

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Bobby Kennedy



COACH KENNEDY: Starting spring, it's an exciting time because you get to see how guys have developed over the winter in the weight room, if they've been able to take some of their strength improvements, speed improvements into spring football. So it's been an exciting time.

Obviously people know that we have to replace a couple guys in that we have a young group coming back. But I'm excited about this group. I think if we continue to work hard and improve daily, we'll have a chance to be a good group.

But like I always say, we're not a finished product right now. We've got a long way to go. Guys have to take things on a daily basis and keep improving on a daily basis and understand that there's going to be, with some of these players, some good days, some bad days in practice.

But obviously it's my job to keep pushing them to improve. I'm confident they'll do that.

We're not a finished product. But I'm excited for the future.

Q. How is Jay Scheel progressing?

COACH KENNEDY: Jay is doing an excellent job. I've been impressed with Jay so far. Coach Davis always refers to wild catches, he just made a wild catch. Jay is doing that when the ball is high, when it's behind him, a little out in front. He's shown the ability to go get it.

Now what he has to do is he has to develop and be a more consistent player. He's actually learning two spots. So that's challenging.

But I've been pleased with Jay. He has good hands. He has good speed. He needs to keep developing his stamina because to be a wide receiver at this level, you've got to be able to run all day. I'd like him to keep developing in that area.

But I think Jay has a bright future. I've said that in the past. I think he's ready to kind of show what he has and how he can contribute. So I'm very excited about that.

Q. Matt VandeBerg, could you see him catching 65

catches in his third year?

COACH KENNEDY: I definitely did not.

You know, Matt is just like the rest of these guys. There was a growth process with him. When he became the guy, you know, the neat thing about Matt is he's never shied away from the challenge.

I still remember when he was a freshman and he was obviously playing in a backup role to Kevonte Martin-Manley. Before the game, Kevonte came to me and said, I can't go today, I can't do it, because of an injury.

I told, Matt, Hey, you're up.

I mean, he didn't flinch at all.

The neat thing about Matt VandeBerg and the things I'm most impressed about with him is not only does he have the ability to make the wild catch, consistent plays, be a consistent player, gives good effort on the perimeter blocking, but he's a guy that this game, doing well, is really important to him.

So I always thought Matt would be successful. But you never know how many times a guy is going to get targeted, if when he gets under the lights on a consistent basis, is he going to make those plays over and over and over again.

Yeah, he's shown that ability. But once again, my goal for all these guys when they come into the program is that, even though Matt is going to be a senior, he's been with us for four years, he's not a finished product, he can keep getting better, he can gain more strength, more size, more physicalness.

I'm excited about the future with him, but I also know that he's anxious to get better every day. When we talk about some of the younger players, I'd like to see a little bit more of him in them.

Q. What are you looking for in the spring? We've seen previous springs, Iowa has had breakout receiver stars that don't materialize in the fall.

COACH KENNEDY: Here is what I would say with all these guys. You're looking for consistency. Are they going to make the plays when their number is called. You're looking for toughness. Are they going to go in

there and do the gritty stuff like guys have done in the past.

You're looking for guys that it's really important to do well. When I talk about the daily grind, whether it be spring football, whether it be training camp, you know, do they accept that grind. Are they willing to go lay their body on the line to spring a runningback for an explosive run.

But also those guys, when it's thrown to them more often than not, they catch it and make plays. We keep charts. Catches, drops, missed assignments, et cetera. What we're looking for, and it starts in spring football, that's when guys start to redevelop their habits, is you look for that consistency.

If you're not going to be consistent in the spring, going into summer, then training camp, it's really hard to do it in the fall. Guys don't just emerge. They've got to do it over a long period of time.

Q. You lost a couple of those gritty kind of guys, Tevaun Smith. Has this group embraced that, some of these young players? Is that a difficult transition for some of those guys?

COACH KENNEDY: It is a difficult transition. I think they're doing a better job. We still need to be more gritty on the perimeter with this group. By the way, Tevaun would love to say that he was a gritty blocker. He did. He developed into a good blocker and I think he got better each year.

