

August 27, 2013



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

Editor's note: Transcript is missing opening statement and first four questions.

Q. How do you prepare for the heat? (Bob Brooks, KMRV)

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it was almost predictable. It seems like the first Monday back, this is my chamber of commerce week, I was with the quarterback club yesterday, seems like that's always a hot day. We practiced in it on Sunday, and we'll practice in it today and tomorrow and just see what it looks like.

But our guys have trained in heat and they've played in heat. It's a factor, but it's a little bit like rain or snow. It's going to be equal for us as it is for them. It's just one of those things you deal with.

Q. With Jake, do you envision another season where only one quarterback takes a snap for you guys or have you left the door maybe a little more open that CJ or Sokol could get in there? (Andrew Logue)

COACH FERENTZ: Well, I think if it played out he's the only guy that played, that means he's playing pretty well, which is a good thing. We haven't ruled anything out or set any boundaries up. We'll take it a series at a time.

But Jake has done a good job, and he's -- the thing I would say first of all, first and foremost, is I think all three of the returning players have really improved during this camp segment, 25 practices, and that's what we were hoping to see. They've all progressed at a little different stages and timelines, but clearly by naming Jake last week we felt like he was the furthest ahead and has been the most consistent.

But both CJ and Cody have done a good job, too. We feel like we have three good candidates, kind of like we did in April. This is the ultimate test, what happens in game competition.

Q. Do you think it could be tempting for him when you have a Jordan Lynch on the other side to want to match things or a little -- (Andrew Logue, Des Moines Register)

COACH FERENTZ: I would hope not. I don't think he's looking at it that way. I think he's focused on the right things, which is doing the best he can do, and just playing quarterback. He doesn't have to be the leader of our football team right now. Got to be unfair to expect that from him, other than what a quarterback does, and quarterbacks have to lead, and I think he understands that. He's been down that street before.

The big thing is just go out and play as well as he can play the way he plays, and that's what we need him to do.

Q. There's a fine line probably between the quarterback looking over his shoulder and the team moving the ball and having success on offense. Are you going to worry about the quarterback looking over his shoulder in that scenario? (Marc Morehouse, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: Hopefully not. We'll address that. Kind of already have, but we'll circle back. We're going to let him play. He's earned that over time. Again, we have confidence in both CJ and Cody, but Jake is going to play, and we'll let him go.

Again, it's like anything, you don't want somebody looking over their shoulder. That's not productive anyway for him. He needs to be looking at what's in front of him. He's going to have a lot to look at, and it's going to be moving fast, too. Those guys are quick.

Q. If you had time to separate the three, what kind of put him over the edge? (Steve Batterson, Quad-City Times)

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's been consistency over the long haul. We were most interested in what happened once we got back in August. We had a good picture of all three guys in April, but they're young guys, and I'm not going to say no different, but it's a little bit similar to other guys that haven't started yet. You tend to see jumps with every segment and every phase, and all three guys have done a good job.

But Jake grabbed the semi-early lead, if you will, and he's just done a good job of building on that, but again, I'm pleased with all three guys.

Q. At what point during fall camp did it become clear to you that he was the most consistent? (Brendon Stiles, hawkeyedrive.com)

COACH FERENTZ: Probably when we named it. We wanted to give it time, plenty of time. There's no sense rushing to a conclusion because things do change and can change. So we wanted to wait as late as we could but also wanted to start preparing a little bit for this game, which we did at the end of the last week.

Q. Is it fair to say that the quarterback has to play well for you guys to do well this season as a team, or is that too simple? (Pat Harty, Iowa City Press Citizen)

COACH FERENTZ: I can't think of many teams at many levels where that's not true. It's an important position. I'm not minimizing that position by any stretch.

I think what you expect a quarterback to do differs based upon experience and that type of thing, what you ask a quarterback to do. But it's hard to play I think no matter what style of offense you have, unless you just have like 10 dominant players at the other positions. But it's really hard to win without good quarterback play.

I'd even say, I'm thinking about the Ravens right now when they won the Super Bowl, their first Super Bowl. That quarterback was a good player. He played well, he was tough, didn't turn it over, all those kinds of things, they had a great defense. Everybody says, boy, that was a great defensive team. But their quarterback did a great job for the way they were built. And I think that's really important that quarterbacks do that.

