

# University of Pittsburgh Football Media Conference

Monday, October 20, 2025

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

## Coach Pat Narduzzi

### Press Conference

PAT NARDUZZI: Back to Monday here, game 8, so we're at game 8 now. As I told you last Thursday, the season is flying. We closed the chapter last night on Syracuse. Good meetings.

I think probably the greatest takeaway from the game was the adversity we went through in the entire game, our guys fought back. They didn't go -- there was no blinking on the sideline as far as what's going to happen.

They go down, the only real drive of the day they had in the fourth quarter which was a good drive by them -- and maybe poor execution by our defense, but the only drive they had in the game was in that quarter, then they come out and do an onside kick. We call it a sniper where they try to hit a guy in the front row, and that's hard to do. It's a great job by their kicker.

But our guys didn't blink, and we went either three-and-out or four-and-out after that series, which was huge. I think it was four-and-out, stopped them on 4th down. But being down numbers, next man up, guys that were on the field at that point hadn't played a whole lot of snaps the entire year at times, but just the way our guys responded, to me that tells you your guys believe. That's what I told our guys last night.

I think we played really good on defense. I think the first half they scored seven points. It was on a 12-yard drive. Really happy with how our defense responded and played all day.

Happy with our special teams, obviously. That Kenny Johnson punt return was big time, and then offensively we didn't play very good, as you could see. You go back and watch the videotape, it's different than you thought on game day like what's going on.

I obviously did a poor job of preparing our offense for that game. I think the noise was a lot more than Florida State. It's been a while since we've been up there, and we won't make that mistake again.



We practiced with a lot of noise but it was just different, and we didn't respond well. But when you go back and look at the offensive tape, just the amount of penalties. I put it up last night in here, we filled up a page on the thing which really has not been us for the most part.

We've gone six or seven a game but not that many, and the majority were on offense. So it's hard calling plays. It's hard to get 1st downs. It's hard to move the sticks when you're going backwards too often.

I don't care what plays you call. When you're behind the sticks, you've got a problem and you don't protect the quarterback. A combination of those two things got our offense, and that's why the production looked like it did.

But again, the way they finished is critical. That last drive, again, still with penalties involved and Poppi's catch down near the goal line and then just eating up the clock and victory offense -- again, it's not how you start, it's not really what happens in the middle of the game, it's how you finish. So happy for our guys there.

But to beat this North Carolina State football team, which is the most talented football team that we will have played to date - I can guarantee you that, that they are the most talented, they're well-coached - we'll have to play a complete game, okay.

The week before, Florida State, defense didn't play very good, offense played really well. You flip it to the Syracuse game, defense played really well, offense didn't play very good. If that happens Saturday, one of those offense or defense phase doesn't play good, it will not be a good Saturday afternoon. That'll be what we prepare for.

Dave Doeren is a great friend. He's a great coach. He's a great person. He's been in this league for a long time. He's won a lot of football games. Have a ton of respect for him and what he does there at North Carolina State. He does a great job recruiting. He finds guys that fit his system, and they are talented.

Offensively CJ Bailey, it starts with him at quarterback, a young kid that is efficient. He can run. He's athletic. He's accurate. One of the most efficient passing offenses in the country.



Hollywood Smothers, Hollywood is really good. Their tailback is special. Best tailback we've faced to this point. One of the top two leading receivers, as well as he's a balanced runner. He's got speed. He's as close to a guy like Des Reid that we'll face this year, so far at least. I know we've got some great ones coming up here in the future, but he's really good.

Their tight end is special. No. 7 is really special. Kurt Roper does a great job as the offensive coordinator.

DJ Eliot at DC, play a lot of four-down, a lot of quarters coverage like us, a lot of man free and some cover three, as well, so they're very multiple in what they do. This will be the best set of defensive ends that we have faced as well.

The one defensive end, Harsh I believe his name is, Sabastian Harsh, and then Clone (sic) is on the other side. Those are the two best defensive ends we'll have faced this year so far.

Our tackles will have to play really good to have a chance to throw the football and all, and obviously in the run game they're good versus the run and they're good versus the pass. They're not just pass rushers.

Overall, they've got a really good offense and really good defense, and I haven't peeked at a lot of the special teams yet, but I'm sure they're good there like they are in the other two phases.

Questions?

