

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 19, 2019

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here. Just looking back for one second real quickly, it's obviously a very good win for our football team over a quality opponent, and I think probably just taking away from things, just really pleased with the balance our football team showed. I thought we played hard and aggressively.

Those are all positives, and we're going to have to do exactly the same thing this week to have success.

Another quick note, I am just pleased any time anybody is recognized for an accomplishment, so tip of the hat to AJ Epenesa certainly for being the Big Ten Player of the Week. He'd be the first to tell you a lot of the guys on the defensive line did a good job and were getting some good coverage back there, too, which enabled those guys to rush. That certainly is something we're all happy about.

Captains this week will be the same four as last couple weeks. We have Nate Stanley, Toren Young offensively, Christian Welch on defense and Brady Ross on special teams.

Injury-wise, I think it's encouraging that both Brandon Smith and Mike Ojemudia are back working, and I don't want to say they're full speed but at least they're moving in the right direction. Hopefully they'll be able to play at least partially on Saturday. We'll see how the rest of the week goes, but it's encouraging from that standpoint.

We face Illinois this week, and obviously they pose a really significant challenge for our football team. Right now they're the hottest team on our side of the division or our side of the conference, playing with great momentum, four straight wins, and just playing really good football. I think one of the first points we made to our football team was this is a totally new Illinois football team. Anything that we may remember from the past or seen on film from the past really you can kind of discard at this point because they're playing at a really different level right now. A lot of the same faces, but they're playing at a much higher level right now.

And I think it all just starts, you go back when Coach Smith got hired over there. Lovie is a tremendous football coach, tremendous human being, and a very

accomplished coach. His resume speaks for itself and he's had success a lot of different places.

From my vantage point, outside looking in, he went there with a plan four years ago and stuck with that plan. Their administration believed in the plan, they've stayed the course and you're really starting to see it pay dividends for them right now.

Defensively they've had an identity all the way through, and obviously with Coach Smith's background in defense I think that's not surprising. It's the second year for their offensive coordinator, and his impact I thought was very significant last year and continues to be, and on special teams, you look at them, they're very, very impressive. They're top of the Big Ten in several categories, punt team I think is second, kickoff coverage as good as anybody, and I think they're fourth in kick returns, so they're doing a great job special teams wise.

Like I said, they've got a lot of familiar faces to our guys and the media. Not only are they familiar from an experience standpoint, but a lot of those guys are in their 30s in terms of starts during their career, so they've played a lot of football.

And I think the other significant factor is they've supplemented the football team with a significant amount of transfers, six of whom are starting right now and have really provided that extra benefit, if you will, and you can really see it's all coming together right now. They're playing well, and there's a lot of momentum.

Probably the two things that impress me the most quite frankly are the way they're winning. Two of those four wins they won in the not only the second half but the fourth quarter, the Wisconsin game and the Michigan State game, so I think that shows you about the attitude of their football team, their belief in each other, their ability to remain competitive regardless of what it may look like. Then the other thing that really stands out, jumps out at you right away is their turnover/takeaway margin. They're right at the top of the league, and I think that really indicates the way they're playing, the way they're coached, and right on through.

A lot of respect for them. We know we have a big challenge coming forward, and looking forward to that.

Last two things, just real briefly, we recognize 19 seniors. It's always a bittersweet day for everybody involved, but 19 seniors will be out there on Saturday before the game being recognized with their families. It's always a special thing. And, as always, I have such respect for the guys that run the entire race, that stay here and fight through the adversity they go through, whether it's academically, injury-wise, all the things that are challenging about being a student-athlete at this level. It's a really impressive group of guys, and the best thing about it, I'm not going to have to worry about them after they graduate and after they leave and they're all in good shape right now academically, all doing a good job leading our football team. They're a big part of the reason we're having success, and just a lot of really good stories.

You think about a guy like Ryan Schmidt, who hasn't played, but the work that he's put in and what he does for us, a guy like Devonte Young, who came here and actually played as a true freshman, as a receiver, and some other guys moved by him and then he unselfishly moved over to the defense but really has carved out his niche. He is doing a great job on special teams. He's one of our core special teams guys, and also does a great job on the look team for our defense, running routes. He's been doing a great job of that all season long.

He experienced some disappointment on the football field. Found another route to be successful and be a guy who contributes greatly to our football team's success. You have respect for each and every one of the 19 guys, and it'll be good to recognize them.

