

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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LeVar Woods



LeVAR WOODS: Appreciate all you guys being here and talking about special teams. Obviously that's what I'm here to talk about. Right off the bat, I feel like we're off to a good start collectively in all the units that we're dealing with right now on special teams.

There's certainly more work to be done. We're off to a good start, but there's certainly places that we need to get to that we are not at right now.

I feel like we're kicking the ball well. We're punting the ball well, kickoffs and field goals and I think we're covering the ball well in both kickoffs and punts. There's certainly some plays that I think we'd all like to have back but we can't get those back in football.

The things I think we need to improve upon kind of right off the bat are punt return. I think we are starting to get that going a little bit and then our kick return game, as well.

I think the area more important to me is the penalty area. We've had too many penalties. We've had five in three games. That's too many. We want to make sure that we are playing turnover- and penalty-free, so those are things we're working on right now.

Just right off the bat, I feel like we've gotten good leadership. This is year three, I guess, if you will, since I've been coordinator of special teams and some of the guys have been mainstays here for three years.

So they kind of know the ropes and they are leading the young guys and helping develop a good culture that we have going on right now. It's been fun to watch those guys grow and develop roles on special teams and they can translate to offense or defense and seeing some of those guys have success so far.

Q. Can you talk about Keith and his re-emergence, and what you've seen since the spring?

LeVAR WOODS: I think Keith has done a good job. I wouldn't necessarily call it a re-emergence. Maybe re-emergence to the public but I think he's been working really hard behind the scenes, not only Keith but also Caleb, as well.

I think we're blessed with two really good kickers and two guys that are competitive every single day in both

kickoffs and field goals and they push each other. They make each other better. I think that as far as a re-emergence, I think it's more that last year, it was Miguel had the job and those guys still every day came and competed and worked hard, and kind of put themselves in good position for it this current season right now.

Q. How much has Sleep-Dalton helped this team?

LeVAR WOODS: I think it's been pretty obvious if you've been watching, but he certainly has a talented leg and he's helped this team tremendously.

I think if you look at just the Rutgers game alone, I think that's the one that people sort of started to take notice because the first game was terrible, and he'll admit that. First punt, not ideal. But I think the Rutgers game is the one where we started off backed up, his first real punt, he hit the ball across the 50-yard line and we go down and cover for no return, I think it's minus two return. It's a huge play for a team like us that prides itself on winning field position.

I think that's been big. It showed up later in that game, as well, where we pinned one down on the one-yard line, another one inside the ten, the nine-yard line, if I recall.

Then go to last week, in a big game, in a tight game, at Iowa State and comes out and hits two really good balls that end up turning the tide of the game for us. It's certainly been a big deal and it's certainly helped this football team.

Q. The consistency the last couple years, how has that helped you guys coach and maybe tweak some things?

LeVAR WOODS: Sure. I think consistency is the name of the game in any area in football, but particular any in that, where the guys that are covering have a good sense of where the ball is going to be and a good sense that they are going to have an opportunity to go down, particularly our gunners, to go down and take a shot on the returner.

It helps the punter, as well, to know he has a group of guys that are willing and hungry and want to get down the field and handle the returner if the returner does get his hands on the ball.

I think consistency has been good over the last two weeks. First week, I've thrown that out because it wasn't ideal in any stretch of the imagination, but I think we are on the right track and just need to keep pushing that thing forward.

Q. What does a player like Devonte Young do for special teams?

LeVAR WOODS: I think Devonte Young epitomizes what Iowa special teams is about: Finding a role on this team. He may not be a starter on offense or defense, but he has a role on special teams, and not only is he a player and contributor, but also as leader on special teams.

He was a guy that I talked about his freshman year. I thought he played really well as a freshman, but sophomore year took a step back in all areas, and I think he'll tell you the same thing.

He's very productive for us last year in a bunch of areas: hold guy, rush guy, coverage guy, all the different things you look for in a special teams player last year. I think he transitioned that into this year and he's taken a step forward as a leader.

He can still do more and still do better and that's what he's working on. I think it's been a good story so far. I'd be shocked if there weren't more stories from him coming up here.

Q. You kept Colton last Saturday as your holder, and Miguel talked about a lot of trust that he had in him last year and Keith mentioned it the same way.

LeVAR WOODS: I have all the trust in the world in Colton as a holder and I think both kicker, both Caleb and Keith will tell you the same thing; that he does a really good job, and it makes them comfortable. Gives them the perfect spot to tilt the laces the way they want it and Colton has been very good at that. That's been his role this year and he's done very, very well with it.

That's also helped the transition of moving to a different kicker, not only the holder, but also the snapper in Jackson Subbert. Jackson has come light years from last year as a snapper. Last year was his first getting in game, and really, start building as the season's went on and I think he's improved drastically in both the punt game and field goal game.

