

# University of Minnesota Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 6, 2018

## P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: As an opening statement, a lot of you have questions about what has happened, what's gone on. I'll just start with I made a change at the defensive coordinator position with Robb Smith. Robb is a good friend, a close friend, a tremendous football coach, great person. Handled it very, very well.

Of course, it's a very difficult conversation to have, but he understood. We had a great conversation. He's going to be just fine as he continues to move forward.

Decided to make a change. There's a lot of blame to go around. It all starts with me first and foremost. Toughest part of the job. Whether it's popular, unpopular, easy or hard, you get put in a position to make decisions that you feel need to be made not only for now but for the future. It's very difficult to make. But that's why you're the head football coach.

I thought our team responded really, really well from it today at practice. I talked to Robb, then after Robb, I talked to our staff, right after our staff I met with our team. I wanted our team to hear it from me. Then met with a lot of individual players after that.

This team has been over a lot of change. If you've been here five years, you've seen a ton of change. I thought that was necessary for a lot of reasons. I won't necessarily get into everything. You know how I coach in terms of schematics, everything else. There's a lot of blame to go around in all three categories, but I'm in charge of everything, so the blame starts with me.

As we continue to move forward, I thought today's practice was tremendous. I thought the kids came out and worked really hard. Joe Rossi is our defensive coordinator as of today, moving forward, to finish out the season. I'll kind of re-evaluate everything as we continue to go through that. He did a great job. He's accepted the responsibility. Knows what he has to do.

There will be some things that change. There will be some things that don't change. There will be some things that he does personality-wise which there's a new coordinator, different personality calling things, that can change up as well. Very difficult to change so much schematics in three weeks. That's not what this is about. This is me moving forward into the future.

If you know anything about me, when I have a decision made, you know I like to make that decision. I don't like to stall. I wouldn't want that to happen to me. Just the hard part of our profession. Like I said, I felt that was necessary for our football team.

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

### **Q. Will you make any personnel changes in terms of players defensively?**

P.J. FLECK: Well, there might be a few personnel changes. Some of the personnel changes are due because we have another injury, now we're breaking redshirts. We'll do that.

There is some competition at some other positions. To be able to get some other guys on the field, you'll see that.

We've got to continue to create that competition even within the defense, offense, special teams. We have. We've always had that. But this year with as many young guys as we have, they're forced into playing instead of maybe having to earn that spot. They're forced into some role that maybe they shouldn't be in just yet. Our older guys have to continue to lead the way.

There could be some personnel changes, some forced, some made, but those are getting made today, tomorrow and Thursday.

**Q. As an offensive guy, that's your expertise, did you spend more time on the defensive side here lately?**

P.J. FLECK: I tend to be really consistent in how I run our program. I believe in consistency. One thing I've learned is I don't like to micromanage as a leader. I like to let my people lead, let them have the freedom to be who they want to become.

There are times where I meet with all of our coordinators, I meet with all of our staff every single day. I do everything of how I want that particular thing done. But I don't believe in the micromanaging part.

But, yes, I spent some time. As a head coach, I don't like to be, like you said, I'm an offensive guy, I've come from an offensive background, but as a head coach you're neutral. Do I spend a lot of time on the offensive side? Yes. I get over on the defensive side as much as I can. I get involved in special teams as much as I can. I think the head coach has to be everywhere. They have to be able to see the program everywhere. Same with the coaching staff.

I think that's been consistent.

**Q. What were you seeing that necessitated the change?**

P.J. FLECK: Like I said, there's a lot of different things, whether it's schematics, whether it's the coaching part, whether it's the personnel part. It's a combination of all of that.

As you continue to move forward, you either see that you want this to continue to happen and you believe in that, or you make that change. Again, nothing personal with Robb. He's a good friend. It's just I felt that every decision I make has to do and has to be for the University of Minnesota, our football program and our players.

This was not because of our players. This is for our players. I made sure that message was very loud and clear to our players when I met with every single one of them. It's not because of them. It's for them.

Young people at times, when things are changed, they immediately, in our society, look at what did I do wrong, what did I do. That had nothing to do with that. We have to get better. There was a big difference between the beginning of the year, end of the year, for a lot of different reasons. It was a very inconsistent, rollercoaster-type ride. Again, there's a lot of blame to go around, a lot of areas. Again, that starts with me.

