

# Outback Bowl: Auburn vs Minnesota

Saturday, December 28, 2019

## Gus Malzahn

## PJ Fleck

### Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all for being here. I'd like to just, first of all, welcome all the media and the fans, as well, to the Tampa Bay area for the Outback Bowl.

The Outback Bowl, this is our 34th year of the Outback Bowl in the Tampa Bay area. Very proud of our legacy that we have achieved here and with college football, creating a \$1 billion economic impact for the community over our history. We've paid out over \$155 million to universities during that time, and our charitable giving initiative that we started about three and a half years ago has already paid out \$1.5 million and we've committed to providing at least \$500,000 every year to charities in the local market. So far we've been able to touch over 110 different organizations. That's what college football is about. That's what bowl games are about. That's what the Outback Bowl is about.

We couldn't do it without having a great relationship with our title sponsor, Outback Steakhouse. They are the longest title sponsor in the history of college football bowl games at 25 years this year, and of course with our relationships with the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference, which allows us to have such quality programs like the Auburn University and the University of Minnesota in our bowl game each year.

Today representing those two fine institutions we have two not only great coaches in the college football world but also two really quality individuals, and we're just very proud to be able to host them, their families, their players, and their fans in the Tampa Bay area this week.

I'm going to ask each of the coaches to make a brief opening statement, and Coach Malzahn is the official home team of this year's game, the Auburn Tigers. I'd like to ask you to go first and then I'll ask Coach Fleck to make a statement and we'll open it up to questions.

GUS MALZAHN: First of all, we're extremely excited to be back. This is my third time since I've been at Auburn at this bowl. First-class bowl. They do a super job with



everything. This time has been no different. Our practices have went well up to this point. We're playing a very good Minnesota team that won 10 games. Got a chance to watch them on TV during our off week when they beat Penn State.

PJ I think is one of the best coaches in all of college football. I've been a fan of his for a long time because he does it his way and his teams take on his personality. They play with great effort. They're very well-coached. You can watch that with 10 minutes of watching film that they know exactly what to do. I think they're very well-rounded.

When I look at them defensively, they're one of the best units statistically in the country. Offensively, the same way with a 2,000-yard receiver and a 1,000-yard rusher and a quarterback who's phenomenal, and their kicking game is very solid, too.

We feel like we're playing one of the best teams in all of college football, and this is a bowl that here in the state of Florida which is very important to our recruiting in this area. We have quite a few of our players from this area, so it's always good to be here. I know our fans and our players are very excited.

PJ FLECK: Yeah, echoing that message. Just want to thank Jim McVay and his whole staff here at the Outback Bowl for selecting the University of Minnesota to represent the Big Ten. It truly is an honor, especially being University of Minnesota's first time here in the Outback Bowl down here in Tampa. We're very honored to be selected, and I know our team is very appreciative of the opportunity that we have to get to play Auburn, one of the most historical traditional football programs in all of the country.

I've followed Coach Malzahn for a long time. He's one of those guys as a young who you want to be like, one of the brightest offensive minds in all of college football, and it's fun to watch how he evolves, and we've got a chance to -- probably shouldn't even tell him this, but we've watched a lot of the bowl games he's coached in, and what makes him really special is you can watch the tendencies you have during the season, but when Coach Malzahn has three weeks to prepare for you, 80 percent of what you basically just saw doesn't exist anymore, and it's something else, and it's even better.

That's what makes him really good. He's got tremendous football players, tremendous young people.

We got a chance to be around his team yesterday at the children's hospital, which was really important for our players and I know their players to get together.

But when you're playing one of the most historical football programs in the country and one of the best coached teams in the country, it's a tremendous challenge, and it's a challenge that I think both teams accept in terms of looking forward to it, and high, high competition, and that's why you come to the Outback Bowl and it's why you have a season like we did.

I'm really proud of our players for accomplishing what they were able to accomplish. I know it's kind of astonishing to hear some of those numbers, but we are one of the most traditional football programs in all the country. We've had 18 Big Ten Championships, seven National Championships, just hasn't happened for over 50 years. But when you look at what we've done, it's close to 100 firsts or nevers and then about 49 restorations we call them, maybe things that haven't happened since 1904 or 1956 or 1965. Those are really important as you're building a program as you start to hit some of those milestones, and as the years go on, you don't want the gap to be as big.