But, yeah, those guys, they need to be gritty, they need to be tough. If you look at a bunch of our explosive runs, Coach Davis talks about this all the time, third level is where the wide receivers spring you. So, yeah, we need to do a good job on the perimeter.

I see flashes. But like I said, it's still early in spring, about the halfway point. We have not arrived yet.

Q. How hard is it for, say, a young player, a redshirt freshman or incoming freshman, to become interchangeable in your three positions? I imagine that's something you strive for, but how hard is it for the first-year or second-year guy?

COACH KENNEDY: You always start a guy at one position. As he gets comfortable, and we've talked before about their athletic ability takes over when they're not thinking so much. So if you kind of move guys around all the time, they're thinking about what they're doing rather than reacting.

We like to start them off at one position. Then as they show they can handle that, then it's really important for them to train and learn another position. That's where

you create value as a receiver.

If you're a guy that can just play one position or doesn't contribute on special teams, doesn't mean you're a bad player, but you'd like them to develop a little more well-rounded knowledge of the whole offense so they can be interchangeable.

Some guys can do that very easily. Sometimes it takes guys a little bit longer.

For example, last spring, we moved guys around a bunch to see what they knew, how they'd adjust. We're doing a little bit of that this spring, but still developing that one position first, then once you have that mastered, let's move you to another one and see if you can handle that.

Like I said, when you carry five or six receivers through a game, that's not a whole lot of guys. A way for them to create value is to be able to play more than one position and also be able to contribute on special teams.

Q. Jerminic Smith came into camp, made an impression, played a lot, played well against Illinois, also had a couple plays he'd like to have back. How much growth has he made over the winter? What do you envision for him?

COACH KENNEDY: He's making progress. He's another one of those guys, much like Matt, I think he really wants to be good. I think football's important to him.

You see flashes out of him, some really good things. Because he's a young guy and hasn't figured it out yet, he takes a step back.

So the growth process, it's an ongoing process. He flashed against Illinois last year. He made a couple really big plays for us. He also could have made a couple more in that game. That's part of growing up, continuing to develop.

But I think he's on the right path. I think he can be a good player here. He just has to do it on a day-in, day-out basis.

Q. Jonathan Parker, how has he progressed? Has he expanded beyond just a jet sweep guy?

COACH KENNEDY: Yeah, absolutely. I see great growth out of Jonathan. He's a guy right now, because he's only played wideout for a year, he's playing one position, trying a little bit at another position. But everybody always says, move him to wide receiver, those guys can play, because they're great athletes.

There's no doubt that there's a little bit of that. You have to project guys sometimes.

What I see out of Jonathan is this. I see an eagerness to want to be coached. That's what excites me as a coach. When you teach him a technique, you go over something, it's important to him. He tries to do it exactly the way you want it done.

Now, doesn't mean it always gets done that way. But after being with me for a year, boy, he's making improvement on a daily basis. He still has a long way to go. But I see some light at the end of the tunnel for him. That excites me as a coach.

He's not just a jet sweep guy. He catches the ball extremely well. Sometimes it still gets on him, you know, kind of quickly. But he's also a guy, the previous question, that had to develop a little more grittiness and toughness in terms of down-field blocking. He's shown he's willing to do that. As a coach, that's what you're looking for. When guys are willing, then you have won half the battle.

Q. One unrated aspect that Tevaun was able to bring was the ability to high point the ball. Do you see some of the same qualities in these guys or was he just such a veteran that it's going to take time to acquire that same type of ability?

COACH KENNEDY: Tevaun really did turn into a nice player and did some great things for us. Also there were some things early on in his career that we had to work on. To his credit, I mean, he was a guy that would work after practice, work before practice, work in the off-season.

I always say, you know, it's no accident when guys become good players, because they're willing to do the extra. So with some of these guys, I see that out of them. There's no doubt. Just like the play against Illinois with Jerminic, he has the ability to high point a ball. Jay Scheel does that very nicely. Matt VandeBerg does it very nicely. I see progress out of Andre Harris. Nobody ever talks about Riley McCarron, but he's a guy, for example, he's made some plays for us. He's one of those tough, gritty guys.

