

University of Minnesota Football Media Conference

Tuesday, October 30, 2018

PJ Fleck

PJ FLECK: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for coming. Really excited about the win against Indiana last week. Got to give them a lot of credit. That was a really good football game. As I said in the postgame press conference, what a game. We had a chance to be able to finish it. We did not finish it, but then we ended up finishing it.

I'm really proud of our guys' resolve. They've been challenged a lot. We've had two really close games, one against a top-20 opponent with Fresno State. We talked about earlier, they're a really good football team and we had to finish the game somehow, some way. We were able to. And Indiana, even though we had the lead for the majority of the game, then they tied it up late, we still had to find a way to win the game, and they did.

All those things in between there we've got to fix and continue to grow and continue to get better and use it for learning experiences as we continue to grow our football team. But proud to get the win, and we're looking forward to going on the road and playing a good Illinois team that has a lot of athletes.

There are athletes all over the place, whether you're talking about their defense or their quarterback. They love to run the football. It's going to be a great challenge for our football team to go on the road and have to find a way to win.

With that said, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. Earlier on the teleconference you said Shannon was not expected to play --

PJ FLECK: Correct.

Q. Are you leaving the door open for him to return?

PJ FLECK: No, I want to make sure when I say it, it's 100 percent final. I don't want to say it and then something comes back in another test or something like that that is not accurate. As I said, we talked earlier just in terms of it's evolving. It's getting close to being done. But again, I'm not ready to make that, but I pretty much know he won't -- probably won't play this week. But we'll get Mohamed back, which has been really big for us.

Q. Will you stick with Tanner this week?

PJ FLECK: Yeah, we're going to stick with Tanner this week. At the beginning of the year when you're evaluating your quarterbacks you've got to make a really hard decision, and at the time I think Zack was more ready to play at the beginning of the year than Tanner. I think Tanner has gotten better over eight weeks, nine weeks, but I think as you kind of look at both of them, I have confidence in both of them to be able to play, and we said we're going to need both of them to play, and they're going to earn their opportunities.

Zack is still banged up a little bit, and I think Tanner being healthy, and he's earning opportunities -- he's earned the right to play. And it's not like you have a starter that's 30-2 that you're saying, okay, when he gets hurt he comes back, even if he's 85, 90 percent we're going to play him because he gives

us the best chance to win.

Part of what I thought we were struggling with was getting out of the pocket, moving, being able to escape, create plays on the run, and that element was erased when Zack started getting hurt, and as you start to see guys evolve, you know when guys are ready to go and when they're not ready to go. I think Tanner has done a great job putting himself in the position that he's earned to be able to play, and then if he plays well, continue to play.

But again, this is a very healthy quarterback competition. This isn't -- I don't think this is a controversy. I think this is a competition, and they're both competitors. They both want to play, and as we continue to go through the year, that's what it's going to be.

Q. Those things normally sort themselves out with injuries or performance, but all things being equal, if they were healthy, would you play both of them together?

PJ FLECK: That's a possibility down the stretch, absolutely. I don't know if that's what we'll do. It just depends. But Tanner has earned the right as of today to be able to make sure he gets the opportunity to lead this football team. You know, and I wouldn't do it any other way. I've talked to both quarterbacks, explained to them, and they've handled it in an unbelievable mature way. For two young kids to be going through that, they've handled it in such a mature way. When you pick Zack -- I've known Tanner longer. We brought Tanner when he was committed from Western Michigan, brought him here, and they're both like sons to me, but there was one that you had before the other son, you know, and you both love them. You love them equally. But as you've known them, it was really hard for me to be able to tell him he wasn't going to be a starter.

But you go by who won the job. And then as you tell them -- a lot of people say, it's coach speak. It's not. I told them, you have to keep getting better. Your opportunity will come. Some people could just sit there and say, yeah, that's just coach speak. He's just saying that. Tanner actually did, and now he's getting an opportunity where he has to play, and he's played really well.

But he's got to keep changing his best. There's a lot of areas of improvement he can make. Zack the same way. They both had a great practice today. It was good to be able to see Zack back in the mix, too.

