

Big Ten Football Media Days

Tuesday, July 26, 2022

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Coach P.J. Fleck

Press Conference



KEVIN WARREN: Our next head football coach is from the University of Minnesota. Coach Fleck and his wife, Heather, have been incredibly instrumental in moving the dial in the Twin Cities of changing lives for those who are less fortunate.

I'm excited about seeing the Golden Gophers play this year after the big victory that they had over West Virginia in Guaranteed Rate Bowl. With that, head football coach for University of Minnesota, P.J. Fleck.

P.J. FLECK: Great to see everybody. Thanks for being here. It's great to be back for year six at the University of Minnesota and actually ten years of being a head football coach. I promise you this, I haven't taken one day for granted being a head football coach, especially in this league.

I want to thank our president, Joan Gabel, our athletic director, Mark Coyle, for their leadership. I want to thank Commissioner Warren for his leadership. To say that leadership's been easy over the last few years would be an understatement and not true. He's really led us through some tough times.

I want to say hi to my wife Heather. She's watching on TV with my kids, Gavin, Carter, Paisley, and Harper. It's always good to say hi to them as they watch me on TV, I'm sure.

I'm excited about year six. I'm really, really excited about our players. I want to thank our players for all the work they've done in the off-season. I want to thank our strength staff, Dan Nichol, who's one of the best in the country, they're working really hard as well.

We're going to continue to strive to be the best we can be in creating one of the most exciting developmental and educational life programs in the country, and we'll continue to do that.

Brought four amazing young men with us: Tanner Morgan, John Michael Schmitz, Mariano Sori-Marin, and Tyler

Nubin.

Tanner Morgan has been around the league, it seems like forever. He's turning year six. He's got his bachelor's degree, his master's degree, and now he's kind of a non-major student at the University of Minnesota, just taking classes and going to lead our football team.

Got married here a few weeks ago, which I'm sure you all know, to his wife, Sarah. It must be contagious on our team because John Michael Schmitz, a Preseason All-American, you look at the top of the Rimington list, his name is right up there, is also engaged to be married here coming up.

These six-year guys, and they call themselves the encore four. It's going to be really fun to watch these guys develop on and off the field. Got guys getting married already.

He's a phenomenal football player, incredible person.

Mariano Sori-Marin, from Providence Catholic in Illinois, one of our middle linebackers, the ultimate connector on our defense. You talk about a guy who'd be a phenomenal coach one day; he'll do that. He's also an incredible foodie. He's got a list of 105 restaurants that he's visited that I'm sure he'll probably talk to you about, and he's ranked all of them. You've got a certain type of food you like, he'll definitely give you where you should go and give you a ranking on that.

Then Tyler Nubin, one of our safeties, has been an instrumental part of what we've done. We did a tape the other day for our team and showed them the big plays from last year, and Tyler Nubin was around all of those. His dad, Rodney, and mom, Sherese, both athletes at Eastern Michigan University and are both involved in our program. It's great to have Tyler here.

When your best players are your hardest workers, I think you have something really special. We're talking about year six, a lot of guys who chose to come back for that sixth year and a lot of newcomers that will be on our football team that will be helping us for the first time.



When you're talking about a life program, we talk about academics, athletics, social, spiritual, becoming elite in every single area of your life. Our team cumulative GPA is at a 3.3 right now. We have 11 straight semesters at a 3.0, which we're really excited about, or higher.

We have eight Academic All-Americans in the last five years. To give you a little bit of that, we look back in the 20 years prior to us being there, we had eight total. In the last five years, we've had eight.

You look at our NFL draft picks, we had four NFL draft picks this year with Boye Mafe going in the second round, Daniel Faalele going in the fourth round, Ezezi Otomewo going in the fifth round, and Ko Kieft going in the sixth round to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. We also have four others on NFL teams as well.

If you look at the last two full seasons of nine-plus wins that we've had, that's the first time we've basically had back-to-back full season nine-win seasons since 1900 through 1905.

So there's a lot of positive things in our program. I'm really proud of our players. Can't wait to see what happens this season. It's a fun team. It's a committed team. Probably more than I've ever had in the six years being at the University of Minnesota. It's probably the most committed team, and I look forward to what they have.

With that, I'll open it for questions.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the return of Mo Ibrahim, and what does he mean for your team on the field, the way he competes, but then also the kind of leadership and other kinds of qualities he brings to your team as well?

P.J. FLECK: Mohamed is part of that encore four they're kind of calling themselves. I'm not sure if that's NIL or not or some copyright infringement that I just threw out there for them. But you've got Mo, you've got Tanner, John Michael Schmitz, and Crab.

Talk about Mo, he could have went to the National Football League. After tearing his Achilles, I think we all saw it, he had 170 yards in the first half against Ohio State, and he was primed for a huge season.

Decided to come back, not only for himself, but for his teammates. That spread through our entire team. John Michael Schmitz coming back, Tanner coming back, Crab coming back, Chris Autman-Bell. They made decisions on what Mo was going to do. Mo could have gone to the National Football League. As he would say, 5'8" is 5'8".

He's not getting any taller. But he did it for the team and he did it to put a different ending to what happened.

I think he's one of the best backs in the country, but more importantly, he's one of the best people you will ever meet in your entire life. His leadership has become really infectious based on real-world experiences. Here's a guy who had a lot of NIL, and he ran for 170 yards in the first half, got all this stuff, and boom, it all ends.

