

## **University of Minnesota Football Media Conference**

**Tuesday, October 9, 2018**

**P.J. Fleck**

**Q. (On quarterback Zack Annexstad) What are the ones he hasn't repeated and what are the ones that he has come together?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I think he's a lot more decisive in his decision-making, whether it's the right decision or wrong decision, he's more decisive. I think he's doing what he has to be able to do to get out of the pocket a little bit better.

Now there's a difference, now you're out-of-pocket and now just get rid of it instead of getting tackled for a sack or reinjure yourself or anything like that, put yourself at risk. I think accuracy, he's throwing some tremendous -- and we could talk about he's got five interceptions. He's got eight touchdowns.

True freshman, has got eight touchdowns, with seven or eight starters now on offense that are freshmen. And then you start to looking at -- I mean, the ball he slows to Bateman in the end zone, the second touchdown is phenomenal. The fade throw is phenomenal. The deep balls he's throwing are phenomenal.

Are you many some you sit there and go, did they get away? Why did they get away from him? Pressure in his face. Had to make a back-footed throw. Those are the ones we have to get away from him.

This is the Big Ten. You're throwing off the back foot with somebody in your face and it's a 22-yard, 25-yard, throw, those are not the best. We have to be able to find and field the pocket better, step up, escape and do those things.

But he's being more decisive and that's what I can appreciate with him. You want your quarterback to be decisive because now all of a sudden he knows what is throw he can make and what throw he can't make. That's what you want him to find out but he's making some tremendous throws, some great reads.

But again, on the other end of that, there's the other spectrum of that. We want to do everything we can to swing it towards the more positive all the time and the more consistent.

**Q. Looking at Bateman, young receivers, seems impressive, the way they get 50/50 balls or over the middle. I know you teach technique and route running but what's the process for going after --**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Our wide receiver does a great coaching, teaching those guys. Wide receiver is kind of our forte. I think you're starting to see the development of a really special wide receiver unit here at the University of Minnesota. Not just one guy, but a lot of guys.

That's something we wanted to create the day we walked in here. We had to change a lot to be able to do that and bring in a lot of guys and develop some, but as you run into deep ball, it's all about body position. Everything starts with the release and then you're getting into the vertical part of that route. There's three parts to it: A release, vertical extension part of that route and then there's the finish.

I think all guys are doing a tremendous job of keeping their shoulders vertical, as long as they possibly can. They are doing a great job of pumping their inside arm and not just pressing and giving somebody else something to grab on to. We call it a meat grinder where our inside arm has to continue to pump and continue to keep us strong.

The speed that you're running at has to change, not the opening of your shoulders to do that. It's very difficult to

master but they are doing it. We needed to be able to extend the field the last game. We're down 14-0 before you can, you know, before you can sneeze and the next thing you know, okay, we've got to throw the ball down the field.

We need to create synthetically here some explosive plays, without being able to get pressure on our quarterback or get sacks. That's why you saw so many balls down the field. But they are doing a good job going up and over.

There's two instances where there's two interceptions where they should be able to make that play. If they were standing here today, they would say the same thing. That's not saying anything negative about our players. I expect them to make those plays.

They expect themselves to make those plays and when they are 50/50 they need to be more like 90/10 and that's how we look at 50/50 balls.

I understand we are going to play against really good players but they should only win ten percent of the time if it's a 50/50 ball. With all due respect, your 50/50, we look at it, as we keep talking, as our relationship grows, 90/10 is the way I look at it, and that's the expectation. We're not there yet.

**Q. Do you see different defensive looks now with Tyler just not drawing so much attention? Is it changing any because these guys are starting to produce, the other two?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I don't know necessarily if it's one receiver that changes coverages as much. If you have one receiver and you put him into the boundary all the time, you can cloud him and play Cover 2 to that and you can take him out of the game but every safety you take deep, you take out of the box.

I think to be able to make it what we want it to be one day, you have to have an incredible run game. And you know, that's what hurt us with Rodney going down and Shannon going down is that part of that.

Because now, if you could think of those guys being in there, as well as Mohamed and Bryce, and then the weapons on the outside, we don't have that. We are not living in the world of fantasies here of we could, we would, we should; we don't. That's one thing that can draw more people into the box, if they have -- if they know they have to stop that running game.