Q. Are there specific areas where Tanner has improved?

PJ FLECK: Absolutely. I thought at the beginning of the year, he was a little bit -- he wanted -- I think he wanted to be the starter so bad that he pressed a little, and was a little jumpy in a lot of areas, where he'd be a little too early or a little too late or not go through his progression enough and get out of it too quickly. I think he's really settled down in that department.

When you want something so bad, sometimes when you hold on to it really, really tight, you lose it. It slips through your fingertips, and you've just got to be able to let it come to you naturally as you continue to work and do your job, and I think Tanner has learned that, and he's done a great job with that. But he's got to continue to get better. This is not an end result for either one of them. I mean, they've got to be able to grow and get better and continue to compete.

Q. In your experience, how rare is it that you see two young kids like that handle the competitive side like they have?

PJ FLECK: I've never seen it. I haven't been a part of it. Not only just -- I know people -- like I said in my radio show today, I said -- somebody said I should put a dollar every time I say the word "young". But on that side of the ball, when you look at that key position, and then you look at the people around that

guy, when you lose your two best players on offense that are supposed to kind of make the maturation process easier, well, Zack will be better because he's got two experienced running backs that will make them better. That's true.

Well, when you lose that, now you surround yourself with more freshmen, to be able to have them handle the things they've had to go through at a very young age, I'm very impressed. You don't know what's going to happen at times. You don't have a ton of experience to fall back on. Gerrit, our GM and I, were talking even before the last game, he's like, how do you feel, and I'm like, when you know your team, you can have a feeling. When you don't know how they're going to react to a whole season yet and you haven't been through that, you're almost like, I'm not sure what's going to come out of that tunnel at times just because everything is so new. Everything is for the first time with a lot of these young men. They've handled it really well. I'm proud of the way they've handled it, but they've got to continue to get better. We have not gotten to a point where we can sit there and say, yeah, we feel pretty good about how we're playing. We aren't. We've got so many areas to improve. We've got so many areas to mature in and be way more consistent in.

What I'm impressed is the consistency we're getting at times. That's hard to find with freshmen just at any level. Any position we're playing them at, the consistency they're playing with is really positive for the outlook towards the future.

Q. Offensive line has really been firing off the ball playing physical the last three weeks. How much growth have you noticed from them just in the last like month?

PJ FLECK: I think our O-line is probably one of the most improved positions. Now, are we where we need to be, no, and I'm going to continue to say that. You'll know where I'm like, okay, we've got a bad group, in a good way. Bad, like, I'm bad. Do you know Michael Jackson? I didn't know if you did. So young. I might be -- I asked some of our players if they knew who Wally Pipp was. They didn't know the Wally Pipp story. I'm thinking, man, I'm getting really old. But the offensive line is playing really well. They're playing really well together. Do they have to get better? Yes. Again, Daniel is playing well at times, but there's times where he shows his youth. All of our players show their youth at some point throughout a game. That's why it's so hard to find that consistency.

But Blaise Andries is getting bigger and stronger, and he's playing a lot better. He's playing with way more confidence. Blaise is way more confident today than he was the day he walked in here. I think that's the biggest change he's made. Jared has stayed healthy for the most part, and he has called tremendous games. He has adopted that entire group. His leadership style has come out and really connected everybody, and then you look at Conner Olson, who I think played his best football game. He's getting to a point where he's not just a good lineman and does his job, I thought last week was a first time he dominated certain plays, and that -- we've been waiting for that from him, and then you get in Donnell.

Donnell didn't have the sports -- unsportsmanlike conduct penalty. It was actually against him in terms of -- I was really proud of him for just putting his hands up and walking away because he's had a few of those at times. So you can see the growth of our football team. You can see guys getting better. You can see the young guys even behind them growing every day, and the orchestrator behind that, back there, the puppeteer is Brian Callahan. He's doing a really nice job, and he deserves a lot of credit because he's such a tremendous teacher, and I think the guys want to do it for him.

