

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Phil Parker



COACH PHIL PARKER: Thanks, everyone for coming. I appreciate that and hopefully we can give you some insight of what's going on with Iowa Football here in the last week of spring.

Obviously we lost some guys up front with not only experienced guys and then losing Anthony Nelson and the leadership up front is, you know, trying to replace that a little bit with A.J. Epenesa and Chauncey as being the top guys down in the front as being leaders. Obviously working through the linebacker group, I think we got a good group of guys we're working through there, and the secondary is kind of coming together, losing Amani Hooker and now we have to replace him. So that's been a good chance to get some other guys some reps.

And the biggest thing I think of this spring right now, you know, it's kind of hard going through this without having Reese Morgan with us. We lost a good coach, a good person, and I wish him the best in his retirement.

### **Q. What do you see developing up front?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think we've got a good group of guys right now, I think between Chauncey and A.J. Epenesa, and then I really see Cedrick and Riley doing a good job inside.

Getting Nixon back on the field here in the spring has really been a positive, and I think Noah Shannon has really done a good job up front, and Austin Schulte has done a good job.

We've got about five guys in there and Wagner has done a good job outside. We've been experimenting with some other standup guys outside, and I think that's been working real well.

Barrington Wade has played out there a little bit. Welch has played out there. Dillon Doyle has played out there and Joe Evans is playing out there.

We have, you know, three or four guys we like to put and rotate in there and I think they have done a good job of what we are asking them to do.

### **Q. What do you see in A.J. and Chauncey?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: We're constantly working on

that. I think when you go through that, one, it's by your play. It's hard to lead if you don't play well or play hard.

And I think that's what we're trying to push these guys to do, and the more guys we can get to play at a high level -- you know, I see Cedrick Lattimore, he's working harder, and now we expect him to lead, also.

So I think they have been doing a good job.

### **Q. What's the next step for A.J. as far as his progression?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think A.J. is pretty good. I think for him, his maturity right now, he's a lot better, understands what's going on with the defense. We just want to play -- have him play his best that he can play, and I see that.

He has got to understand that he's got to play within our defense and I think he's been doing that, and we're very pleased with the progress that he's made.

### **Q. The interceptions, other than having the best defensive back in the Big Ten, what advantages schematically does the Cash position provide that you can propel that and use that forward?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think it helped us in a lot of different ways as far as protecting different guys and what can we do to the backside X compared to the front side. And usually when we were playing with an outside backer, we were cheating our back side safety to take number three vertical and we were putting the X on the backside corner one-to-one a lot of times and that's hard to do that a lot of times.

So it gives us an option to go ahead and roll up the corner to the weak side, shortest throw, and still play over there tight coverage to the field.

I think when you put a guy in there, it gives you a little bit more flexibility how you can handle the backside X.

### **Q. Do you have any concerns, because Amani was 210 pounds, could tackle like a linebacker, and now the guys you're using are smaller. As far as run protection goes, do you have any concerns?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think Amani, having him out there, yeah, he was a good size, and I don't know if he had a ton of tackles out there but I do think when they

do get out there, the guys we have in there might be quicker feet, can use their feet a little bit better than maybe he did and maybe have a chance to make a play.

But I don't think that is a concern because usually most of those guy, wide receivers, they are going to run the guys off and we're going to try to defend it with the guys in the box.

I think it's a good question. I think the way we're looking at it, to us, it's like a little bit more of a skill player as a corner than it is as a safety.

**Q. DJ Johnson, would he be an option?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: DJ's been working there a lot. Matt Hankins has worked there. OJ's worked there. We put Julius in there, you know, the last couple days. So multiple guys.

Anybody that plays a corner, they have a chance to go down there, you can play inside. It's a lot of the same techniques that we're teaching to the outside.

**Q. Was the decision to go to the Cash position hard for you?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: No, it wasn't very hard after I've seen what happened. We've been cheating the system for a while. Kirksey was there for a while, a very good athlete that can play there.

I thought Ben was a pretty good athlete that could run, and we were getting away with some guys, but those were our best guys to put on the field, and at that time and moment after that game, we kind of looked at it and you know, I put him in a bad spot.

We could have done a better job there, and so I figured if we put a guy there, have a little bit more skill, and can move a little bit better, can help us out in the passing game when they are trying to attack us there, and I think to me, it wasn't much of a decision after the game. I thought it was time to move forward on that.

**Q. You see Michigan going to a spread now, does it validate it even more, another team taking away --**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Yeah, basically everybody wants to spread you out. We played Mississippi State and I think they were in 11-personnel like 99 percent of the time. There's only twice they were in there, had an extra quarterback in there or something like that.

