

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, December 1, 2015

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: First, I want to start by congratulating all of our players that were recognized with All-Big Ten status last evening, and I know the other side of the ball they announce tonight, but just really happy for them and for their recognition. Also Desmond King, for him to be recognized as the Defensive Back of the Year, that's really a special honor for him, and very happy for him, as well.

Certainly last week was a good win for us. It was great to get our fourth trophy, something we haven't done yet, so that was very significant. And for the team to end up with 12-0 record is really a great accomplishment, great team accomplishment on their part.

Just overall the weekend went really well, and I think just looking back right now, I think a lot of the success that our team experienced this year really was kind of rooted in some of the changes that we made in 2012. Our two coordinators transitioned and a lot of changes in the 2012-2013 period.

Since that time we're really proud we've won 27 ballgames, and there really isn't any secret to success from my vantage point. You have to have great leadership on the field and off the field, and I think we've seen that from this team. The players have to respect each other and feel for each other and care about each other, and then the other thing they have to do is focus on a weekly task during the season, and that really is year-round.

This team has done a really good job of that right from the start. Iowa football has always been focused on the fundamentals, whether it's citizenship, their academic work, or being the best players possible, and I think certainly this team has evolved. They've improved at every opportunity, and we're just really, really proud of them.

That being said, I'm really happy about the way the regular season transitioned out, and very, very excited to have an opportunity to play in Indianapolis this week in the Big Ten Championship game.

We've got a big challenge on our hands. We know that, and we're working hard to get ready for that right at this point. Our captains this week will be the same

four guys as we've had: Drew Ott, Jordan Lomax on the defensive side of the ball; Austin Blythe and CJ Beathard offensively.

And overall I think we're pretty healthy right now. Had a couple guys nicked up in the game. Fortunately we've got an extra day of recovery, and the guys that were injured in the ballgame are working back right now somewhat on a limited basis, but we're hopeful to have them all at kickoff time. That part is all good.

Michigan State, needless to say, is an excellent football team. They're very strong on offense. They've got a veteran quarterback who's been very, very successful, very balanced, good offensive line, good running backs, excellent receivers. And then on the defensive side, like you'd expect from Michigan State, they're very, very good defensively, and it starts up front. They've got an outstanding group of defensive linemen, got a lot of good players, but that group is extremely impressive.

Really since Mark Dantonio got to Michigan State in 2007, they've had a first-class program. They've had tremendous success, and I think if you look at this year, particularly the last two ballgames, it says a lot about their football team. They go into Columbus two weeks ago or a couple weeks back without their starting quarterback, not able to play, and the way they won that football game, that was extremely impressive, and then came back last week, the quarterback was back with them, and they just looked like a very well-rounded, dynamic football team.

We've got a big challenge on our hands. We're really looking forward to it, excited to be part of this, and hopefully we'll have a great week of preparation. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Has the Pittsburgh prep helped you this week, just the similarities there?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. We haven't played Michigan State in a while now, so there's a little distance there, but we got a practice game, if you will. It's almost like in high school you've got those two scrimmages before you start playing, so at least it's not totally out of our minds. I think they're very, very similar at least from the defensive standpoint, and hopefully it'll be of some help, but then that also helps them to get

some exposure to what we might be thinking.

Q. What have you seen from the tight end position this year? What credit does LeVar get for moving over to that position?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that position -- I was thinking about the running back position, but this position is kind of similar to the running back position in that it's representative of our football team. We've had to make some adjustments and bob and weave a little bit. If you'd asked me last January, I felt really good about having Jake Duzey and Henry Krieger Coble as our lead guys, George coming up the ranks. As we all know, unfortunately Jake had a real serious injury in the spring, so we've had to adjust that way.

Henry Krieger Coble, I can't say enough about the improvement that he's made. I think he's got every chance and right to be an All-Big Ten tight end. You never know how that stuff is going to pan out, but he's a tremendous football player and plays better each week as the season goes on.

