

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. I just want to start out on behalf of everyone in the program, just expressing our sympathies and condolences to the Stewart family. You know, tough thing for Cara and the entire family with Ron's passing.

I think many of you know Ron served the football program since 1982. That's a lot of years of service. He did it with great professionalism, certainly great passion. I think what people probably don't realize, it's hard to put a meter on this, but the amount of hours that Ron dedicated to the job. Certainly you see him out there on game day, that type of thing. But he'd be with the team, meet the team on Friday. Then come back from a late road trip and he'd drive back to Des Moines. So he really did it out of love for the program and for the people involved.

I got a voicemail, or a text, from a former player, a guy that walked on here several years ago who shared with me that he had come up here with his dad one time and Ron gave him a tour of the building. So a lot of little things behind the scenes that people are never aware of. The friends that he made in the conference, I've had a lot of officials, they knew Ron had been ill a little bit here recently. A lot of officials over the last couple weeks have been asking about him.

So through that kind of timeframe, 32 years, just all the associations, friendships he made, and certainly I feel very lucky and fortunate to have worked with Ron in pretty close quarters for as many years as we did. And I really appreciate all of his efforts, also appreciate his friendship, and our condolences to the entire family.

Just looking backwards really quickly. Really pleased with the win Saturday. Certainly great to get a road win, to get a Big Ten win. Anytime you can do that, that's a good thing. A lot of positives in the ballgame, as I mentioned the other day. I thought offensively we ran the ball a little bit better. Our pass protection at times looked better. Maybe as important as anything, we cleaned up our play a little bit. Two penalties, and those had been hurting us in the weeks previous. So those are positives.

Defensively, the biggest thing is we stopped the run. And I think another really important thing on the negative side we turned it over three times. That's a

little bit uncharacteristic, but the defense answered with three-and-outs. So really did a good job responding to some duress. Special teams were pretty solid, so we're continuing to do a decent job there.

As we look forward now, I think college football and you can look at the NFL, just look at last night's game, it's a week-to-week thing. Really, I think what's important for our football team right now is that we keep our focus on trying to grow and improve as a football team. That's where our focus has to be, and then the other part of the equation is you have to navigate through the bumps and the challenges that pop up during any season. So as we move forward, those are really the two keys. I think like most teams, we're certainly in this category of that line between winning and losing. I said that last week, it's really fine.

So when it gets down to it, all you can do is prepare and practice well, and then you have to compete on Saturday. That's our challenge moving forward this week. So that's where we're at.

Captains are the same four as last week. We've got C.J., LeShun offensively, we've got Desmond and Josey on the defensive side. Mathematically nothing new to report since Saturday.

Then looking to Purdue. They come in to the game with a 3-2 record right now, 1-1 in the Big Ten, very similar to our record. And come off a really impressive road win in overtime. Showed a lot of character in that ballgame winning the thing in overtime, and a lot of really close calls during the course of the game. They stayed the course, and then got the job done in that overtime period. So they deserve a lot of credit.

Broad frame, I think they've improved with every year. I felt that coming out of our last game last year. They basically outstatisticed us other than the score in every category: Yardage, possession time, all that. We had a tough game with them last year. We're expecting the same thing again this year. They've got a lot of the same players back.

Something else I mentioned about them last year, one of their wins was against Nebraska. It was a good win for them. But two of their losses, 7-point loss to a 10-win Northwestern team, and a 3-point loss to Michigan

State, the team we played in December. So these guys, to me, are on the right path and they're very capable of playing very, very good football. So we've got to get ready. On top of that it's a road challenge.

Q. Winning at Illinois, does that make it easier to get your player's attention this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's what I was alluding to, the fine line. Just the way college football is, two teams in the Super Bowl last year. One's doing pretty well. Though they lost the other day, but I think Carolina's won one game. I think since that time, same thing in college football.

So I think anybody that plays or competes in college football needs to understand every week is a new week. We've already experienced that. And favorites, point spreads, all that stuff. I've got no idea what it is for this game, but I just know this: Those are good for people that aren't competing. What our guys need to understand is we need to get ready to play. We haven't really done anything yet. So, you know, if we want to be a good football team, we've got to push forward here.

Q. How did your offensive line grade out? And what was your level of anxiety going into that game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not major. I think the biggest change was Ike going to guard. He hasn't done that much. He's done some of it in practice. If players are capable of being versatile, we'll try to get them some work at that. But the way we started at tackle, both those tackles started coincidentally in that Minnesota game a year ago. That was late in November.

