

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Brian Ferentz



COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Quick opening statement. Obviously we're in the fifth week of spring ball, so you guys have gotten a chance to talk to everybody else and we've made a lot of progress. There's been a lot of development, growth, especially with some of our younger players, veteran players, been impressed so far just with their willingness to come out and work.

And I think a time like this can be somewhat redundant for older guys that have been through it, at least in this case, three times with this scheme. But I've been very impressed with the way they have come out and attacked every day and just tried to improve and make some gains the best we can as we go.

With that, I'll open it up to questions.

Q. When you competed 15 years ago or whatever, every team had a 4-3-4, had seen different variations and your offensive line was equal to or better athletically than the opponent. In the last couple years, there's been different types of front, different blitz packages and different penetration. What can be done to help the outside zone remain viable when you guys are actually getting somewhat of a disadvantage with linebackers shooting gaps?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that all defense has evolved, just like I'm sure that it has for the entire course of the history of the game. What you see now is certainly people are a little bit more multiple in their personnel, but the majority of defenses is really going to come back to one or two front structures, and part of our teach, we try to explain to our offensive players, you can only create so many gaps offensively and any sound defense is going to account for those gaps, and how they choose to do that, certainly differs structure to structure.

Even some of these teams you see playing multiple fronts, our guys, it's out there and certainly not news that they have experimented with using a linebacker as a defensive lineman. They are still going to play out of their base front, right.

So just because we are using a fourth linebacker with three defensive linemen doesn't necessarily mean we are in that traditional 3-4 model like a 5-2 defense. We are still going to live in that four-down front and we are

still going to resolve gaps the same way and play a lot of the same calls and what you see out of most defenses that we play, Minnesota comes to mind, they are a team that's basically played the same front that our guys do but they have used different personnel.

Last year it was Coughlin, 46, right, good player, but was going to play that boundary defensive end spot that in our defense has been handled by a defensive lineman. Are we going to make all the same adjustments that our guys make with him? No, because you can't ask him to do necessarily all the same things.

But when it comes to running the outside zone play, I think it's a lot more about your execution and how your players respond to what happens and the better we understand the play conceptually and what we are trying to do, the better decisions we're going to make on the field on the fly, whether it's 15 years ago when you are seeing maybe just one or two fronts per game or now when you can see a whole mixture of those -- ultimately offensive football is very similar to defensive football. We are trying to control gaps and we are trying to cancel them offensively. It's just how do you fit within whichever scheme.

On the outside play in particular, you certainly need to be cognizant to not over running things.

Q. Who has impressed you?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Nate is a guy that's played a lot for us, dating back to 2016. This guy is going to be a four-year contributor. Just took a little bit of a back seat to the two guys we had last year but played a lot of snaps on some of our three tight end sets, and stepped in as a second tight end and we with needed to spell one of the other guys and often -- not often, or could have ended up in single tight end sets, too, if we needed to give one of our other guys a breather.

So he's played a lot. We trust him. He's had a very good spring, had a good Bowl preparation, coming off the injury from the Illinois injury, just had an ankle injury and good football player.

Good football player that I think will be very productive, and I think if we weren't comparing them to the two guys that we lost, we would feel really, really good

about him as a play maker and that type of thing. He's not quite going to be the guys that we lost but I think that he can certainly contribute in his own way and have plenty of balls go his way.

Shaun Beyer is a guy that probably would have gotten more opportunities over the past couple years but again we went from having a logjam there to being wide open.

So unfortunately we lost him for the second half of last season. He was making a lot of progress early in the year and would have liked to have him, you know, kind of working through Bowl prep in some of those things but he's been out there this spring and made a lot of progress, really pushing forward and expect him to contribute in some ways.

When you look at the group after that, it's a lot of young guys that maybe haven't done a lot except for Drew Cook, who unfortunately is not working right now. But expect him back as a summer program starts, and you want to talk to a guy that's made a lot of progress, Drew Cook is that person.

He's gone from being a quarterback for essentially his whole life, and we asked him two years ago to put his hand in the ground and start getting involved in the core of the formation.

