

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, October 4, 2016

Kirk Ferentz



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Certainly all of us are disappointed with Saturday's outcome. We had a great crowd in Kinnick, and certainly Northwestern played a really good football game. As we move forward, look back in January, college football, all football, you get a new team every January when you start out, and with that comes new challenges. I think it's interesting if you look back right now, the teams that met in Indianapolis at the championship, both have experienced bumps over the last couple of weeks. So at this point really there's only one course of action. That's for us to push forward, continue to push forward and try to make improvement on a daily basis, and that's really where our focus is. I think our players are invested, giving good effort. Right now we're just not playing well enough at times, and those are the things that we have to really try to address. The most important things to be focused on right now are making the makeable type plays, playing clean football and then trying to eliminate the self-inflicted wounds. They've been hurtful to our cause certainly. As most of you know, winning and losing tends to be a really fine line, and when you are winning things get magnified a little bit and some of the things that you're not doing well get overlooked, and then conversely, when you come up to the short end, you know, the things that you don't do well really tend to be more magnified, too. So that's really where we're at right now. Work started yesterday morning. Guys have done a good job in two days of practice.

Our captains this week will be C. J. Beathard and LeShun Daniels, offensively. Desmond King and Josey Jewel, defensively. Injury wise, nobody's out of the game right now that hasn't been out. Got a couple of guys that are nicked up a little bit in their day to day and we'll see how they respond as we move forward.

Traveling to Minnesota, they're a good football team. Very impressive offensively, scoring a lot of points. Like you would expect, they're big on offense, probably bigger than in the past. They've got some new linemen that are really big guys. So the collective effort is big, tight end is big, quarterback is big and a veteran player, really good player, good group of receivers and really impressed with their running backs. The running backs are all three guys who really run hard and do a nice job. They're very athletic on defense; they play hard and very athletic. And then special teams wise, they're

good on special teams, as they have been, and have good specialists. It will be a challenge playing a good football team, and an added challenge playing on the road. We'll continue our preparation and looking forward to getting ready for Saturday. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. What can you do to address the pass block issues, especially at the edge?

COACH FERENTZ: That's something we're working on, just like everything else right now. And our passing game hasn't looked really very clean, very rhythmic at all consistently, and that's going to be one of the things we're focused on.

Q. Is the leadership group doing the job it needs to do right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're getting good leadership from our whole team, not just the leadership group. Leadership's a collective thing. Everybody's got an ownership in that and involvement, and it all starts with having a good attitude and working hard every day, and I think the guys are doing that.

Q. Is it hard sometimes when things aren't going right for those leaders to keep their frustration within themselves and not let it out?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think any of us are playing perfect or coaching perfect. We're all frustrated right now. We came up short twice. That leads to frustration, and there's not a person in our organization that can't do a better job, and that's what we're all trying to do.

Q. Is your awareness of the run defense heightened even more, not only from what you have done, but the fact that you're playing against Smith and Brooks, who are two terrific backs, and they've got a really big physical offensive line where it can get really ugly.

COACH FERENTZ: Tight end is gigantic, too. They've got a big group of guys and they're going to come out, and they like to run the football. So it's going to be a big challenge for us matching up size wise, so we're going to have to do a great job with our technique. The biggest thing on defense is everybody has to be where they're supposed to be there, and number two, we have to tackle better. Those two areas have cost us some big plays.

And my point to you would be the things that don't kill you it's not the five-yard run, six-yard run, not that you like to give those up, but it's the ones that break out plus 15, and we had a couple of them the other day, and that's more about just executing better. And those are the things we're going to have to do if we're going to be a good defensive team.

Q. How much is say technique, not being the place you're supposed to be versus guys get beat?

COACH FERENTZ: Every team has good players in our conference. Talent disparities and all that kind of stuff, and I don't think that's our issue right now. Our issue is just playing more consistently, all 11 guys being where they're supposed to be on a given play. And then you have to execute the fundamentals, and that's what I was talking about the makeables. If you're not going to tackle consistently, it's going to be hard to expect to be a good defensive football team. So that's an imperative. You can't get cut off your feet. You can't play on the ground. There's certain things you just can't do defensively if you want to be sound. And we're not clicking on all cylinders clearly.