Yeah, it's a continuing process. But Tevaun did a nice job. Hopefully those guys will be able to make those plays in the future.

Q. You mentioned Riley. He's been a guy on the cusp. What does he have to do to get into that main rotation?

COACH KENNEDY: What I would say with Riley is this. We considered him a co-starter, okay? He played a lot

of plays for us last year. To me he's a guy that shows great leadership, grittiness, toughness, will do anything you ask him to do. He has very good ball skills, good speed.

So to me, not saying that the depth chart is set or anything like that, but I consider him to be one of the starters. I'm looking forward to Riley McCarron really having a good year and finishing the right way as a Hawkeye.

I'm excited for him because he's a guy that I've definitely, definitely leaned on in the past. Hopefully some more balls come his way. He made a great play at Iowa State. That was as big a play for us, especially early in the season, as we had.

Q. Is Jay Scheel healthy now?

COACH KENNEDY: We don't talk about health issues. But, yeah, Jay is doing a great job. He's running around. We've had no issues with him.

Q. Seems like that's the theme of the day, inconsistency. Is that his track as well?

COACH KENNEDY: I would say Jay is improving every day.

Q. Riley is a former walk-on. Anybody beyond the scholarship players you've seen make any catches?

COACH KENNEDY: I think Ronald Nash, especially the last couple days in practice, he's had a very good couple days. So I'm excited to see more that he can do.

Connor Keane is a guy, when you talk about walk-ons, there's a proud tradition in this program of walk-on players, Coach Ferentz always talks about it. He always talks about, Hey, you might start fourth, fifth team, but if you keep working and give yourself the best opportunity, you never know what can happen. There's countless stories in this program that Coach Ferentz references all the time.

I'm really proud of those guys because, especially a guy like Riley, earning a scholarship. To me, like I said before, he's a guy that he just says, Coach, what do I need to do?

You need to go in and get this guy.

He does it.

You need to run this route, run all day.

He does those things. So that's exciting for me.

I know this. What's exciting, too, as a coach, when you have guys that come to your university, they're not on scholarship right away, I think it builds great chemistry in the team when you reward guys for working hard and they become contributors on this team and in the program. I know he's a great example for a lot of other players.

Q. Fans and media have an idea of what we think separation is. Can you talk about the wide receiver position. For a wide receiver coach, I'm sure it's much more nuances and concepts. What are you coaching your guys to do as far as separation?

COACH KENNEDY: A lot of that has to do with technique, when you're talking about bump-n-run, when a corner is back eight yards and you get free access. A lot of times you're not just going to flat out run by guys. What creates an advantage? When you're working your drills every day, you talk about going and playing tag with the DB, and then, right, you're working to get by him. But once you get by him, you stack him.

Now, separation can only be a few inches. It's not always two, three, four yards, right? But you've gained separation where you've gained an advantage, where he has to come through you to make a play.

Yeah, you'd like guys that are just able to run by people every down, but that doesn't happen at this level. But the little things in terms of how to use your body, how to use your leverage to create separation, leaning on a guy, snapping away from them, we talk about that all the time in terms of sticking and snapping, sticking and snapping.

When you create friction with a guy, you lean on him, you stick and you snap, okay, it's going to create half a yard to a yard separation. We're constantly talking about that.

Q. C.J., with his arm, I think he's accurate, puts the ball where it needs to be. Those six inches and half a yard, they really add up?

COACH KENNEDY: They really matter. That's the difference. I've been in different programs, obviously. The great thing that Coach Ferentz does, okay, he gives us time every day for individual technique work. That's when those guys learn those techniques, then go out in seven-on-seven or one-on-one and can apply them.

We just had Tom Moore here for our clinic. He constantly talked about, you know, when guys are in tight situations, what do they need to fall back on. They need to fall back on their technique and how they've been taught. If they just do things their own

way, what are you teaching them as a coach? They've got to have confidence that the things that you're teaching, I can apply and be successful.

