

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome to everybody. As Steve just alluded to, we're all getting adjusted to a new schedule, so hopefully this will all workout pretty well. Just in general terms the entire staff, I think we're very pleased with the progress the team has made during the last three-and-a-half weeks. I think a lot of good things have taken place during the preseason, certainly practice in the Hansen Practice Facility here has been a big advantage for us and a big help, so that's been great.

I think beyond that certainly the team's made progress on the field throughout practice. Part of that is we've remained fairly healthy, and it's hard to get better if you're not out there working. Then the other thing, just having last week be the first week of school (and) not being a game week was a good break for us to get adjusted to the new schedule. Those are all positives for us.

I think like every football team in America we're eager to play and get out on the field. You get to the point where you have to get out and see how things are going to go on game day competition. Our veteran players have done a good job. They've improved out there and developed good leadership for us. We have a lot of newcomers like every year and like every team, and we're eager to see what they do. They've practiced, I think well.

Both older guys and younger guys have stepped up and done a good job. Now it's just time to see what they do out on the field, so looking forward to that. Captains for this week, and the leadership group selects those guys weekly, we have Drew Ott, Jordan Lomax on the defensive side, and on the offensive side, Austin Blythe and C.J. Beathard. Those four guys will represent the football team.

Injury-wise, as I alluded to a minute ago, we've been pretty clean there. Nobody in the two-deep is expected to miss any time.

Regarding Illinois State, if you look at FCS football, to me there are three teams last year that were just really at the highest level of football you could get, and that



would obviously be North Dakota State who was the eventual champion, Illinois State lost to them in one heck of a championship game last year.

It was a very exciting game, two quality teams, and that had to include UNI too. We have some familiarity with UNI through the years. You watch Illinois State and the way they competed the last year, they played great football, and North Dakota State the same thing. Brock Spack has done a wonderful job. He did a great job as a player at Purdue, was an outstanding defensive coordinator for a long time, and he's built Illinois State into quite a program right now, and to me that puts him on the same level as the other two schools I've mentioned.

He and his staff have done a great job and they have some outstanding players back from last year starting with the quarterback and running back. But they've got a lot of other good players too. They're very veteran up front on the defensive side, and they're going to be a really big challenge for us.

So all that being said, we're looking forward to getting started, and we've got great respect for them, look forward to getting out there and starting to compete.

Q. Your conference commissioner wants these FCS games done away with. What are your feelings about that when you consider the teams you just ticked off?

COACH FERENTZ: Might have been a good job to start that last year based on the way we've scheduled. We had UNI last year, Illinois State and then North Dakota State coming up. So all three of those teams, you watch them on film, they're outstanding football teams. They've played well against no matter who they played or who they've scheduled.

Just I would cite that championship game last year, you had two of the better quarterbacks I would argue in the country last year playing against each other. Both made a lot of big plays. You know, but I also understand Commissioner Delany's desires and we'll abide by those certainly.

Q. What side of Tevaun Smith -- there seem to be question marks at wide receiver. How has that unit progressed throughout camp?

COACH FERENTZ: Tevaun's a guy that three years ago we made the decision to play him as a freshman. It was a calculated decision. We're glad we did that. And I think the rest of the story is I think that group has really improved. We've got four players right now we've got great confidence in. Matt VandeBerg has done a really nice job, and he did a good job last year. I think he's really improved since January. And then Jake Hillyer is probably one of our more underrated players on our entire team, not just the receiver corps. I think Jake's a really good football player, and McCarron has taken a big step for this year, and even from the spring.

So those four guys give us, I think, a good group to build around. Beyond that I didn't mention freshmen that are going to play, but Jerminic Smith will be one of the guys, one of the true freshmen that will play, he and James Daniels. Jerminic is in the mix at receiver, and we have several other guys competing for the sixth position.

Q. What did you see from Jerminic to move him into the depth chart?

COACH FERENTZ: He's just ascended. It's interesting with the first year guys especially. Though James (Daniels) was here last spring, so we had an opportunity to get a 15-day window on him. But a lot of the guys have been here, most of the guys have been here since June and had a chance to watch them train, but that's not really like playing football. And he's really just kind of handled the transition with ease, if you will.