I don't think most guys would have been as willing or as eager to do that and he's made a ton of progress over that time period, and I would expect him to contribute in a meaningful way for us this fall.

As far as the young guys go, a lot of progress moving forward but all those guys still have a lot of work to do and they understand that.

Q. Guards always complain about the bridge -- I'm sure it's not the same thing. How has it evolved? Is it the same play?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: It's the same play that it was 40 years ago in offense. Inside zone is essentially the same play it's always been. Cover two is played the same way that it was played in the 70s. The players change. The schemes evolve from the standpoint of, I think things have just become more multiple.

But plays are plays. Really, what these plays come down to is how you block, how you choose to move people, the fundamentals that you choose to focus on and what you're asking your players to do. The plays don't change. I think anything that's proven over time, certainly, I guess things evolve, ideas evolve.

We run drive the same way that I'm sure Bill Walsh --

probably not as well, but as Bill Walsh installed that thing, really before that, what the Bengals were doing. Football plays are football plays. Vertical routes are vertical routes. Catching the football hasn't changed dramatically. Whenever we went to the shape of the ball, I don't know when that would have been, probably somewhere in the 20s -- the forward pass wasn't legal yet.

Football is football. There's a lot of carry over. The plays don't change and I know that's not the popular answer. Wish I could sit here and tell you they changed. It would be just maybe I'm not changing, I don't know, but I don't think the plays change significantly.

Q. Thursday not on ESPN for an hour -- you're already feeling the benefits -- could this be a big commercial for Iowa and the tight end position and could it really work for you guys?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: I think it should. I've been around here a long time. I don't know that things always work that way. We have a better history and better track record than anybody in the country producing offensive linemen. Five years ago, an offensive linemen left this state to go somewhere else. Now, I'm sure he'll get drafted and have a great career. Had an excellent college career.

But you would think it was a no-brainer you would come here if you were an offensive lineman. Well he didn't and he was from right up the road. If you're a running back, why wouldn't you come here. Our stated goal is we want to run the football.

You think of in-state guys, it's fairly rare for us to get a big recruit at that position. We're pleased with that, certainly, but when you look at historically -- it's not always correlated. Why wouldn't you come here, a thousand reasons, I guess, I don't know what they are. We should have a pretty good TV commercial Thursday night. Hopefully guys are watching. But ultimately it's still going to come down to recruiting the right guys. TJ was a guy that had two offers when he committed to us, one was from us, one was from Iowa State and no one else was involved in it. Wasn't heralded, wasn't heralded as recently at six months ago and now is looking at fulfilling his dream of playing in the NFL.

I think it's more about the person. Noah had a few more offers but he wasn't a national recruit, either. He was more of a regional guy. I guess UCLA was involved at the end, but it wasn't like he had a million schools he was choosing from. It was pretty regional, and ultimately, he was the right person, too.

If you can find the right guy that has all those qualities,

then, yeah, sure, you hope it works out.

I guess I'm jaded or cynical. I just don't believe that that's going to make a lasting impact. I think that right now, if you don't recruit the right kid, the right things aren't going to impress him, anyway.

Q. How is the situation at running back? Is there any movement, change, progress? What's the deal there?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: No. We feel really good about the guys we have. You know, Mekhi continues to grow. Toren Young continues to grow. Both those guys have done a lot of things this spring that maybe I didn't think they were at the level to do as recently as December.

So there's growth. There's improvement. Ivory has been back working with us since about the second week. Obviously he's coming off the procedure on his ankle but he continues to improve.

And then, you know, the young guy Shadrick Byrd who showed up at semester has taken a lot of reps and done a lot of really good things with the opportunities he's had. We're impressed there.

With the top three guys, I think they each have their individual strengths. I think they can all do a lot of things well but the challenge would be making sure that we cater to their individual strengths and what each one does particularly well to try best to have an impact on the games we play in the fall.

Q. How did you get more big plays out of the running game?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Block better. It's pretty simple. People fixate on numbers. We have a coach visiting who I think is a pretty intelligent guy and his comment was, "That's stupid." I don't know if it's stupid but what I found is if they block plays well, they don't make a lot of yards.

