

University of Minnesota Football Media Conference

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P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: Good afternoon everybody. Opening statement will be a little bit different today. A lot of you already know, Nick Connelly, former player on our team last year. A redshirt freshman last year who stopped playing football for concussions, some head injuries things like that. He was diagnosed with cancer. I found out about a month ago, five weeks ago, somewhere around there. I was told to keep it quiet until the family is ready to bring that out. A lot of our teammates knew, but it's hard to be able to keep that quiet. His dad obviously sent out a tweet, and I think everybody now knows that.

Just want to make sure everybody knows, from our family to theirs, from our football family, from our university, our state, we're rolling with Nick, and our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family, as he continues to fight. Any time you have cancer, it's one of those battles that none of us want a family member to have and go through personally. He's got incredible resolve, and he's a wonderful human being. I know he's got a lot of teammates praying for him and supporting him.

Just wanted to start with that and make sure that we all have humble hearts that way and extend our condolences to his family.

With that said, we'll get into some questions.

Q. P.J., what stood out from the 2017 game against Maryland, and what can you take from that?

P.J. FLECK: When you're watching the game from last year as a head coach, you're looking at things that you didn't necessarily do well, the fourth down and 11 on defense, the dropped interception. I could go on and on about all those different mistakes we made offensively, of the interception -- the two interceptions, the one tipped off Ty's hands, gets picked. You can go on and on. We had our opportunities.

The big thing is it was a very opportunistic game for us to be able to take advantage of, and we didn't. There was a lot -- that was kind of the story of a lot of our close games last year. It wasn't any different from a lot of those other ones in terms of we wanted to win, but we didn't refuse to lose.

But they're a very good football team. They've got the majority of their guys back on offense and defense, and they've added a bunch of really, really talented football players. This is a very skillful football team with players everywhere, littered offense, defense, special teams.

They've done a great job recruiting. The Tidewater area, D.C. area is a wonderful recruiting ground to recruit in, and they've taken advantage of that, and they've done a really good job. They've got some really talented transfers. One of their defensive ends transferred from Auburn, and he's really talented. There's a reason why he was the No. 1 recruit in the nation a few years ago, for a reason.

We've got to work it out for us. We've got to be better than we were last week. We've got to focus on that, and that's all we're going to continue to do, control ourselves.

Q. A lot of firsts for this team with all the freshmen, now you've got your first road game. What kind of challenge does that present with so many freshmen playing the first time on the road?

P.J. FLECK: We've got to look at it as another game. We have to with these guys. They're going to go on the road. They're going to get on airplanes. Some of these kids, this will be their second airplane ever in their entire life. Most of them got on an airplane to come here and go through the recruiting process. That was their first. Now they're going to have another one.

But it's part of the game. You've got to be able to go some other places. We've got to be able to pick our culture up and put it over there. That's it. You're just playing a game. Football field is the same, 100 yards. The time is around the

same of when we play. It's going to be the same sun we all play underneath, same clouds, same blue skies. They've got to look at it that way, and that's the way we want our program designed.

Remember, 60 out of the 113 guys on our team are freshmen. They're going through this the first time, especially a lot of them traveling. So whatever we set now is really the belief of then down the road, and I want our team to be able to play anywhere. I'm not going to have the circumstance dictate our behavior. We have to play sound football no matter where we play. We have to play our style of football anywhere we play. We have to be our culture anywhere we play and not let that circumstance dictate our behavior.

I don't know, I'm excited. We're excited to play another game and have another opportunity to compete wherever that is.

Q. How have you seen that level stay the same as the opponents have changed this year? From Fresno with the talented team to Miami that maybe doesn't have a lot of expectations. How have you guys kept your status quo given the opponent?

P.J. FLECK: It's a coaching answer, but we focus on ourselves. We talked about control yourself, and you can control your opponent. When you don't control yourself, your opponent has control of you. That's part of the ball, the 78 percent philosophy we have this year in all four areas. If you look at last week, we dominated in all four of that 78 percent. That's the reason why we won the game and we had the best chance to win the football game. When we do those things and we execute that, we have a higher chance to win, and we know that.

That was part of the philosophy to this Race to MAHturity with these young kids of how to get them to believe -- how to get them to believe and also execute, focusing on themselves. What does it look like? How do you practice that way? How do you watch film that way? How do you respond on a Sunday that way? All those things come into play.