And then one quick side note, I know we're approaching the season of what underclassmen are going to be staying or leaving. It's become a big topic of interest the last couple years. Just out of respect to our players, if you would, we'd like to really get through this month, finish up these next two games and then we can discuss that in December. But right now our focus really is on finishing the season as strong as we can, and that all circles back to the challenge with Illinois this week in Kinnick.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. You have two veterans you can trust at running back in Mekhi Sargent and Toren Young. When you made the switch to go to Goodson this week, what's behind that and how do you see his progress moving forward?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I know we start anew every August when camp starts and everybody has got a

chance to compete. You evaluate what's going on in practice certainly, then the next step is guys getting to the game field and seeing what they do there. We're not unhappy with any of our running backs. I think it's been one of our strengths on our football team. I think all three of those guys are very capable, and I'd throw Ivory in there, too. He decided he wanted to redshirt, which I think is a smart decision at this point. Those are the three guys in the mix. They're all doing a really good job. We're happy with all three of them in the game. Just felt like last week it was time to get Tyler a chance to start, and I think he responded really well.

To me it's a positive situation right now, and just really pleased we have three quality players.

Q. Do you think Tyler is the type of guy that can handle 20 carries or 20 plus?

KIRK FERENTZ: We may find out, I don't know. He's done so far he's responded pretty positively, so it's been really encouraging.

Q. Lovie Smith's teams forever have been known for takeaways and trying to score on defense. I think they have six touchdowns this year on that side of the ball. How do you approach -- you guys are always good about low turnovers. Do you discuss it more frequently with them based on what they've been able to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not really. There's nothing we can do in this game I don't think. At one point I mentioned to our team, we can't make up the gap. It's I think it's 13 and 2 in league play and 14 and 4, something like that. There's a gap. There's a 10 differential in there. Either it's conference or overall both ways. So we're not going to make that gap up this week.

But the goal has got to be to play clean football on Saturday. That's the bottom line. That's really a huge factor in any game we play typically. It was a big factor Saturday. There was only one turnover differential but it made a big difference, so we have to try to be as clean as we can knowing this is a very opportunistic, aggressive type of defense.

Q. Tyler ran out of trouble a few times Saturday. What did that do for your team? What did that do for your offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, anytime you make something out of nothing, I don't know how many yards we had that play blocked for, maybe two, and he converted it into a touchdown. Anytime you can do that, run or pass, that's a good thing. The other guys have their capabilities, too, but we just felt it was his opportunity to get a little bit more exposure and thought he really responded well.

Q. Is Tyler 100 percent? I know he went out with an ankle.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he was sore yesterday and Sunday, but he looked pretty good today, so I think we're good to go.

Q. How about Tyrone?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's fine. Yeah, he's fine.

Q. You're getting to the point of the season where that four-game rule now you can kind of play with a little bit. How are you guys approaching that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we're watching it, obviously. I think Justin Britt is right on that line right now and Ivory is also on that line. But we've already made a decision, and I think Justin right now looks like we're going to be able to keep him out, which is a positive. At this point if we can do that, that's something we'd like to do. And then the other guys have one, two, three games available. And all hands on deck right now.

Q. Reggie Corbin has been pretty explosive for Illinois the last couple years. What kind of stands out about the Illinois run game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, he's a guy we've seen on film, and he didn't play much against us last year, but he's just a really good player. It sounds like we say that every week, doesn't it? It's been week after week we're playing good backs, and he's certainly in there. I mean, he's just a really talented football player. He finishes runs and has got big-play capability. If I remember, he had a big game against Nebraska the week before we played them last year, and it caught our attention for sure. He's a quality player, and in our conference there are a lot of them. He's right there at the top.

Q. You have some good players from the state of Georgia. What's your recruiting philosophy out of state?

KIRK FERENTZ: If we can do it, it's all about getting the right guys certainly, but it's like anywhere we go, we typically recruit out of state. We can't survive solely on Iowa players. I wish we could. So we recruit out of state. We're usually fourth, fifth in line, that type of thing, or further back typically. You've got to really be good in the evaluation process, I think, and then things have to fall right for you, and in this case they did. I give Derrick a lot of the credit there. Seth has some background there coaching at Valdosta, but Derrick has done a good job the last couple years working that area, and he had a good rapport with Tyler and it really worked out well.

Yeah, if we can cherry pick guys from anywhere where there's talent -- and one thing about Georgia unofficially, I don't have statistics to bear this out, but

the obvious big population states, California, Texas, Florida, a lot of prospects there, but I've always felt that Georgia high school football is probably as good as you're going to find anywhere. There and Ohio are two of the better states that aren't one of the three I mentioned a minute ago.

So you know, if you look hard and maybe find some guys that will fit what you're doing and then there's a mutual admiration hopefully.

