

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Just to follow up with what Steve just said, really happy for Jordan to be recognized. He had a great game and has been really playing well for us all season long, as have all of our seniors, so really happy for him, and then also great to learn about the recognition for the special teams, the return specialist by the Big Ten, and to have Tim Dwight be recognized for that is fantastic. He joins two other pretty good Iowa football players, Nile Kinnick and Dallas Clark, so that's really select company and quite an honor for him and well-deserved.

Saturday's win, again, really good effort by our football team, and again, I just wanted to compliment all the people that made the gameday experience possible. The field was in great condition. The crew worked all through the night, as I was told, in really tough conditions, so we appreciate their efforts and the efforts to make the stadium accessible to the fans. I don't know how many people were there on Saturday, really doesn't matter. It was a great crowd and they were really into it just like they've been all season. Very, very appreciative of that.

And then, again, pertaining to the game, it was a tough, hard-fought game. It's Big Ten football. Certainly in our conference there's no easy days, and we expected that. Purdue has been playing hard. They certainly did Saturday.

We were happy to get the victory and certainly happy for our seniors to win their last football game in Kinnick, and finish undefeated in there. Just very, very happy for them.

Captain-wise this week we've got the same four guys; we've got Drew Ott, Jordan Lomax, Austin Blythe and CJ Beathard. Health-wise this is probably about as good a shape as we've been in all season long. Got some guys with nicks and bumps and bruises, those types of things, but that's par for the course. I think we'll have everybody available outside of the guys that have had surgery.

We go over to Nebraska, and typical of Nebraska, they've got a lot of good football players. They're a very good football team. They've got an excellent coaching staff, and I think probably the big thing right now is that they're meshing. The new staff got there whenever

they got in place, it takes a while for things to come together typically, and I think we're witnessing that. They had some very difficult losses, close losses early in the season, but they were playing well but just couldn't quite finish things, and they're coming off two very, very impressive victories now, beating Michigan State a couple weeks back, and most recently Rutgers. They're a good football team, good offensively, good defensively, two excellent specialists, and good core guys on the special teams.

A good football team. It's going to be a hostile environment. We know that. Anytime you travel in the Big Ten it's going to be tough to go into someone else's stadium. That's an added challenge, and we're playing them on their senior day, as well. We've got a tall list of things that we're going to have to get prepared for, and the bottom line is it's like every other game week; our guys are going to have to really prepare well, and then, most importantly, we're going to have to be ready to go at kickoff on Friday.

And then the last thing, just want to recognize both Hy-Vee and American Red Cross for, again, the concept of this Heroes Game. I think it's a wonderful concept and certainly happy for the honorees this year and in past years, as well, but I just think the concept is first rate, and our association with Hy-Vee has been first rate, as well. It's a tremendous Iowa company and great leadership, and it's been a tradition there, and certainly Randy and all the folks there continue that on. So we're just thrilled to have that association with our program and them.

On top of that, we get a special treat tonight. They'll be here to feed our guys, and I can just tell you from experience, it's the best meal of the year that we ever have, so we really appreciate that, as well. They're very kind to come and just extend that hospitality.

That being said, I'll throw it out for any questions.

Q. It seems like the league made a concerted effort to make sure that this series would be a rivalry right off the bat, but it seems like what has happened on the field in recent years has made this a rivalry anyways. Would you agree with that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think there's a lot of stuff that didn't make sense logistically when we expanded, and

we've had that discussion a million times. It's hard to make everything work. But at least this became a year-to-year game, and really the chore has been for us to get involved. My historical experience in this series goes back to '81, and during that four-year stretch it wasn't real kind to the University. My first game as an assistant was against them. That had a happy outcome, not so good the next year.

My first game as a head coach in 1999 was against Nebraska, also, and we had a very high mountain to climb at that point. And I would go back, whatever our first year was this time, I think 2011, I think the mountain was a little bit higher than we could mount.

