

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon and happy holidays to everybody. We got an early Christmas present yesterday with the news about Matt VandeBerg. Glad to get that news back from the NCAA. Certainly better than last year we got a little lump of coal when it came to Drew Ott. That was not much fun.

Anyway, great to hear about Matt. Matt is a tremendous player, tremendous leader on our football team. We missed him this year and it will be great to have him back. The bad news is that Matt informed me yesterday he will not play in next year's bowl if we earn a bid, so we'll have to deal with that.

In all seriousness, I know that was a topic this week and I'm really not going to comment, as necessarily I'm not privy to the situations in either of the three cases. But one thing I did hear that kind of concerned me coming into work, I heard a national media figure just talk about bowl games and a guy playing in a meaningless game and that does concern me a little bit. I think sometimes maybe people aren't aware of what their word choice can suggest.

You know, as a college coach, I think all of us have experienced when you play in bowl games, that is an important thing. It's really important to the participants, and I think it's true of all games. I've coached in the NFL, I've coached 27 years here now in a couple different capacities, I coached in what used to be I-AA football and it was for the academy, Worcester Academy. If we lined up and played, it was important to the team, whether we might have had 38 players, the 42 parents that might have been there, that type of thing. It's really been no different at any level, if you line up and play, games are important.

I don't think the person that said that meant anything by it but it's one of the fears that I have about the playoff system and the concept of expanding. It's almost as if you're not in the playoff system, everything else doesn't count, and I think a lot of people are missing the boat on that one. So that's my commentary for today, just a little something I'm concerned about a little bit.

Looking backwards, just want to congratulate, again we had seven seniors that got their diplomas this past

Saturday. In addition to that, Damond Powell, one of our former players earned his degree. So happy about that and certainly happy for all those guys.

Moving on to our preparation. I think the players have really done a good job thus far. They have been focused, doing a good job in the meetings, good job on the practice field, and really pleased. I think we are making some ground and have done a good job so far in our preparation for the Outback Bowl. We still certainly have work to do.

Because of the schedule and because of the weather, I think it looks like we are going to have a little window for the guys to get home and we're going to keep that to guys that live fairly close so nobody gets stuck or hung up anywhere. We've done it; we've encouraged the players to take a teammate home, if they are going home, maybe take a teammate or two with them. I think the guys are doing that. And then the 40 players or so that are left in town here, we are going to absorb them as a coaching staff and make sure they have a place to go Christmas Eve and Christmas Day time, as well. We'll all gather back here on Christmas night, have a real nice dinner for them and then they are going to go to a movie and get back, do something the next morning and travel down to Tampa. So that's kind of our plan moving forward.

And just wrapping it up, this is really an exciting time for all of us, as players, coaches, and I think our fans, too, I think a lot of them are very enthusiastic about what's going on. Coaches have been busy working on the tape, working on the plan.

Players certainly have been working hard on the preparation and obviously we're going to have to do a great job and try to be ready because we anticipate another tough hard-fought type game like we had in November. Seems like we had a couple of those in the last three-week stretch and we anticipate another one, as well.

That being said, sounds like the Hawkeye fans have been really receptive to the game. We are excited about that. Wish all them the best as they travel to Tampa for safe travels and then certainly wish everybody a happy holiday season. With that, I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Against Florida, you're playing a team that's got potentially four first-round draft picks. It seems to be a Michigan-type of defense. What kind of challenges do they present in how you can move the football?

COACH FERENTZ: One thing I would say and this is probably true at least since '90, they have recruited very well year-in and year-out. They have a lot of good-looking players. They are athletic, they have got good size, the athleticism and speed and they are well-coached. Jim and his staff have done a great job in two years' time.

But they are really a good football team, so we know we have got a challenge there. Michigan does come to mind. They are very, very talented that way. Well-coached, they play hard, and it's going to be a big challenge for us. They have had some injury challenges during the year. My guess is they will have some guys back.

But offense, defense, they have got good players and their punter and their kicker are both outstanding, as well. It seems like everywhere you turn, they have somebody that can really make it difficult for you.

Q. Is Cole Croston back in the practice?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's got a couple days now and so far, so good. Hardly out of the woods and he missed a lot of time but the good news is everything is positive right now and hopefully we can just kind of keep him on track, and if so, we plan on playing him if he's able to play, certainly we'd like to get him in there. But he's got to be able to play effectively, too, so right now, the picture looks pretty optimistic.

Q. If he is ready, does it worry you at all that the chemistry of the lineup?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if we have any chemistry -- I mean, it seems like it's been a different line every week.