**Q. What kind of response did you get from the players when you met with them?**

P.J. FLECK: Well, any time you change, right, no one is going to come in there and say, Whoo. When you make a change like that, no one is going to do that. I let them talk to me, ask questions. I told everybody why in terms of the team meeting. Then I met with individuals. I'll keep those individual ones pretty private.

Our team really understands. I think they feel like we know you're going to make the right decisions for us. Hopefully I've proven that to them over the course of the last two years, that everything I do is for them, it's about them. That's the majority of what I got.

A lot of them had personal relationships. I want them to keep that personal relationship. Life is about relationships, connections. Just because somebody leaves with a job, leaves a job somehow, some way, that doesn't mean you have to end that relationship. I don't want them to. I'm sure I made that very clear.

But I think our players handled it maturely. I think today's practice proved that, just how well they practiced today, how energetic practice was. But that's been what this season has been like anyway in terms of practice. Their response has been very mature.

**Q. You have a lot of young players on the field. Are they improving with experience as much as they should be at this stage?**

P.J. FLECK: The answer to your question is, you're asking if freshmen are improving, and the answer is yes. We've had three Big Ten Freshmen of the Week. That's never happened here. You're starting to look at guys break records as freshmen. That's what we said was going to happen. We also said it could be very difficult.

There's one thing about me saying it, right? A lot of people say, you say this, you say that, you say you say. Year one is going to -- we're going to have year one, whatever it looks like. Year two can get a lot harder before it gets better. Knowing that is based on your roster, what you do to change a program.

What we had to do here was either bring heavy 18 to 20 junior college players in to fix it or start over with a lot of high school players. Not to say I don't recruit junior college players. We went the high school route and young freshmen. We said at the beginning of the year if we stay healthy, we have a chance to be a good football team. We haven't had that. Right now our six best players are out, then some others that provide that depth. Once that was gone, we said that at the beginning, right behind that was very youthful inexperience. That's what's been playing all year.

We're talking about mentally, physically and emotionally young. In 2018, it's difficult to do what a lot of these guys are doing. Rashod Bateman is ready to play. He came here to play. He was ready to play here three years ago at this level. He couldn't wait. There's some that might not necessarily physically be ready but they think they're ready. They say, Oh, my gosh, this is not what I thought. But that's part of, when we said, Hey, listen, you're going to play, in recruiting, they're playing. I think they're getting a lot better. You can see that. I think our quarterbacks are getting better.

The one thing with young players, though, is you get a lot of inconsistency. It's everything. It's academically, socially, athletically, spiritually. First time away from home. You can get by with two or three freshmen playing. When you have 30 some freshmen on your two deep, that's not what you want it to look like. But it's necessary.

I got hired to do what's necessary to get to a certain destination at some point. That's what I'm doing.

I'm proud of the young players that are playing. I'm proud of our seniors. I'm proud of our seniors who understand what their role is in how to develop this young team. They didn't want Rodney or Shannon to get hurt. They didn't want OJ or Antoine Winfield or Antonio Shenault to go. They didn't want all that to go down. They've embraced their role of I'm going to set the foundation of what's to come. When that happens, I've talked to every one of our seniors, they're going to be able to sideline with us.

That's the best way I can describe it to them, is 100% honesty. That doesn't mean you can't do something. Like we said all along, just because you're young doesn't mean you can't win. It's just a lot harder to do it. We've lost one less game -- we've lost one more game than we did last year to this point with three games left. We're the youngest team in America.

We're making huge strides. It just I don't think people -- they just see the win and loss part. We're making huge strides. There's a lot of things we have to fix as we continue to get better, older. Time is one thing we don't have right now, but you have to use it now so you can use it over a long period of time.

**Q. Moving forward, what are some of the qualities you want your future defenses to have?**

P.J. FLECK: First of all, I love how hard our team plays, period. I have never questioned our team's effort. Their lack of how, their spirit, their fight, ever. They play incredibly hard, every one of them. Special teams, defense, offense, love that.

Again, what I want to be able to do, we talk about eliminating big plays. We have not done that. We talk about future defenses, we have to eliminate big plays. Our conference, west side, is getting way better. Most offenses are built on those explosive plays. Our game is changing, which is good. We're changing. We're evolving. We always have.