Q. Broken in Harris and Campbell last week. Something you saw in practice?

LeVAR WOODS: I think both those guys have done a good job. Obviously there have been some depth issues at certain positions, but both those guys went in and did well and got their feet wet. It's fun to see them

and fun to talk to them after the game about their experience.

I think both those guys are certainly capable guys that can help not only special teams but help this football team.

Q. What did they say about the experience?

LeVAR WOODS: It was really fast, coach. It was really fast.

I told you it was going to be fast.

Q. What's the adjustment for Michael this week? One thing he talked about during Media Day was he wanted to be challenged in cold weather. Are you looking at that already? What are some things that he can do as we get into the later weeks.

LeVAR WOODS: Certainly that's going to be a challenge for him, because the last school he was at was warm weather all the time. He's played in rain and he's played in some conditions before but not like he's going to see here in October and November in Iowa.

I think that's part of the reason, as you mentioned, that he came here. That's one of the things that drew him to coming to Iowa. I think last week was a good test for him in a game where the condition, the field, was a little bit muddy and wet. I think it's part of the deal for him in dealing with those elements.

Now, as the weather starts to change, wind is going to be a factor, potentially snow, cold. But I think for him, it's getting used to those things and having a plan like we did last week and executing a plan and going out and doing what he does.

Q. Would you say bad weather helped for a change?

LeVAR WOODS: I think that's something that wanted to draw him here. That's one of the things, when he reached out that he wants to kick in the Big Ten because punters in the Big Ten have to deal with weather, and he feels if there's a chance to play at the next level, that's something to add to his resumé.

Q. Keith Duncan kicked a field goal in each of the quarters -- sunlight, dry, wet, rain, different hashmarks. When you analyze what he was able to do and the distances he was able to do it from, how many performances have you been around that have been comparable? Seems like a very short list?

LeVAR WOODS: I think one of the performances you could compare is the Pinstripe Bowl against Boston College where the field was frozen and eight degrees, the field was frozen. Every kicker I saw go out and take

pregame warm ups fell on their back side. Somewhat comparable to that. I would say that was probably a little bit worse. Keith would admit that, as well.

However I think the way not only Keith but all the specialists, the snapper, the holder and the punter handled that situation, not only the field conditions and wet balls and muddy balls, things like that, but also the delay. That can certainly affect a person if they let it.

But I feel like we have a mentally tough room; a room that had a plan going into it and executed the plan and then when some adversity hit, that they regrouped, went back to the plan again, more adversity, meaning two-hour delay, and boom, they regrouped and went back at it.

I feel like we have a really good group, a really good room and a really good group in that regard. So they are able to handle those situations.

Q. What led to your going with Nico as your punt return guy? Ihmir was top of the list for a while. As an area of improvement, what would you like to see happen back there?

LeVAR WOODS: I think Nico has done a good job. He hasn't been back there before as a punt returner. If you look at the library he's had for three games now, started off with a punter where he kind of knew where the ball was going to do. Traditional style punter with good spiral, knew where it was going to go, and good to get his feet wet with that because he knew where it was going to go.

Next week is, okay, now you have a rugby punter where it can go this way, could go that way, you're not quite sure how deep, how short. And he had two games right way that were bang-bang that were two good tests for him.

And I think then going into the next week, now you play a guy at Iowa State where he can traditional spiral or he can roll out in rugby. I think he was able to take advantage of that.

So I guess my point with all that -- I think you're only going to see him get better at that. I think you're only going to see him become more comfortable back there making a decision, and fielding balls and getting his hands on it and getting more confident.

I think that's what you're going to see here coming up in the future. I've seen it myself in the last couple weeks, just week-by-week, it just gets more comfortable. You've seen him at receiver and he does pretty well. He's good in traffic and has good hands and he's a trustworthy guy.

Q. But you picked him over Ihmir, you must have seen something. What did you see in him?

LeVAR WOODS: I think not to compare him to a person but I feel like he does have the ability to make a quick decision and he can run in traffic. So we went with him for that and Ihmir for kick returns and kind of see where it goes moving forward.

Q. Kicking game as a whole, I don't think it could be any better at this point. How do you keep that momentum?

LeVAR WOODS: I think keeping the guys hungry. I think they come to work every day -- I'm talking about the kickers, punters and also the coverage units. They come to work every day to get better and they have something to prove.

I think one of the things that I've been incredibly pleased with is the way Caleb is kicking off the ball. I think he's a good weapon for us in that regard. He gives us good hang time, not always a touch back, but we have a chance to go down and really get after a returner if we want to.

He certainly can kick a touchback if you want to, can kick it left. He can do a lot of things, and so he's certainly been a weapon for us.

But I think the biggest thing is keeping guys challenged and keeping them hungry and trying to be best we can possibly be and that's what we're doing every day.