Q. Do you consider this like a snapshot in time for this position, whereas if the trajectory of say CJ Beathard, who's only a red-shirt freshman really soared throughout the season and workouts then next year that he'll have that opportunity to compete? (Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: He has an opportunity right now. Nobody has played yet. That's the one thing we do know. So we'll just -- kind of like what we've done through August, we'll let the scenario play itself out, and that's what we're going to do starting Saturday.

And again, I don't envision us making this a three-ring circus or anything like that. But if that's what it takes, that's what it was in '87, so if that's what it ends up being, that year was a three-man competition, '08 was a two-guy competition, and right now we're just going to see how it unfolds, see how things go.

Q. How important is this game from the perspective of a season opener but coming off last year wanting to get the bad taste out of your mouth? (Rick Brown, Des Moines Register)

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it's kind of like the quarterback question. To me every opener is important just like every game, and football is different than basketball or baseball where you're playing a lot of games. Football you only get 12 shots, so every game really is critical, from that standpoint you have to value the importance of every game.

But regardless of what happens, in '09 we got off to a 9-0 start. That was a pretty good deal. But in '08, the year before, we were 3-3; '04 we won the league, we were 2-2; and in 2002 we were 2-1 after three games. So to portray this as the Normandy invasion is not quite that level of importance, but it's an important game. I think it's important for every team playing right now.

If you're in college football you've got 12 shots; you'd better be ready every time you get a chance to go to the bat.

Q. How has Scherff handled rehab and where is he right now? (KCCI)

COACH FERENTZ: Really well. I mean, it was pretty much a non-issue with him in the spring and kind of stays that way, I think.

Q. Freshmen, made any decisions on true freshmen? (Tom Kakert, hawkeyereport.com)

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think right now it looks pretty obvious and apparent that LeShun is going to play, LeShun Daniels, and defensively we're still mulling a couple things over. We have a candidate or two, but we haven't finalized that yet. And then Damond Powell obviously, we didn't recruit him to sit on the bench, so he'll be playing some, too.

Q. Can you talk about the receivers? (Tom Kakert, hawkeyereport.com)

COACH FERENTZ: At this point we haven't green-lighted it, but we haven't ruled it out. I don't think it'll be this week, but we'll keep an eye on things and just see how they develop.

Q. I realize that injuries are going to happen, things are going to happen, but the week before your first game, as a coach do you have a pretty good idea of what you've got? (Mike Hlas, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. We kind of think we do, but you're never quite sure. Yeah, I've been doing this a couple years now, and I swear I learn -- I know less now than I did maybe 15 years ago. That's because you know more, and I feel less organized. Go right down the list. But that's just, I think, kind of like you're always anxious. For a game you tend to be anxious. That's just part of the territory.

But I think it's safe to say I think we're in a lot of areas a lot more veteran right now and a little further down the road. But it's like the quarterback play, you really don't know until you start playing what it is.

But you evaluate 15 practices in the spring, you evaluate 25 prior to game week, and what they do in the conditioning programs, all those kinds of things, I'm really pleased with the way the guys have worked. I'm really pleased with our leadership, and our older guys, not just seniors but older guys have done a good job of showing other guys how to do things.

So I'm pleased with everything they've done so far. I say everything, just about everything. I think the guys are working hard, and over the next 12 weeks we'll find out how things unfold.

Q. Do you feel better or more confident than you did a year ago this week? (Mike Hlas, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: About certain things I do, certainly, yeah. Probably more things than not. But again, you just never know how things are going to unfold. I felt like we were a better team in '08 but we were sitting at 3-3 at one point, and not long thereafter we were sitting there at 5-4. There are no guarantees how things are going to unfold, and there's really no sense in worrying about how they unfold. What's really important is how you move forward, and that's really the mindset we've tried to take since December.

