

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. I'm only laughing because I saw a clip back there of Brett Favre playing against somebody. Just dawned on me that's probably why Stanley wears No. 4, I guess. I'm a slow learner; didn't piece that together. Probably should have known that when we were recruiting him.

Good afternoon. Thanks for being here, especially during a holiday week. Just a couple things. We're looking backwards for one second at the Illinois game. It was a November conference game, tough, hard-fought, competitive, just like you would think. We were certainly glad to get the victory, and happier for our seniors to have a good moment in Kinnick for their last home game. Certainly happy about that.

When you look at the game, always things to correct. Gave up a big play for a touchdown, defensively. Kickoff return, the one that we did have was not executed very well, and that was certainly a negative. Gave us bad field position. I think we missed some scoring opportunities, especially in the first half that would have made the game maybe a little bit different, but came up short in that.

And then really didn't do very well in the run department either side of the ball. Didn't stop the run the way we had hoped, and certainly didn't run the ball very effectively. Like always, a lot of things to work on as we move forward, and our attention turned to that on Monday.

Lastly, just want to recognize Keith Duncan, Special Teams Player of the Week in the Big Ten, certainly happy for that and certainly happy to learn that he's one of the finalists for the Groza Award. We'll keep our fingers crossed and wish him luck in that department.

Captains for this week, we'll have Nate Stanley on offense, Kristian Welch defensively, and then two special teams captains. Brady Ross and Devonte Young will serve as the captains.

Medically we're about where we were Saturday. Brandon Smith is doing some things this week. We'll see how effective he can be. But he's clearly not 100 percent healthy at this point. We'll just kind of play that one by ear.

And then this week, obviously, presents a little bit of a challenge, too, it being a short week. But it's not a new thing for us. I think it's something we hopefully have down.

As you look at Nebraska, certainly the first thing that jumps out at you is the tradition over there, and I go back to when I probably started following college football, the late '60s, early '70s, the epic performances that they had, epic games they played in. Them and Oklahoma, whatever year that was, '72, one and two in the country, and just nationally ranked teams, top-10 nationally ranked teams forever. Got a deep respect for their football program, their football tradition and heritage. It's just certainly legendary.

And then Coach Frost, same thing, was part of that tradition during the '70s and '80s, '90s as a player. He grew up watching it, played in it and experienced great success as a player, and he's experienced great success as a coach, as well. Our paths probably first crossed when he was at UNI, and if you follow his career, everywhere he's been as a coach he's had tremendous success, whether it was as an assistant or now as a head coach both at Central Florida and Nebraska. He's done a great job and certainly knows the culture of Nebraska better than anybody, so I think certainly it poses a challenge for us, as well.

You just glance back at last year's game, I think it probably gives you a good window into what to expect for this ballgame. Basically it went down to the last play. It was a back-and-forth type game and we had a great challenge on our hands in all regards. We really had a hard time stopping or even trying to contain their quarterback and their offensive scheme with the tempo they play with. They've got good skill players, good line, and put a lot of pressure on you. And then defensively, 3-4 front, they give you a lot of different looks and a lot of different pressures to contend with on that aspect, also.

We know we have a big challenge on our hands, and hopefully we can do a good job in a short week here getting ready for that.

The last two things, just to, if I could, just to recognize Hy-Vee for the partnership with the Heroes Trophy game. It's been a great -- I think a great series,

certainly, and I think the nicest thing about this, I don't know if there's another game or trophy out there that really represents what this one does. It's just an opportunity to shine a light on folks who represent the best out of all of us, and it's a great concept, and I applaud Hy-Vee for its sponsorship in the whole thing.

Then I guess this is our last black Friday, at least I've been told that. At some point I guess it'll resume, but sorry to hear about that, and we'll deal with that as we go along. We'll figure that out next year.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Speaking of Stanley, one of the things he talked about today was his growth from a mental perspective from when he first came here to where he is now. What are your thoughts on that? What have you seen from his growth in that area?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think if you go back over the last four years, any time I'm asked about Nate, the first thing I talk about is just the mental approach he takes and his work ethic, his ability to really study and process. We ask our quarterbacks to do a lot. It's a hard position to play, not unlike the mike linebacker position only probably 10 times that.

So it's a position where a lot runs through him. He's got an awful lot of work, and I'll go back to my start here in '81, that's kind of been the story of Iowa quarterbacks, they have to put a lot of their free time into it. They've got to totally be engrossed in it, live it, and it's got to be important to them. Nate takes great pride in that, and he's just been great from that regard.