Not that he knows everything right now and he's going to make mistakes certainly if he gets in there, but he's handled the adjustment pretty well from high school to college and seems to compete well out there, and we're really excited about his potential.

Q. Is Jay Scheel healthy?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he was nicked up a little bit, but he's back this week practicing. That certainly didn't help his progress, but he's still a young player. He's got a great future.

Q. What other true freshmen might play this year?

COACH FERENTZ: Those are the only two we've made a decision on. We've got a handful of other guys. We'll wait to see what happens in terms of their development and how things materialize with our guys.

Q. With all the changes that you made offseason, what player do you think benefited the most?

COACH FERENTZ: Positionally?

Q. Yeah.

COACH FERENTZ: I would say the most obvious choice there would be C.J. I think part of our

motivation back in January was just to bring some clarity to the situation that we felt needed to be addressed, and I think it probably was a good thing for both players. That's anytime you have that, that's a win-win situation.

So I think it's allowed C.J. to ascend into a leadership role, take that role, and he's done a great job of running with it and embracing it. He's doing a wonderful job. All that being said, I think we forget how inexperienced he is. He's started one game since he's been here, but he's a fourth-year player, and he knows what's going on. He's got good skills and tools and if he hadn't grown the way we talked about, we wouldn't have made that decision.

Q. There are a lot of questions about your offensive line and two new starters. But you have a guy that started 36 games kind of the glue of that line. Is it comforting at least to have that in there?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, center is a really important position on just about every football team, and for what we do he's really important. He is our signal caller up front. And it's important to have somebody in there that we have a lot of faith in, and that's certainly the case with Austin. He's earned that from day one. He's done a great job. I just mentioned C.J. getting better as a player.

I would say the same thing about Austin Blythe, particularly since June, took off. He's really accepted the role of being a senior. That's important, not only as a leader on the line but our entire football team, I think it's probably recognized in the captain voting. So that's a good start.

We're going to have new players playing in a lot of positions. Certainly the tackle positions are a focal point, but, again they're guys that have been here for a while. They're guys that we've watched grow and develop. They'll have some ups and downs, but I'm confident over time they'll be quality players for us.

Q. How do you envision the running back rotation working?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see how it all pans out. But LeShun will start the game. But Jordan has done a great job. I think you almost have to talk about the two on the same line because that's how I see them. They're different types of backs, but they both have had a good year.

Again, I go back to January for both guys. They're healthy now. Every phase that we've gone through they've done a really nice job. As a coach, you kind of bank on what you see, how players work, how they practice. That's the best way to project how they're

going to play. Both of those guys have been in games too, so it's not like it's anything new for them.

But we'll just kind of play it by ear, see how it goes. I don't know if we'll go with the hot hand guy, maybe use Jordan a little bit more on third down. I think we have a nice opportunity to mix it up a little bit.

Q. Is there a third running back?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, Derrick is. He was slowed down a little by an injury, but it looks like he's getting back now. Hopefully we can keep moving him forward too. He's clearly our third back right now.

Q. You mentioned Akrum Wadley, is he in the running back mix?

COACH FERENTZ: He still is. He still is. We haven't forgotten about him. As you know, it's a really fluid process during the course of the year, and my guess is we're going to need a lot of guys, so hopefully he'll keep improving.

Q. Illinois State has some speed in the back field, including at quarterback. How can you use game film of perhaps the Tennessee game to plan for Illinois State?

COACH FERENTZ: All we have to do is look at their film. They played a really quality opponent, like I said, in that championship game. That is two really good teams competing. Both quarterbacks in the game made big, big plays, and Roberson's a tremendous player. We've got first-hand experience. We helped him become the first freshman Big Ten Player of the Week that week in his first start. So he was close to 300 yards offense against us. That's a long time ago. He's a better player now.

He's really a threat running the football. If he breaks contain he can throw it on the run, and he throws it really well from the pocket too. He made some great throws in that championship game. So, you know, he's a really quality player and the running back is a high quality player too. A lot of people would love to have him on their teams.

