



Minnesota Vikings Media Conference

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Kevin O'Connell

Postgame Press Conference

Vikings - 27, Packers - 25

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Proud of our team. That was a hard fought NFC North game. The football team we played against was playing as well as anybody in the league. We knew it would be a big time challenge. It took different parts of our team to come together, make some plays to find a way to win the game. Very proud of our guys.

It was so important this year to get back to the way we should play at US Bank Stadium. So to finish 7-1 in front of our fans and have that kind of atmosphere in a game like this, this is why we do what we do and love the support of our fans. Thought it was phenomenal tonight as always. It was huge for us, and our team thrives off of it.

Now we get to go on the road and have a chance to compete one more time. That's all we ask for is just another new week, new challenge. Really, really one of the best teams in football all year long. We've got to go to their place and roll it out there for 60 minutes.

We're going to put our work in this week and try to find a way to go 1-0 this week.

A lot of performances to point out. I thought defensively Cashman was all over the field again tonight. Jerry Tillery with the forced fumble. Flo and his staff had a really, really good plan, I thought really kept them off balance early.

Offensively, what can I say about Sam Darnold other than another big time performance when his team needed it? Phenomenal moment in the locker room after the game when he finally made it in there. It was really cool. I'm just so proud of him. There's so many things that lead into moments like this for Sam since he became a Minnesota Viking, just to see how he's ultimately been able to maximize everything about his opportunity.

Our football team loves him for it, and I've had an absolute blast coaching him and just so proud of him. All of our wideouts, Justin, Speedy, and Jordan Addison made some plays, T.J. Hockenson, and we did just enough in the run game. It was tough sledding at times, but just enough to have the threat there to get a couple great executed plays there late to not have to put our defense back on the field.

Q. Could you take us through the last drive. You called three pass plays, difficult situation.

A. I just didn't want to worry so much about the clock and making Matt use his timeouts. I felt comfortable with Sam in those moments, and I loved how some of those things married up with some of the runs we'd either done late in games throughout the year or even tonight in the game.

So I thought we'd get some edges and get Sam and his athleticism out on the perimeter. Great drive started with C.J. Ham, popping him out the back door there, and we were able to get a great edge on the next one, where Justin comes screaming across on the low cross, and then the last one just burying that thing all down and sneaking Cam out there.



That ball felt like it was in the air for absolutely ever. Sam threw a lot of balls tonight, and that one probably stressed me out the most out of his 43 attempts. But what a play by Cam Akers. To say what that guy has been through, I hope fans understand just how significant what he's been through has been and how he wanted to be a Minnesota Viking and made the play when we absolutely needed it, in addition to catching the touchdown on that screen.

Q. Your running backs had a couple of catches on drives tonight. Just how much does that help in terms of making something high percentage even if you decide not to run it, you stick with the passing game knowing you have a high percentage?

A. It's about making the best possible play to see if we can get Sam out on the edge. Normally, if if people aren't letting you get out on the edge, we should be able to get some runs off. It's a marriage of being able to defend every play they've got to defend out of those looks.

I thought the execution was high. If at any time Sam needed to dirt it or just go down, we were not going to stop the clock on our own accord. I just trusted in the execution of our guys. Between Cam's catch, C.J.'s catch, and Justin's was not an easy one late in the down, kind of driving that low cross right on the one and eight and staying inbounds as well.

Q. You mentioned there was a moment with Sam?

A. He might have been talking to Tom upstairs, but we felt like we waited for a long time, and I certainly wasn't going to interrupt that conversation. When he came back in, the guys were -- they were ready with some water bottles and kind of lifting him up. It was a really cool moment.

Q. The pass to Akers, when were you thinking about that as a clock killer and that whole process?

A. A lot of times in those moments, you spend so much on the game plan, a lot of times in those moments, it's about finding a play and then trying to coach the risk management within it. I thought we had a chance even on the previous drive for an explosive, and one half click, and they were able to hit Sam's hand. Luckily that was an incomplete.

I'm going to keep being aggressive in those moments. I felt like the drive started -- we put it together in a way we felt like we'd get a good play regardless of what the final play ended up being, and then the last one to Cam was really understanding -- once we got the ball completed to Justin and it was a third and two, a little over two, whatever it was, now you truly have on a third down the threat of putting 11 personnel in the game, and they've got to defend everything in our playbook at that point.

Gave them a run formation, and then our guys just executed from there to see if we can get Cam out in space.

Q. You talk a lot about number of plays. Being able to run 70, I guess, how does that feel?

A. Is that what we ran? Yeah, I think it's critical because even on a night when we weren't necessarily like huge chunks in the run game, it was a good front, they were doing some things they always do, keeping guys fresh, rolling waves of guys out there. We were still able to do enough to then apply some no huddle, do some things to try to get some easy plays and then kind of just get a little space in there to then try to hunt up some of the more downfield type throws.

I thought Sam, like he's been all year long, his ability to attack every blade of grass. He's going to stay aggressive. I'm trying to make sure that him and I are playing this game as close-knit as we possibly can so we can be aggressive. He's still going to be a great decision-maker, and he's playing quarterback at a very, very high level and has been for the majority of the season.

You can tell by the locker room. You can tell by the way I call plays. I know for us to get to where we want to go, we've got to be aggressive, and we've got to play football in a way that allows us to have our whole offense at our disposal. It requires all 11 executing every single play. It's very boring stuff that becomes less boring in front of that environment and to see our guys make some of those plays.

