominated led team.

And you look at, going okay, we're going to need running backs because you always need that, and you want to do everything you can -- we had a prior relationship with Mohamed recruiting him. We have a lot of connections in the D.C., Baltimore, Maryland area. He decided to come play here.

We knew him prior to being here, but it happened really fast. Just like everything when we came here. You have two and a half to three weeks to put a whole class together.

You know, especially when you become a head coach at a new place, and it was such a whirlwind that a lot of kid left, a lot of kids stayed committed. I remember I had kids telling me they were committed when they weren't. We had all types of different things. It was like, who do we believe, who do we not believe, how many scholarships do we have, who is in-state, who is out of-state.

But Mohamed Ibrahim, I'm just very thankful he's here. He should really be our third or fourth running back this year, and just like -- him and Bryce, they are both one and two, and they are both freshmen.

**Q. On Coughlin's pass rushing development?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: No, I think his game, he's chiseling his game. I think Marcus West has helped.

Remember, we wanted to put more pressure on the quarterback this year, and as a coach, you want to do everything you can to be able to do that without bringing 25 kids in to fix it.

And you've got to be able to do it with coaching and you've got to do it with development and you have to do it through recruiting.

I think when you see a guy like Boye Mafe get some snaps, he's helping on the other side because I think he elevates our talent level, along with Winston.

But Carter Coughlin is somebody who works so hard at his craft. He's always after practice, working on his game. Marcus West, our rush specialist, that's what he is, pass rush specialist. Let's get more pass rush.

His moves: His footwork, his hands, his leverage, his moves that he makes are way better. Why? Because he works on them every day. He's been working on them every day since January and I think he's starting to truly put a lot of fear in the offensive lines' or tackles' minds. You see a lot more chips, double teams, a lot more of people making sure that they know where he is.

But that's where the other guy has to be able to step in and step up, and even Big O had a really good game, the redshirt freshman Ezezi, Boye Mafe; you're talking about other freshmen that are helping Carter be able to get free.

**Q. From a practice standpoint, how does a guy who gives up that much weight on tackle, does it have to always be speed?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Well, Carter is surprisingly strong.

But when you look at Carter Coughlin, he looks like an outside backer, right, in a 3-4 scheme. He's a slender -- he's not like really thick in the back where you're sitting there going, man, this guy is just -- just -- just -- really, really strong, you can easily see it. He plays at such a high level. He has a Nekton Mentality. His how meter is through the roof.

He loves his life and he loves the game and that's what this culture is all about. He enjoys his teammates, getting better, the sweat, the grind, the failing, he enjoys the process.

He's a perfect example of what our culture is about, what our program is about and what being a Gopher is about.

He deserves a lot of that credit because yeah, I can put a coach in front of him and divvy up more individual time but he still has to put the work in. He's a perfect example for our young kids as they continue to watch, who do I want to be like? I want to be like Carter Coughlin.

**Q. Is there a significant change in his strength since last year?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: I think he's a lot stronger, absolutely. But as you look at him, he's not some huge defensive end but he understands leverage. He understands pad level. He understands his moves. He understands his weaknesses.

Part of being a really good football player I think is understanding your weaknesses, maybe even more than understanding your strengths. Because if you can hide your weaknesses develop more strengths around that is correct you can be a really good player and I think that's what he's done.

**Q. What have you noticed from some of the young defensive linemen in term of their development?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: You're going to see Jamaal Teague coming up here for a few games, being able to take advantage of the redshirt year. We're going to have to, as we keep going forward.

But I see a lot of guys growing up and it's not just -- they are physically stronger. They are getting there. But the mental and emotional approach to practice, to their life, to their academics, to their future, it's becoming a lot more important. When you get freshmen, if you take your entire team, most of the time, freshmen are the most immature. You all have children, your youngest is the most immature, maybe, and it's the same with a football team.

What we had to do this year was race to maturity. We had to get these young guys to grow up fast, because there's 32 of them on our two-deep and that's just the way it is. And they have to grow up really fast.

So a guy like Boye has grown up tremendously. We're talking about a young man who lost his mother earlier this year and you've got to grow up fast. You've got to grow up really fast and you're in a new place, new friends, change, and you don't have your support system like you used to, and you're playing and all these expectations and all this pressure is put upon you.

What these young men are doing is incredible to me. We can talk about the results and that's the bottom line. What they are doing is incredible because I get to see them every day and I get to see their development as men, and that's incredible to me. He's a prime example of what's coming out.