I'd say the same thing about George Kittle. Both those guys have really improved and moved forward quickly, and we've gotten great production with them, and hopefully Jake can keep improving.

And to your point about LeVar, LeVar is a tremendous young person. I think he's going to be an outstanding coach, and I think it's been helpful to have his attention with that group solely. He coaches those guys day in and day out now, meets with them, and then offensively it's helped us, too, having his perspective in the room; how would the defensive guys see this when we start talking about different concepts and ideas.

Q. How much better are you guys when your fullbacks are healthy and playing well?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's part of the story last year, and not only having good fullbacks or healthy fullbacks but good fullbacks, and we've got two outstanding ones. I just talked about, I think both tight ends have really played well this year, and fullbacks are even more off the radar than tight ends are, but for what we do it's really important.

Both of them played really well this past Friday. They've played well all season long, and then on top of that not only are they good football players at their position but what they do in terms of leadership and really being invested, those are two of our stronger team leaders. Our senior class has been outstanding top to bottom, but those two guys are really respected by our entire football team.

Q. Have you ever thought about abandoning the

fullback in your time here?

KIRK FERENTZ: No. Yeah, when we didn't have any. It's kind of like the first Penn State game back in 1999 on Friday. We were putting in a package for no tight ends because we basically had none. I think Austin Wheatley got hurt on Thursday.

Yeah, when you get to that point, that's not a good feeling, and that's where we were that day.

Q. Despite what happened at the end of last season, you didn't get rid of any of your assistant coaches. Is all this a sort of vindication that you always had the right people in place?

KIRK FERENTZ: New Kirk, Maverick Kirk, okay. I know in the world we live in right now, walking the plank is really a popular thing. I had this discussion with somebody yesterday. The first time I really remember assistants being hung out to dry was '83, '84 -- give me a little license on that. It's been a couple years, at a pretty prominent school in our conference, and I can tell you the rest of the story, okay. This guy was let go, ended up coordinating at another school in the conference, and they had a big victory in that team's stadium shortly thereafter, and this person went on to become a very successful college football coach and still is coaching and doing a great job.

Sometimes it's not all about what it appears to be. It's a little deeper than that. I think anytime you experience adversity, and if you're going to be involved in intercollegiate athletics, pro athletics, high school athletics, you're going to have that; you examine it and make the best decision. Sometimes it's just about changing a few things, making some tweaks, and then sometimes there are a lot of other circumstances involved. So you just try to size it up and do what you feel is best for you.

I by no means am being judgmental. I know there's a lot of change going on right now at all levels, and I'm not being judgmental. Every situation is unique, but I've been here 26 years. About the only thing I know anymore is about what's going on here, and hopefully I've got some idea what's going on.

Q. Poise is important every game and probably in every practice, too, for that matter, but against an opponent that's this experienced on this stage, that's been through a lot of big games in this situation, how important is it if they get a big play to be able to stem it and keep it to one play rather than all of a sudden it spills over to 21 points?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, to that point, even before the game starts, I think it's real important, our mindset going over there because it's going to be different. It's a little bit like a bowl game in a lot of ways, you can't be

in awe of the circumstances, and then certainly once something happens in the game -- this is a very good football team we're playing, and all the teams playing this weekend are excellent.

They're going to make plays. They're going to make plays offensively, defensively, special teams, and then how we respond to those things really is going to dictate the success that we have or not.

So that's really the moral of the story, and it's been that way all season long. Again, I said this last week: our Illinois State game was a really big game for us. That was an important game, so we've kind of looked at each one the same way, and hopefully we can do that on Saturday.

This is as good a team, best team we've played all season long, so it's going to be a big challenge for us.

Q. In the era of high-powered, fast-paced offenses, what does it say about the Big Ten, the two teams that are in the championship that run more of a traditional style of offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: I haven't done the math. This is the fifth championship game; if you look at the 10 teams that have played, it might be interesting to see who's who and what's what.

