

University of Pittsburgh Football Media Conference

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Pat Narduzzi

Press Conference



PAT NARDUZZI: To start off, we're going to celebrate Mason Alexander's life on Saturday. Our thoughts and prayers have been with him for a long time. It's an opportunity to go out and play for his family. His mother will be at the coin toss. His family will be there. It's an opportunity for our kids to just kind of show Mason and the family what we've done since he left us.

Again, excited about this football game. Jerry Schmitt, heck of a football coach. Obviously going on his 21st year. I think I've been here a long time. 21 seasons anywhere in the country is unbelievable.

Duquesne is a good football team, well-coached. A lot of Pittsburgh guys. Those guys will come into Acrisure Stadium cranked up and play their best game of the year without a doubt. We expect that.

Offensively they're talented. They do a nice job. They got a kid named Riddell. Quarterback, I believe. I haven't seen a two deep yet. Not sure if you guys have yet. We expect him to be the starting quarterback.

He's a gun slinger, can throw it. This is his third school. He was in East Tennessee and Gardner-Webb. He was a starting quarterback at East Tennessee. He led victory over SEC powerhouse Vanderbilt. He's made plays. He's played in a lot of football games.

They got a great receiver in a guy named Joey Isabella. His brother I think still plays in the NFL. Played receiver at UMass. Really good player. We'll have to know where he is. A tailback named Butts. So 2, 5 and 0, three guys to focus on in the offense.

I think it all starts up front with their offensive line. Across the board tackle to tackle. They have five seniors up front. Pretty salty up front, as well. They're an older team. If you're going to have a strength with a transfer quarterback that can throw it, you want that front four or five guys up front, be ready to go.

Defensively very similar to what we are defensively. Four

down, three linebackers, going to play two shell, play some one high. Structurally a lot like we are. Really a lot of zone pressure. We expect a lot of zone pressure, which our defense is built for that.

So our offense has had a great look all fall camp. We've got 19 practices in on that. Our guys had a little bit extra juice yesterday I think knowing it's game week, practice yesterday afternoon, if you usually don't on a Sunday. Coming out of camp on Friday, having a rehearsal scrimmage. We're excited about what we got.

Going back to the defensive line, they have a kid named Dunkley. A good player. I think he had 11 sacks a year ago.

Their back end, really three experienced DBs back there, both safeties, C.J. at corner. They're talented. It will be a battle in Pittsburgh Saturday at noon.

Q. What did Jeff Persi to solidify himself...

PAT NARDUZZI: Boy, you're going to ask me about every starter.

Jeff came in spring ball, played really well. Just consistent I would say more than anything. Shows consistency on a daily basis. He's done a nice job for us. We're excited to watch him come out and play his first game with that Pitt script on.

Q. These schools haven't played each other since the '30s. What was the impetus to have that game?

PAT NARDUZZI: Our old athletic director asked, Would you be interested?

I said, Why not?

They're right down the road. We can bring someone from Youngstown or Rhode Island. Why not take care of a school in state, let them have an opportunity to play in their city, for their city? I think it's a great game.

Q. (No microphone.)

PAT NARDUZZI: Not that I know of. I try to focus on football, recruiting. It's the last thing on my mind who we



... when all is said, we're done.®

get to play.

If I'm asked, I'm going to give an opinion. We're excited. It's a heck of a game. Short trip for them, so it's good.

Q. Is it good for you guys, too? You could get an NFC school to play you guys, but to have a school, have some energy on their sideline, fans, is that a good way for you guys to open up?

PAT NARDUZZI: I'm not worried about the fans. That won't play a factor in the game. They don't play the game.

I just think it's great to play another team from Pittsburgh. Fans aside, I think it's an opportunity for another Pittsburgh school. I got a ton of respect for Jerry Schmitt. It's good for them, good for us. Again, short trip for them. So we're excited.

