



Head Coaches News Conference

Western Michigan Coach P. J. Fleck
Wisconsin Coach Paul Chryst

Sunday, January 1, 2017
Omni Dallas Hotel, Dallas, Texas

COACH FLECK: First and foremost, just want to thank the Cotton Bowl. Want to thank Goodyear, want to thank the entire committee for selecting Western Michigan to play in this historic game.

This week has been life changing for a lot of our players, I will say that. We're very humble to be here. We're very humble to be able to represent the Group of 5, the Mid-American Conference, and obviously the elite institution that Western Michigan is.

We play an incredible opponent. Coach Chryst and the Wisconsin Badgers have done a tremendous job all year. They're very, very deserving of where they're at. We have got our hands full for tomorrow. I give our players a lot of credit. They've been phenomenal all year in their preparation. For games and obviously for practices all year in their preparation for games and obviously for practices.

And I tell you what? We've had a phenomenal week of practice here, and the hospitality has been second to none. And I just want to thank the Cotton Bowl for everything they've done for our players and our players' families. Even myself. At a young age -- I've been to a lot of bowl games. And by far, this has been the best bowl experience I could have ever imagined. And when you actually live it out, it's better than you actually imagined it is. Everybody tells you how great it is, but when you're actually here, it really is special.

So I just want to thank everybody for that. We're really looking forward to the game tomorrow. Our players are anxious to play. I know that. And tired of practicing, I'll be honest with you. So we're ready to get this rolling. There's my opening statement. Go from there.

COACH CHRYST: Like P.J. said, it's been a phenomenal week for our players. It doesn't just happen. That's why I appreciate Rick [Baker] and Jay [McAuley] and the Cotton Bowl, Goodyear, and all the sponsors and what they've done to give our kids this experience.

And now tomorrow we get to play the game. I think that's the way that we as a team get to pay back. It's our thank you to the Cotton Bowl and everything they've done, is to play well.

And we're going to need to play well, obviously. I think you don't go undefeated in a season without being a really good team and not just good players and good coaching, but I think Western has got something going that grabbed the attention of our players early in the preparation.

And I've loved how our kids have handled everything they need to do to get to this spot. We always talk about earning the opportunity to play another game, and our team truly did earn that. And I appreciate that from them. And we've got one more game to play with this team and looking forward certainly to play it tomorrow.

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Q. You've had three common opponents this year. Northwestern, Illinois, and Akron. Is there anything that you can take from those games looking at the way both teams played those common opponents? Can you draw anything from that? What do you see? Compare and contrast.

COACH CHRYST: I think you can draw something from every game you see or you try to take something away from it. And, certainly, when you have a like opponent, you've got an idea. We played Northwestern later in the year and Illinois. So you've got a little feel for who they were and personnel maybe a little bit.

I think you try to take all the things from the season that you can get. But we're a different team. Western Michigan is a different team. You have got to go out and play it. So I think you try to take as much as you can, but you got to be careful of putting too much stock in it.

Q. Coach Fleck, I guess it was about a year ago in a team meeting you flashed the Cotton Bowl logo. What does it say about your team? I know some of them were probably surprised when they first saw that, how they embraced it, but not the fact that the Cotton Bowl was the end goal but they took it step-by-step.

Second part is: How does a season like this kind of enforce the foundation and the process you've been trying to put together here at Western Michigan? And then I guess I'll ask one more: What are you going to be flashing to them at your next team meeting?

COACH FLECK: We've got lots to live up to. January 7th we put the Cotton Bowl logo up. We're a very process-driven program. We're not result-oriented.

And I even had a meeting with the coaches prior to that saying look, this is what I'm going to do. What do you all think? And pretty much the majority disagreed with what we were going to do. And I'd probably say the entire group, the players, when you kind of showed them, their eyes kind of rolled and went, "Okay. He's at it again. What is he talking about?" right?

But it wasn't just the logo. It was if you want this as players, this is not necessarily my goal for you or my vision for you and to put that pressure on you. However, if you as players want to go where you say you want to go and you want to decide this, then our whole program has to take a completely different step.