Q. We've seen Coach Norm Parker around still really. He had such a reputation of stymieing quarterbacks, whether it's Gabbert or McCoy or JaMarcus Russell. What kind of legacy did he leave behind? Is there still an influence in a way how to prepare for a game like that? (Andrew Logue, Des Moines Register)

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. Phil Parker was with Norm for 13 years, and I think Phil is a tremendous football coach. Yeah, it's not like we're void in that regard. Certainly Norm was critical in my mind to helping us build a good defensive football team because we were not a good one in '99, so that was a process, and what it gets down to is really playing good team defense. I think that was Norm's approach all the time, and that's kind of how we were built and that's how we operate, and I think for the most part we've remained that way.

That's the key to the whole thing is being good fundamentally and realizing it takes 11 guys to stop teams. Most teams we play are going to have some really good performers. The positions may rotate but you have to play good team defense to stop a guy that's a really great player.

Q. Kirksey seems to be the guy that gets the least amount of recognition of the two linebackers just because of positioning plays, I guess. How important is he in a game like this for a quarterback who's such a good passer and runner? Seems like he'd do both of those pretty well? (Rick Brown, Des Moines Register)

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't mean this in any disrespectful way to Anthony, but if Chris played that position he'd have a lot of tackles, too. It's just kind of the nature of that

position. LeVar played it, Grant Steen, you go right down the row there, and AJ Edds. By nature that position doesn't get involved as much with tackling, what have you, but it's a really critical position for us to play good defense.

Again, it just gets back to that point when you play a quarterback like this, and they've got a lot of other guys, too. They've got fast receivers, good receivers, they've got a really good running back. It's going to take all 11 guys for us to be successful because if one guy isn't where he's supposed to be, these guys will do a good job of finding it, and that's really going to be critical for us.

Q. How much time have you put into going over the rules and the change of emphasis? (Bob Brooks, KMRY)

COACH FERENTZ: We've covered them all in camp like we always do. The biggest thing obviously is targeting. It's really not a new thing, but the NCAA sent out a video that was really, I thought, well done, gave great illustrations of what is legal, what isn't legal, why it's not legal. I think everybody in America is all in favor of protecting defenseless players. That's nothing new and I think it's a great thing.

Probably the biggest concern going into this is just the emphasis and the escalation of emphasis and talk about it. I think it's a very difficult play to officiate, no different than an onside kick. But the difference is there's a real heightened awareness right now.

To me it hasn't been a problem in our league based on what I know and what I've seen. It hasn't been a real big issue in our conference. I just hope it doesn't become one because we turn it into one, I guess if that's a good way to say it, politically correct way to say it.

Q. What have you seen from Austin Blythe and his growth? (Jared Aarons, KGAN0)

COACH FERENTZ: He's done a really nice job, probably surprisingly so. I expected a little bit more -- few more bumps in the road back in the spring, but he just kind of slid in there and did a good job. So that was good to see. He's not there yet, but he'll keep getting better. But he's really performed well.

I think the biggest thing I'm happy about is last year he played like a first year guy, and you go back and look at the tape, we're seeing our first game right now for obvious reasons. Like a lot of first year guys, he had a few hiccups in there and all that type of thing, and then he had the injury.

He's starting to get a little bit better. He had the injury, and when he did come back from that, he looked like a first-year guy starting over again. He's made a big jump from a year ago. He's a much better player and I think a lot more confident and all that. But it's his first time playing center so it'll be a little different, but he's done a real nice job in practice. I expect him to do well.

Q. Last year's offense was a little bit lost in translation; some of your players were saying just like this English-to-Spanish type of thing. Do you feel like now everybody is on the same language? (Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: Probably everybody but me. I'm probably the only guy that's still translating sometimes, and that's a good thing. Now I'm in and out of the meetings sometimes, one of those deals. But yeah, I think everybody else has really done a real good job, and certainly Bobby is familiar with it and comfortable and Chris White has done a great job. I think all the players are very comfortable. You can talk to them today. But I think we're a lot further down the road on that one, and that's a good thing.

Q. Have your blocking patterns changed much? (Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: Not dramatically, but we always are looking to do some things a little differently, and I think we've maybe done a couple little things, but we still are pretty much who we are. I don't think it'll be radically different.

Q. Your depth at the tight end position, how can that be kind of a security blanket for Jake? (WHO-13)

COACH FERENTZ: I think the biggest thing that will help Connor is maybe some of our inexperience at receiver, although I think we're making progress at that position. Happy to say that. But the nice thing is I think we can use our tight ends to maybe take some pressure off the outside guys, and Bullock, Canzeri, too, if they can help us a little bit in that regard, that's a good thing, as well. Hopefully we'll have some places to distribute the ball.

