

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Friday, July 17, 2026

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Pitt Panthers

Coach Pat Narduzzi

Ryan Baer

Mason Heintschel

Braylan Lovelace

Press Conference



about. Ryan Carretta at center. Kendall Stanley at the left guard. I feel real good with our O-line and the depth behind it as well.

Jia Cooley is a guy from Erie, PA, that's going to be the swing guy at the tackle spot. We have swing guys throughout.

Defensive line, it starts inside. Defensive tackles with Nick James and Ryan Fitzgerald. Fitz is a dude up front, he's athletic, he's tough. Then we've got probably four defensive ends that can rotate in there. We were short on defensive ends last year. We're excited to have some depth there and stay healthy.

Q. You were hired on December 26, 2014, to Pitt. So many coaches change within a couple years. What has that loyalty meant? What does it mean to you to be one of the few coaches to say where you're going to be and hold true to your word?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, appreciate the question.

To me, loyalty is everything. My dad had a piece of paper, was a loyalty quote folded up in his wallet. He had it there until he died back in 1988. He always talked about loyalty.

I'm a loyal guy. I like loyal players. Loyalty is everything. I think too many guys think about where the next job is going to be, players think about their next team. I think the best thing for you to do is stay in certain places for a long time. I stayed with Mark Dantonio for 11 years. I turned down several head coaching jobs prior to taking this one because they weren't the right jobs. I said when I take a head job, it's going to be the right place, we can win. I think with Chancellor Gabel and Allen Greene, I love where things are going. I fit with the people there. I love our players and team.

I want to build a legacy in Pittsburgh. That's what we're setting out to do.

Q. You've had back-to-back seasons with incredibly strong starts, but the end of the seasons have dimmed.

PAT NARDUZZI: All right, everybody. It's great to get to Charlotte. Had a great dinner in Charlotte last night. Appreciate all the hospitality in Charlotte. Our guys had a great dinner.

We're excited obviously for this 2026 season. Always think this kickoff is really the beginning of this season, starts to get your heartbeat going. We're excited to play in one of the best leagues in the country.

Have the respect for Jim Phillips, what he does as a conference leader, and what the ACC is as far as a football program, football conference. I don't think it gets enough respect. I think we play some of the best players in the country. I'm excited where we are.

We're fired up in Pittsburgh. Can't wait for the season to start. With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. You guys project to be solid in the trenches on both sides of the ball this year. Can you talk about what you've seen from those guys on both sides of the ball.

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, I think anytime you talk about football, you better win it up front. With the O-line, D-line, it all starts up front. We have Ryan Baer. When he sits at this podium, he'll have to crank this mic up like that. A tremendous player, played a lot of years, a lot of games in a Pitt jersey and helmet.

We're excited about that right side of the line.

We have some other guys that we're filling in. We've got a transfer from Penn, Netinho Olivieri that we're excited



PAT NARDUZZI: This year we're not playing Miami and Notre Dame at the end of the year. We had a pretty good damn run. I think Miami played the national championship game. Notre Dame was pretty good. Probably both of them should have been in the Playoffs.

I don't go back and look at what happened last year, this and that. I think we didn't play our best games in those. Those are two pretty good football teams. We'll have our chance again someday.

Q. I know we still ain't able to get that 13th month, but can you talk about how important it is not having that spring portal to where you know who your team is through the spring, summer?

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, I've got less gray hair. I'm not thinning out as much as I was prior to the two portal windows.

I'll say this. I think one portal window is great. I'm all for our guys having opportunities to go where they want to go, where we want them to go, whatever may be the case. I think that portal is a two-way street.

I think one portal window is all you need. We're hoping as coaches to get it moved down to 10 days as opposed to 15 days. I think that's important.

One of the things you hate about the portal right now, the one window compared to two, is night and day. Our team knows they can go out in spring ball, they're going to be with our guys. What's the talk in the locker room after spring ball. All that baloney you don't want to deal with. I don't want our players to deal with it. It's bad talk, bad communication in the locker room. It's negative stuff that needs to be removed.

If we can go down to 10 days, it eliminates the tampering by five days. Whether it's your quarterback in the last five days getting tampered with, whatever it may be, I think it's bad stuff. I think it needs to be eliminated.

We're not going to get rid of tampering tomorrow, but the fewer days, the less tampering there will be.

Q. How beneficial is it for you to be able to train in the same building with the Pittsburgh Steelers? Same work facility.

PAT NARDUZZI: Yes, sir.