And everything has to be able to change. We have to grow higher. We have to take the next right step, is what we call it. And our whole process has to take the next right step. So they had a players meeting after that. I said I don't want you to tell me right now. I literally want you to have an actual meeting with players. They had two players meetings, and when they came back,

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they said, "Coach, that's exactly what we want. But, Coach, there's one stipulation. We don't want talk about it ever again. We don't want to see the logo. We don't want talk about it." I said, "That's exactly what I hoped you'd say because I don't want to talk about it ever again either. Because if it doesn't happen, I want you to forget that I actually did it," right?

But we are a very process-driven program. Our process starts with people. Coach Chryst is a phenomenal football coach. I think he would agree that we all love football. We all love the game of football. I think that's why we're coaches. We love the Xs and Os part. We love the chess match. We love the competition.

But at the end of the day, we're in college football because we really love the relationships with the players. We love to be able to teach. We love to be able to have that bond for life with our players. And I think if you ask Coach Chryst and myself, that if you could go back in your life and identify some of the most important people in your life, we'd probably refer back to our coaches or our teachers in elementary school. That's why we're in college football.

And I think that's what our whole program is about. It's about people. It's about the power of people. It's about an uncommon trait that we all share and the spirit that we all share to get to somewhere that nobody thought we could get to, especially three years ago being the worst team in college football.

That's what our program is about. And you can talk about all the individuals, you want to talk about all the accolades and all the touchdowns and the passes, we have incredible young men on our football team. And I think Coach Chryst would say the same thing. And when you watch those two teams play, you can see culture jumping off the screen, not just football plays.

Q. I don't think he's going to tell me what logo he's going to put up next year.

COACH FLECK: Next year? I know the theme for next year. I just don't know which one to put up yet to be honest with you. We'll see. I don't know if we're going to get into a habit of showing that all the time, but I promise we'll have something good for them in the next two weeks.

Q. Coach Chryst, I wanted to ask you in your opening statement you mentioned that the Broncos have earned your attention. I wanted to ask if you'd expand upon that a little bit. Is it the record? Is it what you've seen on tape? What is it that's earned your attention, so to speak?

COACH CHRYST: First, we had an opportunity when we were preparing for -- we were just talking about like opponents. So you get to see them on film, and you appreciate it's a number thing. It's all together. You jump out, talent, and then you see that it's well-coached, the way

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they play, play hard.

And then as you start to prepare for them for a game, you're watching everything and you just dive into them. And I think it's a number of -- it's all of the above.

And I think P.J. and their coaches have done a tremendous job of you see kids that are really talented playing with confidence. And they've got schemes that challenge you. And whether it's offensively, defensively, special teams. And, yet, the players are executing. They understand it. And then I think you infer a little bit when you have -- it's hard to win games, period.

And then to be able to go a season undefeated, you think there's something special there. I don't know what it is, right? I'm watching it on film. And I think that's what it's all encompassing, is what grabs your attention. You just want your players to see it and grab their attention. And whether it's the athletic ability, whether it's the schemes, whether it's the execution level, that's what makes it a challenge. But you look forward to those challenges.

Q. MAC and Big Ten have had a tough go of it this bowl season. How important are bowl wins in shaping public perception of your conference?

COACH FLECK: I think bowl wins in general are very important. But I think I speak for Coach Chryst as well. I don't want to put words in his mouth. But we can only control what we can control.

I'm in charge of the Western Michigan football team. He's in charge of University of Wisconsin. Other than that we can't control much. And that's what we want to be able to handle. Our players understand how important this is, not only for Western Michigan but representing the Group of 5 and also the Mid-American Conference, which we don't sit there and look at the records. There's a lot of close games. There's a lot of losses. There's a lot of wins. There's a lot of coulda-woulda-shoulda's. There's a lot of missed field goals, blocked field goals, turnovers in very crucial times. But, again, that's why you play the game. That's football. And, again, our job is Western Michigan University, and that's all we're focused on.