He can share a lot of those experiences with our team and those life experiences. So it means the world to us that he's coming back. He's at full strength. He's ready to roll. And we're excited about having him have a really, really positive 2022.

Q. What are your thoughts on USC and UCLA joining the Big Ten, what challenges and opportunities that would present for Minnesota?

P.J. FLECK: The first thing that came to my mind was L.A., are you kidding me? That's perfect. The Big Ten now is represented from the West Coast to the East Coast. You look at the major media markets now, that's incredibly positive.

I look at everything through the lens of the University of Minnesota. We have a ton of living alumni out on the West Coast, and now that Big Ten footprint is really stationed there for all of our alumni.

I think when you kind of look at does playing out there help recruiting? Yes and no. I think it's very different than it used to be ten years ago, where kids can live stream games, watch any game they want, they have all the types of resources on their phones. But I do think it's really positive for the conference and the league. We're excited about it. It's coast to coast.

I think people asked me a question back there about travel, I think other sports could be affected. Again, I look through it from the football eyes. (Indiscernible) Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday nights on nine-hour bus rides. I'm not sure how many people asked me that question. I think there's people way smarter than me that will figure all that out in terms of how we're going to make that all work.

Again, it's a positive blueprint for the Big Ten, and change is really healthy. It's a big change, and we're excited about having the L.A. market into the Big Ten.

Q. P.J., I'm curious how you would define balance for your offense this fall?

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, doing what it takes to win football

games. I think that's how we define balance. I think the easy thing is to say run for 200, pass for 200.

I think what Kirk Ciarrocca would tell you, and we talked about this a long time ago, if we have to three for 350, we need to be able to throw for 350. If we have to run for 350 to win, then we have to find a way to run for 350.

I think what you saw last year -- think back in 2019, we had two First Team All-Big Ten wide receivers for the first time in the history of the league and also had a 1,000-yard rusher, had one of the best offenses in the country. Last year we lose five tailbacks, four of our receivers miss three to four-plus games, and everybody says what happened? We still won nine games.

That's a testament to finding a way in the system to do what the strength of your football team is. We still had one of the best offensive lines in the country. So we had to make the game shorter. We had to run the ball a little bit more. We had to do what we had to do to find ways to win games.

But now when you look at the balance, when we're at our best, we are balanced. I think any team would be able to want that in a perfect world. But balance to me means you do exactly what you have to do to win that game and have the ability to do that on a weekly basis.

Q. I want to continue the Ciarrocca theme and ask you, were you surprised that it went so quickly at Penn State, it didn't work out for Coach Ciarrocca? How quickly did you have a conversation about him about returning to Minnesota? And maybe Tanner's reaction as a sixth-year guy, because he's worked with Kirk in the past, to run the offense with him?

P.J. FLECK: We talked about this. Change is really hard. It's hard to do. It's hard to accept. It's hard to move on from that. A lot of people asked me, were you hurt when Kirk left? I said no. Besides letting me know on Christmas morning, I said there really wasn't anything I was mad about.

But I said, that's not what loyalty is about, staying with somebody forever. Loyalty is about giving 100 percent committed job effort at that particular time, while you work for that person and while you work for that environment.

I'm not sure I wouldn't have done the same thing Kirk did and take an opportunity. He's from Pennsylvania. He had some family things going on, especially with his dad back home. It was a great opportunity for him, especially financially, and supported him 100 percent. We've had a great friendship that goes beyond football.

But when the opportunity came back to hire him, him and I, it was easy. It was like yes. What I respect about Kirk is Kirk wanted to know how that would affect the kids, and I wanted to know how that would affect the kids.

So you start asking people a little bit about how would you feel if somebody came back? And guys got really excited about that. I said, of course you might have to answer some questions in your first team meeting, but that will be easy after the first five minutes, and he did. We addressed it head on, talked about why he left, talked about why he's back. I know we're excited to have him. Tanner's really excited to have him.

He makes me a better head football coach. One thing I can do really well is hire people that are way smarter than me. It's out there about my 18 ACT score three times. You hire people who are way smarter than you, and you can find a way to move up pretty quick. That's what I found a way to do.

He does that. He's really smart, really intelligent. Makes me a better head football coach. I hope we make him a better coordinator. We're really excited to have him.

Q. P.J., you talked a few times about being the most committed team that you've had. What does that mean exactly, and what examples do you have that make you say that?

P.J. FLECK: The committed part always has to do with have to versus want to. There's a decision to be made. Here's what I have to do, here's on the schedule, and do I really want to do that "have to" part? And then after that, what is the unrequired work that I'm going to do on my own that's going to make me a better football team and make me a better football player?

Our leadership on this football team is fully committed to all of it. They want to do the "have to" stuff. They can't wait to do it. They're off the field on their own doing unrequired work. They're doing unrequired things together. Our HERE initiative back home, our Gopher For Life programs with the attendance that they have, the nonfootball stuff.

This team is fully committed to each other, and it's been fun to watch. You get that vibe when you go down and watch them work. You can kind of weed through all the other things that don't matter and get right to the heart of what matters with this football team, and that's what I appreciate about them. They don't have any time for silliness. They go right in, get their work done, and get better.