**Q. Obviously Des was limited, had to leave the game at the end, but he still didn't have any targets when he was in there. What did Syracuse do to take him away as a receiving option?**

PAT NARDUZZI: (Audio interruption) we also had to plan if he plays of just not abusing him, okay. It's a long season. We feel good with those other tailbacks, as well, as we've spoken. You saw Boosie go down that sideline on that one that got called back; he's special, as well.

We just want to have Des for a long period of time. Probably took too many snaps at Florida State, but gosh, we had to turn him loose, and we tried to be a little bit smarter because he didn't come out of that game as healthy as we wanted him to. As I told you, he didn't practice on Tuesday, didn't practice on Wednesday.

But we just didn't want to get into -- again, I mentioned it before the Florida State game. We just don't want to get him to the point where he goes back to where he was four

weeks ago.

But he's special, and we've just got to be smart with him. Again, I think the one time we had a target to him, Mason ended up scrambling away. He should have just thrown it to him, and they peeled on him and took it away, and I think we ended up getting sacked on that play where Mason should just -- he's going to make somebody miss in space. Even if the defender is right there, I trust O with the ball in his hand. He's going to catch it and he's going to make a play. Mason got spooked out on it, but I think it would have been a big pass reception for him.

Again, what Syracuse did was put us behind the sticks. We put ourselves behind the sticks, as well. We beat ourselves up on offense ourselves. It's what we did, not really as much of what they did schematically.

**Q. They had seven sacks against you guys. After watching the tape, was there something you could have done differently?**

PAT NARDUZZI: It's something we did differently. We didn't execute very well. We didn't execute well, and I don't know if our guys were feeling themselves from the week before. That's kind of what I told them last night. Defense, you played terrible against Florida State and you bowed up. Offense, you played great against Florida State and then you have a down game.

You know what? It's about consistency, and you can't think, oh, we're going to be okay, we're good, and we're going to walk into that game and just beat anybody. You'd better come to play, and I'm not saying they didn't come to play, we just didn't execute for whatever reason. I wish I could tell you exactly what it was, but we didn't execute. But the great thing is they're not going to not execute two weeks in a row.

They will be a lot better this weekend. We've got to keep our defense straight, make sure they can do it two weeks in a row, and that's my job as a head coach, to make sure they're all not feeling too comfortable, too confident that they think they can just put their helmets out there and if they show up they're going to play well.

It was more execution in all phases, not just the offensive line. I think Mason was responsible for three of those sacks, and he'll tell you that. I mean, he's got to get rid of the ball. He's got to do what he's supposed to do. That happens sometimes. He's still a young player, on the road, and that was by far the noisiest place we had been in.

**Q. You mentioned the offense didn't play particularly well, but nonetheless, every game that Mason has**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**started you guys have scored a touchdown on your opening drive. Has there been any correlation game in, game out on why you've been able to start hot offensively?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, we've started hot offensively the last four games. If you go back to Louisville we went right down the field, ended up kicking a field goal, so the last four games we've got touchdowns, the Louisville game we had a field goal. But if you go back and you rewind and go to that Louisville game and look at the first drive, Malachi drops a pass in the right flat on our sideline that's going to be a touchdown; we score on that drive on 3rd down. But he drops the pass. Again, execution, to me we should have scored four touchdowns the last four weeks, so our offense has started fast. Again, obviously it was a 37-yarder this week after a great interception by our corner Tamon.

I think a nice short field helped us, as well, but that's what it is.

**Q. Does it say something about your team that it can not play maybe as well as you would like and still win on the road?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Absolutely. Absolutely. It tells you we find different ways to win, and I think that's huge. That's kind of the adversity. You put yourself in those positions, you don't want to be in it, and again, we beat them pretty handily when you look at the scoreboard, but it was a lot tighter as a coach as you're sitting on the sideline.

But our guys didn't look at the scoreboard. They didn't blink, as I said, and that's the impressive thing is our guys didn't panic.

To me, I like to win when we don't play good. Think about that. If you don't play good on one side of the ball and you win, that's huge.

We would all have been sick to our stomachs if we don't play well, we don't execute well on one side of the ball or the other and you lose the game, so I think that's a fair question, and absolutely. If you said -- I would rather have that than a BC game where you're up 48-0 or whatever. What do you find out about your team? We found out a lot about what kind of character we have in that room.

