P.J. FLECK: Really proud of our team for responding from last week, two weeks ago. Last week against Northwestern came out fast, 21 unanswered points right off the bat. Then we had a little adversity. We were able to respond from that.

You could just tell last week after the Iowa game, our players would have played that Saturday night again. When we got back in the locker room, we got back on Sunday, you could see there wasn't a pout, there wasn't a bad feeling. It wasn't the sulk. It was when is the next one, we have to make that right.

We knew we started slow in Iowa. We started fast at Northwestern. I was really proud of the team for doing that. I didn't expect anything less than that based on the personality of our football team.

Huge game this week. I think everybody is aware of that. Very excited about College GameDay coming out. Very excited for that. I think that's a huge event. It's a time to create a moment and memory for your families.

This is something that when people talk about special sporting events, I think ESPN GameDay has gotten to that. I'm not saying it's the Kentucky Derby, the Masters, the Indy 500, but it's along those lines of experiencing, if you have never done it, that with your family.

There's only 12 places they go during the entire season. We're one of them. Bring your family, bring your friends, your kids, your grandkids, bring whoever you want. It's a very unique experience. I'd like to be able to have the largest crowd GameDay has ever seen somehow, some way.

I know what it's like to bring GameDay to our university or have it come to a university for the first time. It's program changing. This is becoming a national program. That's when College GameDay starts to show up, in games like this. That's how I feel about where we're making this program becoming, restoring that tradition of our past.

One game will not define us. Saturday win or lose will not define where this program is headed, but it's a huge game. It's really exciting. Our players are excited. I'm sure Wisconsin is excited. There's a lot on the line. Who would want it any other way?

We were picked six in the west. Here we are playing for all the things you've written about, in the last game of the year. There's a lot of tremendous things. Worst-case scenario, there's unbelievable things. Best-case scenario, a tremendous end of the story somehow, some way.

Tremendous day of practice, good day of practice today. Guys were flying around, locked in, focused. But it's a huge game. It's a rivalry dating back over a whole century, 60 to 60, split right down the middle. There's a lot on the line. Who would want it any other way?
A lot going on. I'm sure you have a lot of questions.

Q. Seems like this team has been remarkably successful in being able to avoid injuries or recover from injuries. What is significant that you've done as a staff to control the situation that obviously has a lot of chance involved with it?
P.J. FLECK: I think there's a lot of luck involved in that. I think there's a lot of chance in terms of injuries. It's a very violent game. We have a lot of injuries, sometimes you don't.

A lot of the credit goes to Dan Nichol, Jeremy Cole, Ben Schumacher, our strength and conditioning staff. What we do for preventive work throughout the season, as well as building, the proactive work, the dedication to that.

I think Dan Nichol is the best strength coach in America. He learned from Coach Doyle at Iowa, who I have said before I think he is the best. He learned everything from him. That's how our program is being built in the strength and conditioning program.

I also think it has a lot to do with the mental health as well. It's not just the physical health. It's the mental health, emotional health of your football team. Are they in the right place mentally, emotionally, to be able to perform at a high level. A lot of times that keeps players out almost more than the physical injuries these days.

I think Dr. Carly Anderson, Dr. Justin Anderson, Mike Sypniak, our trainer, our doctors, Dr. Jewison, have done a phenomenal job of pouring every resource possible into our student-athletes. I think that comes from the administration, starts at the top, with Mark Coyle, trickles down of what they allow us to do, the resources we have.

You have to give our players a lot of credit. They've invested a lot of time into staying healthy. Again, there’s a lot of chance involved in that. There is also the soft tissue injuries, not many at all. That is overwork, those are things you can prevent, can get better from, heal faster from. I think our staff has done a great job of preventing it. If it has happened, being able to get back fast from it.

Q. What do you want for your birthday?
P.J. FLECK: I think everybody understands what I'd want for my birthday. When you become 39 years old, no one cares what you want for your birthday any more. You don't get many gifts.

It's my birthday soon (smiling).

Q. You're very close with Casey. What was that like yesterday getting that news, talking with him?
P.J. FLECK: Obviously I think now everybody pretty much across the nation knows Casey, his story, defeating cancer three times.

After three-month scans, he always lets me know when the three-month scan is. He drives right straight to my office afterwards. We celebrated all the ones over the last year and a half. This one was a little bit more difficult just because he didn't get the news that he wanted to get. He wanted clean. Well, everything else was clean, but just one little spot.

We talked about it. We had about an hour just of conversation. It was a long time, great conversation
about it. He’s so strong, so tough. He has unbelievable perspective on life that I wish everybody had, that I wish I had. I consider myself a pretty positive guy. But he inspires me every day to be better.

Just like he said on his tweet, he’s going to be 1-0 in the surgery season. He’s ready to roll. We had a team meeting immediately. Whoever could come could come. We checked with compliance to make sure we could have that team meeting on the players day off.

Casey called it, told the team what was going on. He’ll be back with our football team as soon as he possibly can.

I’ve said in the locker room, I told our team, we have an angel with us. We do. An angel living on earth. That's who he is. That's what he's there to do, bring hope to so many people. That's what he’s done.

