

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Start out by congratulating Matt Kroul in recognition with the ANF award. It's a great concept first and foremost that started several years ago. Every recipient has been so worthy and Matt certainly is right there with all those guys. Just a tremendous group of individuals and really happy for Matt, so it's a great, great honor and one he's very deserving of.

Then on a somber note, I think all of us are really sorry to hear about Derrick Mitchell, It is my understanding he was involved in an accident, I think it was last Friday morning. You knew that was a tough circumstance. So it's just a very tough thing, and way too young for something like that to happen. Certainly our condolences with his entire family and just a sad thing to relay.

Look backwards for a couple seconds, throw out few thoughts about the weekend. First and foremost, as I said Saturday, all losses are tough on everybody, especially the players, coaches, everybody involved. But that really is part of football. It's part of competition. If you're going to lay it out there, you're always open to the chances of experiencing setbacks and disappointments.

That being said, you know, I think our team played hard Saturday. I think we played with really good effort and toughness, and all you've got to do is look at the last snap. It wasn't a perfect play by any stretch, but even going down, Nate was able to get the ball off to Goodson, and he made a really good effort and there were a lot of guys hustling to try to make a play out of it.

That's really representative of the way the team played, but the bottom line is we didn't play well enough. We knew we would have to play clean football and we weren't able to do that and protect the ball, penalties, negative yardage plays and then missed out on some special teams opportunities, as well.

Those kind of things are going to make it very tough to win against a good football team and certainly Michigan deserves credit, they were playing well.

It's a long season. We're in it for the long haul. I think we had a good day on Sunday, came in, everybody

went back to work, and the whole thing is taking what we learned on Sunday and trying to grow from that. That's really what we've been focused on doing. We've gotten off to a good start this week. We'll certainly need that in preparation for a very outstanding Penn State football team.

Our four captains are the same, Nate Stanley on offense; OJ and Welch on defense; and then Brady Ross, special teams. Then on the injury front, Brady Reiff has practiced, started practicing last week, so I think he should be ready to go this week. Hankins was able to jump in and start working yesterday so we'll see how the week goes with him but I think he has a chance to be available, so we'll see where that all goes.

We are playing a team that's a Top-10 football team and certainly worthy of that. They are playing with great confidence and momentum. They come in here, they are really doing well, typical of any Penn State team we have played through the years. They are well-coached. They have good athletes, good players at every position, and you know, certainly very, very impressive in what they have done thus far.

I think maybe as impressive as anything right now, they graduated a tremendous player, competitor at the quarterback position, and this guy has jumped in and done a really nice job. That doesn't seem to be a big issue for them right now.

And then No. 1 is a very, very versatile, very dynamic home-run-kind-of-threat player, whether it's offensively or on special teams, so he's certainly somebody that's got our attention.

Then defensively they are playing extremely well and they have good players all three levels up front, middle and the secondary. So just as you would expect, they are a really good football team, very balanced, very strong. Run, pass, offensively or defensively and good on special teams.

So all that being said, it should be a great environment in Kinnick and we are looking forward to doing our best this week to get ready to take on a big challenge on Saturday night.

Q. Looking at the offensive line, the offensive

struggles, what needs to improve this week? Penn State will probably look at the Michigan tape.

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: There's no one magic answer. We didn't play consistently enough. There are some good plays in there, certainly and didn't play consistently enough. The negative yardage plays are always going to affect you and part of that was our lack of execution, maybe part of that's Michigan, being a really athletic, aggressive defensive team but that being said, we are looking at the same kind of opponent this week.

Penn State has got great athletes and they play hard and can be very disruptive, too. We are going to have to hopefully have a little tighter plan maybe and be a little bit tighter with our technique and a little better, more cohesive in our play.

Q. Whether you're using three running backs, is it hard for them to find a rhythm in a game like that or for anybody?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not sure we found any rhythm offensively overall. When you score three points, it's fair to say, probably traditionally, no matter what your offense is or what year it is, any time you score three points, it's not what you want.

So it was a tough day. Just one of those days where they played really well on defense and we couldn't match their tempo.

Q. Tyler is on the depth chart this week. Does that mean anything? And Ivory is off; does that mean anything?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Just watch what we've been doing, right, Goodson has been getting a lot of work. He has done a good job. We are not disappointed with Ivory, either.

We have four guys, and to your point, it's probably tough to rotate four guys, or at least have them do the kinds of things we want them to do. I think right now we are probably more focused on those top three and kind of play it week-by-week.

Q. Nate's had to get off the mat a few times in the past after rough performances by the offense as a whole. How has he grown, and has his demeanor changed in the two years, since maybe the Wisconsin game a couple years ago?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first of all, certainly, he's a more experienced, older, more confident and complete football player, which you would expect for anybody at any position.

