P.J. FLECK: Welcome to the 2019 season. Appreciate everybody being here today. Really excited for this season. Really enjoyed coaching this football team. I know they are really excited about playing somebody else, right. I think I speak for every coach in America. You get to this time of year, and you just want to play somebody else; so you get a chance to see where your team’s at, because nobody really knows where your team is at until you go play somebody, and we are really, really looking forward to that. I’m sure South Dakota State is looking forward to that, too. But I’m really proud of the progress we’ve made as a football team. Really proud of how connected this football team is. We’ve worked really hard at that to be able to establish that this year on all levels and all fronts in very unique and creative ways.

But I’m really proud of the progress we’re making, and we look forward to getting this thing kicked off on Thursday night. With that, we’ll open up for questions.

Q. In the couple of weeks that Tanner has had the job outright, what have you even in him and what’s the next step?

P.J. FLECK: Yeah, I’ve seen a lot more reps. I mean, to keep it obvious, right. I’ve seen a lot more reps. I’ve seen a lot of failing; I’ve seen a growth; I’ve seen a learning moments.

Tanner is one of those guys when he makes a mistake, he’ll own up to it; he’ll be accountable to it; he’ll take responsibility for it and then he’ll move on. He has incredible response mechanisms. I think that’s what makes him very unique. That’s part of the intangible category, right.

He’s not a big 6-5 guy. He can’t throw a 95-mile-an-hour fastball. But he’s got these intangibles that are off the charts, and one of them is the ability to respond, and I really respect him for that in all areas.

He’s got a long way to go, and he’s got a lot of room for improvement, but I’ve been able to see that and then that turns into the leadership role because then everybody else does the same thing. And it’s infectious when the quarterback is doing it all the time and he is the leader of the team. He is the pulse of the team. Whether you want it to be or not, usually the quarterback always is, and Tanner is a great representation of that.

And I’m really proud of the intangibles. Plus the way he’s gotten better as a quarterback. I think Kirk Ciarrocca deserves a lot of credit for that. But again we’ll see Thursday night where we are, and then what we need to continue to do and make improvements in.

But again, I’ve just the leadership role, the intangibles. You know he has improved dramatically.

Q. How do you feel about your defense coming out of camp into the season?

P.J. FLECK: I feel good. Everybody I think feels good at this point. You’ve been playing against yourself for so long. You’ve seen every type of look. You’ve seen everything you can possibly have against each other, but now I think our defense is ready to play against somebody else.

But I’ve seen tremendous growth. Again, the connectivity part, the togetherness part, everybody on the same page. If you go back to year one, everybody is learning. There’s nothing that’s repetitive in year one. No matter what coach takes over what program, year one is very difficult to have repetitive things happen.

Year two, you’re doing everything you can to master something and then we make a change; so you’re kind of learning again.

Now I feel like our team is really in sync with each other in terms of knowing where to be, starting to master the defense. You know, going to level 300 and 400 level thinking on the defensive front. And again Joe Rossi deserves a lot of credit for that, as well as our defensive staff. They deserve all of the credit for that, as well as our players.

But I feel better about where we are. I feel like our players understand our system way more than they ever have and they are playing well within the system. It’s one thing to know the system. It’s another thing to play well within the system, and I think that’s what we’re taking growth -- making strides and having growth.

But again, you know about as good as I do. Until you play a game, you have no idea.
Q. To that point, South Dakota Stadium, Fresno, have new quarterbacks. What's the challenge for scheming something that's an unknown?
P.J. FLECK: Ghosts. You're scheming for ghosts. You have to do everything that you can to do what you do really well, and highlight that through game one, and then from there make adjustments throughout the game.

What do we do as an an defense, and as an offense and special teams really well, and then how do we change that throughout the course of the game. How can we make adjustments as you go through the first quarter, second quarter, third quarter, fourth quarter; how can you do that, because everybody has new wrinkles.

We have a lot more wrinkles. We are not the same team schematically as we were last year, offense, defense and special teams, in a lot of areas. But the first game it's like a heavyweight fight. You're taking each other's first blows in the first few rounds, figuring out each other's game plan out, and then you make adjustments.