But it's the explosive plays and the turnovers. We have to get way more takeaways and we have to eliminate the explosive plays. I think that's what I want it to look like as we keep going forward and keep getting better.

That's what we've talked about since day one we've gotten here. That's how you win ballgames.

**Q. With Rashod being ready, you talked about him meeting a lot of expectations. What area has he done something different or exceeded them?**

P.J. FLECK: I think one thing that you know a kid is ready to play, but what I think is very difficult to do is what you're seeing is every freshman that I've ever seen hits a wall at some point. They hit the wall at different speeds. Some hit the wall, it's flat, just runs down like an egg, right? It's over. Some hit the wall and they hop, they go down, then they kind of crawl back up. Some hit the wall and they go right through the wall.

What he's doing is going through the wall. The catches he makes towards the end of that game are unbelievable, over the middle, then to finish that. That's very difficult to do. He's able to make these big plays in a lot of crucial and big-time situations, which is very difficult for a young player to do.

Purdue has one, too, in Rondale Moore. It's easy to do it when you're up by four, down by 30. But he's been doing it and being a huge part of our offense, and he keeps getting better. That's what surprises me.

Not only that, he's one of the best human beings you'll ever met in your entire life. Constantly serving and giving, going out in our community and doing other things. He's a tremendous student. He has awesome grades right now. He has incredible faith in his life. He's just all around one of those kids that you want your daughter to marry. He's one of those people. That's what we want to continue to bring in, continue to feed into our program.

Our program is about serving and giving. It's about making your life about something bigger than yourself. Football is a part of that, it's not the only part, it's a part of that.

**Q. With Jamaal Teague, he's on the cusp of taking his redshirt off.**

P.J. FLECK: I knew you were going to ask me that.

**Q. Is that something you wanted to avoid?**

P.J. FLECK: I met with Jamaal this morning. Your ears must have been burning.

I met with him this morning. He's on the verge. He's on the cusp. I'm probably going to have to break the year. That's the reality of it. I'm not going to keep information from him. I'm probably going to have to break the year for him.

First I ask, Is it okay if I do this, first of all.

He's like, Anything I can do for the team, coach.

I said, You played some football for us. You're not going to spot play, you're going to start, you're going to play. Now you get the experience to jump forward into next year. If something happens, you have an injury, we can always redshirt you. You have that in your back pocket now.

He's going to play. He's not ready to play, but he's going to play. That's the position we're in. But he's a really good player now. Really good player. He does a lot of things that we don't have right now. Again, he's just not as strong as everybody yet.

**Q. With Rossi calling the plays defensively, what kind of changes do you want to see from him in the final three games?**

P.J. FLECK: It's hard to see, like I said, the wholesale changes. What I want to see him is be himself. I don't want you to be anybody else from Joe Rossi. Call the game as you call the game. He's been a coordinator before in multiple places. Tremendous football coach. Wonderful human being. He knows what some of our issues are.

I told him, I want our team playing fast, I want them playing fast. I want them having confidence when they step on the field Saturday, playing fast, knowing exactly where they need to be. I know that's our conversation. He's

a really special coach. He's going to do a great job.

**Q. Shannon Brooks, a lengthy rehab for him?**

P.J. FLECK: It will be a lengthy rehab. It's a leg injury.

**Q. Was there any discussion with him about coming back next year, or just retire from football?**

P.J. FLECK: Oh, no, no. There wasn't any time with Shannon in terms of retiring. We had the talk. Do you want to come back? I always make sure they get to make that call. Without hesitation, I mean, he couldn't wait. He said, I can't wait. If I have an opportunity to come back, I can't wait.

**Q. His mom, two knee surgeries in one year, seems like a lot. How has he handled all that?**

P.J. FLECK: It's been a hard year for him. Still talking about 18- to 22-year-old young people. Loses his mom, has major injuries, had a situation that went on a few weeks back, right, which he was cleared of everything. That's a lot to handle in a year, especially when you're away from home, as far away as he is, you have a complete coaching change, to deal with that.

It's inspiring to watch these kids continue to just keep getting better. They handle a lot. He has not let the circumstances dictate his behavior.

Is anybody perfect? No. Has he learned from everything he's done? Absolutely. Has he learned from every success he's had? Absolutely.

