

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Minnesota Golden Gophers

Coach P.J. Fleck

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach Fleck, we'll begin with your opening statement.

P.J. FLECK: Good morning, everybody. It's exciting to be back here. I want to thank Commissioner Petitti for his leadership. He's really done an amazing job in a short amount of time from us head coaches. We want to say thank you to him for his leadership.

Media day always kicks off the season. It's exciting to be back here. I never take that for granted as a head football coach and how fluid our profession is. I want to thank my wife, Heather, and our kids -- Gavin, Carter, Paisley and Harper -- for their unwavering support. As always, we spend a lot of time away from our families and raise other people's kids as well. So I want to say thanks to them.

I want to thank President Ettinger who we had as our interim president for two years. Did a tremendous job leading our institution and everything that goes along with that. I want to thank our Board of Regents, and I want to welcome our new president, who's coming to us by the way of University of Michigan, Dr. Rebecca Cunningham, as she enters her first season -- first year as university president.

I obviously want to thank our fans. I think we have the best fans in college football. They do a great job supporting us and our student-athletes, especially as you get into this NIL world. So I really want to thank them.

There's one person I really want to thank, and that's our athletic director, Mark Coyle. I work for the best boss in the business. We have a very special relationship. I think that's well-documented. In fact, our eight years now, going on eight years, is the longest-tenured head coach-AD relationship in the Big Ten, which I think, again, shows the fluidity of our profession as the head coach and as the athletic director.

This is what I meant when I said in my open introductory press conferences, we're going to bring cultural sustainability back to Minnesota. You look at all the

successful coaches that have been in Minnesota a long period of time, and they all had sustainability over a long period of time with the same culture. We're doing everything we can to keep that culture of sustainability in place.

So with Coyle and I seven years being together, it's pretty amazing. It's 50 wins. We've had 16 NFL draft picks. We've had 9 Academic All-Americans. We have a 3.21 cumulative GPA. We had 6 All-Americans. And we're 5-0 in bowl games in our seven years. We're one of only 13 teams that have had somebody drafted in the first and second round in the last five NFL drafts -- Antoine Winfield Jr., Rashod Bateman, Boye Mafe, John Michael Schmitz, and Tyler Nubin.

Again, I say that because that's a credit to Mark Coyle's leadership and the direction of our athletic department and our football program because we both truly love Minnesota. I think in 2024 it's okay to love where you're at. It is okay to love Minnesota. It's okay to love the position that you're in, and I think we share that.

We're actually building a house. It's finally finishing after 2 1/2 years. We're moving in in two weeks, which is great timing for a football coach to be moving his house. So I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. You've got to ask Heather because I probably won't be around to pull my weight on that one.

But we both believe in the student-athlete experience, and I love that about working for Mark Coyle.

As we transition into this new world of college football, I just wanted to say something about our program that we are a transformational program -- academically, athletically, socially, spiritually, the whole life program -- but our world has changed in this transactional world with NIL, with the portal, with salary caps, with obviously conference expansions, new TV deals.

But really the university experience is still there. I know a lot of people think the transactional piece, now we all have to change into just the transactional piece. We don't believe in that. We believe in having the transactional



piece as a piece that allows our student-athletes to benefit, but you still get this transformational life program. And I think that's really important to talk about because we're still educators, we're teachers, and we're mentors, and that will never go away as we continue to move forward.

Fit is more important now than it's ever been. We talk about recruiting. We've just had the highest-ranked recruiting class we've had at Minnesota, and it wasn't because maybe we were the highest bidder. It's because we had the right fit for our program. I think Michigan proved this last year -- team, team, team. You build the best team, you've got a chance to win because it's one thing to have the transaction, but then you've got to transform them into the best team they possibly can be. I feel like we do a pretty good job of that in the selection world.

I'm not for everybody. I think I've said that numerous times. I don't want to be for everybody, and I don't think everybody's for everybody. But if you can find the right people that fits you, I think in the new world of college athletics and football, you can have a lot of success.

I'm really, really excited about where our team's at. I think they've worked really, really hard. Excited about the future of college football and our football team in 2024.

2024 football team, the reason I love them so much is they love ball. Like this team loves football. With all the transactional pieces, do you still love football? This team truly does.

We focused on one word in the off-season for us, and that was competition. I know it's pretty generic and cliché, but we broke it down into three aspects because I think to be the ultimate competitor, you have to understand how to compete.