That's where football's going now. They are spreading you out.

**Q. So you're just looking for a third corner essentially in that role?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: That's what we do. Any kind of athlete that can go in there, not only can you go in there and play corner and play man-to-man and stuff, but you have to be able to see the big picture and be able to pattern match and see things that are happening to you.

You have to recognize the splits of the wide receivers. There's a whole bunch of stuff that goes into it. You know, what is the knack of him to come on the blitz. We bought Amani Hooker a couple times on some blitzes but he knew how to time it up. He could read the cadence and see it and I think DJ does a good job with that and as a matter of fact I think all of our guys are picking up on that.

I think the hardest thing is to find the guy -- that's a knack that's hard to coach to say, hey, when you come and when do you time it up, and I think they have done a good job this spring doing that.

**Q. Typically your most veteran or free safety is the one that makes a lot of the calls. Having Geno Stone playing strong and Kaevon Merriweather playing free, who is going to be in charge of the calls, and also, what do you see in Kaevon that leads him to the field in that position specifically?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think when we made the switch with Geno, I think he's really developed into a strong leader in the back end and very confident in what he's doing and has really good instincts. I think him working with Kaevon has really helped him out and Kaevon is a smart kid and really understands the game of football and puts a lot of time and effort into it, and I think he will be vocal enough to help run it.

And it's going to be more than a pair of guys, a pair of safeties than maybe a Jake Gervase that had control of the whole thing and tried to get everybody lined up. I think we need more guys communicating. Even it goes all the way to the corners, everybody has to know what's going on. Usually the communication comes in and we are just reconfirming how do we play it or what do we see. You need to develop those young guys to understand that.

**Q. You had last year I think eight defensive linemen rotated in -- what do you see this year and is there a number, do you need to have eight? Do you push guys to get eight guys ready or do you just have -- wherever the number ends up?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: We would definitely like to have four ends and four tackles. Right now we're probably leaning more on probably four inside guys and three outside guys. I think we'll eventually get to -- we might have four or five at the outside position.

I'm very pleased. We'd like to have eight to ten guys to go in there and be able to fill a role, whether it's ten plays, 15 plays at a time, if they can go in there and help you.

One thing about the defensive line and offensive line, every single play, they are beating on each other and it takes a toll on you. I think, how many guys we played last year, really kept us fresh up front, and those guys up front are the reason why we were so successful in my opinion is because we had so many of them, and maybe they were getting 30, 35, but we kept them fresh, and that's not only during the games but also doing practice.

**Q. Big Ten scoring defense last year -- do you see pieces in place that could replicate those kind of numbers?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I don't know if we are ready to play a game right now. I'd say we're average right now. We can be a good team. I don't know if we can be, you know, what we're always striving to be; can we be great.

That comes with a lot of effort and hard work and there's a long ways to go before we get to our September games.

I think we have a chance. I think we have enough guys, enough talent to do that to be very successful on defense.

**Q. Last year you recruited four new linebackers and now you're adjusting roles. How does that impact you right now where you probably have an abundance of linebackers and who is kind of at the forefront right now?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: The one thing about having a lot of linebackers is special teams participation for those guys is really good for us. We need linebacker-type of guys, and they really kind of fit into a lot of these special teams, whether it's on the punt team, punt return team, kickoff or kickoff return team.

I think they do give us some help there, but I think up front, Djimon to me is a guy to me that's really improved up front; and you look at Welch and you look at Dillon, I think those guys are going to help us as a linebacker group.

You look at Barrington Wade and Nick Niemann, them guys have been playing outside as a Leo backer, but also playing inside. So it gives us some more flexibility of how many guys we have. We have a good rotation and a lot of depth I think at linebacker, and it's good competition, too.

So it's going to be interesting to see who comes out on top but I think we've got a good group of guys, and I don't think one's really that far ahead of somebody else. Every day, this guy might be a little bit better, this guy might be a little bit better, but I think it's definitely going to help out our special teams, too.

**Q. Last year, you got a four- or five-game preview of Riley and Julius. How much did that help you, and how much has that made that corner position competitive? Do you imagine you have four guys, you feel pretty comfortable with.**

COACH PHIL PARKER: It was a time where they had to go in and they didn't have a choice but to go out there and play and I think they learned some things as they went in there. I think it became at one point in time, I think it was four or five games, they started, and the wear and tear for a college season kind of wore on them a little bit.

But they have experience. They have been on the field, so that gives me a confidence and I know they have been out there before. We have won with them before, and I think they are just getting better as they go.

