

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 19, 2017

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. First of all, just want to start off with Chad. Want to congratulate him. That's really a tremendous recognition, and so well-deserved with Chad, and I think he's the first out-of-stater to be recognized in such a nice way. That list of honorees is really prestigious. Just very happy for Chad and his family.

As far as us, we're looking forward to the start of Big Ten Conference play, and it's really the second chapter of the '17 season. Eager to get going on that. We're happy to have a 3-0 record, and our opponent has one, as well, and theirs is very, very impressive the way they've done that.

As we start to focus on Penn State, really where our focus is right now, we realize we have to play at our best and our highest possible level if we're going to be competitive in this football game. That's where we're focused right now.

I know there's been a lot of talk a little bit about avenging last year's game or revenge factors, that type of thing. The reality is we have a lot of players that weren't -- that are playing for us now that weren't on the field. Many of them weren't even on the trip last year. That really is not a topic of conversation. Our focus right now, our motivation is basically to play our best for 60 minutes, and that's what it's going to take to be victorious.

I think there are two things that we're really focused on right now coming out of the non-league portion of our schedule. Penalties have affected us in a negative way, certainly representative Saturday, particularly on that last drive of the first half, and then we have not had good ball security, and that's uncharacteristic of our football team, but it's something we do need to get corrected, and that was representative in that first series of the game the other day, and both of those things impacted the game I think in a pretty significant way. Those are two things that we're really focused on at this point.

I think overall, though, we're really proud of the way the team has worked so far. They've worked, they've improved. I think we've seen a lot of really good things out there, impressive results and efforts by our players, and at the same time, we're witnessing a lot of learning

opportunities, and we've tried our best to work on those throughout three weeks, and we'll continue to do so as we move forward.

At this point we're just totally focused on Saturday's effort. A lot of work to do in the meantime.

Our captains this week will be Josey Jewell, Ben Niemann, Matt VandeBerg and Kevin Ward will be the special teams guy, and I think everybody knows by now, James Butler will be out at least through the bye week, so he won't be here with us at least the next couple weeks. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. When you look at Penn State, what Saquon Barkley can do as a running back, what challenges does he present?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just about everything. He's an outstanding runner, strong runner, a very fast runner, powerful. 230 pounds they list him at, and also very dangerous in the passing game. They use him in a multitude of ways. He's very, very tough to contain, run or pass. We're going to have to really work at it, and it's going to take a great team effort to get that done.

He's one of several guys that you have to really be concerned about. They've got good balance. Their receivers are all very talented. The tight end is a really big threat. They utilize him in a significant way, and I think the quarterback is really the guy that makes them go. He's the center of everything.

Q. Are there similarities between how you maybe try to contain him to what Josh Allen, both guys can move and create when plays break down?

KIRK FERENTZ: Their offense is really different, the way they do things, but they're a different football team. They're a team -- start with the quarterback, he'll run it or throw it. He's really good at reading things out. He's dangerous. I mean, he makes plays with his feet as well as his arm. Barkley can hurt you run or pass that way, and then the tight end is a heck of a target.

Typical Penn State, they've got a good-looking group of receivers. I know they graduated a guy or two that were really good, but they've got other guys out there right now that are playing really well. They're good all along, and their offensive line is huge, and they're really well-coached. They do a nice job.

Q. When you look at McSorley, he's kind of like Dan Persa but with a better surrounding cast. What is it about his decision making that's made him take a step forward to be one of the premier quarterbacks in the country?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't pretend to be an expert, but it seems like he came out of nowhere last year. I don't know, there wasn't much buzz about him in Chicago as I recall two years ago, but probably should have been. He's probably representative of their football team because as he got better, they got better. It was a little bit of a bumpy road for them early last year, but when they got into October, they started really clicking and never looked back. I mean, they just had a tremendous season.

And I think his development and his growth and comfort out there is a really big part of that.

Q. How much does discipline, how important is that for your defense?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's going to be critical, but it's harder to do than talk about because they've got a very well-conceived offensive scheme, and again, he's really good at -- he's kind of the guy that makes it all go. He really does a good job with operation. He's patient, all those kinds of things. They just put pressure on you at every position. It makes it really difficult.