One thing we have been able to do is be flexible, and out of necessity. So it would be a really nice thing to deal with if we have an excess player or two. That would be a really good issue to deal with for us.

Q. Manny Rugamba, where is he at right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we'll know more maybe at the end of this week. He's got a little bit of a fracture, so it has to be far enough along. He's right on the edge in terms of quote, unquote, the numbers, so it could go either way. We have to play him like he's not going to be there but there's a chance he could be ready, and then you're dealing with, again, the same issue, how much practice time will he get before the

game.

Q. What's your understanding of the Florida quarterback situation, and what do you expect; is one different from another?

COACH FERENTZ: What I understand thus far is that Del Rio is supposed to start throwing when they pick up their practice again. So I don't think -- it doesn't sound like he's throwing the ball. But it sounds like he's going to be ready to throw the ball.

That means it's clearly cloudy for us. We're not really sure which guy will be playing. They are not totally the same, but they are not totally different, either. So it's not like a radical departure. Everybody has got a personality or different traits, that type of thing. But at least we're not going from a guy that's strictly a runner to a guy that's strictly a thrower or one of those situations. It really doesn't alter things a lot for us.

Q. Obviously still one game left, but C.J. Beathard, wonder if you could share your perspective on how you'll look back at his career here?

COACH FERENTZ: No matter what happens in this ballgame, it's been extremely successful.

To me, Bill Parcells probably defined quarterbacks as well as anybody. It's about moving a team and leading a team. That's what a quarterback's job is. You know, no matter what your style of offense is, what your style of play is as a quarterback.

I was telling somebody, I was watching a little bit of the fourth quarter of the Bronco game and they referenced Tebow beating the Steelers in a playoff game out there, whatever year that was. And certainly Tim Tebow was not a conventional NFL player or quarterback. But a quarterback's job is to move his team and lead them to victory.

What a career C.J. has had. Probably in a nutshell, the best way to put it is, you know, last year he was anything but healthy, and all the guys around him were pretty healthy. So we were a little bit more potent offensively.

This year, he's one of the few guys in that connection that is healthy and then, you know, one guy is in Indy and one guy is in Denver, two guys were out most of the season. That really impacted what he was able to do this year but it doesn't mean -- he can still throw the football. That hasn't changed.

And he did I think just a great job of leading our team. We've been running the ball more than throwing it and our quarterback does a lot in the run game for us, too. That gets overlooked sometimes, but the bottom line is

our players love him, they believe in him and they follow him. He's been a great leader for us.

Q. Have you had enough practice where you've been able to tell if George Kittle is going to be himself in this game?

COACH FERENTZ: Optimistic, yes, certainly a lot better than last game we played him in. He's kind of getting to the finish line in that one. You know, we had a big break, no matter what, we had a break afterwards, so we kind of let him get out there and play.

But he was hardly at full throttle in the Nebraska game. He's a lot further down the track. Nobody is 100 percent healthy this time of year unfortunately, and it will probably take him a month or two to get back. But he looks more like George Kittle now which is a good thing.

Q. It's taken some time, linebackers, you had Kersey, Hitches -- it's taken some time to get three guys playing together and now you have got three guys -- do you feel really good about that linebacker core in this game and down the road?

COACH FERENTZ: Really do, and your point is a good one. All three of those guys have a lot of starting experience, and I think one of the good stories in that group is Bo Bower. You talk about guys that have good attitudes. Bo is a starter and then not a starter and now he's back as a starter.

I never saw Bo look discouraged. I'm sure he was. I'm sure there are times he wasn't feeling great about the situation but he never showed it. He just kept working hard. We came into camp this year, really not knowing who would be our Will linebacker. And like a year ago, when Cole Fisher won the job, Bo ascended and really did a good job and hasn't looked back.

He's one of those guys, again, you'll use as an example down the road just about the proper attitude. He could have been discouraged, pouted, all that kind of stuff and he probably did it, but he did it on his own time, not ours. With us, it was all positive, good effort, good attitude. It's really good to see him out there playing well like he is.

We have three guys that we have a lot of confidence in. They are going to get tested in this game. These guys, big offensive line, really good skill players. But it does help us play better defense for sure.

Q. Josey talked a little about his dialogue or whatever it is with the NFL and how that came back. As a coach, do you prefer that, it came back fairly quickly; do you prefer it to come back quickly? He's not a guy who is going to take that

news and probably let it sink in -- probably a slap in the face.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if it's a slap in the face. He is still a junior. We have two guys on the wall that chose to come back for their senior years, and both of them played better as seniors. And to me, they both, I don't want to speak for Desmond. But I think Brandon, I know, felt like that was just a great thing for him, a great experience and I think that's why Desmond came back.

