

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 24, 2019

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Certainly good to get back to game week and everybody get back to a routine.

I think the bye week came at a good time for us. Certainly we got back to Iowa City a little later than we had planned it was a late night for us. If you look back at the schedule, three weeks of preseason, three weeks of game competition, and the bye came at a good time. We had a lot of guys injured and still do.

At least gave everybody a chance to regroup a little bit, tinker with some things, tweak some things. Hopefully learn more about our football team and as important as any, give the players and everybody a chance to rest and recharge, that's everybody involved, players, support staff, what have you. Now it's time to move forward.

We're happy to be 3-0 but one thing that's apparent is we have a lot of work to do and we have a lot of things we can improve upon and that's what it gets back to for us.

One thing about Saturday, you get a chance to look at some football, look around and a reminder what it is between success and failure so many times, and the bottom line is if you're not at your best week-in and week-out, you just open yourself up to being in a world of trouble and that's certainly not anywhere we want to find ourselves.

It's good to get back to work and our focus shifted to Middle Tennessee, a really good football team. Been following them ever since we scheduled them. Following their progress a little bit. I think you look at a couple things that jump out: Coach Stockstill and staff have been there, he has a very good football staff, very veteran staff, been there for quite some time and have had good sustained success. They have built that into a strong program, bowl games five years out of six.

They have good coaches and they have good players, and if you watch them over the years, they show up and they play hard. They play hard, they are well-coached and going on the road is not a big deal for them. They do that annually and they have had success doing that.

The bottom line is we have to get ready to go. We

expect them to be ready, no doubt about that and the challenge for us is to be ready and play a good football game.

Our captains this week are the same four guys. We have Stanley offensively, Ojemudia and Welch on defense and Brady Ross will be our special teams captain. Only thing really new on injury front is Kyler Schott was injured on Sunday and he's going to be out for a couple weeks now. He has a foot injury. A couple guys last week that would have been tough for them to make it, if we played Saturday; we didn't fortunately.

So there are back practicing now. The other guys are moving along and getting better, but we're not making any significant progress or significant news on the injury front. That's kind of where that's at.

Then the last thing, I want to recognize Carson King, a name that's pretty well known around our state right now and to me it's a neat story first and foremost what he's done, very generous in nature, very selfless act by him, and probably a good illustration. I think one of the good things about playing in heated rivalries. Everybody has got their sides and their team they support and etc., but this is a good example of teams coming together and people coming together and just doing something for a really good cause. Purely organic, just like the wave, an organic kind of gesture by an individual that's really grown into something much more than simple gesture. Want to salute him. Rumor has it he'll be in Kinnick on Saturday and hope that's true. We'll look forward to having him in the stadium if that's the case.

Q. Keith Duncan has been an interesting story, can you talk a little bit about his growth and his maturity?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a real credit to him, and what a great moment, if nothing else had happened in his career, what a great moment.

But fortunately he was motivated to push it further and he's had his ups and downs since that time obviously but I think the thing we've all noticed is he's been working extremely hard behind the scenes, especially this past year plus and last year Miguel was pretty firmly entrenched as our kicker. He was improving and working hard, and I could say the same thing about

Caleb.

The good thing is the competition has been very close in practice. They are just so close with each other, so we have total confidence in either one but right now he certainly has a hot hand and is doing a great. It's a real tribute to his ability to stick to it and focus on improvement. It's a real good example for all the guys on our football team.

Q. Do you anticipate any of the guys that have been out coming back this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not this week necessarily. We are getting closer but there is a lot of ambiguity right now.

Q. Is it concerning?

KIRK FERENTZ: We have got a lot of guys out. It's concerning every week. It was extremely concerning the last time we played.

I looked over today, half our two-deep in the secondary is in street clothes watching practice. We are working with the guys on the field. D.J. stepped in and did the job.

So the good thing about it is it creates opportunity for other players and that's how we'll look at it and continue to look at it that way. At some point we'll get guys back. It's been slow, that's all.

Q. You obviously expected a lot out of OJ and Geno, but given they are the only two guys still standing from week one, how much has their assertiveness and their leadership been amplified?

KIRK FERENTZ: That really goes back to the thing I say frequently is our best guys have to play their best and that's part of their role is to help the younger guys come along and better understand the tempo we need, the things you need to do on the practice field and in meetings, those type of things. Good teams function that way.