I'm really proud of the way they've come in -- remember week one I told you they walked in and said, man, I feel like we lost. What's up with this? Every Sunday should feel like you're going to get better. It shouldn't feel like a win, or it shouldn't feel like a loss. It should feel like you're ready to get better. Big boy pants, leather vest, let's go.

And we physically did that this week too, just to keep teaching them that it's a one-game season. No matter what, no matter where, it's a one-game season. When you have that many young guys, you've got to train them in that way now to be able to execute it later on, and that's what we want to be able to do.

Q. How much development have you seen out of these freshmen the first three games compared to the summer? How has that helped them getting that game experience?

P.J. FLECK: A lot of these guys have only been here the last 3 months, 3 1/2 months, so to be able to watch them from where they were to where they are now, there's not a ton of difference because there's not a physical difference. They haven't had a whole weight room, they haven't had a whole nutrition plan throughout the year.

But I think the biggest part is the emotional part of this whole thing. This is where freshmen, young people, and even guys who haven't played a lot of football that are playing a lot of football for us and guys who have played a ton of football for us, in general, the emotional part is everything.

Mental part, they're going to be coached. They're going to know where to go, when to go there, how to be able to do it. Physical part, they're going to be ready physically. They're going to be ready to play on game day. They're going to work. They're going to be disciplined, do all those things, but physically they're going to be ready.

It's the emotional part. It's the, oh, my girlfriend broke up with me, and now all of a sudden that's the biggest thing in his life. You haven't been around them long enough. You've only recruited them, and you've seen them in recruiting deals where it's been really positive. You've seen them in football things with good and bad. But now this emotional part of their life has started, whether it's the relationship part of that or whether it's things happening back home or whether it's these expectations they had of themselves that maybe they're meeting or not meeting.

So this emotional fire is the biggest challenge, and that's the biggest change I've seen in our players. I've seen a huge emotional change in Bryce Williams. Bryce Williams talks 100 times more than he used to. He didn't talk much before. And he still doesn't talk now, but he talks 100 times more than he used to and in only three months. So it's them being able to just be better than they were the day before -- academically, athletically, socially, spiritually. But how do you do that? You've got to know about the three fires. The three fires -- mentally, physically, and emotionally -- to make sure those are all burning when they need to burn.

That's hard for young people. They're going through some things for the first time -- away from their parents at the first time, away from their girlfriend at the same time, their friends. It's difficult. Not only that, then you're playing big time football.

And I mention that because, yes, do we have older guys? Yes, we do, and they're playing really well, but 60 guys on our team are freshmen. That's way over half. So for us, that's got to be the focus because that's the level of our leadership. Yes, we have some of that at the top, but you're only as good as what's on the bottom, and we've got to be able to bring that up at a level that's really, really high.

Sorry for the long answer, but you asked, and there's a lot to it when you have so many young kids.

Q. Did you take anything from last year's 3-0 start to apply to this year at all going into the Big Ten opener?

P.J. FLECK: No, I didn't even mention it to our players, to be honest with you. I'm sure a lot of them know that. It's obvious. This team is completely different from the last team. This season has nothing to do with last season. It's an extension in a way, but it's really not. There's so many different faces. It's just one of those things you look at and you know it's there, they know it's there, but it's completely different.

It's a brand new season. This is a different team than last year. We have different challenges. We have different opportunities, different strengths, different weaknesses, different coaches, so different opponents. And it's just part of it.

Q. Did you see kind of a steady progression of development with Annexstad as he plays more games in terms of maybe makes fewer mental mistakes maybe recognizes a coverage that he didn't in previous games?

P.J. FLECK: That's a great question. The one thing I like about Zack is he rarely makes the same mistake twice. That's what you look at as a coach. When you're making decisions who to play -- we talked about who won the team, who won the head coach, who won the person that's got to be able to trust you. The one thing Zack does really well is, when he does make a mistake, it's almost like he embraces failing better than most people because, when he does that, he knows how to respond to it, and he doesn't get his dauber down, and he's not oh. He knows he's really talented. One thing about him, he knows it.