When you're a coach and people start doing things for you and they want to do it for you and do it for each other, that's when you can really break through. They're getting there. We're not where we need to be. But we're building that. We're evolving every day, which is what you want to see from every

position.

Q. In terms of closing games, what have you guys been telling the players about doing on the practice field or just telling them in the film room about how to get better in that aspect of the game?

PJ FLECK: Well, we've been focusing all year and this is kind of a cultural statement, we talk about starting fast, accelerate in the middle and finish strong. Part of that, it's easier to understand that when you have a very mature and experienced group because they've been through a lot of things whether they've lost a lead, whether they had a lead, whether they finished the game, whether they didn't finish the game. You've got to be able to withdraw from your past at times to create your future, and so for our players to be able to understand what it looks like to start fast, accelerate in the middle, finish strong, like I said in the last -- in the postgame press conference, we started fast, we accelerated in the middle on all three phases, and then we finished, but we didn't finish strong. We didn't dominate that. We're going in to make it 38-9 to really put the game away, and we fumble. What was the big thing on offense? We fumbled three times and then we threw a pick. I mean, you're not going to win many football games.

We talk about 78 percent. A lot of you have asked about that. When we win our 78 percent, you're 4-0. When we lose 78 percent, those statistics that we talked about, we're 0-4. So it's constantly putting proof behind how you win football games. Most games are lost, they're not won, right, in college football. In football in general. We've got to find ways to win games and be that smarter, that better, that more experienced team based on our knowledge from our past.

Q. What do you see young wide receivers take away from Ty this year?

PJ FLECK: I think they're all taking a lot of things away from each other. I think Ty has really -- he's developed into a great route runner. He's really becoming a complete wide out. I think his blocking has got to continue to get better. He's got to take the next step in that department. But I think that when you have your better players, sometimes guys will say, okay, I'm the better player, I'm not going to work very hard. Ty is working his tail end off, and so our young guys see the best players working really hard, and that sets the precedent for their future because he's setting the example of what our guys are going to look like, and whatever he does, he's going to have Chris Autman-Bell, he's going to have Demetrius Douglas, he's going to have Rashod Bateman, he's going to have guys staring at him going, okay, that's what it looks like. That's how I have to be to be special, and that's a lot of pressure and a lot of expectation.

So he's working a lot harder than he did last year, way harder. Not to say he wasn't working hard. I just didn't think he was working up to the capabilities of what he was willing to do or what his capabilities were, to become an elite wide out. If you just want to be a good wide out, just keep working that way. But if you want to be one of the elite and you want to separate yourself, then here's what you're going to have to do, and I think he's done that, the complete game, just not going down the field on a go route, understanding defenses, understanding the route patience, understanding protection in terms of how long that route is actually going to take, can I hurry into my route. How long do I have to be able to run this route. This is a timing route, so no matter how open I get, I still have to make sure that I'm around this spot when I'm supposed to be.

So I think he's evolved that way, and the mental part of his game has helped.

When you're young and inexperienced, whether that's in the system or just in your position, everything happens a lot faster up here. Your mind is moving way faster than your body can move, and you look a little bit unorthodox.

Sometimes Bryce Williams has that. Right now his mind has got to slow down, but that only comes with time and experience, and I think Ty's mind has slowed down where it just comes natural to him now. He doesn't have to think. He can react.

And when you start to get to that point, when these techniques, these fundamentals become habits, that's one thing. When the habits become instinct, that's when you start to see a guy like Tyler Johnson playing that way.

Our young guys are just creating habits right now. They're just creating not only just habits but creating the right habits. They're not at the instinct part.

Q. What's led to Douglas getting more chances the last couple weeks?

PJ FLECK: I think it's just the evolution of the offense. It's not just some guy proving himself or not. He's doing well in the return game. When you have your top target Ty Johnson, you want to continue to get him the football early, but then people start taking him away, so you look at Rashod, then people start doing things for him and Rashod. Well, all of a sudden, now there's Chris Autman-Bell, now there's Demetrius Douglas, and now people don't gain tendencies on you.