Our job is to be able to play with those guys, go out and compete with them. They recruit well. They've had great teams in the past, and they've got a really good football team this year. Our challenge is to be ready for them on Friday.

Q. Last year's game seemed to serve almost as a catalyst for this off-season. You've referenced it several times in the spring, in the off-season, about walking off the field not liking the way things certainly happened to you. Do you feel like that was kind of a momentum change in the program to some extent?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, again, that's just kind of like the centerpiece, I guess, for the discussion, but as I said the other day, it's nothing against them. They did what they're supposed to do, we didn't, and that's our responsibility.

So it's all about us taking ownership. That game is a centerpiece for it, but there were signs along the way; we lost way too many close games, something we didn't do as a team very well last year. There's a lot of things we didn't do well; you can go right down the list, but that word "finish," it gets thrown out all the time in sports. You can take it game-by-game or you can take it as a season. It just so happens that was our last regular scheduled football game.

We didn't close out the season in strong fashion last year. We certainly didn't close that game out in strong fashion, losing in overtime, but again, if you look through and dissect that game, just there were a lot of examples of things that we had to address and were going to have to remedy if we wanted to be competitive the way we want to be competitive.

We've had other years like that, but that just was the last game coincidentally. It's not like this game has got any special significance that way, but it does have special significance in that it's our 12th game, and just like the other 11, it's really important.

Q. You guys always talk about one game at a time, focus one week at a time. Has that focus become more important this year as the wins pile up?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. I made the point to our players yesterday, that Illinois State game was really important to us, as well. Right, wrong or indifferent, I've never been one to circle games or red letter them or whatever those terms may be, because I think that just kind of belittles the other games on your schedule, and to me, if you're going to go compete and if you're going to do something like this, you'd better treat every opportunity like it's important, and if you don't, chances are you have outcomes like we did last year too many times.

I'm not saying we didn't respect the people we were playing. It wasn't that case. But you've got to respect the preparation that goes into it and what's required to compete successfully.

That to me is the downside of pointing too much to one game, and I think so far this team has done a good job. We've shown up pretty well prepared week in and week out, and that's only half the battle, but at least I think we've done a decent job there.

Q. Is it fair to say that some teams do a better job of taking it one game at a time?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely. Good teams do it. But you can't say in April, like I couldn't have told you in April that this team is going to be one of those teams that just kind of takes care of business. A big part of that is leadership, and as I've said many times, our leadership, I'm not sure where it was at in April, but I can tell you now, it's been growing pretty rapidly ever since August, and it's really been -- any good team, any team that's doing well, typically they have really good leadership, or else they've got just the best players, and that's not realistic too often.

Q. When you look at the stats, the yardage you've given up defensively in the last three games versus the first eight, is there any alarm there? You said something to the effect of just suck it up, we've just got a game or two to go.

KIRK FERENTZ: Somebody said that was kind of out there a little bit this morning on social media or whatever. I have people that actually tell me stuff that's going on in the real world. You know, it's football, and we've played a couple good offensive football teams. Name anybody that has shut out Indiana this year. Let me know who it is and we're going to look at that film real closely because we've got a challenge there.

Minnesota is playing good football, and Purdue is a good football team.

You know, the obvious difference right now in my mind is that we don't have Drew Ott, but I would counter that by saying we played pretty good defense against Purdue, played pretty good up in Wisconsin, and that was without Drew, and Drew is not coming back. Sorry to say it, but we all realize that.

So we've got to find a way, and we will. We have got good guys and they're working hard and they'll respond, but this is going to be a big challenge, too. This is a really good offensive football team, you know.

Q. Drew said that he might apply for a sixth year.

KIRK FERENTZ: It's actually a fifth year, yeah. Absolutely, we'd be crazy not to try it. I think there's a fair case to be heard. I don't know how the NCAA rules on things. I really don't pretend to be an expert in that regard, but I think if you listen to the whole case, it's worth at least presenting, and we'll see where it takes us.

