P.J. Fleck

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: At the end I told our team that they beat a culture, they didn't just beat a culture. They beat a really powerful culture that stems from decades ago. It was a good win for us. Had a lot of adversity throughout the game, obviously with Rodney's injury, we needed a lot of people step up. We had to be able to change some of our game plan. We had to adjust on the fly. Thought our coaches did a really nice job of that.

I thought our defense played exceptionally well, especially in the first half. And then I thought our guys did a great job of finishing, find a way, refusing to lose versus wanting to win. Got some great awards, great accolades individually which are ultimately team awards with Carpenter being special teams Player of the Week, and then Antoine Winfield, Jr. being defensive Player of the Week in the Big 10.

Proud of the victory. We are 1-0 in the Fresno season and now we want to be 1-0 in the Miami, Ohio season. Thought today's practice was tremendous. We just have to keep getting better, changing our best and with that open it for questions.

Q. With the SEC, playing some early conference games, the Pac 12 does, a little bit here in the Big Ten. How do you feel about the possibility of maybe everybody playing a Big Ten in their first three weeks or so, and maybe shifting like a Miami game, something like that, to later in the season, which has somewhat been an SEC model for years.

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Yeah, I come from the old school; that anybody can beat you at any moment. So you've got 12 games on your regular season schedule and you have to play them whenever they show up. I think the Big Ten is going to some of that. I think next year, we open up -- or two years, Ohio State, one of our first games and I think the Big Ten is taking that model a little bit. That's for them to decide. We have to play 12 games, wherever they are. We've got to play them and play really well in them.

So that's our job. You know, find out our opponents and be able to schedule them, where we can schedule them, where the openings are, but I like it. I think it's really good for fans right off the bat, have conference games and it kind of paints a picture of the future for people and gives all of you something to talk about. You kind of go through game one when everybody is anointing people as champions already, somehow, some way.

I don't really have an opinion one way or another.

Q. When a team loses a player as important as Rodney, it can be deflating. How has your group handled it?

HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I think adversity has always brought this team, at least the 19 months that I've been around them, brought us closer.

Especially with this team, in particular. Any adversity we've ever had has brought us a lot closer together.

I think it all depends, as well, on how that person that has that injury, responds to it. Do they respond to it in a selfish way or do they respond to it in a selfless way. Rodney Smith is incredibly selfless. He's proven and showed our entire football team for the rest of their life, a prime example from a player, not just a coach, preaching a message, but from a player's perspective how to deal with an injury very quickly. He was back on the field, leading Bryce, talking to our young backs, talking to Femi-Cole, teaching them, along with Shannon Brooks.
And then today's practice, the same thing. He's got his crutches and he's out there coaching and demanding and it's fun to watch. He had his moment, you know. Everybody has their moment. You've got to have your moment where you've got to either shed a tear or really sit there and take it in. You don't want to ignore the signs, or also, the process of grief, because that's normal.

And I thought Rodney did a tremendous job and he's probably still going to have more of that as he continues to go through. We have things that are set up in our program that are all about our players and their mental health and safety. It's set up for them to be elite in every area of their life. That includes the mental part, and so -- but I thought he did a great job handling it.

I thought our team, I never saw our team waiver one bit. I called the whole team up and just told them, you know, nothing that special. Just, you know, this is the next opportunity for somebody else. This is an opportunity that you've got to grow from and it's got to bring us closer together and I thought it did.

But when you lose your best player, it does affect you, right, in a way that when you lose, it's a player's game. We're a much better football team with Antoine Winfield, Jr. on the field than we are without him. We're a much better team on with Rodney Smith than without him. But again, there's things you can't control and how you respond to that, I think that's going to be the difference.

Q. What impressed you about Bryce on Saturday, and how has he improved since he's been here?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I thought his second half running was way better than his first half running. I thought he had his eyes down in the first half. I think he was just getting carries and running. That's okay. He's a true freshman. I get that.

Second half, I thought he felt the game a lot more. You know, he got into a rhythm and I thought that his emotions and the style of play that we recruited came out in the second half.

And you know, we're putting a lot of pressure on these young people. From our last game, our leading receiver, our leading tackler, our leading passer and rusher are all true freshmen. That's what we have.

