P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: We're thankful for a lot of things. Proud of our players, putting together their second annual turkey drive, which is tonight. Benefits eight organizations. Excited about our players doing that. They're a big part of contributing to that.

Disappointed in the loss against Northwestern, 24-14. Had plenty of opportunities. I think it's a matter of five, six plays. That's where the game was won or lost on their side and our side.

They play really well. Got to give them a lot of credit. Big Ten West champs for a reason. They don't beat themselves, we beat ourselves. That is how it came down to it. There were multiple drops, there were two interceptions, a sack fumble, missed a fourth-and-one, cover-two, break on a play, don't get it, miss a field goal one of the kickoffs before the half. There you go. That's the name of the game.

When you talk about them, you don't talk about many negative plays or bad plays or anything like that. They played like a champion, like a champion plays. We've learned a lot of how to be able to do that and continue to add to that for our repertoire as we continue to get older and put that in our bank as we continue to go through the year. Got to give them a lot of credit.

Got a great opportunity this week, chance to go to a bowl, then bring the axe home. One of the most traditional college football games in college football. We're excited to be able to play in it. Very honored to play in it. We respect the rivalry tremendously.

It's not very difficult to tell our players a little bit about this week and what it means. Tomorrow we'll actually educate them about the axe, what that means, the history of the rivalry. Today we talk about what we have to do to be able to win a game. Tomorrow we educate them a little bit about the rivalry.

With so many young players playing it for the first time, we have to be able to educate them exactly what it means. We're excited. Got a great opportunity. We'll leave it at that.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. How would you assess your quarterback situation for the entire season?
P.J. FLECK: It's developing, evolving. There's been highs, there's been lows. Been like a giant wave. There's been good, there's been bad. But they're both freshmen. I've seen an enormous amount from positive from both of them. To do what they're doing as young guys is really good. Then I've seen some things that we've got to be able to correct.

One thing I seen from them a lot of times, once they make a mistake, they rarely make that mistake again. That's a credit to them.

Q. Sort of what you think you're going to get with true freshmen?
P.J. FLECK: I respect everybody's opinion as I've always said, how everybody writes, what they think. We're exactly where I thought we would be. Could it have been a little bit better? Sure. Could it have
been a lot worse? Yeah.

When you talk about when you have those freshmen, they’ve played almost better than I thought they could play. When you play true freshmen or a redshirt freshman, it can get catastrophic quick mentally, physically, emotionally. You can also have highs. It’s to be able to get those highs sustainable over a long period of time.

You can do that if your surrounding cast is experienced, played a ton of football, can bring you into this safety net. If not, you’re all kind of growing up at the same time. That’s very difficult to do, especially on the offensive side of the ball.

I think they’ve handled the pressure, the expectation of going in there and executing at a very high level. I’m proud of them. We’ve got a long way to go. That doesn’t mean we’re where we need to be. A lot of it’s unacceptable. In every area, I am talking about every position, how we’ve grown and got better.

The result might not be there just yet, and the inconsistency is there. The inconsistency is expected. It’s not acceptable, but it’s expected to happen. You’re always ready for that as a head football coach when you’re coaching the youngest team in America.

Q. Minnesota has struggled the last couple years on the road in the Big Ten. How are you helping the team mentally prepare?

P.J. FLECK: We have to quit talking about how we’re struggling on the road in the Big Ten. We have to stop talking about that. It’s hard because I only have them for a few hours a day in the four walls. That’s my message all the time. Doesn’t matter where we play, parking lot, grass field, field turf, Canada, here, it doesn’t matter. Wherever we get an opportunity to play, we’ve got to play. We’ve got to break those stereotypes and stigma of what we can’t do or what we haven’t done.

We’re in the process of doing that. The influx of our young players, that’s why we brought them here, to be able to break that cycle. The guys that are here have to be able to break that cycle. But you don’t do it by talking about what you haven’t done. You talk about what you can do, what the expectations should be.

So that’s I guess how we’re working on it. Maybe we can just practice other places, maybe not on campus. We’ll come up with some creative ideas.

Q. How do you try to help players that are dealing with tragedy?

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, you know, it’s been a crazy year. It’s been a very emotional year, highs, lows. We lost a teammate. A lot of our players have lost either brothers or cousins or siblings, family members. A lot of our staff members have had some things with their own family, their wives, things like that. Then we had the injuries we’re dealing with to our best players, guys playing way before they’re ready. Those are challenges.

We’re educators and teachers. That's life, right? That's life. We've had a year that's been very difficult and very hard, not bad, difficult and hard. That's opportunity for growth, change and education.

