

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Seth Wallace



SETH WALLACE: Hopefully everybody was able to stay warm this morning. You probably witnessed, we've got 13 guys right now at the linebacker position that are going through spring practice. We had 11 out there today that were healthy. We've got two, both with the last name Niemann, that were held out of different portions of practice. But for the most part, we're healthy at the position. We only held those guys out just because they've got a couple nagging injuries.

But we're gaining ground. We've certainly got some leadership at that position. We've got guys with a ton of experience. Some of them with more than others. But for the most part, the guys that are in front, they're staying in front, they're leading in front.

The biggest objective right now at the linebacker position, as I can imagine some of your questions will be revolving around the development at that position. We've got some younger guys. I think you guys probably witnessed a little bit of the depth at those positions. Some of those guys played for us last year in special teams roles, others were redshirted.

So this is a big period of time right now for us, but generally speaking we're four practices in, so there is not a ton that I can give you football-wise other than the 13 that are out there. The group collectively, they're motivated, they're into it, they've got great leadership in front of them, as I said. They're moving forward and we're moving forward as a group, but we've certainly got to find some other guys.

To be honest with you, it's really exciting because some of those guys last year that were redshirted for us, there was probably a mid point in last year's season where we wished they were not redshirted just from a rep standpoint, having them on special teams. There are some guys out there with length, speed and athleticism, and it would have been nice to have them last year, but certainly we're sitting in a good position right now where those guys are going into their redshirt freshman year. We've got a chance to get them better and a chance to see where they fit in. So with that, I'd open it up to questions on your end.

Q. What do you like from some of those redshirt freshmen so far, anyone that sticks out for you?

SETH WALLACE: It would be bad for me to say I didn't

like any of them. I certainly do like all of them. Some of them are at different points in the development, so it's hard to say football-wise, but you're certainly encouraged. Four practices in, there are a lot of things that we're doing. Practice is a little bit different from a design standpoint, certainly a little bit different offensively. So it's forcing us to probably grow at a much faster rate.

So those guys are being thrown into the fire. Right now they're still surviving. So I'm encouraged by all of them to be honest with you.

Q. You've got challenges from veteran groups like the ones you have in spring ball. Considering they've been through their own?

SETH WALLACE: Yeah, I think you try to do some things. You look at a script and you recognize who is in there. You recognize that your veteran guys are in there for X-amount of snaps, and you try to challenge them mentally. From a fundamental standpoint, things of that nature, hopefully those guys, if they are out in front, if they're running with the first group, hopefully those guys have got the fundamentals down, techniques, but you've got to challenge them mentally.

I think you look at the script and you try to do that when they're in there. And when the other guys are in there, you try to give them a little bit of a head start and help them out.

Q. You've got maybe as much depth as you've had at this position for a while. You have all three starters back, plus you have guys that have played a lot, Amani Jones and Aaron Mendis, and Jack Hockaday, is there room for upper mobility for these guys? Can they challenge or is it more a matter of they've really got to jump to get past Bo Bower who has a lot of equity in the bank?

SETH WALLACE: I think there are certainly challenges at each position. I would hope that at this point right now that those that are in front, would stay in front. I think if you were to ask me that question a few more practices into this thing and in a couple of weeks, I hope I'd tell you that there are some guys that are making a push, that are making a move, that are trying to force the hand of those that are in front of them.

Now I hope that those that are in front of them continue

to stay in front of them. If that is the case and those that are in front are getting better, we're certainly getting better behind. But if there is reason for a switch at some point in time, and we're doing that, that's part of what we do as coaches.

You're finding a time where you put Amani Jones in there with the first group. You put Aaron Mendis in with the first group, and you see how they react to that situation. Those are probably the best examples I can give you of where hopefully the guys in front are staying in front. Then if for some reason we've got to make a switch, we'll make one.

Q. You guys typically played the main three guys as long as they're healthy. Do you see that staying the same this season or do you want more rotation in there?

SETH WALLACE: The linebacker position, it's a different position, especially the way that we play defense around here and the amount of adjustments, the amount that's on their plate. If you can get into a rhythm and you've got the right three that are going, that's usually good for the defense. But if we find a situation where we need to play somebody on X-amount of downs and somebody on another amount of downs and maybe it's down-and-distance related, then we'll certainly do so. If that's what's best for the team, then you could see us potentially subbing somebody in there.

It's no different than what you choose to do on third down, when you put a defensive back in and take a linebacker off the field. If we need to do that on first and second down, we'll certainly do it.

Q. Could you talk about Ben's position, and how last year he was hurt early on, and I think he missed a lot of camp. But he really took his -- returned to his old ways, I thought, at the end of the year. Could you talk about that position and what you ask out of him, and how it has to flex and go out and really kind of adjust things and set your defense along?

SETH WALLACE: You're exactly right. Ben did probably hit stride. I've said it in our closed doors, he probably hit stride during the Michigan week. That's where you really noticed him. I think his level of play increased at that point in the season, and it's unfortunate because it did take him a little bit to get settled in for whatever reason. He went through a shoulder injury last year, had a hamstring at the beginning of the year.

But that position's a little bit different. We choose to stay in a three-linebacker set more often than not. There are other teams that on first and second down

they'll throw a nickel out there. We're a little bit different, so there is a little more stress on that position fundamentally, athletically for that matter with the match-ups that he's being faced with out on the perimeter. So we've looked at it. We'll continue to study it. But we've done well over the course of time choosing to stay in that type of set.

There's opportunity for us to take some reps off of that position just because of how much space he's having to play in.

Q. Do you guys stay with the three linebackers a lot of times because Big Ten are still power teams. There are spread teams, but I guess you have to be flexible, right?

SETH WALLACE: You do have to be flexible, but I think it's more about how we're built defensively. How we're structured schematically is why we choose to be, and what you would see on first and second down for the most part with three linebackers out there.

Q. A guy like Josey who has accomplished so much, is there a next step you're looking for him to take next year?

SETH WALLACE: Of course there is. There is leadership. I believe that can continue to increase. I think his level of play can increase as well. His knowledge of the game certainly can increase. I think he recognizes that. That's all the challenges that I have as a coach. It's the challenges that he has as an accomplished player up to this point is how can he continue to grow?

I think you've got to start with what he brings from a leadership standpoint. Because he certainly is out in front of our defense, and he's got to take that on. But he's also got to take on the fact that there is growth football-wise. He's challenged with it every day. As I mentioned earlier, whatever stress that we can put on him when he's in there and those older guys, the veteran guys, it's going to be better for us because we can create a really tough situation for them to be in. And if they push through it, then they're certainly getting better individually and we're getting better defensively.

Q. You have a group of senior starters and then you guys get pretty young at linebacker. You being special teams, do you expect them to show up there and grow there? Or are you counting on the young guys?

SETH WALLACE: You do. Kind of the way this program is built and special teams is certainly a pillar of this program. Anytime that you can find a way, and certainly I have ownership in it. I work with our punt team, I coach the linebacker position. And if your

linebackers aren't involved in special teams, then something's wrong. Those are the bodies that you're looking for.

So the growth would start there. You guys saw the beginning of practice today. So you saw us out there in punt. What you didn't see at the end of practice we had another six or eight-minute period that was completely designed around the fundamental works special teams wise. And you're looking at those guys in the evaluation period. You're looking at them special-teams-wise just to see how they move.

But they certainly have to be involved in special teams. From there, you're going to get your game growth. You're going to get your experience just from being out there on the field in a Big Ten setting. Then hopefully that allows them to settle in and find a better role or a role that they're improving on linebacker wise.

Q. Spring is the time of year where people start asking, and breakout players becomes the topic of conversation. As a coach, are there specific traits you see with guys that are consistent that will end up falling into that category?

SETH WALLACE: You're saying will they just show up out of nowhere?

Q. Breakout guys. Guys that exceed expectations or might change their spot on the depth chart? Is this a trait that you see with guys?