But we're really, really proud of the progress we've made. Very honored to be here. Everything is first class. I know our kids are really excited. You didn't have to do much to excite them. They walked off the plane and were excited because they were able to breathe in warm air. So it was very easy to get them excited. We're very honored to be here, very honored to represent the Big Ten, and I know I speak for our president Joan Gabel and our athletic director Mark Coyle when I say thanks for selecting us, and we look forward to representing University of Minnesota and the Big Ten.

#### **Q. Coach Fleck on his coaching style**

PJ FLECK: I taught sixth grade, and they don't call your sixth grade teacher "professor" for sure, so he'll get that one for sure. You know, people have always asked at least me in terms of when you talk about yourself, are you always like this, and I don't know what they're talking about. It's like me asking you have you always been like this; you're like, what? It's the same thing. You just are who you are. One thing I appreciate of the people I've been able to surround myself with is they've allowed me to be me, and I think for Coach Malzahn, he's exactly who he is.

I think when you get real people who are able to coach the way they truly believe in and who they are as

people, I think it just turns out natural in terms of your culture, right, and your players.

From the outside it might not look that way because you might not get it, might not understand it, and I said it before, if you're not in our program, not in our culture, I might seem a little different or odd or you might not get it, and I tell people all the time if you're not 17 to 22 you probably won't get it. That's our demographic, and that's who we are focused on.

But again, a lot of respect for Coach Malzahn and what he's been able to do because he's one of the best offensive minds in college football, in the whole game of football, and that's well documented, and it's been a lot of fun to be able to dissect him as a coach and be able to break him down on film and be able to find things that he does. There's always things you steal. Coaches are thieves. We've watched so much film we're saying, hey, next year we'd like to do this. We don't have an offensive coordinator right now, so I have a lot of power that way. Hey, we're going to make sure the next guy that comes in we're going to do this, this, this and this. But it's a lot of fun.

GUS MALZAHN: I guess the question was do I get up at 3:00 in the morning? Every now and then I do, yeah.

#### **Q. Coach Fleck on coaching in Tampa Bay in the NFL:**

PJ FLECK: Yeah, I think one of the biggest things, when you're a young coach and coming up, and everybody uses that stigma against you in terms of, wow, you're really young or inexperienced and how will you handle that. I remember when I first got here, I got a wonderful gift, and that was the \$55 million man Vincent Jackson, but I wasn't making that as a wide receiver coach.

I remember our head coach coming in and saying, hey, you got this, now don't screw it up. And that was it, right. And Vincent Jackson comes in, we're the same age, and here I am, first-year wide receiver coach in the NFL, and here he is a two-time Pro Bowler already, but our relationship was really, really close from the start. And I just said if you just listen to me, give me three weeks, and if you think I can change your life, let's do this. If you don't think I can change your life, you never have to listen to me again, and we're still close to this day. He's a wonderful person.

You learn a lot when everybody is watching you are in terms of how will he handle this role, and then you just go back to being yourself. I wasn't any different there than I am as a head coach. You're just yourself, and sometimes that's for people, and sometimes people will never get that.

But you learn a lot when you go up to that level and you're coaching professionals and they're dissecting everything that you say. Very similar to student-athletes, as well. They're finding things that maybe you're 100 percent convinced on and then there's some other things they're looking at, well, let's see if he's real on this. And they're always looking for things. But it was a tremendous experience to be able to coach here, and Tampa has been really, really good to me.

**Q. Coach Malzahn on Derrick Brown:**

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, on the field he's got a unique talent. We had Nick Fairley in 2010, we won the National Championship, and he was a dominant player, Outland Trophy and all that. But Derrick is in that same atmosphere. He's just a big guy that can run. He has really good instincts. He's got experience, too. This is his fourth year coming back. He's played in some really big games. So I think that's it.

And then off the field he is just a wonderful person. What you see is what you get. He truly cares about people. We always ask our players to be great examples for young people, and our players have great influence, and he's really bought into that from day one, and real proud of the awards he's winning outside of football, which is many, and he's represented Auburn and his family extremely well, and he's going to be a top -- probably top-10 pick. He's a dominant, dominant player. He's one of the more dominant players I think to come through our league in a while.

**Q. When you look at Minnesota on film, who do they remind you of?**

GUS MALZAHN: You know, that's what you always kind of -- that's what I always ask our coaches. They get to watching a little bit quicker because we're doing recruiting and everything, hey, who do they remind you of, and really they're pretty unique, a little bit different than what we're used to seeing. But when you look at them defensively, what they do, they know their answers. They're really good. They play extremely hard. Offensively they get the ball to their best players and they figure out ways to get them in one-on-one situations. I always look at when they play a big game, and they played a huge game and Penn State was there and College Gameday, they played one of their best games, so they're not scared away from the big moment.