So we're going to expect them to play, big, and he got a lot better in practice today. It's going to be a process with him. It's going to be a process with Mo. It's going to be a process with Femi but that's what we have and we have other creative ways to be able to move the football that we're going to have to tap in with other young people, as well.

Q. The update with Mo?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Great, great question about Mohamed. He did individual today. Looked really good. I expect him to play. Just depends how much.

Q. We saw a couple times when Annexstad got flushed from the pocket or was scrambling. Seemed a lot of guys in that situation would tuck it and run, but he's keeping his eyes up, downfield, still looking for a target. For a young guy, is that unusual to have that awareness?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Well, you want him to have it. Is it unusual for that young of an age? Probably. I mean, his poise is unusual for that. Remember he just turned 18 in April. I think a lot -- Bateman is 18. These aren't just freshmen. These are 18-year-olds that just turned 18. They are playing against 22-year-old grown men, when they leave college, all these seniors, both defenses we played are senior dominant and now Miami, Ohio is the same way, a lot of these seniors.

He's got great poise, great confidence, he can extend the play. He's got good feel and he's developed a really good relationship with the receivers already where that last play to Ty, that we get the third and eight, he's throwing the ball before Ty even kind of even turns around or comes out of a break point and puts the ball on the money where only Ty can get it.

He worked the scramble rules to perfection. He wants to throw first. You've seen him run. He can run. But he'd rather extend the play and get in the ball in the hands of the playmakers.
Q. Do you notice players just naturally gravitating towards Zack as a leader?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I do. I really do. As I said that's very difficult to do without any performance to back it up, but he's got natural leadership skills and he always has and that's what we loved about him when we recruited him. He had that. He had that it factor.

He's got a lot of room to grow, and he needs to improve in a lot of areas. But he's better today than he was Saturday, and that's all I want out of him, you know, people are going to put expectations and pressure on him but nobody is going to put more pressure on him than myself and himself.

He's just got to continue to get better and that's all he's focused on. That's what I like about him, going back to the poise, he's just poised in understanding today matters. I've got to get better today. And I wasn't good this last week at this; I have to get better at that today. That's maturity.

We talk about race to Maturity and he's adopting that, just like a lot of our freshmen are.

Q. What is Femi-Cole's role on this team? Does he do different things than Mo?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: He gives us a little bit of what Kobe McCrary gave us last year, just a bigger back. I'm not comparing him saying they are the same back. McCrary had a shot in the National Football League, but he gives us the ability to have a bigger back, back there. He has experience. He's been a part of this football team.

So he'll have a role, that's for sure. He's going to need to have a role and then, you know, we brought Nolan Edmonds up, another true freshmen from Georgia. Brought him up from the scout team.

You know, we'll just keep building some depth.

Q. Can you describe the skill-set of Mo and Bryce?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I think, you know, Mo is not a big guy, but he runs like a short-yardage back. You know, you wouldn't expect the way he runs to be from his size.

But he is a high, high culture guy and he's going to find a way to get it done. He's very reliable. He's got a great center of gravity, so he's got great balance. He can see the inside zone and outside zone really well and he's a patient runner.

But he can go from zero to 60 really fast. You know, the long-term speed, he's got that, but maybe not as much as Bryce. I think Bryce has a little bit more of the breakaway-type speed, a little more of a flasher. But he's still developing, becoming what he can become -- both of those guys.

Mo's played in one game and Bryce has played in two, and if you combine the plays, it's probably not even one full game yet.

But we see their style developing before our eyes in practice. It's nice to be able to see that development. You want the guys, and even next year, when you have those two, Rodney and Shannon, you're building depth and you've got some outstanding running backs coming in with the 2019 class, too.

Q. The process for Rodney, what is it like, about coming back for another year?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Well, it didn't take long, I promise you that. Our GM, Gerrit Chernoff was on it immediately with compliance with Jeremiah, our compliance officer, about what the possibilities were. By even the end of the game, Gerrit even told me, he goes, "Hey, it looks like we could possibly get this sixth year."
With the way the new rules are stated, we feel very confident that that can happen.