Q. Along the lines of Ivory Kelly-Martin, a couple of defensive backs that started for you in the past, Julius Brents and Kaevon Merriweather are along that line, too. Are you planning to redshirt both?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. We'll see what happens. I think I'm correct in saying Julius is still at one. Is that right? I should be asking you guys these questions. And I think that is at two maybe. So do the math on that one. But yeah, we're watching it. I think we have saved Julius's year, right, if my math is correct. So yeah, that's good. We're not thinking about that. That's not why he wasn't playing.

Q. I was interviewing Brady Ross today, and I referred to him as a Kirk Ferentz type player and he quickly said that is the ultimate compliment.

KIRK FERENTZ: He runs with linebackers a lot, so he might be a little delusional.

Q. But just the way he said it he got kind of emotional, but you always talk about the relationships. Is that one of the best parts about coaching?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's the best part about coaching. It always has been. The worst part about being a head coach is it's hard to be as intimate with all your players as you were as a position coach. Just the nature of what we do unfortunately or what head coaches have to do. It's a bigger classroom. But yeah, the fun of coaching has always been the people you work with on a daily basis. It's a lot of fun to celebrate, believe me. That's the best part of it.

But as sick as this may sound, there's something about those lows, too. The highs and lows are just -- they're hard to compare to anything else you experience in life. Something you go through at those times with people, the people you care about and the people that have worked really hard and invested, yeah, there's a real special bond that forms. I think that's what sports are all about. That's the best part with sports from my standpoint.

Q. I know recruiting takes you a million different places. Moline, Iowa, I don't know if you --

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, yeah. Quite a breakfast, as you

might imagine.

Q. The Paulsons, their journey, yeah, they didn't start 800 games in a row, but just going from where they were to getting to where they are I think is kind of an amazing journey. I think it's a lot of players in Iowa --

KIRK FERENTZ: One of my favorite memories of both those guys was talking to them on the phone on a Thursday like 6:00, 5:30, something like that. They were working the popcorn stand, I believe of the volleyball game at their high school. The girls were playing volleyball, and those guys were working the popcorn stand. I think they had band practice at 6:00 the next morning, Friday morning. I was just chuckling, these guys are beautiful, they do everything in that school.

If you go in the school and then you see how people in the school feel about them and how they're respected as young people, and then the home visit was just a totally delightful day. It was a lot of fun and a lot of good food.

You're meeting neighbors, family members, all that kind of stuff. There's a lot of things about recruiting you don't like. It's not as bad now because my kids aren't in the house, but the travel when you have kids, that type of thing, but the good part about recruiting is you get to meet a lot of great people around our country and you learn a lot about how good the people are in our country as a rule. We've got so many good people and so many diverse places and from diverse backgrounds, and I think that's a lot of fun.

To me, small town Iowa is about as good as it gets. That's pretty good.

Q. If you look at Illinois, it's just right across the river, but the Quad Cities are an hour away, Chicago is closer than Moline. How do you look at Illinois? Do you look at it almost as an extension of Iowa or is it in that priority zone?

KIRK FERENTZ: It is, yeah. Absolutely. Anybody that can drive here is in our priority zone, and then you mention Atlanta. At least now we have nonstop flights. That gives you I think a little better opportunity sometimes. Although as years go on, I think maybe the travel barriers aren't as steep as they used to be. Social media has probably got something to do with that. But yeah, Illinois is a home state area for us, and to your point, you can drive to Chicago and back by the time you get up to the far northwest corner of our state. So to me -- but there's a lot more people in there recruiting, too. The competition is a little bit steeper. Although it's changed dramatically in our state, as you know. There's so many schools that come in here now,

and again, social media has probably helped that. It's made things a little bit more global.

Q. Same with Sam LaPorta, a different part of the state. I understand you got the jump talking to AJ Epenesa's coach and that's how you found out about him because he's kind of like a T.J. Hockenson almost?

KIRK FERENTZ: He is. We'd seen him in camp down there, combine, whatever they call those camps, tryout camps or whatever they call them in Lindenhurst there, Lindenwood, excuse me, and so he kind of stood out there and then we just kept a track on him, and he's a good athlete and obviously always joke about the MAC All-Stars, but we've done pretty well with those guys. We've had a lot of good players. Looks like Sam is on track right now.

Q. You mentioned Ryan Schmidt. We talked to John Milani. Those guys are Iowa guys, they're never on the two deep, they're probably not going to see the field on offense or defense. Why do they stay?