Q. Is the defensive performance particularly distressing because you guys had seven returning starters and it slid.

COACH FERENTZ: You know, it's just we're not playing well enough, quite frankly. And to me first thought in my mind on the defensive side would be just doing a better job against the run, particularly, again, the big plays. Those are the ones that really make it tough. And we gave up a couple the other day. One was a contain issue. The other was a missed tackle deal, and those two things come free. That changes the complexion of the game really quickly. Not that you want the ball to be driven on you either, but those things are really hard.

Q. One of your former players on Twitter praised Josey Jewel and Desmond King for some of the best play he's seen. On the flip side, didn't think Cole Croston, left tackle, had been playing up to ability or the safeties. Are those two areas concerns that you share right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm pretty concerned about everything right now. And it's really teams meshing together. We got some guys that are doing a great job, playing really well, some other guys that maybe can improve, that type of thing. But it's a collective effort. It really is a collective effort. And there are individual plays you can pull out and say this player got beat on this play. And that's going to happen. And do we want to try to address those, absolutely, but to my point earlier, a lot of things get magnified when you go down in defeat.

And you can go back, we're looking at this game from last year. There were plenty of things that went wrong in this game, too, yet we came out ahead. It's usually a pretty fine line, and there's always things to work on, always things to correct. There's a reason Josey Jewel and Desmond are well known. They're pretty good established players right now. So it's just a matter of everybody else trying to ascend.

Q. Do you anticipate any starting lineup changes?

COACH FERENTZ: Nothing major, but you never rule anything out. We'll see how practice goes this week.

Q. What all do you put into building that first depth chart, building the guys you think will carry you?

COACH FERENTZ: It really goes back to what I said in January. You have a starting point in January with every team. So certainly your depth chart is based on the way you finish typically, and then you start moving forward from there. But that's why I always say in the spring, depth charts mean something, but they don't mean everything. And then same thing in preseason camp, because you're continuing to practice. Preseason camp is your most condensed period of preparation and practice, so we really -- coaches get a chance to evaluate guys in a lot of different situations and close quarters. Then in season it's a little bit different because you're in a playing mode. Certainly we evaluate practice. Health factors into it, whether a guy, how limited he may be or isn't, and then certainly what they do in games. So it's a little harder to ascend as a player probably, if you're a second or third-team guy. But then, conversely, if a guy's not playing well enough, we'll give those players opportunity to compete.

Q. You guys haven't made a lot of personnel changes because of performance on the field. Why is that?

COACH FERENTZ: Just I guess how it pans out. That's like over 17 years you're referring to; right? You know, it's typical. I mean unless a guy is just flat-out not getting it done or is really struggling. If they're out there drowning in the ocean, you're going to try to throw a life preserver in there, for sure, and get a guy out of there. But there are ups and downs in everything you do, and you have to work through those ups and downs. If we feel a player is incapable, yeah, we'll make a change that way. Or someone else if we see them ascending, we'll give them an opportunity also. And health issues a lot of times factor into that, and guys take the opportunity and run.

Q. Last year after five games you could say you guys were maybe five or six points from being 3 and 2, same way this year. Is that kind of what

you're stressing to this team?

COACH FERENTZ: It really is, and that's kind of the history of the program. I don't think we're unique that way. Usually it's a pretty fine line. Occasionally you get on a run where things just start to pop and all that. But usually it is a pretty fine line. I think back to a lot of our really successful seasons, that's how it is.

And the trick is to push it over the top. And last year we won on a last-second field goal. One of our defeats this year was by a last-second field goal. Last week it's a touchdown. We still have opportunities. Boy, you talk about fine lines, one of the last plays of the game the other day was a ball down the sideline. If you look at it, it's a matter of inches, and that's really kind of what we're talking about.

It was the same line protect; we got back there, the ball came out, and it was a bang-bang play. We came up short. But if we're going to be victorious, we have to make some of those plays, too. But it was a well-conceived play; the timing was good, execution was good, but we were off a couple of inches. And we had the guy I'm not going to say wide open, but it was a makeable play.