One, you have to compete within yourself. The within piece is critical. This is winter conditioning. This is summer conditioning. This is you versus you, and you've got to understand that's how you grow the most.

Two, you've got to compete with each other. You're on the same team -- spring ball, training camp. We're on the same team. We're not beating each other. That makes you even more competitive.

And those two things, with and within, gets you ready to compete against the teams that you're going to face here in the season, and I think our team is getting ready to play against teams as we continue to compete with and within ourselves and our football team.

We hired two new coordinators in the off-season. I'd go through all of our new coaching hires, but everybody's a coach now. We would take forever, and that would take all my time talking about all the people we've hired.

So the two new coordinators we have, Corey Hetherman came to us by way of Rutgers, I think it's documented with Coach Schiano and I and the respect I have for him and what he's done. Joe Harasymiak, who used to be on our staff is over at Rutgers now. So we kept the hiring in the family.

Corey was an instant fit, though. You talk about a football coach. I mean, this guy eats, breathes, and sleeps football. Our players really fell in love with him the minute he got in there, and he was all ball. He's done a great job so far.

The second hiring in the coordinating aspect was Bob Ligashesky as our special teams coordinator. Bob and I go back to Tampa Bay. We were both coached in the NFL. He was our special teams coordinator; I was the wide receiver coach for the Buccaneers. He brings a wealth of knowledge, college, NFL experience, and really, really excited to have him. The guy is above 60, I'll just say that, still runs ten miles a day. His energy is endless.

When we transition a little bit into our players, we've added 13 transfers. We had 25 high school players join us. We had the highest-ranked recruiting class since we've been there. Then I think the biggest, glaring statistic for us was we have 16 of 17 eligible returning starters back this year. I think that's a credit to our culture, our sustainability, and guys wanting to be at the University of Minnesota.

Guys like Daniel Jackson, who's Second Team All-Big Ten wide receiver. Aireontae Ersery, our starting left tackle, who's getting a lot more notoriety. One of the notoriety, he's a top 25 player in the EA Sports College Football game. Bet you didn't know that. Not only that, if you take him and move him to tight end, it's a hack. He's a 99. There's some information for you.

Also, Quinn Carroll, one of our offensive linemen, who's also Big Ten. And on the defensive side of the ball, Jah Joyner led us with 7 1/2 sacks last year. He hopes to double that. He's had a tremendous off-season.

Justin Walley, all he does at corner is make big plays in rivalry games. And then Danny Striggow, our rush end, who's also All-Big Ten.

We brought four guys with us. These guys are all elite young men. We talk to our players all the time about be a better person than you are a player. You'll make yourself a

better player if you are a better person. These guys truly, truly represent that.

We brought Max Brosmer, our quarterback, a transfer from New Hampshire; Darius Taylor, our running back from Detroit, Michigan; and Cody Lindenberg, our linebacker from Anoka, Minnesota; and our kicker, Dragan Kesich. He's our social media liaison. That's why we could bring four. The best interview you'll ever have, do an interview with Dragan Kesich, and it will get clicks, I promise.

Max is a 2023 Walter Payton finalist, quarterback at New Hampshire, did a tremendous job there. Our quarterback situation was different than a lot of others. We were going to take a portal quarterback to come in and start and play right away. Somebody had to come in and engulf the program, fit the culture, want to be there for all the right reasons. I think a lot of people want that, but when you're in that role, it's really difficult when you actually get there and who really wants that.

He's a meticulous why seeker, and he's a very curious, curious individual. Any time you have a curious leader, you can accomplish a lot.

The slogan or the quote that he's a coach on the field gets thrown around a lot, but he truly is. This guy, he could be a doctor and a surgeon, which he probably will be, but he'll be a phenomenal coach when he decides that one day after he's done playing.

Darius Taylor, a running back, who I think arguably had one of the better seasons at running back, but he just didn't play a lot. In the off-season, Darius spent a lot of time getting to know his body, working with our sports science team, our nutritionists, our dieticians, our strength staff, our trainers, to make sure he has a really healthy 2024 and do everything he possibly can.

We connected him with some other people in the transfer portal at the running back position, and Jo-Jo Nubin has had a great off-season. You talk about a terrific person who took generational trauma and made a positive change, that's what Darius is all about.