But, you know, we played three tackles last year. And it wasn't solely about that. It was just trying to get guys I think where they might be a little more comfortable and maybe had a little better cohesion. The whole group had better cohesion. So it was hardly the finished product, but I think we made strides the other day, and you know, we'll just have to keep pushing forward. But I'm encouraged.

Q. Defensive tackles seemed to thrive Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's good to be strong up the middle. I think we've always believed that in football, like baseball. Certainly talking about your center position, your quarterback position, certainly the defensive tackles and middle linebacker, the safeties. At least the way we're built and we like to play, it's a pretty good parallel and good to be strong up the middle. Those guys are big, physical guys at Minnesota. They've run the ball very well. They'll run the ball good this year. They're a good group of players. But our guys played better than we have in the previous games and that's

encouraging.

Q. What has Faith done to achieve success as a fifth-year senior?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you know, just with every step along the way, he's a tremendous young man, first of all. He's a really interesting guy. But he's gotten better with every year. And when we went back through the film last year, he probably played a little better last year than maybe we gave him credit for at times, so he just keeps on pushing through.

You've got he and Jaleel our two senior guys, and they've played a lot of football for us the last several years. So we're pretty veteran in there. But we went in with the thought of rotating all three of those guys and trying to keep the balance pretty even through the three of them. And then outside we're a little different. We're very young. Just kind of opposite of the inside guys, but same thought there. Those three guys in rotation.

And Sam Brincks has played due to some injury stuff, and did a nice job when he was in there and will continue to rotate also. But if we can keep guys in and out a little bit, that I think that just helps everybody stay fresher. I've got 330-pound guys leaning up against them, that takes a lot of effort to hang in there.

Q. What is your assessment of what needs to be fixed in the passing game, if anything?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we just have to keep pushing forward week to week. You know, not to state the obvious, but we graduated two senior receivers with Tevaun (Smith) and Jake Hillyer, one of our most productive players has been hurt now for several games with Matt VandeBerg, and part of that equation too is Henry Krieger Coble, when you think about how many big plays he made for us last year. Wasn't going to run by a guy, necessarily, at least if he did it, he snuck by me. He didn't do it with blazing speed. But really good football player, and there's a reason why he's still playing right now in Denver. So that's a pretty big hit.

So we're working on that right now. We're making progress. You know, I thought we played better in that whole area last week, the whole group collectively. And throwing the ball is just like running the ball, usually it's a team effort. Every now and then you get a guy like Tony Dorsett who makes four guys miss, or Ronnie Harmon is usually good at that too. But it's usually a collective effort to get things done.

Q. Noah Fant had seen more extensive action. What do you see from him and blocking, keeping him off the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, just he's young. He's young, that's the biggest thing he's fighting right now. Like in other positions too, where we're playing true freshmen. I talked about the importance of practice, and it's important for everybody. But a guy like Noah, this is all new to him right now. So I'm just thinking about a play that we referenced the other day where we call it 22 for lack of a better term. So we covered 22, and then 23 got called and he didn't know there was a 23.

So things that you sometimes assume, just remember that's young players. But he's really making improvements and making strides, and I could say that about a lot of our young guys. Some of that is showing up on special teams too, which is good to see.

Q. On Desmond playing offense, is that easier said than done?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a lot easier said than done. He's working hard on defense, first and foremost. That's a really important position he plays. You think about how many yards he ran for in the Northwestern game, what kind of energy and effort that took, and then certainly basically every week he's done a really good job in the return game.

We could do it, but you're robbing one to -- there's only so many snaps a guy can play. I know Gordie Lockbaum did it back in whatever it was, 1982 or something like that, but that's pretty hard to do.

Q. Did he say he'd do it or be willing to do it?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, he'd try, and probably be pretty good at it quite frankly. Maybe we need to think about it. I don't know. But still there's a matter of time for all those things.

Q. In the Northwestern game you guys switched the offensive line. Is there a calibration of what you can get off?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, and it's like everything. You're just constantly evaluating what you're doing. I just went through the list of guys that aren't here from a year ago. So you're trying to figure out with your personnel where we're at, and then the other thing, when you deal about it, and Riley is a great example, Riley McCarron was doing a great job on special teams last year. Now in spring ball and most importantly this August, to me he's developed into a pretty dynamic receiver on top of it. So he's a much different player than he was last November.

We've got some young guys in those positions right now. Pretty much everybody excluding George Kittle. So we're week to week. If we're going to be a good football team, all those guys better be better in November or we're going to be out of luck. I can tell

you right now, I'm not big on predicting things, but I'll predict that one. It's all about how we move forward right now and at what rate we can do it, then putting all complementary pieces together.

