

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Brian Ferentz



BRIAN FERENTZ: Good afternoon, and thank you guys for coming. We're at the halfway point, interesting the bye week comes right at the halfway point.

If you look at us offensively going back to week 1, we knew we were going to have some young guys, some new guys stepping into quite a few positions. We were interested and apprehensive maybe about how they would play and perform, and I think those guys have pretty much acquitted themselves very well through six games, and then you look at some other positions we're a little bit more veteran, and maybe the results haven't been what we expected or what we wanted. Bottom line is we're sitting at 4-2, and if you surveyed anybody on the staff or any of our players who I know you guys see every week, our expectation was to be at 6-0. Any game we play we expect to win it, and we don't have the liberty of worrying about Vegas lines and things of that nature or who's experienced, who's not experienced, where the game is, what time it's at. We expect to win every game we play, and we've had opportunities to win the two games that we didn't win.

We're frustrated and certainly disappointed by that but not discouraged. If you look at us moving into the second half of the season, from the offensive standpoint, the first thing we need to do is establish our run game with some consistency, and we're sitting at 3.7 a carry, and that's not going to help us win any Big Ten games. We have six Big Ten games remaining, the West division is certainly still up for grabs.

What we need to do is establish the run game, and probably just as concerning are our turnover numbers, and we sit at 11 turnovers on the year. Two interceptions, and both of those interceptions, I'm sure the quarterback would like to have them back, but he's sitting at 15 touchdowns to two interceptions, so we're not quite as concerned about the interceptions, but nine fumbles, 14 on the ground, nine lost, that's a real bad number, and I've never been around a really good championship level football team that's fumbled the ball at that rate. The good news is we've got six games to clean it up. We certainly intend to.

Q. How do you measure the run game?

BRIAN FERENTZ: There's a lot more to it, but if you look at just a baseline number, when you look at yards per carry, usually it is representative of where you're at

for a season. That's a really good number to look at. Just from this standpoint: All those things tend to balance each other out when you look at the yards per carry. Certainly if it's 3rd and 2 and we get two yards plus an inch, we're pretty happy. That's a win. If it's 1st and 10 you expect four yards, and that's how we measure it. If you're on the goal line, you expect to score. All those things factor in.

But if you look at it over a season and over a large sample size, usually all that stuff -- it kind of evens out, and when you get into the average, I know this, if you're averaging over five a carry, you have a pretty good football team typically, pretty good run game, it's pretty healthy. If you're somewhere around four and a half, you're probably playing winning football, at least for us and our numbers, but if you're below that, it's not good enough.

When you look at it as an entirety, the season to this point, at times the run game has been very efficient, has been very productive for us, and it was a week ago. We were running the ball pretty well. Certainly makes it easier to find rhythm as an offensive unit, but if you look at us two weeks ago in East Lansing, the numbers would bear it out there, we weren't running the ball efficiently and it was really causing some problems for us offensively.

Q. How do you guys measure run efficiency?

BRIAN FERENTZ: We don't so much look at run efficiency as we look at 1st down efficiency or 3rd down efficiency. We try to treat it a lot more situationally. So the run game can be extremely efficient on 3rd and 1, but maybe in that situation we're averaging 1.7 a carry. But the run game could be below efficiency on 1st down -- if we're averaging 3.7 a carry on 1st down, we're not hitting our goal. We'd like to be 2nd and 6 certainly on 1st down. You can measure run efficiency a lot of ways. If you go through every single play and if we were to pull up the tape and just say, all right, here's all the runs from this season, here's all, whatever it is, 213 of them, some of those runs are called runs where there's a bubble pass being spit out. If the bubble pass makes five yards, it's pretty efficient, we'll take it as a run. If the bubble pass makes three yards, we should have thrown it, should have handed the ball off. We hand the ball off, it makes two yards, but it's 1st and 10, not efficient. It's

3rd and 1 and a half and we make two yards, same play, we're pretty happy.

So there's some variables that go into it. I do think the yards per carry is a fair number, like I said, when you look at the average and things tend to balance out over time. We'd like to be sitting right around five yards a carry, and certainly we're well off that right now.

