

University of Minnesota Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 5, 2019

P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: First of all, I'm extremely humbled, honored and appreciative for the faith that President Gabel, Mark Coyle, our board of regents, our administration have in our staff, how we do things, the way we do things, what they've shown in me. Just want to thank them so much, and our entire staff.

Thankful for the support of our university and our entire community. You've accepted Heather and I and our family with open arms, as well as our staff members. A lot of them live in the neighborhoods that you live in. Means so much, accepted us with open arms.

Contract is really a result of tireless effort from so many people. It's not just about the head coach. The head coach is only as good as the people that work for them, period. I'm a perfect example of that, perfect example of having an elite staff, Gerrit Chernoff, our general manager, to Kirk Ciarrocca, our offensive coordinator, Joe Rossi, our defensive coordinator, Rob Wenger, our special teams coordinator, Marcus Hendrickson, in charge of our college scouting. I can go on and on. It's tireless work by so many people that allow you to be the best head coach you can be.

I think head coaches at press conferences like this, you have salaries, extensions, things like that, but you're only as good as the people that you have. I have elite people. Most importantly on top of that is our student-athletes. Tanner and Thomas are in here. Heather and I take incredible responsibility as parents to be parents to them, not only on the football field as coaches but parents.

I couldn't ask for a better group of young men. They were huge in this decision. I love coaching them every single day. This is a very fun team, it's a very fun culture, very different. But I love these young men. I love them as my own sons.

A lot of times at times it's easy for coaches to pick up and leave, go different places. These are very, very special people. I believe in what we can do here at the University of Minnesota because of them, because of the recruits we have committed, because of our future recruits we will have committed, because of our players now, because of our alum, and because of our players now who will be alums, have them come back to the culture that's sustainable over a long period of time, to come back to the University of Minnesota and have the same head coach there. I think that means something. I think that's powerful.

I'm so glad we get to share those experiences together moving forward. Together our program this year has really achieved unprecedented success up to this point. We're looking forward to continue to build that into the future.

Last but not least, I do want to thank my wife Heather. She's everything to me. You talk about courage, what she's been able to do for our marriage, the sacrifices she's been able to make, not only from a professional standpoint but a family standpoint, the energy she has, the love she shows not only to our family, our kids, myself, but also our players, how much she pours into this team, what she pours into this community, whether it's Ronald McDonald House, whether it's Love Your Melon,

Masonic Children's Hospital. Speaking to former players, luncheons, she's everywhere.

She's the ultimate teammate. She really is. She's my ultimate teammate, not just a wife, partner, she's my teammate. So glad to have her by my side. It's a special time for our fan base, for our university, more importantly for our staff and players as well as we continue to do this.

I know I've taken up a lot of time by saying thank you. It just happened. I'm very, very thankful, very humbled. I will say it again, head coaches are only as good as the people they surround themselves with, period. We have elite people around us, elite, special people.

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

Q. You said it just happened. Between when you left Joe Sensor and now?

P.J. FLECK: Right in between there. It's been in the works for a while. My agent Bryan Harlan, all the work he put into that, working along with Mark Coyle. It's been going for a while. I'm just glad it's finished and it's done. There's a lot of legal things that come in when you're talking about a contract. What is taking so long? What are we talking about? There's a lot of things that have to be ironed out.

Thankful for everybody working together, whether it's Rhonda, John Cunningham, Mark Coyle, or our side with our agents, just want to thank everybody involved for making it very seamless.

Q. There have been some job openings already. Specific point in time to show your commitment to the program?

P.J. FLECK: That has been a few weeks in the making. This wasn't just now. You're having other people deal with it for you, so you're not even really dealing with it.

The only thing I have to be dealing with is once in a while get a phone call asking, How about this and this and this? That's it. It never takes away from your game plan, your focus or your vision.

What started to happen, too, is your name starts going out there. What people do is use that in recruiting against you. Throw that out to recruits. Here it comes. All these things you can't control. Our players, at some point you have to say, Hey, let's get moving, get this thing done with. That came for me and Mark and Bryan all working together to get it done.

I just want to make sure our players understand that because they deserve that. They don't deserve going through the next five weeks knowing if their coach is going to be here or not when he knows he wants to really be here. It's one thing to say it, another thing to actually do it. Hopefully they understand now their questions, if they have those in their mind, are put to ease.

