PJ Fleck

P.J. FLECK: Hello, everybody. Thanks for being here. Obviously, disappointed with the loss, big rivalry game. Got to give Iowa a lot of credit. They played really well, started really fast, got ourselves down in a hole and weren't able to come back from. We didn't play our best football, simple as that.

We've got to be able to respond. That's been the message this week, to be 1-0 in the Northwestern season. To be a champ, you've got to beat the champ. Northwestern is still the defending Big Ten West champions, and that's our message to our players. We've got a lot to get better at, and I'm sure you have a lot of questions. So we'll leave it at that and open it up.

Q. P.J., good quarterbacks through the years, but they've also sometimes struggled to get the guy who can really elevate the program. Looks like Zack was really talented. Tanner is having a great year this year, and you have some good freshmen. Do you feel you're going to be able to get the guys who can elevate the program?

P.J. FLECK: I feel like we can do that. I feel like you can do that here at the University of Minnesota. I think there's a lot of strategy behind it, how you're going to be able to get those types of players to come here. It's not just about the stars or the rankings or things like that. Tanner Morgan was a two star, started out that way, then worked his way up to a 3, 3 1/2, 4, I don't know what he was. He was committed to us when we were at Western Michigan, known him for five years, and he's a winner. I think you need to be able to find winners at the quarterback position.

We have a young man that's committed out two years. We have four quarterbacks right now. I know they're young, and they're going to keep developing and getting better, and there's competition within the group, which is really healthy, and Coach Ciarrocca has got a great relationship with all of them.

I think the development of our quarterbacks is getting there. We're still awfully young. We have two sophomores, and then we have two freshmen. But in terms of where we're going, in terms of developing quarterbacks, recruiting quarterbacks to run our system is where we want to be.

Q. I know they're impossible injuries to assess, but is Tanner making enough progress to be on track to play yet?

P.J. FLECK: Making progress, but he's in protocol. So that's all out of my hands. That's all up to our medical staff and trainers, who are all doing a great job. They did a great job on the sidelines noticing him and making him go down. A lot of people are telling me faking an injury and having a guy go down, that's ridiculous. I want my starting quarterback to go down so he has to come out so I can put the true freshman in? That doesn't make any sense.

But I was really proud of our medical staff of seeing that to make him go down. I wasn't about to run back on the field. I'm just glad that everybody saw it, and we could get him the help that he needed.

Q. Who would you play at quarterback if he didn't? Do you know that for sure or not who's going to be starting?
P.J. FLECK: I don't know yet. Whoever plays better in practice this week, if it comes down to it. It's a competition between Jacob and Cole, and they're both getting better. They're both working really hard. They've both made a ton of progress. They both had a lot thrown at them.

There's been a little bit of a blessing with Zack being hurt, in terms of Zack is definitely going to get the year back with a redshirt. But there's also a blessing in that those guys have gotten all the two reps, and they've split those the entire year. Instead of going over to run scout team, they've been over with us in the varsity and being able to get those reps as a true freshman, which usually doesn't happen.

So I'm really proud of the progress they're making. They're still two true freshmen, but I'm proud of the progress they're making and Coach Ciarrocca is making with them.

Q. When is that decision made who the quarterback will be? Is it almost a game time?
P.J. FLECK: When I know, I won't call you and tell you that, but it will be later. It's hard to tell because Tanner's day by day. So based on his status, and as we keep getting later in the week, we'll know more. Then from there, I'll have his information, and the data I have, based on how well Jacob and Cole have performed in practice, and we'll make a decision. You might see both of them play even on Saturday if Tanner can't go.

Q. P.J., you don't have to talk about Tanner's situation specifically, but I'm just curious, when people hear concussion protocol, it's kind of like this vague thing. From your perspective, what happens when you guys have a player that goes through that, and just kind of what is the process that you guys go through?
P.J. FLECK: I think that's more of a question for the medical staff and the trainers because there's a specific protocol they have to go through and a series of checks and balances, series of tests they have to be able to overcome, basically, mentally, physically, and emotionally that they have to pass. I'm not going to get into all the medical steps, but that's for our trainers and medical staff to deal with.

Once they get into the protocol, there's nothing -- the coaches have nothing to do with that. That's all medical department. Tanner is in the best hands possible, though, I know that for sure, with our staff.

Q. P.J., how do you temper how much you give a freshman quarterback at this point, when he's taking over at this point in the season? Not to give him too much. You can't take him back to week 1 and give it to him all again. How much do you give them at this point?
P.J. FLECK: Depending what they can handle. Depending on who plays or if they both play, what can they handle, what have they show they can handle in practice? So it's based on the game plan. The game plan is done. So now it's not necessarily what can they handle, what they can't handle of the whole thing, it's just what can they handle and not handle from the game plan. We feel like Tanner can handle the whole thing. If we feel like they can handle the whole thing, we'll put that game plan in. If we feel there's some things they can't handle throughout the week, we'll pull some out.