He’s going to attack this like he attacks everything else, with strength, encourage, culture, his power to find a way to beat the odds. Again, we don't even know what it is. That's the good thing. We'll handle things when they come. His next step is getting it taken out, that will be tomorrow.

**Q. As you get ready to play for a championship on Saturday, how do you look back at last year’s Wisconsin game?**

P.J. FLECK: I think there's always turning points in head coach's tenure or the staff, the players, for the program. You either get to the turning moment or you probably end up being non-rented any more, meaning fired. You have to get to that moment somehow, some way in the first few years or you’re probably not going to last.

I think the Wisconsin game for us last year, with all due respect to them, that's how big of a win it was when you beat a team like that, you haven't beaten them for 15 years, close to 30 years at Camp Randall. It was a huge win for us.

Again, that's a huge compliment to the University of Wisconsin, for what they've been able to accomplish and sustain over a long period of time. Paul Chryst has continued to do that. His teams are very tough, very talented.

For our team to be able to see they can do something when we haven't done it for so long, people say we won't do it, seeing lots of people fail at it, I think that was a huge point to say we can.

Again, that's its own entity. That was a turning point for last year. It got us into whatever we were going to do in the off-season. It does not necessarily echo or carry over into this year, I don't believe in that. It carried us into the off-season, right? It gave us some energy towards January. After that it's one game, right?

I think that helped bring a little bit of validity to what we're doing. But you got to give them a lot of credit. Heck of a tremendous football team, program. We respect the rivalry so much. I feel like it's back, where it's not just one-sided all the time, I hope.

I feel like that's back. I can feel that from our fans, from the Wisconsin fans, in a different way than our fans. But I think both places really respect at an incredibly high level. That's what is so fun playing college football, playing at the University of Minnesota, the rivalry games. This is the longest standing
rivalry in college football. Tremendous.

Q. You let the axe be shared with everybody in Minnesota. That was a celebration. Some people in Wisconsin might have seen that as in your face, too much.
P.J. FLECK: I don't see that at all that way. Our state of Minnesota hadn't seen the axe for 15 years. That's like finding your long lost grandfather, knowing he exists, then you find him. Don't you want to go see him? If he exists, he's in the state, you're probably going to drive and see the guy. Same thing.

This is going to take the entire state of Minnesota, for our football program, to continue to do what we want to do. It's going to change people's thoughts, perceptions and ideas.

That wasn't a rub in anybody's face. There's people who are very emotional when they had it. We had people rent it out all over. It was at weddings, anniversaries, parties. This year it's Minnesota's. That's what rivalry trophies are. That's why they're so passionate.

If Wisconsin wins it, they get to share it with whoever they want to share it with. It's Wisconsin's. When Minnesota wins it, they get to share it with whoever they want to share it with. It's Minnesota's that year.

It wasn't mine. It wasn't just our players'. It was the state of Minnesota's. For me, I wanted people to be a part of our football program, to invest more in our football program, see we can do things. It wasn't like we were holding it out the window driving through the entire state of Wisconsin. That would be showing up.

But sharing with our in-state alums, donors, boosters, supporters, I think that's culture, tradition. I think that's what the point was.

Q. You have a little experience being able to play in colder weather. What did you like specifically in the Nebraska game? What can you use for this week?
P.J. FLECK: Preparation. This isn't Florida. We all know that. As much as we recruit and bring people up, they come to my house in June, that lake freezes. It's not that hard to figure out.

But for us, we did a lot of things proactively leading up to that. That was the first cold weather game of the year. Usually the first cold weather game of the year, I will go overboard. Ask Tanner. We were dunking his hands in ice buckets between every play, right? The frozen footballs. We had them out today.

We'll be practicing outside. We'll be at the stadium tomorrow. It will be 12 inches of snow. I think that's right, correct? No weather people in here.

Q. 9 to 13.
P.J. FLECK: Okay. Our operational staff will have some work to do tonight in the wee hours of the morning to get that snow off the field. Thanksgiving coming up, I'm sure some other people won't be working at times to get that off. We may have to find a way to do it ourselves.

We want to create that environment. Walk outside because it's going to be similar on Saturday.

Q. How do you slow down Wisconsin's running attack?
P.J. FLECK: I don't know. I think you said it correctly, you slow it down. I don't know if you ever stop it. It's 240 yards a game. You look at what Johnathan Taylor has been able to do, you have to tackle, though. It comes down to tackling. You can be in your gap. If you try to tackle Jonathan Taylor, he can drag you for 15 yards. His yards per carry are unbelievable. May be one of the greatest runningbacks we've seen in my time of being a coach or a football player in our decades. He's the ultimate tailback because he can do it all.

He's so patient. He has incredible vision. He will make cuts at the last second when it's very tough for you to be able to change direction, get a true hit on him. He's hard to hit in terms of a full tackle. You're always getting an arm tackle, always sliding off, or you have to use the tackling circuit from the side. Rarely does he get hit from the front. That's a credit to him, credit to his offensive line, tight ends, wide receivers, the way they block.

