

University of Pittsburgh Football Media Conference

Monday, September 13, 2021

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Pat Narduzzi

Press Conference

PAT NARDUZZI: Got a Pitt win, Steeler win. It's a good Monday in Pittsburgh, isn't it?

Obviously our kids had an exciting win and it was a team victory down in Knoxville for our kids. They went down with a great attitude as I said afterwards in that crazy Zoom. Hopefully don't have to do a Zoom call after a game anymore.

But you know, our kids played hard. They weathered the storm and couldn't be prouder of the way they played. There was a lot of good execution. There was some missed execution in really all three phases. The worst would probably be special teams which we have to clean up. Always say it's nice to have missed execution and W's at the same time, and that's what we were able to get is have some poor execution, live and learn from it, and then it will be a focus this week. I'll be all over special teams and we'll get that stuff fixed.

And then we move on to week three. We close that chapter last night in a hard way. Just close the door on it, and we move on to a very good MAC football team in Western Michigan, a team that's favored to win the MAC, I believe, from a lot of different places.

Tim Lester is the head coach. He's a super coach. I've known Tim for a long time, former quarterback at Western, really smart. I know how detailed he is. He's a guy that's an offensive guy that's spent a lot of time on defense in the off-season, so I know he's focused on what the defense is doing. I think they had nine three-and-outs last weekend, which is probably as good as you can get on a defense on any given Saturday afternoon.

Again, a lot of familiarity with their staff. It's a Midwest staff, so one of the co-offensive coordinators, a guy named Mike Bath who was a quarterback for us at Miami of Ohio back in the Ben Roethlisberger days, so he's smart, detailed. Again, well-coached on offense.

And special teams, Joe Palcic is my old linebacker coach, safeties coach, DB coach at Miami of Ohio back when I



was there in 2003. He's special teams coordinator does an excellent job. His dad was an old-time NFL coach for a long, long time. So Joe is there. It will be good to see him Saturday afternoon.

And then Lou Esposito is their defensive coordinator who has been doing it for a long time and is a great friend of Coach Lester, so they are working together on defense.

So it will be a challenge. It's not going to be easy. Our kids will be ready to go. We'll s a great week of practice. We'll have a better week this week than we had last week, and we'll just continue to do that throughout the season.

Q. Ever played a team you didn't know somebody on the other staff?

PAT NARDUZZI: Always got the good questions. Yeah, there's been times.

Again I really don't know Josh Heupel. I know him because we've played him but I don't know him. He's not a guy I've worked with side-by-side and all that or coached. So Western's got a little bit different flavor that way.

Q. (Off-mic.)

PAT NARDUZZI: It starts with me. I've got to make sure they are locked in it will be a hard week's practice that's for sure. The leadership will help. Kenny Pickett is captain No. 1. So it will start with him and how he practices and guys will follow those seniors.

So the way they flow, the way they go and the way they approach this game, watch more tape than they watched last week, all those things is stuff that we'll be all over, and I don't see it as a problem. I think we have a mature football team. You know, we will not overlook anybody.

When you put the tape on, they are well-coached. They are tough. They are physical and they play hard. You don't get nine three-and-outs on defense, and they have got some good players. They have got some players that are familiar with what we are. Scott Moore, Pittsburgh guy, that didn't play last week, played against Michigan, got banged up a little bit. I think they saved him for Pitt to come back home but he's explosive.



On defense, you have got Therran Coleman, a Pitt graduate coming into Heinz Field and Bricen Garner, another graduate, both graduate transfers. I think Bricen played short season for the MAC, I think played four or five games but they are both back healthy and ready for that COVID-sixth year. Be ready to roll.

Q. In the ACC, having a consistent run game, how have you felt about what you saw last week?

PAT NARDUZZI: Well, consistent run game is based on how you define it. I define a consistent run game with four minutes to go in the game and we had to run it and we're not going to throw the ball in the air and throw an incomplete pass to stop the clock and when they have got one time out left we ran the ball. If we wanted to come out and start off on a P&10 after -- catch the ball, 25-yard line just run it, you know, I feel like we could but we are trying to mix it up and be balanced.