Q. What was the discussion in January with LeShun? It seems like you guys want him to lose weight for what you saw maybe in him rather than him wanting to do it?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, to the point when he came back from his injury he was doing well. He didn't play much in the bowl game, but he was back on that road. We do that with every player. We look at them and critique them. That's what we meant about when we got back from the bowl game and going through our entire roster and things we think players might need to do, whether it's body types or body strength levels,

those types of things as well as knowledge and what have you.

And that was something we focused on with LeShun. We just thought it would help him perform better as a running back, and that's what he wants to do. He's easy to coach and he responded in great fashion. So I think it has helped him. As a player, he looks really good out there.

Q. Where are you right now as far as punt return and kick return?

COACH FERENTZ: Desmond will be our starting, Desmond King will be the lead guy and Riley McCarron will be the number two guy in the punt game, same thing with kick return. We also have Jonathan Parker, Tevaun, and Jordan Canzeri, those three guys on kick return as well. But we'll start out with King and McCarron.

Q. Punt and kick?

COACH FERENTZ: Yep.

Q. From your standpoint you've seen the switch from practices from the afternoon to the mornings. (Indiscernible) what is the motivation in the off-season of all the change we've seen?

COACH FERENTZ: We've spent a lot of time, as you might imagine. We do every year in the off-season. But this January, nobody was happy with the way things finished up. Our last two ballgames were hardly representative of the way we want to play football. So our discussions went a little bit further in depth and were elongated.

We met in January, but like just on the morning practice topic, that's something we went out and researched, talk to some other people just to gain more information. We've been kicking the idea around for a while. It just seemed like the right thing at the right time. Fortunately it's really compatible with our academic schedule on top of it, but we're only a week-and-a-half into it. Our players seem to love it. I don't know if you ask those guys when you interview them, but they seem to be enjoying it so far. And I think we've had quality practices, so that's part of it.

So you're always looking to get better and always looking for better ways to do things. The world of recruiting has changed dramatically. I think we've picked up the pace a little bit. You have to because it's a national trend, and then this facility has made a big difference also. It's most important for the players that work here that come in here every day, but certainly on the recruiting front, it's always been an important thing, our facilities have. It's no different today than it was 25 years ago. Obviously this facility is as good as it

comes, and I think that's helped us as well.

Q. Speaking of last year, you fumbled 21 times, lost 15 of them and only recovered three opponent fumbles. How do you coach improvement on turnover motion?

COACH FERENTZ: I just kind of tie it in. It's not like you can do a drill. Everybody does drills for ball security, takeaways, strips things like that, but I think, again, it's really such a fine line competition as football is. It just gets back to a mindset and how well you take care of details. A lot of times takeaways are the result of good, aggressive football play and good, solid football play. I think turnovers are the same way. A lot of it is concentration, good judgment if you're throwing the football, good ball security.

Other players affect turnovers as well. It might be a lineman missing a blocker, a back missing a blitz pick-up where the guy with the ball has no chance to keep it secure. So both of them are really team things, and they are things that we stress. There is one statistic I do believe, all of us believe it's a really prominent thing in the win/loss category. There are few exceptions to that, but overall, if you look historically, that's a pretty important one.

Q. You guys see another running back this week in Coprich. Do you see improvements starting along the perimeter?

COACH FERENTZ: We're going to find out because they'll test us out. And going back, that is kind of the question about the bowl games and some other ones. We'll get tested out there for sure. They've got the players to do it, both with the quarterback and running back. Running back is an excellent player. He's talented and gifted, and has a knack of finding seams. He's typically moving forward when he's got the ball.

Q. With Austin Blythe, he came in as a fifth-year senior. He came in with Rudock, and they were really good friends. Has this been tough on Austin? Have you had to talk to him?

COACH FERENTZ: You'd have to ask him. I don't think we have to consult him. I don't know, maybe you know more than I do.

Q. But he's handled it?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, guys graduate too. You lose friends to graduation, you lose friends for all kinds of reasons. I think ultimately everybody understands it's probably the best thing for everybody involved. Yeah, I don't think it's been any big deal for him. I haven't noticed him with any droopy dog looks or anything like that so we'll see.