Q. How is the buyout structure? Unattractive for you to leave during the contract?

P.J. FLECK: I think it's definitely unattractive in general in terms of being able to pick up and leave. I think all the contractual things will come out later on. I won't speak specifically about all the contractual things. You can look at all that stuff.

We've made a commitment to being here, that's for sure. University has made a commitment back to us as well. We're going to continue to do those things. Mark Coyle is very open, as you continue to go through. Mark said from day one, Every year we're going to readdress things, see where everybody is at. He's a man of his word. I love working for Mark Coyle. Mean that wholeheartedly. A special

athletic director. He truly cares about our student-athletes, he cares about the progress of his administration, he cares about getting the right people together that can do really powerful things. That's not just football. That's all sports. When somebody has a picture that big, has a vision that fits everybody else's vision, it's powerful.

I'm a believer of people. Yes, there's places, there's different things that happen like that. But I'm a believer of people. When people connect and have that relationship, it's powerful.

He's one of the main reasons why I didn't want to leave at all. Didn't even think about it, to be honest with you. Never necessarily crossed your mind, so...

Q. What is the main thing you wanted in your contract? Was it length, money, your coaching staff?

P.J. FLECK: It was a mixture. I wish I could tell you it was one thing. The people in that make you who you are, they need to be rewarded, right? Everything is comparatively speaking to where the head coach is at as well in terms of rankings. Everybody is going to look at where everybody sits in the Big Ten. Every head coach does that, assistant coach does that. Where do I rank in that?

Comparatively speaking, we have to be able to take care of our assistant coaches. I want them to feel security they can be here, we can have that security and camaraderie for a long time, that cultural sustainability we talk about when we first got here, that is really important. That is how the lowas have become the lowas, Wisconsin have become the Wisconsin.

We want Minnesota to be Minnesota for a long period of time. We want to be the bridge that restores that tradition. There's a lot of things, not just one thing that sits in the contract that says, Hey, that's the one thing we wanted to get. It had to be everything. Again, it was.

Q. Most coaches probably believe they're going to be at a place forever when they start. Speak to any specific experiences or moments along the way here that solidified this is a place where you will be.

P.J. FLECK: Heather and I love Minnesota. First of all you have to be happy where you live. You can do two things, you can make a living or you can make a life, right? Most coaches go somewhere, they live there, making a living. They're always looking for their next job or perhaps it's not a great fit. They don't like the place they live. They sacrifice that based on the job.

At the University of Minnesota it's a complete package for Heather and I. We love the Twin Cities area. We love Minnesota. We're Midwestern people. We love how the community welcomes us with open arms. The people even in our neighborhood, we're really close and good friends with. The ability to have the rural areas and the fishing and the boating, the lakes which we love. To also have the city right next door to you, the Twin Cities, that's a match made in heaven for us. We love the city, but we also love to be out on the lake. We like to be in the country. You can have it all here.

It always starts with your lifestyle as a coach. I think some people maybe overlook that. But we didn't want to overlook that at all. That was really important to us. I think we had that at Western Michigan at a point, right? We knew we wanted to be in the Big Ten. We knew we wanted to be a Power 5 football coach. I say 'we' because it's a family effort.

Minnesota has everything. I feel like we can get to where we say we want to be. We're sitting 8-0

now. A lot of people are shocked by that. The student-athletes back there are not shocked. The coaches are not shocked. The four walls are not shocked. You can have that as well as everything else.

Again, there's so many factors that go into it. A lot of decisions that have to be made, a lot of conversations that have to be made, a lot of real ones.

Do you want to make a living or do you want to live a life? Here you can live a life, plus have the job you love, in the area you love, with people that you love working with. It's a tremendous combination. I think we're starting to see all over the country how hard that is, how quickly coaches can leave, get fired, things can go sideways quickly.

Just very thankful to so many people for allowing this to happen to us.

Q. Do you see this as a place where you can achieve? You've been a climber, going for the top of the mountain. Do you feel this is a place you can satisfy those goals?

