THE MINNESOTA DAILY

The Minnesota Daily • April 2, 2026 • https://mndaily.com/sports/gophers-football-open-first-spring-practice-with-renewed-energy/04/02/2026/eicmndaily-com/

Gophers football open first spring practice with renewed energy

Minnesota's first padded practice highlights roster depth and a more connected team entering the new season.

by Jason Lopez Martinez



Redshirt sophomore Drake Lindsey practicing with Gophers football as padded practice starts up again, March 28. | Photo courtesy of the University of Minnesota.

Minnesota's Gophers football team held an intense, physical spring practice Saturday inside their indoor practice facility in Athletes Village, their third session of the spring and first in full pads.

With the coaches yelling instructions and music blasting throughout the building, the practice featured multiple position groups rotating between drills, scrimmages and situational periods.

Coach P.J. Fleck said the team is working with a larger roster than usual, which has changed how practice is run.

"This is the largest number we've had in spring ball in a very long time," Fleck said. "So we're practicing a little bit longer than we normally practice... but the twos, threes and fours, I mean, they're getting an enormous amount."

Drills ranged from tackling work with padded equipment to quarterback throwing session. Late into practice, the team simulated real game situations, with the speakers playing crowd noise and referees calling penalties and two-minute timeouts.

One of those sequences ended with the offense winning a scrimmage rep and running to grab Paul Bunyan's Axe, a nod to Minnesota's rivalry with the University of Wisconsin. Fleck wanted a rivalry period because of the four rivalry games this season.

One of the biggest takeaways from Saturday was the competition at wide receiver, a group that struggled with consistency last year.

Receivers rotated through passing drills and scrimmage reps while working on timing and catches.

Fleck said the competition in the room has reached a new level.

"They are fighting, scratching and clawing, and the competition is better than it's ever been here in 10 years," Fleck said. "These guys are getting after it, it is so fun to watch these guys compete for spots."

Quarterback Drake Lindsey said the offense's improvement has been noticeable.

"You can already see the big strides from every position group," Lindsey said. "We're going a lot harder than I've ever been a part of since I've been here."

He also pointed to growing chemistry with his receivers, especially on tougher plays.

“He [Noah Jennings] did a great job… making a contested catch, we’ll keep building that connection, along with all the other wide outs,” Lindsey said.

The Gophers picked up Jennings from the transfer portal during the offseason. He spent last season playing wide receiver at the University of Cincinnati.

Younger players got meaningful reps early. Fleck said that includes true freshmen already running parts of the offense.

“They’re not sabotaging practice,” Fleck said. “That’s impressive.”

The added depth has increased the pace of practice and pushed competition across the roster.

“We are doing everything we can… more than probably any other year I’ve had at our players,” Fleck said. “And I think they’re handling it in a very elite way.”

Practice wrapped up with special teams work, including field goal attempts under pressure, before a final team huddle.

Lindsey said the team is already showing growth this early in the spring and noted fans should expect a more complete team.

“I think a way more poised player,” Lindsey said. “The team… we’re going to be way more poised… we’re going to execute at a higher level… it’s going to be really fun to watch.”

Fleck added that the team’s chemistry stands out just as much as its on-field progress.

“This team’s got something… they’re as well connected… than we’ve ever been,” Fleck said.

As spring practice continues, Minnesota will keep building toward the fall as they play Eastern Illinois University in Huntington Bank Stadium Sept. 3.