Q. Has this off-season felt like it's been 40 years?

COACH FERENTZ: Not quite 40, but time does fly. I got to tell you, time does fly.

Q. But just how anxious did you sense in this building to wipe away the last two games?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're all eager to get on the field for sure and start playing. But all of that being said too, I think we appreciate the fact that you have to prepare and there are a lot of steps that go into preparing for a good season. What I'm most pleased about is I think everybody's done a good job of taking it one step at a time, trying to do a quality job. Not that we've been perfect, you never are. But I think for the most part things have been pretty good as far as people being on task, focusing on what they need to focus on, putting the right energy in. We've got a couple workouts this camp that were okay. But typically you have a couple that are like oh my gosh, that was just terrible. So we haven't had those. We haven't stubbed our toe. Hopefully it's not coming tomorrow or at the end of the week. But I think everybody's focused on what they need to do and hopefully that will show up on the field of play.

Q. Having been able to tour the building and see some of the records and stuff, there is a lot from this year's team. Is that from this building, the motivation?

COACH FERENTZ: Strength-and-conditioning-type things? Yeah, I think part of it, the team certainly has been focused and that helps. They've got an edge right now. Part of it I'd give an assist to the NCAA and our administration with the new rules allowing guys to actually eat balanced meals. It's unbelievable the amount of work our players do, and this is true of all college athletes, not just in football, the amount of energy they expend.

So it was the right thing to do. I think that's also helped. Instead of having guys back eating Hamburger Helper and things that probably aren't as good or as nutritional for them. So from our standpoint there is no excuse for players not to be eating the right way and the right kinds of food. We try to monitor that pretty closely.

Q. C.J. says he feels no pressure at all, more excitement. Do you sense that too?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think so. I think the whole idea is for him to go out and play his best, his best football. It's not to follow-up in anybody else's footsteps or be like any quarterback that's played here. Hopefully he emulates the characteristics of the good ones that have been here and we've had a lot of good ones historically. But bottom line, he's his own guy and his own player. That's what I'd encourage him to do. Just go out and play the best you can play. I think it's

true of every player on our team. It's not like you replace anybody when you rise to the first team or you assume a position. It's all about trying to do the best you can do, and that's all anybody can ask. If he does that, he'll be just fine. I think he will.

Q. But the change for Brian to run-game coordinator. Some of the players the offensive linemen and running backs have said they feel like they have a better understanding of one another. Is that something you sensed needed to happen a little more, just kind of bridging the gap over the years? And how has Brian been able to do that?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it brings a little clarity in terms of what everybody's assignments and roles are. But it's like when Greg (Indiscernible) plays, pretty much every situation that comes up during the course of a game, pretty much, not all, it's the same way with the run game stuff. We all decide on that in the room together. So all those things go up on the board or if it's a run scheme and how receivers fit in, right down the line.

Those are things that we all talk about collectively. We've got a lot of good minds in that room and on the staff. So it would be silly not to try to get everybody's input. And we come to an agreement. It's just a matter of getting a little more clarity to a voice anytime something does arise to get it straightened out.

Even if that case, if something happens on the practice field, which typically it does, maybe not every day, we try to bring that back into the staff room and just make sure we're all looking at it the right way and then re-present it the next day. It's a collective effort, for sure.

Q. And the players seem to really, from what they've said, the running backs can see what the offensive linemen are trying to do especially when it comes to cut backs and that sort of thing?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think it's really important. It's true on both sides of the ball. Everybody has to understand where everybody fits in the certain role and scheme. So in the passing game, it's pretty intricate as you might well imagine. The running game maybe not as intricate. It's important again everybody kind of sees things the same way and reads the same keys, et cetera. So we're all kind of working together. Hopefully it does bring clarity.

Q. How has Tevaun Smith improved as far as the physical aspect of the game?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he continues to grow. He's made some big plays for us through the years. It would be wonderful. It's a big part of the passing game to have receivers do something with the ball after they get it. It's funny, Dallas was here a couple weeks ago

talking about how he had been over at Illinois State, coincidentally his brother coaches there. And Brock Smith was still complaining about the 1-yard pass that went for a 95-yard touchdown. Those are my favorite pass plays, short pass and long runs. So hopefully Tevaun can provide a few of those.