First point is, it was a team loss. We didn't do enough to help him and I'm sure there are plays he could have

done better on, too. It was a team loss. We all have a hand in that.

It's going to be a team effort to get back up on our feet, and the challenge for him is the same challenge we have as a football team right now is we got knocked down.

We came away with a disappointing day, but can we get back up and go to work and move forward. It's a 12-game season. There's a chance that's going to happen during the 12-game season. You don't want it to happen but if it does happen, what are you going to do moving forward; what's your response going to be. That's where we are all focused right now.

I'm confident he'll play well. Hopefully we can play well around him and look better offensively.

Q. Quarterbacks receive a little more praise and a lot more criticism than any other position. Sometimes it can stick to people differently. You've had to deal with that for 20 years, how do you deal with that with them?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: 25 years ago as a quarterback head coach, and now it's become quarterback and the coordinator. It's kind of a phenomena in my mind, and then the head coach.

Bottom line is, again, if you're in one of those three positions, or really, anybody's position, but those three are pretty prominent, you can't have a glass jaw. You can't have a glass jaw in this sport, and really you can't have a glass jaw in anything that's competitive and hard to do.

Nobody feels good about what happened, certainly and really nobody feels worse than the people right there on the front.

So the answer to the question: The secret is what can you do to move forward. How do you avoid from having days like that again, that type of deal.

But it's a team effort. Everybody has to do a little bit better, starting right at the top.

Q. A lot of people talk about the offensive struggles but no one seems to be talking about the defense, a lot of people may have thought the defense played their best game of the year. What did you think of the defensive performance against Michigan?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We played well, but not well enough. We didn't win the game. If we shut them out, we'd be 5-0 right now, so that's the bottom line.

At end of the day, that's the challenge is play well enough to win, whether it's 3-0 or 38-39, it doesn't really matter. The objective is to win the football game, somehow, some way.

To your point, we for the most part played pretty solid defense. We gave up one big play. It wasn't a blown coverage or anything like that. We had a guy right there competing for the ball, and their guy made a good play and it was a good throw. Got good protection on it. We did a lot of positive things. We did positive things on offense, too.

We are five weeks into it right now. We have done some good things offensively, so I think the idea right now is to get back up on our field and see if we can't build off that.

That being said, this is tough, this is the best offensive football team we play so we have a big challenge defensively right now and their guys on defense are every good as the team we saw a week ago.

Q. Why are they able to just plug and play, they lose players and they just plug along?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not an expert on Penn State, but I grew up in that part of the country, and traditionally, they have had a really good program since mid-60s. They were underappreciated -- I'm going back 50 years now, but when it was the Big East and all that stuff, I think people just kind of look at it and said "Eastern" football.

I remember as a kid, them going down, beating Texas in the Cotton Bowl, and Texas is where they invented football, back in those days, at least. They have been good for a long, long time. They are close to a large population base, and I'm going back, again, what's it, 50-plus years. They have always been able to recruit well and starting in the State of Pennsylvania.

There's a lot of people in Pennsylvania and football is important there. They have got great proximity to strong recruiting bases. Usually plays well to a program. They have had great resources there. They have had good coaches there for a long, long time.

So I can't think of a reason why Penn State wouldn't be a good team just like Ohio State or Michigan. Just one of those shots. But all that being said, we've had a chance to play with these guys and compete with them on the field and that's our goal with this week.

Q. What's happened with the switch to flip -- in the 2000s, you won the vast majority of games against them and then in the 2010s, it's been the opposite.

Has there been anything that's pushed them ahead?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I can't answer that, really. I can look at things game-to-game, basically. In 2012 it wasn't very competitive. I remember that distinctly.

2016, wasn't very competitive.

The last two years have gone right down to the last series, basically. Our challenge right now is to make it a close game and then figure out a way to win and that's the challenge in front of us.

Q. Protection Saturday, what happened?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, it wasn't one position. We had line sacks. We've had backs not pick up, or pick up well enough. And like that last play, the guy came off. Didn't quit on the play, to his credit. I think that shows you the kind of player he is, and then tried to do something with it afterwards, too. Then there's some plays there, maybe the ball should have come out a little quicker, too. So it's a mix of things.

Bottom line is we weren't in a rhythm. We didn't get our tempo the way we want to and that's a challenge when you play a team that's a really good defensive football team. That's the thing, we have to be a little more precise, a little quicker, just a little bit better.

Q. The running backs, picking up blitzes and the blocking stuff; that usually one of the toughest things that they have to learn?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it is typically. And the irony of this whole thing Saturday is really, since start of camp, August 1, 2, whatever day it was, that Friday, this has probably been the best -- however many weeks we're into it now, seven, eight, nine, ten weeks, we've had. I can't remember us blocking better as backs, whether it's individual drills or team pick up. It's probably the best group of backs for protection.