**Q. Picks have been hard to come by for the secondary up until last weekend. The rebound of the secondary against Syracuse, did the corners and the safeties do anything different just to put themselves in better position to get takeaways?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, it's a little bit of both, a little bit of the quarterback and a little bit of what we did with some of the different changes in coverage, whatever. Every week we have a different kind of -- again, Coach Sanders, Coach Collins, Coach Bates do a good job of just scheming you up and making sure we're in the right coverages and those guys made plays.

Again, sometimes they come in droves. Our linebackers have been the guys catching the ball, and it's just a matter of time. Tamon, Kavir and then obviously Cruce would have liked to have scored on one of those returns. Kavir had the best chance of scoring. If Cruce stays down the sideline I think he's got a chance because that's where our blockers are. That's where they're taught to go.

Sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not. I'm just glad they caught the ball.

**Q. What has Nick Lapi done over the course of these games that you guys trust him?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, Nick Lapi, we had a lot of faith in Nick that he can go out there and execute it. He's just gotten better. He's developed throughout the years.

There was times where he was up and down, he'd have a great play and then it's like, Nick, what are you doing. But he's a kid that came here as a walk-on, earned a scholarship, and I'm excited for Nick and how he performed that day. I know his mom was.

I don't know if I told you after the game, I told his mom probably Friday night that he was starting, and Nick didn't say a word to his mother. I said, don't tell him; I think he doesn't really want to let you know because she's probably his harshest critic, which is awesome, but he goes, I'll surprise her at game time, so I had to let her know so she'd get excited.

**Q. What did you see in Cameron Lindsey and his ability to last minute have to go in for Kyle Louis?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Well, it's never last minute. He prepares every game like he's going to be the starter. It's the most significant reps he's had in a game. We've got a lot of faith in Cam. Then when you get those opportunities and play like he did -- I thought he started off really good, and I thought he got a little tired and maybe mentally exhausted, I don't know, but that comes from experience, so he will be better for it. He played well.

**Q. You've had to go into your depth at linebacker and defensive line. How do you feel overall that some of those guys have worked, or that your depth has shown**



out here?

PAT NARDUZZI: The depth has shown up. Now we'll see if it shows up this week, right. I think the better team you play, the better -- we'll find out if it shows up this week. But hopefully we get a little bit healthier, but who knows. We've got a week of practice to go.

It shows that our guys come out and execute. Our coaches have done a great job putting them in position to execute. It tells you, our guys, they understand our defense, and whether they're the starter or whether they're the third-team guy, they go in there and try to execute the best they can and play hard and play with effort, and that's what we've seen, whether it's our linebackers, our safeties, our corners.

We've been banged up all season on defense for some reason, and our guys have stepped up, and we've found a guy to put -- Shadarian Harrison didn't play at all. Again he was a game-time decision, as well.

I think he could have gone if we wanted to, but Shawn Lee is playing well, and Tamon and Rashad being back, we go through these phases.

**Q. What makes this front seven a little bit different other than executing compared to some of your units in the past?**

PAT NARDUZZI: We'll find out this weekend. If we can stop Hollywood and stay in the top 10, that would be nice. But I think our defense is built to stop the run. That's what we pride ourselves on. I know some people go crazy when we don't stop a pass, but to try to make them one-dimensional if they don't have a running game, and again, I think they came into the game thinking they could run it on us, against the little Panthers up front, and we're going to make sure that doesn't happen. Again, regardless of who we're playing with in that front seven, we're going to find a way to stop the run.

**Q. It's back weeks now that you've talked about being disrespected, first with the O-line, two weeks ago the D-line. How has that motivated you guys?**

PAT NARDUZZI: I get motivated by it. I don't know if the players do. I get motivated if I hear something or something is said in the news or on the field. But I'm old school, though, right? I see news articles, I get opponent news during the week, what's happening with our opponents, what they're saying. That's the one thing I read; Mark Diethorn gives me my opponent news, that's all I need, and Mike gives me stuff that I need.

But again, as a coach, I think you get motivated sometimes. I'm not sure if the players get motivated or care. But to me it cranks me up, but I'm old school.

**Q. There were four false starts on offense. How do you go about cleaning up those penalties?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, I think we got a little bit frazzled and started to do stuff that -- again, it was noisy, and like I said, I'll put that on me. That's not Kendall's fault. I'll blame myself. I just didn't have it loud enough, I guess. Maybe we should have gone to a silent cadence, I guess.

But talking to those guys, it was a lot louder than I want to say practice but it was a lot louder than it was the week before at Florida State. You're in a dome. But if you didn't see it the week before, we really haven't had a problem with it. It's a one-game thing.