Q. Does that help you in terms of recruiting and all that?

PAT NARDUZZI: I think so. What I like to do, to me, football is football. I'm like a football junky. If we're not practicing, the Steelers are, it's a beautiful day. If nobody's practicing, it's kind of a boring day.

We like practice. We finish spring ball, the Steelers go into their spring football. To me it's a major advantage when kids go on visits, they can watch the Steelers practice, watch Mike McCarthy, Mike Tomlin. We have the Mikes over in Pittsburgh. Might call me Mike Narduzzi pretty soon.

But to have Mike Tomlin for 11 seasons, now going into Mike McCarthy and seeing a defensive guy transition to an offensive guy, it's fun. It's football. For our players to go out there and watch it, not only in recruits, but for our players, Mason, Ryan Baer, to go out and watch the O-line coach, to watch the D-line coach, watch them coach, watch the drills, pick up, watch the tempo, it's a major advantage for us.

We enjoy playing at Acrisure Stadium, as long as we don't tear the field up.

Q. Can you speak to what excites you about Cory Sanders, what made him the right fit?

PAT NARDUZZI: With the retirement of Randy Bates, who I talked to last week -- was his birthday. Happy birthday again, Coach Bates. We're disappointed he's retiring. Happy for him.

We're excited for Cory Sanders to run our defense. He's been here seven, eight years, I don't know what it is right now. He knows our defense inside and out. It's a fresh voice in the room. I'm excited just for that opportunity for him to start his career as a defensive coordinator at the Power Four level. Again, there's nobody that knows the defense better than he does in our building.

He's fun to work with. He's positive. So we're excited about that new change. There will be some new wrinkles.

Q. You have one of the top centers in the ACC, also in the country. Can you tell your thoughts about how important that particular position is for your team.

PAT NARDUZZI: Yeah, I mean, there's two really important guys, Ryan Carretta, our starting center. He touches the ball every snap. He snaps it to our quarterback. For him to get a consistent snap, because it's so important for our quarterback to have his eyes down the field. If he's worried, right or left, the center is critical.



Again, snapping the ball every down. Obviously doing what he does as far as communication goes prior to every snap. We're looking forward to an exciting year with Ryan Carretta to touching that ball every down. Giving it to Mason, too. I like that.

Q. Looking at old Northeast football, what the Big East used to be, assimilating into the ACC, a lot of those Northeast schools struggled, but you played for two championships and won a championship. What does it say about Pittsburgh and what you've been able to do that other Northeast schools haven't been able to do?

PAT NARDUZZI: First of all, Pittsburgh is in the Midwest. There's a lot of confusion really. I'm messing with you (smiling). That's a big question, are they a New England team... I think Philadelphia is kind of New England, Pittsburgh is more Midwest. That's for a different discussion.

But I just think football in Pittsburgh is a little bit different. I've coached up in New England at the University of Rhode Island a long time ago. I just think we have -- whether you consider it New England or the Midwest, I think Pittsburgh is a football town. I think it's a city of champions. It's a steel city. Football is really important there. That's the advantage we have in Pittsburgh.

Q. The word that was going around on the radio with you guys this morning was the word 'unselfish'. Why is that important to you? How have you seen that come forth in this group?

PAT NARDUZZI: I don't know what they're talking about on the radio, but it's good. We always talk about we, we, about being together and unselfish. If that's what they're talking about in Pitt football, we're going to have a great year.

I think when you have coaches or players thinking about themselves and what's good for me as opposed to what's good for the team. If Mason worried about his passing stats or throwing completions and taking sacks because he doesn't want to have a bad completion ratio, that's a problem. He's thinking about just his stats, his numbers. But we need our quarterback thinking about Pitt football, what's best for Pitt football.

He understands what the turnover ratio is. It's important for us to win the turnover ratio every game. It's important for us to be in the top 20 in giveaways. To me, that's part of the unselfishness part on the field.

It goes to off the field. I think we have an unselfish football

team. I'm excited about the team we have.

Q. You've coached for the ACC for a long time. You've built a great reputation with your defense. Are there any trends that you're starting to see in college football offensively that you can prepare your defense for?

PAT NARDUZZI: We'll find out. Every year about fourth game of the season, we talk about all these offenses, they go to the same clinic. You start to see a different formation or motion or run play or pass play that everybody went to the same clinic and learned it, came back and put it in on their team.