Q. What's the outlook on Pat Jones' knee injury?



A. I'm glad you asked. It's a right knee injury. Hopefully we avoided kind of a super long term injury, but I won't know much more than that until he gets fully evaluated. Expecting him probably to miss a little amount of time. As I said, I don't know what that looks like right now.

Then Aaron Jones did get a quad contusion at some point. He was working his way through it, had some really good runs, but we decided to kind of pull him. I thought Ty Chandler showing up, having some physical runs, getting downhill fresh. Pairing him with Cam there in the second half was a winning formula to then get some of those plays off either in tempo or some of the play-pass role.

Q. In terms of your progression as a play caller, how much is in your DNA as a coach and philosophy, and how much of it is Sam that, when you call these plays in big spots, he's going to execute?

A. I think it's a little bit of both. We want to be aggressive. The best parts of our team come to life when we're aggressive. It requires execution. It requires some hard downs for some guys out there, whether it's the guys up front, our running backs, our tight ends, whatever it may be. Then it's ultimately Sam's ownership of the plan each and every week, truly absorbing that.

We've got one game to win. Let's totally submerge ourselves in this game plan, apply the confidence from all these weeks that he's played so darn well, but then laser focused on this plan and this opponent. I thought Jeff Hafley did some things a little different, had some adjustments. Always going to happen when you play a team twice. I thought our guys responded to some of the things we adjusted with in the moment to make a few plays.

Q. It seemed like you guys attacked the middle of the field early. Was that the game plan?

A. The expectation obviously was a heavy plan to Justin, and I think that's why you saw guys like Jalen Nailor, Speedy, T.J. make some plays. But as the game progressed, we're going to find some space out there for 18 and let him go to work.

I thought the third down catch that was called back because of the hold was absolutely ridiculous in a gotta have it type moment. Clearly, that last low cross on the second to last pass play I called, that's not easy execution either.

So just great examples of Justin, the growth he's had to still give us what he gives us snap after snap even though it's frustrating for him at times because he's such a competitor. When his number gets called and we can find him some grass in there, he's going to make a play. He just always does. We're very, very fortunate to have him.

Like I said, I thought Speedy was huge. Whether it was single high or not, there was just a strong emphasis on making sure they had presence around him, around 18, so there was some grass to be found. First touchdown was an example of that. And then some of the plays, even the dagger cut that we got back to Speedy on the back side there when he kind of climbed the ladder to make that play was ridiculous, awesome.

Q. What would it mean to you to have home-field advantage in the playoffs?

A. Just this place, our fans, it was such a point to play well at home this year and win football games for what I believe is the greatest group of fans in the National Football League. This venue, this building, what we do, our folks that put the game on, everything about it feels like we're operating as one in these moments.

It would be phenomenal, but it is going to be an absolute challenge going on the road to a very hostile place and a team that's had a ton of success. We have nothing but confidence for the team we're going to play this week, and we've got to go earn it with really great preparation late in the year.

December football was something I wanted to make sure we're good about, and I think we'll finish that 5-0 as we click over into that January, but we've really been into January for a few weeks now in my mind.

Q. The touchdown to Addison, how much does Justin's gravity factor into that and how good was the execution of Jordan's route?



A. The timing, the sell of it, we were trying to give Sam a chance to read a couple of other eligibles, T.J., Justin being one of them. Climbed up in the pocket right about the time we got a nice little rhythm kind of set right there, and was hoping Justin would clear out the whole right side of the field behind him. Then if we could get behind that flat defender, whether it was a safety or linebacker, we thought there would be a ball to put up right there, and he went and got it. Big time play.

Q. You talked about Cam Akers and how much you like him.

A. Love. It's okay to use that word every now and then.

Q. For him to come through in big moments, just what can you say?

A. Cam has something inside him that allowed him to push through the adversity of what's happened to him over the course of his career. He loves football. I think he loves being a Minnesota Viking. He loves his teammates. His teammates were probably the most excited all season when Cam scored on that screen, then obviously the catch late.

He just brings something, brings physicality, brings a level of mental and physical toughness that I think makes us all better. We've got a lot of examples like that on our team, but Cam is just another one of them that I feel very fortunate to have him on this team.

Q. Do you say anything to Will Reichard after he misses there?

A. I just told him, hey, next one is going to be the best one. My confidence in Will is as sky high. An unbelievable session on Thursday when he was kicking. Hit the first one true. That's my confidence level. I'm going to -- if we think we're anywhere near the range, I'm going to give him a swing. He's a phenomenal kid, great makeup. The next kick's going to be his best kick is how I look at it, and I know our team does as well.

Q. How did it feel to go 1-0?

A. It felt the same way that it has for 14 times now. This was going to be a grind. You can hear it in my voice. That's what these things are, and we're all, every man in that locker room, player and coach, we're laying it on the line every single week with everything we absolutely have. And the best part of it is I do believe all we need is all of what we are and we're going to have a chance to win football games.

We're going to have to keep on doing the things, like I said before, might come off as cliché, but when your team has ownership of every possible thing that we're doing and they work for something greater than just themselves, anything is really possible.

That's not to take away from one snap, it can all go the other way if you're not totally and completely present, locked in with what we have to do, especially against the type of opponents we're going to play tonight and here on out the rest of the way.

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