And I think right now we have some balance to our offense. But you've also got a quarterback that can throw it. You've got some talented receivers, and we've got to spread the ball around. We showed two tailbacks last week. I hope Rodney Hammond gets a chance this weekend as well. I think the slower start didn't give him a chance to get in there in the first quarter and we were just playing catchup, as opposed to playing in front.

So I feel like we can run the ball when we need to and again we have to do a better job executing some of the things up front. We saw more than we thought we would see and they threw more blitzes than we thought might happen but you can't prepare for which ones and when. I know Coach Whipp felt like, as many points as we scored against an SEC team, he felt like, man, it was just one play off. Like just switching the plays up which sometimes happens as a play caller, offensively or defensively. It's all when you call those plays.

Great thing is we scored enough points to win, and Coach Whipp is not very happy because he feels like he could have called an even better game. You've just got to sometimes be lucky with some of your play calls and where do they go. But that goes with the games that you have on tape and knowing -- you sit there, you look at Penn State tape thinking they are going to do some of that stuff, and then they have got more stuff and different shows. They ran some blitzes into some more runs that we have to be able to pick up or get the ball out.

Q. With a mature team, with the quarterback, do you feel more comfortable going for it in situations like that?

PAT NARDUZZI: It comes down to how did you feel about your run game, which I feel more comfortable. Just have to look at the numbers there and find out what we like. You're not going to go for it on every fourth and one or fourth and two or three or four or five.

But if we feel good about our plays that we have available in your back pocket. You know, tell you what, it's a problem as a defense when someone gets four down instead of three to get a first down. It's a lot easier to get a first down when you use all four of your downs to get that first down.

Again one of those reasons is Kenny Pickett; the trust we have in him, but also those receivers we have trust in that when you throw the ball, they are catching it very well right now and having a back and offensive line that can push the pile.

Q. Nice to see some familiar players --

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, we went back and pulled a bunch of their one-on-one tape which is easy with XO's to pull all their one-on-ones and watch how they played and obviously they have gotten better in two years.

But we know who those guys are in the back end and we will attack accordingly. So that does help when you know somebody a little bit better but they are both good football players. They were ACC football players. Played a lot of downs here, and two unbelievable kids I can't wait to see after the game.

Q. How do you feel about your pass defense on Saturday and what areas are you focussing on heading into this week?

PAT NARDUZZI: You know, during the game I didn't feel so good, at least in that first quarter. You're seeing -- you're watching the rush, you're watching the quarterback and then you look down the field and you're seeing separation. We knew there would be separation. I've had situation with everybody.

But I always say this, when you're playing corner and you're playing press technique, you win at the line of scrimmage. You win with your feet, hips and hands, and when the guy has to run around you, okay, you're messing up the timing.

So everybody sees overthrows, but to me it's winning at the line of scrimmage. And you look at Marquis, he was behind and then he finishes, he's out of phase and finishes on that big, deep play where No. 11 got hurt, I believe, I'm not sure he returned. He just finished and played great

football, and that's a heck of a play.

But I told you, the stresses they put on you when they spread you out there, there's not much else you can do. I mean, whether you play cover three or cover one, all you would be doing is wasting the safety in the middle of the field based on what they do. Because they are throwing the ball out there. You play cover two, they will run the ball down your throat.

So it's kind of pick your poison. We shoulda, coulda done a better job, but really the quarterback draw is the one that got us. But the pass setting, you worry about getting your hands on those fast receivers down the field.

But I thought all in all the kids did a nice job. I'm mad about that quick -- we call it a now route where they throw it out and the guy comes down the sideline. AJ Woods didn't do a good job turning it back. Safety was in position but it got outside the corner. Corner has to send it back in.

Those are some of the things. I mean, those 50/50 balls are usually about 20 percent, but you have to win at the line of scrimmage and you mess up the timing and that's what you saw is messed up timing.

Q. What did you think in terms of the tackling?

PAT NARDUZZI: I thought it was average at times. I think our linebackers had quite a few missed tackles but again give them credit. It's not like you're playing against the children of the poor. It's a good football team. They have got skill, and they are going to make you miss.

But our guys, you know, kind of broke down too much more than what we want. They need to go take shots and that was one of our keys to victories is go take shots at these guys. Don't give them time to make you miss, and we didn't do a good job there. We have to practice better at that this week.

That will be a focus this week of, we don't go thud, we don't go live -- actually tomorrow we'll probably go a little live, a period or two. But we've got to tackle better and we have to take better angles and we've got to get our feet in the ground.

Q. What is it like having Hooker coming into the game, a player that's had experience in the past?

PAT NARDUZZI: You didn't think you were going to see hooker when Milton went down. I hope he's healthy. Here comes Hooker out there from seven to five and they both look really good on the hoof, too. I thought maybe they changed numbers because they are both good looking kid.

I saw Hooker after the game. Great kid. We knew he was a good football player. He started in the ACC and won a lot of games at Virginia Tech it. Was interesting we had to go back and look at some of our notes because you didn't prepare for him. You knew Joe Milton was the guy so we had to go back to what does he do well, and we didn't do a good job on some of the bubbles, some of the quick game which is kind of what he does well, and then they hit us with a couple tight end verticals versus some zone pressure which was a weakness for us.

Q. They talk about needing to trust your guys -- with Damarri -- went after him a fair amount of time --

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, Damarri is a good football player, and even the one PI he had on a post route, he's right there. I mean, he's got his hand near him, but there was no restriction at all and he's on top of the guy. It's not like he's running behind the guy. He was on top of the post, and I wish he had got his hand off the tail and got a pick. He had a chance if he puts two hands up to get an interception, so what are you going to do.

Q. What are your impressions of Sam?

PAT NARDUZZI: Sam has been unbelievable. You go into that atmosphere and kick field goals, you've got faith that he can do it anywhere now. I mean, you know, you wonder how he's going to react. I think some guys look at the atmosphere and didn't play like they needed to play in that atmosphere when the lights turned on. Sam is a guy that went out there and did his job.

So I was happy for him. That was a bright point in the special teams.

Q. The receiver -- separation, winning at the line of scrimmage?

PAT NARDUZZI: Didn't we just talk about that. If the ball is overthrown and didn't; if you watch the tape closely again on the field I was like, oh, my God, we can't cover these guys. But when you watch on the field we got them all the way downfield and the right hand, it's a little push by them, and all of a sudden there's a separation. If you watch it close, we are on them and then there's separation.

Again, the one that Marquis Williams made a stop on was kind of a different coverage, almost like a cover three. He was trying to split No. 1 and 2 receivers and No. 2 is the guy that got down the middle. So he has to lean a little bit more, so that one was a zone coverage, as opposed to a man coverage.

Most of them we are on them and there's some separation and push-offs and we don't seem to do much with that but sometimes happen. Again being physical at the line and trying to reroute that guy and making him run outside of his comfort and get him off the red line is important.

Q. Are you playing zone or man this year?

PAT NARDUZZI: You tell me. You've got the tape. You've got the DVR. We played a little zone, we played a little man, we played a little bit of both. So we do a little bit of both.

But against them, I'd say we played probably 70 percent man; you have to because you're out there on an island. Any time they are way out there standing on the sideline, you going to play cover three and you've got a corner out there and his third; there's two guys and his third, if the free safety, middle field player, can he lean over that way? Well then they have you over there on a post, so you're just covering grass if you're in some type of zone coverage.

Q. Slow starts all year but once you get going seems like you're really in a rhythm. How do you want to avoid a slow start this weekend?

PAT NARDUZZI: We'd like to start fast and again I attribute a little bit of that to our kickoff return team not allowing us to. I mean some of those balls should not have been fair -- they should have been touched outside there on the numbers where we caught them.

So you know, it's tough in that crowd. Alls we did is move our offense a little bit further right into that student section where they can scream and yell, and now again, just the nerves. The great thing about the offense is I think we had one false start, one unforced error.

So we talk about dealing with the crowd noise, I've been in a lot louder places than that place for sure, and you know, wasn't an issue at all. Matter of fact I think they had more issues than we did.

Q. Calling the game --

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, we gave them parameters and we don't get into that. Again, young kid that's never dealt with a crowd. He's a freshman that has never been in that atmosphere ever. Again, we have a lot of faith in him and he'll learn from it and we'll get better.

Again, you know, to me, you put that as a judgment call and he has to know when and where, but it's just like telling a returner not to catch the ball inside the eight-yard line, and how many times do you see it happen. You get in the

game and things happen.