Q. Losing Scherff last year, how big of a blow is that to your line, and how great is it to

have him back? (KCCI)

COACH FERENTZ: You know, it didn't help. If you wanted to talk about two things right off the bat, our running back, it was tough to have two healthy backs that were proven backs at one time. We go into this season at least with an opportunity to have, I think, three or four guys we feel pretty comfortable with, which is an upgrade. We had lost Blythe with an ankle and then we lost both Brandon and Andrew, bang-bang.

That's not good for any football team certainly, and we just don't -- typically I haven't rolled out backups that look like starters. It's just not as easy to do here as some places, so injuries are always a factor.

Q. At the right guard spot, is Jordan Walsh pretty much a full go in there for you, or are you looking to do some rotating? (Brendan Stiles, hawkeyedrive.com)

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's fair to say we'll play both guys, Andrew and Jordan. Jordan I think has really made a jump this past week, which is good to see, and I think Andrew getting out of camp, his rehab was a little bit more involved or lengthy than Brandon's. Getting out of camp is going to be a good thing for him, and he is a starter. He has played. So has Jordan. I think we all feel pretty comfortable with those guys, what they can do.

Connor only started three games, but I feel comfortable just because of the way he's practiced. He's really done a great job since the string.

Q. How do you feel about your defensive line? (Steve Batterson, Quad-City Times)

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're gaining ground, but it's going to be a great test. I think the one thing about Northern Illinois, if you just focus on the quarterback you're missing the boat. There's three years of success there. There's more than three years, but the last three years, tough to match those numbers.

So they've got a lot of good players, a lot of spots, and where I'm going on this, they've got a Big Ten -- a good Big Ten offensive line, not just a Big Ten offensive line. All their guys are back. They're big, physical guys.

It's going to be a real -- it's not like we're waiting four weeks to see how we match up with anybody. This is going to be a quite a test. We've got more tests coming, too; I know that. But this

one right off the bat is going to be a real challenge for our guys up front.

Q. You said you have multiple capable running backs. How do you plan on using that running back depth this season? (Ben Ross, Daily Iowan)

COACH FERENTZ: Well, the nice thing is hopefully we won't have to run one guy into the ground, not that we ever do that. But when you have some options, and I'll go back to -- speaking of running guys into the ground, Shonn Greene, but we had guys that could come off and give him a break here and there. I think we at least go into this game with that flexibility and not have to be just holding our breath every second that somebody else is in there. I think we have four guys that have demonstrated they can help us out.

Q. The defense, how much harder is it to plan and coordinate? (Ben Ross, Daily Iowan)

COACH FERENTZ: We have two different style of guys, but running backs are running backs and they come in all sizes and shapes. These guys have a little guy that's tougher than nails. You'd think their guy, like he might have some blocking deficiencies, but he's a tough blocker and he's a good runner, too. I think our four guys are good players.

Q. Talk about Nate Meyer a little bit, is he going to be a situational guy? (Tom Kakert, Hawkeyereport.com)

COACH FERENTZ: He showed us a year ago he's tough. But he was trying to channel that toughness and make it productive. It was a little bit of a challenge. But he did a good job in the spring. He's a guy that we hope can play on special teams and hope that maybe he can help us a little bit -- he's not the biggest guy in the world right now, but if he can give us a little something on passing situations, things like that, we might utilize him.

Q. Has Powell been consistent since his performance at the open practice? (Marc Morehouse, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: It's been a process, and I think you probably saw his highlight; him catching that ball right there on the pylon was really a great football play, so that was good to see. We figured out he's fast pretty quickly. We

noticed that. I think he's starting to -- it's been fun to watch him climb the ladder. Would have been really neat if he was here in the spring; he'd probably be further down the road. But he's doing a good job.

Q. Is he a guy you can count on in every situation? (Marc Morehouse, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: It's like a lot of players, we'll try to find roles for everybody and play to their strengths, do what they do best, and certainly we'll do that with him, too.