Q. It's obvious you guys did a lot of self-scouting in the off-season based on not only the personnel groupings but when you do it, how you do it and how you approach it. What did you see on 3rd down from last year, for instance, I think the first five games out of your 57 3rd down plays, 50 of them were in 11 grouping, now it's completely different, all over the place. How much of that did you examine, how much of that has been measured to try to vary what you're doing on those downs and distances?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Certainly you want to have some balance to what you're doing. But what really factors more into those decisions on 3rd and 2 to 10 is typically who are your best players, what's the best way to get them the ball, and how can you best match up against what somebody else is doing, and typically anywhere from 3rd and 4 to 10 yards, you're going to see some form of cover one every week, some kind of man coverage. You're probably going to see some kind of zone. For most people it lives in the two high world. For some people, they play a little bit of post safety zone to match their one.

How can you best effect that? How can you best get match-ups, and how can you get the ball to the guys you really want to get it to, the guys that can win in those situations, and whether it's more mesh type crossing routes, if you look at us, I know we've always said this in the run game, hey, we run three plays, and that's true, and that's still true. We run three plays. How they get dressed up, what personnel group, formationally, how we try to match those things up, that can vary a lot week to week, and really when you look at the passing game and especially 3rd down passing game, it's pretty much the same thing. You're going to try to run about three or four concepts. How many different ways can you make them look? Sometimes it's as easy as changing personnel groups and just having a bigger guy do something a smaller guy normally does, and usually that's far away from the play. It's window dressing. But we try to be cognizant every week of what we don't want to do is go out there and run the same play we ran the week before the same way we ran it because that's what those guys watch, just like they don't want to line up and everybody has these exotic 3rd down blitzes. We're not typically going to see the same one that they

showed on tape the week before. They know we've studied that. So it's kind of that cat-and-mouse game.

We like to change the personnel, but when you look at a guy like Noah Fant, he really lives in that hybrid world anyway, so sometimes we have two tight ends on the field, but we just as easily could play with three receivers on the field and do the same kind of thing.

If you look at what we've done, sometimes you have the same call come up two or three times, you put a little formation or personnel window dressing on it.

Q. How would you assess Nate Stanley?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Right now I think we have a pretty efficient young quarterback who's exceeded our expectations and really has done a fairly good job for us. You look at the touchdowns, interceptions, you look at the completion percentage, he's right at about 57 percent. So just his efficiency numbers have been impressive.

One thing I'd say about Nate, I feel good about how he's grown as the season has gone on, and I think the benefit to a young guy like Nate who's 19 years old, he's in his first year as a full-time starter, and he's seen more defensively in six games than I think a lot of guys do maybe in two years, and that just is because of the schedule we've played and how people have chosen to defend us. That's a real positive. How he's handled it along the way, also very positive. We've had some real low lows. We try to kick into a two-minute situation there at the end of the half in the first game, and we can't get the snap. We can't even get the snap.

Then you fast forward a week later and we have two big tempo situations where we have to go score and get points, and he's operating like he's done it for five years. So you look at what he's done, you're real encouraged, but also he has a lot of room to grow. I mentioned the fumbles. Shoot, he's responsible for three of them, and two of them weren't even contested. He's got to do a better job taking care of the ball. He's done a pretty good job in the throwing game, now we have to have a little bit more ball security back there in the pocket, but he's a guy that's got us in and out of the right plays, and he's been extremely efficient throwing the ball as I mentioned. You look at 3rd down, he's gotten the ball out on time, and he's gotten it to where it has to go the majority of the time.

You look at last week and we were right off our 3rd down number; we weren't quite exactly where we wanted to be, but he threw the ball 12 times on 3rd down last week. He completed nine of them. He completed nine of them. Six of them were conversions. If you're completing the ball nine times on 3rd down in 12 attempts, you have a chance. You have a chance.

We chose to run the ball a couple other times, and then really if you look at two of the incompletions, he didn't make a great decision.

I think a more veteran quarterback checks the ball down, and we probably are looking at two more conversions plus 11 completions on 3rd down, so if you just look at some of the things he's doing from a numerical standpoint, it's very encouraging. But I think the challenge for him is just like the challenge for a guy like Tristan Wirfs or Brandon Smith or Ihmir Smith-Marsette or Noah Fant or T.J. Hockenson, go down the list, right, some of these young guys we're playing, can we continue to improve and how much better can we get. Because I think it's real easy sometimes as a young player to start feeling like maybe you've accomplished something or you have arrived, and we went through that after the Iowa State game. The goal around here is not to be 2-0, it's not to beat Iowa State. Just like the goal is not to come close with Penn State. We expect to beat Penn State, and that was the comment in the meeting room afterwards. I told those guys, was anybody here surprised when we were in the football game in the fourth quarter despite our best efforts offensively to not be in the football game? Was anybody surprised? And the answer was no, and of course it's not. We expect to win the football games we play. But I think young guys have to learn, right, it's so easy to be satisfied with things. I don't think Nate is in danger of that, but I know why you ask the question and I hesitate to say anything other than he's a young guy who's done well, but I think he has a chance to be a really good football player here, and I think that puts him in a club with a lot of other young guys we have, but are we going to go do that, or are we going to be satisfied with being 4-2 and being average? That's the question.