Q. They have the hyper speed and varying pace?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. How do you slow them down?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just one more degree of challenge. You start with good players, and then you have a good scheme, and that's part of this game, as well. Yeah, you're always on edge. You're always on edge, period, because basically any one of those guys can make a play that can hurt you, so you just have to be at your absolute best every snap of the ballgame.

Q. Barkley on one side and Akrum on the other, in your time here do you remember a match-up like that where two guys so similar, so high profile going head to head?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean this with all due respect to Akrum, but we're talking about Barkley being one of the guys that's going to be I would imagine a top-5 pick. I don't know all the seniors in the country, but my guess is he would have been pretty high last year. Akrum is a really good football player, too. But you look at their surrounding cast, the supporting cast, their entire offense, man for man, 11 guys, there's a reason why they won the championship last year and why they had such a good year. There's a reason why they're in the top five right now. They're a team that's really

loaded right now. They're playing well. They've got good players.

You know, if you start comparing it that way -- and football is all about team. Akrum made some plays on his own. He's really good at that, obviously, but we're going to need to help him. It can't just all be about Akrum.

Q. Sounded like on the teleconference Akrum is full go this week, but also how much do you anticipate integrating Toren and Ivory into the game plan this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, just like we talked about James, about having him become available and doing so well gave us a chance to keep Akrum fresh, and that's going to be important all season long. We were worried coming out of the Iowa State game that maybe we overworked Akrum a little bit in that game. Our plan will be to use all three guys, utilize all three. And the good news is the other two guys did a good job Saturday. It was a good chance for them to get their feet wet and do some good things. Hopefully they'll continue to practice well. They've got to plan on playing. They're in there now.

We're going to be better if we can use all three guys.

Q. Through three games, how would you assess A.J., and what are you looking to see from him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just keep growing. He's doing a lot of good things right now, but he's learning every day, like everybody is, but he especially because he's coming from so far away, just starting here in August. Really pleased with what he's doing. He's got a good energy to him. He certainly belongs out on the field physically, and it's just a matter of him just keep building on what he's got. But he's off to a good start.

Q. A lot of people were confused about Wadley's penalty, the touchdown called back. He even was a little bit today. Did you have to talk to the team about --

KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully he's not confused or anybody else. In fact, I even -- I don't spend a lot of time reading the rule book, but I did go back and check it because I was a little confused about a couple things I saw in that category on Saturday on tape.

If you look at it, it's pretty clearly stated. Obviously it's not clearly enforced. That's the issue, because I think we've seen acts like that similar, and I don't by any means think that he was taunting anyone or trying to be showing up anybody. I don't think that was his intent. But it is in the rule book that that could be called, so we witnessed that. We all learned a lesson, all of us did, and then I think the other thing I learned is

it's probably not going to be enforced real consistently, but why leave the door open for something to be called against you. We all have to be a little bit smarter in that regard.

Q. When you look at the night games, have you come around on being as excited as the players seem to be?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you can't help but be excited. It's true on the road, too, there's something about night games, I don't know if it takes you back to when you were in high school playing and all that, but yeah, I think it's a lot of fun for everybody to be involved in. But it's not going to guarantee anything.

We're playing at home. We'd much rather be at home than on the road at night, but we still have to go play, and that's what it gets down to. I think anybody that's human, their juices will be going a little bit on Saturday just because of the environment. There seems to be a little bit of extra electricity. Then it's our job to keep generating it. We can't just count on the crowd because they unfortunately can't help us enough, not in this case.

Q. You've played a significant number of true freshmen last year and this year. How much would you say is out of necessity versus the fact that they were just good enough to get on the field right away?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably a little bit of each. Probably for the most part where they are playing, there's opportunity, and then the other thing you don't want, you don't want to just put a player out there before he's ready. As I stand here and talk right now, I go right back to looking at Allen Reisner, threw his facemask out there against Illinois in '07, and I'm thinking to myself, this guy looks like he's 12. He looks so young. But we were out of guys, and he agreed to go out there and play, and he competed his tail off, did a really nice job. But that was a case where we were out of guys.