Jamaal Teague, same thing. Big Ezezi, redshirt freshman, he's going to play. He had a sack against Ohio State and you're looking at your program saying, if it wasn't Carter, who is it? Must be a freshman.

That's the position we're in, and as continue to add in recruiting 2019 and 2020. That's what we're elevating.

We're racing to get to those guys being juniors and seniors, so you can finally have that where you're just playing juniors and seniors every team at some point, where some teams in our league that have that cultural sustainability, are doing.

**Q. What can Brevyn Spann-Ford contribute later on this year?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Well, I can't wait to play him. Again he's a true freshman, so I'm expecting a lot because I like the way he plays, but we've got to be able to get him used to playing before next year.

And it's so hard. The hardest thing as a head coach, in my opinion, is when you're talking about these young

players, and you're talking about these red shirts and talking about playing them now, you're preparing them for the future, but Blake Cashman doesn't have the future after this year, and neither does carpenter or Peyton. They don't have next year. They have now. That's why we talked about season two. This is season two. Season one was 3-3. That's over. We're 0-0. We have learned a lot. We have grown up a lot in six games. We've grown up a lot.

Now what can we do. And again, springboarding off a championship team that we lost to, what can we one day do to become champions, whether it's Bowl champions, whatever.

We can still do things to accepted these seniors off on the right note and be able to play freshmen, more freshmen, that are going to help us do that.

Our seniors have been very mature about understanding that they know the position we're in. It's pretty obvious. You're talking about 50-some percent are freshmen. They are not looking around and seeing tons of juniors, tons of sophomores, tons of seniors and saying, why aren't you playing them. Why that's the position we were in.

So they are looking at it, saying, we know that kid. Brevyn Spann-Ford is a kid that can do that. He's 6-7, 265 pounds and he's getting better. Everything within my power to just hold him back; it's getting harder to do.

But you look at some of the other guys, Jake Paulson, freshman, playing better. Getting a lot better.

Bryce Witham had a really good game last week.

Ko is getting better. We're not where we need to be but we're getting better and that's what I want to see and Brevyn is going to be able to help that and we want to be able to get him in there at some point. We just have to again evaluate when that right time is, mentally, physically and emotionally.

**Q. What challenges does JD Spielman present?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Everything. JD Spielman presents everything. He's fast. He's explosive. He's dynamic. He catches the ball well. He's got a great catch radius. He blocks. He plays hard. They do a lot of things with him and they move him all over the field. He's got a tremendous center of gravity. He creates separation. He's a tremendous football player.

It's not just him. It's Stanley Morgan. You know, you've got him. You've got the quarterback where he's an incredibly dynamic runner. They have got a huge running back who we played against. He's got speed and he's got power.

Again you cannot look at this team and look at a record. This team could easily be 5-1, 4-2, easily. They have lost on strange oddities. If I would tell you stories of how they lost watching these games, you'd be like, no way.

So you can't look at that. This team is averaging close to 400, 500 -- 500 yards of offense a game. Again if you think just taking a pill or hiring somebody flips it like that, that's not reality in 2018 with certain situations.

You know, but they are very, very dangerous offensive football team and defensively. Their front seven, they are play a 3-4 and they are stout up front now, stout and their outside backers can run, inside guys can run, too, but they are box players, they tackle well and the back end has a ton of speed.

Their specialists can hurt you at any point. I don't know if you call him the backup running game, but he's very fast and explosive. In the kick return game, they moved towards him in the kick return game. And you have JD

doing a bit more of the punt return, so very dangerous.

And Martinez is a tremendous leader. You can see it. He's tough and he can lead.

**Q. Now that you get so many numbers in every last probability in the analytics, how has that over time affected your philosophy and other coaches in terms of fourth and short situations?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: Analytics are part of our game now. There's no getting around them. We use 78 percent, right, when you're talking about ball security, when you're talking about yellow punt, when you're talking about explosive plays, when you're talking about percentage of winning games.

I think one thing the analytics, that's hard when you're the head coach making the decisions you know your team better than anybody. The statistics are statistics for a reason. That's kind of an average of everybody.

Well, we're not everybody. We're us. So the human element has to be added to that statistical information. I'm huge in the statistical part. We have books upon books each week that come out to me through our quality control that give me stats, percentages, numbers.

But there are times where it depends if you trust your team or not, you fourth and one, you go for it; you fake a punt, you fake a punt, you trust them to get it done.