It's kind of like the outside zone question. Wish I could get up here and give you a scientific answer. Coaches are pretty insecure by nature. We have to justify the job we have. They pay us a lot of money to come in here and coach a children's game. It's simple. It's really simple. We need to block better. Certainly we need to run the ball better but the more we block, the more yards we are going to make, it's really simple.

Q. How often last year -- the running backs not seeing some of the cuts they needed to see -- did you see enough on film --

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: We could watch our tape from this morning, and I could probably critique all 11

guys on everyone play and tell you how bad it all was. But we managed to make some positive gains this morning.

That's Derrick's job. Derrick's job is coaching the running backs and maximize the performance of those running backs and squeeze every ounce of potential out of those guys, and I think he does a heck of a job and I think he probably got a picture of that, in the amount of detail and work that goes into that.

But from where I sit, I'm pretty pleased with how those guys run. I just think we need to do a better job, and it starts with me as a coach: Putting them in positions to be successful, running good plays, calling good plays and comes down to the other ten guys out there, the quarterbacks, certainly make sure we're in the right play; and offensive line and tight end and receivers and whoever is involved in that blocking scheme, they have to do a better job of not just covering up the people they are assigned to, but moving them and displacing them and causing some disruption on the defense so that the ball carriers -- look, on any play, we are not going to be able to block them all.

So what we are trying to do is put the ball carrier at the least dangerous guy and at that point when they get on the least dangerous guy, that's when they need to be ball carriers and they need to make a play at some point. I can't just watch the tape and say we put the guy on the correct on-block player enough to say that those guys aren't producing.

Q. Do you feel like you have a much better wide receiver room, has it grown? What are you seeing there?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: I just think it's grown over time. We kind of hit the reset button a couple years ago. Felt like we needed to restock that room and restock the bodies and the development. Nick is a guy that stepped in and really was a stop-gap for us.

Unfortunately Matt VandeBerg wasn't as healthy as we would have liked to Nick would have liked to do a lot of heavy lifting over two years and we were very fortunate -- that was just dumb luck, going back to the recruiting question. We didn't really do a great job of recruiting him.

But just lucked into him. He showed up and was able to plug the holes while we were able to bring some young guys along. Added two guys last year to help on the interior, more that slotted position and we're really understudies to Nick, both of whom have come along and done a really nice job.

I know Colt mentioned Tyrone and Nick. Max Cooper is a guy that's continued to grow. Unfortunately he's

still recovering from the ACL, but we'll get him back in the summer.

So you have three bodies that you can think can do a nice job inside. You have Brandon Smith the outside, Ihmir Smith-Marsette can second step out there, and whether it's Nico or Tyrone, you have some flex going from inside to outside so that's a good thing and all we're trying to do is get the ball to guys that can help us win.

So I think the key now is, you know, we look to certainly last year because two of our better play-makers were tight ends. If we feel like our better play makers are at the outside or running back position, two years ago we played some sets with running backs, true tailbacks and James and Akrum were on the team.

So just a matter of getting our best players on the field and put them in the best positions to be successful. I think we can do more of that with receivers this year and certainly that gives you more flexibility offensively. That's nice. It's a nice luxury but what we need to do is keep improving. It's April, whatever it is, and not going to play a game between September -- August 30 -- I get confused on that, too.

Whatever we have to do over the next two and a half months where we can head into camp and feel like we're ready to continue that competition and we have one guy joining us in the summer.

So right now, it's all things are trending the way we want them but I know we're a long ways away from doing anything that matters.

Q. I know you don't read everything -- Tracy really stuck out last week in the press conference --

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: You should give yourselves more credit. I read a lot of things you guys write (Laughter).

But yeah, I know that Colt mentioned those guys, and rightfully so. Those guys have jumped off the tape and they are doing a really nice job.

Unfortunately Brandon was a little bit limited for a while there. We had about two weeks where he was just bumped and bruised and not able to go really full speed with him but he's another guy that continues to improve. I just look at him as a guy that's come a long way.