Is it a lack of focus? I know Kendall talked about starting or thought maybe I should peek at the ball, then peek at my guy, and I'm like, don't start doing things in a game that you really haven't done in practice. You've got to practice that stuff.

So I think it's a young guy that's -- again, maybe he's not a young guy. A guy that's playing Power Four football in an atmosphere like that for the first time, and it just maybe got him a little bit more, but he won't have that problem this week.

**Q. Kenny had that punt return for a touchdown at the end of the first half. How has he developed as a returner, especially on punt returns?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, that punter, he hit some bombs. Besides his kickoff return, he does a great job fielding a punt. Usually we have Des back there, or at least had him as our starter, but Kenny, we know he's a great returner. He's a great kickoff returner. He's been that way. We've tried to give him a break on kickoff returns, and we know he's a superb punt returner, as well. So he can make plays with the ball in his hands as a receiver. You guys have seen him catch and run. He's going to be your YAC guy; he's going to get yards after catch, and he's dangerous with the ball in his hands as a returner as well.

**Q. What's the push-pull there when you have a guy that's so important to your offense in that return position where things -- look, obviously he's a dang good player, but sometimes bad things happen on punt returns. In the NFL you don't see that a lot where the team's top receiver is also the kick returner.**

PAT NARDUZZI: You've got guys flying down a lot of





times unblocked, taking shots at your punt returner or kick returner, so you've got to be smart with it. Like you said, in the NFL -- I don't get to watch much NFL, but it makes sense that you've a guy, a specialist back there, that's what he does, and he gets paid to do that.

If you feel comfortable having a guy back there, you've got to go with it. Again, the most important one is punt returns because you're going to have opportunities there more than people are kicking touchbacks. We'll put our money into that.

And again, going back to Kenny's return, the execution by our guys blocking, and I've talked to you about Coach Bronowski and Coach Dodd, the work they've done, if you go back -- and again, it's obviously impressive what Kenny does there. But the blocking and the technique used and how we do things to me is what's special. It's something nobody sees.

But Rashad Battle had a great block. Abe Ibrahim had a great block. We had guys doing what they're supposed to do exactly to a tee. When good things like that happen, there's a reason.

**Q. Are you aware of what happened on Friday night in Miami? Were you guys aware of that?**

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, yeah. I don't have to look at the standings to watch that game late at night. I also watched -- shoot, right as we got off the plane, we landed at 2:00 in the morning, we were watching on the plane. I think everybody had the other game, the Florida State game on, as well, watching how they lost that game, which I thought it was a touchdown at the end. I don't know what you guys thought, but I can't believe they didn't call it a touchdown at the end. I was shocked by that. I don't know how that's gone after the game.

But right as we landed, then the TVs on the plane went off and we didn't get to really see it out. But I had it on my dashboard on the way home on my iPad, and I was able to watch the last part of that as I was driving up 79 North.

But right as Tommy got hit and taken out of the game with a targeting call, got to watch the other kid come in and finish that game off. But tough one.

I watch games. I watch football. I like to see what happens. I don't look at the standings but I know who's doing what. The Miami game, again, anybody can beat anybody; you know that. Who did they play again, was it Duke? Louisville.

Louisville is a good football team. Shoot, we saw that. We

beat ourselves in that game, but it just tells you what kind of football team we have. It tells you what kind of team Louisville is going to be, and we know Miami is talented and has a great football team that will bounce back.

**Q. I guess the reason I asked that is because it looks like the league is kind of wide open again. There's a big cluster of you halfway through the season that have a shot to get to Charlotte. Is that a good thing, or in the era of the playoff --**

PAT NARDUZZI: If you're asking a football coach. If you ask all the analysts, it's bad. It's like nobody is good. It's like, Miami is still really good, Georgia Tech is good, Miami is good, Louisville is good.

To me, it makes it fun in the conference that everybody has got a chance. It's not Ohio State and everybody else. So I think it's a good thing. It's not just top heavy.

From top to bottom, the ACC, I've said this for 10 years now, is probably top to bottom the best conference in the country, and that's why, because there's good athletes, there's good depth, and anybody can win on any given day.

You can go up to Syracuse and get your butt whooped; that's why it's so impressive that after a big emotional win at Florida State we were able to bounce back the next week and get another one on the road and not play great.

It's a great conference.

**Q. Anybody that got hurt on Saturday that's done for the season?**

PAT NARDUZZI: No. That's the good news.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports