

University of Iowa Football

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Kirk Ferentz



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We had a good bye week. It was a chance for our football team to recharge a little bit and then hopefully improve and also just get caught up a little bit socially and academically, some things they don't have a lot of time for.

Two points we really tried to emphasize with our football team last week. First part was right now we still got 42 percent of our season left and close to 63 percent of our Big Ten season left in terms of scheduling. So there's a lot of football left, and then the second thing is we just gave some illustrations from this past month, not including last Saturday, but last Saturday can include some games as well, just the quote, unquote upsets that take place in college football. And the point there is as much as everybody wants to think they know what's going to happen or what should happen, football is pretty unpredictable. So just tried to illustrate those two things with our players and just encourage them to take care of some things outside of football and recharge a little bit.

So our task Sunday was to get back into a game-week routine, get back into a mode of thinking like you have to during game week, and really what that involves is trying to get ready for your next opponent and also improving as a football team. So that's kind of what we shifted over to this past Sunday.

Our captains this week again are Drew Ott, Jordan Lomax on defense and Austin Blythe, C.J. Beathard offensively. Drew did have surgery at the end of last week. It went successfully. So he's in the process right now of starting some rehab work and moving forward. We all feel badly for Drew and sorry to see him miss the rest of this season for a lot of reasons.

Also on the medical front, looks like Jordan Canzeri and Ike Boettger both will miss this week, and then on the positive side, we should get back Tevaun Smith. You saw him play a little bit in our last ballgame. He's practiced really well, he's full speed again. LeShun Daniels has had a good week thus far; we still got some more work to do, and Boone Myers has been able to work this week, too. So I think given the

setbacks in the next couple of days we'll have those guys back Saturday, so that's good. Also, just one other cleanup item -- we didn't meet last week -- but just, again, want to congratulate Akrum Wadley on being the Big Ten Offensive Player of the Week two weeks ago. So that's certainly a nice honor for him and really a team award.

Now our next challenge is to get ready for Maryland. And it's interesting, it's another team that we're playing that has new leadership. They played with a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of energy the other day, played really well, and it was a really good ballgame to a very good Penn State team. They lost by one point to a team that's 6 and 2 having a good season.

Maryland is a team that beat us last year. They've got a lot of good players from last year returning. They do have a new quarterback. He's playing really well; a dangerous runner. They've got a lot of backs that can run and good skill players, veteran guys up front defensively. They've got some good players up there too, and the guy up front, No. 7, the defensive end, really active, really hard player to block and contain. And they got one of the better DBs veteran in the back end, but one of the better DBs that we're going to see this season.

Same thing in the kicking game. They've got both their punter and kicker back. Both of them have done good jobs, and then we really feel like Likely is as good of a returner as there is in the country, not only in our conference but in the country. He's very dangerous, both in the punt and kick return game. So we've got a lot of challenges on our hands that way.

They're coming off a bye week a week ago, so to me I'm guessing they just look at this whole thing like a new season. Played an excellent football game last Saturday. As I mentioned, a one-point loss to a very good Penn State football team. So we expect their best certainly coming in this Saturday. Again, they beat us last year, so I'm sure they'll be confident coming in, and really, what it gets down to is we have to have a great week of preparation. We're off to a good start, but we need to really finish it up here this week and make sure we're ready to go at kickoff time.

Q. With Boone back, how do you work with Sean

having been at right tackle. Can Cole flip to right tackle?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Cole really has got pretty good position, flexibility and Boone and Ike really did last year, too, but during camp we settled in with those guys. So we'll probably shift Cole back to the right side, put Sean back into the left guard position and still rotate the guards internally. We're hoping we can get Boone through the game, if I can get him through the game, but at least we've had a positive start to the week.

Q. The work with Sean back in?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We haven't really talked much about it. He's looking better certainly, so that's been refreshing, and hopefully he'll look good again tomorrow. Walk away healthy, and you know, we'll play all the guys -- just based on recent history, we'll probably need everybody. So I don't know what the rotation is. So far it hasn't gone according to plan.

