

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here. Just a couple comments from the weekend. Certainly there's no joy in losing a football game, and our players worked extremely hard. They're highly competitive, so it's not much fun after a loss, certainly. You know, bigger thing right now is for us to move on. They work hard all season long, you get 12 opportunities and don't want one to linger on.

Bottom line is Wisconsin outplayed us, they deserved the credit, and we came up short. We've come up short now in three tough competitive ballgames, and you can be proud of that, but to come up short and coming close is really not the goal. Like we do every Sunday, we looked at the tape, we'll learn from it, and the biggest thing now is to shift our focus to a team that's playing extremely well.

Minnesota comes in here 9-0, and that's hard to do, really hard to do. They deserve a lot of credit for that certainly, top-10 ranked team and certainly deserving of that, too. They've earned it, playing well in all three areas, and that's where our attention is right now. They're a big, physical football team, especially on the offensive front. They have a huge offensive line. They've got good receivers. They had good receivers a year ago. All those guys were fairly young at that point and they're still a very dangerous group, big-play guys, throw the ball down the field well and all that, and they've got three running backs that really do a good job running the football, and then the quarterback has really played well for them this year. I think his statistics speak to that.

I think probably the biggest impression defensively, they're really comfortable with their system. They've got a system that's tested and true. They believe in it, and they play it extremely well. Play very hard on defense, and they're very fundamentally sound. Certainly make you work, and they're coming off a really big win against a very good football team, and I think the overriding impression is the big thing, they're not going to beat themselves. They play smart football. They're playing really good football, and so if you're going to beat them, you're going to have to really earn it. For us it's going to require us to play well in all three areas, certainly play as well as we have all season long to have a chance to pull this off. That's kind of where our focus is right now.

On the captain front we've got the same four guys as last week. We've got Nate Stanley, Toren Young offensively, Kristian Welch defensively and then Brady Ross on special teams. Injury-wise Kristian is getting some work. I don't know if he'll be able to play or not, but at least he's showing improvement now, so that's a reason for hopefully some optimism, and then also Brandon Smith is coming along. I doubt that he'll play this week. Hopefully he can dress out at least and warm up, but he's making progress. We'll just kind of take that day by day and see where all that goes.

3:05 kickoff, it's a little bit unusual, but it'll end up being a night game, second half at least, and we should have a great crowd, so I know we're anxious to get back in Kinnick. It's been a while since we've had a chance to play there, and I think our team is all very excited about that.

Q. Do you think maybe sooner on Brandon than later?

KIRK FERENTZ: At least it's encouraging. He's actually out there running out the trainers and starting to move around, change of direction, those types of things. We'll see how fast it comes along, but it's at least encouraging.

Q. Does the team need Kristian to be -- I know you want your senior linebacker there, but you guys need him?

KIRK FERENTZ: It certainly helps. It certainly helps to have senior players out there, and he's a leader. He's been voted captain, I think, weekly here. Just tells you the respect everybody has for him. I think the young guys have done a good job, but anytime you have a senior in the lineup it's a healthy thing. Hopefully at least he's getting closer. We'll have to see how the week pans out here.

Q. When you look at Tanner Morgan, a lot of things stand out, the way he runs the RPO, from my novice point of view, maybe a Brock Purdy type. What have you seen from him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the first thing is his statistics. I think he's 21 touchdowns, four picks, I believe. That's a really good indicator that not only is he being productive but he's being smart with what he's doing. I think that's probably the biggest thing right now. They

don't beat themselves. A big part of that is the quarterback play. He's really done a good job. He's a young player, but he's not playing like a young player, and that's really impressive. They've got good guys to throw it to, too, and that puts a lot of pressure on you. They've got a good run game and good pass game, so they're very balanced that way.

Q. A lot of their plays have been big plays in the receiving game, especially last -- well, all season long. Is that schematic or is that more by yards after contact or the catch?