Cody Lindenberg, one of the best linebackers in the Big Ten. Again, we were hit with the injury bug last year, and only played in a few games last year. He's the heartbeat of our defense. He's everything to our defense. He's the voice. He's the reason. He gets everybody aligned. We're really excited to have a healthy Cody Lindenberg in 2024.

Last but not least, Dragan Kesich is here. He's our social media liaison. He's the reigning Big Ten Kicker of the Year. We were talking last night at St. Elmo's about that,

that's a great accomplishment. However, if you have the Big Ten Kicker of the Year, you're probably not very good on offense. That's part of it, you're kicking way too many field goals, and I think that's where we were last year.

He's got a huge leg. I hope you all get a chance to spend a little bit with him because he's a very, very, very unique individual.

Really excited about the 2024 season. We've got a great group of kids here. Again, really excited about our transformational program. With that, we'll open it up for questions.

Q. Coach, you talked about obviously everything you've accomplished at Minnesota. In regards to just dominating recruiting in the state of Minnesota, because a lot of great players have come from there, how do you in this phase lock down the best players in the state to keep them there? When you look back on how far you've come as a coach, what are you most proud of?

P.J. FLECK: I think your question in recruiting is -- it's a great question. It's a valid question. That was something that we talked about at the beginning when we got here is we really wanted to recruit Minnesota at a really high level, and I think we've done that.

Last year we had the No. 1 player in the state of Minnesota, No. 1 player in the state of Wisconsin, and the No. 1 player in the state of North Dakota all committed to the Gophers. If you look out right now two years out to 2026, the No. 1 player is already committed to Minnesota. We take that really seriously.

To do that, you have to be there a long time. I think, when you talk about what we're most proud of is the relationships we formed within our walls. We talk about the type of players that continue to come back to us through spring and be around, that takes time. Before we got there, I think we had seven head coaches in 14 or 15 years. So it's really hard to be able to attach to something when you're an alum.

Now our guys come back, they're there all the time. They want to be around spring practice. They come there and work out in the summer. I'm just really proud of the progress our guys are making and then watching them accomplish their dreams, not just in the National Football League. I'll give you a name, Preston Jelen, who's in med school right now working to be an orthopedic surgeon. I can talk about the lawyers or the doctors or the teachers that we're producing out of our program, and that's still a university setting. This is still education and teaching and



transformation.

We brought the transaction piece, and rightfully so for our student-athletes, that is awesome. But the transformational piece, I think that's what we're most proud of is we're truly transforming lives as teachers, educators, and mentors.

Q. We often talk about how the identity of a team can change from year to year. From what you've seen since January, what is this 2024's team identity?

P.J. FLECK: I think for us they're incredibly competitive. It kind of goes back to that word. If we're talking schematic piece, consistency is the truest measure of performance. I think last year we weren't very consistent in anything. And we're talking on the offensive side of the ball.

The whole focus was to be incredibly consistent on both sides of the ball in what we did and all the fundamentals and techniques.

We go back to even our pass game. I know it's been well-documented in our state that we didn't have much of a pass game last year. When we're going through a season, you're listening to what your players can do. You're listening with your eyes, your ears, you're watching what they can do, and if you're not adapting to what they're showing you, you're just going to continue to do the same thing, and you're not going to be very successful.

So what we had to do was adapt to new people at different positions, what we were good at, what we weren't, maybe what we were very good in training camp, when we lost certain people, we weren't very good after that in certain areas.

But even the pass game, if you go back, I mean, Daniel Jackson, he might be one of the -- we've had 4 of the top 10 receivers I think at the University of Minnesota. When we're talking about the pass game, we want that to be way better. We want to be way more balanced, but we also have to be able to have the personnel to do that, which I think we have.

We're deeper at wideout. We're deeper at tight end. We've got basically our whole line coming back. We've got a really good quarterback who's really consistent. Then, like I said, we've got a running back room that's really deep.

If we can stay healthy, we can be balanced and be consistent on a daily basis on the offensive side of the ball.

The special teams one, we'd love to be able to create more

explosive plays, and that's part of hiring Bob Ligashesky. And Corey, I know he's fired up to make this defense his own.

This identity, they do love football. That's an identity, and we want them to be incredibly consistent and competitive. If we do that, we'll have a really good ball team in 2024.

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