

University of Pittsburgh Football Media Conference

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Pat Narduzzi

Press Conference

PAT NARDUZZI: We talked last week, so I'm not going to talk about the last game. We'll move right into this week, but we had a great week off I guess, if you want to call it. Had two good practices. Had a chance to get fresh, get a little bit healthier, as healthy as you can get in November, because everybody is banged up. Got a chance to really go back and self-scout what we do on all three phases of the game and just kind of look at who we are, look at fundamentals, what can we do better in all phases.

I think that's kind of what you do in an open week... evaluate each position as far as what we're doing there and as far as what we have to improve on. I think great week as far as that goes.

Then we're on to Notre Dame. Again, heavy game planning this week. Just a tiny bit last week. We were worried about Pitt last week and focus on Notre Dame kind of in a normal game week schedule.

Again, Marcus Freeman, heck of a football player. Obviously a former linebacker. Was a great player at Ohio State. Obviously he's a tremendous coach. He's a competitor in all respects. You watch him on game day. He's into it. He's not just a sit-back. I can imagine he's active, just being a defensive guy in all their meetings, offensively, defensively, and special teams, because they're aggressive in all three phases.

They got an incredible team. I've said this before. We've faced some really good teams and some better than others, but this is by far the most athletic, the best team across the board in all phases, every position that we'll face. It's America's team. It's the All-American team, period. They got the best players from all of America.

Our guys will have their work cut out for them. It will not be easy at noon on Saturday. They got players everywhere. Mike Denbrock, obviously their offensive coordinator, does a great job. Was at LSU. Was at Notre Dame, was at LSU, and is back. I think was at Cincinnati as well. He's been all over the place and does a heck of a job calling the game.



They do a great job with check-with-mes at the line of scrimmage. They'll be a slower-tempo team, but they'll be on the ball looking for IDs on what we look like, what we're doing, and what kind of signals we're making, all that kind of stuff that you can imagine happens in college football.

Obviously it starts with CJ Carr at the quarterback spot. A young guy, but plays like he's a senior. Can make all the throws, manages the game well, doesn't make mistakes. He plays disciplined.

You go to the tailback spot, Love and Price, two great tailbacks, No. 4 and No. 24. Obviously they got Heisman Trophy candidates. They got Thorpe Awards on defense, but Love and Price are -- Love is obviously special, and then when he goes out, Jeremiyah, comes in there, the Price kid, and he'll run it down your throat as well. They're a two-headed monster at the tailback spot.

Raridon at the tight end spot, No. 9, is special. Malachi Fields, No. 0, special. Jordan Faison in the slot is a guy that is their leading receiver. He can make you miss. He's also their punt returner.

Then defensively, I could just keep going on and on about all the names that are out there, but they're special everywhere. Front seven, they got probably the Thorpe winner corner, No. 15, Leonard. They're special across the board, and special teams, they're aggressive on special teams.

Coordinator does a great job there, as well. They're going to run reverses on kickoff. They have since North Texas when he was there, going as far back as three jobs ago to see the reverses they did then. They're still doing some of the same stuff here. They're going to be aggressive on punt block. They're going to try to go block a punt. We got to be great with our protection. Junko has to do a great job getting the ball off.

And the return game is special. Price is back there for kickoff returns. Faison is punt returner. They got dudes everywhere, and they play a lot of starters on special teams.

Questions?



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Q. (Off microphone).

PAT NARDUZZI: Well, let's start with he's got a ton of talent, but beyond the talent, probably like their head coach, they play hard, they play tough. I mean, they give great effort. There's talented teams out there that don't play hard. This is an elite, talented group that plays hard all the time in all three phases. Every play is the game for them.

They play like we want to play, okay? I would hope someone would say the same thing about our football team, because we play hard all the time, whether we're right or wrong or make a play or don't make a play, but our guys play hard regardless of who is in the game. That's who they are.

Defensive head coach, I think most defensive head coaches are like that. He's intense. Like I said, he's aggressive in all three phases. He's going to go attack you. He's not waiting for things to happen. He's going to go make it. They've got more fake punts than anybody in the country combined maybe. Navy calls a time-out just to run their offensive line out there, their second offensive line. I mean, they'll put their offensive line out there and try to fool you just like we saw last week with USC putting a quarterback at punter and throwing. We got to look out for that. We got to find out what No. 4 is on the field. Is it Love, or is it the linebacker, the 240-pound linebacker? Size-wise we should be able to tell.