Now, he knows he's also going to fail, but he also knows that's part of the process to becoming really successful. So when he does something, he knows not to touch that part of the stove again, and he fixes it. It's one of those things. He's a freshman. He's going to touch the stove, as much as I tell him not to touch the stove.

He tweaked his ankle a little bit, why? Because he doesn't make a protection call. He'll tell you that. He's not going to tell you that, but I'll tell you that. He doesn't make a protection call. I didn't do a good enough job of coaching that. Coach Ciarrocca didn't do a good enough job of coaching that. It's to protect himself. It's clear as day. And he always makes the call. Well, he didn't this time and what happened? His ankle got hurt. Touch the stove, see what happens. It's based on protecting yourself first.

But he learned, and he'll joke with you after. I learned my lesson about that call. I'm never going to miss that call again. That's true. He's serious about that. He won't, and he's an incredible competitor. Back at practice today, every rep. I mean, that's what this football team needs. We need people to show like this is how you play the game of football.

Q. You guys have talked about the poise you've seen in him, it's the same -- you saw that already in camp before he even started playing games. Is there anything you actually have learned about him, do you think, through three games now, just seeing him?

P.J. FLECK: He's still a kid. That's the one thing I've learned about him. We have such high -- it's our career, it's our job, it's what you guys do, cover him. He's a kid. The things he said to me on the sideline, which I've shared with you, like isn't this fun? No, this isn't as fun as it seems to you right now, all right.

But he loves the game and has fun with it. And there's no moment too big, but he's still a kid, and he's going to make mistakes. He's going to fail. It's the only way he can grow to become the player we all know he can be is for him to fail a lot and him to fail often. And he responds better than most people I've been around to that. You've got to give him a lot of credit because he's mature past his years.

Now, we've played in three games. He's got a lot of work to do. We've got a long way to go. Nobody's anointing him of anything right now, and he doesn't want to be anointed. He fights and competes every single day, and that's what I

respect about him.

Q. How much do you appreciate the consistency of a kicker with Emmitt and just how reliable he's been for you?

P.J. FLECK: First of all, Emmitt Carpenter is one of the best people you ever meet in your entire life. He can kick and do all these things. He's one of the leaders in all of our community service, not because he has to do, but because he wants to do it. He thrives in that. He's going to make his company, he's going to make his family, he's going to make anybody who comes around him in his future better. He's going to make everybody better around him, and that's what he's continued to do.

I think last year he focused a little too much on everybody else and forgot a little bit about himself. Now he's been able to make sure he's right to be able to then serve everybody else. But he's been exceptional. I don't believe in knock on wood and jinxes. I don't believe in any of those things. Goats on the field or any of that. I don't believe on that. I'm from Chicago, for gosh sakes, and if they can break the streak, anybody can do it, right?

But he's just a tremendous person, and he's a great leader. He's amazing at how he takes these young people under his wing, no matter if they're ever going to kick here or not, or they're a wide receiver or a defensive back, everybody on this football team likes Emmitt Carpenter. I take that back. Everybody loves him. I'm not sure if they all like him, but they all love him because they respond to him when he leads and he has their respect, and they know that he sacrifices a lot for them.

And he's just a tremendous student-athlete. When you think student-athlete, Emmitt Carpenter should come right to the top of the list.

Q. In the past year, what have you noticed in terms of Carter Coughlin's development as a pass rusher?

P.J. FLECK: I think Marcus West has a lot to do with this. I talk to our players constantly. Greg Schiano always taught me, as a head coach, you've got to be an information gatherer. That's it. If somebody asks you about your program, that's great. You need to gather information. So I'm constantly asking our players, hey, what do you think of this guy? What do you think of that guy? Once in a while as a coach, hey, aren't you glad you have him? And you see a natural reaction. Every one of our pass rushers love to have Marcus West on the staff. Man, Coach, I don't know where you found him, but thank goodness you brought him here.

Because I think that having a true pass rush specialist has helped Carter take the next right step. He was always a great football player, but one thing about separating yourself just as a football player, now you've got to be a technician at your position. It's one thing to be a great rush end, but how are you a great rush end? Are you making enough plays? Are you that much closer to the quarterback than you were last year? How do you close that gap? Fundamentals, technique, discipline, and I think that's where you've seen that. He's really committed to that.