Q. Were you surprised that he said he was coming back?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, no, not at all. I mean, we're with these guys day by day, and you know, the injury gutted him. It gutted all of us. It's just a hard thing because he's put so much into it. He clearly is one of our strong leaders and has been and still is. So yeah, he wants to finish this up. He wants to have a good senior year. That's what he wants, like most players.

Q. Is it a case of what's best for the student in his case because he's probably going to miss the combine?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, I think there's a lot -- I won't get into it now, maybe in the out-of-season, but there's a lot of details in there that I think would be -- to me a rational person would sit down and listen to it and say, this guy's got a case. But I just watch this stuff; I don't know how they rule on stuff half the time.

Q. Purdue attempted eight 4th downs, they faked a punt, Minnesota went into their bag of tricks. How difficult is it to prepare for teams whenever they're playing with nothing to lose?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, that's an added degree of difficulty, but that's football, and that's going to happen. You deal with it, and we knew that coming in. They were going to come in trying to win and play very aggressively, and they did, and to their credit, they made it really hard on us. That's just the way it goes, and that's part of the territory, part of the terrain, and it wasn't like it surprised us. We knew they were going to get after us, and Minnesota the same way, so you just have to deal with that and hopefully you're prepared for it.

Q. Do you guys suspect Nebraska may come out and try to surprise you a time or two?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think part of good coaching is to have a couple wrinkles, and they've had a little time to develop a few, too, maybe, so I'm sure they'll have something for us, and it really gets down to playing good, sound fundamental football. That's how you stop those types of things, and if you don't, if you leave the door open a little bit, you can be victimized by those, and we have in the last couple weeks.

Q. How remarkable do you think it is that your team hasn't trailed since the first half of against Illinois?

KIRK FERENTZ: That is remarkable. I wasn't aware of that quite frankly. It doesn't feel like that on the sideline, I can tell you that. We're winning by 20 and I'm just churning. You never feel comfortable.

But it's a credit to our players. We've done a pretty good job in the second half and closed games out pretty well. But I wasn't really aware of that until it kind of came up the other day.

Q. You guys have a short week. Nebraska had a bye week. Is that a scheduling quirk that you're comfortable with?

KIRK FERENTZ: You don't have any choice. I think in the future, hopefully both teams have the same opportunity, whenever it may be, but to have something to do with the lunar eclipse and all that other stuff, it's just one of those freak things. At the end of the day, it won't decide the game. We both have had a bye week this year. We've both played 11 games, so I think we're on the same page. This is as healthy as we've been. We're not looking for excuses. We're going to go over there and play well, and hopefully we're going to play really well because we're going to need to because that's what it's going to take here.

Q. The Sports Illustrated cover I think is still an iconic thing, and you're on at least a regional cover this week. Do you have any feelings about that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I just heard that one this morning and wasn't quite prepared for that. I did speak to a reporter last week, so knew there was an opportunity, but I'm a little behind, so we're going to have to do a little research and prove that there is no jinx. That's been thrown out there before. We've already done some things nobody has ever done here before, so maybe we can -- last time we couldn't survive -- I think we lost that next week, right? I think we did, so maybe we can break that one, too. That's one more thing we can put up on the board and try to shoot for.

Q. Going off of that, do you feel sort of vindicated

with all the success you've had this year after all the critics from last season?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, it's never been about that. We've tried to look forward, and that's what we encouraged our players to do back in January. I've said this many times, if you're going to compete as a player, as a coach, you'd better be able to take the heat as well as all the other stuff that comes with winning.

That's part of the terrain, and really rather than worry about all the emotional stuff that gets involved with that, probably the better course is to try to figure out what you have to do to get better, and I'm really proud of the staff. They've done a good job of that, and our players have really been committed, and you know, what else can you ask for. I come to work every day with a great group of coaches and get to work with a great group of players. I feel good about that. I feel very appreciative of that.