Q. How do you feel your team handled the loss in general, 24 hours later and Monday?
P.J. FLECK: Good question. They're disappointed. Everybody is disappointed with a loss. If they weren't disappointed, I'd worry. But it was one game. It was a one-game championship season. We lost that particular one-game championship season.

We came out on Sunday and showed them everything that's ahead of them, like we normally do.
Remember Sunday afternoon, when they first get there, we show them everything. We celebrate with them, we high five with them, we show them where they are in the rankings, we show them all the things you're going to talk about, and then we end it. We high five each other, and that's the last celebration we have, and we move on to the next week. Nothing changed that way.

We ended it, and we became 0-0, and all of our focus went on to Northwestern, and they flipped the switch like that. This is a very mature group that knows how to do that. They know why they lost. I think that's really important to always address of why did we lose? Not just we lost. Whether you win or lose, the result is the result. It's just how did you get to that result? Why did you get to that result? And how are you going to fix it? Whether it's an W or an L in the column.

This team is learning how to play championship football in November. We haven't been in this position in a long time. So this team is learning how to do it. We've had one that we were able to defeat, a top four team. Then we played a top 20 team on the road that defeats a lot of top ten teams at Kinnick Stadium, and we had an opportunity in the last possession.

As bad as we played, according to us, as bad as we played up to our standards, we still had a chance to win the game in the last possession. That just shows how far this team has come and what they can overcome through a series of a game and in a hostile environment. Even though the first few possessions didn't go our way, they were still able to find a way to come back.

Q. P.J., even when the running game is not effective, do you have to maintain that balance for the offense to be successful?
P.J. FLECK: We were down 13-0 before you opened your eyes, and I think that changed the whole landscape of your game plan. You've got to take things in stride. Hindsight doesn't exist when you're coaching a game. It's all to be determined afterwards, and then you sit there and go would I have done that or not do that?

But you're now in 13-0. Every decision you make is based on down 13-0. So now we have to be is it going to continue? Is it going to be 20-0 and then 27-0 and then 34-0? Is that the kind of game it's going to be? Or is it going to be we're going to be able to stop the bleeding and now we're going to be able to get our run game established?

So I think there was a combination of we've got to still be us, but we've also got to throw the ball sooner to get some explosive plays and get back in this thing. I think that's where you saw kind of a shift away from the run game a little bit quicker.

Q. How would you assess special teams so far in Big Ten play?
P.J. FLECK: I'd say we're average. I think that we've done a really good job in some areas, and some areas we haven't. Obviously, inconsistent in the kicking game, which we knew we'd be inconsistent this year with everybody -- a lot of guys that have major contributions being freshmen. I think you always expect that. Now, you hope for the best, but you're, in the back of your mind, being able to expect those highs and lows from those guys.

They're working through it. Failing is growth. This is only going to help them get better. And it's part of that deposit you have to make. Just like last year, we were the youngest team in America, right? At one point, everybody is like, oh, here we go, and then we win the last few games, and everybody feels good, but that young team grew up. These guys will eventually grow up.
We just have to be more consistent on our punt return team, our kick return team, stay on our blocks, give a little extra effort on the kick return game, and coming back, we have to do a better job on the kickoff team of tackling.

Again, there's a lot of young players on those teams that were playing, based on some of the roles we have to continue to rely on of our starters on offense and defense as well.

Q. How did you feel like Kamal did coming back in his first game?
P.J. FLECK: I thought he did okay coming back. You come back from injury your first game, I wouldn’t expect it to be his best game. You always know there's probably going to be a little bit of rust here and there, but I thought he played really hard, and every day he’s going to play better and better, which is good for us.

Q. Who's the kicker this week?
P.J. FLECK: I don't know yet. We'll see. It's a three-sided coin.

Q. So there's three options?
P.J. FLECK: We'll see, 2 1/2.

Q. Is that a week-to-week competition between your kickers?
P.J. FLECK: It really is because I think everybody has had an opportunity to win the job, and what you do with your opportunity is how you get evaluated.

Q. Is part of that you talk about the internal pressure you put on your team?
P.J. FLECK: Absolutely.

Q. You have two freshmen kickers. Is part of that internal pressure having them in a constant competition as they're young?
P.J. FLECK: You have to continue to do that. You want them to be really special. There’s certain steps you have to go through to become really special. You’ve got to grow up. You’ve got to fail to grow. You've got to succeed to grow. There needs to be a combination of all those things. But the big word in between, there’s always a response to that. Whether you fail or whether you have success, how do you respond to all of that? I'm pleased with how they've responded. The results have been inconsistent, but their response has been consistent, which I appreciate.

Q. What does it do for your offense when you have two guys like Tyler and Rashod who are each closing in on 1,000 yards individually? Typically, you might have one guy in an offense that can do that, but when you have two, that presents a whole other --
P.J. FLECK: It's huge for us. I think both of them had two catches they want back or two balls they'd want back, but we wouldn't be in the position we were in if it wasn't for their big time catches. Tyler on the fourth down catches that ball 100 out of 100 times. Somehow on this one he didn't. Rashod catches a bender that hits him probably 95 out of 100 times, and he could take that one into the end zone possibly. So I know they'd want some back, but we wouldn't be in the position we're in if it weren't for Tyler and Rashod.