Miguel is a great example, for Keith, I think the last couple years, and certainly Geno and OJ have done a really good job. They are both veteran guys. Geno is not a senior but they are playing with guys that have played and they play with some confidence and they are also good about sharing their expertise, their knowledge with their teammates and that's how teams have to function.

We are going to have injuries every year. It's not a new phenomena. It seems like we are bunched up a little bit this year. You deal with it and keep moving, and it's an opportunity for someone else to jump in there and play well.

We talk about Paulsen sliding out to tackle doing a good job. Wirfs going to the left side. There's been a lot of really positive things that have come out of it. When we get guys back at some point, we'll be a stronger football team, but it will be fun to get them back here a little bit more liberally.

Q. To clarify, so Brady Reiff was on the depth chart, does that mean he's back?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's an error on my part. He's out this week.

Q. Is the 4-3 now because you have so many guys out?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll be a lot more limited in our sub packages because we are out of guys, and you want your best guys out there playing. But you know, I'm not going to say it's totally off the table but we'll probably do a little bit less of it than maybe we would have in the past.

Q. Playing a team like this, that's got a lot of wide receivers, what's the challenge, especially from a speed perspective?

KIRK FERENTZ: Biggest thing is our guys that are out there are going to have to play with great position and technique and that's really what it gets down to. It goes back to, you know, back in 2000 against Northwestern, we had that discussion -- I was pretty sure we would go sub and he stayed regular defense.

He knew what he was doing because at that point that was our best chance to win. The key thing is making sure the guys that are on there play smart. To think that an outside linebacker is going to run play after play after play with with a fast receiver is probably not good coaching. Just be smart how you do it and play a defense that's going to give everybody a chance to be successful.

Q. How pleased were you with the running game overall against Iowa State?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it was effective. They are a really challenging defensive football team to prepare for and play against. They play extremely aggressive and I think what we did in that ballgame was effective, run and pass, and you know, as good as anything, we didn't turn the ball over which really, really helped us win the football game.

Q. A few D-Linemen said they are disappointed in the amount of pressure that they have gotten on the quarterbacks over three weeks. How would you assess the D-Line pressure?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if that's a totally fair assessment. You always want more. You can always do better and always want more, but I think we're doing

some good things up front, and guys are working hard at it and we'll just keep working up there and keep digging and hopefully as you go along get a little bit better. I think they are doing a fine job so far.

Q. A couple guys brought up UNI in 2009 to remind them that it doesn't matter what is coming to play, you have to be ready. Do you like being able to harken back to a good team like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if you win, which that was a miracle. I don't believe in miracles too often. That was a miracle. That's the only way to put it. Also that's half the truth. I referenced Arkansas State. We had a pretty good game in 2009 and they played their tails off. There are some parallels in the program quite frankly. I'm not saying we underestimated Arkansas State 10 years ago. We can ask those guys when they are back here for their reunion, but bottom line is it was a heck of a football game start to finish. We had to fight our tails off to get out of there.

The message is if you're not doing your best internally you're going to be involved in many games like that. You can come out on the short end and we should have really against UNI. You could argue that. It's just the way sports are.

Same thing in basketball. Couple years later I'm watching Butler play Duke in the National Championship and announcer said that Butler just lost to Youngstown State. I said to my son Steve, who was still in high school at the time, "can you imagine?" He says, "Dad, you lost to UNI in 2009 and won the Orange Bowl." It's the same thing. That's sports. You have to get ready every week. Every game is tough.

Q. On that same note, can you point to a reason why you've maybe been more effective, you haven't had a repeated September slip up?

KIRK FERENTZ: We are trying like heck not to. It's still that team and that week, everybody has to do their job, and the key thing, and this was not like a first game exactly, but it's a little bit like a first game when you take a break, the danger of breaks is, okay, what's it going to be like when we come off the break.

The break is great but now we're coming off the break and time to get our focus where we need to, our sharpness. We had some questions philosophically, how much did we hit last week, which we did very little of because I felt we really needed to recharge, regroup a little bit.

All those decisions you make during a bye week or anything, it's a little bit like Bowl prep, did you make the right decision and you find out when you start playing again. It just gets back to everybody involved taking the

responsibility and making sure that they are doing what they are supposed to do to give ourselves a chance to be successful. It's different every week and every year it's different.