He's done that and been a good, aggressive player for us. This is his fourth year and I think the most comfortable he's been, so we're looking forward to him being out there.

Q. Is he doing a better job of getting away from separation when there is a contact run away early in the route?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that's part of the evolution of any player and certainly at the receiver position you've got to be able to get free, work free. They usually don't just let you run down there. So he's improved in that area. We are counting on a great year from him.

Q. They have expected high temperatures this weekend. Do you expect to rotate more guys in?

COACH FERENTZ: Not necessarily. That's one thing about football. It may be 90. It might be 32 or 22, I guess, that one year. So it's something we talked to our guys about all the time. That's why physical condition is so important. That's a year-round thing.

We're lucky that Chris Doyle and his staff do a great job with our guys. But it might be really extenuating heat, it might be cold circumstances, but you've still got to perform. Like everybody, we're mindful of hydration, rest, nutrition, all those things which are so paramount in performance, and that began the first day of camp. We've been talking about that since the start of camp.

Q. Beyond number of victories, what would constitute a successful season in your mind?

COACH FERENTZ: I kind of covered that a little bit after last year's season. To me it's more about how we play. I know that sounds mundane or whatever, but when you watch the game tape after you come off the field and then you watch the tape, it's just about how did you maximize the opportunities that present themselves? How did you compete? How did you maximize opportunities to give yourself a chance to be successful?

Really, for 16-and-a-half years that's how I've looked at the game. It's the way it was when I got here. The ultimate goal is to win the football game first and foremost. This isn't ninth grade football. I've got different thoughts about that. But for what we do, that's our goal. But the bigger challenge is how do we play? How do we maximize what we have and what we are?

Sometimes you play teams that play better than you, that happens. But it's about how you play. So that's how we'll evaluate each game and evaluate the season.

Q. How did Cole Fisher go from a guy that had nine career tackles to starting inside linebacker? That seems, for us on the outside, sort of an upset.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't want to say he's quietly done it, but he's done it in steady playing. He's played well on special teams for us the last couple years. I've been saying all along, it felt like we had five players that could play successfully at the linebacker position at the start of camp.

And you're never sure how it's going to play out. So we try to give guys opportunities at different spots, some players more than others. Right now we think he's in that equation of our three best guys. But we still have great confidence in Travis and Bo, so unlike last year, I think we're a little deeper at that position and feel confident about the guys. It's not that they're performing badly or whatever, it's just that Cole's ascended a little bit.

Q. Update on Jake Duzey?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's still working forward. He and Darian Cooper are rehabbing every week. They're working with the training staff right now and making progress. But the prognosticate would be a little too far away on that one.

Q. How about the two freshmen quarterbacks?

COACH FERENTZ: They're both working right now. Hope we don't see them, no offense to them, but I hope we don't see them, either of them.

Q. There was a new award announced, the Joe Moore Award. You've had a long relationship with Joe. What's that mean to you?

COACH FERENTZ: That's really special. I've got to give the credit to Aaron Taylor, that's really been the driving force behind that whole thing. Aaron was an outstanding football player at Notre Dame and an outstanding football player in the NFL and an outstanding human being, so it's interesting.

I don't want to speak for Aaron, but he shared with me during a conversation on the phone the two most influential people in his life outside of his mom were Coach Moore and Coach Ladouceur out of De La Salle. And had the good fortune of hearing Coach Ladouceur speak a year ago March. And I could shut my eyes and I thought I was in the room with Dan Gable, that's what it sounded like just listening to him talk.

It's really a great thing. Coach Moore is a special person in my life, obviously. He was a tremendous football coach, a tremendous person. So for Aaron to be the driving force behind this, I really appreciate that. I just think it's a great thing. What it stands for is going to be fantastic.