Now, we have got two freshmen starting on the offensive line, so again it's one of those things that you guys kind of look at, and I think early on, the bracket tie, but it didn't really change the overall strategy of the defense to take the others away.

I think now, you're starting to see across the board, it's hard to just be able to just play Cover 2 against one guy and where you can move him around at different spots. But the running game is what really helps that. If we can establish our running game even more, the better we can have in our pass game. But when you're down 14-0 like that, that was hard to get back into.

**Q. When you look at your defense in a couple years, when you have your guys in, what do you want the identity to be?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: First of all, that's a great question. They are all my guys now, right. Day one, with all due respect, I told everybody that I chose them. They didn't choose me. These players did not choose me. I chose them. They are all my kids. They are all players. They are all my sons. That's the way I look at it. That's how we run our family.

Defensively I thought in the game our front seven played out standing and when you hold Iowa under three yards a carry and right around a hundred yards, and their two tight ends, they had pretty good game but that wasn't why they won the football game overall. You put the ball in Nate Stanley's hands and other wide outs, that's how they beat us.

So the back end, we have to be a lot better. If you look at what happened a few years back and what was here and that's a need for us in recruiting, 100 percent. That's why Terell Smith is here; that's why he's playing as a true freshman. That's why Jordan Howden is here. That's why Benny Sapp is here, and so on and so forth.

But you can't just have nine defensive backs you recruit because you have ten other positions. You need to be able to fill that, too.

But we want to be able to do exactly what we're doing. We just want to do it better. We want to do it better tomorrow. We want to do it better at the game on Saturday, a year from now, two years from now.

You have to be able to stop the run in this league, period and then you have to be able to play man coverage on the outside -- as we talked about receiver, you have to be able to win one-on-one battles. That's the defense I want and that's the defense we're developing is to be able to lock people down one-on-one and put enough people in the box to stop the run and put enough people under duress at the quarterback position through blitzes; but also have the ability to sit back in Cover and get to somebody with a four-man rush.

You asked about what I want, my dream, we're getting there.

**Q. How has Daniel Faalele become more assertive?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I don't know if assertive -- he's an assertive man, if you tell him you're not going to move, I'm sure he's going to move you in the hallway. I'm sure he's assertive.

I think the biggest growth he has, hasn't been the physical part, because he's just physically, naturally strong and he's only going to get stronger as he goes. It's the mental and emotional part.

The one thing, you don't want to play a lot of freshmen to begin with because they are not ready mentally and emotionally, let alone physically in the Big Ten. So that's the reason why a lot of people don't play freshmen. Well, we have 33 in our two-deep, but that's part of it. Get them mentally and emotionally ready as fast as possible to play. That's what this race to maturity has been about since January, when doing what you have to do becomes doing what you want to do.

When they get here, they all want to do it. It's just over the course of time, these freshmen hit walls and at different times, they miss home and they get homesick and have all these different issues. They have a girlfriend for the first or second or third time; they open to a lot more scrutiny than they were before; they are looked at like they have to be able to play at a certain standard that maybe they didn't expect that walking in.

But Daniel is a guy that can handle a lot. I think back in March, April, I probably wouldn't have said he was ready yet and as he's continued to go, every day Brian Callahan has got him more ready and more ready and more ready and to a point where you feel like, at this point, he can play.

When you play young people, just like the NFL talks about quarterbacks all the time and I think that's a little bit

over-hyped: If you play a quarterback early you can ruin him, or you can play a quarterback early, he can be successful. You can have him sit behind a Hall of Famer for four or five years, he's probably going to be better. Have the same system over and over, he's probably going to be better

I think for us, you don't want to play him, but if you are put in a position where you have to, you still want to make sure he can make it mentally and emotionally. Rashod Bateman has no problem making this thing mentally and emotionally or physically. He's not that strong yet, but I don't worry about him mentally and emotionally.

He came here to do exactly what he's doing and so did Daniel and Curtis and so did Zack Annexstad and so did Bryce Williams and so did so on and so forth and so did Terrell Smith. But those are the guys that you look at when you know you're going to have to be able to play freshmen.

That's part of the evaluation process: Can this guy handle playing as a freshman. If you look at some of those freshmen and say, yeah, we need you to come in and play as a freshman; if they go, oohh, I'd like my son to be redshirted and play his junior -- you might not want to come here. And that was part of the whole process.