So when young people like Mohamed had a tragedy this past week, you can always tell, one of our assistant trainers came up to me and said, You might want to check on Mo, he’s not acting right. That’s why we talk about we all touch our players. That’s what the board of HOWphers is for, to be able to go through every one of those players on our team, say physically, mentally, emotionally, what do they
look like, what's bothering them.

Someone said, He just doesn't look right. We look into it, he lost one of his closest, closest people in his life to a very tragic ending to a life. So he's dealing with that on a Tuesday practice, and you're talking about going out and beating the Big Ten West champs. He's the starting running back, 18 years old, you're telling him that we got to be able to get through this.

You got players who have never played in the Big Ten, played in those games, you're helping them deal with that. When you're dealing with a tragedy, that's a bunch of things. That's grief. You do not ignore the grief. They're usually in my office, that's the first thing. We go through different avenues. I start talking to them. We have our own mental health specialist here on staff. We have our trainers for that, as well. We connect them with a lot of guys on our team.

We're very open in what happens. Do you mind if I share that with the team so the team knows? That way everybody rallies around them. I think he's gotten through that pretty well. The best way I've ever experienced tragedy or how I deal with it is to be able to celebrate that person's life by how you act, how you play, how you go about your life.

What did you learn from that person and what did you like, instill that in part of your lifestyle, make that a part of you now as you move on into the future, as a husband, as a father.

It's unfortunate, but he's handling it really well. He's a very, very tough young man. He's very mentally tough, emotionally tough, physically tough, which you'll get a chance to see on Saturday.

There's a lot more important things than football. That will always come first in our program, our players' feelings, not like feelings, I'm talking about physically, mentally, emotionally how they feel will come way before a football game.

Q. Have you been surprised by the attendance numbers? How concerned are you the impact that could have on recruiting?
P.J. FLECK: Well, we're almost full for 2019. We have two commits for '20 who have been at every home game. My focus is on the people who are actually there. That's it. You look across college football in general, I think whether it's NFL, college, attendance is down as it is.

Again, for us, I know when we build it, everybody will be there. There's so many things to do in this town, too. I knew that would probably be something that took a little while to be able to get.

But again, like I reminded somebody else, how many sellouts have we had in the last 10 years? All right? That's one of the other things we want to change on a weekly basis. That's going to take a lot to be able to do that.

Again, that's one of the goals I have for this program. That's why we're doing it the way we're doing it. We're not going to come off that plan, period. It's not like I'm sitting there, changing, panicking, now I bring in 20 juco players.

We're going to get way younger before we get any better and more experienced. That's what we're doing. When you look at our 2019 class, a majority of high school kids, they're going to help play next year. There's going to be a lot of freshmen and sophomores on the field next year. That's exactly what I said was going to happen.
I'm not concerned with that at all. I think we have an incredible fan base, a lot of people that love and care for us. The people at the games, the fans, student section, band, I give them a ton of credit. I appreciate their loyalty. That's the ones we're going to focus on.

Q. At Western it went down before it went way up.
P.J. FLECK: Western Michigan, it went way down when I got there, then way, way, way, way up where you're selling out your last year and College GameDay is there, things that people could never imagine happening, won't happen, especially when you're going through the rebuilding part, the dig, the foundation part. People are like, what's going on over there? We started completely over.

Just because you have five, six players that have experience, are really good players, that doesn't make you a good football team. There's a lot of things that go into that. There's the academic part, the social part, spiritual part, depth part, recruiting part, brand part, perception part. There's all these things. You got it.

Q. Building a culture is one of the biggest things you focused on since you got here. What would a win against Wisconsin do for that?
P.J. FLECK: We take one day at a time in our culture. We want to be better today than yesterday. We want to respond to whatever we get in the right way.

One game is not going to do able to turn everything. Again, when you win, it helps. When you lose, if you respond the right way, it helps. You're continually building those scars as you continue to go. You build enough that's necessary to become a champion.

Every program that you look at, that we all look at as top, top programs were somewhat started over and built at one point. It was really tough at the beginning, right? Really tough. But, I mean, we've won the exact same amount of games as we did last year. We're 5-6, not 0-12. We've won a lot of really good football games against some good teams. We've lost some good games against some good teams. We've had kind of a mixture in between.

These are the things, usually all the things we're learning on what a culture looks like. Cultures deal with things a certain way. That's what you're building. How do you connect people? You want to have your environment in that culture that no matter what happens, you can grow positively from it.