You know, we have to file the paperwork, though, at the end of our last game. That's why we can't sit there and say it's a hundred percent yet because the paperwork technically hasn't been filed.
But when the paperwork gets filed at the end of the Wisconsin game, we are confident that he meets all of the requirements for it to happen. Every one of them, he checks the box, so we feel confident that that will happen. It's going to be for the final word, just like Antoine, you guys always ask me: Can he get the year back, can he get the year back. Same thing. Just have to wait till the end of the year, last game.

Q. Is there a timetable of Brooks' return and would he be a candidate to play in more than the four games?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: I'm not going to play him in more than the four games. Made that very clear to him and his family. There is a strategy based on what we feel -- we might have to play him sooner, but I highly doubt it, because there's a few things that go into the mix here. There's a safety issue that you want to make sure he's 100 percent.

I'll never put a player on the field that's not 100 percent, and I want to make sure he's 100 percent and I want to make sure he's confident.

Like today, he got in some drills that was semi-contact for the first time, and you could tell, he was like a kid in the candy store, big smile on his face, because he was finally involved in some real football. But it's going to take a little bit of time.

So you have the safety issue and then you have, okay, what games do we want to play in. Now, we could have a plan and that plan could change based on our depth chart really fast, based on who else gets hurt, what happens, but we have a plan. I'll keep that to ourselves of what we're going to do, but he'll play four games by the end of the year.

Q. How do you know when a freshman has gotten over the hump and the lights aren't too bright for him and he understands what's going on?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Well, I think the guys that have played, I don't think any of those guys have shown any type of spook or any type of, wow, this is too big for me at all, by just how hard they play; their willingness to do it for somebody else, and you can look in their eyes.

You can tell, at some point, the freshmen I've played in my career, you can look in their eyes and see if they are really well or if they are actually somewhere else.

Even the way they are breathing, you know, but I think based on when they get a chance -- you don't really know until they actually go play and then you watch them play and I wouldn't think any of our freshmen think it's too big. This is why they came here.

I do believe this, though: I think a lot of them thought that me telling them they are going to play as a freshman was a recruiting ploy. And then they are actually playing and starting. And I'm looking at them, like, I told you that. And it's a lot of you, right. There's 30 freshmen that have played, 28 freshmen that have played, and they think, oh, yeah, yeah, it's just recruiting.

Everybody tells you that, and then you get here and it's exactly what we said it was. If there's one thing that we are, we are exactly who we say we are. If we say that's going to happen, that's probably going to happen and when you're honest with people, sometimes they -- everybody wants the truth until you get it, I guess, is the one thing. That's okay. I think I'd rather have it that way than any other way.

Q. Along those lines, Terell Smith seems pretty fearless, challenging guys at the line or trusting his instincts when he's breaking on a ball, is that something you saw in recruiting?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: If you could run 10, 300-meters, you would probably impress people, too, Chip. I would, too. He's very confident in his ability. He understands -- one thing I like about him is he understands he's got to get way better fundamentally, and with his technique. Coach Addae is doing a tremendous job of developing him that way.

But you can see him play more aggressively and you can see him playing down the field better than he did in
game one already, down the field, even in practice, playing the ball down the field. Using his lean locate. He has four pass break-ups already. Our leader last year in pass break-ups had five, in the entire year and he has four.

Now, through recruiting, through development, I really like our freshmen secondary players, but when Antoine Winfield is in front of you, you know, you’re going to be on special teams for the most part.

But I like the freshmen, as well, at the secondary, at the safety position and then we're recruiting a lot in the 2019 class to bring in some more of the secondary members. Again we'll still be young in the secondary next year but you can start to see the type of talent that comes in.

And Terell had a lot of places that he could have went, and I think you see the difference of, that is what we're going after and he's an incredible person and he's got an incredible spirit. He's not the most vocal guy but he is an incredibly hard worker.

Rashod Bateman, the exact same way. It's fun to coach these guys, some of our best players are our youngest players, and some of our youngest players are some of the hardest workers on the team. As you continue to develop that culture, that's what spreads.

Q. Winfield, the interception. Players with an instinct for the game --
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Well, I think I said this publically. Sunday night I recreated it with our managers. Our players were not on the field back. I ran back, went over my right shoulder, went over my left shoulder, put my hand up, tried to catch the ball, put my foot down: Almost tore my ACL, almost dislocated my hip and almost tore my rotator cuff.

