

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, just good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here and covering the team.

Just looking backwards for a second, last weekend was a defining weekend for a lot of teams in college football, and certainly a pivotal one for our football team. You look back, every team starts preparation for the most part in January with the out-of-season programs. You go through a lot, and then August rolls around and there's a lot of hope and optimism, and we certainly felt that way. It was a guarded optimism, but you have goals, lofty goals and expectations, and the bottom line is this football team this year has really worked hard. I've said that consistently. They've worked hard. They've had a great attitude, and they've showed up and competed hard, and that is commendable. Certainly, the first seven weeks went better for us than the last three, and that's certainly disappointing for each and every one of us.

That's part of the deal. They've been tough losses, two points, six points, four points, and I know that's disappointing for our fans. It's more disappointing for our players as you can imagine with just all the investment that they've made, but that's part of the deal.

With that, I understand there's always questions, and questions are asked, and quite frankly probably the hardest time for me to deal with that stuff is right after a ballgame. You're thinking about the players, where they're at mentally, and you're thinking about the game in a million different ways.

Clearly I had some time to reflect and look back, and just to hit two questions quickly, I'll touch back on those, and then we'll move forward to Illinois.

First thing is how do we move forward as a football team right now, what's there left to play for, and I've always felt like anything in sports, I mentioned the other night we prepare pretty much year-round. You only get 12 opportunities guaranteed, so every game is special. We've got two scheduled and they're important to us. I know they are for our opponents, also, and it really goes down to two things for a football team or anybody when you face disappointment. You're either going to pull together or you're going to divide or you're going to

fight and compete or you're going to surrender. There really aren't options in either one of those choices.

The choice is to push forward and maximize the opportunities moving forward, and I'm confident and comfortable our team will do that, and that's where we're at right now.

The other thing was regarding playing time, roles, and that type of thing with personnel decisions, etc, and as you can well imagine, our first goal as a team is to win, and then our secondary goals are to score points offensively and stop points on the defensive side.

We spent a lot of time evaluating our team, looking at the team, watching them, and then week to week trying to figure out what gives us the best chance to do those two things, attain those two goals, and it's a little bit complex. It starts with knowing your personnel and then obviously trying to match your opponents, anticipated things that they're going to give you. So it depends on the plan.

Injury situations of players also factor into it a little bit, and then most importantly once you get to the game; how the game goes, how the opponent chooses to attack you and go on from there.

There are a lot of things that go into it, a lot of it is reactionary and then just work from there. So that's how we go about that.

Circling back to our football team, I've said this consistently, this team so far has really shown good leadership, and they've continued to do that. We've had good leadership there, and we've seen a good attitude from everybody, and there are a lot of little things you look for during the course of a year, whether it's academic, social, just things they do, how they interact with each other, what the locker room looks like when you walk through it, and I think these guys have really done a good job of doing the little things well.

Nobody wants to lose, obviously. Nobody wants to lose one game, let alone three in a row, but the big thing right now and the thing we've tried to communicate to our players that's the key is looking forward at this point. There's nothing you can do about what's happened behind us, and really what's

important is what we're doing on a daily basis because that will affect what happens in the future, and that's what we've got to be concerned about.

That's kind of been the message to our football team the last couple weeks, pretty much all 10 weeks for that matter, and will continue to be.

Turning the page to Illinois, the captains will be the same guys: Parker Hesse, Nate Stanley, Jake Gervase and Keegan Render. Injury-wise it looks like Brandon Smith will be back. He's practiced the last two days, so as long as he gets through the week, he'll be back. Nate Stanley is doing better than the last two weeks. I don't know if he's 100 percent, but he's certainly doing better and doing fine, threw the ball well today and yesterday. And then on a different note, Max Cooper, we lost him in the last part of the game there on Saturday, so he's going to be out for the season, unfortunately. He's been doing some good things and just came back off an injury. That's disappointing for everybody.

Talking about Illinois, Coach Smith's third year and they're a very young football team in a lot of regards. When you look at them defensively, clearly there's an identity there that's been consistent, and then where the big change is offensively, they made a change in systems this past out of season, and the last three weeks especially they've really been clipping right along. I think they're 41 points a game, 550 yards average over the last three ballgames, and a lot of that's coming on the ground.

Quarterback and the running back are both doing a great job, extremely dangerous players, and then they're playing with great confidence, and probably the biggest change outside of that that I would cite is just their offensive line. They were a young group last year and a little bit rough around the edges, but they're much improved as a group and they're allowing their offense to operate really efficiently. They've done a good job of moving that thing along.