Q. What's your definition of success in the passing game? Is it completion percentage, something else?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, definitely success would be completing them. And it's like I mentioned with the football games, we don't dial up shots down the field expecting to throw incompletions. Now, you try to be realistic, you're not going to complete every ball that goes down the field. But I'll tell you what, we'd better start completing some of them because I really think that would help us offensively.

But when you dial up those deep shots, the true shots where you're sending the ball down the field no matter what, if you send one down the field once a quarter and you look at four a game, if you're hitting on two of those, I think you're really, really good. If you're hitting on one, you're doing pretty well because those are the type plays that change the game. But certainly we haven't been afraid to send it down the field. Probably

looking at more like five or six a game for us, and when we hit those, it really changes the complexion of things, and I think what that just comes down to is, again, it's the word that nobody wants to hear, but it's execution, and I think that falls on us as coaches, starting with me. I've got to do a better job in practice making sure we get those things repped, making sure we get them hit, giving those guys opportunities to make those plays so that when we get to the game field on Saturday, we feel like we're ready to do that, and we can reasonably expect to be successful doing it.

Q. We talked about you never having called a play before. How have you evolved as a play caller?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, you don't really dwell too much on the successes. I'm not sure there's been that many. I know this: I feel a little bit better calling a play when you go into the first game and you've never done it before, you wonder if anything you call is going to be successful. You might be the first play caller in history to not make a 1st down in 12 games. You have those kind of thoughts. It's kind of like being a player, you get in there a little bit and you make a couple calls and you have some good ones and some bad ones and some things work and don't work and you start to feel a little bit more comfortable in your role.

But I don't know that I've done anything particularly well. I know our players have done a really nice job of turning some average things into good things. Fortunately we have an excellent staff. There's such diverse background, and there's a lot of great ideas that come in there. You've got a guy like Ken who's done it here and then was in the National Football League, and you just look at the job he's done with Nate Stanley. You asked a question about Nate Stanley, well, he's played really well. Why? One, because Nate Stanley is a good player and it matters a lot to him; two, because Ken O'Keefe has done a tremendous job getting him ready to play. You look at the improvement he makes every week, I think that's a direct reflection of the job Ken's done.

You look at Kelton; we have young receivers playing really well. Well, they're being coached extremely well and brought along and pushed forward. Cope has done a great job.

LeVar has done a really, really good job, right. Special teams I can't speak to other than this: I know this: We start with the ball outside our own 30 a lot, right, and the other team doesn't. So I think our special teams we're covering kicks, we're kicking better than we ever have. We've got fakes, I told those guys my only frustration right now with their special teams is if we could just score on one of these fakes. Boy, it's a lot easier -- instead our offense has to go out there and score. It's a lot easier if we just score on the fake, take

some pressure off of us. But the job LeVar has done with our special teams I think is excellent.

But we have two young tight ends. T.J. Hockenson hasn't played a down here, and I think he's one of the better ones or has a chance to be one of the better ones we've had. Noah Fant has been excellent for us. He played about 30 snaps last year. You look at what LeVar has done, and shoot, nobody has had a harder job than Tim coming in here, and all of a sudden the whole line gets blown up and he gets to learn from day one what it's like when you have some injuries and things change, and he's done a tremendous job. You look at a guy guys like Wirfs step in, that's not easy to do, to start here as a true freshman, as a tackle, and really had two bad plays. So I think that's a testament to the coaching that's gone on there. So like my job is pretty easy, my life is pretty easy.

But as a play caller, I think about the bad calls. I think about calling a gimmick play down there backed up against Penn State that cost us two points, probably changed the complexion of the game. I think about a couple 4th down calls you wish you had back, starting with the one last week. We run the same play that we had run on 3rd and 1 a little bit earlier, they're loaded up for bear, we come back later, throw it on 3rd and 2 and hit it for 18 yards. That's all we had to do the first time.