KIRK FERENTZ: A little bit of each, but we had great respect for the receivers last year. I thought they were one of the better groups in the Big Ten, if not the best a year ago. One guy was a little bit more veteran than the other guys. Those two guys stood out, but the third guy was really good, also. Now it's a year later, year plus. We played them earlier, and they're just continuing to grow. They're really all excellent receivers, so they can take balls and run with them, but they also will throw the ball deep and do it successfully. They do a good job.

Q. The way you and your players are describing Minnesota today, it sounds similar like when you guys are playing really well at the top of your game, the balance and running. Is that kind of what you see, some similarities there?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's what you're shooting for certainly. We're not near as big as those guys, but that's what we want it to be, and throw Wisconsin in there, too, kind of similar that way. You know, that's what you're hoping to do is get a good balance. They've got that statistically the way they run the ball and throw the ball successfully, and they're just playing well. They're playing with a lot of confidence right now. They've earned that, and they've improved with every phase this season, which is a real credit to their players and their staff.

Q. Do you see any similarities to kind of what happened to you guys in '15?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, they're 9-0 right now, and that's hard to do. We've only, I think, experienced that twice. So it's really hard to do. We haven't done it a lot. Not many teams have. Take Alabama and Clemson out of the mix, it's really difficult to do that.

It speaks really that they're wired in. They're playing well weekly and finding a way to win. It's a little bit more challenging than just saying it.

Q. I know you didn't come until '81, but Hayden brought 'the swarm' here. Coach Fleck brought 'row the boat.' How do you get guys to buy in to that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think whatever it is that your mantra may be or whatever it is you decide is important. But mantras and words or concepts are just that, they're words or concepts until players really understand what the concept means, what the meaning behind it is. That's part of the education process and really you have to usually experience ups and downs, but at some point hopefully there's an illustrative moment, if you will, or moments that really help reinforce the things that you're trying to get across to your football team, and they clearly are -- they're all on the same page right now, there's no question about that.

Q. Where are you guys at in the secondary? I assume this is a big cash week. It was last year. But you've got Ojemudia and Moss now --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll see how it goes. We'll see what it looks like by the end of the week here. But the good news is we've been getting guys back on defense at least over the last month. Whereas we'd had no depth a month ago, we were right down there to the nubs, I think at least now we have some options and hopefully we've got all the guys ready Saturday. I don't know if that's realistic or not, but hopefully we do.

Q. How do you think the offensive line looked with Kyler back out there in the mix?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it helped. You know, he was really playing good football before he was injured, and if you had told me that in July, I'd have said, geez, I don't know about that, we'll see. But that's the fun thing about things sometimes; you see guys develop and really improve. He's playing really well. I think for the first time out for as much as he's missed, I thought he played solid in there, so that's encouraging for us. He also gives us a backup center, which helps, too, because we were getting a little thin at that position.

Q. What about at tight end? Nate Wieting, I think he dressed out the other day but may not have played. Is he back, and how would you kind of assess the play of the other guys, Beyer and LaPorta?

KIRK FERENTZ: Friday was his first day really practicing again. He's just kind of had a nagging injury. He's able to work this week, so he's back in the mix, and I think both Shaun and Sam are doing some good things. Shaun has been able to stay healthy. That's been a problem for him or a challenge. So he's improving with every practice and is playing okay, and then Sam has done some really good things for a young player. As you can imagine, his head is spinning a little bit just learning terminology and play formations, motions, but he's doing a good job. So hopefully we're going to be stronger at that position than we've been the last couple weeks.

Q. Historically you've been able to circle the

wagons after tough losses and rally, and probably the greatest example is three years ago Penn State to Michigan, but other years, too. How have you been able to do that as a program, to just put what happened behind you and focus and move forward and have success?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think probably every coach believes this: The biggest challenge is you've got to turn the page at some point, whether it's the 24-hour rule, whatever catch phrase it is that you use, at some point you have to do that. And it can be really challenging after a great win, too. It's maybe more challenging that way sometimes.

