

University of Minnesota Football Media Conference

Tuesday, October 8, 2019

P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: Got a lot to cover with a lot of things going on in Minnesota right now. Proud of our football team on homecoming weekend, coming away with a victory. A lot of things we'll talk about, but really proud of the resolve they continued to show right off the bat, 7-0 Illinois right off the bat. Our football team to being able to respond was critical. That's what they've been doing all year, they've been responding to all the adversity, success or adversity, responded all year.

We have a lot of things to clean up, a lot of things to get better at. Had a tremendous day of practice today. I thought this Tuesday was better than last Tuesday. Got a good Nebraska team coming in here for a night game. Really excited for that.

With that I'll open it up for questions.

Q. With the weather forecast being what it is, having some troubles with drops last game, what are you doing to try to prepare for that?

P.J. FLECK: We're doing a lot. Doing a lot. We have ice buckets for our wide receivers, dipping their hands in there between every series, every time they go out there. We have frozen footballs, wet footballs. We have all types of other things that we'll talk about after we get done playing.

Some other psychological things that we're doing. We found out how cold our indoor can actually get down to, which is good. We ruled out the snow machine. We didn't have that. The big giant fans, we didn't have those either.

But we have some other things we're doing to make sure we're doing everything we can to create that environment. You walk outside today, it's maybe one of the nicest days the state of Minnesota has had in the three years I've been here. It's beautiful. What a fall day, right? We're going from fall to winter really quickly, then back to fall next week. I'm sure by two weeks from now, everybody will be on their boat for the final 85-degree day in October, then it will be winter.

Q. Couple of drops, couple times the receivers were trying to hit the home run instead of securing it. Was that the case on film?

P.J. FLECK: It's a mixture. One, I think Tanner learned a lot just about the type of environment you're playing in. You're not going to let the circumstance ever dictate your behavior. However, there's a way to be smarter, right? Where the throws go, whether it's out in front in an extension, it's going to be different when it's pouring rain or going sideways, wind conditions.

Some have to be body catches with the receivers. Ball placement plus being able to possess the ball, make it moving the chains, because a drop is way worse than having us just move the chains. Doesn't happen every play and every catch our wideouts have doesn't have to be 80, but I'd like it to be. Certain things dictate that might not be the case.

I think our wideouts are learning to become complete wide receivers. When you can catch and go,

you go. Other times we just need that first down to be able to keep that drive alive, running the football really well. We're going to throw it to get the first down. We need those chains to just keep moving.

I thought quarterbacks learned a lesson. I thought wideouts learned a lesson. They've responded really well today. They handled the unique circumstances we threw at them in a very positive way.

Q. How cold did you get the thermostat?

P.J. FLECK: I couldn't get it down. The actual temperature, it was in the upper 50s. That's about as much as we could get it down there. It's a pretty big facility. We've tested the one side of how hot we can get it, now we've tested how cold we can get it in a 48-hour period. We know exactly what our indoor can do, just like our players, finding out what that thing can do.

Q. A lot of people are talking about this team going 8-0 heading into the Penn State game. How are you going to make sure your players don't start believing it and reading it?

P.J. FLECK: We're not everybody, right? Everybody is going to be able to say what they want to say. We're focused on being better today than we were yesterday. That is the coach speak, but I've said it for seven years. At least I'm consistent.

We wanted to have a better Tuesday than we had last week. This is a one-game championship season against Nebraska. All of our attention is going into Nebraska. That's the only thing we're focused on. Our players truly do that. Our four walls are the only thing that matters.

What I'm excited about is our state, our community, the Twin City area, are all talking about Gopher football. That's what I love. I want them to keep talking about Gopher football. Talk all you want, say what you want, whatever, bring up conversations.

Our players are talking about us, of what we have to do to get better. That's how we're going to handle that because right now we're 0-0. Everybody from the outside looks at what we are. We are 0-0. Our players want to be 1-0, that's it.

Q. How do you prepare defensively with the uncertainty of Nebraska having players Martinez and Spielman dinged up?

P.J. FLECK: One thing you got to give Coach Frost credit for is he recruits. There are plenty of people behind them. You got a chance to see their backup play last week. You saw McCaffrey come in, as well. They're probably going to play both. I'm not putting words in Coach Frost's mouth, but I'm sure they're going to be able to play both.

They both can run it, throw it. There are still weapons everywhere. Wandale Robinson has turned out to be the Rondale Moore of Nebraska. As Joe would say, everybody is saying, right? I can hear that.