This is an educational program. This is not a professional program. This is an educational program. Everything that happens to our young people, they are going to respond and they're going to learn from. They're going to be taught how to do that. If they embrace that, that's a choice. If they don't embrace that, that's another choice.

All Shannon has done is embrace it. That does not mean that same situation won't pop back up at some point. That won't mean that you won't get fired from your job, that you won't lose somebody in your family, somebody else won't pass away, or you won't ever not get in trouble again. But how you respond, the choices you make is going to affect the rest of your life. This is an educational program, it always will be. 0-12, 12-0, it will always be that way.

I'm proud he continues to keep his oar in the water and he continues to row the boat. This is what row the boat is all about. Nobody said rowing the boat was easy. We haven't won a championship in 51 years. There's a lot of things that go into that than just winning. There's mindset, perspectives, consistency, all these other things. There's this educational piece of how to do that. We feel we know how to do that. We have done it, not only on the field but off the field with a lot of players.

I love that challenge, to have that. All he's done is respond, I think, the best he possibly can. There's times that he's done it the right way, than, okay, let's not do it that way. That's how you grow up. He's matured a lot since the day I stepped foot on campus. He has tremendous grades right now. That's a compliment to him. Academically, athletically, socially, spiritually, he's growing up, maturing, becoming a man. It's fun to watch that happen, that you have a piece and part of that. Kenni Burns, our running back coach, does a great job with him.

**Q. Eight fumbles the last two weeks. How have you addressed that?**

P.J. FLECK: The ball is the program. The 78% we always talk about. You know that. We are 4-0 we win it, 0-5 when we've lost it. Very simple. We've continued to stay very consistent on how we do that, I think overreacting to something, I don't ever do that, overreact. We have addressed it multiple different ways. It's been addressed.

Again, there's some people that have to be able to fail to learn, to fail to grow. That's the biggest worry you have with young players. Once they become juniors and seniors, they usually have enough that they've touched the hot stove enough, they don't touch the hot stove any more. No matter what you tell the freshmen, they're going to touch the stove. You know they're going to touch the stove. The inexperienced players, they're going to touch the stove. Not on purpose, you just know what's coming. You know how it works.

The ball comes out in every football game known to man, NFL, college, high school. They have to understand the value that that ball is more important than anything that can ever happen in that game. If you just win that battle, just win that, you're going to win the football game 78% of the time.

The games where you have won it, we've showed them why. The games we've lost, we showed them why. The constant message behind that, trained behavior becomes instinct. The ball is the program, and eventually it will be a behavior we have, a habit. The more consistently we do that, that habit will become an instinct. You can't have that instinct before the habit, you can't have that habit before the behavior is trained. That's what we're working on every day.

**Q. What do you see about this Purdue offense, how does it coincide with the change you're making?**

P.J. FLECK: It's a big challenge for our football program. We love the challenge. I always want our players to understand the challenge they have before them. Alexander the Great, one of the youngest rulers of all time, took over when he was 20. Young, inexperienced, didn't know what he was doing. Boom, ruled an empire, did a lot of things people probably didn't think he could do.

Purdue is a good football team. Explosive players everywhere. You play the game, that's why you play the game, in college football you just never know how it's going to turn out.

Their quarterback is a fifth-year player, five or six, I can't remember. He has failed a lot to be successful. He talked two years ago at the Big Ten Media Day, David Blough. One of the most impressive speeches I've ever heard a young person talk about. I actually went in the hallway, met him, said, I have never heard that come from a student-athlete's mouth in my entire time. Most well-spoken about process, how his interceptions earlier in his career have helped him be who he is now. That was two years ago. Now look at him.

Weapons all around. Rondale Moore, everybody knows how good of a play-maker he is. Went to Jeff Brohm's high school. Initially committed to Texas, then went there.

They have explosive play-makers on the outside, great running game, experienced back, offensive line. They stayed healthy. Defensively they rallied to the ball. They play with high, high energy. They're a really good football team.

You got to give credit to him and his staff. They've done a great job. Their offense is very difficult to stop. Not many people have stopped them this year. Not many. The two times they've been somewhat stopped it has been inclement weather.

They scored so many points against Ohio State, you watch them do what they do, I mean, it's exciting. They do a great job.