SETH WALLACE: Well, it typically is going to be your mentally tough. The tough thing about us defensively is there is a lot that goes into it. It may not appear to be that way when you're looking at it from afar. But there is a lot that goes into it. In order to push through defensively at Iowa, you've got to be extremely mentally tough. You've got to be mentally focused. You've got to have an internal drive that is driving you past the fact that you're just out there playing football.

To me, it's pretty easy. We've recruited all these guys because they were very good high school players or very good football players. But when you get here, there is so much more that's on you defensively and especially at the linebacker position. If you're going to breakthrough and push through, you've got to find somebody that's driven, that's internally driven to do the things off the field. Outside of the classroom, outside of the fact that I've got them for an hour or so a day meeting-wise, they've got to do it on their own. And if they're doing that, there is a good chance they'll end up pushing through and breaking through.

Q. Mentally, what are the things you see the kids struggle with picking up at linebacker?

SETH WALLACE: Probably just the speed of

everything. It would be nice if everybody lined up in one formation and they didn't move guys around. But as soon as a guy moves an inch or a foot around here, that changes us drastically. The tough thing is that responsibility typically falls on the linebacker position to make sure that not only do they adjust themselves, but they also adjust what we're doing in front, what we're doing behind.

Q. Does the mental side of it determine playing time almost as much as the physical part of it when you're picking between guys?

SETH WALLACE: To a certain degree. But we've got a little room for error. You've got to throw somebody in there, and you've got to accept the fact that maybe they're a little bit behind mentally, but you just want to see how they react to things, and you want to see how quickly they can get to the ball. We're not going rogue defensively, but you definitely want to throw them out there and just see, just see what they can do.

That's why typically you take somebody that is of lesser experience and you put them in there with somebody that is of greater experience to try to help that curve a little bit.

Q. How would you chart Bo Bower's growth last year? He had to win the inside position and he held it all year. Was it kind of a turn-around year for him?

SETH WALLACE: It was in some ways, and in some ways I think there was some that was left out there. I think Bo recognizes that. I think everybody in each of those positions recognizes that, whether you're to talk to Ben or to Josey. And I think they'd say there is plenty of football that we left out there. There's plenty of improvement to be had. And I think in Bo's case, he certainly is somebody that's mentally tough, that's driven, that has an internal drive that's coming to practice every day with the right type of motivation that he recognizes that there's more meat left on the bone for him. That's his pursuit right now.

That's my job as a coach to continue to push him towards what it is he's pursuing. Right now it's improvement, not only at that position but also at the Mike and the Leo position as well.

Q. Along the lines of special teams, you were heavily involved in recruiting Ryan Gersonde in Milwaukee. What did you see in him? What do you think of the punting situation right now?

SETH WALLACE: Right we're four days into it, that is a skillset that is kind of like a golfer. If any of you guys were to go to the range today I doubt anybody's going to hit it right down the middle. I wouldn't think so unless you guys got a pretty big ego if you felt like you

hit it down the middle of the driving range. But in the case of our punter, I don't think it's something that you typically look at. Because they've been punting indoors if they've been doing it on their own up until this point.

With the punting deal, I'd rather answer that two weeks from now. But you're asking the question, right now we've got a lot of work to do at that position. We've got a couple of guys that are out in front of it. Colten Rastetter was our back-up last year. We threw him into a tough situation. Anytime you go out there and you're asked to hit the ball down the middle of the fairway, and we threw him in for one time last year against Iowa State, and I understand the game was a little out of hand at that point. But we put him out there, and he put a stroke on one that was pretty good.

We've just got to get him into that season. Into the situation where he feels comfortable being out there. But then in Ryan's case, we recognized what our depth looked like at that position. That's why we went out and recruited one. I had the opportunity to recruit Ryan. To me, the jury's out on how he'll handle the college side of things. But high school-wise, he comes from a very good high school, a high school that's produced some players that have gone on to Madison and done well. So he's had the right coaching. His head coach has been there for years.