So when you look at them, when I say I think they're one of the best teams, I truly believe that because they're balanced. They're very good on defense, they're very good on offense. They take on PJ's personality, and like I say, I love his energy. You watch them on the sidelines when you're watching film and everything is like their hair is on fire. That's a really neat thing to

watch from a coaching standpoint. But no, they don't really remind us of really anybody we've played. They're kind of unique. But they're very good.

PJ FLECK: Yeah, unique, as well. I don't think anybody runs the football like they run the football, and they're so creative, whether it's the counter read, whether it's -- they're pulling people left and right. They're coming from all angles, different formations. It's hard to be able to find -- when you break them down, it's hard to be able to say, hey, they have tendencies out of this formation because he does such a great job of changing the formations, changing the motions, changing personnel groupings and always keeping you off balance that way. And like he said a little bit about us, they have players everywhere. I mean, every single one of them are players.

He's done a tremendous job recruiting. Programs, Coach will probably tell you this, too, you've got to have really good players and really good people to win games. You have to, and he's had a lot of success with multiple years of top 10 recruiting classes, and you can see it on the field. And then when you're looking at us it's how we're starting to build this of what we need to be able to do. I mean, we only have five four-star players on our team, but these guys play so hard and they play for each other, and when you watch them, you can see he gets the same thing out of those four- and five-star players, as well.

It's a breath of fresh air because we got a chance to be around Derrick Brown at the hospital yesterday with all of his teammates, and you talk about one of the most sincere, humble men you've ever met in your life, and I've gotten to go to a lot of banquets that Coach Malzahn has been at, to, and same thing with Derrick Brown. He's the same person there that he was here. He's full of life.

It's kind of fun and it's refreshing when you have two teams that have those two values. But they're very, very talented. We have a saying in our program: Comparisons steal your joy, because whoever we're going to compare them to is really good, and I don't want to sit there and think our team -- hey, it's like this team and this team, but we play a lot of teams that run the ball. They just don't run the ball like a Coach Malzahn team, and it's very difficult to defend.

**Q. Coach Malzahn, on what he has noticed about how the team has changed since the Peach Bowl loss to UCF:**

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, I think there was a learning experience, like I've said before. That was a year that I think we knocked off two No. 1s back to back, and we went to the SEC Championship game a little banged up, and of course we were thinking big things, and we

got beat there. And then we got a UCF team that's very, very talented, and we didn't play our best game, and that hurt. That hurt a lot of guys, but it helped us last year. Last year I felt like in our bowl game, we played our best all-around game, and so our approach that we had was different. And it should have been different.

So we tried to keep the same approach for this game. This is a business trip. We're playing one of the best teams in all of college football. This is a very important game for us, not just this year, a chance to win 10 games with the schedule that we had for our seniors, but to give you momentum for the future. We think we've got a really, really bright future that we think we've got championships on the horizon.

This is a huge game for us, and we've got the same approach that we had last year.

**Q. Gus, Coach Fleck talked about being a team that has all these firsts, they have the energy of a young team. What's it like kind of facing that?**

GUS MALZAHN: Well, I mean, I think we know exactly what we're getting into. We know that we're playing a very good team. We know they're going to be extremely motivated. So our guys get that. Our coaches get it. Our players get it. Like I said, it ought to be a really good game.

**Q. PJ, talk about what you see from Auburn's defense.**

PJ FLECK: That's one of them, yep. I think top to bottom it's probably the best, just in every area. You look at the D-line, and I mean, it's not just Derrick Brown, it's not just him. They have players everywhere, linebackers are really long, athletic, can run. They're really good tacklers. One thing I've always loved about the SEC and watching SEC football is the tackling. There are a lot of sure tacklers. It's a credit to Coach Malzahn and the way he's been able to run his team.

One thing I love with him, you know -- someone called him the professor and he's got all these plays, but his team is very, very, very fundamentally sound, and that's when you know a team is well-coached. We all know plays, we all have schemes, we all have that, but when you talk about a well-coached team, that's when you talk about the fundamentals, details, technique, playing for each other, and they all do that, and their secondary is very talented.

But they're really good tacklers, do a great job of disguising things. They can all fly around the ball, and that's what's fun about them is when you watch them, everybody is around the ball. When they get there, you stop the film at the end and there's nine, ten guys around that ball, and I think that's why they have the

success they've had.

**Q. With time off, do tendencies go away?**

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, I mean, I think any time you're in a bowl game you've got a chance. During the season you always check your tendencies from week to week, but you've got a little bit more time, and that's just what coaches do. And then of course Chad (Morris) being here, we're from the same family, so he understands kind of what we're doing. When we were at home, he was just getting a feel for our players.

Now we're here, he has more influence on what we're going to do, and like I said, he'll help me and assist me during the game. But yeah, to answer your question, he will have influence on the game.

**Q. How hard is that fine line between a business trip and a reward for a great season?**

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, you know, for us it's really not that hard. It's kind of the question that Brandon asked two years ago. We've got a lot of seniors that we had a really neat run, and we were close to where we thought we were on the way to a championship, and we got beat in the SEC Championship game and we got stung, a loss to Central Florida. But at the time, I think Central Florida was one of the best teams in all of college football, but at the time maybe everybody didn't know that. But we didn't play our best.

So any time you have experience and your players specifically have experience and they went through that hurt, it doesn't take a lot to get them motivated. In last year's bowl they were very motivated. And then this year we have a bunch of seniors, some of them could have left early for the NFL like you see around the country. Our guys decided to stay.

So I think the motivation factor -- we can have fun back home, but our guys are here to win a football game, and I know Minnesota is the same way. So a reward for the season to me is winning a bowl game. I mean, that's the reward. You can have fun back home.

PJ FLECK: I mean, I echo everything he says. We're here to win a football game. We talked about that in our team meeting today. The Outback Bowl does such a great job of providing all these elite experiences, and like I said, it didn't take much for us to enjoy it when we walked off the plane. But other than that, you're here to play a game. There's a reason that you're here. This isn't just a team trip. You're here to win a football game. You're here to prepare. And at the end of the year, you want to be playing your best football. That's what every team strives to become, the best team they can be, the best version of themselves at the end of the year. So you have both teams that have that same philosophy, and their last game of the year. Again, whoever plays



better is obviously going to win, but it's the ability to play your best in your last game, not only just for your seniors but for the development of your program as you continue to move into the future.

**Q. Coach Fleck, on his philosophy of players leaving for the NFL:**

PJ FLECK: You know, the philosophy we have is we do everything we possibly can with the National Football League, to submit all the proper paperwork, and then the NFL will come back and say you're a first- or second-rounder or go back to school. We never tell our players what to do. Every case is an individual case-by-case basis, but we'll support them in whatever they want to be able to do. Kamal Martin is not playing in this game, but Kamal Martin has to have surgery, and he was a completely different case than everybody else. But every other one of our seniors is playing in the game and draft eligible players. I think that's just like Coach Malzahn, I think that's a credit to the type of culture and program that you have and the connectivity you have as a team, as well.

But there's advantages on both sides of it, and that's why it's really a player and a family decision. All we're here to do is give them the education on both sides of what we've seen from the past, former players, and make sure our players don't make a decision when they're being told one thing from an outside source when realistically here's what the pros are saying, here's what the professionals are saying. And when you have -- I've played in the league and I've coached in the league, and you have a lot of friends in the league, so that helps, as well, to get other opinions. But we'll support them.

It's really at that point a player decision, family decision, and I'm just thankful that our guys continue to believe in our team. It's the same with Coach Malzahn. You look at Derrick Brown, he's a top-five pick, and he came back, said he's playing, and you can just see that that's the connectivity of those seniors, that senior group. They have a lot of seniors.

But it's a case by case for sure. I've seen Corey Davis stay and went from maybe being a third-rounder to a top-five pick overall by staying. I've seen guys leave like Mohamed Sanu that was probably better for him to leave at that particular time. So everybody has their own ability in terms of what their philosophy is and their family decision. But we'll support them anyway that they want. We're just here to educate them the best we can.

**Q. Coach Malzahn, on how he has fun:**

GUS MALZAHN: What do I have fun with? I really enjoy being on the field with our players. I'm a former high school football coach, so the joy for me and the

funnest part of the week is when we're on the field with the players, coaching them, helping them to be the best they can be. For me, that's the funnest part of the week. Does that shock you I say that? You knew the answer before you asked it. I knew that.

**Q. Coach Malzahn, on the Outback Bowl being his last experience with the seniors:**

GUS MALZAHN: There's no doubt. Today at practice our offensive line, we got five seniors, really got six, and just we talked about this is our last rodeo, man, let's enjoy this. So it's a real special moment from year to year as a coach, that you just have, and it's the last time, and you always want to do your best as a coach to help those guys go out on a positive note, and so you have those moments, and they're usually on the practice field.