Q. You mentioned the running game. You struggled a little against Illinois. How do you get it going against Nebraska?

KIRK FERENTZ: We've got to block better and we've got to run better. They did a good job taking away from us. A lot of people do what they can do to do that, and they were successful. We didn't run the ball very effectively at all Saturday, and we're going to have to do at least a somewhat better job on this Friday to have any chance in this football game. We've just got to do a little bit better job being detailed. Part of it's aiming points, part of it's just cohesion and fits, all those kinds of things, but the bottom line is we didn't get it done on Saturday.

Q. Has Brandon Smith's recovery kind of stalled a little bit?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if stalled -- they're really hard to predict. Recoveries from any injuries are hard to predict. I think he was doing pretty well, came out of the gate strong and plateaued a little bit. So it's just one of those deals. There's no way to predict it, and it's

just hard to deal with no matter what. Unless you're back full speed you're not happy. The good news is he's not a senior.

Kristian Welch was looking at that clock a couple weeks ago, so at least he's back playing. That's a good thing. But if there's any consolation right now for him, he's got another year, but it's still frustrating.

Q. You've played three emotionally, mentally and physically grueling games consecutively --

KIRK FERENTZ: One to go.

Q. And one to go. Have you noticed any kind of fatigue, whether it's -- obviously there's physical, but mental?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's why you train, both mentally and physically. That's why you train. Hopefully our older guys understand a lot better than the younger guys that it's a 12-week season. We talk about that all the time, 14 weeks calendar wise and three of camp. You have to be in shape physically. You've got to be in shape mentally, and you've got to be able to get up every morning and put one foot in front of the other. It's easier said than done, and it's tough after an emotional loss, and every loss typically is emotional, and then it's tough after a good win, too. But most wins are good.

Those are the ups and downs that you go through as a college football player, and it's part of the process. That's where experience helps, the more experience you have, and the older guys have to show the younger guys how to do things, too. But yeah, it's just part of the grind. But that's what makes this game, I think, good and makes it so challenging.

Q. The receivers, I think like 75 percent of the passing game is run through them in the production. Obviously you lost two guys from last year, but what's impressed you the most about those four guys and their ability to improve and come and play every week?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's twofold. We're just such a better receiver group right now than we were two years ago. Some of the same faces, but just overall we're a lot better, and we're not as good at tight end or as experienced, and it's kind of a dumb statement, we had two first-rounders last year, right, so yeah, no kidding we're not as good.

But it's just the way football works; the ball kind of goes where it goes, and certainly having a little bit more experience and guys that are more adept at the receiver position helps since Brandon is not playing right now, but Ihmir is a much better player than he was two years ago, and you've got guys like Easley and -- I'm thinking of Easley. I'll go back to that, but you've got

Nico and Tyrone that are young players like Easley was, and once Easley got going, he was playing pretty well.

Right now that's one of the strengths of our offense I would say is that receiver group. Those guys in particular are really doing a good job, and I think we all have confidence in them. Been able to get the ball to the tight ends a little bit better here the last couple weeks, too, and this week we'll probably have to spread it around I'm guessing on Friday.

Q. With Nico and Tyrone, have they progressed how you guys thought because I know obviously spring ball, before you thought, hey, they need to do it on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, and that's where I had my Easley thing going on in any mind there because Nick it was a matter of time. Nick was okay that first spring. He was okay in camp and then once the season got going he really started to go, and after that he was a tremendous player a year ago for us. I think that's what we envision both Nico and Tyrone becoming, and Tyrone is probably on a little faster track because he's getting a chance to play more due to Brandon's absence.

That's really good to see. But yeah, you see guys in practice growing and improving, gaining confidence, and it gives you a little window into what might happen.

Q. The players were talking about having no contact this week. Have you done that all five years since you switched to morning practice on Nebraska week?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'd have to go back and look. I think so, but -- yeah, just we're 12 weeks into it, 13 weeks into it, I guess, so this is our 14th week. You know, it's just I think the biggest thing right now is for us to be fresh physically if at all possible. It's hard at this time of year. But also mentally sharp. We may have -- four or five years, we may have hit once during that practice, but we typically in November start cutting back anyway pretty much in terms of how much we do hit in practice.