So I think he'll do okay when he gets here, but you certainly can't take for granted that you lost somebody that did a really good job in Ron Coluzzi last year, so we'll continue to push forward.

Q. What do you think of some of the changes on the other side of the ball that you've seen? How has that helped your group challenge them? Because talking to Josey and some of the guys, yeah, we kind of knew it was coming before, and now we don't.

SETH WALLACE: Yeah, it's been different. The offense has been different. What Bryant's doing with the offense is certainly it has a lot of the same flavor as what it's been in the past. It's got more flavor with Ken being back and some of his thoughts that are gone into it.

What it's done for us defensively is probably made us think as at a faster rate. We've typically been able to put our toes in the water before we jumped right in when it came to spring practice. We had jumped right in. We had water up to our waist on the first day, which has been good for us, because we've had to adjust to it.

To the point of the question that was asked earlier, those guys have had to -- they've had to grow up.

They've had to move a little bit faster. With veteran guys that's been a little bit easier, because those guys jumped right into it. And they felt a little bit of pressure. Where, if you were to ask me a year ago after four practices, I would have told you that they probably didn't have a lot of schematic pressure. Now they're being forced to think a little bit more.

Q. There is a Wisconsin native now on the coaching staff. Has he taken over under your turf?

SETH WALLACE: I turned that over as soon as Tim -- and I had the opportunity to get to know Tim very well when he and I both recruited the State when he was at North Dakota State. So when he officially signed on I raised my hand, threw up the White flag and said you can take the State and they can put me somewhere else. He's really good, he's really thorough, and he's got a ton of relationships up there. He knows everybody. Everybody knows him. So it's a perfect fit.

Q. What is your turf now then?

SETH WALLACE: I guess it's yet to be determined. I'll continue to have the northern suburbs of Chicago and I'm sure they'll find me a place down in Florida, hopefully. That would be nice to be down there for a couple of weeks.

Q. When Brian was named offensive coordinator, how was that received among the guys that were still here?

SETH WALLACE: Talking our players, talking our staff?

Q. Staff.

SETH WALLACE: Staff? I think it was well-received. I don't know that anybody objected to it. They certainly didn't say that, probably for good reason. But Brian, I mean, Brian you guys see Brian, you've been around him enough to know what type of personality he has. His internal drive, as I mentioned with the linebackers, if you're going to be good at anything, you've got to be internally motivated. He's certainly got that. I think you're seeing it already. I think our players are starting to see it already. It's been a good transition.

Q. Is that the type of thing that can energize a team? A new offensive coordinator, new ideas?

SETH WALLACE: Certainly. I think his role is a little more tied up in certainly coaching a position. But right now from a practice stand point he's more administrative involved because he's the one that has to go off the script and relay the plays to the quarterback. So you're not seeing him like you were seeing him when he coached the offensive line.

But what you're seeing offensively has been challenging for us defensively, like I mentioned, just from an adjustment standpoint. But I do think that

there is some energy involved in it too, just what you're seeing out of our offensive players.

Q. I know you guys have postseason interviews with players. With Joe, what piece of film do you shove in front of him and say, okay, here's where you need to get better? What things do you put in front of him?

SETH WALLACE: I think you start with the stuff that he may have struggled with last year. I don't know that there is a certain piece of film. He's at a point in his career where, I'll use a quote that I got from Coach Brands when I watched them practice, but you've got to be your own best coach. There's only so much that I can say. There's only so much time that I have when I'm worried about not only the development at that position but other positions as well and you're trying to get through it in a certain amount of time, that you've got to be able to coach yourself. I think that's probably the biggest thing for Josey right now.

I'll certainly give him the coaching that is deserved from a coach's standpoint, but he's got to be able to recognize the little things. Which I shouldn't have to harp on the little things because he's pretty clued into that. But that's what he's got to go back and look at from last year, and that's what I have to share with I am had on a big picture. Here's what you've got to get better at and here's why. Then you should just be able to put it to rest after that. Because, again, he's had a ton of experience and it's going to allow him an opportunity to get better on his own. Then certainly what I'm doing as a coach as well.