COACH CHRYST: I have the same, very similar feeling as P.J. does. And I think it's -- what it really is for us is it's this team. And we're proud to be part of the Big Ten. And, yet, all you can put your energy in and focus on is the things that you can control, or at least have an influence on. Whether it's players, coaches, our responsibility, our challenge is to finish this year the best we can. That's where we've got to focus. At the end of all these bowl games, you can have conversations and write and read and whatever you want. But all that matters is what we do. Because that's all we're really in charge of doing and in control of doing.

Q. P. J., talking to your guys this week and the last few weeks, they constantly say this is the

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best team we've faced, the biggest team we've faced, the most talented, the most seasoned. Yet, they all turn and and say we obviously believe we can win this game. Can you address the confidence they have? You haven't been an underdog much this year but how they embraced that underdog role, especially heading into this game.

COACH FLECK: I think we'll always be an underdog. We talk about a crack on our shoulder, not a chip. We talked all year about being humble and confident and having a wonderful balance of two of those, both of them. When you're picked to win your league and you haven't won your league since '88, that's a lot of pressure and expectation. So the entire off-season was built upon being able to teach them pressure, teach them expectations, put them in major high-pressure situations on and off the field to develop them, to get them to August and September to be able to handle things like that.

But our team had to understand that they're humble enough to know that anybody on our schedule could beat us if we're not at our best, period. But we're confident enough to know that we can beat anybody on our schedule or anybody we play if we do play at our best.

And there's a constant battle with that, especially when you're listening to the media. The time we beat Northwestern, we're 1-0. Every one of you thought you could go undefeated. Do you know what that does to a head coach's mind? Literally, that's what you're thinking about right now? We haven't won the league since '88. We haven't won more than nine games in the history of the program, and you guys are talking about going undefeated.

We had to make sure it wasn't just the development on the field. We had to develop their minds to be able to handle the pressure and the expectation that was in such unfamiliar territory that we had to prepare them for it. So that's a great question.

When you look at Wisconsin, it's the best team we've played all year by far. I don't like to make comparisons. But when we played Ohio State's defense last year, that was the best defense we've played in the four years I've been there. Very similar type defense. And when you compare them to last year when we played a Michigan State-type offense, very similar in a lot of ways. They can hurt you in a ton of ways, in a ton of areas, and including special teams. They're deadly in offense, defense, and special teams. They're loaded in a lot of positions, and they play incredibly hard for this guy to my left. They play incredibly hard.

They blitz -- the most impressive thing about Coach Chryst's team in my opinion is the way they blitz. It's not just the blitz schemes. Everybody has blitz schemes. It's how they blitz. They don't care if there's anybody in their way, they're going to go through it. It's amazing. That was the first thing our running back saw on film is, wow, they really bring it.

Q. Coach Chryst, both teams, key to their success, at least I think, has been time of possession,

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the way you control the ball. Both teams have been very successful. Well over 30 minutes a game in time of possession. Someone's got to give. What are you game planning to keep the ball out of Western's hands?

COACH CHRYST: First of all, I think time of possession is a by-product of good football. We've never gone into a game trying to just win time of possession, it's a team stat. Right? Your offense is getting first downs or holding on to the football. Your defense is getting the opponent off the field. To me it's a by-product.

And you're game planning to try to give your players the best chance to have success. But I think it's a by-product of good football in general. If you have good special teams, the opponent can be playing in a longer field. There's not one stat that -- I think the one stat, if you were to take it, is what jumped off to me is about Western Michigan is the turnover take-away ratio. I mean, that's a huge stat.

And you look at football games in general, big swing there. I think that's the one, if you're going to say what's the one statistic that will matter most. But even then -- I've gone into games and there's never been a coach that says you can't turn the ball over. Because what if you do on the first drive. You're just going to sack the bats and go home? You've got to keep playing. But you game plan for everything. Try to give yourself, your kids a chance to play the game. And then you've got to go out and play it. And you've got to make plays, and that's the fun part about it.