I think it's just probably more importantly, kind of goes back to Scott's question, too, just about keeping the team fresh. If you leave the game on the practice field, that's just a bad thing. So we're trying to be as efficient and effective as we can without leaving it out there during the week.

Q. Players, as they're wont to do, repeat the same thing over and over when it comes to being asked about rivalries: You treat every game the same, prepare for every game the same, don't put any extra importance over anybody. Are rivalries things

created by the outside world, or do you have them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably yes and no. I was thinking about that this morning because I guess maybe I was anticipating a question about that. But I got to thinking about it, like we play for four trophies, which all makes sense, but that leaves out Northwestern, it leaves out Illinois, and those are big games. And they're certainly close, even though for whatever reason we didn't play Illinois for whatever, three or four years, whatever it was there. It was kind of weird.

So I guess any of these teams that border us, and then for that matter anybody in our division quite frankly, the West, to me they're rivalry games because we play them every year. I still haven't quite figured out that other side, who we play and when we play them and all that stuff.

But yeah, to me I think all of our conference division games in my mind are a rivalry game, if you will. But I'm not sure who defines it quite frankly.

Q. Is there anything or has there ever been anybody that you just really wanted to stay on top of, basically --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, basically anybody on our schedule. I know everybody keeps track of that stuff. But the only thing I can say there, I know when I got here in '81 it seemed like Minnesota was the big one. I'm speculating because there was that absence of playing Iowa State for however many years. That struck me odd coming from Pittsburgh, like why would Minnesota be more important than Iowa State. But that's the only theory I would have on that, there was that absence of play for a while, and I know it's deep-seeded. It goes way, way back. I'll date myself; I remember the Johnny Carson Show they told Iowa-Minnesota jokes, was that like 60 years ago probably? Anyway, but yeah, I don't know where it all comes from, but when you play a team year after year after year, typically it's a pretty good rivalry, or can be.

Q. I know players all over the world say things that maybe aren't reflective of their coaches, but Nebraska players said yesterday, They don't really like us, they don't have respect for Nebraska anymore. Is any of that true?

KIRK FERENTZ: I have no idea where that comes from. All I know is it took us a 4th down conversion and a good field goal to win last year. It was hard. One thing we try to teach our players is to respect every opponent that we play and respect what it takes to win. I think that's one thing if you play college football long enough or coach it long enough, you realize just how difficult it is to win a game against anybody. So yeah, we respect everybody we play. That's week in and week out, and that's opponent after opponent after

opponent, whether it's Middle Tennessee or last week it was Illinois, it really doesn't matter to us. They're all -- that's how upsets happen. We've been involved in a few of those through the years, too. You have to always respect what it takes to win.

Q. A lot of the guys downstairs are talking about 10 wins. Obviously it seems like they've responded after the Wisconsin loss, number one, but what has your messaging been to them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, that was the point after Wisconsin and that's the best we could do, so that's at the top of the board because you can't go any higher. It would be mathematically impossible. It's nice to have those goals or visions and all that kind of stuff, but really what it gets down to is trying to get ready for this game, which means we need to utilize every minute. Those kind of fantasy goals, think about those during your off time, we've got plenty of time after this game to think about it.

But it may be a moot point if we don't take care of what we do this week. So really what it gets down to is taking advantage of every day, and this week is a little bit unique. There is no day off day for our players. The off day is on Saturday.

Q. My question was geared toward what was the response you've seen since that Wisconsin loss?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we got back up on our feet, and that happened that Monday following the game. It's okay to lull around a little bit on Sunday and mope and all that stuff, but I think our guys got back, went to work, and that is one of the good things about being in season. At least you don't have time to waste. Just like this week, we put Illinois to bed on Sunday, and Monday morning we were working on this team.

Q. Nebraska hasn't had the season they wanted, but they're one win away from bowl eligibility. How dangerous can a team be when they're desperate and they want to keep their season alive?

KIRK FERENTZ: I would expect them to play hard no matter what. Again, we witnessed that last year, and I can't even tell you what their record was last year when we played them. It doesn't really matter to me because all I know is it took us every play in the game to win the game. It was really tough, hard-fought, and my guess is that that's what it's going to be on Thursday, Friday or whatever day we play this week. It's going to be the same case. So that's where our focus is. I expect them to be fully ready. It's their senior day, too, and they'll have 89,000 people there screaming, so I think we know what we're walking into. It won't be easy at all, and it's going to require us to really communicate, and we'll all be in focus and playing our best football.

