P.J. Fleck

P.J. FLECK: Really excited to be 1-0 in the Nebraska season. That was the mission, and I'm glad we were able to accomplish that. Got a lot of respect for Scott Frost, Nebraska, him as a coach and them as a program. Want to thank our fans for being here and creating a tremendous environment on a nice mid-October night. I thought that was tremendous, especially with our band. And I thought our players played really well, offensively, defensively, special teams. We still have a long way to go. We can get better in a lot of areas. I think our players understand that, know that. It's a mature team in doing what you have to do because doing what you want to do -- that's the maturity part of it. I thought that again today in today's practice.

We celebrated on Saturday night and then Sunday we talked about a lot of things, and then we put our leather vest on, zipped it up, and we're 0-0 again, and that's where we're at. I'm sure you have a lot of questions, so with that, we'll open it up for questions.

Q. When you have three running backs like that, do you ever think, this guy is hot, I'm just going to ride him the rest of the game, or is there always a substitution pattern?
P.J. FLECK: You play it by ear. It's a feel thing, and I think Kenni Burns has a really good feel of his room and he has a lot of leeway in that in who goes in. And if there's something that I want to be able to overturn and put somebody in because of a special run or a special situation that maybe I feel it's more directed towards that running back, then we'll talk about that. But he does a really good job rotating the backs.

I like them getting into rhythm, but 12 plays in a row is not necessarily a rhythm. I like them getting into the rhythm and DT can tell you, you want to get in that feel, but also you also want to be at your best, as well. And I think that's the ability we have with the three backs we have is they just continue to come at you over and over and over and over, and they're very selfless. It's very difficult to find people like that.

But that's a credit to Kenni Burns, credit to our players' buy-in to the culture, that it's forget about me, I love you. How can I make everybody else better? Our running backs were joking with Mohamed that he gets all the touchdowns. We got all the yards and you got the touchdowns. And Mo was like, well, I've got really good teammates.

But they're very selfless. It's a fun room. They're really hard workers. They inspire me to be even a better coach. As you keep going through this, it's not only the players getting better, it's the coaches becoming better coaches. We want to elevate our game, as well, as you keep going through the season.

Q. What's changed for your three techniques that has them playing so well in Big Ten play?
P.J. FLECK: Well, I think understanding the position, I think that's the main thing. I think our technique, our fundamentals are a lot better. I think we have some depth there. I think we're rotating - - our three techniques have been really good. We'd like to keep our three techniques on the move,
but I think the details are -- they're cleaning those up. Our hands are on the hips, they're actually on the hips, they're not on the side. When we need to be tight to something, we're tight to it. When we need to have space, we have to have space. When we have to come off the ball, we come off the ball.

I think it's just the whole picture. I think Jim Panagos really developed that room, not just the fundamental and details, but the personality of that room. It's taken on Jim Panagos' personality, very outgoing, very energetic, very passionate. And that's what you want to see, and that's how they play. We're not the biggest D-line, but they play so hard and they play so passionately, and that's a credit to Jim Panagos of creating that culture and that environment in that room.

Q. How do you balance the players' excitement of being excited for being 6-0 but also with the added weight that might come every week you remain undefeated?

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, the biggest thing is you celebrate, right? To people who are successful and they're never satisfied, the best advice I ever -- one of the pieces of advice -- I always say best advice -- I get a lot of advice in my life -- but was to make sure that you celebrate the moments. You celebrate when you do something and you accomplish something. Some people skip over that, and then all of a sudden, you lose your passion and your fire for it. Saturday in our locker room -- you're more than welcome to join us one of these times -- we have a blast after a game. Sometimes I keep you waiting. I apologize for that. But we have a blast in there.

And then on Sunday, we celebrate it, we all stand up, we all have this certain process we go through and then it's over. But we had as a team the ability to celebrate it, whether we win by one or 100. You would have thought we won the Super Bowl. We never take winning for granted, ever. How you do it, that was the mission, and we accomplished it, great. Let's move on, put your leather vest on on Saturday, and let's find a way to get better, right? And we want them to enjoy getting better. We want them to enjoy the process. The dream is the journey.