We'll have to be on alert all the time for anything they do on special teams. Love is special, going back to that. They're special. He's talented. Again, going back to the effort that he plays with, I mean, you saw him Saturday night probably go down, but he's not down. He rolls over a guy and takes it to the house. He's never down. We got to gang tackle both those tailbacks, but he has elite speed. He has track speed.

Q. When you think about the team that you are about to play, the stage you're about to play on and just the overall implications of this game, what gives you confidence in your guys that they're ready to go out there and meet this moment?

PAT NARDUZZI: What gives me confidence is what we've really done in our games so far this season, right? We've got nine games of who this team is. Our guys were locked in in a 4:00 team meeting, which is earlier than normal in an open week based on what we did yesterday in our meetings.

You talk about the stage. You could play this game at 7 a.m. over at the fieldhouse on campus. You could play at

Carnegie Mellon or in the parking lot out here or in our indoor facility. Doesn't matter what time. Doesn't matter who we're praying against. Our guys are coming to play, period.

All the hooplah, the game day and all that stuff, that's great for the city of Pittsburgh, it's great for the University of Pittsburgh, it's on a big stage, but we're insulated in here as far as that goes. It's just a game. Once that kickoff starts, our guys got to be locked in, play one play at a time to be focused. That's what it comes down to.

You guys can get all excited, but we're just going to play our game.

Q. How do you keep them focused with all this outside noise? How do you keep that internal?

PAT NARDUZZI: Great question. The focus is just like it is when we opened up against Duquesne, or whoever we opened up. Is that who we opened up with? The focus is the same. It's a football game.

Again, it comes down to the details, and you got to win the inches on Saturday. If you don't win the inches, you're going to get beat. You might get beat really bad by a team like Notre Dame.

They'll stay focused, because it comes down to the details, and you can't execute properly when you're out of control, when you're too excited, and you're focused on the wrong things. To be focused on game day, good luck to you, we're big trouble.

Q. That being said, it's a good problem to have, right, compared to where you were a month ago -- or I'm sorry -- after September?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, there's no doubt about it. It's a good place to be, but again, that's what our guys work for. That's what the dream is, but we've been 7-2 before, too. It's not like this is the first 7-2 football team we've had in Pittsburgh. We've been there before, and our guys know the mistakes we've made. The big thing is how are we going to respond after being 7-2, and can we finish the season the right way? That's my focus.

Q. The personnel that they had, is there a certain way about the way that they play? They are committed to running the football. If you stop them on first down and you stop them on second down, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're not going to run it on third down. Does that make them a little different than some of the teams you've played this year?



PAT NARDUZZI: Not really. There are a lot of teams that wanted to do it like that. Stanford still wanted to run the ball. BC wanted to run the ball. Even on third down, they were going to run the ball. We faced other teams that want to establish a run game. They're no different. They're just doing it with the best players in America. That makes it a bigger challenge.

Q. (Off microphone).

PAT NARDUZZI: I'll watch the games, and in the evening there's a lot of good games on with two minutes to go at exactly the same time, which drives me crazy, that recall button. I don't like watching four or five, but I'm watching every game I possibly can. I'm watching Miami-Syracuse. I'm watching them all.

Not worrying about that, because we can look and see what happened by the other teams in the ACC or in the country. We got to do what we got to do. We take care of our business. I've told our guys all along, one game at a time. We just take care of what we do. We control our destiny, period.

You can look and go, Oh, yeah, we're in good position, and then get smacked in the mouth and you're not in such a good position.

Q. You mentioned how you guys want to play. Do you feel like you're ready to match their physicality?

PAT NARDUZZI: We'll find out Saturday at noon. I sure hope so. They're bigger, they're stronger, they're faster. Our guys will play hard like they will. I don't have any doubts about that.

Q. Looking back the last two times you played Notre Dame, you guys have been outscored 103-10.

PAT NARDUZZI: I appreciate you. Thank you.

Q. For you and the defensive coaches that were there for both those games, how personal is this one for you and Bates and Sanders and Collins?

PAT NARDUZZI: There's nothing personal about it. It's the next game. Nobody cares about what happened in 2020 when Joey Yellen was playing quarterback. Nobody cares in 2023 when we went there, and the first three series of the game I think we turned them over and scored zero points. I think their first touchdown was on a punt return for a touchdown, and I told you they're really good on special teams. It will be a special teams war, because we're a lot better than we were in 2023.

That's why they play the game, 2025. Again, the past doesn't matter. You can take all the scores to -- what was it, 103-10? You can take all those scores, and we'll find out what happens Saturday. That's why you play the game.