**Q. Coach Fleck on Carter Coughlin:**

PJ FLECK: Well, I think he's just going to be a legacy player in terms of hopefully he has children and has a son and we offer him and he comes and plays at the University of Minnesota. But I think for him, it's been the ability to overcome adversity and continuing to be himself. He's got a long legacy and a long line of his family that played at the University of Minnesota or had a big impact at the University of Minnesota, whether it's football or whether it's administration. And he's done a great job of echoing that legacy and providing another level to it. And one thing about their entire family, they just continue to always raise the bar, and Carter has raised the bar with everything he's done here, especially in his leadership role. Because those seniors have been through a lot. We don't have many of them, but they've been through a lot, and we've talked about that at length back home. We've been through a lot, and they've been through a lot.

But to have them overcome what they've overcome and have Carter be the leader of that whole class, especially when he picked Minnesota when maybe it wasn't popular to do that, that's a feather in his cap, and that'll always be his legacy in terms of, one, his name, but what it means to be a Coughlin, and he's taken that to a completely different level.

**Q. Coach Fleck, on his search for an offensive coordinator:**

PJ FLECK: It's interesting because you're doing everything you can to interview some people while you're here just on FaceTimes, phone interviews, and then you're obviously planning for a game and you have all these activities you're supposed to do and have fun and do all those other things. But you're doing everything you can to talk to some people right now. We're making progress in it. There's a lot of people who are really interested in the job, but my focus is really our players. It's this bowl game. Coach Malzahn

and his staff make it hard enough. You don't need time away from it.

But when you have a little bit of downtime and free time, Heather will tell you it's not like we're out there having a ton of fun. We're interviewing people in the room on FaceTime and just getting to know some people, but most of the people that we've thought of for candidates we already know as people, so we're just really catching up, talking a little football, things like that. But we're still in the beginning stages of it, but it'll start picking up here towards the end of the week and then once we get done with the bowl game.

**Q. Coach Fleck, on the weather in Minnesota:**

PJ FLECK: Well, cold. I think it's an ice storm back home right now. Do you guys have ice storms.

GUS MALZAHN: Oh, yeah, storms. I think it's snowed twice since I've been at Auburn in 10 years.

PJ FLECK: So see, to those recruiting, it does snow in Auburn as everybody knows.

No, the energy is really high. I mean, when you have the Vikings having a really good year and having success and then the Gophers are having success, we talk about one Minnesota back home, and when you're in a pro town, at times I thought that was the best thing about it when I took the job, and some people say, well, it just wasn't a college town, and I love the whole pro town. I love going to NFL games, NBA games, Major League Baseball games, taking my kids, taking our team through those things, creating experience, moments and memories.

But I think what we're doing is we're restoring the tradition of old, and I think that's what's really important to never forget here. Row the boat is our culture, right. Ski-U-Mah is our tradition, and what we're doing is restoring all of that.

I love it when some of the older generation will come up to me and they have tears in their eyes, especially during that last game with the hope of doing what we almost did, right, of just having those memories that they had 50 years ago come back and be that close to becoming a reality. At least the New Year's Day bowl is a reality for them. I think that's what's fun when you're restoring a program. Your culture is different. Every coach has a different culture. So changing the culture is just natural when a new coach comes in. Our row the boat culture is just different than previous cultures, not that it's better or worse, it's just different.

But when you have a tradition of Ski-U-Mah and you have tradition of old of 18 Big Ten Championships, seven National Championships, it's fun to be that

bridge, and you can feel the excitement and you can feel people really excited about the future of Gopher football for sure.

**Q. Coach Fleck, on getting a photo with the pirate ship backdrop:**

PJ FLECK: We have a team photo planned, yes. At some point we do, yes.

**Q. (Inaudible.)**

PJ FLECK: For the photo? Not really. The boat makes a good backdrop. I think that's what's pretty ironic about it. But that's pretty much it. So we'll see if we can get that done.

**Q. Coach Fleck, on injuries:**

PJ FLECK: Yeah, Jake Paulson will not play. He had surgery last week, but he's doing great, here on the bowl trip. And then Daniel (Faalele) is really kind of a game-time decision. Making a lot of progress, which is good. Our offensive line, we don't have a senior up front. We're still really young. And Daniel has been a big part of that.

We're only two and a half years removed, three years removed from having four linemen on our roster and going through that first spring ball. You were there when coach Callahan had to fill in at left tackle just to practice, right, which was interesting enough, him and his knee braces.

We've come a long way up front in a short amount of time doing it with high school players, and you've got to give a lot of credit to Brian Callahan and the players for how much they developed in a short amount of time.