Luckily we haven't been in that situation recently, and that's a good thing. So it's really a combination of both. Again, it's got to be the right positions. You can't do it at every position. AJ is a little bit of an outlier on the defensive side, but that's a little bit more unusual.

Q. When you look at wide receiver, there's been a lot of attrition over the last few years. Does that help boost the three that have played already?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there are things you can't count on, a guy like Jay Scheel, for instance. Okay, we had such high hopes for Jay coming in, and he had a medical situation that never really allowed him to look like the guy we thought he would, and that's unfortunate, but it's part of what we do.

So when those things happen, it creates opportunity. As I alluded to the other day, I read a lot about our receiver situation. Well, it is what it is, and it gave opportunity for guys coming in here, and some guys have really kind of embraced that and taken off. Nick Easley comes to mind certainly, and Ihmir has done a good job. The doors open and they shot through.

Q. You've had this before with AJ Edds I believe it was, he looked at it as the next year he was going to be your guy so you wanted to get him out on the field, and some of your guys who were true freshmen who played like James Daniels said it really helped them the next year. Is that what you anticipate with say Tristan Wirfs, for instance?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's another factor certainly. Sometimes a guy may not get to play as much as he would hope or you would hope. But moving them forward is a big part of it, and that was kind of our decision with Nate Stanley at this time last year, too, a gray area decision that we all made. I felt like it was the best thing for him and the best thing for the team. Yeah, that's another way that you might factor in a decision to play a guy.

Q. Same with Amani Hooker?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, exactly. He played on special teams. Quarterbacks can't play on special teams, linemen typically don't, but at least with a safety and linebacker, they've got a chance to get out there, maybe help the team in other ways, and that's a real positive.

Q. Any word on Brandon Snyder's return?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not really. He's working for it. He's ahead of, quote-unquote, schedule, whatever that means. His attitude has been great. He's been pushing hard, and it's all good. But we'll see where it goes week by week, but he's climbing the hill, that's for sure.

Q. He'll be back during the regular season, though?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's possible, but what I've encouraged everybody on our staff to do is just if it happens, it happens, great, it's a bonus, but right now we'll go with the guys that we have and just keep coaching like we should be doing.

Q. Josey and Bo have been playing together for a really long time now. What's it like having so much chemistry at linebacker?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, Bo looks older than Josey. He looks a little bit older than most of us, actually. I was teasing him about that. I think he might have an illegal road game contract. We're investigating that.

Somebody probably will, now that I mentioned it.

Yeah, both those guys have been outstanding guys. Bo came here as a walk-on, he took a leap of faith. LeVar convinced him that this might be an opportunity for him, and he came in and did a great job right off the bat. We have three veteran linebackers that are pretty close as friends. They're in the room together a lot and confer a lot, and then those two guys are in the box together. Neimann is kind of out there in left field a little bit. He's more like a DB a lot of times.

But yeah, I think what you see is guys become pretty good friends off the field, too. I mentioned Chad Greenway, that's one of the neat things about football. You've got a guy like Chad Greenway from South Dakota and Abdul Hodge from Fort Lauderdale that are friends for life, and Abdul is going to be here this week, too.

So those are the things that are really pretty cool about this whole thing and really are a lot more lasting than the wins and losses.

Q. You had've really good 3rd down defense this year. Last year against Penn State you struggled to get off the field. Are there things you can apply to the way they attacked you last year to the way you're playing this year and match that together for Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the only thing we might have been all right with last year would be the coin toss, and I'd have to look that up; we probably lost that, too. There wasn't much out of that tape we can take, and that's one of the tricks right now. We're looking at it, obviously, but you know, there's just not a lot there right now. All I know is we're playing a team that's really good, and we're going to have to play better than we did last year, that's for sure.

Q. Talk about limiting the big plays; is there a key to limiting those strikes?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the big thing is you have to be sound with your technique, and everybody has got to be on the same page. It's first things first. And then all that being said, when you play a guy like a guy that's the running back from Penn State, he's going to make some plays on his own because he's not your average back. I mean, he's just a different guy.