Q. Is Jordan's injury a week-to-week thing?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It is. It's an ankle injury. It's not good for a back, and I say it half jokingly but half seriously, too. Sometimes you're better off having a fracture or some other kind of injury. They're unpredictable. He's making good progress. It was a lot better two days after than we maybe anticipated. So that's good news, and I think he's feeling better by the day, but to say when he'll be ready to play, I'm not sure yet.

Q. With the way George Kittle was able to block, did a really good job it looked like against Northwestern, and when you have a dude who is on the track back, what kind of flexibility does that give you? You could throw three tight ends out there, but you've got guys who are almost wide receivers in their skill set. How much flexibility does that give you?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: George, I said last spring was probably one of our most if not our most improved player on our football team. The light just came on for him during spring practice. We saw that, and it continued through summer. And part of that is blocking. He was not the biggest guy when he came here; he was kind of a tall, linear player. He's worked hard in the weight room, really worked hard on all his skills, and sometimes for receiving tight ends blocking is not the favorite thing for them to do, but he's really just attacked it aggressively. He's done a great job. And he's blocking Drew and Nate during camp, really in impressive fashion. Not consistently. Nobody really does. But that was impressive too. So what he's doing on the field right now hasn't come as a surprise. We're really pleased with him. And I think Jake's -- I don't want to say he's full speed right now, but he's closer,

and the guys you mentioned, Jake, George, and then obviously Henry has done a nice job in the pass game, too. So it just gives us a little bit more flexibility and maybe just one more thing we can draw into offensively which is always good because you never have enough weapons.

Q. Is blocking your wide receiver guys on the field, they probably don't get enough credit for all the plays they have.

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely. Not always, but usually big plays, especially in the running game, are a team effort. Sometimes in the passing game it might just be a great throw and catch, but for the run to really consistently go and your yards-per-carry to be good, usually it requires guys on the perimeter doing a good job.

And I think that's one of the areas we've really improved in. Certainly we've talked about our perimeter play defensively being better, and I think we've gotten better on the offensive side as well, whether it's our receivers or even tight ends when they flex out. So they're doing a good job coming in, at least making defensive backs aware of them and knowing that they don't just have a free rein or free shot on the backs. So those are good things, and then the backs have been involved, too, knowing how to set those blocks a little bit and read off of them, that type of thing. So it's all positive.

Q. What have you seen from the team and how they've reacted to the --

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Like I said, after our last game, I think that's one thing certainly you could say about the team is they're resilient. And the other thing I said is we're playing good team football. I think that's part of team football. It's not just offense, defense, special teams, but it's also when you need something or you have an area of concern, you find a way to work around it. And I go back to '04 where we didn't have a running game basically. Our objective was not to go backwards when we ran it or fumble it, turn it over, and we were pretty successful with that, but we didn't go forward very far. But when that's the case, what are you going to do to compensate for that. We did it on special teams. We did it on defense, and then we also did it throwing the ball, coming up with enough big plays, and even our last regular-season game, we ran the ball really successfully, especially in the fourth quarter that year.

So it's the team being sensitive, I think, to what's going on, being aware and then realizing that if something happens over here, somebody over here might have to step up and get the job done. And so far at least we're seeing a lot of those cases. Hopefully that'll continue through the next five games.

Q. You mentioned Canzeri is a big blitz blocker, Maryland has shown they like to blitz, now with Wadley and Mitchell, is that an area of concern?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: They're definitely not bashful defensively. They're very aggressive, and we anticipate that. And you know, thus far we have talked about Akrum protecting the football. I thought he did a good job when he had to block the other day and we've had a chance to practice since that time, too, and coincidentally, Derek Mitchell had a great block this morning on a blitz pickup, in a high-tempo drill. So those are things those guys are aware of, and if they're out there, they have to get the job done and they understand that and they've worked hard to achieve that.