Back on the road again, and just another Big Ten challenge. We need to have a good week. We're off to a good start and the challenge now is to go on the road and try to get a Big Ten win.

**Q. With Noah, I don't understand how a player of that resume doesn't get on the field. I don't understand that. It feels like he's one of the best players.**

KIRK FERENTZ: No question. I said the other night, we've got two really good tight ends, and it's rare to have that. But if you look at it, this year plus compared to last year, we're going about roughly the same ratio, amount of snaps. They're out there, he and T.J. are

out there together at times, they're out there separately at times, and if they are out there separately, the lean is to T.J. probably because he's a little bit more versatile as a tight end. I would compare him more to a specialist position. But nonetheless, he's an outstanding football player, and we've tried to get him the ball, and we'll continue to try to get him the ball.

**Q. Noah had, I believe, eight or nine snaps in the second half. Is that enough in your eyes for Noah?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Nothing really looked very good last Saturday, quite frankly, offensively. There wasn't much we did that really did with consistency, so we went back and looked at everything and we'll try to keep him involved and get him involved. But he's a good football player. We're going to be a better team if we can get him the ball. He didn't play that many snaps against Indiana, but he had a lot of production, and that was coming off an injury and what have you. Snap count was pretty low, but his production was really high, as was T.J.'s, and we didn't get that kind of production from either of the guys the other night. Not putting it on them, it's just Northwestern did a really good job of making it tough on us the other day.

**Q. There's some speculation that there's maybe a character issue or a vendetta issue. It doesn't seem like that's actually the case, though, right?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, if that's floating around out there, which I've got to apologize, I'll read the papers tomorrow night. I haven't heard that. I can assure you that's not an issue. Noah is a high-character guy. He's been tremendous with us. He's a great kid. So there's no issues there at all, and that's hardly the deal.

Beyond that, again, he's a good player. We're going to be better if we can find ways to get him the ball. We tried to get him the ball on that two-point play at Purdue, the last one we had. Unfortunately he was assaulted on that play and didn't get the opportunity. And that kind of factors in sometimes, too. Remember, we have a lot of plays that are designed for he, T.J., other guys, as well, but if the defense takes something away, then you're out of luck on that one.

**Q. You've told us in the past that Phil has the primary decision making on personnel decisions on defense. Is the same true for Brian on offense?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes, pretty much, and LeVar on special teams. We'll have conversations. I'll interject thoughts, ideas. I had one last night before we left on the other side of the ball about a couple things. But that's kind of always been the way I've operated. I'll make my observations, say what I think is important, and then pretty much let the coordinators handle things.

Obviously there are times you step in. Bob Sanders in 2000 I thought it was time to get him on the field and see what we could do, see if he would help things.

But yeah, we let the coordinators pretty much dictate, and they're the ones that have to make the calls in critical times, so I think it's better that way.

**Q. You mentioned after the Purdue game, you're building for the next one, next Big Ten Championship. How important is this finishing stretch --**

KIRK FERENTZ: It's always important. We've always talked about November football being important, and that hasn't changed. Again, this has been disappointing because we've had two tough games in this month and then another one prior to that.

Coming out of Purdue, it looked like a long shot to go to Indy, and yeah, so that's always been our attitude going back to day one in '99 when we couldn't win a game. But you're always trying to build towards something, and it's really important, you're either adding to it, you're contributing, or you're taking away from. That was really the impetus behind sending bowl watches to the 2000 seniors because they never got the opportunity to play in a bowl and that was a real pivotal -- those guys helped set the table for that 2001 season, and that was hardly momentous looking back, but it was at that time. That was like going to Indy for us at that point.

And then right along with that, you get pressed about evaluating teams and all that, and I am reluctant to do that until the season is over. Two of my favorite teams to coach and work with on a daily basis are not going to go down in the record books as memorable Iowa teams perhaps for a lot of people, but they will for me. The '13 season and the '08 season were two of the better -- I thought those guys really -- they were on the right page, they were working together and maximized every opportunity as best they could. In '08 we lost -- after our 3-0 start, got off to a good start and then had three tough losses like this stretch. But they came out of it. We had one more loss at Illinois, coincidentally, by three points I think. But that season, the team just kept driving and kept pushing. That's all we're asking our guys to do right now, and there's still a lot of good moments we can have if we'll stick with it, and that's the goal right now.

