

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Minnesota Golden Gophers

P.J. Fleck

Press Conference



P.J. FLECK: First and foremost, I just want to thank Commissioner Petitti for his unwavering leadership really through these evolving times of college football. He's been an absolute rock star, and we love working for him.

I want to thank my wife, Heather, and my kids Gavin, Carter, Paisley, and Harper for allowing me to live my dream every single day as a college football coach. Truly love you guys.

I think one of the most underappreciated things in our sport, in our profession isn't just necessarily where you work, but it's who you work for. I think I work for the best athletic director in all of college athletics because of his values and how he looks at college athletics even to this day in our changing world of college athletics.

I have the best athletic director in the country in Mark Coyle. Our president, Rebecca Cunningham, has been so supportive in her sport time at the University of Minnesota, and obviously our board of regents have been absolutely awesome.

This is our ninth season going on at the University of Minnesota. When we first got here, we said that there were six head coaches in 12 years before we got there, and we talked about cultural sustainability will be key to Minnesota's success. This is our ninth year, and we're really proud of that. I'm grateful to have signed another extension that we can continue to be at the University of Minnesota, a place that I have absolutely fallen in love with, love to make a life there, and love to live there and coach our student-athletes.

The last thank you is to the Big Ten for having this in Las Vegas, Nevada, period. Viva Las Vegas, baby. I absolutely love this city, so this is great for us to be able to be here.

Not only that, what I love about this is bringing our donors with us. College football is changing. College athletics is changing. What's great about it is our donors get to know our players a lot more. We had dinner at Carvers Steak,

had an unbelievable time.

To take that even further, some of our former players got to be in Spain with one of our donors, and they connected because they were in the same place, same time, and got a chance to do that. Tony Fiorillo and his Vision Management company got some of our former players together, and they got a chance to meet at his house in Spain. I think that's huge.

Last night's dinner, we had Greg Eslinger having dinner with us. He's going to be inducted here in this city in the NFF Hall of Fame here in December. He got to be around our players and talk about his experience.

Having our donors being able to come along with us was absolutely critical. And tonight we get to take our players to our favorite restaurant, Prime in Bellagio, with our favorite waiter, Howard. So we get to experience that Vegas with our players here in Vegas. Nothing better than that.

As we transition and talk about '25, I do want to stop and hit on 2024 a little bit. It's always key to know where you've been to know where you're going to go.

For us, we talk about ourselves being the ultimate life program. I know there's changing aspects of college athletics, but they're still student-athletes, and until somebody tells me differently, we are going to run the best life collegiate program in America, and that's what we'll continue to do.

Academically, we have over a 3.2 GPA as a football program. We had ten players with a 4.0 this past semester. We've got ten Academic All-Americans since we've been there. And this past semester, there were 59 All-Big Ten academic selections from the Gophers.

Not enough people talk about that, they're student-athletes still. It doesn't mean that in the transformational programs and things like that, there aren't transactions, there are transactions within the transformational programs. I've had to learn that and adapt to that as well.



Athletically, we just finished up being 6-0 in our bowl games in Minnesota. We've been here eight years, going on nine. One of those was a COVID year where we only played seven games, but we won six straight bowl games with us at the University of Minnesota, which we're really proud of.

It's the sixth straight year, talk about developing young people. You recruit them, you develop them, you retain them, and you repeat. But we're talking about six straight years of a first- or second-round draft pick in a row at the University of Minnesota. That's a huge accomplishment for us, and players dreaming of doing something when they arrive on campus and watching that be fulfilled as they go through their time here.

This is the highest winning percentage of any staff in 75-plus years since Bernie Bierman at the University of Minnesota, and that takes players, that takes staff, that takes cultural sustainability, that takes retention, that takes donors, that takes our fans, that takes our state and city, it takes everybody for us to be able to do that.

We're tied for most ranked wins, six in the last six years, and we've had eight All-Americans. That's a lot in the short eight years that we've been there.