We'll find out what that new trend for 2026 is. But there will be some little wrinkle we'll see, whether it be formation into the boundary or some crazy formation that we'll end up seeing more of, unbalanced. A couple years ago was the big one.

We'll find out what that one may be. Nobody tells us early. We have to adjust to that.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, you and Ryan can switch spots. Ryan, first question...

Q. Can you speak to what transfer Keylen Davis brings to the offensive line.

RYAN BAER: He brings just more depth to the room, just experience. Obviously I think he was like a two-time All-MAC player. He can play all interior positions. Just someone that's bringing more competition to the room, which is something we've lacked the last couple years. He's pushing other people to be better, so...

Q. You've had experience on both the left side and right side at tackle. Speak to that versatility.

RYAN BAER: I think you need to be able to play every position. You never know what happens, what you're going to be called upon to do. If you want to be on the field, you have to be able to do everything, know everything.

That's helped me out throughout my career, just knowing that no matter what happens, if they need me at left guard, right guard, left tackle, right tackle, I know what to do. I'm ready forever.

Q. You have two brothers and two sisters. What is it like being in that position?

RYAN BAER: I'm the youngest by a while. Most of them



were out of the house by the time I was old enough to even know who they are.

I grew up, I don't know, man, I have a sister -- I have a handicapped sister I grew up taking care of. My other sister is a traveling nurse. She's the second youngest. My brothers, once I got old enough, they got me in the weight room. They taught me how to work.

Q. Offensive linemen, they are not known for their stats, at least to the fans. How do you know you've had a good game before you see the grade on film, feedback after the game?

RYAN BAER: I put a lot of people on the ground and didn't get my quarterback put on the ground, so...

Q. As somebody who is very disabled myself, I want to thank you for taking care of your sister. But what has having that responsibility of taking care of her help you develop as a football player?

RYAN BAER: I would say it matured me from a very young age, understanding the differences in life. Not everyone has the same opportunities as other people. I take advantage for what I was gifted and given every single day. I'm blessed to be able to wake up and do what I do every day. I take advantage of it. I wake up, I work hard, because she wasn't able to do. I want to do whatever I can to take care of her, so...

Q. You enrolled early into Pitt, spent a lot of time here. Can you talk about what the program and city means to you.

RYAN BAER: I love this program. I love Pittsburgh. I feel like I've lived here just as long as I did Ohio at this point. The city means a lot to me. Biggest reason why I'm still here. I wanted to play my best football for this city. I knew I had a lot more to give.

I love our fans, the coaches, the players to the left of me. I just want to give them everything I can.

THE MODERATOR: You and Mason can switch spots. A couple minutes with Mason.

Q. Last year you obviously had an impressive season for a freshman, ACC Quarterback of the Week, Rookie of the Week. What does that experience do for you going into year two? During the off-season, knowing you are the starter, what areas do you think you've grown the most?

MASON HEINTSCHEL: I think the biggest thing for me is

everything in your question just ties back to leadership. I think getting that experience from this past year of just kind of getting some games under my belt, time under my belt, I think that's helped to show everybody that I can play at this level, I've proven that.

I think that allows for me to kind of take that next step as a leader, like I said. At the quarterback position, you have to take that step, be a leader for these guys. They've done a really great job of being really receptive of what I'm trying to do. I think that's made us a really tight group. I'm excited to be able to show that this fall.

Q. Second year, full off-season now with Kade Bell as the offensive coordinator. Do you feel like you have more freedom to operate in this offense?

MASON HEINTSCHEL: Absolutely. Coach Bell and I have a really great relationship. He's really put a lot of faith into me. I think for good reason. I think we proved that last year together that we can do some really special things. I think we're going to take that next step as a group this year.

Just kind of checking things at the line, seeing what coverages we're getting, getting us into the right play or right protection. It's helping the offensive line out, too, I think is going to be big for us. Ultimately just keeping me upright and trying to be the best player that I can be and helping out our receivers. We've got some great players out there. We want to get them the ball in space and make plays, so...

Q. Back to that moment where Pat Narduzzi took you aside and said you're a true freshman but you're going to be my starting quarterback, bring me into his faith in you and that moment.

MASON HEINTSCHEL: Yes, sir. It was everything. He brought me into his office, told me I was going to be the guy this week. We were coming off the loss against Louisville, tough game.

I remember I told this story before. He brought me in his office, We really need a win this week. We got to get back on track.

I looked him right in his face, I said, We will win this week if you play me.

That confidence, I think they had that belief in me as well. Kind of really set the tone for that week. We had a great week of practice and were ready to roll.