He's one of the hardest workers on our team. When your best people and best players are the hardest workers, as I've said before, you've got something started. Hopefully, you have 113 of those at that point, and now you have something really special. We're developing that. Carter deserves a lot of credit as well as does Marcus West.

Q. What's the difference between a defensive line coach and pass rush specialist?

P.J. FLECK: Title. Here's what I wanted to do. When I kind of looked at our -- I evaluated our team last year, I feel like we needed to make some changes in pass rush. These young people, especially millennials, always want to know why, and if there's an issue, how are you going to fix it? That's constant through their mind because always on this phone that constantly happens. If they have an issue, they can find the problem. If they find the problem, they can find the solution immediately. Well, how come I can't do that as a player? So they want that.

So when I looked at what we needed to do to improve our defense going into this year, I felt like, one, Joe Rossi is one of the best defensive line coaches I've ever been around. Whether he's a coordinator, whether he's a coach, he's one of the most intelligent coaches I've ever been around. He was going to coach the entire D-line. But what I really wanted was this "R" group, rush end. That's what they are, they rush the passer. I wanted them to be able to have some type of specialist rather than just hiring a Tae Kwon Do specialist or that type of deal in the summer, which we do like everybody else, but I wanted to have somebody constantly where we could divide the interior guys and then obviously the outside guys.

It's kind of like when you have somebody coach the corners and the safeties, there's not much difference, but to me I

thought the D-line is most important because, in our league, if you have a really good D line, a stout D-line, and you can rush the passer with four, you can do a lot of things. Now, are we there yet? No, we're not. We've got a lot of room for improvement, but that's the thinking behind it, that I wanted to make sure our players know, if we have an issue here, that guy is going to solve it. Somehow, some way, he's going to solve it.

That's what you want from your players is to be able to look at you, okay, maybe we didn't do this, didn't do that, but that guy's going to fix it. As a leader, that's what you want them to look at you as, and hopefully they do.

Q. What can you expect from Tyler Johnson this year with different wide receiver options around him?

P.J. FLECK: I think what that might help us as we keep getting into league play, I thought last year it was really difficult because I didn't think we had a lot of supporting cast around him. We had Shannon and Rodney and did a lot of different things last year, if you remember, a lot of fly sweep motions with Shannon and Rodney on the field at the same time.

Now we have some receivers that are developing within the program. Are they there yet? No. Exhibit A, last week. That's an example. Ty Johnson has a tremendous game. Where's the supporting cast, right? And that's something that we showed them. It was there in the first two games. Why wasn't it there in the third game?

Again, you're still looking in the eyes of these 18-year-old kids that are here, that are true freshmen or redshirt freshmen that are playing for the first time. But if we can continue to develop the supporting cast around him, it's only going to make Tyler better. But more opportunities for those young guys, they've got to earn. They've got to continue to earn that from game to game. It's rare that you see Ty Johnson have 130, 130, 140, 160, and minus 8. That's not how it goes.

Our guys have to look at Ty and say okay -- again, it's not just the wideouts. It's everybody. They've got to know, okay, that's what I want to look like. That's what I have to be able to do to become like that. I think more of our guys are starting to see that and understand that, but they're going through games for the first time, not just training camp and practice. It's different when you start playing, and now you're in school for the first time, you're playing, so that's that emotional piece too, that confidence they have in themselves that you've got to keep building up.

Ty Johnson can recover from a drop like that. Some of the other guys, I mean, oh, my goodness. Now everything's coming down. Their world is crumbling because then everything else piles on top. Heather says I do that once in a while. One little small thing, and then, boom, I throw everything in the mix, just like a big pot. Start stirring it up into a stew.

Q. 15 games into your program here, are you where you want to be, or are you where you thought you'd be?

P.J. FLECK: We're exactly where I thought we'd be. Exactly. I'm not talking wins and losses. I'm saying cultural development. Athletically, academically, socially, spiritually, exactly where I thought we'd be. I think we're a little ahead academically. That's something I'm very proud of for our players, three straight semesters of the highest GPA in the program's history.

I think we're exactly where I thought we would be. As I said from day one, we would get a lot younger in year two than before we got more developed and deeper, and that's panned out exactly the way we said.