I think like any freshman, the train kind of gets ahead of it and he was seen a certain way maybe a year ago and probably didn't develop into what we were all hoping until a little bit later in the season.

Look no further than the Bowl game. You talk about a guy you were getting some production out of in the Bowl game I would say against legitimate defensive players, he's a guy that can win one-on-one matchups and he's a guy that's won one-on-one matchups in games.

I'm a little bit excited about him and I'm probably more cautiously optimistic about the other two guys, which I think was kind of my tone on Brandon a year ago. Until you show me in a game, I'm not real interested, you know. A lot of guys can do a lot of things when the lights are not on. That's why you appreciate some of the guys we've had here so much is that they are playing their best football when the lights come on.

Q. You talked about the mega recruits earlier. Why don't you think more of those types look at this, especially offensive linemen?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Never crossed my mind. We recruit them. We recruit them. We try to get involved with them and often we do get involved with them and we've had some guys come in that were pretty highly recruited. James probably the last guy, Balaga, if Tristan was anywhere but Mount Vernon, I think he probably would have been more highly recruited.

Alaric, that was a dogfight till the end. I think it was us and Michigan at the end.

We've won some of those battles. I don't mean to stand here and cry poor, I don't mean that at all. I just think what we are selling often maybe doesn't resonate with most 18-years-olds, which is okay. We want it to resonate with the right ones, and that's not a knock on anybody. What is right for us is may not be right for someone else.

But if we do a good job recruiting we get the right people in here that get the right mindset and share the same values and structure that we do, usually the results are really pretty good.

So I don't know why more mega recruits, or however you phrase it, I like that. I think that's a good way to describe it. That was mine, mega recruit? I said that? That's good. I'll give myself credit.

I don't have a good answer. The last thing I want to do, I spent a lot of time trying to crawl into the mind of a 16- and 17-year-olds, it's a scary place. My mind is a scary place. I know my mind when I was 16 offer 17 was frightening, probably downright terrifying, if you have kids that age, it's not easy.

You think ultimately, it just depends on what you're selling. We sell what we are, and we're never going to

change that. We're going to be very honest and we're going to be very direct and basically announce to you what it's going to be when you get here because if we don't, it won't work.

You know, you can't -- you can't promise things and not deliver them so, we try to under promise and over deliver. I don't know if that's always the best sales tactic but we've had success with it.

Q. Well, that's what worked with James Daniels.

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: He was the right pick -- I mean, the right fit, and we had a lot of history with the family, too. Make no mistake, recruiting a brother is pretty easy. I don't know how much credit we deserve for recruiting James Daniels. We've recruited several sets of brothers and I've never lost on a brother where we had the older one. Usually whoever wins on the first one gets the brother.

James Daniels, I think we had some inherent advantages.

But you look at other guys, Jackson, we didn't have any advantages and we resonated with him and he's had a very good career thus far. I think what you learn over time in recruiting is not to get hung up and caught up in the individual battles because ultimately, I can't find out what's in a player's heart, and if this isn't the right place for him, if he doesn't believe that, then it's probably never going to work anyway.

I think the only recruits mistakes I can really think about are times when maybe I thought it was a better fit for the kid than it actually was, and I spent a lot of time trying to convince him if it was a good fit. If you have to do all that convincing, it's probably not a great fit.

Q. You had multiple tight ends on the field for 61 percent of the plays from last year, which is up from 40 percent in '17. When you evaluated the season, did you feel like that was the right number? And then also, your 11 personnel fell by nine percent, do you expect that to return --

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: It just comes back to, any decision you make, ultimately, you can look at all the numbers, you can look at all the analytics, self-scout, and we do. Ultimately, decisions are about whatever is going to help us win a football game in that moment and it goes back to the question about the outside zone, or the question about big plays. I'll just fall back on the coach's comment early this morning; that stuff's all stupid. He was saying that. He meant it. I don't mean it. I'm kidding. All those things are important.

But ultimately, when you make a decision, in the heat

of the moment, during the week of preparation, it's based on who is available, right. Bill Parcells wrote this in his first book. He talked about how an NFL coach makes decision, and the first thing he does on Sunday is find out what personnel is he going to have available, not just for the following Sunday, but for Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, because that's going to affect how you do play next week.