But losses hit you. They hit you because again, our guys work not quite 12 months a year, but it feels like that, and you get 12 games. It's not like you can say, 'hey, we'll just play the next best-of-three series,' one of those shots. They really hurt. And the trick is you have to somehow find a way to put it behind you and really just kind of move on. I think moving to Monday practices maybe has helped us a little bit with that because you have no choice, at least the players walk in here Monday morning and they've got to move on to the next team. Instead of us talking about it, at least we're actually doing it.

There's always a little residue there. But at some point you've got to get your attention, and when you play a team like Minnesota, 9-0 football team, that shows you how important every second is. We can't be looking backwards, we have to be looking out the front window here and doing what we can do to get ready for a really tough opponent.

It's a discipline, I think, that takes mental toughness for people to do that because it's real easy to feel bad about that, and that's natural, but you can't do it, you just don't have that luxury at least in season to do it.

Q. Playing Wisconsin and a tough loss, is it better that you're playing a team like a Minnesota that's going to catch your guys' attention, that's a rivalry game, you have a trophy for it?

KIRK FERENTZ: College football is so unpredictable, but in conference play, you'd better be ready every week. Hopefully that's something our players learn, too, is that no matter who you're playing, you need to get ready starting on Monday morning for us. In this case it's obvious because we're playing a top-10 team that's undefeated. We don't have much time to waste right now.

Q. Does the success you guys had in the second half throwing the ball, does that give you something to think about going into this game as far as starting that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, perhaps, but the big thing with the tempo the other day as I said Saturday was you're looking at possessions, the way they were running the football, so we were looking at possessions and just felt like we needed to push the envelope a little bit and really get things going. But we'll stay open to any possible way to move the ball a little bit better and score more points.

Q. Do you feel like the offense right now has 90 percent success plays, stuff that you can rely on? It feels like that's really elusive.

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know. It's all about your execution and what have you, and also the teams you play. We've played some really good defensive football teams, and that's one thing our conference is really strong in that area. We're playing as good a defense in the Big Ten, I think, as anybody. I don't spend a lot of time on national stuff, but I know this: When you look around the league, a lot of teams are playing good defense, and these guys are doing a good job, also. I think they're giving up 20 a game.

Q. Tyrone Tracy the last couple weeks, big play protecting against Northwestern, last week 75-yard touchdown against Wisconsin. What has his emergence, with Brandon Smith out, what has that meant to your football team?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a good illustration. He'll be a guy I'll be talking about in the future, with young players, just a guy that had the door open a little wider. He was playing already, but more reps were incumbent to him just because of the situation. He not only took advantage of that, but he helped our football team.

It's a good example of a young guy who's second year, first year playing who's really worked hard, has continued to improve, and then when the door opened for him he jumped in there and tried to make a difference for us. It's a great story -- a player for our younger players especially to model. You have a lot of young guys, and if they're smart they learn from guys that are doing good things like that. Tyrone has got a great attitude on top of it, so when you're out there on the field with him you're just feeling a real good energy from him.

Q. How much did the inside rules impact maybe your decision the other day, and certainly the fact that you helped get that replay going, did that impact you at all in your decision-making process?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not really. There's two ways to play it, obviously, and we had two time-outs. That was probably the bigger factor at that point.

We were hoping we could get them at their end, get a stop and then do something with the football. That's

probably the biggest thing.

And one little side commentary thing, this came up, I talked to a coach who's on the rules committee who's been in favor of us going to the NFL rule with the umpire behind the line, but somebody mentioned in our room, in fact it was Ken O'Keefe, the suggestion maybe if the ball is inside the 10, or maybe it's the 12, maybe just put the umpire on the end line. Probably would make sense because there's not a lot of room in there, and the umpire from my vantage point, what he did was correct mechanically, but it just turned out he thought it was a pass. There's no room, so he's in a bad spot there. So maybe that'll come out of that game. Maybe one positive thing will come out of the game.