But for us, we're going to do what we do really well and then start with that and go from there. And I think that's how we've always approached game one in my seven years being a head coach, something that we've always done, and then you kind of go from there, because there's not enough data. Especially when you have new quarterbacks, just because somebody did something last year doesn't mean that's person's skill-set this year and how are you going to change that.

That's when we talk about last year compared to this year; there is no comparison because it's a completely different team. Might be some similar players, but it's always different. Each year is its own entity, and that's what I mean by that, and again, we've just got to be really good at what we do and that's what needs to be our focus.

Q. What can you tell us about the backfield against SDSU and what you think that split might look like?
P.J. FLECK: Yeah, I mean, I think Rodney and Mohamed will take the majority of the carries early, right and then we'll see how it goes from there, because there's not enough data. Especially when you have new quarterbacks, just because somebody did something last year doesn't mean that's person's skill-set this year and how are you going to change that.

But you know, I want to keep those guys as fresh as possible, and you know, they have earned that right. But Rodney and Mohamed, you know, those guys are going to be taking the majority of the carries, especially early.

Q. With the redshirt rule, any guys you know that will take it off entirely, like Tyler Nubin maybe?
P.J. FLECK: It's really hard to tell, just because I could say that we really want to play Tyler Nubin. Something could happen midyear. Could happen after the third game where -- I don't want to do that anymore, right, or the fourth game.

We are going to play it game-by-game, and the success we had with playing red-shirt rule last year and kind of getting very familiar with it was -- doesn't matter who we're playing or what the score is. Doesn't matter, any of that.

But being able to play a lot of people in game one is important to me, if we feel like they can play and I think that's -- we want -- we have to get them experience no matter what. It doesn't matter who you play. It doesn't matter who your opponent is or where you are. We had success with that last year and that's a philosophy that I want to continue to have.

But to say this person, you know, Tyler Nubin is an example, yeah, would I like to be able to have him this year? Sure. But if he goes through and shows can't handle this or can't handle that, I'm not going to jam a square peg into a round hole. I'm not going to do that.

So it's too early to tell. Last year Daniel Faalele wanted to redshirt and ended up not redshirting him, right. Some that we can and some that we didn't. Zack Annexstad would be an example of we are pulling it and playing, let's go. But I don't know if there's a true guy that we are going to do that with just yet.

Q. You're talking about of the intangibles and leadership ability that Tanner has been developing. How much has come from how he's latched on to Wiley ready. You have the four-game rule. Those guys have practiced really hard. I mean, you look at the two freshmen -- and I'll even throw Bryce Williams in there. He's had a really good camp.

But you throw the other two in there, Cam Wiley and Trey Potts, who a lot of people don't know much about; I'm not afraid to put them in the game. And that has nothing to do with an end-of-the-game scenario. You might see them in the first, second quarter, depending on how the game is going and what the strengths are and what we're doing, what we're having success with, what we're not having success with.

But you know, I want to keep those guys as fresh as possible, and you know, they have earned that right. But Rodney and Mohamed, you know, those guys are going to be taking the majority of the carries, especially early.
But I think he’s developed and his whole game is three years we’ve had him, I’ll take, total. I wish I had him that early, but the wish I had Tyler over four years since the day he got Tyler, Tyler, Tyler. I have. I’ve seen a lot of growth. I wish I had Tyler over four years since the day he got here, I really do. I wish I had him that early, but the three years we’ve had him, I’ll take, total.

But I think he’s developed and his whole game is becoming complete. He’s a better blocker and he’s a better leader than he ever was and he’s better pass catcher than he’s ever been. He’s better route runner than he’s ever been, better student. I there’s always room for improvement for him.

And that’s one thing that I think Matt Simon does a really good job of. He never sits a ceiling. Once he hits a ceiling, make another ceiling, he breaks through that and goes to something else that he’s maybe not able to do. He’s been very open to that. And some people aren’t. Some people put a wall up and say look, man, I’m good, I don’t need to be coached. I’m going into my last year, I have three and a half months, four months here and I’m good.

