

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Minnesota Golden Gophers

PJ Fleck

Press Conference



PJ FLECK: Good morning, everybody. Want to just quick start and just say hi to my family, Heather at home, with the kids, Gavin, Carter, Paisley, and Harper. They like to hear their names on TV. They're watching right now. One of them actually asked me when my baseball season started, and Coach, or, Dad, did you play football? So there you go. That's what my kids think. I'm a baseball coach and I never played football before. So that's always humbling to know when your kids tell you things like that.

I do want to thank Commissioner Warren. This is just so great to be back. It's nice to see all your faces, for the most part, get to see your whole face. It's nice to be able to see you. I know everybody's really excited for the 2021 season. I know our coaches and our players are as well. I want to just give a great thanks to a few people, President Joan Gabel, who is an absolute rock star at the University of Minnesota, does a great job supporting our football program, couldn't be more thankful. Our athletic director, Mark Coyle, and his support and his leadership through the times we just went through. And then Paul Rovnak, our SID during this time. I know it's a really busy time for him and how he puts that all together.

Not only that, I just want to thank our trainers for everything they have done. Mike Sypniak, Arno, Joe, JP, and then Joi Thomas, who's in charge of our medical team, just going through COVID and last year, it's been really awesome to see them continue to keep all of our players safe and continue to push the envelope that way. And then our doctors, Dr. Jewison, Dr. Olson, Dr. Smith, Dr. Macalena, and Dr. Boyd.

And I want to give everybody an update on Casey O'Brien who gave a speech last year, five-time cancer survivor, works for RBC Wealth right now. He just called me three days ago, got a clean scan, so I am proud to be able to say that. Yup, appreciate that. (Applause.)

We've got three unbelievable young men that we brought here from the University of Minnesota. We always talk about make sure a you're a better person than you are a football player, and all three of these guys are definitely

that. Mohamed Ibrahim, Boye Mafe, and Tanner Morgan. Mohamed Ibrabim, I'm not going to go through all the things that he's been awarded. He's a Big Ten Running Back of the Year coming back. He's kind of like a bowling ball going down hill with razor blades on it. He's not the biggest guy, not the strongest guy, not the fastest guy, but he is one of the toughest guys, I think, in the country, and I'm glad he's on our team.

Glen Mason said a long time ago at the University of Minnesota, You need a pair and a spare. The good thing about Mohamed being our running back, yes, we have a pair and we have a spare, but we also have air to go in the spare and the pair to top that. And he wouldn't be the running back he is without the help that he has with Trey Potts and Cam Wiley and Bryce Williams and some young guys behind him. But when you talk about the identity of our football team, Mohamed Ibrabim represents that perfectly. He's tough. He loves every area of his life. He serves and gives. He's just a tremendous humanitarian. You're not going to meet a better person than him.

Boye Mafe, one of our defensive ends, looking for a big breakout year for him. He had four and a half sacks last year in six games through a shortened season. But you talk about a guy that's played behind Carter Coughlin with the New York Giants now for a few years, has started the last two years, a guy that's an absolute freak when you talk about vertical jump, size, weight, speed. He's going to come to this stadium one day probably after this year and just blow the combine out of the water. He's going to be one of those guys put up all types of numbers. Now we're looking forward to that breakout season and I know he is too.

And then Tanner Morgan. Tanner Morgan is the heartbeat of our football team. He's 18-8 as a starter but that's not what's important. This guy's the ultimately defender. He is definitely, he has competitive greatness. He's one of the most competitive people I've ever met. I think the stories been told already. His dad, Ted, passed away of cancer last week, and to watch him go through that last year and a half as his dad battled brain cancer was incredibly inspiring to our team, inspiring to our city and our state. And when he has so much passion for what he does and the purpose,



but he also does it with incredible poise, you love having that as your quarterback. And it's unfortunate because Ted, his dad, was a huge part of our organization, a huge part of our program, did a lot to bring a lot of people to our program. I've known that family now seven years, which is very rare to have somebody be with you, committed to you, playing for you, and still one more year ahead to be able to know the family that much. But he is a really special player, really special person, and really is the leader of our football team.