We're not ready to hit the panic button on all that stuff. I think we've been doing a pretty good job since the start of camp. We just have to get refocused here and see if we can't do a little better Saturday.

Q. Jack Koerner, taking advantage of his opportunities, walk-on here, did you see this when you offered him a walk-on spot?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Reese was the point person on that one. Had all the attributes that you're looking for, and ironically when Miguel Merrick was here a week ago Friday, he spoke a little bit about his experience as a young player. He had a chance to get in, and basically what he told our team was, I got in and I blew it. I wasn't prepared and didn't do a very

good job.

Then he referenced a young guy when he was a senior, fifth-year senior, there was a freshman on the team that was redshirting that would be with him at every meeting, and they'd come up Thursday night and watch together, the defensive guys. This kid was on his hip watching with him, and the rest of the story -- it was Brett Greenwood and when Brett went in the game against Illinois, Brett knew what to do, he's ready to go, and I think same thing about Jack. I'm not saying he's Brett, but we've been watching Jack since he's gotten on campus.

He's worked extremely hard. I thought last spring he really started to play with some confidence back there and looked like a guy that was capable of maybe going out there and helping us as a football team. He's done a good job on special teams, but as a safety and then certainly this camp, he's done a really nice job. So when the door opened, he was ready to go. It's a credit to him.

Q. Looking into the team and helmet safety, speaking of resources, it's something that you guys have -- curious what your take is from something that you've seen from the beginning days until now, and what the reaction's been like to the players --

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Any time I think about helmets, must have been with the Redskins, I think George Allen was coaching, put the year to that, '70s, when I used to read Sports Illustrated -- they still make Sports Illustrated? I don't even know. Magazines are way out of fashion, right.

Back in the day they had a picture of a Riddell helmet, suspension helmet on the cover of Sports Illustrated, an article about the Redskins. When I went to college, that's what they had, the suspensions helmets, and it's a miracle everybody is not concussed from those days.

The advances in technology are so much different and now to have custom made helmets, but I think that's the direction we are going in sports and life, probably. It's a much more secure world and secure life for our guys and then equally as important, I think is the medical care that guys get now as opposed to like 40 years ago where there really wasn't any for that.

Q. What's the reaction from the players what have you seen?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I think players are players. They play hard. I think that's our No. 1 responsibility is make sure we have -- do everything we can for player safety, whether it's equipment, how we choose to practice, those type of things.

There's been a lot of legislation to help I think make it safer world, safer sport, and I think at the college level, we are fortunate to have those kind of resources for equipment, from youth league right on down, first and foremost, the teaching and instruction young guys get and certainly equipment is important.

Q. To detect -- the most contact in practice, and things of that nature, do you use that --

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: They have not shared that data with me but we have a medical staff that's pretty much on the cutting edge, so I think we are doing okay there.

Q. How can you get more out of your tight ends?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Won't hurt but it's not going to ruin our day if it happens or not happens. It's great to have good balance, certainly. We haven't had a lot of production this year but we've been moving the ball and scoring points. I don't think it's critical but I think it would be helpful.

Q. How about Hankins this week? If he's back, is he starter level?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see how the week goes for him. It's not the same as Reiff a week ago or Jackson two weeks ago but all that being said, how much work can he do, if he is able to go, that type of thing. You worry about volume with the kind of injury he had.

We'll play it by ear and see what he can do. He's a veteran player that we have confidence, certainly. The good news is D.J. has done a good job back there.

Q. The home losses in the last three or four years -- is it more disappointing, knowing how tough it is to play on the road?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Losses are losses. They stink. There's no way to put it other than that. You want to win at home, certainly and protect your home field, but there's no guarantees on that one. And then if you're going to be a winning football team, then you've got to win on the road, too. That's part of the deal.

But yeah, losses, there's no way to sweeten them up. It's not doable.

Q. When you look at what Geno Stone has accomplished, have you noticed or placed more responsibility on him since he was the returning guy?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Sure.

Q. And then having the injuries and compensating for it, in what ways has he stepped up mentally

along with obviously what he's done physically?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: That's what you count on your leadership for because things are always going to happen during the course of the season, whether it's somebody getting hurt, depleted here, depleted there, whatever happens, a loss on the road or what have you.

There's always going to be things that you don't want to take place. That's the beauty of having veteran leadership, and Geno is not a senior but he's a veteran player that everybody respects and knows that he's going to be ready to go and it's time to go.

That's how teams operate. Just like anything else. You rely on those guys, not only to perform well, but also help steady the ship when things are not going so well.

To the performance part, you talk about guys doing things in practice and having it carry to the game, I think he had two picks last week in practice, maybe not on the same routes or patterns, but doing things right during the week, those things will tend to show up and he's a good illustration of that, certainly.

Q. One of those players where you wondered why more schools weren't looking at him when you were recruiting him and liked him?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think I mentioned that Saturday. I know Kent State and Patriot League schools were looking at him, too.