When it works, that's the great thing about coaching. When you teach a kid about technique, he goes out, executes it, it works, you see his eyes light up, wow, I can do this all the time. That's what's gratifying for me as a coach.

But those daily individual drills, and I know sometimes, like, I am not a believer that people say, Oh, well, guys get bored with this drill. You know what, you shouldn't get bored until you master that drill. Then when you master it, you can still get better.

Those daily, everyday drills, when you're in those tight situations, you have to rely back on those things because that's what's going to help you be successful.

Q. When you have a young, somewhat inexperienced group, outside of Matt probably, you're going against a unit like the secondary now with the best defensive back in the country, veterans there, how much do you have to gauge their improvement despite the prowess of their opponent on a daily basis?

COACH KENNEDY: The great thing about guys going up against Desmond or Maurice Fleming, whomever it might be, because they are a solid group on the other side, the enemy, okay? But the great thing is, when you go against good players, you should get better on a daily basis.

I often equate it to guys that come and play at this level. They were great players in high school. Well, then you ask them, some of those teams you played against, how many guys on this team or that team went on to play Division I football? One, two? Well, you should defeat those guys, right? Obviously you're going on for a reason. They were probably good high school players, but...

When you come here and you're going up against Desmond King, you're going up against Maurice, Greg Mabin, guys that are quality players, when you have success against them, that should give you confidence that you can do it against anybody. You're going to win some, you're going to lose some.

Once again, if you keep working to get better, keep trying to improve... That's the biggest thing with players. If they're willing to do the little things, work on the basics, the techniques, guys will improve. Sometimes it's a long haul. Sometimes it's a long haul.

But going up against players like that, I enjoy it. I think

it's a good thing on a daily basis because you're challenged.

Q. Drew Ott a few years ago going against Brandon Scherff, if you get beat, you can get embarrassed if you don't work hard. Is that the same thing with Jerminic or Riley?

COACH KENNEDY: What I see is this, when you go up against a Desmond King, I'm sure Coach Parker will tell you there's still things he can work on and get better. In this program, when you talk about being a developmental program, there's no doubt when you go up against Desmond King and your technique is not good, he can embarrass you and make you look silly. The good thing, too, is if that does happen, you decide to saddle up and go against him again, you're going to learn some lessons about that.

Q. For this wide receiving corps, how important is it to have C.J. being the guy for a second straight year?

COACH KENNEDY: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, obviously we're not going through a transition at that position. C.J. has been such a great leader, really a special guy. Obviously we all know about his arm talent, his ability to move.

But, you know, starting over in spring, last year was last year. What I continually talk to the wide receivers about is, It's time to move on, okay? Now Jerminic and Riley McCarron, Harris, Nash, all the guys, Jay Scheel, they have to develop that chemistry with C.J. That doesn't happen overnight. Spring is a good place to start.

But this is just the starting point. Now they've got summer workouts, then they've got training camp. You've got some time to develop that chemistry. But it's an ongoing process. We always say it's not add water, instant player, right? It's the same thing with chemistry.

I think C.J. had a good feeling about, you know, where Tevaun was going to be, where Jake was going to be. When Matt came into the crew, he started to have to develop chemistry with him. So it's an ongoing process.

Q. How surprised were you that Tevaun Smith didn't get an invite to the combine, especially with what he ran here?

COACH KENNEDY: I know this. Obviously they're looking at different things. I just know that he was a really good player here and helped us win a bunch of games. I think he has a bright future.

I know Coach Davis feels the same way, Coach Ferentz. They've had a bunch of good receivers in

their time. We think he's a quality player.

I have no doubt he's going to get a shot. I don't think that's necessarily the end all if you don't go to the combine. But obviously he showed that he can run and he's been a reliable player for us, so I'm excited about his future.

Q. Right now I believe you have one wide receiver coming in as a true freshmen in Devonte Young.

COACH KENNEDY: I don't know if that's been determined yet. Devonte is the guy we have penciled in coming in. I think that's up to Coach Ferentz.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

COACH KENNEDY: Thank you, guys. Appreciate it.