So many people think the dream is the result. When the result happens, no matter what it is, people are going to look at you and say, can you do it again? And then everybody goes, hold on a second, aren't we supposed to celebrate this? No. Now you're already moving on to the next dream. So you've got to find a way to enjoy the ride, which is very difficult to do because then people sit there and say, well, they're overconfident or they're this. We are the same as we were when we started the season in terms of our mentality. We're 0-0. We want to be 1-0 in the Rutgers championship season, period. I'm proud of our players for adopting that because it's one thing to say it, it's another thing to have your players actually respond to it and then have them become messengers of that.

Q. Relates to the way you guys have progressed each and every week because it seems like you've gotten better every week.

P.J. FLECK: Well, that's what you want to have. You definitely don't want to get worse. You want to get better, and I will feel like we're getting better in every area. It's a credit to the coaching staff, it's a credit to the commitment the players have made to each other. This is a team. Our four walls are very, very tight, and that's a credit to our team. They don't have to like each other, but they must love each other. And when you're talking that love, that sacrifice, that action, they mean it, and our leaders have done a great job of leading this football team.

And it's not just the seniors, it's some of the freshmen that are leaders. It's Tanner, it's all the guys that have been able to push this thing forward because they've got to lead at all levels. Somebody
made a comment that we had 25 captains. Yeah, we had 25 captains on Saturday. If we have to have 30 captains, we'll have 30 captains. I believe everybody has a chance to possibly lead, back, middle, front. We're getting better, but how much better we've gotten, that's over and done with. We have to now get better, and today's Tuesday was better than last week's Tuesday. And I even told them, I said, I couldn't wait to go in there today. I even told our staff, couldn't wait -- could wait until just after practice to say that wasn't good enough. I couldn't say it.

And one thing I hope our team understands -- I'm always honest with him. And I even told them I wanted to do that. I crumpled up the paper and said, nope, that was better than last Tuesday. So tomorrow's practice has to be better than last Wednesday, and they accept that challenge.

They handle it like professionals, but they're still kids. We want them to enjoy it, as well, but also know 0-0, and I'm not sure if they enjoyed practice today, but they worked through it and got better.

Q. Talk about the coaches getting better, too; how do you feel like you're a better coach now than at the beginning of the year even?
P.J. FLECK: Yeah, I think that I made this comment on the radio show earlier, that I watch every coach's press conference as much as I possibly can. You don't get a lot of personal time as a head football coach. You're always in different meetings, admin meetings, football meetings, staff meetings, whatever it is. But I take my time, I like to watch certain people and watch their press conferences. I have my favorite three or four that I usually watch, which I'll keep to myself, that are very close friends of mine that I really learn from, how they're handling certain situations with their team. Because everybody has different records and everybody is going through certain things.

So for me as a leader and moving the culture forward and the vision forward but also focusing on the now, the microscope and the telescope kind of theory, you're always learning that way. But our coaches are constantly finding new ways to be able to -- 80 percent of what we do is what we do. But then also what are some other things that we're getting really good at that we can exploit or we can install that can make our team take that next jump. And I think that's what Kirk Ciarrocca is really good at, Joe Rossi is really good at, Rob Wenger is really good at, our coordinators. And then that trickles down to everybody else.

Because being a better coach isn't just on the field. It's about being a better person, husband, father, it's about being a better recruiter, it's about developing relationships two years out now, then just one or three years out. So we're constantly pushing that envelope as coaches to find a way to make them better. And one thing I learned from Greg Schiano when I was at Rutgers was -- my practice scripts, you've all seen it. It's like Greg's were, they're like 30 pages. Every page is meticulously detailed, and on the back of those, I just write down my thoughts of how I can coach the coaches, find a way to make them better. And in return, they find a way to make me better, and I think when you have that time of camaraderie in a staff, I think that really works.

Q. How do you prepare for a team like Rutgers when they're going through a lot on their end with coaching changes and certain things going on there?
P.J. FLECK: Well, I have a lot of respect for Nunzio, first and foremost. I know him, recruited his high school. I have a lot of respect for Rutgers. A lot of our staff has been through. It's kind of like a rite of passage, you had to go through Rutgers almost. It just seems that way with our staff. I have a lot respect for what I learned from Greg Schiano and Rutgers out there. It's difficult when people go through coaching changes of how they handle that.
I watched Nunzio's press conference yesterday, and I think he's handling it so well. You talk about a difficult situation, and he is just absolutely crushed it. He's doing a great job. He's a phenomenal person. He's a wonderful football coach, and he's all about the kids. That's the one thing I have always respected about him as a high school coach. You loved recruiting his kids because it was all about the kids, and that hasn't changed at all, and you can tell that with him. The hard part is you don't know what you're going see all the time, and I think some people take that as well this person is not playing or that person is not playing. Sometimes that makes it difficult because coaches like to know exactly what you're going to see and what you're going to get because you can plan on that. It's the contingency plans that throughout the game time adjustments -- which it seems like almost our whole season has been that way, at least half of it -- that we've got to be ready for everything, because they've got some players that can really hurt you on the offensive side if you let them.