I mean, we haven't won this game for 15 years or whatever it is. That's what we keep talking about. Sooner or later, our group is going to end that. It's going to end that. We have to find a group that's ready to end that.

Q. Minus 11 turnover margin in Big Ten games.
P.J. FLECK: The ball has not been the program. We stress it. We coach it. We demand it. There's three things up in our team meeting room, besides the Minnesota Golden Gophers logos. H.Y.P.R.R. culture, Row the Boat, the ball is the program. Those are the only three things in our team meeting, the three most important things.

We haven't done it for multiple reasons. To be able to value the ball, you have to know what it's like to not value the ball. We have a lot of guys who are really finding out what not valuing the ball is.

I take it back to Western Michigan, Zach, our quarterback, we were 1-11, we threw twenty some interceptions. Worst in the country. Four years later we were number one in the country. That was the only difference. Wasn't the same guys, but it was recruited guys.
They understood that the ball was the program. We didn't turn the ball over till the seventh or eighth game, that late. Understanding that's how you win game. That's how Northwestern has been able to win the Big Ten West. We're minus 10 in the turnover battle. We're lucky we're 5-6, right where we're at. We're lucky we're there. We have to be able to fix that.

**Q. When you look at the majority of Zach or Tanner’s interceptions, when you look at them, God, that's a rookie mistake, didn't see something, confused on a coverage?**

P.J. FLECK: I don't even know it's a majority. We've had some interceptions, man, the ball is missed by that much, then it bounces around, stays on somebody's back, hits off another guy, lands in somebody's hands. Hard to say that's the quarterback's fault.

The second one, that's a bad decision, bad read, right? I have to do a better job of coaching him up and getting him to that point, not make that throw, go to the second round, check it down, eight-yard gain.

I would say a lot of them we had some down-the-field throws, we have to win the 50/50 ball. We need to make it 9/10. We have to pick off that ball, which wouldn't even be a bad ball in my opinion.

He has a one-on-one battle. We always say an overthrow is a bad throw because nobody has a chance at it. At least you give a guy a chance to go make the play. Eventually in recruiting and development, we want our guys to be better than their guys, then go make the play.

I wouldn't say it's as much as you think it is. I think they're playing really well at times. The sack fumble we had, you can't see anybody coming off your backside right when you start to throw. We have to have better protection.

They're playing at a high level, but not consistent enough. High level comparatively speaking to where they are.

**Q. Talk about Cashman’s journey from being a walk-on to getting exposure.**

P.J. FLECK: I didn't get an opportunity to recruit him, but I do know we put him on scholarship for a reason. I don't know what he was like before that. He wasn't on scholarship for the three years he was prior to us. The minute I got here, I was like, this guy is going to be really, really special. You could tell.

Had some injuries last year that kind of held him back a little bit here and there. I think you saw what he's able to do, especially at our 'Will' linebacker position. He's a perfect role for it. A lot of things we can do schematically to be able to give him the ability to make the plays, because he's our best player. We do that.

Joe Rossi did a nice job the last two weeks to be able to have that happen, put him in the role to be able to make the plays. He's got to be able to make those plays. He was put in roles to make plays in the Illinois game, didn't make it. 20 tackles, that's an enormous amount.

One thing if your safety has 20 tackles when it's 15-yard gains coming out, another when your guy is making tackles in the box. His journey has been incredible. He's basically had three head coaches, three different cultures that he's known here. He has been nothing but an advocate of our program, nothing but representing Minnesota in a first-class fashion.

I give him a lot of credit for that because he's one of those guys who has stayed, he's one of our best players. I'd like to be able to think the program has helped him even become a better person than he is.
He has his own non-profit organization already. He's just a tremendous young man. Bright future.

Q. Any injury updates?
P.J. FLECK: As of today, looks like most of the guys will be back. We'll get some guys back for the last game. I think it's a little too early to say for definite, but it's trending towards the way we'll get some guys back.

Q. What are some of the challenges presented by Wisconsin's physical offensive line and Johnathan Taylor's running style?

Their system is really good. They gap you out. They make you fit gaps. They give you different formations. They extend gaps out. They're very physical, especially in their gap schemes. Taylor falls forward. He doesn't go down with one person hitting him. He's almost had 2,000 yards. With injuries to some of their other guys, he's almost had to do it by himself a lot of the year. They've had a quarterback change due to injury. He's been able to take a load off that quarterback. We're going to run the ball, we still run the ball. When they're doing that, you know you got a really good football team. They present a lot of challenges.