I thought he did pretty well when he was in there. He's got to get a lot better but he's fully committed to making himself a really good football player.

**Q. Second nationally in sacks. Is it just the front or do they bring a lot of pressure --**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Where our defense really comes from is Coach Schiano and Fraser and Robb Smith and all of us together at Rutgers at the time.

Greg is doing a little of that. He's not doing all of that anymore. Greg would love to be able to, as I said, play man coverage, lock you down. They have two of the fastest corners in the country, two of the fastest players, period at corner, so they have the ability to lock down at the outside, plus still get pressure with four, let alone still have under coverage or a rat down in there that could be able to do some things.

Not only can they cover the outside but they can take away your screens, and they can do a lot of that and they make it very dangerous and put pressure on you very quickly. It's an enormous challenge for us, we know that, but we have to keep getting better every single day at what we need to get better at.

**Q. Defensively, what are some of the most important variables to improving third down defense?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: You've got to get off the field. Third down, that was not good on third down at all, 10 of 19, you get off half of those and we can possibly win the football game. It's the details. It's the small, small details. It's the alignment. It's the depth. It's the ability to go set the edge. It's the ability to break foot, drive foot on the hip and keep your eyes on the key. If you're going down the field with a guy, your eyes should be on his hip, not down the field like this because you think it could be a deep ball.

It's the small, small, small details that you really worry about as a coach when you're playing so many young kids. That's what you worry about. And you have to be okay when -- you just can't overreact and pull somebody out there because that's part of the expectation. You demand it so they don't do it, but you know sooner or later, they are going to touch the stove. Remember these guys played for another football team in high school last year, most of them, or they haven't played yet or they are playing a different position.

When you have that, they are still breaking some old habits and creating new habits, which then create new instincts. It's a process. They are working really hard to get it done, I know that. There are a lot of upset young men

in that locker room at a very young age, very upset. They felt like they could have won the football game. That's what you want to see from your team.

You don't want to see: Oh, well, we've always got next year. That's not what you want to see from a football team. I've seen it before. This is not what this football team is about. They want to get better now and they want to do all the little things right, which they want to do it.

Are they doing them? That's what we've got to get more consistent but they want to do it and that's half the battle which I'm glad we're on that part.

**Q. What would a win against a ranked team mean?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: For us, just as we treat everything, everything is the next step. It's the next right step to our program. We've got to look at in terms of, it's one game. One game doesn't define your season, win or lose. But it's a wonderful environment for us to know, especially with this; this is a championship football team, consistently, traditionally; past, now, then, this is "the" Ohio State University, with all due respect, and I worked there, so I feel like I can say that because I know what it was like to work there.

When you're going to go play a champion, you've got to know what one looks like. You've got to know what one hits like what they feel like, what they breathe like, how fast they play, how organized they are, the small, the details. I'm not saying all 11 guys, I just want to say, they are going to snap the ball, everybody stop and watch. That's not what I'm saying.

But they know what I mean when I say that. When you play somebody like that, that is where we want to ultimately get. And if you don't really get experience by seeing it, feeling it, hearing it, experiencing it, how can you get there? So that's the standard and that's where we're continually working our way up to, and I'm not comparing us to them at all.

What I'm doing is giving them a great compliment and making sure our educational experience, no matter what we do, no matter who we play, fits in line with our football program.

So for us, obviously winning football games is why you come here, is why you play the game. But you have to get better and you have to be able to embrace everything that comes your way on the path of that happening.

**Q. Any other clips outside of Miracle on Ice?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: A lot. I'll have a lot more data for you, if you want to ask that later in the week, because all that's coming, majority of it's coming tomorrow. They haven't seen anything yet. I mean that in terms of, not like they haven't seen anything but the big stuff comes tomorrow. But again they have to see those things.

You know, I said this in my radio show today. I said, think of a world, you know, Coach Brooks could say things to his team that nobody necessarily could verify, or they could sit there and say, hey, fact check at the other side that that as wrong. I'm using this as an example, not saying he did this.

But with media on the outside, social media, constant 24 hours coverage, there's all these things being put in these young people's heads. If you don't have a culture that continues to bring them back to center, bring them back to center, bring them back to center, let's bring it back to center, bring all that noise out there; yeah, bring it in here, bring them back to center. Let's use this and continue to get you on your straight line again.