But he's very talented, very tough to tackle in space. I'm not sure if J.D. is playing or not, but he's a tough player, very talented, one of the best receivers in the Big Ten. Offensive line is back. Tight ends very involved in their offense, even more than last year. They got a transfer that can make some plays on the outside. This is going to be the biggest and strongest defensive line we have played all year. Got our work cut out for us up front, we know that. Linebacking corps is deep. The secondary has been around for a while. That No. 5 can play anywhere, safety, corner, he can move around. We have to be at the top of our game. Doesn't matter who we face. We have to be the best version of us.

But the game plan necessarily doesn't change because what Adrian does well. These other quarterbacks do a lot of the same thing.

Q. Your pace metrics have gone up every year at Minnesota. How much do you evaluate in-game tempo with your philosophy?

P.J. FLECK: Wondering when you were going to ask me a statistical number on numbers. You and Blaze are tight at the hip.

We are going to take what the defense gives us. Every game plan is its own entity. We have our own system. Everybody has their own system. You change it and tweak it throughout the entire week based on what the defenses are going to give you and what gives you an advantage.

We have never done one thing that says, This is going to give us a disadvantage, we want to do this. We want to always put ourselves in an advantageous position. We rely on pace at times to be able to get us back into a rhythm.

But for the most part I think you know how I like to coach. I like to see the time of possession on the Gopher side with a lot of first downs, a lot of big drives, running the football, having some guys on the outside making some big plays.

Q. You were kicking yourself over trying to ice the kicker. Do you have a philosophy on that? Is it a gut thing?

P.J. FLECK: Here is the thing. I'm going to be very honest with you. No coach speak here, okay? I've never called a timeout in the first half to ice a kicker. That's against my philosophy. I'm sitting there thinking about doing it. I think I'm going to do it. Literally, I hadn't done it before, I figure I'm going to do it. I did it.

Obviously he misses it. Everybody is celebrating. At that moment, everybody in the state of Minnesota, I could feel every eye turn towards me. I knew that.

Then the ref on the side looks at me, You going to do it again? I'm going to do it again. I thought to myself, Wait a second. The stadium might come down after all the boos we had after I called that timeout.

There's certain times I want to do it. The philosophy I have set up perfectly for it, kind of where it was in terms of missing the first one, things that I have personal to me that based on our past experiences of why and when to do it. I felt like it was the right call. Wouldn't have called it if it wasn't the right call. Almost went against my own philosophy. I felt it was right, but the kid made a really good kick.

I told our defense they earned a shutout. I gave them a shutout. Three points is on me, 13 points is on the offense, the defense had a shutout. I'm very honest with them. I tell them when I screw up. Our job is to peel the onion back of their whole life of what they're not doing right, get them to do the rights thing. When the head coach doesn't make the right call, I want them to understand that I screwed that up. That's my fault.

But I don't think I would do it any different, the way I felt. I'm not saying like I would do it differently. I just went against a little bit of what I usually believe in. That's when you have that gut feeling. The gut

happened to be wrong.

Q. You called the defense outstanding this last game. What specifically about their performance stood out to you?

P.J. FLECK: I thought they swarmed to the football. The tackling was really good. The spatial awareness was really good. I thought our rush lanes were better. Sometimes when you have rush lanes, what I mean is if the quarterback is here, the rush lanes go all the way behind, that's where you go instead of retrace. The quarterback can have a lot more success, running lanes. We had to condense the running lanes. I thought we did a better job of doing that.

Q. Rashod posted a picture on social media. Do you expect to have him on Saturday?

P.J. FLECK: I saw that. I called him right after that. He likes to post a lot of things. He's active on social media for all the right reason, which is good. He's fine. He did not have that on today.

He likes shoes, he likes clothes. I think it was a fashion thing for him. He had it on for one day. I think he thought it was pretty cool. I'm sure there's people in Tift County, Georgia, wearing that today. He is a trendsetter. There's people down where he lives having that on saying, I got the Bateman thumb today, whatever it is. He had it on for a rep, but it's off now.

Q. Your offensive line looked more physical Saturday.

P.J. FLECK: We're getting better. I think offensively, offensive line, that's what we keep talking about, keep getting better. Don't judge yourself, just keep getting better, right? Let the judgment happen for Sunday film study, when we actually say what we have to get better at for the next week. Do not judge yourself in between plays.

There's still not a senior on that offensive line. It's still a young group that's coming together. I thought they finished their blocks, technique was better, our first step, hand placement at times. There's so much more room to grow. There's so much room to grow.

I thought the tight ends were the unsung heroes of the offense, Ko Kieft and Jake played their best game up to today. I thought they deserved more credit than they got.

But again, I think our defense led the way with everything our defense was doing, giving our offense opportunities to get the ball back and put drives together and go score. Coach Rossi deserves all that credit.

Q. You've been having Sunday night scrimmages. Any guys standing out to you that haven't been able to play on Saturdays yet?

P.J. FLECK: Those are fun. I wish you could see those. No (laughter).