Q. Knowing you are coming in as your own, you want

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to take the next step, what is the next step for Pittsburgh this year?

MASON HEINTSCHEL: Getting back to the ACC championship. That's our goal. We get back to there, go win that game, then obviously the sky's the limit. College Football Playoff, all that stuff.

We have to take this one game at a time. Miami Ohio week one. Have to have a great fall camp before that. Taking it one game at a time. Once we get back to Charlotte, that's the goal. We're going to do everything in our power to get there.

Q. You ended a 42-year drought for your high school winning the division championship. Talk about that moment and how it set the stage for your collegiate career.

MASON HEINTSCHEL: I think a big thing that ties into that is the loyalty aspect of that. As a freshman in high school, I was talking to people about maybe transferring to a private school in my area. Was talking to my parents about that a lot, had a lot of discussions about that. I want to stick it out at my high school, stick with my guys, do something special. Like you said, we were able to do that for the first time in 40 years.

Coming here, being loyal to these guys. When I was first getting recruited out of high school, a couple teams trying to get me. Staying loyal to Pitt, coming here, having that belief and faith in Coach Narduzzi and Coach Bell, I think that's something special. Also that aspect of them having that faith in me playing me as a freshman. That's a tough position for them. Having that trust in me, I owe everything to them. I think we're going to have a really great year.

THE MODERATOR: You and Braylan can switch spots. Your first question...

Q. You lost a couple guys out of the linebacker room. You're going to be the guy who is going to step into that leadership role. How are you looking to lead that room this season?

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: Just trying to be more vocal. Me, myself, I'm more of a person that leads by example, is not a very vocal person. Just stepping into that role of being a leader in both ways in the linebacker room, trying to show guys how they can reach their best ability as a player and also just as a person, trying to get younger guys in the film room so they can learn, teaching guys all the tips and tricks I've learned over my years.

Q. Being a part of this defense, just the history of

Pittsburgh, everyone that's come through it, made it to the NFL, had success, won Super Bowls, what that means to you to be a part of a fabric of a defense?

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: It means everything. Just from the way that I play football, fast and aggressive, getting downhill, that's just what we do here at the University of Pittsburgh. It's just everything to know that I can go make a play at any given time because that's just the way our defense plays.

Q. Kyle Louis was here last year talking about the linebacker core, the sharks. A lot of those sharks have swum to other pastures. Talk about what kind of leadership they instilled in you even though they're no longer at Pitt.

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: With those two, I mean, just the mentality thing, the whole shark mentality. Just always, like, competing, always trying to be the best, always bleeding the water, trying to go get that next thing. That's something they instilled in me a lot, being the best player at all times, having that confidence in yourself.

I'm trying to (indiscernible) that down the line, keep that same mentality all the time. Like I said earlier, that's the way we play football with that same mentality, that shark mentality, aggressive, fast, going and trying to be the best.

Q. Your 100-yard pick-six at Georgia Tech became one of the biggest defensive players in Pitt history. At what point during the return did you realize you were going to score?

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: I looked at Rasheem Biles. He's like, Good, let's go (smiling). He was a couple yards in front of me. It was just a surreal experience. Have all that happen, to see him say, Let's go, you good. That was it right there.

Q. The linebacker group as well as the defensive front is a very active, disruptive group. Talk about the philosophy you take on that side of the ball.

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: I mean, that's our defense. That's what we do. We're aggressive, disruption. We love to play the run. That's what we're all about, just getting down there and hitting people. That's what we want to do.

A lot of times we say 'car crash' in the defensive room. That's just something we're trying to do, make big collisions that disrupt things. You disrupt it, there's nothing they can do about it.

Q. A pretty cool family story. You were the first

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Division I football commit from Leechburg, Pennsylvania. First one since your dad committed back in 1993. A pretty proud moment.

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: Yes, sir. I mean, I've been chasing to be like him my whole life, ever since I was a kid. I always told myself I was going to be the next person to be Division I from this school, the school of Leechburg. It's a very small town.

I'm very proud of myself to do that. I'm happy that I could do this so I could show all the kids of Leechburg, no matter where you're from, how small the school is, how small the town is, you put your mind into it, you put in the work, you can do it.

Q. Your high school had 177 students. Did you know everybody's name?

BRAYLAN LOVELACE: Yeah, yeah. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody knows everybody's drama (smiling). It's a big loop all the time, so...

THE MODERATOR: Pitt, have a great season.

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