And then we just have to be able to play our best football, and we've talked all week about -- it's not any different this week. We've got to play up to our standard, we've got to be able to change our best. We have to find a way to be better this week than we were last week. It's a broken record, and that's okay, and that's what we want to continue to do.

Q. When you watched the tape back, was that your offensive line's best performance of the season?

P.J. FLECK: I think it was. Now, again, now that's not good enough, so that doesn't matter anymore, and they'll tell you that. We had four guys make the elite club, which was the first time we've had that this year. And it's funny because we see this progress of everybody, but everybody, once you reach something, we set another bar for you. And like your question earlier was like, nobody is ever -- well, Coach isn't satisfied. Well, we'll be satisfied when it's all done. Right now we're in the process. You've got to celebrate the satisfaction and then move on. And that's what change your best philosophy is all about. You've got to be truthful, listen, and then you've got to move and change.

I thought Curtis Dunlap played really well, his best game since he's been here. I think Blaise Andries, he's kind of a Swiss Army knife, he can go inside, go outside. I thought John Michael Schmidt adds that toughness up front to us, tough Chicago kid. Known him for five years, known him as long as I've known Tanner, just tough. Man, he's strong, got bear claws as hands. Every time we were recruiting him, he was building something out in his backyard with his dad. And then when you look at Conner Olson, I think that was one of his better games he's played, and he looked really good at guard.

And then Sam Schlueter, we gave out four awards and Sam Schlueter didn't get. And Sam Schlueter's probably thinking must be the special one at the very end that I'm getting. I'm getting the special award and he didn't get one. And he must have been thinking -- I still haven't talked to him about this. Brian Callahan did. But he's probably thinking, man, Coach made a mistake, he forgot me, I must have been on the list. He played one of his better games, but he has accelerated the expectation of him, and that's a product of success. You accelerate the expectation, and he did that. And now he understands that, and that's the way to keep just moving this thing forward. But he played outstanding, as well. I'm not saying he played bad. But having those five guys do that and then the tight ends doing what they did, we've just got to keep getting better. We've got a lot of room for improvement at pass protection, and in the run game.

Q. The tight ends Jake and Ko went down with injuries.

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, Jake practiced today in a lot of the certain things we were doing. We held him out
of one or two drills. But Ko did not practice today.

Q. You talked about how you feel like you have six starting linemen. How has the development of the starters maybe trickled down?
P.J. FLECK: Yeah, we wanted to continue to provide depth. We're only halfway through the season, and we want to be able to provide depth to continue to get every position to find who's next, who's next, who's next. As a head coach, you've got to be the most positive guy, but you also have to think of worst-case scenarios all the time, and you want to constantly develop that. You don't want to get in a position and say, wow, that surprised me.

Leaders should never be surprised. I hate surprises. I hate being surprised on my birthday when others surprise me. I hate surprises. You want to constantly have a plan for the plan, and then if that plan doesn't work, there's another plan for it, so that's why we bumped up Axel. I feel like he really deserves it, and he's working really hard to be a better football player.

Q. Benny Sapp also didn't dress for the game.
P.J. FLECK: He's back.

Q. How much do you draw back to your final year at Western where you go 13-0, 12-0 when you're 6-0 at your start here at Minnesota? Any?
P.J. FLECK: It's a great question. Has nothing to do with here. Nothing. I think a lot of people want to make comparisons to certain things, and I was told a long time ago, comparisons steal your joy.

This is a completely different football team, completely different place, different season, different challenges, different expectations. Just different year. But when you - experience matters; I believe in that as a coach. I think as you get better and as you've gone through certain experiences, you know how to handle certain situations.

I don't look at it like all of you do. And that's not a bad thing. I look at us as this right now. This is the most important game of the season, period. This is our championship season. This is it. The only thing that matters.