Now, do they need to grow and keep on growing, that's the hardest thing was we go and play a freshman and then all of a sudden he sits there and say, how do I get there; they really worked hard. They have to continue that work ethic of what made them get there and actually play on the field as a freshman to keep on improving to be back out there, you know, as your sophomore year.

You just don't want to take a dip of your work ethic. You've got to keep on striving to get better at every point.

**Q. Can you talk about Matt Hankins?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think he's done a good job. The thing about it is he understands the game of football, and the one thing about playing corner, you're always out there on an island. It's hard to play out there at times.

You've got to make sure you take care of him and protect him, but I think he's grown and we need him to grow as a leader, and be part of that leadership that we need as a whole on the defensive side.

**Q. How much does durability matter when you are picking players for the cash position, where every year it seems like a couple corners get banged up?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Yeah, it's interesting. You've got to change your recruiting a little bit and I think we started doing that a couple years ago about, hey, how

many defensive backs do we need just based on how much we've been used to playing with.

I think the wear and tear, you've got to be careful. You've got to make sure that you take care of your players during practice, and we do measure them and see how many yards they are running and we test them, and Coach Doyle does a great job with that stuff to monitor that.

If we feel like a guy is doing too much -- somebody will come and tell us, hey, you'd better slow down his reps here a little bit.

**Q. What do you see from that 3-4 look when you bring in some of those linebackers? I know Jones before he got hurt was doing that, and you mentioned Dillon Doyle and Welch. What do you look for and what do you see so far in the spring?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Usually, it's almost like playing the Leo backer -- sometimes you're going to play on a tight end and sometimes you're going to be playing on an offensive tackle.

What we're looking for, some toughness and guys that have a lot of energy and effort, and I think our guys have been doing a good job. Some of those guys are 235, 240, and I don't know if we go back to Parker Hesse when he started playing and exactly how much weight he was, but he was a big-sized linebacker when he first got here, too.

I think it's all the way we are developing this and the way you can put him into a certain position where they are not always going to be taking on the power-O with a double team on a tackle and a guard.

So it's more or less they are going to play against a tight end, maybe on the back side, or they are going to play against the open end.

So it gives them a little bit more freedom and it's not like they are going to be pounding all the time. Very similar to what sometimes an outside backer would do.

**Q. How is Ojemudia health-wise, and who is kind of the next guy in? Is it Julius at this point?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think there's been a lot of guys in the back end that's kind of moved up. I think obviously Julius, Riley Moss, I think Terry Roberts has really done a good job here in the last week. I mean, he's definitely got good speed and he's been playing a lot better in the last, I don't know, five, six days.

It really kind of jumped him up into that same as Moss and Julius area where I feel real comfortable about putting him in the game.

So that helps us a little bit, especially with DJ, playing the Cash and him bouncing back and forth and playing corner and Cash.

So you've got to save their legs a little bit, but I think Terry has done a good job for us.

**Q. Tell us more about DJ Johnson. We barely saw him last year.**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Yeah, DJ was banged up. Took a while before he had some hamstring issues and early in his freshman year and then he came on and we practiced him a lot during the Bowl prep in there at the Cash position.

He's got the ability to see it and he's got good footwork and he's got decent speed and he sees things pretty good. I think he's a tough kid. The maturity of saying, hey, you went through one year and we really didn't have to -- we red-shirted him, so it was kind of a nice thing to do.

So he has a lot of things to work on, but I think he's the best fit right now for us inside, even though right now I could sit there and say, Matt Hankins or OJ, if we had any issues, probably could put it in there and we practiced sometimes as a free and a strong, at times.

So I moved these guys around a lot this year, probably more than ever, and feel more comfortable about guys understanding what they need to do.

**Q. What about safety then? Geno is the only one who has really had much experience, and on the outside you have four guys that started at least five games?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Yeah, obviously Kaevon I think has really jumped up here, and obviously in the beginning of spring, I really look forward to him keep on growing.

Jack has really done a good job for us as a free safety. I mean, he's working his way up the ladder, another walk-on guy that's kind of got himself in position where he can go out there and compete. I think he has a chance to, you know, fill in there or start. You know, he's going to be pushing Kaevon and Geno.

But then you've got Young who has also played as a strong safety. I've got some guys in there, and obviously some freshman guys who are going to come in. It's hard to count on freshman guys, but now they are going to be here in probably another month or so, right. Hopefully we can get those two guys started.

We had two freshmen corners play. It's not unheard of



-- seeing one or two guys help us at least with depth there. I can see that happening.

Everybody's leaving early and this, you have to be way ahead of the game right now starts recruiting and who you're bringing in and what's the chances of these guys playing early.