Q. You guys have been pretty great on 1st down as far as being efficient and getting what you need to get. I think the players have said that it's sort of the emphasis during the off-season; you guys had competitions set up in practice to get that --

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not a big stat person, period, and then offensively, defensively, we have a couple different parameters. But offensively it's always been since Greg has gotten here, and Ken, I think it's just kind of football 101. First down success is as important and plays into third down success a lot of times. So we chart it weekly and we always discuss that.

But yeah, we had a couple things that we built into practice, and again, that was just us brainstorming a little bit, hey, maybe we integrate this, integrate that, and we found a menu maybe that would work for us a little bit differently than maybe some other people we talked with, but nevertheless maybe stemmed from some of the discussions we had with other folks.

Q. Has that come to fruition? The stats are there.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I would not just point to one thing, but I would say the accumulation of things has been -- looks like it's been helpful, so far at least. I said back in October I was waiting for that other shoe to drop. It may drop and hit me right in the head on Friday, we'll see. You just never know. But I think we've got enough evidence right now that some of the stuff we've done has been pretty good.

Q. How much are you selling the opportunities to your players, finishing an undefeated season with the potential to advance to a playoff?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we're trying not to focus on that. I've said this before: These guys are in college. They're smart. Every one of them. They may not have

a car, they may not have clothes, but they've all got a phone and technology. It's an essential in life anymore.

They get more information than they need probably, so I don't think I have to remind them about those kinds of things, but to me the reminder is how do we get to here. How do we get to this point thus far, and that's really the secret. And again, you talk about it every year, but it's how it's received and then how it's acted out, and so far the guys have done a good job. But the altitude gets a little bit harder the more you do things well, and if you can handle that altitude -- go back to our first trip to Miami, we didn't handle it too well there. Just making a comparison. Next time down there, we did better.

But you've got to be able to handle it. The better things get, the more distractions there are out there for everybody to take them off course of what makes you successful. I think that's really the challenge that we're trying to deal with right now.

Q. Darian Cooper got in the last play of the game, and he went through a two-year ordeal that most people probably would have just said forget it and moved on with their life. What does that say about his perseverance and maybe his craziness, the fact that he's still with the team?

KIRK FERENTZ: Check and check, perseverance, and he is a little bit goofy, in a good way, strictly in a good way. You've got to be to be a defensive lineman, especially in the interior, but he's fought hard, he's worked hard, and he's not 100 percent, and I'm sure he probably told you that today if you talked to him. But he has worked extremely hard, and it was really important to get him in. We were trying like crazy to give him an opportunity to play, and it just worked out. So really glad about that. He's not going to be 100 percent between now and the bowl. It just isn't going to happen.

But the good news is he's a great young guy who's going to graduate. He's got a tremendous personality, and if he puts it to use in the right way, he could go really far. It could be a real attribute, could be a disadvantage sometimes, too. But I think he gets it; he's really done a great job. He's a first-class guy and I'm really happy for him.

Q. It's clear that he's not what he was two years ago, never will be probably after what he went through. Does he have the potential to help you? Is it more of a practice type player that helps you, or can you have him on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's been out there in practice the last couple weeks, and we started him out in the kiddie pool and then shallow end, and let him in the deep end

a little bit last week. But to me we did that because he's earned that, and it was all about us paying him back a little bit. He's run the whole race. He's gone through a lot of tough stuff, and I talk about that all the time when you talk about guys that go through injuries. People don't understand just how lonely it is and how hard it is to fight back from that, so that was like the least that we could do for him. He wanted to try to do it, so I was so happy.

I can't document this, or prove it, but he would have been a really good football player for us. He's got a good spirit to him. But that happens. It's really hard, and if Drew doesn't get to come back and finish out his career -- it's reality, though. We all know that, coaches know that going out there coaching, and players know that going out there and playing, but that is the other side of this whole thing. Not everybody gets to be Player of the Week like Jordan, not that he hasn't paid his dues, too. So yeah, it's the humanistic side of things, and Darian is just a great young guy, and at the end of the day, not many guys are going to play in the NFL for two years, let alone 10. It's really about who you are and what you are once you get out of here and you're 35 years old and bring your kids through the building. That's what's important.

