

# Big Ten Football Media Days

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

## Minnesota Golden Gophers

### Coach P.J. Fleck

#### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by head coach P.J. Fleck.

COACH FLECK: Good to see everybody. Like everybody said before me, really excited about the 2023 season. I want to thank our athletic director, Mark Coyle, who I think is the best athletic director in the country. Thank our interim president, Ettinger, for his leadership and the guidance he's provided over the last few months.

Heading into year seven. Seemed like yesterday, but this is year seven for us at the University of Minnesota. It's a tremendous honor to lead the flagship university of our state. Never take it for granted one day.

We talk about our program being elite academically, athletically and socially, and with the serving and giving piece of that, I think we've made strides every year since we got there in all four areas. It's a life program as we continue to talk about.

We're talking academically, we'll skip to all the other stuff, we've had 27 Academic All-Americans in the history of the University of Minnesota. Nine of those 27 have come in the last six years. I know our staff and Jacki Lienesch and her department and Robert Day are very proud of that as we are too.

Athletically, over the course of the last three full seasons, I think it's well-documented, we have 29 victories, which is almost averaging ten wins a year, and -- along with 14 draft picks over the last four years.

So incredibly proud of our players, not only having the success on the field but also doing what they came to actually to the University of Minnesota for, and that's obviously the academic piece of that.

Transitioning into the 2023 year, a lot of you and outside sources have considered our schedule the second hardest schedule in America, right behind Ole Miss of the SEC. You know me, I like to take things and be able to give it to my team and let us process it.

We presented it to them in January, basically, and said, hey, listen, this is the second most opportunistic schedule in America and that's the way that our team has been talked to since January and what we've been preparing for.

We've also taken this word, you're going to see we're pretty experienced team and inexperienced kind of combined this year, but we've taken this word "poise." And I'm talking about composure and balance, especially with the schedule we have.

We better be a really poised football team. We better be a composed football team. We better be confident, and we better be balanced.

And we've taken this word "poise" and said this is what we have to do to be really successful in 2023. And then we took it to a little bit of an extreme and said, okay, how do we get our message home to our players.

What we did since January they've been listening to the band Poison in the weight room every single workout. I'm not sure how many are '80s rock fans, but if you ask them what their favorite Poison song is, I'm sure they can actually tell you at this point.

We actually got to a point where I meet with our board of directors, which is a lot of our players on our team who are the leaders. We meet around once a week and they usually start the meeting for the first five minutes telling me what they need to make the program better. It's their time to be able to tell me what we can do to even make it better.

And the first thing that came out of their mouth this summer was, Coach, listen, we get it; we just want a little less Poison in the weight room. We've actually diminished the amount of Poison we play in the weight room. It's really interesting to connect our generation with them with that band.

We have an interesting blend of experienced and inexperienced players. Talked about, I think it's well-documented the players we have to replace in 2023. We're talking about five-year starters, four-year starters,



the Tanner Morgans, the Mohamed Ibrahims, the Mariano Sori-Marins, the Jordan Howdens, the T-Times who are all now moved on to the National Football League.

We obviously have to be able to refill those and replenish that with some inexperienced players who will have an opportunity, but that's why you recruit.

When we talk about the experience we have coming back, we've brought three players here, Chris Autman-Bell, Brevyn Spann-Ford, and Tyler Nubin that have 18 total years of Gopher football combined: a seven-year player, six-year player, and a fifth-year player. It's going to be a really interesting combination that we have moving forward.

This is definitely a player-led team. And we talk about this all the time: Bad teams, nobody leads; average teams, coaches lead; and elite teams, players lead.

This has definitely become in the offseason a player-led team, and I couldn't be more proud of the guys we actually brought with us today.

You know me, I like to talk about the guys we brought. Chris Autman-Bell. I've known him eight years. Most guys go to school -- he's getting his third degree in seven years. We call him Dr. Crab, Chris Autman-Bell. Crab is his nickname.

Who can forget his touchdown against Fresno? If he has a size 13 shoe, it's out of bounds. Thank God he has a size 12 shoe and stayed in bounds or that '19 season doesn't go the way it has. The big catch against Penn State, '19, another big catch, touchdown he had against Wisconsin.

The one thing I love about Chris Autman-Bell, he was part of the group we offered once we got to Minnesota to bring with us, and he's matured tremendously. We talk about a young man who is going to be a tremendous father, tremendous husband, and has grown up a lot through the adversities that he's had.

He's getting close to being back to 100 percent and came back for his seventh year in our culture, which I think speaks volumes to our program.

Brevyn Spann-Ford, feels like yesterday we were recruiting him, 6'7", 208, 210 pounds at camp. And I remember this young man had multiple offers, but he had to keep coming back to our camp. We're a developmental program. 210 pounds, we were wondering if he's going to be a tackle, a tight end or a wideout.

It comes to the third time he comes to our summer football

camp, and his mom looks at me, she bangs the table and looks across from me and says, "What does my son have to do to get an offer to the school he wants to be at, his home state Minnesota Golden Gophers?"

I said, "I guess that's it. We're here to offer him."

That's all it took. We offered him, and I think the rest is history.