I'm more focused on things I haven't done well. I don't think we had a good plan going into Michigan State running the football, and then unfortunately our line has got to take the brunt of the criticism. I think that starts with me. I didn't design it very well. We didn't have a good plan going in there. We didn't ask guys to do things that were going to help us be successful, so who's fault is that? That's mine. I've got to live with that. I know we talked before the season, I think I was pretty realistic about what the job was going to entail. I knew it was going to be hard. I knew there were going to be good moments, and there's no better moment than the one we had at Iowa State. That's as high as it gets, right, but there's no worse moment than some of the ones we had in East Lansing. That's as low as it gets, and that's how this job works.

And I think it's like being a player, if you're a player, a coach, if you compete, this is what you do for a living, the minute you think you have it figured out, the minute you think you're any good at anything, right, that's when somebody is sneaking up to get you because we never have it figured out. We're never any good, and I think we're learning as a team. When we think we're good, we have got a problem. If we just operate like we're not, then we have a chance to maybe win a couple football games.

Q. Conceptually at the passing game, seems like there's more of a concerted effort not only to get the tight ends involved but also within the hash marks, and you've been really successful at that. Was that something that you looked at in the spring as keys to success in the future, and how have you been able to apply that if that's the case?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think it's more what I'm comfortable with. It's more the background that I've come out of and where I've been. I learned from Ken a long time ago. That's the background Ken has. Start with this: we try to model ourselves after a high school offense, and if you have a high school quarterback it's a lot easier to throw balls in high school, not between the hashes because that's like the whole field, right, but in college football between the hashes, those are certainly more manageable throws and catches. And then you just look at this, too; we talked about this, I think, in the preseason. We're driven by our tight ends, right. We're driven by our tight ends. We can recruit tight ends. We know we can get guys in here to play tight end. Typically we have some receiving threats out of the backfield. Those guys live between the hashes. That's the easiest place to throw them the ball. You've got to be able to go vertical to some extent. You need to threaten the defense down the field.

More than anything, it's funny you bring it up because I'm just looking at our 3rd down yesterday, and if you look at us, we probably need to throw the ball outside the hashes a little bit more on 3rd down based on what I was looking at.

But you try to be as balanced as you can. You try to make the defense defend the whole field. I think we've had real good moments this year in the run and pass game where we're making teams defend the entirety of the field. Even if everything is not paying off for us, the more we can stretch them out and make them respect everything, then the more certain things open up. And then I think we've had other moments where we haven't been as good.

And I'd say this: Yeah, we've been between the hashes a little bit, whether it's crossing routes, in cuts, seam balls, all those things. I think probably we need to focus a little bit more outside the hashes because the one thing is the defense knows this, it's a lot easier to throw it between the hashes. Typically the coverage is going to be a little bit softer on the outside. I'd like to see us hit more comebacks and hole shots and things of that nature. It probably starts with me helping them out and getting some of those things called.

Q. Would you say James Butler is close to coming back? With him going down, how did that change what you wanted to do on 3rd down?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't know how much it changed things on 3rd down. We've tried to focus more on getting those backs out of the backfield than necessarily lining them in space. But maybe on 1st and 2nd down, some of those two halfback packages we had kind of played with and experimented a little bit with in the first couple games, that kind of went by the wayside initially. I think we'd be a little bit silly not to look at playing a guy like Toren or Ivory just a little bit more on 1st and 2nd down here in the coming weeks without James. And I don't know when James will be back; that's probably a better question for the head coach. I know he's working hard to get back. It's a serious injury, and we can't heal up the bone. I know he wishes he could. He's done a really nice job with his rehab. But while he's out, a guy like Toren, I really believe has earned carries here. I think when he goes out on the field, he gives us a little bit of something. Ivory was probably going to see the field a little bit more on Saturday until his first carry, then we weren't so excited about putting him back in, and he understands that, and he learned his lesson, I hope.

But I think we have to be a little more open to playing some of those guys early, and it'll help Akrum, as well. You can't have Akrum out there for 60 plays a game. That's probably not helping him get anything done.

Q. Is this the offensive line you see going forward except for Boone probably getting back and getting healthy?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I hope this is our line moving forward. I'm not naïve enough to believe that it definitely is going to be. We'd like to get Boone back in the lineup. Boone has struggled with injuries. He's another guy, whether it's Boone or Ike, I think this has to be mentioned, too. This isn't always appreciated from the outside. Nobody has had a harder job than Boone Myers this year because he hasn't been 100 percent, and he's gone from being the alpha to not being able to do some of the things he's used to being able to do, physically can't do it -- I told him this the other day. Unfortunately we live in a world, and the kids are in this world, too, where they're going to judge themselves based on how they're performing on the field. And that's probably because that's how we've told them it's going to be judged for a long time.