So if that happens, it happens. You've got to keep playing, get up and keep playing. But what we can't do is just give him stuff that's uncontested. If we do that, I can already tell you what the result is going to be. It's easy to predict. And it's the same which with their tight end. He's a big target. He's going to make some big plays just because of his height. We've seen him on

film do a lot of that. So that's a tough match-up, but we're going to have to really be smart positionally, that type of thing. If you just let them go where they want to go, it's going to be really difficult for us, so we're going to have to try to be a little bit disruptive that way, but again, easier said than done.

Q. Your tight ends seem to be working together pretty well. They seem to complement each other. TJ, his blocking (indiscernible) he's come a long way it seems like to me.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, our biggest concern going back to recruiting with him was just you didn't get to see him play tight end. He caught balls, which is so common right now, there aren't many tight ends in high school. But we saw him catch balls, he scored a million points in basketball, very productive that way in both those realms. And then on defense, at least my Kodak moment, was watching him play safety, and it seemed like he was about 20 yards from the ball. But when he came to camp, what we saw was his attitude, kind of like Ike Boettger. You'd just get a feel for a guy's attitude and the kind of person he is, and that's when we really started to warm up a little bit.

You know, you project things a little bit easier that way. There's no guarantees, but blocking is all about a guy -- and you've got to have requisite size and skill, but what's really important is the attitude. There's a lot of tight ends in the country that don't want to block, and to his credit, he did.

George Kittle came here, skinny kid, and watching him, he did block pretty well last year. That was one good thing I found in the film. He blocked pretty well out there on the edge. But that wasn't natural for him. That was because he made up his mind he was going to do it.

Q. Still in the same boat as far as coming from what he did in high school to what you guys want him to do here?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, Noah is a skilled guy, so the rest of the package is okay. You know, we've got to teach you to block here a little bit, too, and he's been great. He works at it really hard.

Q. You talked Saturday about the possible safety rotation; is that something you guys are still toying with?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we're open to it. I think ultimately all three guys are going to have to play a lot of football for us, and Geno might work his way into the equation at some point, too. I don't see it happening this week, but all three guys have to be ready to go and help us out.

Q. You're in a six-year cycle where you're playing Penn State as often as Wisconsin, Northwestern, Minnesota. How do you feel about that arrangement?

KIRK FERENTZ: That was news to me, actually. The downside is I'm from Pennsylvania, so I get hit for tickets when we go out there. That's a downside there. You're way ahead of me on that one, though. I didn't realize that. You're looking forward or counting -- I cannot keep up with our schedules, other than -- I was going to say, you always know you're going to play your border states, but we didn't do that for five years with Illinois, so it's hard. This out of season I'll take a look at some of that stuff.

Q. With an inexperienced secondary and what Penn State is capable of doing, how much are you stressing, maybe even beyond normal, discipline; if McSorley is rolling out, don't come up because the receiver may go past you, that sort of thing?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really the past couple weeks it's been the same thing. First week you've got a quarterback that can put the ball anywhere on the field. Then the next week you're playing a really good group of skilled guys and good passing attack and they can run it, too, and the same way this week. And last week those guys didn't have the size maybe some of those schools that we're looking at, but they've got guys that can get open and do some things. Every snap is really a learning opportunity for us, and that's part of what we're going through right now, we're really learning on the fly. We talked about Brandon a little while ago; I remember him taking the bait a couple times last year early in the season, and those are painful lessons, but sometimes you've got to do it, and that's part of the growth process. Where you get concerned is where guys aren't learning. But you know, he started to really climb. That's part of the process.

Hopefully you can avoid too many of those coaching things on Saturday.

Q. How is Matt Quarrels coming along? Do you anticipate him seeing the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll see. He's doing fine. I think he's getting a little better every weekend, but we'll see. I think we're pretty pleased with the guys that are playing right now. We're seeing some good things out of those guys. Hardly out of the woods, but I think we're seeing some growth. Brandon Smith, I think, took a step forward last week. That was positive. Nick has been outstanding, a really big addition. Obviously Matt is a good player, and Ihmir has done some good things for us. He's got a chance to work in there, and I think you'll see Cooper there at some point, again, running around a little bit and catching a ball or two.

