P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: Being able to respond the way they did, just kept their oars in the water, kept rowing the boat, and that's what it's all about. You can go from losing by 30 points to winning by 30 points in one week. We're just too inconsistent. We've gotta get that to become consistent. And how do you do that? You've gotta fail to grow. You've gotta have success. You gotta do all those things. And that's the type of knowledge we're gaining as a really young football team. So a lot of great individual performances. I thought Blake Cashman was outstanding. I thought he played one of his best games of his career that I've been here. I mean he had 58 production points. He had 28 production points in one play. His stat line was incredible. I thought we all rallied around him. I thought he set the tone for how we played. I thought Joe Rossi, the defensive staff, did a great job of handling a lot of adversity coming up with a great game plan, simple, sound, fast, and they played that way. That's what we said we wanted to do, and they executed it, and we played to our strengths. And I thought we played really well.

Offensively, I thought our team did a nice job -- between play 10 and 23 I don't think was a very good job. But other than that, I thought they did a nice job of executing the plan, and that's what we needed to be able to do. We needed to stay ahead of the chains. We needed to win on first and second down, keep third down very, very short, and for the most part we were able to accomplish that.

I think if you look at the third down stats, they were 0 for 12, which I've only been around one other game that was an 0-fer in third-down category. That's very difficult to do. And then I think we were right around 40 percent on third down, which was good for us. I thought Emmit Carpenter and Payton Jordahl, Jacob Herbers in those types of conditions performed at a high level. So we gotta respond. We got a great challenge this week, tremendous football team in the Big 10 West champions. And this is all about response. This whole year has been about response. We've had a ton of adversity, and all they've done is respond. So we get to the tenth game and they're playing like that, we're doing a lot of things right.

And I'm really proud of them. So with that I'm sure you have a lot of questions, so we'll open it up.

Q. What does a win like that do for the spirit of a team? You talk about trusting the process, but to get that result.

P. J. FLECK: Yeah, the one thing is if we just hang our feelings based on just the results, then we're teaching them, I think, the wrong way to live life, because it's all about not letting that circumstance dictate your behavior. Focus on what you can control to get better. Can't focus on that anymore, it's over it's done with. You've gotta get better. And that's one thing I think our attitude every single week, our team meetings after a win or loss have all been outstanding. The focus our players have on Sunday night practices, their belief in the one game 1-0, 0-1, whatever we were, the belief in that that we can get better, squeezing all that juice from that orange to be able to get better from that film, humbling yourself, putting your big boy pants on and your big boy vest to make sure that you can handle all the criticism that's going to come through film, constructive criticism, to get better. And like I said, I think I made that comment, one of the first wins we had, we came in and some of our young players were like, it felt like we lost, but we won.
This isn't about, hey, see you on Wednesday after you win Saturday, but it was like they were constantly being coached, constantly being coached. And I think at that moment they realized no matter whether we win or lose, you've gotta come back with the right attitude to get better and just continue to change your best and get better today than you were yesterday, and that's all we can focus on. When you come in the team meeting, it's a little bit better coming in after a win, but it's not like our team meetings are completely different when we win and completely different when we lose. We're very consistent in the positive energy we bring of how we have to get better.

Q. I wanted to see if you could expound on something you said on the radio. You talked about top 10 offensive improvements. Can you explain a little bit about what that means and how you feel like your offense has been able to improve?
P. J. FLECK: Yeah. I think that, you know, there are seven starters that are freshmen, and it's really year one for them. We always talk about getting better within the system as we continue to go. But some of them that's the first time they've ever done it. Yes, it's year two for us, but a lot of those guys when you're going to start over, that's their first time going through all of that. But what I see is a more consistent football team on offense. We gotta be better with the ball. But when you start to look at playmaking ability, I think we have a lot more playmakers than we did last year, and I think the playmakers we had last year are better playmakers this year than they were last year.

And with playing two freshmen quarterbacks throughout the year, that's very difficult to do. It takes a lot of buy-in, a lot of belief. It takes consistent systems with Coach Ciarrocca, and it takes patience, giving your team what they're ready to handle and being able to have a pulse of that. It's very difficult to do, and I think Kirk Ciarrocca and our whole offensive staff, the congruency they have is really powerful, and sooner or later that rubs off on your team and they start being congruent the longer they play together.

And when you are making changes, it's smaller changes, whether it's personnel, one guy here or one guy there, it's not wholesale changes. And we're going through some of that right now, but sooner or later that won't be. And they'll be even more consistent, you hope, as we keep going forward.

But, you know, same thing, that's what rowing the boat is all about. Keep your oar back in the water and go. There's times we haven't looked really good on offense and there's times we look amazing on offense. But it shows what we're capable of doing, and the more you show people what they're capable of doing on this end when you don't execute and this end when you do execute, now they know what you're talking about when you're talking about a spectrum of where we can be. You might not always be on this end every single day, but you gotta be closer over here. And you know what gets you over here and you know what gets you over here, and you gotta make those corrections.