But you've got a guy now that physically can't do some of the things that he used to be able to do. That's a really hard position to be in, and I can't say enough about how he's responded to that, and instead of being bitter, right, or angry or sulking or doing any of those things, the first thing he did was put his arm around a guy like Alaric Jackson or last week a guy like Tristan Wirfs and help them get ready to play, and I think that's really difficult to do. I think it's really hard to do.

I hope someday, I hope in 20 years that my son, whatever he's doing, can be the kind of team member or community guy that Boone Myers has been for us. I really hope he can be, because to me that says a lot more about him than anything he's ever done on the field performance-wise. Same thing for Ike coming off the injuries. Disappointing, but he's helped some of those young guys come along.

I hope we can keep this group intact. If we can, then I think we have a chance to build a little bit of cohesiveness and chemistry. But more than anything, I think the onus falls on myself and the coaching staff. We need to find a way to put guys into positions that they can be successful in, and whatever that is week to week, and things change, and everybody has injuries, we're not the only people that have injuries, we need to find a better way to manage what we have and squeeze something out of it because if we don't get to running the ball, if we don't get to being a little bit more efficient on 1st and 2nd down, I don't think we reasonably expect to be successful as an offensive unit, and if we're not, then boy, we're putting a lot pressure on the defense and special teams. So we need to get back to controlling the football. We need to get back to running it. We'd like to keep this group intact, but most importantly, I think I need to do a better job of getting us going downhill a little bit.

Q. In January Nick Easley shows up and I think he's your top targeted wide receiver, showing great body control, showing great courage. How did you find him?

BRIAN FERENTZ: We didn't find him. We lucked into him. He's a guy we called on Christmas and said, hey, would you be interested in walking on. I believe he was walking on at Iowa State. It was obviously a position of need, we were scouring some things. Tyler Barnes kind of dug his name up and we called him. We were down in Tampa. He said, yeah, I'd love to walk on. I believe his mom works in the University, so it was a little bit easier for him, and he did. And then we've said since day one, this guy is working hard. I know we mention his name a lot, and like you said, it doesn't mean a lot, but we saw him every day, and we saw the way he competed. I'm not saying he's Riley McCarron, but in a lot of ways he's reminding me of Riley since he got here. He's a guy who knows what he is and knows what he isn't, and he knows what he has to do to get on the field, and that is to have a little courage and go to some dark places, and he's done that for us, and he's been extremely reliable. He's been a nice little safety blanket.

He's moved into that Z position, which has allowed us to move Matt and really it gave some balance to our receiving corps where we knew we were going to be young. So we were fortunate. He was a little bit of a

Godsend. And that allowed us to buy some time, too, to bring some of these young guys along. So Nick has done a tremendous job since he got here, but then you look at guys like Ihmir Smith-Marsette, Brandon Smith, and Max Cooper, I'd throw in that category, too. We need to get him on the field a little bit more. But these are guys that since the day they showed up, they didn't worry about how old they were or how much experience they had or didn't have, Nick Easley didn't worry about how many schools recruited him or didn't recruit him. They come to work every day and they do their job. And it's amazing, if you just come do that, you get a little bit better each day.

These guys have really performed pretty well. Whether it's Nick whether it's Ihmir or whether it's Brandon or Max or Noah, go down the list, right, T.J., I'd throw Ivory in that group, too, young guys, Toren has played a little bit, we need to make sure we're not satisfied. We need to make sure that we have our eyes on something just a little bit bigger down the road here, and if we can keep improving -- I'm extremely optimistic about what I think we can be.

But at some point we have to go do it just like we can talk about ball security and we can work on ball security but at some point we've got to hold on to the ball because that's the only way to change those turnover numbers.

Q. When you look at Matt Quarrels, a guy who came in late, started late, does he fit in right now?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, right now, no. Right now we've got guys that are ahead of him, and the challenge would be for Matt to push and move past some of these guys. They obviously had a head start on him. But right now those guys have continued to climb, and it's not so much what Matt is or is not doing, it's the fact these other guys are coming in every day and pushing it forward, and so I think the challenge for Matt would be to get going a little bit and try to pass him. But right now the encouraging thing is we have healthy competition in that room. I don't know if we could have said that back in March. That's encouraging in and of itself that we're talking about guys that aren't seeing the field. I think that's good news, right?