You just have to be consistent. You have to be in your gap, dominate your gap, then you have to be able to swarm him. It's hard to bring him down with one person.

Q. Passing game has been so good. Do you have the same trust in it regardless of conditions?
P.J. FLECK: Absolutely, yeah. You have to. We talk about not letting the circumstance dictate our behavior. Both teams have to play in it.

Again, I think it's going to be a pretty nice day. That's what it says, 15 miles an hour, which isn't that bad, some snow, 30 some degrees. I've played in way worse. That's balmy. It will be nice.

Q. (No microphone.)
P.J. FLECK: I knew you were going to say that. It's a lot harder than it looks. Everybody always says it's very simple. It is if you execute it at a very high level and everybody is on the same page.

Tanner is very intelligent. One thing I love about Kirk Ciarrocca and Tanner's relationship, all of our quarterbacks, it's a relationship. It's not coach to player, player to coach. It's a relationship between them.

Kirk has always done this since I've known him. He gives the quarterback exactly what they can do, maximizes that, continues to build on that. In the off-season what they have to get better at, that's what we continue to work on. That's an accumulation from January to August. What does he have to improve on, get him better on that, highlight that in the 12-game season that you have, regular season.

I think if you're trying to just change the person in-season, it's very difficult. You want to get better at the things you're getting better at. Tanner is good at that, very smart, accurate. You're not going to meet a tougher competitor, right?

Part of that is competition. He has to hang in there, stand in there. He's taken shots over the course of the last few games because of the RPOs that happens.

A little more complex than it looks. That's why we had a lot of success with it. If it was easy, I think everybody would be able to stop it. Comes at different angles, different spots, different positions, different people.
Again, you have to be able to run the football for RPOs to be effective.

**Q. Tanner has been solid all year. Specifically from that Penn State game to now, seems like he's played at a different level. Did you see something? Just part of the evolution, growth, maturity?**
P.J. FLECK: It's him changing his best. Goes for everybody on our team, whether it's Thomas Barber, Kamal Martin, Carter Coughlin, Rodney Smith, Rashod Bateman, Tanner Morgan. You have to find a way to be better than yesterday.

He is the ultimate example of that. There's not a guy that comes in more energetic, passionate, excited about the opportunity to grow. Whether he failed or whether he succeeded, there's not a guy that comes in more excited about that.

When that's your leader, that's the quarterback, it goes back to when your best players are your hardest workers. That's infectious, that spreads to everybody. That's what Tanner has been able to provide for our team. Now everybody is catching on to that. That's infectious. That's all over the team, not just him.

He makes everybody else better. That's how he makes everybody else better. I tell him all the time, I think he's a tremendous point guard. He's a distributor of culture, a distributor of the football, of the calls. He's the distributor of the response. He's the distributor.

**Q. Update on Jake Paulson?**
P.J. FLECK: Day-to-day is the update.

**Q. As you reflect upon Rashod Bateman's time here...**
P.J. FLECK: He's incredibly talented first and foremost. I say talented. Skillful is one thing. You're blessed with skillful things, height, weight, speed, hand-eye coordination. You're blessed with that. There are people that can make you faster.

I'm slow. I got a little non-slow, right, a little less slow than I was, right? He's got tons of skill. That's one thing. There's a lot of players all over the country have tremendous skill. But when you talk about the talent mixed with the skill, the talent is hard. His passion, unconquerable will, his desire to serve and give, work ethic, selflessness.

When you start combining the skill with that, that's an inferno, that's a bonfire, instead of the fire in your fireplace with one log.

He is constantly that way. You watch him practice today. It's unbelievable to watch him run. It looks like training camp today. As fast as he practiced today, what he did at practice, that looks like training camp speed because he is taking care of his body, he's listened to Dan Nichol and our strength staff, he's put the right things in his body, listened to our nutritionist Jordan, his whole staff. He's dedicated himself to his entire process of being the best version of him. That's talent.

You can take the skill all you want. If you can't combine it with the heart, the desire, the passion to be your best, you have no shot. You're going to be a guy with wasted skill, a number that comes and goes.
Q. A number of missed tackles in the Northwestern game. What have you learned over the years as a coach and staff, how do you adjust now during this week?
P.J. FLECK: You got to do your tackling drills better. This late in the season, it's very difficult to go back to middle drill. We're going to scrimmage on Tuesday. It's the law of diminishing returns at this point.

You can focus on and show your players exactly what they're not very good at to this point, no matter what it is, and then highlight it. Usually what you emphasize is what you're going to get. You can only emphasize so much, right? This week we have emphasized our tackling, how we're going to tackle.

We come up with a little quote for them, which I will not tell you. It's not bad, offensive or anything like that. It's a quote we use to get them to know how we need to tackle this week. I think it's been accepted. The players showed it today in the tackling drills we did. They showed that in how they practiced. We call it tackling convention, which is a non-contact but a tackling circuit we do, then at the end of practice as well.

It's one of those things, we got to be able to tackle better, really swarm to the ball. You're going to have to against Wisconsin because they're very, very, very good. If you don't tackle them well, they're going to score a lot of points.

Appreciate it. Happy Thanksgiving everyone.