Q. Notre Dame lost it's first two games of the season. You had some tough losses with West Virginia and Louisville. I know you can only speak for yourself, but what is the challenge of just having to rally the troops, if you will, at a low ebb during the season, and was there a moment for you when you felt like you really had to circle the wagons with your guys and just keep eyes out to the rest of the season?

PAT NARDUZZI: Not really. I feel like nobody beat us this year. We beat ourselves, so as long as we take care of business and keep our focus as we've talked about here, we're going to have a chance to win a football game. I think we got a really good football team, too.

They lost the first couple, but Coach Freeman did a heck of a job bouncing back. They played some good people, and that's why they play the games.

Q. When you talk about beating yourself, how do you go about avoiding some of the mistakes, whether it be playing behind the sticks, penalties, interceptions, so on, mistakes that could really come back to bite you against an opponent like Notre Dame?

PAT NARDUZZI: If you get in third and long against these guys, you're in big trouble. I'll just tell you that right now on Monday morning. If you get in third and long, their third down package is elite. They got a different one every week. You're going to see all kinds of different stuff. They're going to blitz from everywhere and try to kill your quarterback.

That comes down to the focus, right? It comes down to our focus and the details and how we practice, our practice habits this week. Hopefully it transfers on the field on Saturday.

Q. You've mentioned how you think the whole team will handle it, but with Mason being a true freshman quarterback, big game, lots of eyes on it, how do you see him specifically handling it, and why are you confident in him in this situation?

PAT NARDUZZI: Actually we're confident because he's been our guy for the last five weeks, and just like his first start, you're not sure how he's going to respond, and going into the sixth start, big game, how is he going to respond? We have a lot of faith in him.



We just got to make sure he doesn't go out there and try to be "the guy" and let your players around you make plays. Don't try to make them all by yourself.

Q. (Off microphone). How much more of an emphasis is that this week?

PAT NARDUZZI: You're talking about a team that will take the ball. They got great ball skills in the back end. Not only can they run -- I mean, they'll have a guy -- this podium has got him beat, and this guy will be trailing and burst in front of the ball and take it away. It's, like, holy cow, what a great play. That's the speed you're talking about that you don't normally see.

Some of those throws that maybe worked the last few weeks might not necessarily work this week. It's got to be a focus on protecting the ball. He's watching the tape right now, and our coaches are watching it. We got to be smart with the football. Turnover ratio in this game has got to be critical, period.

Q. Notre Dame had a long history. You have faced four times before. What has the series meant to you?

PAT NARDUZZI: It's another game. After the game, it will mean a lot. Before the game, it means nothing. You're facing a tremendously coached team, a talented football team. We just got to go out it and play ball. Doesn't do anything as far as me, Pitt, anything else. What's it matter?

Q. Do you see it as a rivalry with them?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think so. We haven't played them since COVID in an empty stadium. I shouldn't say that. The last time we played them at home was COVID in an empty stadium, but I think it's a rivalry game, but they got all kinds of rivalries. Rivalry game against Navy. Rivalry game against B.C. They're all rivalries. Anybody that plays Notre Dame, it's a rivalry game because of how good they are.

Q. Controlling your own destiny, do you feel like this is a must-win for this team?

PAT NARDUZZI: Absolutely not. It is not an ACC game. I'm glad you brought that up. It is not an ACC game. I would gladly get beat 103 or 110-10 in that game. They can put 100 up on us as long as we win the next two after that.

Again, our focus is on Notre Dame and getting as many wins as we can, one at a time.

Q. The ACC and the tiebreak, it's a pretty convoluted situation right now. When they did away with the two divisions, were you on board with it? Would you like to see them go back to division so it's a clearer picture?

PAT NARDUZZI: I remember vividly campaigning, you might say, for keeping the divisions. Then you add teams. Now you got even more teams. You got this big, long line. I remember talking to Dino Babers saying, Dino, it's a lot different being sixth or seventh in the division as opposed to 15 or 16 in the ACC. When you are way down there, it gets you fired. Being sixth doesn't sound as bad in the league.

So I was a big proponent of keeping the divisions. I still believe in it. I still think it's the best. I think you guys heard me say this before. I think it propelled us being a Coastal Division Champion to start off with and then having an opportunity to go win an ACC Championship after that in '21. To me, if we weren't some type of champion in '18, I don't know if we ever get to '21. I think there's a building block that you need.

Now you don't get a chance to be a co-champion anymore. In the NFL you got AFC and NFC Champions, and there's fireworks and confetti and a stage. Now it's one or two, and if you don't win the championship in Charlotte, you're a bad team, period. You end the season like that.

