

# University of Pittsburgh Football Media Conference

Monday, August 26, 2024  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

## Pat Narduzzi

### Press Conference

PAT NARDUZZI: Game week excitement. Obviously we've been preparing a long time for this opportunity to come back in 2024 and open up against a Kent State team from the mid-American Conference. I think our team is excited to hit somebody else. They've been hitting each other and competing against each other for a long time, against themselves.

I think these openers, sometimes you can worry about the opponent. I told the guys yesterday, I don't care if we're playing Georgia or we're playing Kent State; the focus has to be on what we do. It doesn't come down to what they do. I told them yesterday after practice again, it's what we do as a football player, as a team, as a unit, offensively, defensively and special teams. To me, that's the critical thing is focus on us. Don't worry about the opponent. If we go out there and play the game we're supposed to play, I think we'll walk off the field happy.

As you guys probably got the first updated depth chart whenever you got it, you see there's a lot of guys that you would think are starters on that football team. We've got a lot of guys that are going to get an opportunity to go out there and either start or be considered a starter, so we feel like we've got a lot of guys.

Obviously that quarterback position is one that you guys probably take great interest in, probably more than I do. I don't know who it is, but we feel like Nate and Eli both are guys that we consider starters, so those two have competed their tails off all camp, and we'll go out there and go.

I think the starter will be determined how we practice this week. We got practice in yesterday, so we'll see how they practice, how they pick up the game plan, but the plan right now is to play both those guys on Saturday and let the competition begin on the field.

It's one of those that I think is just too close to say, hey, this is what it is, let's take a chance at it. I think both of them are very capable. I think they both are guys that can win football games for us, and I'm excited to watch both of



them play.

If you guys recall, back in 2015 we did it, my first year here, with Chad Voytik and Nathan Peterman. We got into game 3, I believe, and it was over at that point, and I wish I'd have made that decision to pick a starter quicker than that.

But we're going to let it ride. Again, I feel great with both those guys. I think we've got two conscientious, smart, intelligent, athletic quarterbacks, and that's where we go there.

Obviously Kent State, Kenni Burns going into his second year at Kent, a guy that spent a lot of time with PJ Fleck at Minnesota. He's an old running back guy. He's an offensive coach. He likes his run game. He's got a new offensive coordinator who was the tight ends coach a year ago who came from Charlotte, so we've put on a lot of Charlotte tape as well as Kent State personnel tape and watching what they're doing. You're preparing for Kent State stuff, you're preparing for Charlotte. Typical opener.

They've got a new defensive coordinator. I think they got a new defensive coordinator halfway through the spring. Kody Morgan is their new defensive coordinator. He's a guy that was a safeties coach and a special teams coordinator a year ago, so really when you think about guys calling the offense, Carney and Morgan both will be calling their first game as coordinators, so it'll be a little bit hard to know kind of what you're going to get either way. That's why it's even more important that the focus comes on us. It doesn't matter what they give us, we have to just go out and execute. If it's a run, execute the run. If we're going to blitz them, then let's be really good at the blitz and keep things as simple as possible, let our guys play hard, play fast.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

#### **Q. Sean FitzSimmons isn't listed on the depth chart. Is he out?**

PAT NARDUZZI: He is not out. Maybe a little bit banged up, but Sean would be on the depth chart. But I probably should have put "or" next to him. Thanks for letting me know about that one.

Sean has been banged up. I'm not going to get into talking



about injuries. But he's been banged up a little bit, and we hope to have him back real, real soon.

**Q. One of the classic sayings in football is that if you have two quarterbacks it's having no quarterbacks. What did these two guys show you that's so unique that both these guys are ready to go?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Last year at this point I didn't feel like we had two quarterbacks. I'll start there. I felt like we had one quarterback, and I thought -- okay, I feel so much better about where that is. You can take slogans and those terms -- we'll find out on the 31st.

I believe we have two really good quarterbacks. I really do. And again, Nate was the starter coming out of spring ball, as we've talked through camp, and Eli made some major, major improvements. It's like he caught up. There's some competition going on, that I feel like to say one guy is going to get that opportunity to take the first snap, but to say at that position, at the quarterback position, that hey, it's all about practice -- because you know what, you get used to playing against one defense or one coverage or whatever it may be, that doesn't mean you're the best quarterback. To me, that thing needs to be put over into a gamelike situation and go from there.

Just like a lot of those positions; I don't care if you talk about the defensive end or D-tackles. I've got Ki Johnson, Nick James, Isaiah, shoot, there's a lot of guys up there that -- that whole D-line, Eli Donald -- who's the starter? Every week there's going to be a different starter there. I'd almost bet my life that every week is going to be a different -- who played well last week, they're going to get that chance in the beginning of the week. You could be an all-conference player; if you don't come out and practice the next week, you'll probably be a backup if you can't get the checks and come out and slop around in practice just thinking you can show up.

It doesn't matter what position. If we've got five D-tackles, then do we not have any. I think it's the same thing. I really love our quarterback situation right now, and I feel like we're in a good position, and someone is going to have to prepare for two of them because they're both going to play.

**Q. Are their skill sets complementary, Eli and Nate? Do they bring different things to the offense?**

PAT NARDUZZI: You know what, the offense is not going to change that much based on who they are. But they're very similar in what they can do. Like I said, I started off, they can operate and manage it offensively. That's the first thing. It's not like one is going to be slower than the other.

They can both operate at a fast tempo, and we'll find out what skills come out there on game day and who's got those intangibles on game day and who's going to bring us the best package.

**Q. (Indiscernible) does that work for you for the other team?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Not really. Sometimes in different positions but not for that one. That's not the reason; I can guarantee you that. Because they're preparing for both of them. Even though they probably don't have much tape on Eli, they're preparing for both of them probably, just like we're preparing for two of their quarterbacks.

**Q. You're saying that both guys will play Saturday; do you guys have certain packages for one or the other? Will you use them in different ways?**

PAT NARDUZZI: No, the same package. To Will's question, really it's the same thing. It's not like we can't run this with him, we just do this. Now, I can tell you this: Coach Bell will have -- he'll sit down with both of those guys and say, what do you like, what do you like. They each have things they like better, but they can operate and do everything the same. It's not like he's going to have to change.

But instead of Nate's favorite play may be this, and Eli's is this, but they're all in the favorites. They've all practiced everything that we're going to have in the game plan.

**Q. Will you settle this battle after Kent State week or are you comfortable seeing them in Cincinnati week?**

PAT NARDUZZI: You know, I like to do what comes -- whatever happens. I think we maybe could all be sitting in that press conference room after the game going, okay, looks like that guy. We can all have our opinions. I want to know as soon as possible. I don't want to drag it on. I want to do it as soon as I possibly can.

**Q. You're trying to judge the two quarterbacks but you're also trying to break in a new offense. Do all these things make you maybe less likely to hold big chunks of the offense back like you've done in the past in these season openers?**

PAT NARDUZZI: No. When you say that, I've never held anything back. Again, I've never called an offensive play, but I've never held anything back in an opener. We're not holding back. We're going to play football, going to win a football game. Kent will not be coming in here -- they'll play their best game of the year. I can promise you that. They will come in here cranked up, two hours down the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

road, and they will play their best game of the season.

**Q. Has Nate shown a similar level of mobility to Eli?**

PAT NARDUZZI: You know what, at times, yeah. You could probably put him on 40s, if he can go to the NCAA '24 game, I think one has got better speed than the other. I don't know how to predict that. But they both run pretty darned good. It's not like there's some drop-back quarterback that isn't going to be able to be mobile enough. They both move well.

**Q. (Indiscernible).**

PAT NARDUZZI: I don't know, maybe I missed an "or" there. Rashad Battle has done a nice job. I think Ryland, and you can almost say Tamon, the same thing, and Rashad might be the top three right now. You can probably put another "or" there if you want to. I just got bored writing "ors" on EJ's sheet. But between Ryland, Tamon and Rashad, those to me right now would be the three guys that are going to get the majority of those reps. We'll kind of see how it goes.

But I've been impressed with Rashad. He's a senior. He's been through a battle, okay, through his career here at Pitt. I'm excited that he's stayed healthy and excited to see him play.

**Q. Rodney has obviously played a lot of snaps for you. What has Desmond shown to have that "or" there at the running back position?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah. Desmond, and I've probably said this pre-practice, just Desmond has got a little gear, and he's tough. Like I said, I think he sits behind the podium and is kind of like this looking at the guys when he's got a chance sitting up here and talking. I think the guys have messed with him a little bit and said, hey, stand up, because we have a lot of fun in here. Desmond is a tough son of a gun, let me just tell you. He's fast, and he's got burst. He's not as big as Isy was in the past, but he's got one of those -- he's got that breakaway speed that if you give him a hole, he can take it to the house. Again, he can catch the ball out of the backfield. He's very versatile.

**Q. Has that familiarity with the offense helped him, as well?**

PAT NARDUZZI: I think so. I think he wouldn't tell you that because he doesn't say anything. It's like, I try to get him to talk a little, and he just smiles, and you've got to love that about him.

**Q. You didn't list your quarterbacks alphabetically.**

**I'm curious why not.**

PAT NARDUZZI: Because I was struggling with the alphabet maybe. I don't know. I have no idea.

**Q. You said Eli made big strides, closed that gap. What specifically have you seen from him during camp?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Probably wasn't as fair maybe in spring ball. He had a little bit of a hammy. I think he dealt with a hammy going in, a hamstring injury going into spring ball and out of spring ball. I don't know. I couldn't put a finger on it. Just the time, I guess, that he had in the offense in the summer. Obviously he did a great job in the summer, and spending time in the classroom and just learning it. So I couldn't put my finger on exactly why, but he's made some strides. That's for sure.

**Q. Would you speak a little bit to what you've learned about Kade since you hired him?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Gosh, you learn every day. Do you want the good or the bad? I'm just kidding you.

**Q. Both.**

PAT NARDUZZI: I'm sure you do.

No, Kade is enthusiastic. He coaches the same way every day. He's consistent. I can't say he's anything but a ball coach, a coach's kid. Just love everything about him right now. We'll find out when games come. But he's a ball coach. He's into it. He's got great plans. I like the way he game plans. That's something that comes up new. Every day there's something new you learn about him. I can't go through the list, but just watching the way he game plans, he game plans different than other guys that I've been around throughout the years.

That's about all I can tell you.

**Q. I don't think I've seen a freshman get one of those starting fours like Francis Brewu did at a position like that. What's he done to show that he's at that level?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, Francis started off a little bit robotic, but he's a pleaser. When you talk about a 4-3 and -- he's a guy that's just trying to do exactly what Coach Daoust or we want him to do every play, and if you tell him to stay in his A-gap, stay in his A-gap. He's really consistent with his footwork and doing what he's supposed to do. Probably the hardest transition was just trying to teach him how to run to the ball. He'd play the run and turn around and look like this for a while and see where the ball

is going, but he's improved there.

But he just attacks his gap, and he's where he's supposed to be, and that's half the battle sometimes. Some guys want to swim around gaps and try to ad lib. He's a dude that just consistently every day, you go -- I trust that guy that when we put him out there and we say, do this, he's going to do it. That is why he is where he is.

The other thing that separates him a little bit is he's strong. When he puts his hands on you, I'll tell you the first day we went scout team -- I don't know if you told you this already. First day we went scout team, he's on the scout field because every freshman regardless of what your position is goes to the scout team. He's over there and I heard some of the O-linemen saying, well, he ain't going to be here long, Coach. They know. That's what you want. When guys know who that guy is, that's what you want.

**Q. You're going to need all five of your D-tackles on opening day, aren't you.**

PAT NARDUZZI: We're going to need six or seven of them. I'd like to play them all. Again, practice is practice, guys. It's hard. I'm sure it's the same way next door. It's hard to tell who those guys are. That's why I wish we had scrimmages. I could give you -- there may be less "ors" on there if you get in a game and you don't get it done. Maybe there's less "ors" week 2. But until you have that opportunity to do it in a real game and not in a scrimmage and in front of people when the lights go on, I think it's critical.

**Q. What has Jimmy Scott done to separate himself as a starter?**

PAT NARDUZZI: He grew up in spring ball. Jimmy has been solid. Again, he's separated himself, but let me tell you, Chief is right there, too. I could put another damn "or" there. I really do. And going to the other end, Sincere. Sincere a little bit banged up during camp, but Sincere is another guy.

I'm excited to see all those guys. That's a good thing. If there wasn't many "ors" on here, it means we don't think we have many guys that can play for us.

Again, in two weeks, I may say that, hey, there's less "ors" and I was wrong, and again, that's what we're going to find because camp is over, right? I mean, when the season starts and you get an opponent, you find out really where you are.

**Q. Kade told us at Media Day that he doesn't script plays in practice. How much do you think that's**

**helped the two quarterbacks take command of the offense?**

PAT NARDUZZI: You know what, it's great question. I don't know how it helps them take command. I just know he's never scripted a play. That's something I've learned, going back to your question. Somebody that never scripts a play. Hey, can we script this? No, he just calls it. I love it. When I was at Michigan State and the last few years here, I'd have a "call-it" period. Sometimes last year I'd say, hey, it's a "call-it" period, and we were like this reading stuff off of a piece of paper.

The "call-it" period is about as realistic as you can get. It means you're doing it, and you know what, it's made Coach Bates better because he's got to call it every day and he doesn't have -- he's got to call it. He doesn't know what the heck the play is. I think it makes for a fun practice. It goes fast.

I like scripts personally. I'm old school. I like scripts, but it's something I've had to get used to. I don't know what I would have done if I was a D-coordinator. I might not like it as much. I like to know what I'm getting and get a defense versus an offense and all that.

I don't know if it's helping the quarterbacks. They just know, like we're going. They can operate at any speed, and they can operate regardless of what the call is. That's their job is to know everything.

**Q. I know you're in the midst of game planning, but you're going into your 10th season here at Pitt. It's a milestone and you're one of the longest tenured head coaches here, one of the winningest. Have you had any time to reflect on that?**

PAT NARDUZZI: No, not really. I'm worried about winning a football game. The only thing that matters is next Saturday. What we did in the past doesn't matter. Where the future goes doesn't matter. It's where are we today. We're just worried about Kent.

It ain't about me, it's about these seniors in the front row, it's about our captains and this football team.

**Q. Outside of Brandon and Keye, you have a lot of youth at linebacker. Do you feel like you've got some young guys that are going to step up and make some plays?**

PAT NARDUZZI: I do. Kyle Louis has played a ton of football, Biles has played a lot of football. Jordan Bass would probably be the youngest one in that group of six guys that you see on the depth chart there. We have some

guys after that that we should probably put on the depth chart.

We feel good with those six linebackers right there, and Jordan would be the youngest of the ones in there. Kyle Louis has played a lot of football. He's aggressive. He's physical. Biles is a dude -- we know Lovelace. All those guys can play.

**Q. What do you know about those two Kent State running backs, Thomas and Garcia?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Both good players. Obviously the transfer from Minnesota, the starter, is a good player. He was the MVP of a bowl game when he was at Minnesota. Coach burns -- that's his guy. He's going to get the rock. He's going to get a chance to run the football. He coached him at Minnesota, and now he's at Kent State.

Both good football players that we're going to have to stop the run. Stopping the run will be key.

**Q. You listed Kenny Johnson as a starter. What did he show during the summer to improve what you saw last year?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Kenny has had an up-and-down, I would say, fall camp. As a lot of the guys, especially at the receiver position, were banged up during the summer, Kenny is back and feeling good and has been for the last several days. So we're excited to see him back at full speed and playing Kenny ball.

But Kenny is mature, the offense fits him, and he's an explosive guy that can make plays.

**Q. You've got a lot of guys on this offense that were recruited -- you guys were playing a different style. It appears, judging from what I saw in the spring, that this is pretty different. Do you have to allow for some breaking-in process here, or did you expect, hey, man, we're snapping in 10 seconds, until they get it?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, it's a great question again. I would say this: We're going to find out. But that's what the whole 292 days since January, whatever it is, since January 8th when we sat in this room here and talked is to get them on that tempo. Listening to Coach Bell every day talk about it because it's new to me. Just the operation, our operation is getting better. Our operation right now with the guys that haven't been in this system and didn't get recruited into this system is so much better than it was when we ended spring ball.

The operation, getting lined up, doing all those things is

better. Is it good enough? We'll find out. If guys are moving and not set and the quarterback snaps a ball, we've got an illegal procedure, and it's going to annoy the hell out of me. But our operation keeps getting better.

These guys that were in different offenses, half of them played in that type of offense or three quarters of them or maybe 100 percent of them played in similar offenses in high school. They love all these one-word calls that tell you what formation to line up in, what play to go, and it's just like that's kind of -- we see it every week whoever we play. I think they're used to it. I think it shouldn't be a problem.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