Q. What could Desmond King do to get even better the rest of the season?

COACH FERENTZ: Just keep playing. I thought he had a heck of a game the other day. He's playing well on defense for us. He's not getting tested near as much as last year, for obvious reasons. But he's doing all he can to help us win certainly, and it goes back to January. One of the things I really appreciate about Desmond, I don't think he's missed a snap since last year. He's out there every day in practice, works hard. And you know, Saturday it was a little bit unusual for him because he actually ran forward more than he was running backwards. A lot of his yards going forward, but did a great job in the return game. And he's doing all he can, and that's all we ask of every player. But he's certainly stepping up as a returner, did that a year ago. I think that indicates he was an unselfish guy that wants to play hard and try to help the team.

Q. Backups are always popular after losses. You look at a depth chart, and you see a fifth-year senior, Anthony Gair, at safety, and people are wondering what's he not doing to be on the field. How close is he to being on the field?

COACH FERENTZ: It's not a knock on Anthony. It's just that we feel like Miles has played better and practiced better. Everybody starts clean in January. A guy like Desmond certainly has a head start, but he still has to go out and play and improve and work hard too. And it's strictly based on what we see in practice, and that's how depth charts get established. Typically we

don't like to be reactionary with our decisions, and hopefully you're looking at things and being rational and basing it over the big picture and not just a momentary blip.

Q. This might sound like a vague question, but weeks go by fast. How do you make positive changes in a practice week?

COACH FERENTZ: There's nothing really dramatic. That's one thing I've learned in coaching. Typically improvement's not dramatic, doesn't usually happen overnight. And that's the whole concept behind break the rock. It's a repeated swings at the thing, and you just keep hammering away. First thing comes to mind when you bring that up is Eric Steinbach, who for years, literally years, if he was going left, he would drag his right elbow. It was driving me crazy, driving Joe Philbin crazy. And it was a Tuesday practice, I can't tell you exactly what week of the year it was, sixth, seventh week, but he actually went left and brought his back elbow with him, which doesn't sound like much to you, but it was a break-through moment for him, and I remember looking right at Joe Philbin; we both couldn't believe it.

But he had been coached on that point, coached on that point, coached on that point, and when he got the feel for it and really developed it, boom, he just really kind of took off. And he was a good player before that, but that's an illustration of what can happen to a player, but it typically doesn't happen overnight. You have to work at it. And it's that way in every sport where very few things happen naturally. That's an individual basis, but for team wise it's kind of the same thing, you just keep banging away until it happens for you.

Q. You've probably had a little time now to probably talk to him. Does he want to come back?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think Matt would really like to come back. I don't have official word yet, but it sounds like this one is a little bit more clearcut than the one we dealt with last year. So that would be good news certainly.

Q. Five games into the season now. Do you ever find yourself needing a boost mid season? If so, how do you do that?

COACH FERENTZ: Playing better is always a good boost for everybody. I know how our fans felt Saturday and Sunday. I know how we felt. And as you might imagine, it probably impacts us a little bit more directly, players and coaches. The biggest boost you get is getting back on the field with your players. And we didn't do it with that intention, but practicing on Monday as opposed to Tuesday, it's cut however many hours that is out from Monday morning versus Tuesday afternoon to be back on the field.

That typically is the best medicine after you get stung. So it gives you a chance to get back to work and start working on something positive, working on solutions rather than kind of dwelling on what took place, not that you forget that or put it in the past. Sundays are for dissecting, looking at things, what can we do to give our players a better chance to be successful, and then you try to start implementing that. So it's always good to get back on the field and just feel some energy from the players.

Q. Over your time you've dealt with every manner or frustration. How hard or easy is it to not take that stuff home with you after a frustrating couple weeks?

COACH FERENTZ: It's impossible. I mean unless you're a robot, it basically kills your weekend. But it's the other way after a win, too. All those little things that went wrong after a win tend to be, you know, shielded a little bit and you kind of put them aside. Losses are it's a one-way street. That's just the way it is. We all signed up for it, so nobody's complaining.