Q. Coach Fleck, you've had some pretty impressive pregame speeches for your team throughout the year and I just wonder how much thought you've put into what you'll say to the team before the game tomorrow. And I imagine it wouldn't be pretty hard to get them excited to play in this game.

COACH FLECK: I think the pregame speeches get too much credit. I think the pregame speeches are more for me to actually think I actually made a difference, like I actually did something to get them to play better to be honest with you. Half the time I look back there and I've got a lot of eyes and Zach Terrell is back there going, Yep, I've heard this one before. I've heard this one before. Yep, heard this one in his office last week.

So to me, the biggest thing is I just want to give them a 30-minute soundbite, really encompass the entire week or the entire four weeks. This one will be a little bit more emotional just because of the guys that are leaving from our football team and what they have meant to Western Michigan University, what they have meant to me personally and Heather [Fleck] and our kids.

I don't know if you can ask the kids who would remember every single one of those speeches. I don't remember many pregame speeches from coaches that talked to me. I think it gets too much credit. But, like I said, you want to give them something right before they go out there that can

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really tie it all together, get their juices flowing and let them go out there and play.

Q. Coach Fleck, Wisconsin's running game is such a powerful thing. When you think about your defensive line and your linebackers and things, going in, is that something you address from a scheme thing? Or is it an emotional aggression thing to try to stop that powerful running game?

COACH FLECK: I don't know if that's the big white elephant in the room, that we're a little bit undersized compared to Wisconsin's up-front offensive line. But I'll say to you one thing that they really do well on offense -- this is going to sound like rocket science -- they use all three downs perfectly. They set up the third and one, the third and two where that's the time of possession comes in, where Coach Chryst is talking about really good football. They manage first and second down really well to set up, if they do get the third down, very manageable third downs where they convert consistently. I think the third-down conversion ratio with really good football, that's a tie when it ties together.

But, for us, we understand what our disadvantages are and what our advantages are. I think we've always understood that with our football team. We're very real with our football team. We know who we are. We know what we do, and we know how to do it. But we're going to have to be quicker, faster, smarter. We're going to have to be able to use our disadvantages to our advantage somehow, some way. And that's the challenge of the game plan. And that's what you spend four weeks on deciding how you're going to be able to get pressure on the quarterback and be able to stop a running game that's one of the best in the country. And especially when there's a physical mismatch maybe up front. But, again, that's what coaches are for and that's why you play the game and that's why you put them in a position to use our strengths to our advantage.

Q. Coach Chryst, just talk a little bit about the very obvious challenge of facing a very strong two-dimensional football team. There's been teams that have tried to stop the Western running game and been burned through the air and obviously the opposite. Talk a little bit about how you just can't shut down one facet of their offense and cruise to victory, obviously.

COACH CHRYST: Yeah, you said it right there. I mean, it's a well-balanced offense. And any time you overcommit, you can expose yourself. And especially when they're good enough to take advantage of that. And that's the challenge. And you have to play good team defense. Every kid has got to do his assignment. And then once the ball declares, you've got to fly to it. But that's -- you know it. You said in your question. That's the challenge that Western Michigan presents our defense.

Q. Coach Chryst, had you ever met Coach Fleck before this week and what are your impressions of him as a coach?

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COACH CHRYST: Yeah. We met last spring. P.J. was coming and spoke at our state clinic and took the time and came up to our offices. That was the first time that I met P.J. I had certainly known about him in the profession. And obviously impressed with a number of different things, the way -- one, what they've done. I followed the MAC for a number of years. And when you see what someone is doing or a group -- right, a group of people are doing that's impressive, then like anything, you want to grow as a person. I do as a coach. And so you try to follow and get ideas and see what people are doing. And certainly from afar I've been very impressed.

Q. I was talking to your offensive coordinator Kirk Ciarrocca earlier in the week, and he told me a great story about when you interviewed at Rutgers. He said you were 27 years old and you got the job shortly after. You began to know him a little better. And he said you were already working on a head coaching book. You're five years still from getting that first head coaching job. Talk about how your mind is always working and working ahead and how that's so advantageous to your football program.