He constantly wants to be coached and wants to be better. But the biggest steps he’s taken is he’s spread that to everybody else. Plus, it’s his birthday today, so happy birthday to Tyler.

Q. When it comes to the momentum that you created at the end of last season, have you seen that continue in camp? And then does that kind of mean like you’re expecting to see it in the game or is that a whole new ballgame?

P.J. FLECK: It’s a great question, people always ask me something about last year and the momentum of last year with the Wisconsin win and Purdue and Wisconsin and then, boom, you win the Bowl game and that has nothing to do with this year.

I know people get on me all the time, this word momentum. I don’t believe in that. I don’t. And that’s something I’ve said since I’ve been a head coach, I just never believed in that. That means somebody is playing really good defense and really bad offense, or really good offense and really bad defense.

Basketball is full of momentums. They go on runs. If we allow that to dictate how we’re going to play and how we’re going to win, we’re not going to be very good.

So this year is a completely different entity than last year. The only extension of last year is I hope that people see we can. We’ve proven we can do things and people for the last year and ten months were just hoping, they were – we had faith and then all of a sudden you saw some things that maybe haven’t happened here in a long time, or ever, and then you’re like, okay, well, I see maybe what they are talking about where maybe we believe that much, or before maybe it was that much. That’s okay. Whether that was players, whether that was fans, whether that was our, you know, whoever, around us.

But everybody wants proof and I think that was just proof that we’re ready to do something else, whatever

your culture and embodied that?
P.J. FLECK: People forget, I’ve known Tanner almost four years now. He was committed to us at the prior stop for close to two years, and now we’re going on basically year five of getting to know each other, and that’s a long time. That’s a long relationship, with his family and me and my wife and Tanner. There’s -- he’s like your son. They are all our sons, right. There’s some that are older, which you’ve been on the planet longer and you know them a little bit more, and then there’s some younger ones that just came out of the womb and you say: Don’t know you just yet; don’t know what you’re going to be, but you’re still my kid, right.

Tanner is one of those guys that are a little bit older, but he’s still young in our program; that you know what you’re getting every time you put Tanner on the field. You know the competitor. You know the spirit. You know the intangibles. You know the work ethic he has. You know the type of connectability he has with the team. He gets the most out of everybody around him.

And I think when he steps into the huddle or he’s on the field, there’s a sense of urgency with our whole team and he’s earned that. That has not been given to him. Especially when you’re new and here comes your influx of quarterbacks and probably people look to Tanner and he’s not that big.

It’s not like, you know, Peyton Manning walking in the huddle, right, and here I am. You’re Peyton Manning, five-star, whatever he was, maybe he was, maybe he wasn’t. Here is our guy just because of the type. Tanner had to earn that, and especially in the last few games of last year, ending up the way he did. I think that just captured the team, as well.

So you know, I mean, with Zack’s injury, it’s unfortunate. Hopefully we’ll get him back, as well but I think Tanner has done a really good job in the role and again, I love him as a person, no matter what kind of quarterback he ever turns out to be, I love him like a son, and he is a tremendous person that I hope all of our fans get to know over a long period of time because he is a special individual. And if you get enough special individuals, you can win a lot of games, and he’s a connector of all those guys.

Q. Have you seen enough from Tyler this fall and what’s the next step for him?
P.J. FLECK: We have a few more Tylers now. I was like, Tyler, Tyler, Tyler. I have. I’ve seen a lot of growth. I wish I had Tyler over four years since the day he got here, I really do. I wish I had him that early, but the three years we’ve had him, I’ll take, total.

But I think he’s developed and his whole game is...
that something else is this year, is going to happen. And we took that and said, we drew a line in the sand, that was last year. This is a whole different year with whole different challenges, difference of how we're going to win. Different type of games. Different opponents.

We're better at some things we were last year and maybe some things we are not as good at in some other areas but that's up to us to find ways of how we are going to find ways to maximize the ability to win and that's nothing to do with last year. Completely different mentality, team, different seniors, different camaraderie. Different connectivity. Different family.