It's a day-to-day, week-to-week evaluation, and probably won't always look the same. But we've got to find out what will give us a chance, especially against the people we're playing week to week. But I thought we took a step forward last week. Wasn't perfect by any stretch, but I think we're heading into the right direction.

Q. You've had terrific defensive backs, one of which is still playing in the NFL and doing good things there. But your teams didn't completely avoid him. What kind of impact does that make on the defense? Not to use the comparison game, but how different is what he can do versus what you've had in the past?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, one of the down sides about being a corner is you can only play usually one place. You're either here or there. Then on sub-defenses, we'll match them up on guys, but then they can go outside instead of inside. So if you have a guy that's that good -- and I'm not saying he is, I'm not standing here saying that -- but I'm saying if you've got a guy that people deem to be that way, unless you want to move him to safety, then it's a whole different circumstance there too. Which I think he'd play really well there too.

But I guess if that's the worst thing that happens, that's a good thing. If people think they should throw that way. He's going to get challenged. He has already been and he will. You know, it's a good thing.

I mean Bob Sanders is a guy you probably don't want to run around and get too close to him if you run the football or that type of thing too. So really good defensive players sometimes there are certain ways you try to attack them and certain things you try to avoid. I'm sitting here thinking about Reggie White. There are certain things that -- there weren't many things that were good with him, quite frankly. But you try to figure out what it is and go around it.

Q. Hyde was terrific, Paschal, Spivey, is he in that echelon?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll let him finish his career before we judge him. But one thing I would say, you just mentioned Micah, that's a guy I always want to talk to the pro guys. I think he's like Micah in some ways. What I mean by that, he's not exactly like Micah, because he's not.

But Micah wasn't, for those guys, he wasn't for

everybody. But that's for them to do. They make their evaluations. But my point to them is he's just a really good football player. I think to this day if Micah had played offense, he would have been our all-time leading receiver. I believe that. I don't think he'd be playing in the NFL right now. Maybe he would. It wouldn't surprise me.

But his measurables weren't over the top; that's how he ended up here, and same thing with Desmond. I think that's how he ended up at Iowa. Yet they're both really good football players. If you throw a ball near them, they're probably going to grab it, one hand or whatever. Somehow they'll come down with it. Jovon Johnson was like that too. Not as big as those guys. But those are things you can't teach. They're just really good football players. It's good to have those guys on your team, I know that.

Q. Is Desmond made to play the nickel corner?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's for them to figure out. He's rare because he's got good ball skills. He's a very physical guy. Like Micah, his production doesn't match his measurables. Does that make sense? He's not going to knock you out at the combine, probably. But good luck catching him. I've seen some of those returns that Micah's had and fast guys can't catch him. So I don't know how fast he is, but fast guys don't catch him. That's all that counts. And Micah's the same way.

Desmond, I can't remember the last time he missed practice. I'm sure he has some time in his four years here. But I can't remember what it would be. That's part of being a really good player, too, is being out there every day and just getting better.

Q. When it comes to the passing game, what role would C.J. play in trying to help you to get that movement that you're talking about?

KIRK FERENTZ: Like I said, I think we took strides. It may not have looked like it to you guys, but I thought we made strides from the field Saturday. And then watching the film, there are a lot of things that were encouraging to me. I made a Steinbach reference here in the last seven days, but that's how things are in sports. You don't always have those breakthrough moments when you want them all the time. But if you make incremental gains, at some point it starts looking better than it did.

When we were 2 and 18, we weren't very good by record, but we were seeing improvement. There were little things on film that we were seeing. And lo' and behold, we started getting okay. We started actually being able to do stuff, and that's usually how it goes.

Obviously the clock is running right now. We're running a really tight race here. We've only got six weeks left,

so we're pushing as fast and as hard as we can. But you're only allowed to practice so long. And more importantly, the players can only practice so long or they're going to be dead on Saturday. So you've just got to keep pushing and be as smart as you possibly can. Knowing that you can't always be perfect, but you're always trying to move forward.

Q. The team's that have wrinkles or unique formations like Purdue does with their wildcat. How much time do you spend dedicating to that in practice and is there a line that you have to follow?

KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully your system rules out any defensive system or punt defense or whatever it may be. Hopefully your system is solid in its foundation where you have ways to rule things out. But all that being said then the people involved have to understand what those rules are. So you have to spend time on it, no question about it. That's why people do that stuff.

Then the down side, if you're doing it, you have to take time out. So, again, I just mentioned we've all got the same amount of time to get ready for a game. Kind of the same way, what do you want to spend your time on getting good at?

But no question. You've got to cover it. The muddle-huddle or whatever you want to call it, the fake extra point stuff. You've got to rule that out. You've got to go through it and all those crazy things. So, yeah, it takes time.