Q. On a national level people talking about Iowa, Big Ten, playoff picture, this kind of talk. What do you make of all that and also what kind of impact does that have on your team?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Again, my point there is we've got 62.5, to be exact, percent of our Big Ten schedule to play yet. So to worry about those things is really kind of silly, and really, you know, you get defined by what you do on the field. The best thing we can do right now is just worry about this game. We've got a big game coming up with Maryland, a team that beat us last year. So we have our hands full worrying about that, and if we can win this game this Saturday, then we'll figure out what we have to do next week and just kind of push ahead. And I think all that talk's really premature. Like I said, my point about the 62.5 percent deal. It's really premature to even think about that stuff at this point.

Q. During the year how sore do the players get from game to game, and with that said, what is the true value of them having a week off to rest?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I haven't been sore in 40 years, that kind of sore. Sometimes you lose sight of that, and the game's a little tougher than it was when I played. Certainly our equipment is better now. But it's a rough game, and anybody that stands on the sidelines and watches, you walk in our locker room, not just our place, but anyplace, it's a really tough, competitive sport by nature. And I think that's a big part about coaching is having some feeling and sensitivity towards what's going on out there.

So to have a bye week, it's really helpful. It can be helpful, and I think especially where we were at, our team was beat up a little bit coming out of our last ballgame -- actually going into our last ballgame. But flip it around, in '02 we didn't have a bye week until the end of the season. That was an unusual year, too. I think we had one starter miss playing time, at least in

my mind. C.J. Jones might have missed some time. Some years are better than others. I think anytime you get a chance to recharge a little bit, it can be really healthy and productive for you.

Q. The 62.5% reminder, is that something players need in your mind? Working on their minds?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. I didn't do the division. I gotta confess, Mr. Rich Saccani, another high school moment, he still comes out here annually and watches our team play. Great math teacher.

But bottom line is all this talk is really premature. We have a lot of football left in conference, and I think we've witnessed that in the last three, four weeks there's been four weeks of conference play. It's really hard to predict what's going to happen, so all the talk, that comes with winning, and nobody's against that. I'm not poopooing that by any stretch. But for the people that have to compete, you need to be mindful of what's really important, and that's the trick. We've been down that road before. It gets a little trickier the more success you have. So how well can you focus on what's really important, and really the thing that's important to us right now is playing Maryland.

Q. And on that note I read an interview last week, I think I saw it in a couple of places that you told the team after the Northwestern game to take a little time. Is that mutually exclusive from keeping an eye on the next opponent?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, only because we had a bye week. I can guarantee you, if we had not had a bye week, I never would have uttered those words. But I did. And I think to me the players have earned that. They've done a heck of a job. And I've said this repeatedly. They've really done a good job since January, quite frankly. But our game really started taking shape in August, four months of preseason and seven weeks of game weeks, and it's been hard, it's been tough for a lot of guys.

So I think they deserve a chance to really think about things, and you don't get anywhere in life without a vision, but at some point you have to understand it's time to go back to work and let's focus on what it is we'd like to do. And I'm pretty sure most of the teams in our conference had a vision back in August of playing in a championship game and then representing the conference.

But you know, you can sit around and think about things and dream about them for so long, but at some point you have to get to work, and that's really where the rubber hits the road. So that's the most important thing, and we gave them whatever it was, 72 hours to do that. Party's over, let's go. Back to work.

Q. On your limited interactions with them, they've always shown a linear focus, and there's never been any wavering, big-picture type of discussion. The fact that of your final five opponents, three of them beat you last year. Does that kind of help, I mean you look at Maryland, okay, the record is the record, but last year they beat you.

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I touched on that very briefly Monday, which is yesterday, I guess; right? Seems like three days ago. But anyway, I touched on it very briefly, but we haven't spent much time this year talking about last year, I gotta be honest. The focus has been on what's in front of us, the opportunity.

But I will say to that point, whatever I said five, six, seven weeks ago, I go back and look it up. I really sense that we probably could beat anybody on our schedule, and I also sense that we could get beat by anybody, and I don't think that's changed. And I haven't seen everybody on tape, but that's just my guess. So instead of worrying about all that stuff, let's just worry about what we can do this week because this is the only one that counts right now.