Because I'm not one of those coaches, take away phones or take away your social media. They need that for their growth. That's how they connect. But it's also teaching moments. It's that cultural way of teaching those lifetime lessons and part of that, that's what we're doing. We're showing all those upsets as best we possibly can, because if we had a chance to win, you all would call that an upset. They have to know what the u-p-s-e-t looks like, what they are actually talking about and what that looks like.

That's why we do it. We just educate that in terms of what that looks like. If that person can do it; if that person can do it -- that's why you play a game. Doesn't promise you anything because you watch a bunch of people do it, doesn't promise you anything, but it gives you a perspective and I think that's what coaches continue to do when you have those young people is our job is to give them perspective at every area of their life.

You can't live it for them, but you can give them perspective of how to handle different situations and I think that's the job of a coach.

**Q. You talk about the running game. You may have talked about this last game but Brooks, do you have a set plan for him yet, or will that be a surprise and he shows up and places?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: We have a plan. I don't know if the plan is going to go according to plan but we have a plan. I still have to wait for him to be 100 percent cleared and then there's a certain protocol you go through. He's getting closer.

That's what I keep hearing, he's getting closer, and I know he's working his tail end off. We'll do a lot of things to get him closer as we go through the next few days and few weeks. But I know he's biting at the bit. He was biting the bit in August. If you would have allowed him to play in August, he would have. Obviously he was not ready but that's his mentality. But one player does not define you.

He's really excited to get back on the field. The plan is at some point to play four, though. I will not break his redshirt. I've told him that. I told our team that. I think that's very public, and no matter what happens, I will not do that. He deserves to come back next year.

So you know, when he's ready to play and when I get told that he can play, then we'll start looking at when we want to do that.

**Q. Carter Coughlin is the only defensive lineman with a sack through five games. How do you change that in the remaining seven?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Part of our scheme, we are doing everything we can to get him freed up, one-on-one on a tackle the best we possibly can. What we have to do is be able to get way more pressure from other people.

Our system is designed, you have to do your job. But when you get on third down, we have to sit -- pass rush, anybody can create a sack. We're that close. Nobody cares when you're this close. You know, what we talked about it at the end of the game, we're that close; and some people are saying, we're this close; some people say we're from here to, you know, here to L.A. close. But we're closer and we just have to fill that gap.

Again, attention to detail. Fundamentals, technique. Those are the things that get you that much closer, and what's what we have to be able to do.

**Q. What do you remember most about your time working at Ohio State?**

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I remember a lot. But I won't tell you a lot. I was only there about seven months. I got cut

from the 49ers and got a call because I wasn't going to play anymore, got a call immediately that somebody didn't get into school and they had a GA job open. I was like, 'that sounds good.' Went there and had a tremendous run.

I got a chance to see -- and this is a great compliment. I got a chance to see Jim Tressel go 12-0, and every game we won, I was like, man, this coaching thing is easy. Playing was hard but coaching, this a breeze. Every game we win by 30. This ain't that hard. Just do what Jim does, and I'm sure they will do that when I become a head coach.

I remember we got into the National Championship Game and you all saw how that went. Teddy Ginn scores the opening touchdown on a kickoff return, breaks his foot. Entire game plan is built around Teddy Ginn.

And middle of the second quarter we go for it on fourth down, Jim Tressel says into the headset, which again I'm thinking, he's the closest thing to a higher power you can get.

And he says, "Boys, if we don't get this fourth down, it's over." And at that moment I found out, that anybody can get beat at any point, whether you're looked at as a terrific coach, whether you're looked at as a bad coach or whether you're looked at anywhere in between, whether you've got great players or whether they have worse or whether you've got worse players or they have got better players, at any point, that can shift.

And I think that was the most humbling part of -- even my second-most humbling part of my coaching career was watching that. It was a tremendous lesson. If we had won that National Championship Game, I don't know how that would have affected me as I continued to go through my coaching career, but I got to see the greatest parts of him and that he's human and that he's like every other coach.

I think that was good for me to see. Jim Tressel will tell you he's a teacher, not only a president of a university or head coach, he was a teacher before all of that. If he could find a way to teach all the people in his organization a lesson, that's what he was always doing and that's what I took out of it.