Q. You knew Ron Stewart before you came back here as a head coach. But does it feel odd or strange to you to have somebody in that position, your sidecar guy?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, totally. Started with the first I-Club I went to in Des Moines. He was there to meet me and walked me through the kitchen, so I felt like I was in a movie. I still find it laughable that I have any form of security like that. To me that's like I'm just some guy walking down the street and all of a sudden I have a guy with me. But I understand what happened too. The marshall, whatever that night game where there was a fan and all that kind of stuff. So, you know, you have to do it. It would be stupid not to.

But as you might imagine, we're spending a lot of time together, close quarters, and you just become really good friends. His passion for what he did and his feeling for the program just all those things. That's why he did it. He loved being part of this. And I think everybody that's been involved with him over the years feels it's a mutual thing.

Q. Do you remember any Ron Stewart moments that popped into your head this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, yeah, the first time he took me through the kitchen in Des Moines. I think it used to be a Holiday Inn at one point. I'm not sure what it is now. But that was a weird feeling for me. Like, really, that's not necessary. And then the other classic one was after one of the victories we were doing the interview on the field, and he's holding off about 6,000 students. The students were having a great time.

It was a good win, and somebody grabbed his hat. Which I didn't know that at the time. He got me back to the locker room somehow, and then the next day Matt Engelbert showed me the video. The look on his face was priceless. I mean, it was just a classic moment. It was like somebody took one of his kids. It was unbelievable. And then Dolphin put an APB out at the radio show that week, and the hat did come back, and most importantly, the badge. That's what he wanted.

We all had a good laugh over that one, but Ron was a great guy, a real professional, and a great human being.

Q. Playing on the road, has there been anything that has kind of clicked for these guys, or has it just been a gradual process to where you're seeing the success you are now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Everything we ask any of our players to do, it's usually founded on one thing. What can we do to help the team be better suited to win and what have you, and I think our guys understand that. I was going to say linemen typically are pretty unselfish. But we've got a lot of unselfish guys on our football team.

We've spent a lot of time talking about Desmond King. He's a pretty unselfish guy from my vantage point. I don't live with him, I'm not walking around with him all the time, but as I mentioned, he's out there practicing, working hard. To me, your actions speak more about you than anything.

Some of the guys may have been mad. I don't know. I didn't ask them, and I don't think Brian did either. But we're trying to find the right connection and right combination to help us move the ball a little bit better. Just like tweaks in the passing game, the thing we may be doing there is trying to get the thing to move a little smoother. That's all. The guys, as far as I can tell didn't flinch. They came out, went to work and did a good job.

Q. Was there at any point where you saw it eclipsed with these guys in the last couple years, or that was built for your system?

KIRK FERENTZ: The first thought that pops in my mind, last year we changed our whole practice routine. In retrospect, it worked out really well. Also in

retrospect, one of the observations I made, and I shared this with our team this year, it worked well because we had a really mature team. They stayed and didn't let any changes really flap them too much. They just kept pushing forward, and they handled it really well.

Having an off day at the end of the week is totally unconventional, and to me, if you don't have the right kind of players, it can be really dangerous.

But I think we all had a trust with our guys, so I guess what I'm getting at is to me to win on the road you need a team that has some maturity. They've got to understand what you're trying to get accomplished and stick to the routine. Don't get distracted, whether it's Manhattan out the window a couple weeks ago or this week will look a lot different as we're landing and looking out the window.

So all that stuff really doesn't matter. We're going to play a football game and it's no different than if we're going over to Kinnick. And once the game gets going, you have to be focused on that game and not the environment. And teams that can do that historically will be better and have better results. It's week to week still. We don't have this figured out by any stretch. But we do have a routine that we do and try to stick with it.

Q. Any road trips that you either love or hate?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like bowl games. The ones we lost were awful, and the ones we won were great. No matter where we go. A bowl game in Montana, if you win it, with all due respect to Montana I'm sure it's a great place to go, like Maine in the summertime. But if you can play there in January and you won the bowl game, it would be a great trip, and that's kind of how it works.

Q. Anything for your run defense Saturday? You had guys cueing up double teams. Is there a more thankless job in the game than that?

KIRK FERENTZ: The thing I would tell you in my mind at least, to run the ball, it's hard, and it to stop the run it's hard. It's not glamorous. You have to be tough-minded. You have to take care of your spot, which a lot of times means you're doing the heavy lifting and the linebackers trot over and make a tackle, and the safety comes out and makes a tackle.