P.J. FLECK: We tell that to our players every single day, about what we can become. What we want to be able to do is restore the traditions of old, right? National champions, Big Ten champions. There's no reason why we can't do that.

Again, when you start to look at some of the developmental programs in our conference, it doesn't mean it's going to happen every single year. There's going to be really high, some lows, some things like that.

When you look at what Pat Fitzgerald has done at Northwestern, he's a good friend of mine. I'm not afraid to say other people's names in press conferences or schools. You look at what Barry Alvarez had done at Wisconsin, the highs and lows. You look at Kirk Ferentz and Hayden Fry at Iowa. I feel like that's what's University of Minnesota is missing. I feel like someone has to do that.

We came here because we felt it was our mission, that we were called to it, and for whatever people believe in, like we believe in our spiritual life, we felt we were called to do something. We're putting that plan to work.

We tell our players all the time, There's nothing you can't achieve here. For all the reasons why people say you can't, you sure can. It's going to take a strong commitment towards that for that to happen.

Q. Can I ask you a Penn State question?

P.J. FLECK: I would love one. My next comment was, On to Penn State. We can talk about Richard's game, anything. We're going to be here. This is good.

Q. Clifford, what do you see from him?

P.J. FLECK: Incredibly accurate. Their quarterback is phenomenal, playing at a high level. The one thing he does really well is if he doesn't have his first, second, third read, he's not afraid to pull the ball down and run. He runs like a tailback. He's elusive, can run, has great vision.

When you have that, you have a guy who doesn't just take sacks, nor does he throw a lot of incompletions or interceptions, he knows I can just pull it down and run, get the first down and keep

the chains moving. He can reset the down and distance and go from there. Talented athlete, talented player. Weapons everywhere, I mean everywhere.

Q. Hamler kind of like Rondale Moore in his speed, the way they use him?

P.J. FLECK: I've never coached Rondale Moore. I have said that publicly, he reminds you of a Rondale Moore, a Wan'Dale Robinson. The minute he touches the ball, he can change the game instantly. He is so explosive, so fast, elusive. He has great ball skills. He can play tailback, wide receiver. He can do everything.

Then they have a supporting cast around them. When you have one player that's one thing, when you have multiple players that are really fast that's another thing. They have multiple players that can really run. We're talking about world class sprinters on the outside. Their tight ends are very involved in the run game and pass game.

James Franklin has done a great job of recruiting. He's a tremendous recruiter. You can see it all over that field, especially on the defensive line, and linebacker.

Q. What are the challenges associated with that Penn State defensive line, how they rotate players?

P.J. FLECK: The biggest thing is the defensive line, it's very rare that you see this, right? This is a credit to James, his whole staff. I think they do it better than 99% of what's out there. They recruit really well, then they can also develop. Sometimes you get one or the other. They do it all.

Their defensive line, they can all stop the run, they're all pass-rushers. It's very rare to have both combinations. You're talking from the nose, five technique, three technique, whatever it is, they all can do both. You have two guys inside that can stop the run, pass-rushers on the outside. It isn't the case. They can all do everything.

They have three or four guys behind those guys that can do the same thing. Incredible depth. When you look at their depth chart, every position, sophomores and freshmen right behind them. When those seniors graduate, they reload, they're not rebuilding.

They're a blue blood program. They get the top recruits in the country. That doesn't surprise you with James Franklin. Not only do they get the top, they get the top of the top because it's James Franklin and his staff.

Q. Could you speak to what it's like to be in this moment with this team. Ever since you came on, this has got to be the most excited the community is ahead of this game. Adding on your new contract, a great moment. What does that feel like?

P.J. FLECK: We always talk about the dream is the journey. You have to enjoy the journey. You have to look at the lows as a learning point, you have to look at the highs and learn how to celebrate them some way.

We had a talk with our team, How do you have fun throughout this? Some of them, College GameDay, someone asked me, What do we get to do during game day? Hold signs?

No, you got to play the game. You don't get to go out there and talk to Lee Corso, hang out with him. He's not going to care to hang out with you.

That's their minds, right? What they have to understand, just like the homecoming dance question, they have to understand this is a time when you look back five to 10 years down the road, this is what you're actually going to talk about. You might forget the scores, the records, not necessarily how you played in that game. You're going to remember the relationships you have with the players, things that happen in our team meetings, practices, camaraderie. Stories like Casey O'Brien, the stories of our resolve and courage in the first three games of the season. You're going to look back on that. That's when you're going to be able to have it all set in. That's going to be the funnest part of this.