Q. After the game Saturday, you talked about tempo a lot and you used the term stuck in sand. When you guys switch to high gear, when you switch to no huddle, is that your call and why does it go away during a game?

COACH FERENTZ: It's just a suggestion during the game and I suggested it. But nothing was really looking good at that point. So it was just a shot in the dark. There's no guarantee. If that was the answer, you'd do it all the time. Some people do. I get that.

But sometimes change in pace helps a little bit, sometimes it doesn't. But what we really need to do right now, I mentioned that one-pass play, like to me, that's a good illustration. That was good football. We hit that one slant route to Riley. That was, boom, the ball came out, that was third and seven, I believe. That was a good play. And then the converse of that, the one that sticks out right at the first quarter we ran the ball twice, instead of first and 10 on the 40, midfield area, we got a face mask, which I've never seen, but it was on film. I'm not disputing the call. And then we get a false start, so we end up third and 21, fourth and 21, punt the ball, give them the ball at the short field, they score a touchdown. That to me is the focus right now. Those are the things that we need to correct, we can correct. And you know, who knows what's going to happen when you got the ball on the 40 with a little momentum, a little inertia as opposed to going backwards, and I know it's the same way for you as it is any of us, when you watch a team going backwards, it just feels like you're grinding coffee.

So those are the things that we need to clean up. And I can't document this, but I believe if we can clean some of that up, you start to gain a little momentum, you start to look like a football team as opposed to climbing up Mt. Everest, and that's kind of how it feels, and those are the things that we need to address and do a better job of.

Q. Not just penalties. It's a negative play on first down, incomplete pass on first down. Do you see this offense getting to a point where it's resilient enough to handle it?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we have. We have to get back to it. The incomplete passes, there's two kinds of incomplete passes, there's ones where, like the one I mentioned, it's not a high-percentage pass down that sideline, but you're going to throw the ball down there, hey, you got a shot at it and if it's incomplete, you go back to the huddle. The ones where you drop balls, or makeable plays or a more high-percentage throw that you don't complete, those are the plays, those are the ones that we have to do a better job. That to me is the difference. That's where that line is.

Q. You mentioned self-inflicted wounds. How do you teach that not to happen?

COACH FERENTZ: It's practice. It's fundamentals, and like I say, same thing about missed tackles. A missed tackle against Tony Dorsett is a little bit more understandable than if they're tackling me. There's a line of -- you judge that, too.

But if you're playing good defense where the ball is in a phone booth, then you oughta be able to make that tackle. We gotta be able to make that tackle or it's going to be a long season. Those are the kinds of things that are coachable, addressable hopefully. And the faster we get there, the better off we'll all feel.

Q. Kids day last year, I think it was, you were talking about Boone Myers, and it was kind of in his head or something along those lines. Can an offensive line's struggles be mental?

COACH FERENTZ: I mentioned Eric Steinbach with the elbow. That was strictly -- and he was here the other day. He's got five boys now, by the way. But anyway, so those are things, again, you just keep pressing forward.

Confidence, rhythm, all those things, those are things you earn, you earn as a player. And you just gotta push and work hard, and you gotta go through the valleys just as well as the peaks, and if you can't do that, then you probably need to get out of the game.

Q. Your third down percentage was really good last year, not so good right now and you're about

halfway through the season. And I want to say it's 88 percent of the time when you're three wide receiver shotgun and every single time you're in shotgun and three wide receiver on third down you pass. Is that kind of something self-scouting that you're struggling with or is it something just what you do?

COACH FERENTZ: I would add on that probably if you check the down and distances for those, pretty predictable, too. And as you might imagine, we go through scouting reports, both self-scout and then also our opponents. And I think if you would check most of the opponents we play, it's pretty consistent the same way. When teams are third and five, third and six, third and seven, it's not unusual for them to throw a heck of a lot more than they run, and then same thing, throwing the ball out of the gun. That's pretty commonplace. So I don't think that's a big tipping point or big secret.

Again, the thing is we gotta execute better. And my personal preference would be more third and four, third and five, third and three. So it would be a heck of a lot better for us to operate out of if we want to up our percentages. Those go hand in hand.