So it starts up front. Both sides have to really be willing to really be dedicated to their job, work at it, and then everybody else has to do their jobs too. And I'm not minimizing the jobs of the other guys because those are really important too. But it's got to be a team effort. It's got to be a team effort.

It's choreographed usually in the run game. If one guy

gets out of whack, it could be a bad deal. We stopped the run, I think I mentioned this after the game. There was only one run over ten yards. It was 11, and it was on 3rd and 19, so it didn't kill us. It hurt field position a little bit. But that was a big improvement from the other five weeks. Those long runs are just hard to watch.

Q. Defense had more guys chewing up double teams on Saturday. Is there a more thankless job than that?

KIRK FERENTZ: We talked about the guys inside. If you're going to play inside, you have to be able to do that. It's not always fun. So it might be a guy like Jaleel who is 310, 315, something like that. Bazata is not near that size. Cole and King were not near that size, Karl Klug. And Karl's still playing really good.

Karl's like the anti-inside guy the way he looks, but he just played. He played and that was technique, dedication just the same way. That's how he put weight on too. It was all about technique and dedication. That sounds stupid, but that's how he went from being whatever he weighed to 270-whatever he weighed here. You have to be dedicated. You have to be willing to do the dirty work.

Q. Many years ago the ultimate goal was to win the conference and go to the Rose Bowl, today the tournament has changed that, is that something you have to recalibrate when determining your goals?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's no question the world has changed. With all due respect, I don't listen to a lot of -- I do listen to stuff coming in in the morning because every now and then there will be a good guest on or something like that, football stuff like ESPN or whatever. But outside of that, I'm just checking scores usually or something like that.

But there is so much talk right now. That is one thing about I hope we don't get to an eight-game playoff system, but we're going to because there is so much talk and attention and emphasis on it. I think we're right where we need to be. All that being said, that's one of the beauties of the bowl system. You can be in the playoffs and still have bowls that mean a lot to the teams involved.

But all that being said right now, we need to have a winning season first before we can worry about any of that stuff. We're three runs away from that still. It's every step along the way. And I know the best way to get to that. We've got to play good this week, and that's about as far down the road as we look.

That's the neat thing about college football, every game counts for a lot. They all mean a lot, and you better

treat them as such.

Q. If something happens, and okay, number one goal is off the top of the list. And number two, you're still pretty early in the season.

KIRK FERENTZ: You end up screwing up and winning 12 games and end up in the playoffs, that's not bad. You'd rather go to the Rose Bowl if you're in the Big Ten. But, oh, shoot, this year they sent us over here. You look at those things. But the idea is to just play well every week and that's kind of how I looked at it. I hate to be a party-pooper, but right now that's really all we can think about is trying to do well this week. We have a lot of work to do, and that's all we're focused on right now.

Q. It's been a few years since C.J. made his first start which happens to be at Purdue. What has changed in those two years with him, and what did you see back then?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably the same thing, like Desmond, the same. We talked about him a lot today. But good players get better too. We talked about some of the younger receivers and younger guys that you know, Boettger's first game at guard.

So when you're younger at stuff, hopefully you're improving and it's usually a little more visible and dramatic. Older guys tend to, it's not maybe as, wow, if they're doing it right, they're getting better as players. They have better confidence, better control, command, better vision. Just everything that makes you a good football player. That's it. They're developing with every game of experience and every practice. That's what I'd say about him. As I said last year, the only way to know about him going into last year, poise and toughness levels, and, boy, he passed both of those really early in the season.

But every player is on the same race, trying to get as good as they can, and be as proficient as they can.

Q. When you look at the north end zone project, how important is that to the overall program?

KIRK FERENTZ: During the summer I do think about stuff. You take some time to think about just how different things were. When I got here in '81, we were in the Field House. I think Coach Elliott had a suite built, it was about the size of this room right here. Offices around the outside, little room in the middle for people to sit and stuff.

So you think about that, just everything that's happened and the last 18 years I've been able to witness 17 and a half years. You really start thinking about it, which I did during the summertime, it's pretty neat. To me, this is the next step. I've seen some

drawings, and they just look spectacular.

And we've already got an unbelievable stadium that was pretty good before that press box went up. Now it's more spectacular. So it's kind of the next step for me the program continuing to push forward. It's like anything in life, it's competitive. If you're not pushing forward, you're probably not doing the right thing. It's the next step.

There's going to be a lot of work that's going to have to go into that certainly, and I'm anxious to help in any way I can, once we get done with the season. But right now we're focused on the year. If we want to be a first-class program, we need to keep pushing forward, and we certainly hit the jackpot with this building. We did it right and did it right for a long time.

I think that demonstrated responsibility of the program, the long-term health of the program.