Q. As far as the defense goes, you talked about simplifying things a bit. What else do you point to when you go from 55 points one week to 10 the next. And also, how do you help them maintain that these last couple of games?
P. J. FLECK: We've talked about this year it has its ups and downs. It's been very inconsistent, but we talked about that even at the beginning of the year. Youngest team in America, inexperience, whatever you want to talk about that, that breeds inconsistency. You know that, and there are a lot of teams that are very, very young right now, if you're not maybe one of the top five teams in the country, and there's a difference between sometimes when you're getting the 18-year-old that looks like Daniel Faalele. If you get 20 of those and you consider yourself young, yeah, it's a little different, in the physical, emotional and mental part.
But we’ve learned so much over the course of the year, and what I’m really excited about this team is whatever they learn from they respond to. And sometimes they do it in the right way, sometimes they do it in not the right way. But they’re learning, they’re gaining this knowledge. How do you become successful? You continue to fail forward. And that’s what they’re doing, and that’s what I’m really proud of them for is they continue to fail forward.

We had a lot of adversity, a lot of challenges, some out of their control, some within their control. But this is a player’s game. They’ve gotta go out there and they’ve gotta play; they’ve gotta execute. They’ve gotta have the confidence to do it. Our coaching job is to bring them always back up, get them back up believing in themselves. And it’s harder to do in 2018, not because of all of you, but because of our market, just because of media, because of the constant coverage, because of the cellphone, because of all the instant gratification or instant just demise of what they’re reading. It’s one of those things that you have to be aware of and you have to constantly educate young people of how to handle those things and internalize those things, physically, mentally and emotionally. And you’re not just a football coach in 2018. You’re not. You’re a lot of other things.

Q. You see a lot more confidence out of your offensive line this last week?

P. J. FLECK: I’ve seen confidence out of our offensive line throughout the entire year. You know, anytime that you win a football game people feel better. But what you have to be able to do is bring it right back of, okay, you might feel better or you might feel bad when you lose, but it’s never as bad as you think, it’s never as good as you think. We know what we have to get better at, and we’re getting better in those certain areas, and that’s all we can control.

They’re playing better together. I thought they played really well together this past week, pushing piles. Mohamed Ibrahim had 150 some yards; he had 72 yards after contact. Well, close to 40 of those yards came on piles being pushed. Think about that, 40 yards just from a pile being pushed. I mean there was one play, I think it’s play 36, if you’re keeping track at home, it’s a two-yard gain, and then we ended up getting 12. It happened multiple times. And that’s what you love to see from your offensive line. That’s what I love to see, because that’s the how; that’s the heart; that’s the spirit; that’s your unconquerable will; that’s a crack on your shoulder. That’s when you start to see, okay, this team’s figuring things out. They’re not there yet, but they’re getting the culture. They’re understanding how to go win football games, how to play the right way.

Q. You mentioned earlier about Blake Bell. It was either his points or rating, whatever it was. I forget. You said it was his highest one ever. What kind of things do you guys to measure for that?

P. J. FLECK: We have grade sheets for every position. It looks at production points. You get points for tackles, tackles for loss, PBUs, interceptions, fumble recoveries, doing your assignment, doing your assignment with the incredible how. You get minuses for whether it’s lack of effort, whether it’s a missed assignment, whether it’s -- whatever it is; missed tackle. So you get all these points, and you add them up, and 58 points is the highest we’ve had, from an offense or a defensive player. It’s astonishing number. 28 points in one play; one play, which you get a lot of points if you, one, get a tackle for a loss; two, you get a sack; three, you force a fumble; four, you scoop a score and score a touchdown on that play. Think about all the things that happened on that play. Not only that, he executed the scheme to perfection. We practiced that particular play on that particular situation, three or four plays and said, hey, yes, you have an assignment, but you need to check the quarterback at all times to make sure that ball is out of his hand because there’s nobody else if you don’t do that. And knowledge is power if you use it. Quarterback had the ball. He makes the play. Not only that, he knocks the stiff arm hand down, because you get the point for that. If you get stiff armed, you lose a point. If you knock the stiff arm hand down, you gain a point. Not only that, then you’re supposed to tackle him;
he ripped the ball out of his hand and then scooped and scored. So that just shows, I think, the development of him. Goes from the worst game he's ever played to the best game he's ever played.

And again, it's just getting back to letting our players play fast; simple, sound, fast, just get them to play fast. And they were playing fast. And I thought they communicated on defense better than we ever have. And these are expectations we have. Whether we're meeting the expectation or not or we're consistent enough in the expectation or not, that's the question as we keep growing up.