Our players continue to do amazing things off the field academically. We just set the highest cumulative GPA in the history of our program at 3.33. We have 106 players above a 3.0. That's why I love being a part of the Big Ten. It encompasses the entire student athlete experience on the field, off the field, academically, athletically, and socially. Part of an example of that are two of our offensive linemen, our fifth year starter Blaise Andries. He's an actuary. I didn't even know what an actuary was. But he's an actuary and he is a first team academic All-American. We have had six academic All-Americans in three years, which is a record at the University of Minnesota.

And then Conner Olson, one of our starting offensive linemen, is now basically a doctor. He just tested 96th percentile in the MCAT. I got a 18 on the ACT, everybody, so you can imagine how smart he is. We got 45 career starts, and 51 is the record at the University of Minnesota. When we arrived, we had four linemen on the team. Now we have guys, probably four guys or more, that will be drafted next year. We haven't had an offensive linemen drafted since 2006. I think that's been well documented. We had four when we got here, on the team, and now we're at a point, we have had nine linemen start Big Ten games. Really excited about where we are there.

And last but not least, we have got 10 starters back on offensive, 10 on defense, all of our specialists back. We brought in two kickers through the transfer portal to win that job. We want our players to continue to practice like pros, and this team is so fun to coach. I want them to play like kids. I want them to truly, truly enjoy playing the game. We talked about TGIF leading into this season, being together, being grateful, having an identity, and focusing on each other. We had 11 players decide to come back for their fifth, sixth, and seventh year. We had two players drafted, went 2-2 last year with a first rounder and a third rounder, respectively, with Benjamin St-Juste in the third round and Rashod Bateman in the first round.

With that, again, incredibly grateful to be a head football coach at the University of Minnesota. Thanks to all of you. It's so good to see all of you. Welcome back to Big Ten Media Day. We'll open it up with some questions.

Q. You seem so dialed in as to Minnesota right now. Where did the rumors come from that we heard about leaving Tennessee, because right now I can't detect any of that even being present in your --

PJ FLECK: I have no idea. I mean, there's rumors in college football all the time about coaches. I have no idea where that comes from. And, yeah, once somebody starts speculating something, it goes like wildfire. And, again, there's nothing you can do about that. People are going to speculate and talk about all you want. What I love is they're talking about the University of Minnesota. My name attached to the University of Minnesota. Minnesota gets that attention, right, somehow, some way, through the media, and I love with when people talk about the University of Minnesota.

Q. With the name, image, and likeness freedom that players have now, what challenges has that presented for you as coach?

PJ FLECK: First of all, I'm fired up. I'm fired up about name, image, and likeness. I think it's tremendous. Our location, the Twin City area, the three and a half million people we have in our city, the 18 Fortune 500 companies, this isn't a small, little college town. We have businesses galore and now having the ability for our players to benefit off their name with all of these companies, that we can't be a part of organizing that, but they have all these resources at their disposal, at their fingertips. Now there's no Minnesota state law yet, so we have to be able to follow the NCAA, and obviously the University of Minnesota guidelines. But this is awesome that players get to now benefit off their name, image, and likeness.

Change is inevitable. This was coming. We all knew that. But to be in an urban area like we are with the major corporations that we have, it's only going to benefit our student-athletes, and we have had numerous student-athletes already benefit from that. I think that's really positive as we continue to move forward. The big thing we have to continue to do is we got to keep adding education because with the name, image, and likeness comes things like taxes, scams, agents. We have to continue to educate the student-athlete and that's what we already have built into our program. We have had to Gopher Life program, which used to be the Bronco For Life program, for nine years now, which talks to them about finances, taxes, all the things we have done. Now we just got to be able to make that bigger and better as we continue to inform our student-athletes. But I'm excited. As long as we have our players' safety at the forefront of everything we do in terms of keeping them safe, I think it's a benefit, and we knew it was coming. Being at the

University of Minnesota, where we're located, I think it's a grand slam.