If it's fourth and five like we did against Ohio State, I felt like we had an opportunity to pip them down or do whatever or kick a field goal at that particular time. We had to make it a one-score game.

So maybe the chances in your own zone to go for it, I'm not sure what the stats say, but what the statistical information says might not necessarily match up to the human element, and when they actually match that's, when you can make those decisions.

**Q. Do you think that's made coaches more aggressive in valuing possession over field position?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: I think it's all based on the coach's personality.

I think it's all based on the knowledge he has of his team, what his team can do and what his team can't do. He's the only one that really knows that. The opponent really doesn't know all that information. You might know the stat part but field position is really important to me.

Time of possession and field position have all been very important to me. Now, part of that is part of, you know, a deception. That's why you fake things at times. But those are two things that have all been important to our program and our culture of how we've ran our offense and how we've built our defense and how we've handled special teams.

I would like to go for it on four downs. I would like to do that more often than not but fourth and nine is different than fourth and one, depending where you are on the field.

**Q. What does the defense need to do to stop the pass?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: When you look at where we're at, you have -- every team's got strengths and you have weaknesses and I'm not saying that's a weakness. That's somewhere we have to continue to get better.

When you don't have Terrell Smith and Antoine Winfield, Jr. -- we all talked beginning of the year saying, we have guys at the top that have played that are our best players, and then behind them are going to be very youth, very youthful and very inexperienced players where there's even going to be a lot of depth issues.

And I even said at the beginning, if we can stay healthy in the secondary we have a chance to do some things on defense. If we can gain experience fast with our young people and they are ready to play, we will be successful if our young guys are ready to play back there.

Terrell Smith, right now, and Howden, would probably be the two young guys in there. And you throw in Coney and Kiondre Thomas, they have to step up and be able to fill those gaps for the people who are not going to play.

But I think our front seven is playing really well. We played a top 20 team. We played a top two team, and Maryland, you know, beat us pretty good when it came down to the run part. We were able to stop the run, but again you've got to focus on what is our game plan, if -- not to sit there and say, if you're going to get beat, how are you going to get beat.

But what do we have to make sure we're always in the game. You start there and you continue to build your game plan around that.

Again, we have to be better at playing longer on the back end. And when you do that, you've got a chance. We've given up some big plays back there, whether it's been a dropped coverage or somebody dropped their guy. We can't do that.

**Q. With a young quarterback, I assume there's a million things swirling in his mind on game day. In your experience, what part of the process does being able to manipulate the second air with his eyes -- is that later on in the process?**

HEAD COACH FLECK: It's a good question, because we see exactly what you see. You're seeing the right things in terms of using your eyes, but there's a comfort level of that. Especially when you're a young quarterback and you haven't played a lot, and a lot of the things you're doing, you're doing it for the first time, right.

So you want to make sure that guy is open before I throw it. And so even if his head is there, his eyes could still be over here, but he's got to be able to continue to look people off.

There's times where he didn't need to look people off. The throw he makes, the last interception -- there's no need. The safety is rolling the other way.

The problem is, there's too much trajectory to the football. It wasn't his eyes. Because he's looking this way and the safety is moving the opposite way. He wasn't moving there.

Now could he have quickly moved to one side and came back? Hold it on extra second? Yes. But that wasn't the issue. The ball flight was the issue on that one.

But again I think he does a good job of going through his reads. I thought did a really nice job of pulling the ball down and going, when he knew there was a certain coverage that put us in a problem, he saw it, tucked it, ran it. That's a huge step for that young man.

Remember, this is -- just these little steps that he's making, and some of the big things, over time, he's going to correct. But the small things about using your eyes, move defenders, pull things down and run when you don't have it, throw it away, get out of the pocket, protect the football, those are the things you want to see every week continue to improve in a positive way.

I'm proud of his progress. We've got to be better. But when you're playing, you have two freshmen back there,



you're coaching a lot and that's why every time he comes off, I'm there to meet him. We're talking about something. It's not like, hey, what was that for.

It's, no -- what did you see; let's talk about through the series. Let's talk about something that's a teaching moment that he'll be able to take and learn.

Because most of the time, you know, he doesn't make the same mistake twice. Once you tell him something and coach him on something, he's very coachable where he does it. That's why he's a starter, because he can do that. He's learning a lot. He's putting a lot in his bank and you know we're getting better as a football team and that's good to see.

Appreciate it.