There's a systematic approach of how we do everything, especially the way we run our culture. There's a belief system. Now, different places have different challenges and opportunities that you have to adjust that to, but the skeleton and the bones of it are the same, of how your own core beliefs as a person is of how do you rebuild a program? And that's something that I believe deeply in, and when you believe that deeply in it, nothing's ever going to get you off of that.

I never control time frames. I just say, here's what it's going to look like. Somebody else controls all that. I just go to work and continue to execute the mission every single day.

Q. In what ways has O.J. Smith provided a little bit of leadership and different perspective coming from Alabama?

P.J. FLECK: I think O.J.'s developed in a way that I thought he would develop. I think he's been shown that maybe he thought he had to lead but maybe he didn't think he had to lead this much. I think that's been good for him. It's because he's watched guys really lead him, and he's like, wait a minute, I'm supposed to be leading you. I think that only makes you better is when other competition's out there. Competition is there to make you better.

In the face of competition, you do two things, you either stare right in the face and attack it or you turn away from it. And he stared it right in the face and attacked it. Not only competition in terms of a nose guard position but in leadership.

That's part of our leadership council every single Friday now. That's that leadership development. I think we have 40-some guys now on the leadership council. That's 15 more than last year. Why? We have to develop the leadership from the bottom and the top, and everybody has to be hearing that same message of how we can grow as leaders, and then that way I can hold them accountable to the step-by-step approach of becoming a better leader because it's one thing to say, yeah, you're a leader. It's another thing to say, well, how do you do that?

Again, these millennials, whatever you want to call them, they want to know why and how. Why do you want to do that, and how do I do that? If you're going to tell me to do it, you'd better show me why. That's fine, then how? They're sitting there challenging, which I want to. I want our team to challenge status quo. I always want them to challenge how we're doing something and how can we get better? And that's that change your best mentality.

Q. How do they get on that council? And the other night you said you made freshmen captains. How does that process work?

P.J. FLECK: How do you get on the leadership council is our players vote. Players take a vote beginning of the season, right after training camp or during training camp, the last week, and you put down who you want. They go from true freshmen, redshirt freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and they put a certain number down. We tally it up and draw a line where the cutoff is at each one.

This year there was so many at the top we had to just continue to add them, and there's some we have to develop as leaders, and I think that's really important. That's a leadership question. What was the second one?

Q. You mentioned you made true freshmen captains?

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, I decided -- so many of these freshmen are in critical roles, right? And they have to know what it's like to feel the pressure of being a leader and the expectation of being a leader before they're there. That's my philosophy. If I'm going to be expected to do something one day, I want to know what it's like before I do it. Throw me in there. The best way to do is throw in there and fail.

I promise you, last week, the freshmen that were captains probably weren't the best captains. But they now have been a captain. That first is gone. As many times as you can eliminate first for a freshman, the better off you are, no matter what that is -- first day of school, the first day of being a captain, the first day of whatever -- you know, first pass, first catch, first touchdown. Those things have to be eliminated because now all of a sudden that's when it starts rolling and the firsts are all gone.

I thought they deserved it. These guys, these guys are in these huge roles are freshmen, but they're people we're counting on to make the plays and be the example, then why shouldn't they have a "C" on their chest? We only have eight scholarship seniors right now on offense and defense. Why do I have to just pick them? We get to develop this how we want to develop it, and they have to have a taste of what that true leadership is like.

We're excited for the opponent. We're excited with Maryland. Just so you all know, offensively, they're a little bit like option football. It's a little bit like Miami of Ohio, but times ten. They have fly sweep motion on everything. You've got to keep your eyes on everybody. You've got people down the field. You've got run game. You've got skill everywhere, and then defensively they're incredibly stout up front in the front seven. Incredibly athletic back end.

Their best player, I think, is No. 4 on their defense. He's all over the field. He's like Antoine Winfield Jr. for us, might even be faster. He is everywhere. And special teams, they've got a lot of young kids playing. Coach Canada was, like I said, running back coach, then quarterbacks coach, then the offensive coordinator for me when I was in college. I know him very well, always have, a ton of respect for him, incredibly competitive person, and he's always built his offenses to match his skill, and he's got a ton of skill. Very, very, very creative, very confident, and very determined offensive coordinator and now as a head coach.

Just wanted to make sure I said that. Appreciate it. We look forward to getting out there. Go Gophers. Thanks, everybody.