KIRK FERENTZ: John is doing a lot on special teams for us. Schmitt, quarterbacks it's tough to get them in there. It's one of those deals. I don't want to speak for those guys, but I'm standing here thinking about Will Lack, who I was thinking about last week for a different reason. But I asked Will that one time because he was working over at the hospital, he's trying to get into med school and he's got to go out and get his brains beat out by Colin Cole twice a week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, on a routine basis. So I said, why do you do this, just out of curiosity. You could be better investing that time studying, working a part-time job, make some money, all that stuff. His answer was really simple. He said, to be part of the team. It kind of goes back to what we were talking about earlier. It gets in your blood, and it's something that's hard to separate from, and then it's something you really miss or chase kind of the rest of your life because it's really hard to find, at least my experience is in real life. Not that I know much about real life, but it's hard to experience things on the outside where the bonds are as close and the emotions are quite as intense.

There's something inherently sick about football in general. I can't explain it. But people seem to be drawn to it. Certainly the players and coaches are. So I think if you ask them, that's probably the answer they'd tell you.

Q. We saw the video of you postgame in the locker room celebrating with the team. They said one of the reasons you came to Iowa was to play for a coach such as yourself who is pretty open with his emotions. Have you become more comfortable being genuinely emotional in the locker room and

in public or how important do you think it is to do that?

KIRK FERENTZ: You are what you are. You know, you are what you are, and I've been accused of being emotionless, I think, many times. But you are what you are, and I'm my dad's son. My dad had that same gene. You just are what you are. That's one thing I believe no matter what you are, be who you are, and that's be comfortable with who you are. It's the way it worked out. There's not much I can change at this point, and I'm really not interested at my age in changing a hell of a lot.

Q. Minnesota comes in here last week, top 10 team, the win may be more significant in the eyes of others than normally. Illinois comes in here, a lot of talk about them, what they've done in the last month. Is the Big Ten changing -- is it going to get harder for you to win Western Division titles?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think it's been hard. I'll start there. But I think college football in general has really gotten competitive. The scholarship -- that's why I'm going back to the '90s now. The scholarship I think really has changed things certainly, and there's a lot of good coaching staffs out there, a lot of people doing a really good job. If you look around our conference, I think you see evidence of that. It's pretty much everywhere you go. Credit goes to those folks.

I think a lot of people would probably underestimate how tough it is to win in college football, one game, let alone 12. There aren't many teams that are going to go undefeated. But I think it's fair to say. We've seen that coming. We knew this would be a really competitive year. I'm not at all surprised by Illinois. I didn't know when it was going to happen, but my sense was it was going to happen, and it is happening now, and again, I'll go back to when we were getting ready for Wisconsin looking at film, like that was not a fluke. They earned that one the hard way. That's what you have to do. But yeah, they're doing a great job, and pretty much everywhere you look that's what you're seeing in our conference, and we're not the only ones.

There's some other good stories, but I think our conference is a really competitive conference, and if you're a coach or a player, I don't know why you wouldn't want to be in the Big Ten. To me it stands for everything that's great about college football.

Q. When this place opened you were kind of ahead of the game for a while, weren't you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I mean, Jeff Tarpinian was telling Brian, whatever year that was up in New England, he says, hey, they were showing me those plans when I was in high school. They had the vision, had the plans, but just pulling the revenue together to

build it took a while.

But that's just the world we're living in. Everybody has nice places now. I don't pay close attention -- I can't imagine anybody has got one much nicer. This is really -- not that we tried to make this the Taj Mahal, but I think we really did it right and it's first class and it's really functional. Now everybody has kind of got one of those, and it levels the field a little bit.

Q. What are realistic expectations for Brandon Smith this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, time will tell. I don't know how many plays he can go for. He's probably not in the best of shape right now based on the time he sat, but he's eager to go, obviously. He's got fresh legs. That's one good thing. We'll see. We'll just see how it pans out. But we plan on him playing. I just don't know how much or how effective he'll be.

Q. It's interesting for us to watch your players grow from being 18 to 23. I'm sure for you you're with them every single day and you see the growth. Is there a measure of pride when you see not only Nate Stanley but other players that come through here and they're boys basically and then they leave here and --

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely. We've had three -- Mary and I have had had three kids play in this program, but me being the coach and their dad, you just see things that -- first thing is it's amazing, to get through here without a surgery. Of our three boys, James is the only guy that made it out without a surgery and then he played, what year was that, 2010 with probably about six weeks where he barely practiced. He was playing on a really bad ankle or bad foot.