We have four receivers in my opinion that can all do -- almost a lot of the same things. There's not one little guy who can only do this. There's not one big guy that can only do this. I'm not into all that. I want guys that can do everything, and you want three or four of them, five of them, six of them, seven of them, and then you want a tremendous ground game to go with that. So that way you can run the same plays out of the same formations with different people so they can't get keys and tendencies on you.

Last year, every time we had something it was just how can we Mickey Mouse this thing to be able to make sure it doesn't look the same, smoke and mirrors, but it's the same play. Now we don't have to worry about that. We trust our guys to be able to make those plays.

We want to be able to get some of the guys that have proven it over and over maybe a little bit more than guys that are unproven, but Demetrius is working his way up, and he's gotten a lot better. His hands and the style that he plays with -- a lot of these guys, again, they're all freshmen, so they're not the strongest and biggest yet. Their bodies are still in a 19 year old's body. I can't wait until these guys are at 20, 21 years old and they start filling out naturally and then the strength program hits. That's when you start to see that dominating part. No matter where the ball is, they can't get bumped off a route or can't get stopped.

Q. You talked about competition; there's a good competition in that room in terms of not getting left behind, so to speak?

PJ FLECK: Yeah, I always think of competition this way: It's a healthy competition and you compete with, not against. We're a team. You compete against other teams. But when you're on a team, first of all, it's always healthy competition. You don't like where you are, work harder, get better. Bill Belichick said, you want to play better? Play better. Right? And very simple, but that's the formula. So you have to have healthy competition and you have to create that within, and just like I've told our entire football team, my job is to out-recruit every single one of you. Whether you're playing right now as a freshman or not, my job is to out-recruit you. Your job is to keep your job. Because come January there's -- I don't know how many are starting early as of right now, but there will probably be 11, 12 freshmen coming in that feel like they can come in and play, and you've got to continue to elevate your game, and that's what that does, and it continues to create that healthy competition within.

Come January, we're going to talk about the quarterbacks, we'll have probably four scholarship quarterbacks come January. That issue is a fix. Now, we've got to develop that as we keep going forward, but we want to be able to create that.

Q. Do you recruit a quarterback every class?

PJ FLECK: Every class. I'd like to. I always have, and I don't think that'll ever stop. No matter what, you'd always like to bring one in because eventually here you could get into a point where you have some guys that leave. And that's okay. That doesn't mean that's bad. There's transfer quarterbacks all over the country that end up leaving. I want people to say in our program because I want to keep developing you not even just on the field but off the field. I want to help the rest of your life.

But we're getting into that world of 2018 where that's a major reality, and when you start having players do that, that's a good thing. That means you're elevating your level of talent every year, and that's what we want to keep doing as we keep growing this program.

Q. You said Zach practiced today. Is he expected to back up Tanner on Saturday?

PJ FLECK: Yeah, at this point it looks like he will. I can't say that for sure, but it looks like he will be able to do that.

Q. How concerned about O.J. Smith's health are you?

PJ FLECK: Any time a player gets hurt you're always concerned about their health. I mean, I had Rodney and Shannon in my office this morning, just talking about life before the team meeting this morning, just about how they're doing, how they're doing mentally. What can I help you with, what can we do as a program to get you to where you need to be, mentally, physically and emotionally. It's very difficult to go through injuries.

We haven't had a lot of season-ending injuries this year. We haven't had a lot of surgery injuries. But we've had injuries that are like that happen to three or four of our best players. And that's what's tough at times.

But of course I'm concerned about O.J. Any time a player gets hurt, you're very concerned. He's a wonderful kid, wonderful young man, and he wants to be out there.

But you don't fool around with that stuff. You want to make sure that he's ready to go.

Q. Playing off coverage, press coverage, is that a youth thing? Is that a talent thing? What is that?

PJ FLECK: We're mixing it up. It's being able to, one, you've got to know, can they do it, will they do it. Last week we pressed them up pretty good. It worked really well in the first half, didn't work well in the second half. Played off, they threw a lot of hinges, got some 1st downs, put some drives together but didn't get in the end zone, it was kind of a bend but not break, keep everything in front of us, and then we challenged when we did some things, we challenged some. I want our players to know even on the 4th down we're going to be aggressive, and they've got to start developing that now. It's like developing your children. Usually those influential ages, whatever you do at the beginning is what they're going to be able to know and do down the road. It's the same thing with young players.