Q. With the holiday this week, is there anything that stands out to you that you're really thankful for this season?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll probably get around to that tomorrow with our team, try to brief them on what the holidays mean since we seem to work through a lot of them. But yeah, we'll talk about that. I've been fortunate my entire career in that I've been able to do what I like doing. I'm allowed to do that. And then the other part, I've been around great people every stop. I've never had a bad job and I've never been around bad people. Not everybody can say that, and I really feel fortunate about that for sure.

Q. You're in the coaches' ballot for All-Big Ten. You've seen eight opposing quarterbacks; you know the Michigan quarterback, Michigan State quarterback is hurt, Ohio State is kind of -- would CJ Beathard be your first team vote?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're allowed to vote for our guys? I am asking, I guess. I think he's pretty good. But I'm not politicking, even though we're in Iowa. I don't have a blue shirt and red tie on right now, so I'm not getting into political mode. I think he's pretty good. I'm glad he's our quarterback, I know that. I'd vote for him.

Q. Are people kind of sleeping on how good he is maybe?

KIRK FERENTZ: Possibly, except maybe the teams that play him. The guy is a good player. He's a really

good player.

Q. Last year after the Nebraska game they fired their coach and their AD said they had to measure where Iowa was, that where Iowa was was where Nebraska wanted to be. Did that resonate at all?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not really. I don't think he was the only guy that said that. It seemed like there was a lot of company on that front. All of us have been looking forward since January. What happened, happened. We take ownership. Anybody that was there, we take ownership, and the good news is we got to swing the bat again and things are working out a little bit better right now. But it's temporary parking, just like all the rankings and all that stuff.

Q. As Austin Blythe's career comes down to its last two or three games, what has he meant to the program in his time here?

KIRK FERENTZ: He fits a lot of things we've just talked about. He played a lot as a freshman, and that's unusual, a redshirt freshman I guess it would have been. But he played a lot of snaps, got an ankle hurt, came back, but that was really valuable time for him. And then each step along the way, he's just gotten better and better, and the thing that jumped out at me right away, the first time he did anything on campus he did it pretty well, whether it was playing guard, center. So I'm not saying it's easy for him, but he's really got good ability, I think rare ability as a lineman.

But the bigger thing is the growth of him as a football player and then most recently as a leader, so those two things this year are the things that we're really seeing. He played well last year. I'm not diminishing that, but he's really stepped it up, and talking about all-conference, I'm sure there are other guys really good, too, but I wouldn't trade him for anybody.

This guy is a really good football player, and he's a really good leader. We're getting a lot of that from a lot of guys that are seniors, but Austin is a tremendous young man.

Q. You mentioned James being a guy whose redshirt freshman year that kind of brought him along. What did you see from that relationship?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we're very fortunate. We've had a lot of that at a lot of positions, not just in the offensive line. I go back to -- a couple things impacted me when I got here in the early '80s, and it was fascinating to me because, like the school I played at, we weren't very good at UConn, quite frankly, and University of Iowa hadn't been very good.

I was fascinated with the way former players came back here and the way they felt about the program and

the University. That kind of puzzled me quite frankly, and I was fascinated to observe that, and then the other thing that hit me right off the bat was the way the older guys accepted the younger guys, and I've got a couple theories on that, I won't bore you. I think it's unique to our program and our geography maybe, but I've gotten to witness that 26 years as a coach, just the way the older guys embrace younger guys here. There's no hazing, rookie treatment, all that stuff, that little league stuff. They treat guys well and they want them to be part of the team.

So I'd like to think that's a tradition that's been ongoing here. It's not like we started it, but we've had a lot of older guys be really good with younger players, and the key is will the younger player listen to the older guy. The ones that do are a little smarter than the ones that don't. It's a little funny how that turns out.