You see some of these little things, the challenges these guys go through. It's hard to play football and not be injured, whether it's surgery or not surgery. The academic challenges, the ups and downs, we all experience disappointments, coaches, players, everybody does. I don't care where you're at, what program. There are a lot of tough days. So when you see those things, your respect for these young people, and then it's a whole different world now. The expectation is on their shoulders, and we always encourage them just to block that out. I think college football players should be protected a little bit, me personally. They're not earning a salary.

So yeah, you see all these things that they have to weather and deal with and still go out and do a good job. I admire the guys who aren't playing or playing significant snaps more than the guys that are playing. It's a little bit easier to be motivated if you know you're going to be out there on Saturday, but the Will Lacks or

the John Milanis, you go right down that list, they're doing it for all the pure reasons, the real -- it's just about being part of the team and doing what they can do to help the cause. That's how you build good teams, having quality people around.

Q. How have you seen Ihmir and Brandon progress from where they were as freshmen now to where they're real contributors in the receiver room?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we kind of threw them in the water before they really could swim two years ago. We had to. It was just the situation we were in. And they dealt with that fine. They worked through it and all that, but it's fun to see them now really learning how to play. We saw a start of that last year, and I think this year we're seeing both those guys -- it's been a while with Brandon obviously but they're both playing at a really high level. They're having more fun than they've ever had, and both of them have tremendous attitudes. They're good practice players. They have a smile on their face. They enjoy being out there. They're good with their teammates. And as a coach, you value that as much as you do their production, although I'm not minimizing their production; it's been pretty good, too. But just the way they are as football players and the way they are as people makes it a lot of fun.

Ihmir is a spirited guy, as you might imagine, and comes up with some clever little lines and all that stuff. It's fun to have some banter with him every now and then.

But for those guys to model the right behaviors for those younger guys, I'm very appreciative of that. All of us are as coaches.

Q. Nate said one of the keys to expanding his game was getting out of his comfort zone, obviously getting a shot as a freshman but has really grown to become a very respected leader in the locker room. As a coach, how do you get players comfortable with trying to go outside their comfort zone, or is there anything you can do as a coach to ease the transition?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's part of the growth process, and I was told Nate even joked around with the media a little bit on Saturday night, so that's a breakthrough moment there. Every player is different just like your kids at home. They're all different, different personalities, and you just want to try to encourage them and grow. Nate's biggest challenge to this day, I'll say it's probably until he's done playing, he's such a perfectionist. He puts a lot of pressure on himself. That's one of the reasons he is so good and has been so good in almost anything he's done academically, athletically, but also there comes a point, too, where you hope it's a little fun, too, and you just kind of enjoy the moment and

play a little bit out there. It's easier said than done, but everybody has got different challenges.

Ihmir was enjoying the moment a little bit too much sometimes, and it was the wrong moment or wrong focus. But he's done a great job. So everybody has got a little different challenge, and just a matter of trying to guide them towards in a direction where you think it might be beneficial for them.

Q. When you look at Amani Jones and he's a guy that almost started as a true freshman, weak side linebacker, then last year he's out after the first couple series, this year he's a defensive end and then kind of beaten out there, but then on Saturday nobody is leading the charge like him on the sideline during that. What does he mean as far as an inspiration and an energy guy?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's the same guy Mike Barry told me about when I did the clinic at Fenwick High School back five years ago. As soon as I walked in the door, Mike sought me out and told me about that, and I fully understand what he's talking about as soon as we were around Amani as a player. He likes playing and he likes his teammates, too, and he's been great. It hasn't worked out exactly like he hoped or planned, but like Devonte, he's been a real force on special teams, and I'm just guessing like every kickoff return meeting on the opponent's side they start with No. 52, where is he at, what are we going to do to rub him out and negate him a little bit. He's found a way to make his contribution. He's been positive, and I am really proud of him and the way he's handled things.

Q. Tyrone Tracy getting the X snaps, he really rose up to the occasion. What's next for him? He really came through in every way you can imagine at that position, and now Brandon is coming back, I imagine that's probably just good growth for him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that'll be great. So getting Brandon back, if he can play and play full speed, that would be a benefit for us. But we're really pleased with Tyrone. We've got a lot of young guys right now that have made positive contributions, and it makes us a better football team. The more guys that can get involved, the better off we'll be, and he's really grown, and we all kind of thought -- I say we, we all as coaches, we thought it could happen this year for him based on what we had seen in practice and seen the growth, and I talked about Ihmir and Brandon the way they practice, and Tyrone is the same way. He goes out there and works hard and really does a lot of good things. If you mix that with his talent level, then usually there's a good outcome that's going to follow that.