So he'll figure that out. Again I put it on coaching as well. Any time you can talk about that, whether it's good or bad, there's coaching involved, and we just have to do a better job coaching him and all of our guys in some of those situations that we ran into.

Q. Having success early on with routes and stuff like that --

PAT NARDUZZI: Pick routes, you mean.

Q. How do you manage to work around that?

PAT NARDUZZI: Well, hopefully, hopefully they get looked at on the field and -- picking is illegal. So we saw some of those, and you know, we have different calls to take care of that if we want to. Most of the time it's a five-yard route that they are trying to pick us on. You know, sticking arms out, trying to purposely pick you is illegal. So I guess we have to do a better job working through those.

Q. Do you think your guys, your kickoff return guys had too many touches?

PAT NARDUZZI: No.

Q. This team --

PAT NARDUZZI: It all depends on where your return is going. You know, their kicker did a heck of a job putting it way outside, okay. And the problem is when you kick it way outside, let's just say they put the ball on the numbers, when you look at where they are going, putting the ball on the numbers, they are going to squeeze their coverage all the way down inside the hash.

So you have ten guys covering a kickoff outside the hash. There's not much space there. And then now you're running sideways to get it to the field and then you've got issues, so it all depends on where your return is going. If we wanted to try to smack something up through the boundary, you know, you're fighting an up-the-hill battle.

And Kenny, Coach Whipple, that fair catch, 25-yard line, is a nice place to start. I think everybody saw that on Saturday. It's not fun to start on the 14-yard line.

Q. The discipline of the offensive line, now on the road, hostile environment --

PAT NARDUZZI: You know, Coach Borbely does a great job. It's a discipline and they are locked in all the time. I really like our offensive line. They are paying attention to



the details.

Again we can get a lot better at blocking and picking up some different stuff. You know some of the blitzes, some of the blitzes you see, looking at it from a defensive standpoint, you are seeing safeties come up the field and blitz off the edge and you're looking, you know -- center, tackle out here -- (moving off-camera) -- he's not looking at the ball but sideways cadence. You can't be out here looking at the safety and the ball moves and you're stuck and now you're really late.

So there's some situations that I think people overlook in the big world of things, and for an offensive line, they did a heck of a job in that atmosphere of picking up what they had to pick up with their eyes, you have to go from here to the ball whether it's a five technique, an I-technique or whatever it is, or safety coming off the edge and they brought a few of those, which probably a good game plan in a silent atmosphere knowing you're on silent cadence.

Q. (Inaudible.).

PAT NARDUZZI: I think they both had winning performances. They both played well and ran the ball hard and protected well and flipped some guys upside down. I think Kenny got sacked once, and if he didn't slip it would be one sack on the day. I think one was a two-yard sack. They protected well and when they had the opportunity, you know, they ran the ball well and they had the right reads. Again sometimes where some safeties coming off the edge and that's a part of the game of football.

Q. Did you see improvement in the offensive line from Week 1 to week two?

PAT NARDUZZI: We did overall, offensively, defensively. But you have consider the opponent; if we play UMass twice you probably see a little more improvement, but you play UMass and go to an SEC program. There's some talent on that football team. There was a lot of NFL scouts there watching, obviously our guys and their guys. I wouldn't be shocked if they had five or six guys get drafted off that football team.

Q. What was it like to come off the field and see the fans, ran the flag out, must have been a cool moment?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, we appreciate you asking that question because our fans are unbelievable. I heard they were unbelievable -- I actually had a video sent to me Friday night how they took over Knoxville, and our fans are unbelievable. They were really, really good.

We need that again this weekend. From my information

the game is not televised locally, so get your tickets and get there. But our fans were unbelievable. They helped us win that football game -- we can't do it together.

We talk about "me not we," the "we" part that is our fans were there. You felt them; you heard them. I think early in the game, they were yelling and chanting, "SEC! SEC!" And late in the game I heard an "ACC" come crashing down in the stadium. They were impressive. It was good. It was fun to see them out in that atmosphere. Got quiet in the fourth quarter. Pretty quiet in there.

Q. Control of the game --

PAT NARDUZZI: Out of my control for sure, I kind of like it. I get to the stadium. Get to the stadium and help us out. I like it. Can't do anything about it but I think it's good. So I'm letting people know early, hey, get there. We need you.

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