It's one of those plays that you look at, you know, coaching -- it's so aggressive, it's his man, he doesn't even look at his man, turns around, makes a play like that -- I'll always say that.

Being a player and playing football for almost the majority of my life and now coaching in it, everywhere I've always been, it's a player's game. You have to have coaches, you have to have schemes, you have to have that but it's a player's game. You see coaches with really good players and they shine and you see some really good coaches that don't have their weapons and they are not as good of a coach.

Coaching is important, but I think development, academically, athletically, socially, spiritually, being teachers in all those areas is really what a coach is about; taking them from where they were to where they dreamed of being. It's not about the X's and O's on the field, it's not, and never will be in our culture.

But you can see Antoine Winfield, he's an incredible player but he's an even better person than the day he walked in here in my opinion and he's grown a lot and his maturity allows him to make that play, but also, he's got incredible genetics.

Q. Blake have a big role?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: You watch the play and everybody thinks it's Antoine, and it is. I mean, that play is incredible.

But if you watch Blake Cashman set the edge, the running back grabs it, starts running out there and gets ready to throw and gets spooked a little bit and kind of jumps back and lobs the ball more of a lob than he would have, if Blake wasn't in his face; and that's what caused the ball to arc, caused it a split second later and it's a game of inches and split seconds and we just happened to be on the good side of it this time. Our best player made a huge play.

Q. What do you see from Miami and what do you expect to see?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: Yeah, we are familiar with them. Chuck Martin has done a great job. He's in his sixth year. Played a lot just being in the Mid-American Conference. Anytime a Mid-American Conference team gets to play a Big Ten opponent, we are around the same recruiting base and see each other in recruiting and
we are very familiar with each other.

So I know they will be really excited. Our players are going to be excited, too. We're going to control us. Do what we can to be better this week than we were last week but they have a good quarterback. Ragland is a really good player, keeps the ball, keeps things alive.

They do a lot of misdirecting your attention. They do a lot of things in the backfield to get your eyes in the wrong spot, very similar to option football, and then throw the ball down the field. They throw the ball down the field a lot.

And they have got a really good running back, multiple skill positions, very talented, James Gardner, big, tall receiver. We recruited him at Western Michigan, and the defense, we know what they can do. Starting some new defensive ends this week. But again, they have played a lot of football together. They are a senior-dominated group offensively and defensively, and special teams, they play really hard.

It's another challenge but for us, we have to focus on ourselves, that's all we continue to do, change our best, it's about us. We have to get better and that's the expectation we put on our players and our coaches and today I thought we had a phenomenal practice, phenomenal practice, hard practice but phenomenal practice.

Q. You have eight players who have already got their undergraduate degrees. Does that make your job easier as a coach?
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: In what way? Just want to make sure I answer your question correctly.

Q. More seasoned or easier to coach.
HEAD COACH P.J. FLECK: That they have their degree? I don't think that makes it easier. Might make it easier for them. When you sit there and look, okay, I have one class or one internship and two things and you're sitting there going, wow, that must be real tough.

What we want to be able to do is have our young players, they have a full summer schedule, every player has got summer school. We want them to take their academics incredibly seriously. We have three of the highest GPAs back-to-back to back, I think in the history of Gopher football and we want to continue to move the bar and move the needle forward in that and keep changing our best.

We want to have our guys have the ability to graduate in three and a half years, because ultimately, I think there's going to be a lot of players here that have an opportunity to leave early. We want to build a culture that way. But if they can have a chance to leave early, we want them leaving, if they can, with their degree and if they are not able to do that, we want them to come back and finish their degree at any point in the off-season in the NFL.

I don't know if they have their degree they are easier to coach. I think their life becomes a little did I know. But for us, I think from freshmen to seniors, they all have their different -- wherever they have free time, it's filled with something else.

So if I have a lighter schedule and I've already graduated, I'm filling it with something else. They might be filling it with more film time on their own or something else that interests them or internships or things like that. I wouldn't say it that much easier, but you know, we take it very serious in terms of what we want our guys to accomplish off the field.