Who will start to replace Kyler Schott?

KIRK FERENTZ: Cole Banwart fortunately is coming back. We sat him two games and I think he's back to where he looks.

My fear there was we go through the season where he's 80 percent like he was last year and that really wasn't fair to him. I think we've got him healthy so he'll slide in.

Q. Where do you feel like Alaric is at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: He is one guy that's making a move and an active move forward. That's encouraging and that's just the nature of injuries sometimes. You're kind of stagnant, or plateaued and all of the sudden the guy will take a jump. He's starting to work and I think we're getting closer with him.

Q. How did you grade D.J. Johnson?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not good on grades and I hate them in the paper, with all due respect, when you guys grade things. I never graded. I had to give the head coach grades, so you give him plus, minus, all that jazz.

I never gave players grades. I wanted them to watch the film and learn. That was always kind of my deal and that's what he did during the game. He obviously got caught in a play or two that was costly and kind of took us right back to State College 2009 on one of them.

But the bottom line is that I thought he kept competing and getting better during the game. When you go through that, if you can survive those hiccups, boy, the growth, the potential for both is really good, if you've got the right guy, and I think what he showed all of us a week ago was that. This guy has got the right kind of temperament. He really kept his head in the game, kept fighting, kept competing.

To me it was a positive we were able to survive some hiccups and he played the way he played. I thought he really competed hard. He's done a good job in practice. The good thing is we start getting some guys back and now he's right in the thick of competition where a couple weeks ago, he was down in the depth chart a little bit, second, third guy.

Q. Coming back -- as a starter, do you see Koerner or Johnson --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, time will tell. If you take a

break, somebody else may move right in front of you or whatever. But again the big thing is it should make us stronger as a football team. Give us some depth maybe we didn't have two months ago and make us a better football team as we move forward.

Q. Last year Ihmir broke out on the return game. This year it seems like kind of slow out of the gates, is it frustrating that he has not been able to break the 50-yard line?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like a lot of things, see how that goes. He's a lot better football player now, physically, mentally. Every part of his game is better right now. I think that return stuff will just, first of all he needs some opportunity, but you know, it will all come. He's a much better football player than he was last year even though he did make some really great returns.

I think we're in a better zone with him for sure right now.

Q. You have four running backs, seems like Brian is comfortable using any time.

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really rare and they are all a little different as you know. Take Goodson out of the equation. The other three guys are players we know pretty well. They have been here now -- second year where they have all been prominent, and Ihmir is a much better football player, all three of the backs, you talk about Mekhi or Ivory or Toren are all better players than they were last season and certainly gives us a little dimension. It's a little bit unique.

The trick is to figure out how to get them in and out of the game. Right now offensively, and I think it's true defensively, too, I think everybody -- nobody is counting plays. They are just playing. That's all we are asking them to do is go in there and do what they can do, and I think we're pleased with what we're seeing so far.

Q. They lost their record-setting quarterback from last year. Seems to be 70 percent completion percentage, runs the ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: Leading passer, leading rusher. He's really doing it all. So it all really starts with him and he's a little bit of a wildcat, not that they are in the wildcat formation; I'm not starting rumors but he's a little bit of a wild-card. Maybe that's a better word to use. He'll pull it down, break contain, those kinds of things.

You talk about watching football on the weekends. When quarterbacks break the contain, bad things tend to happen. He's got that ability. So a big part of us is going to be trying to -- big part of our success will be trying to keep him in a position maybe where we've got him contained a little bit knowing he's going to get his completions and they have got good receivers.

So they have got a multitude of ways to get the ball on the perimeter and they do that and they do it well and we'll have to see how well we hold up out there.

Q. What about defensive end right now, AJ played a ton --

KIRK FERENTZ: You guys are complaining he wasn't playing enough earlier. We can't win. No, it's what he wanted. Watch what you wish for. He's doing a good job. Chauncey, too. No question that's a position we have to keep growing guys. I think we're seeing John and Zach, those guys are improving, Amani. Joe is out, Evans has a hamstring. He's out for a while.

Hopefully we're developing those guys behind the scenes. That was a big part of last week, getting those guys more and trying to push them forward. We're going to need them all.