All these things go into the number that will eventually get spit out at the end, but all you're trying to do, I think if you look at the Bowl game, as opposed to the last game of the regular season, you're going to see our 11 jump way up, some of the 21 went up and the way 12 went way down. It's just based on personnel ultimately.

This year, I would expect the 12 to probably diminish and I would expect the 11 to go up based on the personnel we've seen right now. But I don't know what the future holds, either. We could come out of Friday night looking totally different than we look right now.

So what you try to do is build the system, build the scheme, and build the structure so that it can handle multiple personnel groups so that you can carry one particular play, whether it's the outside zone or the drive concept and you can take it from, you know -- you don't have our playbook but I think ultimately we have like 23 personnel groups, okay, puts this guy there, all -- it's crazy. It's too much.

But in theory, you should be able to run your core stuff across 23 personnel groups and probably across a couple formations and that gives you the illusion of multiplicity to the defense, just like the multiple defense is really just the illusion of being multiple; you're playing two calls, the good teams.

So what you're trying to do is make sure that the personnel that's showing up on that sheet right there is matching the best players we have on the team.

So was it too much? Was it not enough last year? I don't know. You know, in the games we won, I think it was just right, and the games we lost, anything could have been better. Certainly anything, and that's what you struggle with as a coach. That's what you hold onto is, what could I personally have done better in the games where we came up short because that kept us from achieving our goals, and you have to go back and look at all that.

Q. TJ was telling us last year about the concept -- tight end the most important position or was it just last year?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Let me phrase this properly. It's not necessarily tight end. It's any of those

positions that are potential adjusters within the personnel groups, meaning this: A fullback in 21 personnel may be the adjuster, if we want to go from a two-back formation to a one-back formation, he's going to be the guy that's going to have to move. Or, and we're built this way, for us, a lot of times that might be the tailback, right.

So we look like we're in a formation that has three receivers on the field, but one of the guys is a tailback, and he's out there playing a severe position.

Whoever those adjusters are in your offense, so it could be a fullback, probably not as much. I love our fullbacks. I love them to death. But if we are going to put them in the slot to run an option route, I'll probably get fired, right. But maybe we have some tailbacks that could do that, maybe. We'll see.

You have tight ends and all of a sudden you have -- and we were very fortunate last year, we had a couple guys that could do multiple things.

You know, this year, probably Beyer would be more that guy, but I know one thing about Nate Wieting, which is going to get to my point, he could go to any of those spots and know exactly what to do. He may not be the best guy to go out and run a certain route or do a certain thing, but he knows where to go and what to do.

When you teach, when you learn, we're trying to teach conceptually, because we want the players to learn conceptually. I think what TJ was talking about, and this is so important, you need to understand the football play conceptually, whether it's the outside zone play and what we're trying to do conceptually, or, whether it's that drive concept and what we're trying to do conceptually, because if you understand that, now you have a chance to learn the different roles.

And just because, okay, you always run the 12-yard basic on this play, doesn't mean you shouldn't know what's outside of you to either side, what's on the outside, and, in fact, if you're a really good football player, you should know what the back is doing and I promise you, the guys that have been productive for us, they probably know what the quarterback is looking at, too, because when you start getting that conceptual understanding, now you have guys that can go to multiple spots.

A receiver that was playing No. 2 to the strong side in a concept, maybe now he's the y in that personnel group and he's playing No. 3 on that side of the concept. So now he has to have the understanding of what goes on there.

And then you have to take that a step further. It's one

thing to understand it. Now you need to have fundamental mastery of doing all those things. So we try to be as basic as we can in the teaching of blocking and catching and route running; so that we can be not only multiple with our assignments, but if you can't execute those assignments, then really, it's a moot point. You've lost the whole purpose of doing that drill.

What he was talking about -- and your question -- is the tight end the most important position? Not necessarily. Could be a receiver. Could be a tight end. Could be a back.

It's those guys that have the ability to adjust and assume multiple identities and roles within different personnel groups -- like Swiss Army knives. You like those guys. Guys that are one-trick ponies. That's a little harder. You'd better be really good at that trick.