Q. Do you think that's something that's emblematic with the state of Iowa, good core Iowa players, being Iowan, they kind of welcome people and welcome strangers?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we're kind of a melting pot of football. Most guys, not all guys but a lot of guys have stories that end up getting here. They weren't the first choice at the dance and all that stuff, so I think there's a little bit of a unique chemistry. And again, I go back to the '80s, not just the last 16 years, but I wasn't thinking about it in the '80s but I thought a lot about it in the '90s, why did that work; why is it such a good place to be; and why were those players so good to work with. And I think there's a little something unique about this whole thing, which is fun.

Q. Austin said to start the season he talked to his family about wanting to be on a team that Coach Ferentz talked about in the future, like you referenced 2002, 2004, 2009, those teams. Is this team going to be in that conversation as you go down the road?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're off to a heck of a start. Who knows what's going to happen. We have a really tough game Friday. Every game after that is going to be tough no matter how many there are or how few. Where it all goes, who knows, but what these guys have already established and what they've already accomplished is very impressive, and more so the way they've done it. That's what's impressed me. I'm speaking for all the coaches now, not just me.

They've been hard-working. They're fun to be around. They're fun to coach. We have to get after them every now and then. That's just like your kids at home. But you do that and they make their beds. They've been really good that way, so it's all good.

Q. Nebraska has a pretty good run defense, particularly the defensive tackles, Maliek Collins may be as good of an athlete as they've ever had there, and Valentine, the big guy. What kind of challenges do they present to your interior?

KIRK FERENTZ: They've got an NFL defensive line, period, and those two guys inside, if anybody has got a better combination nationally -- first thing I think of is the LSU group that we played two years ago. Those two guys were pretty good, too, and LSU in '04 had -- these guys are both excellent football players, but they've got a lot of other guys, too; safety is really good, a lot of other guys that are really good players, good athletes, so that's going to be a good match-up, tough match-up for us because their ends are big and physical guys, too, and good players, active. They've done a really good job against the run, so something is going to have to give probably.

Q. Your pass rush the last couple games, I think you've had three sacks in three games. You've also gone against, at least the last two games, mobile quarterbacks at times. Was that by design to try to keep them in the pocket?

KIRK FERENTZ: Our design is to keep people under 17 points, and if we do that, then we're really happy, however it gets done. And if we don't, then we don't achieve that goal. Some games it's got to be less than that because -- Wisconsin, that wouldn't have cut it. Bottom line is try to get less -- let them have less than what we've got, so play it week by week, but these guys present some challenges because they're balanced. The quarterback is an excellent football player, very dangerous, as we saw last year.

Q. Do you have to kind of manufacture a pass rush with Armstrong?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if you can do it, great. We're looking for ways.

Q. Is it better to attack him or --

KIRK FERENTZ: You don't want him outside. That's not a good thing. When he improvises and gets out -- in the last play of the game last year we let him out of the pocket and we paid for it. That's usually not a good thing, and he makes good decisions when he gets outside. Some guys don't. He keeps his eyes down the field. He'll find a guy that's open. He did it a couple times against us last year, but he can hit them out of the pocket, too. It's feast or famine on that stuff.

Q. How do you think the natural perception coming in, how do you think the state of your program here compares to the national perception entering the season?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've said it before, I'm not real big on national perception, anybody's perception, other than

there's a handful of teams every year that you can go out and say, these guys are going to be pretty good probably, and you'd be right almost 100 percent of the time. A couple surprises in there. But to me that's the beauty of college football. Afterwards you just never know who's going to do what and what's going to materialize, et cetera.

It really gets down to the people involved, and then a lot of circumstances that happen.

We've certainly had our share of hardship this year injury-wise, et cetera, where maybe people would have thought, hey, if they'd lost here, I could see why. But that's the interesting part about college athletics or athletics in general, and we try not to get too bogged down on that stuff, just like the College Playoff rankings that have been going on a couple weeks now. Right now they really don't mean a lot. It's really about the competition and what's going on on the field. We're just going to try to keep our eyes on what's in front of us here, and see where it all takes us at the end.