**Q. What about Dallas Craddieth?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Dallas, he's working hard. I think he's made a bunch of improvements since he's been here and we've been flipping him back and forth between free safety and strong safety and he's very active, very strong kid. He's still got a ways to go, though.

**Q. You've kind of traditionally, over the years, 4-3 and now you are evolving in different directions. Is that just the nature of where football is headed and is it more of a chess match now?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I guess you could say that. I think it's always been a chess match game all the time, but after awhile, it's 11 guys on 11 guys, and are you calling the right things, are you playing the right coverages, are you doing the right things.

As long as everybody understands what we're doing and they can execute it, it's okay. But we're running the same defense, whether it's the Cash guy in there or the outside backer in there, Leo backer.

So our philosophy of what we are doing structure-wise hasn't really changed, or our thoughts or how we are attacking somebody or how we are trying to defend somebody, hasn't changed.

**Q. Is the best part of the defensive line that you don't have to worry about your blitz numbers?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Any time you have a good up-front eight, ten guys like we had last year, you don't have to bring so much pressure because most of the time they take care of most things and you have the -- if you go watch a game, the safeties are probably involved in maybe ten to 12 plays a game. The corners might be seven or eight. They don't get much. All the work is done up in the front seven, the guys up front.

So you'd better have a lot of those guys playing and when you have a good front, you have a chance to be a good rush defense, and I think we improved that from last year. Last year was decent and hopefully we can improve on that with adding something more addition up front.

**Q. When do you feel like you need to have that middle linebacker -- that person still calls the signals, when do you have like you need to have it**

**figured out?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think hopefully by the Friday before first game.

**Q. Okay.**

COACH PHIL PARKER: That's when I'd like to have him. (Laughter).

I think we've got a bunch of guys that have a chance and have the leadership. I think Seth does a really good job with those guys and they all know what's going on.

I think it's going to take time. It might be halfway through two a days now -- not even two a days now, but fall practice. It happened with Jones, we thought he was a starter, all of a sudden things happen and all of the sudden Jack goes in there.

Things change in a hurry and I think we have enough depth and we have enough competing going on there that it's going to be good for us as a defense.

**Q. You've adapted some of your pass-rush schemes over the last few years from the Raider package. Last couple years, been blessed with four defensive ends who can rush the passer. Is this 3-4 hybrid outside linebacker kind of the next extension of what you may do differently up front?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: It has the possibility of doing that right now. Right now, we're just playing our base stuff. We haven't really gotten into all the third down things that we like to do right now.

We're just focusing and concentrating on first and second down, and do a little third down stuff. We're trying to put in our basic stuff instead of getting all this exotic stuff that we've done in the past on third downs, and I think as we go and we find out more about our linebacker group, that might happen. Might go back into the bandit package a little bit more.

**Q. A lot of coaches talk about RPOs and how they are kind of not fair. You've never really bashed them. How do you defend that?**

COACH PHIL PARKER: I think what's helped us a little bit is we're a split safety team and we're not a straight man-to-man team. I think that's kind of helped us, but eventually, I like to play with a lot of zone I's, and the more zone I's I have, but still play tight coverage within that. It's a little trick that you've got to play a little bit.

But I think there's things that you can pick up. You know, what kind of RPOs are they running. It's been tough. It's always tough. As long as we can play quarter, quarter, half and we've got a chance in there, I don't think it's that big of a deal.

The only thing I get kind of discouraged with is guys changing the rules of how far the linemen can go downfield. I mean, let's play by the rules. I don't care, just tell me the rules, whatever they are. If he can go downfield, that's fine, I don't need to talk about it.

It's hard because these guys are running the ball; whoops, we want to come out and throw the ball and all of a sudden you have a guy nine yards. If I'm coaching the safeties and I see that line man down, you know, eight yards, I think it's a run or screen draw, right. That's what I'm thinking. At least that's what I'm coaching them.

But when I see them sitting there hitting the safety and he's deeper than, you know, nine yards, it's kind of a little bit -- it's hard to swallow a little bit.

But that's the way the game of football is. It's all about advertising. You all know that.

**Q. How do you get that point across at the national level to encourage officials to see it because they can only see so much, they can't see --**

COACH PHIL PARKER: Well, we send in stuff on tape. It's still hard. The way society is, everybody wants points nowadays. So the more points you score, everybody's happy and you keep their attention span going.

If it's a 6-4 game, you're going to lose a lot of people, you know what I mean (Laughter). Lose a lot of TV tests. You're going to lose a lot of people just disinterested in the game of football. I don't think it's ever going to change, you know. Just not.