I'm a big proponent of the divisions, and I remember going through. It will make you dizzy. I don't even look at the standings. I don't care. Let's just win our football games and go 1-0 every week, but I know the first one is head-to-head. After that, I'm not the math major. I'm not looking at it. I don't care who played here.

But you are going to come down and I think we talked a couple of weeks ago about possibly sitting in front of your team saying, Hey, we're not going because we didn't play this team. That's no fun. That's the life we're in, and we'll live with it.

Q. When you say, hey, you were advocating for divisions. I wasn't paying that close attention. What was the reasoning that they told you why we're going to this massive, one-glob format?

PAT NARDUZZI: Well, it was so long ago, I don't know. I know there was some coaches that aren't in the league anymore that were whining because they had to play Clemson every year, and our division was too tough so we can't win a championship.



I'll go back in '21 we beat Clemson in the regular season. We had them on our schedule. So to me that was just kind of a cop-out. I think it was more of we don't want to play Clemson. Let's spread it out and not have to play Clemson every year.

That wasn't me. I could care less. Just put them on our schedule every year and stay in two divisions and give us Clemson. That's even better.

Q. You talked frequently about the parity in the league, and that's a sign that the league is good. If one team can go and beat any other team on any given Saturday, that means the league is competitive, as opposed to having a couple of top dogs. As long as the CFP stays at 12, can that hurt the league?

PAT NARDUZZI: It can hurt the league.

Q. Nobody is going to have maybe less than one loss or less than two losses in the season.

PAT NARDUZZI: It can hurt the league. You have to stay healthy, as you know that. I don't know if our depth is like the SEC's, because they purchase players, and they got depth. You look at Virginia. Their quarterback gets knocked out in the first half, and all of a sudden they're playing with their backup, and that's probably the reason they lost. If their starter plays in that game, we're not sitting here having the same conversation.

It's November. Anything can happen. The next man up. You got to find a way to get it done somehow, some way. You got to adjust.

Q. CJ Carr is also a young quarterback. What have you seen him do well?

PAT NARDUZZI: Everything. I think he's completing 68% of his balls, maybe more. He manages the game. He doesn't throw interceptions. He can make every throw, as I talked earlier, and he gets them into the right play.

They're making calls in there, whether it's third down and a front running against third and long, they're going to run it and gain 15 yards on third down running the football. I think Will talked about or Jeff talked about running the football.

He's getting them in the right play. He's smart. Obviously he's Lloyd Carr's nephew, great football coach at Michigan. He's a football coach's dream, I guess. He's got a year under his belt. He's not a true freshman.

Mason is a true freshman. You take it, where is Mason

going to be in another year? That's trying to compare those two.

Q. Different conversations this week or last week also with Mason leading up and knowing this is probably the biggest stage he's about to play on.

PAT NARDUZZI: Maybe. I haven't. I walked in there this morning at 6:30. He is in there watching tape. Not really.

It's like talking to the kicker. Just don't mess with him when things are going good. He knows he's got to play the best game he's played all year to win this football game. He knows that. I think he doesn't want to do anything to hurt the football team, so he has to be smart. He also has to take chances, too.

If you sit back there and worried about not -- I don't want to get him to that point where he doesn't make that great throw because Coach told me to protect the ball. He has a guy open, but he was a little scared, so he took off running and got hit. I just want him to play his game, but just to understand you got to be smart.

Q. Six weeks with Mason as your starter. Do you feel like you're able to know what you are going to get out of him more than maybe when you first put him in there?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think, for sure. A heck of a lot more we know now than going into that first game he started. Yeah, we know a lot more about what he is, what he likes to do, what we like to do with him and his strengths and weaknesses.

Again, that's what we've kind of addressed here over the last week is just at every position. Obviously start with that quarterback spot. What does he do well? What does he not do so well? Don't ask him to do things he doesn't do well. Let's ask him to do things that he does well, and let's keep it simple and let him go out and execute.

Q. As you evaluated and self-evaluate, how do you feel like run game is coming along?

PAT NARDUZZI: Depends on who is in that front seven. Again, they don't let you run the ball. They really didn't let Navy run the ball, and that's what they do for a living.

You're going to have on pick your poison. We got to find ways to run the ball. We want to run the ball. We will run the ball, I guarantee you that. I still don't know what it's going to be for.

It might be not so good, but you have to establish some

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type of run game, and you got to prove to them you're going to run it. You can't just drop back and throw it 87% of the time, or you're going to be in deep, deep trouble. It becomes third down and long, which I've already talked about that.

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