Q. If the ACC were to go to nine conference games, would this kind of game still happen or would you end up dropping it?

PAT NARDUZZI: It's hard to say. If we did drop it, I think it hurts FCS ball. I'm a IAA FCS guy. I know all the teams that played in the Northeast Conference. I know the Patriot League. I know the old Yankee. The Atlantic 10. All those conferences are run by some of these games they get an opportunity to play. Call it a money game, whatever it is.

I think it would hurt if that happens. I think it's going to happen across the board throughout. We're going to try to play the best schedule we can. I anticipate the ACC probably following along. We've talked in coaches meetings about going too nine.

The problem is for five or six teams in the conference, Notre Dame will be 10. You're playing 10 conference games. That's a difference that nobody else in the country has to deal with, is Notre Dame, because they aren't in a conference, but they half are as far as playing games in this league.

Q. What is your impression of the NEC?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think it's a great conference. There's no bad conferences in the country. Another FCS practice. They have Robert Morris, which is another city rivalry, I guess you could call it.

It's a great league. It's building. They continue to bring good talent in. They got good players. Shoot, they had a linebacker go to Ohio State last year. There's good football players all over the country.

I think Jerry and his staff do a great job recruiting, bringing talent in. They brought a bunch of transfers. I don't know how many, 20. Five of their six linebackers were guys we haven't seen tape on.

Typical opener. What are we going to get? What have this changed on offense, what have they changed on defense? What is this 2025 team going to be? They have the same problem on their side.

It's a great conference.

Q. (Question about Jake Overman.)

PAT NARDUZZI: There will be a rotation. We're going to keep those guys fresh. When we're working tempo like we will, that tempo is going to go. When we get a break in action, whether the ball is out of bounds or we want to sub guys, we're going to sub 'em in.

We feel really good with Holmes and Malachi. We have three guys I would probably consider starters in there. Jake will start it off, make plays, then we'll move on from there.

The beautiful thing is we have depth at that position, like we do a lot of positions. You guys can look at the depth charts and the ors and all that. Ors are a good thing. But I feel good with our depth going into this opener.

Q. (No microphone.)

PAT NARDUZZI: Rashad, yeah. No doubt about it they both played a ton of football for us last year. You can have the experience and go out there and play awful in fall camp, you'll be at the bottom of the depth chart.

You have to come out... Starter coming out of spring ball, the 2024 season, doesn't mean you're guaranteed a spot. You have to go play. Those two guys have maturely gone out there and practiced, played hard in every scrimmage. I think that's why they're where they are.

Like Shadarian Harrison, I consider him another starter. He's a guy that's going to play a lot of reps. Gotten better and better every year that he's been here. He plays better by the month.

Q. What has Blaine Spires done over the season to earn the starting role?

PAT NARDUZZI: Him and Jaeden Moore, really good. Blaine has been really consistent. He's physical. He's tough. He knows what he's doing. He didn't get much spring ball, as you guys know. What he showed in fall

camp, he can be a difference maker for us. I'm excited to watch him play on Saturday.

Q. (Question about Francis and Isaiah.)

PAT NARDUZZI: I don't know if there's ors in there or not. I think there are.

They're all starters. We feel good with all those guys. Really who starts in that game depends on how they practice this week. They practiced yesterday. They all practiced well. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday we'll determine who gets to start.

They're all going to play probably an even amount of snaps. They're all going to come out of there with 25, 30 snaps, depending how many plays we have. If it's a 60-play game, we expect to keep those guys fresh so they can play fast and be active with their feet.

Q. How have you seen Francis grow from last year to this year?

PAT NARDUZZI: Big growth. He's a guy that can push the pocket. He's big, he's strong. He's like a Mack truck in there. He's going to take guys back in the pocket, the quarterback, which I think is huge.

If you got good pressure from the ends, you can push the pocket inside, which I'm not sure we had that push a year ago. I know with what he's shown, like he's got the ability to push the pocket and get sacks. You don't normally have a guy like that.

But all those guys can do that. He's a strong dude that can put people on their seats.

Q. You talked a lot about depth today and all through training camp. Are you feeling just as good about the depth as you were at the beginning of training camp?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, I think so. We're going to find out on game day. Depth, you never know till you have an opponent. Then you're really not going to know until you play a Power Four opponent. You really find out then who's stepping up and who's game ready.

Playing against each other for so long... I think that's the beautiful thing about openers, we don't know what they're going to do, they don't know what we're going to do. I think Coach Bates and Bell do a great job game planning. So we'll see a little difference there.

We'll find out when the dust settles on Saturday afternoon.

Q. You have two true freshman as backups in the secondary. What did Shawn Lee do to secure that spot?

PAT NARDUZZI: Shawn is a football player. His dad played ball. I think his dad coached him for a long time in high school. He's not just a freshman coming from a program that didn't coach football. I give his dad a lot of credit for how he came prepared. Then Coach Collins and Coach Sanders have taken it from there.

I just think he's a football player. We're going to find out. He's a young guy we're not afraid to put out on the field, find out what we've got. We feel good with the corner depth as well.

Q. Through camp, did you get what you were looking for from Eli as far as leadership, on-the-field performance?

PAT NARDUZZI: No question about it. Again, game day will show it all. Leadership, I think he's come a long way because last year I think he was just worried about being the starting quarterback, then just doing his job.

I told him the same thing: You got to focus on quarterback. You're already the leader. You don't need to be a captain. No one needs to put an 'L' on your shirt saying you're a leader.

He is the leader of our offense, period. He has Cooper there as a captain, Overman, Des Reid standing next to him or behind him.

I'm happy with where Eli is. Can't wait to watch him play. Can't wait to watch everyone play.

Q. How do you feel about the offensive line at this time compared to last year? What do you need to see from them?

PAT NARDUZZI: We need to see 'em execute, right? We need them to identify, block the right people.

I feel better about this offensive line. Probably the top five guys this year and last year, I feel the same. I felt really good going into last year's opener with the starting five. We have more depth, more guys that are prepared to go in there and take care of business than we did a year ago.

The depth at that position, which was our goal coming out of last season, was we got to build the depth there. We got to go find some guys that can help us play, continue that development there.

Q. You said Duquesne's defense is a lot like yours. Their coordinator spent a few years here. Do you see your influence, trying to do a lot of things...

PAT NARDUZZI: I see him trying to do a lot of what we do. Obviously they're going to play their three deep, two under, which is a trademark of what we do. Play a lot of quarters. They trust their guys to play coverage like we do. I'm sure they'll play some man three. We expect a lot of cover three, as well, which they haven't done a ton of. We're practicing that, as well.

Yeah, there's a lot of things that show up. Mickey is a good football coach. Does a good job. A Pittsburgh guy that will be glad to come back to Acrisure Stadium.

Q. You mentioned their linebacker that ended up going to The Ohio State. In your time, what have you noticed about kids that make the move from FBC up to FCS? And vice versa of that, maybe guys that go down to FCS thrive? What do you notice to be the defining characteristics as to why those moves make sense?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think everybody's looking for the stars, go play in a big atmosphere. I would say this, a lot of those FCS kids, we've had a couple of them that have done well. I don't care if it's a Division II player, IAA. They come hungry. They have more tools and are able to come in and play. I think it's a good thing.

The other thing I'll say, if they're not playing, they're there for depth, right? So I don't know what their percentage of guys that leave FCS to go to Power Four are going to go in and start. But they provide depth, which obviously we've talked a lot about depth here today. Depth is important. If you lose somebody, you got a guy that has played football before.

Q. A name that doesn't pop up here is C.J. Lee.

PAT NARDUZZI: C.J. is still recovering. C.J. could be in the two deep. I just said, Leave him off. But C.J. could play in this game, if we need him to, if we want him to. C.J. is available, okay?

We're going to be safe and smart with him. He was a start a year ago, in our opinion. He's back to maybe 99%. We are just going to be sure. Chris Hanks has done a good job monitoring him, making sure we don't go too fast 'cause he's way ahead of schedule. He was behind schedule in January. He has worked his tail off. We thought probably in the summer he was going to be ready by October. He's ready in September, for sure.

Q. You have Butkowski taking field goals, you have Carpenter on kickoffs.

PAT NARDUZZI: Just watching the kick. One guy is going to kick it to the goal line, one is going to kick it five yards deep. It comes to that.

That can change in an instant (snapping fingers). Again, there's still a battle going on at kicker. Butkowski is the guy to start off with. We have a lot of confidence in him and Sam Carpenter.

I'm excited for both of them. They're both going to have a chance to go out in a game, execute, see what they can do with their election.

Kicker questions. I love it.

Q. Some kids on the roster, when they were in high school, hoped they'd end up here. When you say we're going to get their best game, is that part of it? Some of those guys are going to show that you made a mistake by...

PAT NARDUZZI: Heck, yeah. There's no doubt about it. Like I say, they will play their best game. They will be cranked up. They get to go play in that stadium, whether they played there in high school in the championship or they're getting their chance.

This is their championship game. This is their opportunity to come out and show who they are. No doubt, prove some people wrong.

Q. What do you do to make sure your guys give this game the level of attention that it needs?

PAT NARDUZZI: They'll figure that out real quick, if they don't, because they'll get hit in the mouth. They're physical. They play hard. They play tough. We need to go out and do what we do. We need to focus on us to start off with, right?

I'm not worried about who we're playing against. It's about what we do, how we do it. Just starting off on the right foot here on Saturday.

Q. You have a lot of guys who have high school teammates on the other side. Is it easier to get your guys up for a game because they know who they're facing?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, I hope not. That doesn't really matter, who's on the other side. It's a different color jersey with different helmet, different faces underneath those



helmets. I don't think it really matters. Doesn't matter to me, so...

Our guys haven't talked about like, Oh, can't wait to play against Joe, I played against him in high school. That really hasn't come up.

Q. (No microphone.)

PAT NARDUZZI: No. I'm going to go out and win a football game and rotate as necessary, so...

Q. How has Des evolved from a year ago? He's talking about wanting to do even more. What more can the guy do?

PAT NARDUZZI: That's a fact. If he just maintains, I'll be happy. If he just maintains what he did. He's had a great camp.

I think probably what he's done more of is leading. People look up to him. Obviously he was named captain last week. People look up to him.

Again, it's his attitude he has every day. You love all your players. That guy, he's special. He's special in the classroom. He's special on the field. He's special everywhere.

Q. He is a dynamic player, but his size is still his size. Early in the season, do you have to make gains where you should, in theory, give opportunities to protect him or let the guy go?

PAT NARDUZZI: We're going to let him go. We're going to let him go play football. That's what he loves to do. As soon as you start trying to protect people, they get hurt.

Des is tough, he's going to go. He loves to play. He's going to go out and play his best game.

Q. (Question about quarterbacks, Cole and Mason.)

PAT NARDUZZI: Probably. I feel good with Mason going in the game, as well. He's still young. Both those guys, we feel good with, so...

At some point during the season we're probably going to need both of 'em. They'll be ready. They study the game. They're smart.

It does help Cole that he knows that offense, has been in that offense before, without a doubt.

Q. Jerry has spoken highly about you and your

relationship.

PAT NARDUZZI: Where is he? I mean, he's supposed to be sitting there.

Q. Jerry Schmitt.

PAT NARDUZZI: I thought we were going to get to a Jerry question (smiling).

Q. Why has it worked out so well between you guys on and off the field as coaches, peers?

PAT NARDUZZI: Jerry is a class act. That's first thing. I get along with him because he's a steady guy. You know what you're going to get. He's been over here multiple camps. Even this summer he's with us during camps. He's been to spring ball. Probably never been to fall camp.

I just think he's a great person, a great coach. It's worked out there because he's got continuity there. He's done a heck of a job over there, without question. 21 years, done a heck of a job.

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