Right now you're in the thick of things. Everybody else is enjoying it. You do it for other people, that's great. We talk about serving and giving. We want Minnesota to be at a high level for everybody else to enjoy as well. We want to have sellouts at the TCF Bank Stadium, looked at as a national brand. They're doing that.

But you can't get caught up in that. You have to worry about your routines, find a way to go back to 1-0. We had the bye week to celebrate, talk about all the things they've been able to accomplish sometimes 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, sometimes never. They reset themselves. We got to Sunday, 0-0. Focus was right back on track.

That's what you want to be able to see. Do they keep extending the celebratory times? They didn't. They went right back to being focused, 0-0, be 1-0, in a championship, biggest game of the year, 0-0 matchup.

Q. What would it mean at this time to beat a team like Penn State? If you beat a team like Penn State, you'll probably be ranked in the top 10. What would it mean to the program, what you're building here?

P.J. FLECK: I think it's a complete compliment to what James Franklin built at Penn State, how he was able to take over, build it from there, basically restoring the brand, right? Not only restoring the brand, taking it to a completely different level in modern football.

But I think any win you have at this point, no matter who it is against, it's significant. You're talking about your final four games. We know we're playing ranked teams as we continue to go. We're playing for three rivalry trophies. Our players know that.

It's not just one game means more than the other. They all matter. It always goes back to game one. If we don't win game four, this doesn't matter. Don't win game seven, this doesn't matter.

It's hard to sit there and look at it, Who are they? Where are they ranked? I tell our players internally they have to think they're ranked 1 with everything we do. We want to do our best, everything at an elite, championship level. Sooner or later you get to that point.

Again, Penn State is Penn State for a particular reason. We're on our way to building that in terms of restoring our tradition from the past to the present. Again, if you start looking at it like it's just that game, what that means, you put all your eggs in one basket, I don't want them to ever think that way.

I want them to think in a one-game season. This one got you a chance to be this one. You've earned the right for a big game. No matter who it was against, you earned the right for a big game because of what you've done. The only way to continue to have that is keep having success in these big game

games, big moments. The pressure they have on themselves to play a top-five team in the country, that's earned. Not just play them, because they're on all of our schedules. But it means something, right? I think that's really special.

Q. How do you approach a second bye week in terms of getting players healthy?

P.J. FLECK: We did something a little bit different. We had a health and wellness week. Tuesday we had an educational class, which I don't really want to talk about to all of you because you'll sit there and go, Why do you have that with your players? I think it's very proactive, unique, very different. We did that.

Wednesday we had a little bit of Dr. Carly came in and taught our players how to meditate, how to be able to visualize certain things happening, how to calm yourself down before you went to sleep.

Dr. Howell from the University of Minnesota, one of our sleep specialist, came in, did some more research again on sleep. Thursday we got them extra massages, and we did a little bit more of a walk-through. We took one of the days that we normally practice during a bye week, made it a long walk-through, added a lift there. Friday we had a lift in the beginning, then they were done.

We've done it a little bit differently because we know where we are in the season. We want to be fresh. We want to be healthy. Everybody is beat up. But then also get them back mentally, physically, emotionally because I think that's really key as you make a stretch towards the end. You have to find a way to be able to fill those tanks back up. We invested into that, which I thought was really important for our players.

Q. Have you told your team yet? If not, when will you?

P.J. FLECK: I was hoping to tell them before all this. Mark and I kind of agreed we probably should put it out there. Everybody was talking about it.

I'll tell them as soon as possible. They know already. 2019, they knew probably the minute you knew. They knew before I came up here. So hiding things or keeping things in a team meeting all of a sudden, that's very hard to do, especially with what's going on, everybody anticipating what was going to happen.

I'll tell them at some point. I can't legally have them back in for another meeting today. I'll probably text all of them, then I'll tell them tomorrow in our team meeting. Again, whatever happened today, they could care less tomorrow. They'll be like, That's old news, what else you got? That's probably how they'll respond.

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