I guess what I'd suggest is there's a lot of ways to be successful in football, and a lot of teams across the country do things with their own personality, and a lot of that plays into where you are and who you are, and I think that's the most important thing in the whole deal is know who you are and what you are and what you can do to be successful.

It just so happens we have two teams that are fairly similar. We're different in a lot of ways, but we're similar in some ways, too, and that's just kind of the way it's worked out.

Q. We've heard of lot of coaches talk about how they try to model your program at Iowa. Do you take that as a compliment?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, unfortunately some have done it better than we have. It's a compliment, but I mean, we all do the same thing in coaching. I know I was the same way when I came here 17 years ago. At that time Wisconsin was a team, I thought they were playing at a really high level, Rose Bowl-type football team, and the way they played, and some of the circumstances about their program and ours were similar. It was a team I had a lot of respect for.

But I go back to when Gary Barnett was at Northwestern, the way they did things was very similar,

I thought, to what Wisconsin was doing in the '90s.

But yeah, we all make that assessment and try to figure out what it is that's going to fit at your place.

Q. Some of these seniors have talked about leaving the jersey in a better place than when they showed up. Obviously they're doing that now. Is that something you've talked to them about?

KIRK FERENTZ: We stole that from a different book than "The Slight Edge." We'll get to that one next. I'm going to hold that back. It was a concept in another book that Chris Doyle came up with, and a lot of good themes in there about culture and what it takes to be successful in sports and certainly any organization.

But we're a little bit more focused on the sports aspect of it.

Q. This is an active recruiting week. You guys are obviously busy. How are you approaching that from a recruiting standpoint?

KIRK FERENTZ: We just tried to explain to them that this is full metal jacket right now; we're straight ahead trying to get ready for this ballgame. They certainly understand that, and I think they all want what we want -- to see a good football game on Saturday.

We'll hit the road, a couple of guys will leave right from Indy on Saturday, most of them will come back, and then go out that night or the next morning.

Q. With your fullbacks, it sounded like you guys assigned them as roommates as freshmen. Four years later they're probably going to be in each other's weddings and that kind of thing. When you guys do that, the roommate assignment thing, do you put any thought into it, and are you happy when it turns out something like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we're happy how it turned out. I'd like to say we had a master plan. They were both walk-on linebackers at that time. It's kind of interesting. I'll never forget the first time I saw Adam; I was like, really? I shouldn't say that, but he came out to the field on spring ball. But I'll tell you, once you meet Adam Cox and once you meet his dad, it's like, okay, sign this guy up fast because he'll knock something over, a wall or whatever.

But it just kind of worked out that way. They both moved to fullback at the same time a couple springs ago. They really impressed us, not necessarily the way they were playing right off the bat but their attitude and the way they were working at it, and to me, they're really representative of a lot of guys on our team. They have improved so much since the spring of 2013, every step along the way, and they're both playing at just a

really high level and great young guys. It's neat.

And then the friendship part and all the stuff that happens down the road, that's what makes all of this so much fun.

Q. A lot of players talk about your referencing past teams like 2002, 2004, 2009. What message are you sending with those references? What are you trying to get across?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we reference ones that come up short, too, and maybe why, some things that we observed. It's like anything you do in teaching, you're always trying to serve good examples up, and then if you can tie it to part of your culture, it's obviously, I think, helpful at least.

The other neat part goes back to just the uniqueness of coaching at Iowa, with the longevity, it's really been since 1978, December 1978 that there's been kind of a family atmosphere here, and I'm not suggesting there wasn't prior to that, but I know how it's been since '81. So there's connectivity there, and when I talk to our players about some of these guys, they've seen them, they've met them, they've seen them. You think about a guy like Mike Ferroni, who's a state trooper out in New Jersey, played here -- I think he finished up in '92. He was a young guy when I left here, called into the radio show last week; they all watched it back in New Jersey, the game, his mom, dad, his family. So that's the fun part about it. But those guys, they've been out here. They show up. They come to practice, and our players get to know them a little bit, and that's a really neat thing, not to mention the guys that work out and train here.