Q. Your defense the last few years has had a few rough patches to start the season, whether it's having a tough time getting in the back field, tackling or in coverage. You've had some early troubles, like last season against Michigan and Maryland 2020, and some early non-conference opponents, 2019. How in practice this summer do you and defensive coordinator Joe Rossi make sure to not have a slow start to this season, essentially?

PJ FLECK: Yeah. That's a great question. With all due respect, the way I -- I don't put a lot of stock into just the record, like all of you do, from last year. There was a lot of different things that were way more important to football that we focused on. Now, we went two overtime games, we're 5-2, and everybody's talking about how good we were and that's just two overtime games. We didn't do that. Right? So we also could have been 1-6. Right? We have to find a way to win the close games. We know that. However, when you look defensively, leaving 2019 we lost seven starters. We knew 2020 we were going to be young to begin with. We knew we were going to have to basically go through some growing pains. We knew that. But we did and now everybody's back. So I'm not worried about that. I think Joe Rossi is one of the defensive coordinators in the country. I love our scheme. I love what we do. I thought people got a chance to see that towards the middle and end of 2019. And I think that we have something very similar to that now. And we had to be able to take our lumps, bruises, and we played a lot of people. There were 35 players missing at that Nebraska game. And defensively, that was a pretty good performance.

So I know why the things are the way they are. Sometimes we don't always know that from the outside, but I do know why, and I do know the exact reasons why, and it's my job to make sure that gets fixed in the timely fashion, and to be honest with yourself exactly where you are. We're a developmental program. We're going to take kids from high school all the way to when they graduate and they get multiple degrees. I don't take a ton of transfers a lot. We did this year to, take probably five or six to be able to plug some holes. But for the most part, we're a developmental program from high school all the way until they graduate. 95 percent are high school kids. And we're going to keep doing that. And there's going to be times we're more experienced and we're younger.

But now, as we get into year five, especially with this team, I really like this football team. I love coaching them. They're fun. They make coming to work really exciting, even more exciting than I already am, which is hard to do.

I just love the type of people that we're coaching right now, and the connectivity is tremendous.

Q. When you look at the identity of a college football team and how it changes from year to year, now in year five, what do you think the identity is going to be for your Minnesota team?

PJ FLECK: Well, we talked about those four things, right, this togetherness, this gratefulness, this identity, and focusing on each other. That's what I want people to see when they watch us play. Period. Right? People always ask, Well, what makes a successful season? It's not a numbers. We won 11 games in 2019 for the first time since 1904 and everybody forgot about that already. That's college football. That's sports. It constantly keeps moving forward. But I want our team to be the most together football team in the country. And there were a lot of things that happened in the Twin Cities that we addressed, that we went through, that we're still going through, and it's not just checking the box, it's truly changing, being the change we all want to see, addressing those issues, creating something better than it was as we continue to move into the future, connecting our players to that togetherness, be grateful to be out there, just to be grateful to play football, to have the ability to be around one another, have you guys here, have our stadium full. We opened up with Ohio State. How much better could that be? Right? It's a big stadium, brand new name, third straight sellout, in Minnesota, in Minneapolis, against a top 5 team. It couldn't get much better than that. Right? To be grateful for that.

And then our identity is going to be who we are. Every team has their own identity. Comparisons steal your joy. This is not going to be like another team. It's not going to be like a Western Michigan team, like a Minnesota team, like this other team. It's their team. They get to create whatever they want. And as we go through training camp, we'll start to form that. We're still going to want to run the ball. We still got a lot of RPO and play action. We're still going to want to build a drop back. We got to score more points than the opponent.

And then you have to focus on each other. There's going to be all these outside distractions, all these outside expectations, all these outside predictions, right? We were picked sixth in the West when we tied for 1st in the West in 2019. That's why they call it the wild, wild west. You just never know. So we have to focus on us, our expectations have to be bigger than anybody else's, and we have to put more pressure on ourselves than anyone else will put on us, and if we do that, we got a chance to be a pretty good football team. It's a fun team to coach. I can't wait to get going with them. Thanks for everybody being here.