We just saw he's a good football player, and maybe he's not tall enough, not quite tall enough or quite fast enough but he plays good football. I hate to use the word "instinct," because that makes it sound like the guy doesn't work at it. He works at it. There's instinct that -- guys tend to study and get an edge from being smart players. He was a quarterback and that probably helps a little bit, too. He's just a good all-around football player that maybe other people thought was not quite, but we thought he was pretty good.

Q. The open-field tackle -- where he came out of nowhere, is that what you're talking about?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It's not all instinct but some guys just have a knack of doing things better than others. That defies their measurables; I guess that's a better way to put it.

So we have had a history of having guys -- well, we are going to honor a guy here in a few minutes that, quote, unquote, wasn't quite big enough, not only envision him being great inside player in the Big Ten.

Going back, night games -- I guess that was Penn State. A couple plays he made in that game out there when we really needed one and one led to an

interception, critical interception, gave us the ball back there at the end.

You know, certain guys just have a knack of doing certain things and I think that's just because they work at it and they are just very, very determined, and Geno is certainly that way.

Q. How much Saturday was Michigan taking away the run, and you guys just doing what you thought you had to do with throwing the ball?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: The bottom line is what we did wasn't good enough. I think the biggest challenge, ironically, we made some hellacious third down conversions. Our biggest challenge was our issues on second down. We ended up in bad third-down situations, things like that, whether it was run or pass.

Did some things that weren't characteristic, I guess. That's the biggest thing. We need to be good at what we do. Good at what we're good at I guess is a better way of putting it. Hopefully we can get that stuff cleaned up and put ourselves in better situations this coming week.

Q. Desmond King and George Kittle had touchdowns this week, both having fabulous starts to their career, if they had to redraft I'm sure they would go much higher. How does that happened? How do people not see what people around here think they see?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We just talked about Geno, and you mentioned Desmond -- so I'll throw in Micah Hyde; I know he's going to be here this weekend. We're going to have a bunch of people here, but Micah must have a bye.

Probably in that same category again. Not quite big enough. Not quite fast enough and even in the draft, with Micah and Desmond, they ended up being middle-round type players, because they didn't quite have the measurables, and I get that and understand that and appreciate that but they are both doing really well at that level and those are great mid-round picks, certainly, because they have the ability to play and play well. But neither one are ever going to be a 4-3 guy, but they are good football players. That's probably the market we are looking for in recruiting, maybe guys that aren't obvious, marquis school-type guys but can still play.

Then George is a little different story in that to me he just keeps on blooming and developing, and you see guys bloom in their senior years in high school and you see guys kind of develop in college. Jack Koerner might be going through in a right now, Geno.

And then in George's case, probably where he got drafted probably is not totally off the target and then he just keeps getting better and better. I didn't realize he scored last night but I'm not surprised. He's just kind of hitting his stride right now. It's really exciting for him.

Q. Nate mentioned downstairs -- goal is off the table -- undefeated season. Is that a message you reinforce, there's a lot to play for --

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It's a reality but there's no guarantees moving forward, either. If you look at any of our really successful seasons, outside of '15 or '09, we experienced some turbulence, either in September or October, but we had the right answer moving forward.

In 2003, we had a couple bumps along the way but we kept getting back up and going back to work. That's why I say, you play out the whole season. Don't panic after one game, or don't have a party, either. It's all about running the race well, and we have 12 laps we have to run and we'll assess everything at the end.

You know, biggest thing we need to be doing right now is just worrying about this Saturday. That's the only thing that really counts for us. That's the only thing that we can really have any production on, so that's kind of where we need to be thinking.

Q. In what ways is Clifford is a different athlete than McSorley. But in what ways is he as effective maybe in the passing and run game?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It's probably too early to grade him as a leader. McSorley is off the charts as we all know, and we experienced that. This guy, he was unbelievable.

Again, talking about guys that weren't recruitable, I think at one point people were looking to him as a safety. He just did a great, great job, and his resumé is going to be tough to match. But this guy has been doing a good job throwing and running, and running their offense. Seems like things are going right along. That's what you want your quarterback to do is to lead the offense first and foremost. Looks like he's got a great future, so hopefully we can find a way to slow him down a little bit.

Q. Punting question, wasn't Michael's best day, was that out of the blue?

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It wasn't characteristic, like our offensive performance. I don't think it's a trend. I think we'll get back and get straightened out. Probably the toughest play in the game from my vantage point is where their guy chose to field it on the three or four, whatever it was. We can't

tackle and then he puts the ball on the ground and we can't come up with the ball. We had two opportunities there to really impact the game and didn't come up with it.

That play to me is kind of representative of the way the game went for us. If you're not going to cash in on either end of that, it's going to be tough to beat a good play like that. That's only one play, but that's a good snapshot moment right there.