But they're really fun. They are. Because everybody gets into it. It is Sunday Night Football under the lights. We did the red zone scrimmage this week. It is awesome. I'm telling you, we give out this little trophy afterwards for the Sunday night MVP. I think the linebacker position, D.J. is coming on strong, Donald Willis is coming on strong. If you look at the defensive line, there's a plethora of guys. DeAngelo, he is going to be a special football player. His motor never stops. His first step off the ball is scary quick and fast.

DV Harris is coming along. Logan Richter, M.J., Rashad Cheney had a great day today on scout

team. Our scout team has gotten better. I think that's one of the biggest improvements we made, switching gears for one second. Our scout team is really good. I think that's why we're getting better is because our scout team is putting that challenge upon our ones. It's not just cupcake practice because you're going at somebody than you're really better than. These are guys that could play for us, but we're redshirting them, getting them experience.

Brown in the secondary. You have seen Cam. I don't think any of you have seen Trey play. Those two are really coming along. Quarterbacks getting better. That's their time to be able to get in there and play. Jacob and Cole. Then the wide receivers, I think Erik Gibson, he's coming back from an elbow.

Harry Van Dyne has gotten a lot better. He's going to be a staple in the offense as we keep moving forward. Michael Brown-Stephens is getting better. Nick at tight end, he's getting his feet wet, doing a good job. J.J. Guedet on the offensive line. Cooper. Nate Umlor. The movement we had from D-line to tight end and now back to the offensive line is doing a really good job.

I could name a lot of them. As a whole, they're just getting better. It's so fun to be out there. We even see the people in the apartments, the dorms over there, they're sitting on their patio watching games. It's a fun time for those guys to get a lot of plays and play football. It's their game day. I think they're getting better.

You have to play to get better. They're getting scrimmages. They're getting game work. They're just getting it on Sunday instead of Saturday. They're having that experience by the time we get to spring ball next year.

Q. Did you do that at Western?

P.J. FLECK: We did. I've always believed in Sunday Night Football. I think it's fun. I think it's great for the varsity. We come out on Sundays, do a little conditioning, then we'll do some cleanups. We take the 10 to 20 plays we didn't perfect that we do, really our bread and butter, then 10 plays of our opponents just based on the self-scout by the quality control people to get us going.

We'll do a lot of seven-on-seven green zone that we don't get as much during the week, early in the season. But then we shift to this as we go. Then we get a really good stretch and a rollout, we call it team coffee for our varsity. The varsity goes over and watches. Joe calls the defense, then Matt calls the offense. Then this week we switched it up. We had Tanner call the offense and Thomas Barber called the defense, then Zach called the offense and Antoine called the defense. It's funny to let them do that.

Tanner comes over to us afterwards, It's way harder than you think.

I'm like, Yeah, go tell Kirk that.

But I think it's really good for them to have that experience where all of a sudden they don't have time to think, Tanner, you're calling it, Thomas, you're calling it, play clock is running. Now they have to think like a coach.

I think it's really important for their development to do those things. Everybody is involved. We'd have sideline warnings left and right if we had officials on the field. People are storming the field. You'd

think Cal-Stanford every single Sunday. It's unbelievable.

Q. What are some of the challenges associated with Nebraska's defensive line?

P.J. FLECK: They're big. They're strong. They're active. They do a lot of different things up front, which constantly keep you on your toes. You got to prepare for a lot against them. Every look that you're going to have, you got to prepare your quarterback and the offensive line and tight ends and runningbacks for multiple looks.

They make it very difficult on you.

Q. Last year when you took Sam Schlueter out of the lineup you said you saw him coming back in at some point. Now that he's back in, what gave you the confidence and what have you seen?

P.J. FLECK: He's grown up and matured. Doing what you have to do becomes doing what you want to do. I tell our players here, nobody has to be here, nobody does. Not coach, not operations, not managers, equipment managers, football players. Nobody has to be here. It's a choice. It's a privilege to play and coach at the University of Minnesota.

I think he has truly matured in that way, where truly what he has to do, I got to go to school, get my scholarship, playing football, he loves it. He loves it. It's what he wants to do now. He's really good at it.

He's been the Offensive Line Player of the Week four straight weeks. This is a guy that needed some time off for a while a few years back, was going through some really tough times. It's fun to watch guys like that go through that. That's why you coach.

I say that every week. There's so many stories each week I wish I could share with all of you that say why the staff coaches, why we coach, why I'm a head coach. Sam Schlueter would be one of those. He has to do the work, put in the effort. Nothing is going to be given to you. You have to earn everything.

He's really come along, a good football player, a tremendous teammate and a professional. He comes into practice ready to go every single day. That spreads all across the offensive line.

Appreciate it. Go Gophers. Row the boat.