Q. How much of the tight ends impacted what you're kind of doing on the ground?
P. J. FLECK: They're getting better. It's hard because we've got Bryce Witham, who we've kind of offered another year to, which would make him a sophomore right now. We're able to kind of get that paperwork going and get started, which we think we're going to be okay there. You got a guy by the name of Brevyn Spann-Ford, who you see at times. I get to see him on every Sunday night, see what he gets to do, and some of you have had a chance to see what he can do. He's going to be a very impressive player. I'm not breaking his redshirt year.

And you look at Jake Paulson, who's a redshirt freshmen. I mean, he's still a boy. And in all due respect, he needs to get stronger and bigger, but what he's doing as a redshirt freshman is impressive, just like a lot of the other guys. Ko Kieft is getting better. Colton Beebe is providing some things for us. So it's kind of, you know, the room is kind of by a committee. Whoever is ready to go and whoever is playing best that week is going to get more reps, and until we get into this rhythm of getting bigger, faster, stronger and more experienced. But Clay Patterson, our tight end coach, is doing an outstanding job developing that group. They're playing really well.

Q. Senior games for most of these guys.
P. J. FLECK: Senior day is really important, especially for all these seniors what they've been through. A lot of these seniors have been through three head football coaches. That's very difficult. It's like three divorces. It really is. In the four or five years they've been here.

And all they've continued to do is be for the culture, for what we're doing, have supported us 100 percent. And this is, you know, is our last home game. It's very important. I still remember my last home game as a college football player. It's one of those things you'll always remember. And we get to play a champion, and to be able to have them at TCF Bank Stadium at the middle of November, that's a champion already, to have a lot on the line, to be able to do something really special for this group, to send them out on that type of note. They get to control it. They get to control whatever they want, their own destiny from this point forward in postseason play and be able to go out however they want.

So I want to thank all of them for what they've been able to do, because they've learned more about life. And they'll know that 10, 15 years down the road. They might not know it now, but when they get 10, 15 years down the road, they're going to be very thankful for every experience they went through. And it's hard to be able to see the forest through the trees sometimes, but they'll be able to do that.

I do want to make one announcement. Rodney Smith will walk for senior day. I don't want anybody panicking. So I just want to make sure everybody knows that. I know that's been announced. But he wants to walk with some of the people he came in with, and I've allowed him to do that. So just like Conor Rhoda had two walks, Rodney Smith will have two walks. So I just don't want anybody panicking and wondering what's going on if that happens.

Q. Just to follow up, when you talked on the radio about the offensive improvements, is that a certain standard or metric that you're referencing or is that just kind of a broad term?
P. J. FLECK: I think it's a broad term. I think when you're looking at points, when you're looking at yards, when you're looking at the consistency of your football team. I don't think it's very hard to look at our football team and say, yeah, we're definitely better on offense. And not only are we better on offense, there's seven freshmen starting on offense. These people are going to be around for a very long time here in the Twin Cities area.

And that's the fun of it. People want to evaluate now, and I get now, but I didn't come here just to be able to do it now; be able to do it over a long period of time, and you have to sacrifice now. And that's why this senior class is so important to me because what they've had to sacrifice and go through, they didn't pick that. But they had a choice to stay or not. And they've stayed. And I've said from day one those who stayed will be champions. And they're going to be right along with us when we become that. When we get to those types of games, they'll be right on the sideline and I've made that commitment to them. They'll be right along with us, because this is -- we talk about this as a foundational year, and it could be whatever you want it to be. Doesn't mean you can't win. We've won five games. We're five and five. We've won just as many games as we did last year with a way younger and more inexperienced football team.

And when you look at those guys, they've had a chance to leave, stay, be a negative voice. And all they've done is being 100 percent positive, row the boat and learn a lot. But they are the foundation of what we're doing, and they're going to be back when we get to those days.

Q. What have you seen in the development of Tanner, maybe some confidence level, going from second string to getting that big win last week?
P. J. FLECK: Yeah, again, when you're playing two quarterbacks, they're both very confident people, first and foremost. You know them. I'm sure you've all sat down, talked to them. Very confident. They believe in themselves very much or they wouldn't be here.

But I think that when you look at both of them and now Tanner obviously playing, you know, he plays a good half against Nebraska, gets his first start, wins, comes back. Doesn't necessarily play particularly that well. We lose by a big margin. I wanted to see him respond. Then he responds, and from play 10 to play 23, again, I'll hit on that. Of course, being a receiver guy, that one irritated me a little bit more than others. So there's four drops in the matter of those 13 plays. He'd been 14 of 18, for who knows, over 250 yards probably and more touchdowns; and he's playing at a high level. I think he's leading at a high level of what he's capable of doing today. And I'm good with that. And he could always get better. He's gotta change his best.