Q. How much of your defense is still Norm's stuff as far as containing (indiscernible)?

KIRK FERENTZ: The foundation was set 18 and a half years ago, and that was Norm's deal. You know, the thing about it all, and obviously Phil is in the family tree, Seth is in the family tree, Reese went to the dark side a couple years ago, jumped over on defense. So there's a lot of DNA there through Norm. But football keeps changing, and it all cycles around at some point, but it's funny, the sideline guy last week was a Georgia Tech player, and we were just talking about it, and I remember Norm distinctly holding that folder up from 1974, I forget who they played, he was at Minnesota at the time, I think, and that's when he had his Kodak moment on Georgia Tech with the option.

So this stuff just keeps going around, and the principles there, you're always tweaking it and looking for better ways because offensive coaches have become like defensive coaches. They think of devious things to keep defensive guys up at night. It used to be the other way around. It's kind of a cat-and-mouse thing, so there's always evolution, always growth and tweaking.

Q. Josey said today that so much of what you guys do on defense is to containment.

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, part of that, like we're -- how do I put this? We haven't had a lot of NFL corners, I guess, playing. There aren't a lot of those guys walking around just like left tackles in the NFL. So unless you've got a handful of those guys, you just have to play good team defense. I guess that's the best way I can put it. That's kind of been what works for us. You can probably do -- I'm not a good basketball guy, but you can probably do some parallels between some programs. You find out who you are and what you are and then do things that give you a chance to be successful in your world. We feel pretty good. We haven't been great on defense all the time, but we've been pretty consistent over the years once we started actually playing it.

But it still gets down to position is really critical, and then you've got to be able to execute the basic fundamentals, and if you can do that, that gives you a chance to be successful.

Q. Boone, you inserted him at left guard. Last year you tried to keep him there. Do you feel like this is a pretty good lineup if everybody stays healthy with him at left guard next to Alaric?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that's probably our best lineup at this point. Ike is not coming back. He had a very productive surgery and repair on that. But he's not coming back. So I think we're settled right now with what we're at, and next guy in is probably Ross

Reynolds. We'll keep working him in there. He's played well. Six-man rotation, that type of thing, and then we'll just kind of keep bringing everybody else along.

Q. If something happens on the outside, Boone is probably the swing tackle and then Ross is inside?

KIRK FERENTZ: It would be Boone or Wirfs. One of those two guys would probably go out there.

Q. Is Stanley further along than you thought he would be at this stage?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know what we expected quite frankly. We just expected him to play as well as he can. I think he's done a good job. He's improved. That's the biggest thing. That's the No. 1 thing you hope for, and talked about ball security at the start of the deal here. He had his hand in on that and had another one the other day. So those are some painful lessons were learning there. But he's serious as can be, and we've had some quarterbacks that have been that way. Drew Tate doesn't come to mind, a little different personality, but most of our guys have been pretty different, more conventional study guys. But he's working at it, and he's made some good throws, and I think the guys have responded to him. I always like to throw Tyler in there, too, anytime I talk about Nate, because Tyler is doing a nice job, too. He's practicing well, and I told you it was really close, so I really feel like Tyler would be playing really well, too, if he was in there.

But yeah, we're pleased with Nate's progress. We'll never be satisfied. He can always get better. He's doing a lot of good things, though.

Q. Is Boyle trying to simulate McSorley?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, Manziel is doing more of it right now, but Ryan is a little bit closer to it, as well.

Q. Do you have anybody who can simulate Barkley?

KIRK FERENTZ: Are you kidding me? He'd be at our end if he did. He wouldn't be simulating -- he would be our guy. Or else time for me to be doing something else, that's for sure. If you see one of those guys walking around that wants to come to Iowa, let me know, will you?

Q. Derrick Mitchell, you moved him over to be --

KIRK FERENTZ: That would be a tough one here. That would be like somebody here imitating Lebron, right? If I was Fran, that would be tough.