COACH FLECK: We have a saying in our program "change your best". That's not just for our players. That's for everybody within the organization.

One thing about our program is we want to continue to learn, we want to continue to expand, we want to be on the cutting edge of everything. We want to be a trendsetter. We want to be able to influence as many people as we possibly can, serve and give.

But that goes back to knowing what your purpose in life is. I think that's what we want to teach our players, is find your purpose in life. Whatever that is, capture it and run it down and be the best you can be at it.

I knew I wanted to be a head football coach at a very young age. I knew that. But I knew I also had to get around some of the best head football coaches in the country. I knew I had to work my way up. My dad is not in the coaching profession. I don't have that luxury. I don't have any family members that were ever a coach. I don't have all of that.

My dad worked for Terminix and AT&T, and my mom is a teacher's aide. I taught sixth grade social studies, for gosh sakes, coming out of college. I have an elementary education degree. I knew I wanted to teach and I wanted to do it at the highest level.

And I think that goes well with all of our coaches. We are teachers. We're educators. We just get to do it through the greatest game known to man in football. And we get to do it on a national stage. And we get to do it with 105, 18- to 22-year-old kids every single year and make a difference in their lives.

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So making the head coach book was everything. It had camps in it. It had different philosophies in it. It had different plays in it. It was, like, this thick. And I just continued to add to it things that I liked, things that I'd see.

I'd go on the recruiting trail, and I was one of those guys that there would be a camp brochure from another school sitting over here and the coach would walk out and I'd take that camp brochure and I'd put it right in my briefcase. Felt bad for that team that I took. But on the other hand, I felt like, hey, you know what? I got to see if I become a head coach one day what a great camp brochure looks like.

You're always learning. You're always changing your best. You're always expanding. That was my New Year's resolution to Heather [Fleck], is I want to continue to learn and write down one thing I learn per day and make sure we give that to our kids one day. And that's what we're going to do in 2017.

That's our program. Serve and give but that started at an early age, especially as a young assistant.

Q. I have a feeling people would buy that book. Are we going to see this thing?

COACH FLECK: You'll see it. You'll definitely see it, Andy. You see everything in my office. I'll definitely show you, but we haven't even gotten to the end of day one yet. So I'll let you know in 364 more days.

Q. Coach, want to take you back to 2002. Your junior year at Northern Illinois. You and teammates made a trip over to Madison. Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember from that game. You guys came pretty darn close to the upset that day. I think 24-21 was the final score?

COACH FLECK: Almost, right? Almost. Only good in horseshoes and hand grenades.

Q. I'm not supposed to use that word.

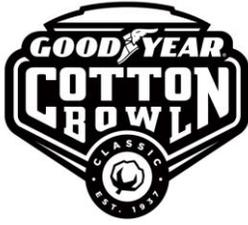
COACH FLECK: That's okay. You got it. I remember Camp Randall, one of the most historic, greatest college football venues of all time. In the fourth quarter, I remember our football team jumping around, jumping up and down. We're doing exactly what the crowd is doing. And I'm sitting there thinking we're the opponent. It's that exciting.

Growing up a Chicagoland kid, I was always a fan of the Big Ten and always have been a fan of the Big Ten and especially up at University of Wisconsin. I actually thought I was actually going to go there, and I thought I was good enough to walk on their basketball team.

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But it's a very special place, Madison. And when you go to Camp Randall, it's a very unique experience. Like I said, one of the greatest college football venues in the country and one of the greatest college game-day experiences in the country. And especially for a Midwest young man growing up around that area, getting a chance to be in there and have the family in Wisconsin.

That's what I remember about it. You don't remember necessarily the plays. Or I don't even think I even played in that game. I think I hurt my hamstring so I had to fair catch every punt known to man to be honest with you. Coach [Joe] Novak just put me back there to fair catch.

But you remember the moments and the memories. And one thing, whenever you think of University of Wisconsin, you think of Camp Randall and the traditions they have.

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