Q. I feel like six, seven years now, you have a good idea with Phil Parker, what the defense is going to look like. What do you think this offense has to do to win the Big Ten?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: The offensive identity, the role of the offense is very simple: We need to do whatever it takes for our football team to win and I think you've got to understand a couple things about us. No. 1, we need to stop the run. That's obviously not our department.

No. 2 we need to run the football. That is our department.

And No. 3, we have to play great special teams. We have to cover kicks. Again, not our department.

But the interesting thing about offense is what you do offensively directly affects the other two phases, more so than the other two phases can affect what we do.

So one thing we try to be very cognizant of offensively is we need to protect our defense and keep them out of bad positions. That means we need to protect the football, we need to change field position and we need to score as many points as we can with the opportunities we have.

And we tie into special teams in the same way when it comes to the field possession battle. And you add in time of possession, controlling the football, I think the Bowl game is a good example.

It was very important for us in the Bowl game to keep our defense fresh and to keep them off the field as much as possible. So even though there were some things that were probably not the most effective things in the game, it was irrelevant because we needed to make sure that we kept the clock moving and we

possessed the ball as much as possible. Gave us our best chance to win.

There's going to be other games that we need to go out there and we need to score, and that's going to give us our best chance to win.

The challenge offensively here or anywhere else, you have to be able to meet those needs as they arise during the season. And to some extent, you can predict them. To another extent, you can't predict them. They are going to come up pretty organically from game-to-game, and that's the beauty of football is all three phases are working together. There is no equal distribution of the work. Some weeks it's going to be the defense pulling it. Some weeks it's going to be the offense and on some weeks it may be a special teams effort.

But we need to be multiple enough. We need to be flexible enough to rise to the occasion, regardless of what we're tasked to do. What's the identity going to be for sure? I don't know. I'm able to tell you better week by week based on who we are playing, what kind of game we think it's going to be.

But our role is pretty simple. We need to put the team first and we need to make sure we win football games here and we have to do whatever is necessary of us that week to do it, and if we can't do it, then it's not going to go well.

Q. How is Tyler Lindenbaum doing at center, and the offensive tackles?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: Tyler has done a nice job. Tyler has really made a nice transition there. And I think he's progressing well. He still has a lot of work to do and we'll see how that thing goes as we go through the summer and the fall, but he's a guy that's handled the transition well.

Really impressed with what he's been able to do in a short amount of time, but I tie that back to the receivers. I'll be impressed when we're playing other teams. That's when I'll be impressed and kind of know what we have. The tackles have done a nice job. Those are guys that have played in games, played well and probably right now are playing their best football, which is encouraging.

That's what you want to see. I'd single out both of them. Alaric has really grown in a lot of ways, trying to get a lot of flexibility out of both those guys. Tristan has impressed me through the last four weeks. He's seemed to have grown up and matured a little bit as a football player and things are starting to make a lot more sense to him. Threw him in there as a freshmen, and he's big and strong, but not quite up to speed in

what was going on.

He's at a different point in his development right now where he's starting to understand the game a little more, and that's very exciting.

Q. How comforting is it to have a quarterback who has the ability to get you out of bad plays and into the right plays?

COACH BRIAN FERENTZ: That's good and that's what we're trying to train the younger guys and get them to that point. If you're going to play quarterback here, we're going to give that you freedom and we're going to ask you to be that person on the field and I think both young guys have made a lot of progress with that. We tried to spoon-feed at first, but now we're at a point with both of them where you're starting to put more logs on the fire and they have both handled it pretty well.

Nate, we know what it is, and certainly is a really good feeling to have him out there under center, because again, you go back, you look at this thing through the years, he's played some in tough environments and big games against some really good defenses.

He's had his ups and downs like any of us, but the one thing he has done for two years is improve steadily, and he's continued to do that through this offseason, so it's comforting to have him back. It's more comforting to know that he has a mentality that's about improvement and seeing if he can't play his best football moving forward. That's what I get excited about, and not so much what he's done, but what he's going to do.