Q. I think between third and three and third and six, there have been 17 passes and two runs. You're such a balanced program, run versus pass. Are those situations that maybe it's a little askew towards the pass?

COACH FERENTZ: Typically I think that's fair to say. Third and four and beyond and typically skewed to the pass. Pretty typical.

Q. When you were talking about tempo, I felt like you were maybe mentioning, talking about shortening the decision time that C.J. has and just kind of shrinking that and maybe going a little quicker. Is that maybe how you unlock C.J. at this point?

COACH FERENTZ: Going quicker with our procedure or the ball coming out quicker?

Q. The ball coming out quicker.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, the more of those, the better. The one I alluded to down the sideline, if you go back and look at it, I can't tell you if it was the next-to-the-last play or third-to-the-last play, but that was a good play, just bump, bump, and the ball came out and you go. And the more of that we can get, the better off we're going to be. And that's a team thing, whether it's protection, guys not getting open fast enough or maybe it's us not reading the right plays, right places, all those three things factor into it, so that's what we gotta keep working on.

Q. C.J. seemed like he was more of a play maker

last year. There was more kind of improvisation in his game. Is that physical for him? Is it a physical thing for him to not make things happen on his feet this year?

COACH FERENTZ: Not to my knowledge. I think just right now it's where we're at collectively. I think he's fine physically.

Q. How do you keep this week fun? I mean after a loss it's tough for you guys on a weekend.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. How do you keep it fun? It's football.

COACH FERENTZ: Practice better. You know, quite frankly, the fun in football is playing well, playing -- you never play as well as you want. I mean that's never happened. But playing more to what we want to be. That's the fun in football. And it's a lot of hard work. Football by nature is kind of a hard game. But that's the fun of it all. Coming off the practice field feeling like, hey, we had a really good day here, we're moving forward. And every practice has ups and downs to it just like games. But just trying to gain a little bit of inertia that way. That's how you have fun. You just gotta push through it.

Q. Mitch Leidner has had two really good games against you. What kind of challenges does he present not only physically? He's a big guy with a strong arm and can run. He seems to have grown and matured as a player over the years.

COACH FERENTZ: Oh, no question. He's a very good player. He's big, he's physical. He can run, throw. And he's a leader. At least from our vantage point he looks to be a very strong leader. That's everything you want in a quarterback and that's going to be a big challenge for us. We know that.

Q. What stood out with Ron (Coluzzi) when you decided to bring him in to punt?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, we thought, number one, he was experienced, needless to say, being a college graduate. But we thought he would be a really good acquisition, good addition to our football team. But he's done better than we anticipated. And for the most part he hasn't been flawless, but he's really performed really well, really consistently. On top of that he's a tremendous young man, so it's really been a win-win situation for us, and he's doing a great job kicking the ball, too, as well as punting it.

Q. Cole (Croston) obviously had a rough day Saturday. What is your process for bringing a guy back, for a guy to get back through that mentally?

COACH FERENTZ: It's like any position. It's not fun when it happens, and some days it just comes downhill. And that's life. And boy, it's a tough thing to

go through. All I know is I've watched Cole for four-and-a-half years now, know him pretty intimately, know his dad, his family. He's a tremendous guy, you know, and I think that's -- it's kind of like our football team, we got a lot of really good players and good people on our team. So it's not going perfect right now by any stretch, but the guys are working hard, they've got the right attitude. They really care, they're invested. And everything I'm saying, that's Cole Croston. He's a really tremendous young man. So he'll work through this. He'll fight through this. He's played good football for us we'll get him back to where he needs to be. He'll get himself back there. That's the most important thing. It's not fun, but that was yesterday and now we're moving forward.

Q. Your first move, though, today is it just thinking things through, getting him to see the tape? Is that the first move or do you just give him a day?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah. They gotta watch the tape the next day. We don't give them that day. That's just kind of our routine. But good, bad or indifferent, you gotta watch the film because I think that's really where the answers are typically, and it's little things that you can do better, and normally that's the case. There are little fundamental things you can really kind of focus on, and usually when it hits the fan, which it's going to if you compete, the best advice I've ever been given is you fall back on your fundamentals, and that's really where this game starts and sometimes ends.