Q. As a coach is that one of the most rewarding things in your profession, to have guys come back and stay connected the way they do?

KIRK FERENTZ: It is. That's what makes being involved in a family so important. Again, I think we have a unique tradition here in that there's some stability, so when guys come back in the building, they know people here. Rita, my assistant, has been here longer than Coach Fry and I, and she started work when she was nine years old. So she's seen a lot and she knows a lot about Iowa football.

Amy Thomas picked me up my first day of work, 1981 in June, took Bill Snyder's car and picked me up at the airport. And then Terry is a rookie; I think she's only been here like 20 years or something like that.

When they come back, there's a lot of familiar faces, not just the coaches but other people in the building that -- you know, they're welcome here, and that's important.

Q. Some of the biggest plays against you the last handful of years have come on special teams. I think back to Wisconsin in 2010 where you were up in a very competitive game, fake punt there. 2013, similar scenario against Michigan State. They were up six but you were getting the ball back --
KIRK FERENTZ: Thanks for bringing up all those great memories, Scott. (laughter) Keep going; I'm sorry.

Q. Along those lines, those special teams plays tipped out of your favor. You've seemed to buckle down on special teams. Did those plays in particular have an impact on how you coached special teams or emphasized special times?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely. And you didn't mention the onside kicks that we didn't get, some legal and some not so legal. Anyway, that's part of football, and it's good, aggressive coaching -- the two you referenced was good, aggressive coaching on their part. We've got to be ready and we'll have to be ready Saturday for sure because there's a long résumé of fakes, be it on field goals, punts and all those types of things in critical situations, so we're really going to have to be on our toes.

Q. Those plays really caught you off guard it seemed like at that time --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. We always have somebody assigned, but we didn't coach them well enough obviously because they were successful on their part.

Q. Are the senses more heightened now for those situations maybe than they were a couple years ago?

KIRK FERENTZ: We've had years where we've really played well on special teams, and that's typical of our best teams, and then maybe years where we haven't. It goes back to year one when I got here. The two things I really felt were critical for us to be successful, strength and conditioning -- I feel extremely fortunate Chris Doyle has been here for the entire 17 years. He and his staff do a great job. And then special teams. Those are the two areas for us where maybe you don't need five-star recruits to have success, so that's where it all started.

To that point, if we're not excelling in those two areas, we're probably going to have a hard time being successful with the competition we have to play week in and week out. This has been a good year, so it's safe to say our special teams have been pretty good. I think we're four for four recovering onside kicks right now, so that's good because those are all critical situations.

Q. Tevaun Smith was saying that it's weird how much Plewa and Cox seem to enjoy the contact part of football. Are they that unusual?

KIRK FERENTZ: It takes a different kind of guy to be a fullback. They always say linemen are a job for special people that don't need any recognition. I mean, fullbacks, tell me what good they have, other than self-satisfaction, the pride of doing their job really well, and their teammates, they all recognize that. We never give the ball to those guys. We throw one pass a year to them. Basically they're going to line up and run into somebody and block them, and it's a tough job. It's not as easy as it may look or appear to be.

It takes a real special kind of guy, a total team guy, and that's exactly what we have. That's exactly what you see with those guys.

Q. In the running game, is LeShun ready to go? He didn't carry much the other day.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's just kind of who's hot, and Akrum has fresh legs. He didn't do much either last week. We may need everybody.

Q. Canzeri seems to be your main guy right now; is that the way you're looking at it?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's kind of been ebb and flow a little bit. Jordan closed out the game two weeks ago, and LeShun closed it out the week before that, so we're comfortable with both guys. They both have a different style. They both complement each other really well. It's probably safe to say you'll see both of them playing. My guess is we'll need everybody on Saturday.

Q. Would you say Austin Blythe is the epitome of an Iowa football player?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know how you can do much better. Again, all those things I just talked about. The guy is a great citizen, excellent student, married on top of it, and we haven't had many married players recently, so that's kind of interesting. But what a football player. He played well four years ago when he started playing. He is playing at such a high level right now, and Michigan State's center is, too. Both those guys are as good as you're going to find. Austin is on our team, so I'm a little biased that way. Everything about him is just stellar.