Socially and spiritually, you've heard me break that down -- academically, athletically, socially, spiritually -- our players are serving and giving at an all-time rate and not being paid for it. They're going to the Children's Hospital and our Row the Boat barbecue. They're at our diaper drives, where we've already given out more than 100,000 diapers. They do a turkey drive. They do a trick-or-treat drive for HopeKids. They run a HopeKids camp.

That's the part of football that's not being looked at anymore. It's just being skipped. This is still an educational program. We have to continue to educate our young people about life, not just money.

What I love about our football team as we go into 2025, they want to do it. They don't have to do it. They're not just doing it because they get paid, they want to do it, and they want to be the best team they can be.

One word to describe this team in 2025 are multipliers. That's the best way to describe this football team. It's a very, very talented football team, but they're multipliers. A times B times C times D. They're a team. That's what a team has. They legitimately want other people to be successful, and they make sure those people are successful, whether they're at the same position, they're competing with them or not.

Groups just add. A plus B plus C plus D. They just add it, just like you're adding out of the portal, adding to your team. Can you connect that team? This team has done an unbelievable job of amplifying the talents we have around each other and multiplying those talents.

Speaking of multiplying those talents, we brought four individuals. These players are absolute multipliers in every way, shape, and form. Darius Taylor, our running back in the second year of the program, he's one of the best human beings you will ever, ever meet. Second year here, third in the program, I should say, sorry about that. He was Honorable Mention All-Big Ten last year. Again, one of the best players you'll ever meet.

But versatile is the best word I can describe about him. He caught 54 passes as a running back last year. Those who follow Gopher football, Mohamed Ibrahim maybe caught one in three years. He caught 54 in one year. He's a former high school running back. Not only can he run the ball really well, but he can catch the ball out of the backfield. Incredible human being. His Grandma Carletta and his Auntie Shanika deserve a lot of credit for that.

Loves cars. It's a good time in college athletics to like cars. He's from Detroit, Michigan. He should like cars. It's a great time in college football to like cars.

And the best part about him is when he found out he was going to Vegas, he had one request. He says, I want to meet Chumlee from "Pawn Stars." Chumlee, if you're out there, come on over. I would love for Darius Taylor to shake your hand.

Our next player is Anthony Smith, one of the best defensive ends in the league. Honorable Mention All-Big Ten last year. Fourth year in the program. Part of the AFCA All Good Works Team nominee. Talk about charismatic, this kid is that. Might be in a bad mood, you go up to him, you're going to leave with a smile on your face. He's 6'5", 6'6", 295 pounds. But he's a great snowboarder, believe it or not. One thing people don't know about him, he's a thrifter. He can put the best \$3.65 outfit together better than anybody. Loves to thrift. Very, very eclectic individual. Loves the outdoors. Great state to be in if he likes the outdoors.

He's really transitioned, in my opinion, from a high school basketball recruit, where he broke numerous high school basketball rims, to become a really tough, dynamic football player.

Some of you know our safety. He's only been on campus 13 months, Koi Perich, our All-American safety, Freshman All-American and First Team All-Big Ten selection. I think

that's really impressive when you think about he got there in June, and then by December he was all of that. It doesn't surprise you if you watch this kid play basketball, run track, play football, he loves to play. He's a throwback. He's like a lot of us that grew up. You came home when the lights went on, but you played all day. That's what he loves to do.

It's interesting, when he was at the high school All-American game, I was getting calls from coaches: Hey, how's Koi doing? How's Koi doing? He's doing all right. He got beat by this guy, beat by this guy. You get to the game, he's the MVP of the game. He blocks a punt for a touchdown, he has an interception, and all he does is dominate. He can't wait to play.

His mom, Danielle, and dad, George, deserve a lot of credit for the young man they raised, and we're lucky we have him. He's a direct example of the recruiting success we're having at the University of Minnesota, and we said that was going to take cultural sustainability.

We have kids that we're recruiting now that went to camp when they were six to seven years old that now they're in high school. The in-state recruiting is better than ever, but it was going to take, whether it was me or another coach, in Minnesota with six coaches in 12 years, it was going to take cultural sustainability for somebody to be there for a long time.

We're honored to be there and represent Minnesota every single day.