Q. Two yards deep in the end zone at the snap and then stepped in to the two --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if he stays where he's at and it's a pass, which it looked like it was, then you're in all kind of traffic area, so usually they move up in that case. But we faked him out at least. He thought it was a pass. So that is probably a pretty good suggestion to consider, maybe putting the guy, putting the umpire on the end line at least in crowded areas. He can't be right, really. It's a tough job.

Q. Three years into your new offensive coordinator, how would you assess the progress? Has it been slower than you hoped?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll leave all the grading and evaluations until postseason. That's kind of my mode of operation. We didn't score enough to win the other day. We didn't stop them enough to win. That's kind of the long and short of it. They got more points than us.

Q. When you see efficiency stats or read them, how does that translate? When you see Minnesota's pass efficiency is No. 1 in the conference, how does that translate to you on film and what does that look like?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's usually a good indicator. Again, the most important stats are winning and losing and then points given, points allowed, or scored and allowed, and then usually turnover-takeaway. But all those things, teams that are playing well, and these guys have been playing well in all phases. You know, they're in a real good rhythm right now, and yeah, it's better to be at the top than the bottom, that's for sure. There are exceptions to every rule, but it's a credit to them. They're in a good rhythm right now. They're using their players well. The guys that are touching the ball are really very, very talented and very, very good at what they do.

Q. You've said kind of you probably don't want to coach past 70 --

KIRK FERENTZ: Did I say that?

Q. You kind of indicated it, I think. I mean head coaching. When an opportunity of a season championship kind of slips away, how do you deal with that personally?

KIRK FERENTZ: As I said the other day, I'm not real global with my thinking at this point. I'm thinking about our next game, and that's really the only one that counts. We have every opportunity to have a really good season this year. I do know this, though: It's going to be better if we win this week and then the next week and then the next week, and the only week I can worry about is this one. To Scott's point earlier, you just have to have that mentality. There's going to be disappointments and there's going to be elation, hopefully, in every season. Hopefully less disappointment, more elation.

But whatever it is you have, you have to move on, and there's nothing we can do about what's behind us right now. It's all about this week, and at the end of the season we'll count up where we're at and then we'll get what we deserve either way, good, bad or indifferent.

Q. How do you reconcile wins, losses, at home? Is your wife a sounding board for you?

KIRK FERENTZ: We don't have a dog, so I can't be accused of kicking the dog. Haven't ever done that. We do have a cat -- that would be a really bad deal. I mean, I'm a little more mature. I have to do the math. 55 years ago I might have been guilty of some egregious act, but I think I've grown out of that.

You play long enough as a player, then you coach long enough, and I think coaches probably deal with it a little bit better because we're older and have done it more. Every time you go out and compete -- you can come up short, and if you're doing it in front of a national audience, it's less fun maybe, but it's not much fun -- it wasn't any fun at Worcester Academy when we lost a game. Losing is losing, winning is winning, but if you can't deal with both -- I'm not saying accept both, but if you can't deal with both, you really need to get out. I have figured that out, at least, in my lifetime that all you can do it try to prepare your best, compete your best and then knowing you're going to make mistakes. That's just the way football is, and that's the way everything is in life.

You deal with it, and then the most important thing I think is what's your response, what are you going to do moving forward, good, bad or indifferent, how are you going to improve and make the next outcome go a little better for you.

Q. Have there been any recently that have stuck in

your --

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, sure. I'll talk about those when I am retired. All that kind of stuff, I'll give you the full story.