Just like our other seniors, his leadership this year has really amped up. It's been really impressive to watch him grow.

Q. A year ago this week your athletic director went to the media and said basically the foundation of the program is strong, he believed in the talent, he believed in your ability. Did you pay attention to

that? Did it mean anything to you? How do you look back on that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I preferred that answer to the alternative, without a doubt. But I'm very appreciative of that, and again, that's kind of what I referenced about coaching at Iowa. This is a unique place. I always go back to where I grew up. The Pittsburgh Steelers; they've had highs, they've had lows, they've had Super Bowl seasons and they've had seasons where they don't make the playoffs, but as an organization they don't panic and they've had great stability there. I think in a lot of ways we resemble that here at Iowa with our athletic leadership, going back to Bump being here. I think '70 was when he got here, and we've had three athletic directors. All three have been outstanding. As a coach, what more could a coach want than to know he's being supported by the administration?

I've worked for several presidents now. It's been the same way that way, too. I feel very, very lucky and fortunate. I didn't know that in the '80s. I knew who the president was, never had met any of them I don't think as an assistant, but as a head coach you do, and certainly your relationship with the athletic director as a head coach is different than as an assistant. So I think if you go back, since the time Coach Elliott got here, it would probably be hard to find any coach that would have a bad thing to say about the leadership that we've had, and heck yeah, I'm really appreciative of that.

Q. Do you see yourself Friday when you get there having a "Hoosiers" moment where you're measuring the goalposts because Iowa has not been to this stadium?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably not. We're excited about it, but we've gone to some really good bowl games, and I'd probably draw a parallel to that. I told the team, Saturday morning when we touched base, we didn't know who we were going to play at that point. I told them it was a safe bet we'd be underdogs. We've been underdogs 11 out of 12 bowls, so I figured we'd be underdogs again. But we've been in that environment. We've played a lot of big games historically, and this team has played in big games this year.

What it really gets down to is that it's another game. It's important but it's another game. What's going to decide it is who plays the best, not all the other stuff, so that's really what we've got to focus on.

Q. Where does this game rank in terms of your time here at Iowa?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll tell you, I go back to the start of the season. That was pretty important; that victory against Illinois State was really important on a lot of levels, and they all count. It's like your kids, it's hard to

say this one over that one because you get in trouble on a lot of fronts, but we've had a lot of great players, a lot of great moments, a lot of important games, and it's nice to coach somewhere that you get to coach in big games. That's something I really appreciate and I feel very fortunate on that front.

Q. What were the biggest factors that have led to the turnaround this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of like I said mid-season or somewhere in there, we're doing a better job on the takeaways, and it's not like you have a drill for that. To me it's a reflection of just like everything else, we're doing little things a little bit better right now. Could be positioning, better technique when you're tackling, breaking on the ball, anticipation, which might be film study. There's just a lot of things that go into it.

When you are doing things right and really honed in, I think you've got a better chance for the takeaways, and then conversely, ball security is everybody's issue. I mean, if an offensive lineman cuts a guy loose and he knocks the crap out of a back or a quarterback, there goes the ball. Same thing on special teams. So it's not just the guy with the ball, it's a real team-shared responsibility.

I think these guys have just really done a good job of tuning into the things that we're really trying to emphasize, and that's one of the biggest things we emphasize is playing clean.

Q. You're prepping your 13th game of the season this week. How much of practice is polish as opposed to actually putting in --

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really been a normal game week. I told the guys the other day, I said, we're only three away; you guys will be NFL players in three more games. All you've got to do it right in a row. It's no fair cheating; you don't get a month off. So it's been a long thing, a long grind, but it hasn't been a grind because I think they're enjoying it. They're having fun every week and we're trying to practice, as intelligently as we can as far as what we're asking them to do in the time, contact, and all those kinds of things. You've got to practice. You can't get it done just sitting there in chairs. You can't just do it sitting in a chair looking at film.