Q. You've had to deal with some pretty good RPO quarterbacks, Morgan and Purdy especially. Their offense is a little different, obviously, but how does Adrian Martinez run that style, and how effective is he when he does have those options?

KIRK FERENTZ: First thing that comes to mind is he's a better runner than the other guys, with all due respect to other guys. They're really good quarterbacks and they're both playing great, at least from what I can tell, and they played great when we played them. The added dimension, this guy is the second leading rusher on their football team, so that's a big part of what they do and what he does. Once he got going last year, I mean -- they ran it a lot of times, what happened? We couldn't stop him, we couldn't slow him down, we couldn't contain him. So that's a real concern for us right now. How are we going to try to keep him, limit him to what he does or what he can do because we had a real problem last year.

Q. The world of sports psychology when you started as head coach at Iowa, it seems like almost all your players have some sort of wiring -- I know it's mostly performance related, it's not like a shrink.

KIRK FERENTZ: Right. Probably the first exposure I had, I'm not very smart but I've got a lot of smart friends that send me neat stuff. There was a guy that was working with the Indians. I know he was from New Jersey. I can't remember if he taught at Rutgers or had some connection there. But he worked with the Cleveland Indians a little bit, and I've still got one of my -- I've got a Bible folder I keep in my desk there, it's just got some good articles in it.

But that was the first -- I want to say that guy's name was Shapara, but don't quote me on that one.

But anyway he was a guy that worked with guys going through slumps and pitchers that couldn't throw strikes or throw where they wanted to. That's really the first time I kind of started reading about it a little bit. You talk to Zach Johnson, as you might imagine, he's got a guy he works with pretty closely. And it really pertains to any sport. It really pertains to anything that you do.

But I think the benefit is just somebody that can help make things that are a little cloudy for you clearer, give you some focal points, those types of things, and I'll flash way back to when I was coaching at Maine, I still remember -- I can't tell you who the golfer was, but I was flying back from our league meetings probably the first year, and some guy sunk like a, whatever, 15-foot putt, I don't know. But anyway, I remember his quote being, I tried to focus on the putt that I made a million times in practice, not the circumstances. So it all kind of ties into that. But I'm guessing he probably had a

coach, too, that was like really working with him on that.

The world has changed a great deal. I think more and more people in athletics are taking advantage of that for sure.

Q. You have some freshmen linemen in kind of development stage on your scout team. Just kind of curious on the progress of Tyler Endres, the walk-on Nick DeJong and then Ezra Miller who was in in the spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably a good time to talk about that would be like late December or even January. We'll get a good look at those guys here in the next couple weeks, but right now it's like they're -- with all due respect to those guys, worry about the guys who are playing on Friday.

Q. Nate said you were using wet footballs today. Remember last year, I think it was Maryland, the wind was --

KIRK FERENTZ: We should have practiced this afternoon. We could have saved on the water bill.

Q. When do you make adjustments knowing what the conditions could be versus what they actually are?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's sounding like chances are pretty good we're going to be getting wet on Friday. Sounded like that. Now, the good news is I read that we played in rain last year; is that true? Last year's Nebraska? It said that. I read some article that said it was raining. I can't remember. But I'm so dumb today, I'm looking for the buckets, right. There's no buckets out there. They're just using water bottles.

Anyway, I think what we've learned is the new gloves, these new gloves that are like stick 'em gloves that the guys have don't work so good when they're wet. So if you see our receivers wearing gloves on Friday, they're sneaking them on past us. But anyway, you just try to prepare for whatever is going to be out there. Hard to duplicate snow.

Q. Any common thread -- as you look back at this four-game win streak against them, what have you see from your team that has gone wrong, what have you done well?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I guess I'm pretty optimistic as a person, but I think I usually go into every game thinking we may get beat by four touchdowns. That's kind of how I feel about every one of these games. I mean, especially the two that got away. When Riley (MCCarron) hit that -- we hit him on a quick slant and he took it. Like all of a sudden that game just happened, and it's kind of like the Illinois game a year

ago. Like that just happened in that second quarter I think it was. Like how did that happen.

But I usually go into every game thinking it's going to be a dogfight, and that's how I remember every one of these contests. Going back to whatever, '11 I guess was the first one. So there's not a lot of things that stick out. The wind in '12 was really crazy. The warm weather a couple years ago over there, that was weird. But you expect every game to be hard, and that's kind of what I think is going to -- what we had last year is probably what we're going to see this year over there would be my guess.