But again, the extension part, the only thing is, I think you sit there and go, okay, we can and you hang on that and move on. It gets you closer to the vision, to the ultimate vision you have and that backs it up a little bit where everybody wants a little bit of proof.

Q. Coach Panagos said he wants to have a rotation on the D-Line. Where do you feel like the rotation is at 3-technique? How deep do you feel like you're comfortable going?
P.J. FLECK: Well, I feel like we'll be deep as however we have to be deep at 3-technique. I think Keonte Schad has had a really good training camp. I think he really has. I think you look at Jamaal Teague and Micah Dew-Treadway and Sam Renner, we can rotate all those guys. They are all interchangeable, Nose-3, Nose-3. We are finally in a position where I feel like we can at least rotate guys and not take a step back, and I think that's a compliment, right, to those guys that are playing. Because sometimes in years past we have had the guys, and then before, if a sub had to go in it was just a step back, somehow, some way, and I don't feel like we have that this year.

And how we are running our third down package is very unique and very different, which is going to be able to help us in a lot of other areas, which will be able to help the noses and 3-techniques over the course of a full game, as well.

You know, I'm really excited about it. I'm really excited about the progress Jim Panagos has made with that room. He is a fabulous football coach. You talk about the positivity and this connecting word and this together word and this family word: We have that in that room. For the first time we have that. It's authentic. It's real. It's genuine and he deserves a lot of credit because he took that room and connected it really quickly.

Q. You mentioned the difficulty of scheming against a new quarterback. What else has stuck out early on scheming against South Dakota State?
P.J. FLECK: First of all, South Dakota State they are a really good football team. I mean, there's no way around that. They are a good football teams.

And doesn't matter, you can put three letters in front of their division. That's hogwash. Who cares? I mean, does not matter. FBS, FCS, Division I, division -- I know that matters to a lot of people but when you play on game day you and game people, that goes out the door in coaches' rooms. We don't look at any of that. And they are picked 3 in the country, No. 3 in the country, right.

Some of them have been picked to win the national title, right, whether it's James Madison, North Dakota State, them, they are very, very talented. Coach has been there a very, very long time, a lot of cultural sustainability. The expectation there is to win, and they play hard against everybody.

2016, they scored 41 points at TCU when TCU was 13th in the country. These people don't back down to anybody and we wouldn't expect that any bit. We wouldn't expect that with anybody we play, ever.

They are very, very solid all around. They have got a tremendous All-American wide receiver, as well as another counterpart, a Batman and Robin, if you would, in terms of the wide receiver core. They have got a quarterback who has won the job that's a redshirt freshman that got to learn behind one of the greatest quarterbacks of South Dakota State history, so he can't wait to play.

Defensive side of the ball, their linebacker they have, four-time All-American, this kid is really, really special and they have one of the best kickers in the entire country no matter what level. When you look at them top to bottom, they are a tough, physical football team. Play very sound. They are very well-coached, and you've got to give them their compliments because they are a really good football team.

On our end, we need to worry about us. We need to be the best football team we can be and it doesn't matter who you play; we have to be able to focus on our style of football, how are we going to play our style of football better than they play their style of football, as best as they can, no matter who the opponent is. But you've got to give them a lot of credit. They are a really good football team. Again, look forward to it 8:00 on Thursday.

Q. Big punt returner in the season opener last year. Who is No. 1 this year?
P.J. FLECK: We'll see. We're still thinking about that. It's all depending on conditions, where we are at in the
game. We have options now. I thought last year we didn't have options. No. 11 obviously is very, very dynamic, right. 82 proved he can do it, as well. It's not like you had one take one back and one didn't. They both can do it. It's just how much do you want to put on some other people.

Same thing with kick return right now. I haven't made that final call. I mean, they will be called up. They are like the bullpen guys. They will go in there at any point, go be a punt returner and if we can go multiple punt returners, we will. If we can do multiple kick returners, we will and that's something that we haven't had before and I'm glad that we finally have that.

**Q. Anybody not available for Thursday?**
P.J. FLECK: Not anybody that I didn't expect to be unavailable.

Thanks, everybody.