Q. When you're doing your walk-through on Friday, what's your thinking there?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're just treating this like an away game. We've played in a lot of different stadiums this year, all unique in their own ways, and this is one more. One thing we know is that there is no wind, and we know it's not going to be cold unlike the last two games. We're just going to treat it like it's a normal

away game, because that's really what it is. It really is.

Q. Neimann was all-conference honorable mention. Is he going to be available?

KIRK FERENTZ: Hope so. Plan on it. Yeah, he practiced today.

Q. Was it a concussion?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's going through that right now, but he's doing great. He could always turn the other way, you never know. Those things are unpredictable, but I think he's good to go.

Q. Nate Meier?

KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully. He's on a limited basis right now. It's a soft tissue issue.

Q. You told ESPN that Iowa is playing with house money. Why is that so --

KIRK FERENTZ: How did you know that? Did they share that with you? (laughter) I'm sorry.

Well, in a lot of people's eyes we weren't supposed to be here right now. I say that tongue in cheek because it's important to us. It's not like we're out there just winging it. We're treating this just like any other game. We're trying to put a really good plan in place. The staff has done a great job of that all season long. Our players are doing a great job of absorbing it right now. We're a couple days into the preparation; we've still got a couple more to go.

We're probably the team that's not supposed to be there, so what the heck, let's go cut it loose, see what happens.

Q. The symbolism that your strength coach Chris Doyle showed this summer regarding the broken trophy case seems to kind of have spilled over throughout the season when it came to trophy games. More in advance there seemed to be more discussion of them more publicly, whether it's through videos and social media, the players have seemed more loose about it. Is there a little different attitude regarding the trophy games or is that just preparation during the summer?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'd say yes, but I'd also say those games became important because there were trophies, but the other eight didn't have trophies. The team has been consistent with their preparation. I think they've treated each game like it's really important, because they are, and so they've done a good job with the preparation, and they've gone out and competed hard. That's how you get a trophy. You earn a trophy; they don't give it to you, and you don't own it, either. It's yours for a little bit.

I think they've carried that over to the other eight games, as well. It just so happens that those four games have trophies. Somebody deemed it important for that, and I'm all for that, but it's more about the approach. I think it's carried over all season.

That's kind of what I did. I waited until Sunday to really start thinking about what we're going to do and how we're going to do it.

Q. When you talked about earlier that you could find linemen at Iowa and develop them, that there's kind of a natural resource here, did Boone Myers kind of fit that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely, yeah.

Q. You found him as a walk-on tight end from Webster City?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's interesting; both tackles that start this week will be walk-ons, former walk-ons that nobody knocked the door down to recruit. Ike was really playing well, too, before he got injured, and he's working his way back right now.

Fortunately we've had some really good stories at all positions but especially more so with linemen. Part of that ties into the strength-and-conditioning program, but it still takes the right kind of guy. You've got to get a guy just like those fullbacks that really have a lot of pride and they're really hard workers and they're really determined, and those are commonalities with all those guys.

Q. This is your first championship game of any kind at the college level, right?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I guess. It's kind of weird, I've never been involved in divisions. In the NFL we had divisions, but again, I would just say when we play in a bowl game, to me it's a championship game.

It was literally a couple times, but when we were co-champs, I guess you could say those were championship games, but it's a big game. It's another big game. That's what you come for. That's what the players come here for and that's what you hope for and dream about. It's just a great opportunity.

Q. How did you approach Saturday knowing that two different games could have implications on what you did? Did you watch the Michigan-Ohio State, then watch Michigan State?

KIRK FERENTZ: We got our guys, we showed them the tape, stretched them a little bit and jogged them, and then we got them out. I'm not sure I saw a snap of the first game, quite frankly, and then by the time I got home I had some stuff to clean up. I got home and probably saw, you know, two quarters of the other game or three quarters, I don't know. They had control, so it was pretty obvious what was going to happen.