Q. Coach, not having a game plan for a week, figuring out some of the things you have to improve on?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We try to do that weekly, just really examine closely what we're doing, what our opponents are seeing, what they're tracking, and some of it, you know, doesn't bother you. It's good to have tendencies in a lot of areas.

You know, Norm's famous undercover 8 story from the bowl game in '03, 62 out of 64 calls. That can be a really good thing, but also you want to make sure. But to your point, when you have a bye week, you have a little bit more time for discussion, reflection, so yeah, we took advantage of that, and hopefully it'll make us a better team. No guarantees, but the biggest thing now is for us to have a really good week of practice and get honed in on this opponent, which we need to do because they're a dangerous football team.

Q. What are you seeing out of C.J. in practice this week?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: He's been working. We gave him a majority of last week off, which was good for him, and a couple of other guys in that same category. He's been working and he's throwing the ball well.

Q. In light of national news, being in the rankings, what would you tell the team if they win Saturday?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: I know we're ranked right now because I drive in the car and I have the radio on. I listen to stuff. In fact, I heard something Friday

morning that was really interesting, about the conference and how it pertained to us or where we stood in their eyes, which I can just tell you this. It was like we're already -- they got it written in permanent ink, so if we do lose, we'll be the class clowns, all that stuff. But my message there is none of this stuff really matters. It's October. We haven't even hit November, and all you're trying to do is advance. That's all it is. And college football, it's a one-game playoff every week for everybody, whether it's championship race or a bowl game or a better bowl game. You only play 12 games, so you better take advantage of each week, because it's not like you get 162 of them.

Q. How do you walk the fine line of not wanting them to focus on the rankings?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: We gave them 72 hours. I'm not a tyrant. Okay. We gave them 72 hours, and you know, I didn't care -- they could hold hands with their girlfriends, take a walk and talk about whatever. But right now, if you're a competitor, you just have to think about what it is that's going to affect you.

We're going to get defined by what happens each and every Saturday. So far we got seven in the bank, but there's no guarantees moving forward, and if anybody should realize how fine a line it is and all the dynamics that are involved, it should be us because we've seen it internally, all the moving parts that we've had. And there's no guarantees that things are going to keep going smoothly.

We've had first-hand exposure to that, so we should learn from that. Hopefully our guys have. We talk about that all the time. But the good news is, too, at least we have some say in what happens this Saturday and the remaining five games, and that's really what we need to be worried about, and that's kind of been the line of thinking really since January. It's no more complex than that.

Q. The Maryland QB has a wrestling background; you don't see that very often. How does that translate?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. Well, we kind of gave up Pittsburgh recruiting. Our record's not very good in my hometown. Sean Lee kind of broke my heart, and end of story there, you know. Haven't been the same since. What a great guy. But anyway, yeah, he's a good football player. He's a really good football player, and I'm not saying he's their best runner, but he's one of their best runners, which that gives you a lot to think about and they're very creative offensively.

Q. You mentioned showing highlights, do you actually have the guys gather around the television and plan or do you talk about that stuff?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: No. It was just on a sheet of paper. We just kind of listed them out, and coming out of Wisconsin, I'm no expert, I'm not real global in my thinking, but it just seemed like those were some unusual scores, whether the favorites won by a little. You know, it just seemed like the prognosticators are wrong without really knowing. But I got it on a sheet now, so I do know they were wrong, and that was the same weekend that Mississippi was on its way to a national championship and got beat by 21 or whatever it was that same day.

So every weekend there's examples of how wrong the experts can be. But experts don't have to play games. Players play games, coaches have to coach them. There's a lot of things that can happen during the course of a week, and if you're sitting behind a desk, with all due respect to people sitting behind a desk, but if you're sitting behind a desk, it's easy to give commentary on what you think might happen and there's nothing wrong with that. I'm not criticizing it or making fun of it, but for the guys that have to go out and compete, it's a whole different deal.