They've been so consistent all year. They've been the big time playmakers for us, and it's just unfortunate there were two passes we weren't able to complete that were really big. They know that.
They've been able to respond to that. They understand that responsibility. That goes back to that reason. We want to be the reason. We want to be the reason that maybe we didn't have success, and we also take the responsibility that we were the reason we didn't have success. That's a huge responsibility on young people, and they're learning how to be able to handle all that.

Q. This is a young team that hasn't experienced defeat in so long. How important have the seniors and the leaders been in the locker room making sure everyone that has the right attitude?
P.J. FLECK: It's critical. Go back to the culture. One-game mentality. This is the next game. This is for the Big Ten West Championship in our mind because, if you want a chance to win the Big Ten West, you've got to beat the Big Ten West champ. Northwestern is still the defending Big Ten West champions. That's how we have approached this whole week.

Q. Do you get heavily involved during the game? Just what you said, you're down 13-0, are you saying we need to run it, and here's who I want in the game? Or do the coordinators and position coordinators say it's going to be Douglas Johnson and we're throwing to so and so?
P.J. FLECK: We do all of that, who it's going to during the week, in terms of the plays and other things. I don't think the score necessarily determines that because we have plays for Tyler, we have plays for Rashod, we have plays for Chris Autman-Bell, we have plays for Demetrius and then our backs. It's all done on the game plan prior to that. But I think, when you're down 13-0, yes, it's hey, we've got to get the ball in the air. We've got to start putting some drives here and might have to go to the pass game a little quicker.

Q. How much of a game changer has Antoine Winfield Jr. been for your defense this year?
P.J. FLECK: I think he's one of the best game changers in all of college football. When you have guys that can literally change the game with one play, change the game by how hard they play, be disruptive of teams' offenses, that's what he's brought. He's a special player at any level. I'm just glad I don't have to play against him. He's on our team.

Q. Tanner, obviously, was lobbying to get back in there after one play. In the heat of the moment, how is he handling sort of that having to be patient now that he's in the protocol this week?
P.J. FLECK: Just as Tanner would, probably not as well as you think he would be, and that's okay. He's a competitor. That's why it's completely to the medical staff because he is such a competitor. He wants to get back out there, but the medical team's got him, and they'll make the decisions for him.

Q. Are Lance and Dunlap good to go? What's the update on them?
P.J. FLECK: We'll see. Day to day.

Q. There were reports out of State College that Sean Clifford was dealing with death threats after the Minnesota game. Is that something you guys have to deal with internally?
P.J. FLECK: I don't know of any specific texts or tweets or messages to our players about those types of things, but that's how sick our world is, yes. I'm sure our players have dealt with that. I think we've dealt with that as coaches. I think you deal with that when you're in the public light or in sports. People have such a passion for something, and you take it to an extreme level.

That's what I don't understand. We have an open public -- we have freedom of speech, which I get, but when that becomes threatening people, if you did that to somebody face to face and you told
somebody you were going to do that face to face and they filed a police report, they'd follow up on that. How is Twitter any different? I just don't know if our laws have caught up to our social media. I don't know how that's appropriate. I don't know how that's not a crime of threatening somebody's life because of a football game, of a kid. Someone is going to have to explain that to me.

When you're a grown-up, you can handle those things, but still I don't think -- there's no room for it, whether it's the bully board or Twitter or whatever it is. People can have no name, no face, and say exactly what they want with no accountability. I just don't understand how our world's that way. We wonder why we have a lot of the problems and issues we have in our world today because, if somebody can say whatever they want to somebody and get away with it. The world we live in today in 2019, I don't know how somebody can do that. It's pretty pathetic.

**Q. With the offensive line, what's the health status of the offensive line? Playing against a unit like Iowa's defense on Saturday, was that a huge learning opportunity?**

P.J. FLECK: It was a huge learning opportunity. They're one of the best defensive lines in college football, one of the best defenses in college football. I think it was great for the offensive line to get that experience. They went from Penn State to Iowa, which are very similar. We've got to grow up. We've just got to keep growing up. There's no seniors on that offensive line. The better competition they play against, the better they're going to be. They failed a lot, but they also had a lot of success as well.

One of the things I was really proud of our entire football team, including the O-line, was they were all ready to come back and get better and go right back to work. The response mechanism of these players has been inspiring as a coach because you never know, when you walk into a room, what they're going to be like. On Sunday, these guys were fired up and ready to get better. They know what's on the line.

Minnesota football is really important right now, and I think that's really special. One loss will not define us. Whether it's a win or a loss, one game will not define us. We have a lot to get better at, I think that's very obvious, at every position. But on the offensive line, when you give up six sacks, you've got to find out why you did that, and I think our guys responded really well.