Q. You've coached your sons. How many times have you coached a former player of Iowa and then coached his son?

COACH FERENTZ: That just means I'm getting older. Exactly. When they showed up, Chuck Hartlieb's son showed up -- I think that's one of the great things about coaching at Iowa, quite frankly. The legacy and connectivity, if you will, through the generations is really neat. We saw some younger guys, like Yanda was in here, Mattison, and Humble doesn't have kids right now. But Yanda and Mattison were here in June with their kids going through the building. You go back to the guys in the '80s. It struck me in 1981 how players from the '70s, '60s, '50s, the connectivity they felt to the program. I haven't been exposed to many different college programs. Obviously, Connecticut and Pittsburgh, but I've never seen anything quite like it.

It's just something that I think is unique to this university and it's great to be part of it.

Q. Is James Daniels your number three guard?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a little fuzzy right now. You've got him, James, and Eric Simmons both working in there. And Eric's improved an awful lot too. I'll just interject that about the whole line. I wasn't sure we had any depth back in the spring. I wasn't sure about our five starters either, but I think that group is really taking steps and moving forward.

We'll find out if we're ready to play on Saturday, I don't know. But I think we're moving in the right direction certainly. There are seven, eight guys right now that I could see going into a game and playing pretty well, so hopefully that's the case when we get out there.

Q. What is your punter position at this point? You have Dillon listed as your starter?

COACH FERENTZ: It's been close competition. I don't want to speak for Dillon, but I think it's been good for him. The biggest thing is he's really improved. That began in January too. I think he really rededicated himself. He's improved and he's practiced with good consistency. So we're eager to see him out there and Marshall has done a nice job also, if we could see a separation in jobs, that would be the best to travel.

Q. What are you most excited for on Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: I feel like every coach in the country right now, we're all anxious to see our guys

perform. There is no way to predict it, certainly. You always feel a little better if you prepare well and practice well. That always makes you sleep a little bit better. But first games especially you're always a little bit eager and anxious. Like I said, I probably share that view with every football coach in the country right now and high school coaches have already gone through it. Most of them have started right now. So it's fun to get started and see where we're at. It's always great to be in Kinnick on top of it. It's a special treat.

Q. You mentioned Dallas visiting a couple weeks ago. What's it do for a program to have a guy like him and his presence around your program?

COACH FERENTZ: I'll take that a step further. Jason Baker made a trip in. He spent a couple days here and that's what prompted Dallas to come, and again, going back to the connectivity I think with this program. The main reason Dallas came is because Jason came, so it gave him a reason to come down. He wanted to see a friend of his.

It's neat when those relationships continue 15 years later. Those guys are both adults now. They're parents, but Dallas came down. He got here I think about 11 at night. I talked to him on my way home that night. He was just coming north of Cedar Rapids. I don't think he could get in the hotel, so he ended up sleeping on Baker's cot I think or whatever. So a little closeness and bonding there. Then he was going to leave after the morning practice, and he ended up leaving a day later.

It's just how Dallas is. I think it's reflective of the closeness those guys have, the camaraderie. That's one of the neatest things about coaching here.

Q. Can you talk about you mentioned a little bit the mentality of this team going into this FCS opponent game on Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: It's like any game. The most important game we're playing is this one right here. Nobody in the media wants to hear that, but it's the truth. If you follow college football, good teams can beat good teams, good teams will beat bad teams certainly, and they've got a really good football team.

So we're doing our best to prepare to play as well as we can against a really quality opponent and a quality coaching staff. And worry about next week and the week after once they get here. But this is the thing that we've been focused on solely. You go through the camp period where you're just practicing to get better and practicing for the whole season without any specific opponent work. We just don't do that. Then we got a little jump on Illinois State here previously. Last Thursday, we started to turn our attention to them.

So they've had our undivided attention since last Thursday, and deservedly so. They're a quality football team. And that's on our list, but also on our list and it will be this way every week, what can we do to play our best football for kickoff. That's our goal.

Q. Preconference special teams taking a step up?

COACH FERENTZ: We're going to find out. I'm hopeful. I think we've practiced better and the players are aware that we've got to play better and we want to play better. For us to have a good football team at Iowa, and that is one thing I do understand a little something about, is what it takes to be successful here. We have to play well on special teams. I think our players understand that and I think they're committed to that.