Q. Seems like one of Rudock's real attributes is he's a really bright guy. Is that maybe part of the reason he is where he's at? (Luke Meredith, Associated Press)

COACH FERENTZ: It didn't hurt him, and he is bright. I asked him last night what he was taking. He happened to be in the office last evening, and I didn't take many of those courses, I can tell you that, that he's taking. Probably none of those courses to be specific. He's on a different planet.

But that's a good thing. He communicates well. He's not an egghead, if you will. He's a guy on the team that really does a good job. He's a smart guy but he's also a guy who prepares, and he's very serious about what's in front of him and does the same thing academically. You see guys go both ways, but he kind of takes care of all the details.

Q. There were six games last year that were decided by three points or less, and a lot of those type of games sometimes will come down to kicking. Have you talked to Mike Meyer about how important every kick is going to be this year? (Jared Aarons, KGAN)

COACH FERENTZ: You know, we do every year, be it a kicker or a punter. Special teams come down to a couple things; the specialists first of all. They have to do what they're supposed to do to make it work, but everybody else has to do their job, too. I think the big thing for Mike is just, kind of like every player, just go out and do what you do; don't worry about all this stuff. If you're called on to kick, then kick it well. And I think he'll do that. He's a tremendous young guy, and he's improved with every step of the way.

Q. Is there anything else that you've found has been the difference between winning

those three-point games versus losing them? (Jared Aarons, KGAN)

COACH FERENTZ: That's kind of the story of our history, if you will. I go back to the '08 season. I think we lost three games there by 10 points or 13 points. I'd have to look it up. It's been a while. And then lost at the buzzer there at Illinois.

Conquering the close game thing is, if you can do that, you're going to have a really good year or a chance for a good year, and if you can't, you're going to come up short. That's one of the challenges, things that go into it, and it's something we certainly try to point out to our guys on a continual basis, what it takes to be successful in those situations.

Q. Ideally about how many wide receivers would you want to play? (Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: Ideally would be like 10. If we had 10 it would be great, but I don't know what we'll do. I think you guys probably know the names, who's going to be in there. It's just how it all shakes out. It's a little bit like everything else, depending on how they're doing in the game.

Q. You have a lot of coaches around the country talking about how they're trying not to get burned out. Are you still finding time to enjoy yourself here? (Josh Bolander, DITV)

COACH FERENTZ: Sometimes, yeah. It was tough last year; when you're going 4-8 it's not much fun.

Q. Your non-conference win percentage I think is actually in the top third in the Big Ten Conference. How important is it for you guys to get those wins? (Josh Bolander, DITV)

COACH FERENTZ: It's helpful to get off to a good start in anything you do, going to class, starting a game or whatever and starting the season.

But no matter what happens, no matter how it starts out, you have to keep pushing forward. You really can't dwell too much on what's going on. I go back to being 2-2 or 3-3 and the sky was falling in both those cases. You can't worry about that. You've got to worry about what you're doing moving forward. But it's always good to start out well, and that's something -- that's one of our

goals, obviously, but we've got to go do it.

Q. Going back to special teams, has Connor come along as you were hoping as a punter now that he's handling all the duties now and not just punting like he was a year ago? (Brendan Stiles, hawkeyedrive.com)

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it's still a process. His plus-50 punting has been pretty good in practice. But that's a tricky position, and when he hits it well, he hits it really well. But the consistency thing is the biggest thing. I go back to that first year, Jason Baker was a veteran guy but he was still a little bit up and down. 2000 he really just took off. It happens at different times, but we're optimistic Connor will do a good job.

Q. Do you have any interest in wearing white jerseys at home instead of black? (Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette)

COACH FERENTZ: I hadn't thought of that. Do we still have time to pull that one off? I'll have to ask about that. Hadn't thought about that. They wore their -- it was '07, they wore some traditional jersey. But yeah, if I coached in Florida I'd probably think of that. They do it down there in the NFL I know for sure, but we'll be okay. I hadn't thought of that one, though.

Q. With the no-huddle, I guess you take the risk of maybe someone being on the field a short time if it's one, two, three-and-out. On a day that's terribly hot would you back off from that plan a little bit? (Rick Brown, Des Moines Register)

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see how it goes. But I think we work in the heat, it's just part of football, so we'll be okay. I think we'll be okay.

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