I want them to be able to say, okay, you can't get beat on press coverage if you don't play press coverage. We're going to play press coverage eventually, and if you either have success or you get beat. There's really no between. Now, there might be a bad ball that's incomplete. That doesn't mean that was a win, right? Indiana throws a slant and go, and if it's a better ball he hits it for a touchdown.

But we have to be able to play that moving forward. We want to be able to play that. They want to be able to play that.

But if we just sit there and protect, protect, protect, it's just like your kids, you can't protect them. Sooner or later, you've got to push them in and let them go, especially at a young age. That's what we're doing with these guys. I know at times T-Time is going to get beat or Coney Durr is going to get beat or Howden is going to get beat in the slot. I know that.

But this is part of getting them to fail to grow. I mean, four weeks ago we're talking about Jordan Howden missing four tackles, three or four tackles that all go for big scores against Maryland, right out the chute. Well, four weeks later we're talking about how great his development is. Remember, young players grow so much more because they have so much room to grow in every area with technique, with fundamentals, with discipline, and now their physical part.

You know, we're getting there.

Q. You've talked so much about cultural sustainability in your program. Looking at a team like Kentucky right now that's built their team in to a top-15 squad, does that kind of mirror something that you want to accomplish in the future?

PJ FLECK: Well, I know Coach Stoops a little bit. I've only met him a few times. I don't know how he's building it, but it's a prime example. We haven't won a championship in 51 years, and when you start looking at that, we can either continue to do what we've always done or we can be different. Not to say we have to be different to do something, but our approach might be different. I don't know if it is or not. It's just our way.

But I do know and have watched and have coached and have done it to take a team from 1-11 to 13-0. I've seen it. And when you watch Kentucky in the first three years, I think they've only won five games total, right, and it didn't matter what happened prior to that. He started over, right, and same thing we did here.

So when you go through that, it's very difficult to be able to say, especially -- and you all know what I'm talking about when I say this, I've heard this ever since I became the head coach here which I didn't really understand at the beginning, that sometimes in a pro town there's always that -- well, you have the draft, you have free agency, it's all about just win. It's all about bottom line. It's all about those things in professional sports. And when you're in a collegiate sport in that type of environment, sometimes people feel you should be or can do the same things.

Well, you can't. You're working with kids, and you're developing a culture and a program and a way of doing it that if your best player gets hurt, you can't go on the waiver wire to get the next best player who's been working out at home who's played six years in the league who's ready to go. You've got to play the freshman. You've got to play the young guy, and those are the growing pains, as people will say, but I do think cultural sustainability, whether I'm here 20 years or I'm here four years or whatever it is, cultural sustainability in anything is a positive. I really believe that. I've always believed that.

I think that's what gave us the success we had at Western Michigan. That's the success Greg Schiano had at Rutgers. There always comes a point where, yeah, it's going to get really hard before it gets better, but when you look at teams like Northwestern who's in the top of the West Division, cultural sustainability. We've talked about Iowa and we've talked about Wisconsin, we've talked about those teams.

There's a reason for that. It just doesn't happen. There's a reason for that. And when you have to be able to change systematic approaches all the time, whether that's schemes or coaches or philosophies or culture or learning strategies and teaching strategies, that's hard because you're only learning. You're never mastering. Learning is hard enough, and once you get to a mastery stage where players can start teaching players and players lead the entire program and the program is the program and you're known for that, you're known for that culture, that program of how you build, of how that program is going to be inside and out, that's when you can start recruiting down the line where people desire -- you make it a destination. There's vacation destinations you all want to go to. There's a big difference in -- bowl destinations. Well, there's program destinations.

We want to get to that point one day where we're a program destination, and you can only do that through cultural sustainability when you have a program who hasn't won a championship for 51 years. That's my philosophy, that's my belief, and I'll always believe that. For the rest of my coaching career and my life, I will always believe in that.