Last thing about Koi, No. 3, he's going to play offense, defense, and special teams. I think that's very clear, and everybody understands that. That's three different spots -- offense, defense, special teams, number three. Him and Drake Lindsey, our quarterback, are best friends. How good of friends they are, Drake Lindsey changed his number from 3 to 5 to make sure Koi had his number. Talk about a selfless teammate.

Speaking of Drake, we brought Drake along, our quarterback, from Fayetteville, Arkansas, who was a redshirt freshman for us last year from. Played a very, very small amount. Really studied Max Brosmer constantly. Really was his right-hand man. Learned how to lead an entire football team at a very young age. You know how hard it is to find a freshman quarterback that you can have for those four years. We feel we have a really good quarterback in Drake Lindsey.

It's interesting with the Minnesota ties, his grandfather played for Bud Grant with the Vikings. I know his dad, J.D.; his mom, Amy; and his stepmother, Brook, are very,

very proud of him. But we're really thankful for the relationship him and Max had as he transitions into our quarterback.

He's the ultimate connector. He brought a bunch of players down to Pensacola in May to work on the pass game and all those things. So he's the ultimate multiplier.

Last thing I want to hit on, I give you guys three things we talk about with our program going into the year. Three things we hit on since January: Be delusional, get two, and give more.

The be delusional part, for the media, I've got to explain that. It means no cap on the jar. No limitations. Dreaming big.

With the College Football Playoff where it is, as Indiana showed last year, anybody can get there. If we're delusional enough to know we can do that, we can get there. When you're somewhere long enough, the standards are one thing, but then you continue to raise the expectations, and that's what we want to continue to do. We want to do that off the field as well. We want to be delusional as husbands, as fathers, as brothers, as sons, as members of our community. Take the cap off the jar, limitless.

The second thing is get two. There's two things that connect the locker room more than anything, it's empathy and gratitude. If you do not have those two things, you do not have a connected locker room. And our players are incredibly grateful, and they have empathy. They can walk a mile in somebody else's shoes. They're willing to do that for each other. So the get two piece is really, really critical.

The last part is give more. We were 8-5 last year, but the great thing about Minnesota now is, when you're 8-5, you're like, yeah, all right. That's our sixth straight in a row bowl game with our team being there in technically seven years. That's tremendous, but we've got to continue to raise the expectations. We were 3-4 in one-possession games last year. People always say, how do you improve that? You've got to win situational football. You've got to be better in two minute. You've got to be better in four minute.

That's what we've been focusing on since January, if we can give a little bit more and we can flip those, just like in 2019, 6-1 in one-possession games, that's how you win 11 games in the Big Ten. There are nine conference games. It is a hard league. You have got to be able to find ways to win those one-possession games. We're a missed field goal, an onside kick offside, and a fourth and three away from having that flip to 6-1 and being in the College

Football Playoff. That's what our players know, and that's what they believe.

We're very, very excited for the 2025 season. I'm not sure if I have any time left. If I have any time left, I'll answer questions for you. If not, I'll see you at the podium.

THE MODERATOR: We have time for one question.

P.J. FLECK: Perfect.

Q. Coach, you listed off all the legendary accomplishments you have and that you've done since you arrived in Minnesota, what would you tell the young P.J. Fleck, the guy that was a 73 overall in Madden? What would you tell him, and what advice would you give him?

P.J. FLECK: I think 73 is very generous. I'll take it.

I would say that control is for amateurs. I think that's one of the hardest things I had to deal with. This is my 13th year being a head football coach, 44 years old. I think that's the hardest part is as a coach in the older way of college football, you had control over so many other things.

I think in this new world, whether it's with outside parties, it's with agents, it's with NIL collectives, it's with donors and boosters. It's when this new era, you have to trust your people more than you've ever trusted them.

Our jobs as head coaches have changed an awful lot, but we will not stop being a life program because my job is to make sure that they're better men than they are football players. And better men over the course of 13 years in my experience have become the better football players.

The better football player that's not the better person usually doesn't pan out as much. So continue to understand control is for amateurs. Trusting your people even a lot more. That's what I would tell the younger self.

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