You know, so everything has its time and place and those guys have plenty of time to be NFL players. The results were kind of predictable, you know, and if he was really serious about it, what we would have done is talked to, like we've done to the other guys, reached out to six, seven people that are real high up the chain, get their reports and get a good, accurate survey of where they would go.

I don't think Josey was all that concerned about it. Pat Angerer was just in the building; there's another guy. That extra year makes a really big difference for most players, unless you're just a freak of nature player and there are a couple of those walking around but I don't think we've too many come through our hallways. Most of our guys get better with every step along the way.

Q. I was going to ask, Dallas Clark's situation was different.

COACH FERENTZ: He was a year older because of the injury, he had -- for lack of it, he was a medical gray shirt, as I understand it. He sat out that first fall. He was, whatever, 23, 24. You know, Shonn could have come back for another year, Fred Russell. Running backs are a bit little different if you've really had a prolific career.

Q. I know that there was a mix of developmental early on in camp. Did you like what you saw out of the No. 2 quarterback? Is there competition there?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think there will be wide open competition, really. It's not like anybody is head and shoulders above right now. We'll let those three guys go compete and see where it all goes. That stuff we'll worry about when we get back after the holidays here.

But we shut down the developmental part and we're just straight ahead with the team and normal practice.

Q. What have you seen out of Alaric Jackson?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's got really good potential. The obvious thing, he's big, and probably the biggest guy we've had, I'm guessing. You know, I always thought Scherff and Carl Davis were the two biggest guys we brought in as freshmen.

Alaric is pretty big, and raw like most first year linemen. He really has a great attitude, a really good work ethic. And speaking of the period that we've gone through, we've seen some things that are really encouraging about him. You know, we'll let him just keep growing but my sense is he'll be a really good football player for us.

Q. Obviously none of the players on this year's team have won a bowl game. Are you sensing any extra motivation in that regard?

COACH FERENTZ: Not yet, but yes, I would say that, because in August, or in the summertime, it was actually in July, they gave us that as one of the three things that they were really focused on. It's positive that they are thinking about it. They are aware of it.

That is something they want to do and it's like anything, you know, it's going to come with a price. It's going to be tough to accomplish. We seem to have a habit of being underdogs in bowl games and that's going to be the case in this one. It's realistic.

We're going to have to really play a good game, but I do think, I gave our seniors all the credit in the world for what happened down the stretch in November, and to me, I'm very confident they will do all they can to put us in position, at least in this game.

Q. You say there were three things you were focused on in August. Can you say the other two?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, the trophy games were really important to our guys, and we're three out of four in that category.

Getting back to Indy and winning was important to us and we came up short there. But they did their part to at least help us to the next trip. They got us back up on our feet.

And the other one was win a bowl game. They wanted to win a bowl game.

Q. How about you, in your approach, coaching, the last several bowl games haven't gone well, especially in first halves. What tangibly can you say that maybe you've done differently as you look to prepare for this game?

COACH FERENTZ: We just tried to shift our approach a little bit and be a little bit more Iowa City centered, if you will. We've had some heavy work, especially with younger guys, earlier.

The idea really starting today was to really start to streamline our process a little bit more. It's required that we go down Monday. Otherwise we probably

would have traveled Tuesday. That would have been our other plan. I don't think it's going to affect the game -- I know it's not going to.

But that's what we would have done, so we would have stayed even one more day here, and just kind of functioned in our home environment. But I think you know, I think the idea was to streamline things from really from today on with our practice schedules and hopefully the players will respond. Today went well.

Hopefully the next two days will be really good, as well.

Q. Does that mean like opponent, when you say streamlined --

COACH FERENTZ: Now we are really starting to focus on the game plan. We haven't really talked much about that. Also our time, we're cutting our times back a little bit. So the heavier lifting has already been done. Now it's more a matter of coming in and kind of a little bit of a November mode, the latter part of the season where we do trim times down, and we're typically on the field longer in September than we are in November.

Just wanted them to feel like we're really kind of honing in on what we're trying to do. It takes a mature team to do that, so that's a risk you take. We keep putting that challenge out there for our guys.

Q. Any type of like curfew changes or anything like that when you're on the ground there?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, yeah, we used to have later curfews but we used to be there nine days ahead of time, too. We're going to treat it like we're in-season, basically and there will be a lid on things. Certainly I think the first night is the only night they will be out at all, at an hour that I would consider late.

So you know, I'm 61, right, so nine o'clock's late for me. We'll give them one night where they can stay out past 11, but after that, it's going to be kind of a little tighter.