Q. How about their running backs?

KIRK FERENTZ: Theirs or ours? Theirs are good. I think ours are good, too, but they've got three guys that really run the ball hard, and they're all very similar. They're not exactly the same but they're all similar, and they make tough yards. If you don't tackle them, they're going to run through you. A couple of them didn't play last year. They were going through injury rehab, but they were good players a couple years ago when we played them, and they're -- that's kind of like their whole football team. If you let your guard down, they're going to make a play, so you've got to be at your best competing as hard as you can every play, and those three guys I think all illustrate that.

Q. You guys have kind of taken control of this series. I know when you were here in the '80s it was a really back and forth series, seemed it could go any way in any year. Does it feel like it's kind of maybe sliding back? Granted, you guys have won the last four.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah one of our -- talk about bad losses, we were just talking about that, one of our worst losses in my opinion was '14 up there, right? Wasn't that the -- I've got my years straight on that one? But we were never in the game. We just got nailed right from the start. I can't remember an easy game with Minnesota since that time. We got throttled that day. It was a bad loss. And then everything since then has been tough. I mean, it's just been hard fought, so I expect that's probably going to be what it'll be Saturday, if we're playing right.

Q. I know that it's impossible to measure this and impossible even to think about it when you're in a game, but when you play the same program every year, bad blood may be built up, you guys tore down the goal post -- not you guys but the fans did --

KIRK FERENTZ: We had nothing to do with that, just for the record. No fingerprints, no DNA, no nothing.

Q. But those types of things kind of tend to fester -- I know it probably does with you guys --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, with old people, but all the guys playing in the game weren't even born then. That's so long ago. I do have a good friend that still thinks that's the greatest thing he ever saw in sports. He saw it on TV, and he also said, your fans aren't very smart, they're not going to get that thing through a revolving door. But he still talks about that.

Q. It didn't matter at the time.

KIRK FERENTZ: I can remember in the '80s where it was not a healthy rivalry. When I got here in '81 it was not a healthy rivalry. There was a lot of real hostility and bad blood and all that. So I think it's just a good, competitive series, and there's a lot of that going on in the conference, which is good for everybody, I think.

Q. Does it help that you're playing a team like a Minnesota that's already a rival, you have a great trophy and everything, but also the fact that they're here and they're ranked high to motivate your team? Just every aspect that you could want --

KIRK FERENTZ: You'd have to ask our players, but I think every time you play a ranked team it gets your attention. I'm not minimizing September, but September rankings really are kind of speculative. Now you're in November. So rankings I do think are a little bit more significant now, and we have a little bit of idea of who's who, what's what. So yeah, I think certainly it gets your attention. To me their ranking matches their record, and their record matches who they are and what they've done on the field most importantly.

I missed the show last night. Or is that tonight? I can't wait to see where they're at. But that drama is really killing me. All I know is they're 9-0, and they look like a top-10 team. Yeah, I think certainly it gets your attention. If you're smart, you've got to take note of that.

Q. Are you excited to see your ranking?

KIRK FERENTZ: I could care less right now. We're 6-3 and we've got to get to seven. That's the next most important thing for us right now.

Q. Is this whole name thing, like we talked at Big Ten Media Day about Northwestern, how like there's a gap between what they look like and what people perceive? Do you get that with Minnesota?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, and I don't want to get too -- but it seems like the talk, maybe a couple weeks ago, well, they hadn't played anybody yet and all that kind of stuff. All I know is they've improved every week, which is really important if you're going to be a good football team at the end of the year, and then they left no doubt about it Saturday. That wasn't a fluke win. They took the lead, kept the lead, and they really played like a winning football team against a team that we've tried to compete against, and we know how good Penn State is personally. We've got a lot of respect for what they've done, and they've earned it the hard way. They've gone out there and done it week after week. There are some teams maybe that don't require a lot of sweat to beat, but over the -- you play in the Big Ten and you're 9-0, it's not easy to get there. It's just a really tough thing to do. I'd say that's true of any Power Five conference

with all due respect to everybody else. But if you're in a Power Five conference and you're 9-0, you're a legitimate football team, that's for sure.