Tomorrow will be a higher expectation than there was today, of both quarterbacks, Zack and Tanner. And like I said before, Zack's getting ready to be able to play again. But again, I'll continue to evaluate. That's a quarterback competition. It's very healthy, and again, like I said, there's not some guy that has 27 starts and has done X, Y and Z. They both have played. They both have played really well at times. They both have had some times where they can get better, and that's great. I want them both to have that experience, because as we move forward, next year they'll both be sophomores. And then we'll add two more freshmen, and there we are. And hopefully we'll have four scholarship quarterbacks. That's a lot. I mean, geez, sounds a little different; right? We got one. We're gonna have four, in two months!

Q. Is Phillip Howard going through a position change?
P. J. FLECK: Yes! Thank you. Great job. How did you find that out?

Q. Depth chart.
P. J. FLECK: Oh. I guess we put that on there. I forgot that went out today. Thought maybe you were looking in the windows. You're more than welcome to.

But Phillip Howard, yes. First of all, something about Phillip Howard, he's a Minnesota kid. I recruited him when we were at Western Michigan University. He ended up going to Minnesota, and we kind of knew that if they offered, he was going to be there. He's kind of been our -- we've kept for the most part -- a lot of our wideouts have stayed pretty healthy. So he's been biting at the bit to get in there, but the other guys are still ahead of him right now. We obviously have an issue at defensive back, and if we have one or two guys that don't make it to Saturday, Phillip Howard could start at corner. But that's the position we're in. We gotta hit it in 2019 hard, and we will, bringing in a lot of defensive backs, some that can play now, some that need to help now and then some maybe we can take care of and redshirt maybe. But Phillip Howard is a very, very selfless player. He's got the highest GPA he's had since he's been here. He works tremendously hard in community service, and I'm not saying he didn't do that when we first got here, but he's doing it way better and a lot more, and he's doing it because he really wants to do it now, and it's really fun to see.

And so I went to him and had a meeting with him, and I said, we're going to have a man-to-man conversation. I always start my important conversations that way with these young men, Seth Green the same way. And they kind of just sit up in their chair. And I say, I'm going to come on the other side of the desk, because I hate the desks. I hate desks separating me when I talk to my players. So I walk around, and obviously he knows it's getting serious. He's like what is he going to talk to me about? And we had a really good heart to heart, and he was tremendous. His words were "anything I can do to help this football team, Coach, I want to do. I love it here. I love what we're doing, and I just want to help our football team."

When you have people saying that to you as head coach, you know you're doing all the right things, and it's only a matter of time.

But the position change will be for the next 11 days, and then we'll reevaluate it. However, that could go right back to offense in four days, and I told them this is just ever evolving, but he's going to go with the defensive backs because he knows the offense, he knows our techniques, but now he's going to go to defense just to be able to help, and come Sunday he was backpedaling. I said it's just like playing receiver; it's just backwards.

Q. Question on recruiting. If you have to move on from a player for whatever reason off the field, academics, do you have a standard policy on that?

P. J. FLECK: We have standard policies in recruiting that every player that we recruit, every player that's committed to us must uphold the standard of what we feel is what we have in our culture now; not only for us, but their high school program. And a lot of times if you don't do that, you put yourself at risk.

And you've gotta continue to do well academically. You gotta do well on the field. You've gotta do well with your teammates. You gotta do well, you know, in your high school. You gotta continue to serve and give. You've gotta continue to make your life better. Just because you're committed and you have your scholarship doesn't mean all of a sudden now you're on Easy Street and coasting. That's not what this is about.

Then every individual is handled on an individual basis because everybody's a little bit different, and every situation is a little bit different. But we have standards that we have inside of our program, just like we would.
Once players have been offered or they are committed, we hold them up to the standard of what we would have for our players here. I mean, I think the players think the same way. We see that all the time in recruiting as well. But when you are part of us, we feel like you're a part of us and you're a part of us maybe not even here yet physically, but you're a part of us. So we want to see your life improve and continue to improve. We don't want to see you go backwards. We want to see you go!

I'm not saying you have to go from a 2.5 to a 4.0. I'm just saying I want to see your life get better, and just like anything, you want to see that and help them through anything that they're going through.

Q. How valuable was Chris Williamson last week in kind of that role keeping Rondale Moore in check?

P. J. FLECK: Yeah, I think Chris Williamson played his best football that I've seen him play. He hadn't played football close to two years before this year and even sat out some of this year, so getting him back and playing the game -- practicing the game, under conditioning, spring ball, it's all different than playing the season. Summer conditioning is way different than playing in season, and he's getting back into a groove. He's got a long way to go. Gotta get better in a lot of areas. But I thought he played one of his better games, and we need him to continue to do that, because I thought he played it at a really high level, and he was very physical, very physical. And he covered really well, tackled well and really was in a lot of key positions for us, made a lot of key calls and a lot of adjustments and did a really nice job for us.