Q. What's your depth like at corner? Did you move anybody?

COACH FERENTZ: The few, the proud, the three. That's kind of the way it was with the offensive line in some of our games. You just, you Spahn and Sain and pray for rain; you just kind of hope nothing happens, nothing dramatic between now and whenever the game ends on the second.

Because we're really thin. When Manny went down, that's where we're at. We were thin when he was still healthy. So you know, the calvary ain't coming, so we have to make do with what we have, and if somebody has to move out there, we'll do that but I have no idea

who that would be.

Q. Will you move anybody during bowl practice?

COACH FERENTZ: Mmm-mmm. So there we go.

What really would have been amusing if we were playing Washington State. And believe me, I had that thought, okay, when Manny went down, I'm thinking air raid, or whatever they call it now, 47 passes in a half, and we've got two DBs out there. It's like, you know, whoa, okay, that would have been interesting.

Q. Have you seen any appreciable growth out of the wide receiver core?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're making strides. We'll find out on the second. Hopefully we're getting a little bit better and a little more confident out there. We'll find out.

Q. Do you usually use like a third corner as a nickel or a fourth in the dime or will you move a safety maybe to that role?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, that's off the table, right. We don't have a fourth corner right now. So it has to be a safety or a backer to sub somebody out. That's really what we're down to.

I guess the good news is, we've got a couple more safeties, or at least one more safety than we thought we had due to miles getting injured and he's back healthy. We have at least a couple guys that can play now and are experienced.

Q. Which one is going to start?

COACH FERENTZ: That's a good question. I don't know. I'll ask Phil that later on. They both have done a really good job.

Q. Do you like playing a bowl game at noon? Wake up, eat breakfast, go to a meeting, go to the stadium and play ball?

COACH FERENTZ: It's actually one o'clock there, I believe, 1:07. That's really weird because that used to be when all games were, unless you were 'the game.' So it is really weird. It's funny to say one o'clock is a strange kickoff, or noon. We've had a couple of those on east coast time.

It really feels strange because we are kind of ingrained to that 11:00, 3:30 deal or whatever it is, 2:30, I can't remember. It's going to be a little bit strange. The guys won't have any problem. They will sleep an extra hour. It's no problem with them.

Q. With C.J., you've had him and other players over the years with young children. How different of a challenge are those players versus your typical

college players?

COACH FERENTZ: My experience on that has been we've had more than several players that have had children.

In fact, one of them was back here recently as an honorary captain, Abdul Hodge, and his beautiful daughter was with him and that ages you, too. I think she was born just the same year he came up here and she's whatever she is now. She's going to college next year -- I'm sorry, she's a sophomore. So she's like 16. I guess she was born when he was in college. But anyway, she's a really nice young lady, what a great couple they are, what a great family.

I think the key thing from my experience and like anybody with children, if the family, are they ready to support the parents in this whole endeavor, especially when you're going to college. We've got guys on our staff that had kids when they were in college. It's not easy. It's not easy going to college. It's certainly not easy to be a college football player, and to have a child on top of it, that's one more part to the equation.

But I think the key thing is great parental support from both sides and that's exactly what we have here. So it's really, it was great news and based on what I know, really comfortable with the whole situation. I think everybody is in a good place to support the baby.

Q. The VandeBerg news, how did it all come about? Since we didn't get to talk to him, what was his reaction?

COACH FERENTZ: He actually announced it to the team yesterday, and I threw that in there about, he's not going to play in the bowl game, so that got a laugh out of the guys. He actually came up and thanked me. I don't know what he thanked me for; I should be thanking him. Just really the opportunity to come back, like we were going to shut him out or something or kick him on the street.

But we just found out through compliance. We were told the 20th would be the day of decision and we found out yesterday morning. And it seems like a black and white case, but you just never know, so it's better to get it black and white on the right side, but it's great news, certainly.

Q. He was out there this morning in practice. Is he full go?

COACH FERENTZ: He's not full go but he's been in gear a little bit and doing some things, you know, in individual work, that type of thing. It just started about two days ago, so at least he's -- I'm not saying he could play, probably couldn't, just because probably blow a hamstring out in the first quarter. So at least everything is healing the way it should and no surprises

there.

Q. You look at some of your true freshmen, Shaun Beyer, T.J. Hockenson and Noah Fant, how do you like their progress? Obviously Noah played well down the stretch. Do you feel like the other two are going to challenge for positions next year or are they a little behind?

COACH FERENTZ: We kind of thought Shaun would end up in there, but it was one of those situations where we thought maybe he could potentially help us out, so we let that go until December.