And again, I go back to our last game. If you guys knew what I knew, I promise you, I was the most surprised person in Illinois that day. So you just never know what's going to happen. And those stories go both ways, too.

All that being said, if you are one of the people that have to compete, you're better served just worrying about what it is you can do to get ready for that game knowing there are no guarantees whenever it kicks off. There's a lot of things that can happen. And the things that you can control it's really beneficial if you do a good job of at least giving yourself a chance there.

Q. Did you do anything differently during the bye week?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: There's a couple of schools of thought. Guys that came out of that West Coast family tree, like they've got the next calendar year planned, which we kind of do. We know when we're practicing and training and all those things, but like on bye weeks, you can practice schedule. There's a lot involved, too. And to think in August that you know where your team's going to be in October, that's usually guesswork.

So I go back and look at our files, file everything from previous years, but really, it just kind of came down to what we felt like was best for this football team at this point, and that's what we kind of use as our barometer.

Now we've gone through the week, I feel good about what we did and how we handled it. At least thus far -- we're only a couple days into it, but thus far our

practices have been good in preparation for our opponent. That's the ultimate goal is to make sure this week we were going to have a good game week and give ourselves every chance to be successful against Maryland.

Q. How much do you think having Thursday off has benefited the players?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: They could probably answer better than I, but we ask them a lot, we're trying to always get information and make sure they feel good about what it is we're doing, trying to do. So I think it's been good, and we'll talk about it at the end of the season certainly, but thus far good, and I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Hopefully it doesn't. But you never know.

But I think it's been good, and we've enjoyed it as coaches, too. It really gives us a chance to go back to our thoughts and make sure we've got them worded the way we want to.

Q. Is Thursday like walking on the moon?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It's really strange. Although -- full confession. I look at my sheet every day now because I still don't have -- the tabloids have been out for how many years, 20-something years. And I'm just trying to make sure, I've only been late for one meeting so far, where they had to send somebody down and say you're supposed to be here 10 minutes ago.

Q. Cole Fisher is a unique story this year. Are there other examples in your career in regards to fifth year guys?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: That to me is Iowa football. I did learn a lot of things, I hope, in the 80s, but one thing I learned I coached three guys in particular that didn't start until their fifth years. One guy was just like Cole. He was second going into camp, Chris Gambol. I believe that was '87 who played in the NFL. So that's the unique thing about college football and I think high school football and to some extent the pros, too, except they've changed their rules so much it's harder for those stories to take place. But players do get better, players that work hard and have good attitudes do get better, and sometimes it's a matter of opportunity. But usually that opportunity has to be met by a guy who's really prepared and worked hard and developed. And we've had a ton of those historically here. When those happen, it's a good thing. That is a feel-good type deal.

Q. Is the inclination for players to come together and play harder when there's a coaching change?

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: It seems like it. I can only base it off two firsthand exposures. Illinois certainly was a much better football team when we played. I'm

not saying that was the reason, but we played them late in the season last year and they had a lot of the same guys, and they played really well, as we all saw a couple of Saturdays ago. And I can only base this thing off of what I saw Saturday Maryland playing against Penn State. It was a heck of a football game. Maryland ran up 460-some yards of offense and really played aggressively on defense. That's all I can base it on is what I see there.

Q. How much blitzing as Maryland does, how much comfort do you have having a veteran like Austin Blythe, who's played four years for you, but not only that. But the way he's blocking is at a level that's maybe unrivaled at this position.

COACH KIRK FERENTZ: Austin's a really good football player and a guy who's played a lot, almost as much as anybody has historically for us. Had that ankle injury the first year, but boy, he's played really well. So to have him in the center of things is a big position just like middle linebacker, quarterback, free safety, so to have veteran players, and Josey is not a veteran, C.J. is really not either but both of those guys are playing older than their experience would dictate. That helps, certainly, and these guys present some real challenges for us, our offensive team. So to have that communication in there and we're going to have to be really sharp to avoid bad plays.