And then we'll talk about next week when we get to next week, and the next week after that when we get to that, but right now this is the only thing that matters, and we want to constantly show our players that.

Q. Is it almost hard to believe that this program hasn't started 4-0 in conference in almost 50 years and now you have a chance to do that on Sunday? Is there any --
P.J. FLECK: Yeah, well, we have a saying in our program, also: Nevers aren't forever. Records are made to be broken. Spans over time are made to close and get shorter, and that's why we came here. We came here to make a difference and influence young people and change people's perspectives, thoughts and ideas, and I hope we're doing that. Whether people feel that way or not, I can't judge that, and I can't compare that, but we're working hard every single day on and off the field to make sure that we're doing that, and the vision is to make sure every kid that's born in the state of Minnesota, around the state of Minnesota grows up knowing that, hey, Minnesota is a top-25 program, I can go there and I dream of playing there and I dream of going there. And that's this whole vision that's not just for this year, but these guys are playing for -- they're going to be alum one day. Tanner Morgan is going to be an alum of here and he's going to bring his kids back here with his wife,
and that's what we're looking at. You're constantly looking toward the future.

Like I said, I can't control other people's thoughts, but we're looking at it as one-game seasons, and that's the best we're going to continue to do. It's hard to ignore it at times that you're doing something well for the players and the mindset and the state of Minnesota. You want people to think that. I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't want people to think that. I want people to be excited about Gopher football, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

Q. People like to talk a lot about Rashod and Tyler and rightfully so, but Chris Autman-Bell, what he's done this season in his limited opportunities, how has he elevated his play in your mind?

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, he's incredibly productive. I think he's become a big-play receiver. I thought last year he was a little bit more in a possession role, and I don't know how much he even believed in himself yet; being able to be a redshirt freshman last year, what kind of role am I going to have. He's made huge catches. We wouldn't be in the position we're in without him. He's constantly getting better. He's had three straight games with a touchdown. He's consistent, and his game is consistent, and it's getting better, and I love to see that whole room just -- their blocking is getting better, their fundamentals are better, they're sharp. It looks like we're getting faster as the season goes, and part of that's both on practice design and how we take care of our players in the training room and all their education.

But Chris Autman-Bell is a huge part of this football program. He was in my office yesterday for 45 minutes just talking about life. Mo Mondays. He joined Mo for Mo Monday. We had a good one, so it was Chris Autman-Bell and Mo yesterday, so we're adding some people on that, I guess.

Q. You've got on your defensive staff now, you have Joe Harasymiak, who is a defensive coordinator, you have Rod Chance, who's a defensive coordinator, then Panagos has been on a long time. How much do you think their experience has really elevated the defense this year?

P.J. FLECK: I think it's helped a lot. Obviously it's a players' game, and they've got to go out there and execute it, but I think that having Harasymiak being a coordinator plus a head coach and having that experience with Joe Rossi has made a world of difference, right, and then Panagos with the experience he's had, Rod Chance and the people he's been around, and really just being able to coach the corners I think has helped us a lot, and Joe just being able to help and coach the safeties. I think that's helped us a lot. I think that's underappreciated a little bit in terms of them being able to just coach that group instead of the massive group.

The stress and pressure is gone on Panagos a little bit just with him coaching the whole D-line. But I thought everybody has been working really well together. Everybody knows each other really well, and they know each other more than I know them, right, because they've worked together, they've been around each other a lot more years than even I have, and when you hire your coordinators, you really trust them in terms of, hey, I'm really looking at this guy, what do you think. And you start, your first question is who do you want, who are the people that you want to surround yourself with. And then as a head coach you've got to say, can they recruit, are they really good people, are they great husbands, fathers, are they going to be wonderful teachers, educators. And then are they going to treat the kids really good. You've got to go through that whole process, but you start with asking the coordinators because I think that's important. He's going to be the one that's the head coach of that room, and the first names that Coach Rossi said were the ones we ended up hiring: Joe Harasymiak
and Jim Panagos.

I can't say it's easy. It's hard to be able to get somebody from a head coach over to be a position coach from being the FCS Coach of the Year, and then Panagos to come over from where he was at takes a little recruiting, as well. But I think it was very easy once they knew they were going to work for Joe Rossi and the type of person Joe is.