The one thing I love about Brevyn is when you watch him with his nephews -- we have open practices for all of our families to come to any practice. And his family takes advantage of that, being a Minnesota young man. Watching him play with his nephews, again, another guy who will be a great husband, great father, and just an elite person as he's developed inside of our program.

Last but not least Tyler Nubin one of the best safeties in the country in my opinion. You talk about all these guys, Brevyn Spann-Ford was a 2018 scout team player of the year. Mohamed Ibrahim was a 2019 scout team player of the year. We're a developmental program.

Tyler Nubin had to sit behind the Antoine Winfield Jrs. and Jordan Howdens. And he emerged as one of the best college football players in the country. We originally recruited him as a corner/wideout and ended up as safety.

His dad, Rodney, and mom, Sherese, were both student-athletes, and he gets a lot of that competitive nature and confidence from his parents.

But he's really become the vocal presence on our defensive side of the ball. And he can back up all the charisma and confidence that he has.

He missed the last two games of the year -- I think it's well documented -- with an injury. But the best thing about him is as Coleman Bryson, a freshman who was his backup, became the bowl game MVP with a pick-6. The first person to meet him almost in the end zone was Tyler Nubin. And he almost got a penalty for running onto the field. If somebody is going to get a penalty running onto the field it's only going to be me. Kidding, that's a joke if you know what I'm talking about.

But that's the type of kid he is, young man he is. I'm looking forward to the season.

**Q. How big is it for your program to be opening up this season by hosting Nebraska, Thursday night prime time, and how do you plan on taking advantage of the spotlight?**



COACH FLECK: I just got off the radio with the Nebraska guys. And I have known Coach Rhule for a long time. I have a ton of respect for what he's done. We go back to the Western Michigan games for me and Temple days for him. He's a phenomenal football coach with a phenomenal culture. His culture is all about connectivity.

And anytime you're opening with a Big Ten opponent you always know it's going to be a tough matchup, especially when you have a coaching staff like he has and a team like he has.

I've always had a ton of respect for Nebraska. Our team always has. And starting Big Ten play right away, really kind of gets the season off to a really exciting start right away. And it's going to be a fun environment, Huntington Bank Stadium, and we're looking forward to it.

**Q. A story that ran yesterday, there was some allegations that you probably found troubling regarding your program made by some former players. There was a reference to a Fleck Bank and Fleck Coins that could be used in some cases. There's allegations of violating team rules with those Fleck Coins. Could you kind of describe what a Fleck Bank is, those Fleck Coins, and maybe respond to some of the allegations made?**

COACH FLECK: First of all, the Fleck Bank, mostly used in 2017 and '18, was an analogy used in a team meeting talking about the more you invest into a program, the better experience you're going to get out of it.

As a head football coach when you come in and you don't know anybody, the guys that do really good things are going to have a really good experience. If you're not doing all the right things, you're probably not going to have a great experience.

There was no currency ever exchanged. There was no coins that ever existed. It was an analogy simply to explain investment for life, a life lesson of investment. Simply that.

No one ever got out of any type of punishment for that. And just so everybody knows, in punishing our football team, that word "punishing," in fact, our athletic department has taken over our disciplinary-type actions. We do not use physical activity to discipline our players at the University of Minnesota. And we have never done that.

Our players do things like they wake up early and clean the weight room. Whatever you did, you watch a video on that. If you were late to class, you watch a video on tardiness, you write your professor a letter.

Those are the disciplines we actually have within our program; that our athletic department changed their policies and made sure that no physical activity of any sport could be used as punishment based on what we created as a football team.

These allegations are baseless. We have full support of our athletic director, Mark Coyle, and our university leadership. This is a similar story that gets peddled every single year, and the majority of the players have been dismissed or removed from our football team. We also have around a half-dozen anonymous reporting avenues within our football program that players can go to if they have an issue.

Protection for all, EEOA office, mental health support, SAC, leadership council. And our athletic director, Mark Coyle, gives his cell phone number to every single football player to call him if they have any issue. To this date, there have been zero claims on this issue. Zero.

Our program and culture is proven to work on and off the field, and it's always done in a first-class manner. We're one of the most transparent programs in the country. There are tons of testimonials from past, present, and even future Gophers to support and prove that.

My energy needs to be on the 2023 football team, and that only, and not the baseless allegations.

So that's what the Fleck Bank was, was strictly an analogy. And with all the other things that were reported, we have explanations on that as well.

**Q. With the new schedule, how important was it to keep those rivalry games that Minnesota has been playing for hundreds of years?**

COACH FLECK: It's huge. I think when we all had to fill out -- we had to all fill out as an administration and a program of what programs, what rivalries mean the most to you. For us, we have so many rivalries at the University of Minnesota, being one of the oldest members.

But to hold onto the Wisconsin rivalry, the Battle for Paul Bunyan's Axe and the Floyd of Rosedale with Iowa is incredibly important for our fan base. It's important for our tradition, the pageantry of college football.

The Big Ten got it right when you're protecting those rivalries. You won't make people happy when you're rescheduling everything like that, but I thought the Big Ten did a good job making sure we protected those rivalries I think all of our fans want to see on a yearly basis. If you don't see it on a yearly basis, you'll see it very soon. I think

change is inevitable, and it's been for the better.

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