T.J. has done a really nice job and we felt good about those two guys in particular in camp, and that kind of helped us move Noah along, knowing that we felt like we had two pretty good players to stagger, wouldn't be a bad thing.

I think collectively that group of three has a chance to be really good. That's important for us. As you know, we like to use tight ends. I feel good about that. We'll know more as we go along but so far, so good.

Q. What's it mean when a player like Damond Powell comes back and gets his degree? He would have maybe not done that?

COACH FERENTZ: It was important and I know it was important to his mom and dad, first and foremost with them. My experience, and I was 18, 19, 20, at one time, too. It's been a while now but I know when you're in that age period and you're a football player, you know, sports and academics don't always balance out the way they should, and unfortunately a lot of us learned as we get older how important that education part is.

Luckily it's kind of like talking about the baby, but when there's good parental support for that education, that really helps, too, and that message comes from home as well as from us that completing that degree is really important. And we've got two more guys that are just like this close; they will graduate this spring from that same time zone, the '13, '14 teams that didn't complete their degrees. Both of them are about two -- one guy is one course away, one guy is two courses away, and they should be done in May.

So that is important. I've never worried about the APR, or graduation numbers. Graduation numbers we use in recruiting, but there's ways to beat that system, too. I've learned some tricks. Jim Reid came and told us about stuff that gets done in other parts of the country, boy, that's a good trick. Put a fifth-year walk-on on scholarship and you get to count him as your graduate, like he may not play, but you have one sitting there. Got a guy that can't play but he can graduate. That's

one way to pad your stats.

I've never worried about that. You just worry about doing the right thing, and going to class, getting your degree. The end of the day, that's the most important thing, so it's really good.

Dallas Clark, I remember him coming back after the Super Bowl. He's sitting in class with a Super Bowl ring on, and you know, but that's great. That was important I think in his mind, his mom wanted him to do that. That motivated him to come back.

The biggest surprise of all time was when Matt Roth came back. I had to ask him, I said, "You're doing this because of your mom, right?"

He said, "No." He said, "I'm a father now. I've got kids and it's just important that I do this." I was like, you know, Matt Roth, the world does change.

Mike Titley, the same way. Mike did the same thing for that very same reason. That's a great thing. It's a really good thing and sends a great message.

Q. Speaking of rules, Alabama apparently has figured out that it can bring back players to actually practice in pads. Would you bring back any former players, and which ones would you bring if you could?

COACH FERENTZ: I think most of our guys are probably smart enough to know that it's just not a good idea, it really isn't. You know, it's kind of like coaches lining up and going against current guys. That's not a good idea, either.

But yeah, I guess, you know, to each his own. I remember talking about when we were playing against Pryor, like how do you get somebody to simulate Pryor. It's impossible and unfortunately we don't have a lot of graduates that can do that, either. It's kind of funny.

Totally unrelated but related, Kevin Kasper is living down in Arizona now. Kevin is a little bit of a fanatic. He and Bob Sanders train. I asked LeVar, what do you think the body fat between those two guys is, it's ridiculous. Those guys could probably do it because they are workout warriors. But I think they are both too smart to go back and get whacked around by guys that are younger.

Q. Did you know that was even legal?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I didn't. I still can't believe it is. I'm not saying -- I'm not accusing anybody of that that it's illegal or they wouldn't be doing it. But they certainly wouldn't be talking about doing it.

I guess it's one of those things that maybe you have to explain that red means stop and all that stuff. But it's like, are you kidding me, that's legal? That's stupid. But if it's legal then you might as well do it, I guess.

Q. Along the lines of graduations, Des King comes in and graduates in three years, that's pretty impressive.

COACH FERENTZ: No question. Anybody that graduates in three and a half years, and Tyler Nielsen did the same thing. It's funny because we were practicing for a bowl game Friday night, you know, the night before graduation and this guy has a 3.6 in business and he had a 7:00 final. Or maybe it was 5 p.m. I think it was 7 p.m.; it makes a better story. That's a heck of a gift for you, you know you're doing a good job. You get to have the last final available.

But it does, it sends a really good message. And to graduate in three and a half years for anybody, that's not easy. I think the norm right now is four and a half to five for any student. It's kind of the way he works on the field. He just works, always practicing, doesn't miss things.

It's really an admirable thing, and he's the first guy in that family to graduate which I know his mom is very, very proud of and Desmond is proud of it, too, and rightfully so. It's a just a really nice accomplishment.

Same thing with Jaleel. I can tell you right now, Jaleel is not wild about school. We knew that when we recruited him, and I don't think he's wild about it now. But he just probably had his highest GPA for a semester since he's been here. You know, just when you see those kinds of things, that really shows you guys are growing and doing things right.