**Q. You talked about the problem with the running game postgame, you talked about it last week. How frustrating is it watching the film and not seeing really any progress?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that was a big part of the game the other day. It was 3-0 at halftime, might as well be

0-0 in my opinion, and really I think the critical things in the game the other night, my observation would be we did a nice job on kick return, but outside of that we didn't help ourselves in the kicking game, especially with punt and punt return. We got nothing out of that. In fact, we helped them a little bit.

They ran the ball better than we did, and they were able to run it with success in the second half especially, and we weren't. And then 3rd and 4th down conversions factored in there, too, and that kind of tied in with the running game's success.

It's something we'll keep working at. I think the guys are working hard at it, and we just haven't gotten it to the point where we'd like to, and we've got two games left, so this would be a great time to get it started.

**Q. Do you think the running back by committee has hindered that? Has it not allowed it to get into a rhythm?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think necessarily. I think it's a matter of us being a little bit more cohesive and trying to -- we've got to push this thing through. It's kind of like our team overall; we've just got to push this thing through and do things a little bit better.

**Q. Gersonde, you wouldn't waste a redshirt by using him; is there any chance you might see him this week?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's true of a lot of the guys we have right now that are under that four-game count, so yeah, we'll definitely let those guys compete, and Ryan is -- we can play him without being penalized now, which is really nice, and there are probably a couple other guys, too, that we're looking at that might be able to help us in some way, maybe small roles, that type of thing, help us win the game.

**Q. You had NFL guys on the offensive line last year in James and Ike, then Akrum, NFL running back, but still, last year the running game was a little bit short in some games --**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we really didn't have Ike, but yeah.

**Q. And it feels like that's a large part of what you guys want to be, a large part of your identity when you're right in your offense.**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that was a bad night offensively for us, period, and if you look back at Wisconsin last year, which ironically our tight ends weren't very involved in that game, either. When we don't run the ball, it's really tough. When you're struggling offensively, which we were the other night, it's just -- it's a bad situation. They kind of feed off each other, and we've certainly run the ball better with NFL guys up

front or in the backfield. LeShun helped us a lot. But we've also run it effectively without NFL guys, and it doesn't take that. It's got to be a little bit more cohesive of a team effort.

The other night they -- I think I mentioned last Tuesday that I really think a big part of Northwestern's success is what they've done defensively from 2008 on. Not every year has been great defensively for them, but they've got an identity. I think they really do a great job with their players, and that was an example, unfortunately, for us. That was an example the other night. You can look back at their season, and I think Michigan will probably tell you the same thing. Michigan has scored a lot of points this year; they got 20 against Northwestern and had to work hard. We knew it was going to be a challenge going into the game, and unfortunately we weren't really able to generate anything.

But historically I know this, too, one game doesn't determine what's going to happen in the next one. So we're back at work, but to your point if we don't run the ball better this week, it's not going to be pretty.

**Q. How would you assess Sargent's progress this year?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, again, nobody had a great night the other night, right, but the two weeks prior to that, I really thought he was playing really well and doing a lot of great things. But we've got to get him started, too. It's not fair to -- you can't just hand a back a ball and expect him to go do it. We didn't give him enough opportunity or any of the guys carrying the ball enough opportunity the other night. That's what we're going to try to get that going a little bit better this week.

**Q. I have a recruiting question. I know you guys have had the rule that committed guys can't visit other schools, verbally committed guys can't visit other schools. Is that a strict rule still, or is there some leeway there?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Everything is case by case, but as a rule, commitment means commitment, and we try to encourage when players do commit to us, we try to encourage them to embrace that, that concept. What they do, their actions, anything in life, your actions kind of dictate what your intentions might be, so if we see something that might be a little contradictory to a commitment, then we'll have to consider it and talk about it, et cetera, and visit with the prospect about it.

**Q. Do you anticipate some poaching that may go on now with the earlier signing day? You guys have been through this cycle now.**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it does, every year that's a concern or a reality I guess I should say. Probably the

one observation I think the poaching is going to happen now in November and October instead of January -- it used to be January when it was a conventional January, February signing. Like everything in recruiting, it's moved up, and Florida I think accelerated, quote-unquote, the poaching period. I know we've had a couple guys that have been offered by schools that are, quote-unquote, the elite type programs.

You know, anything is possible. We're hopeful everybody committed to us is committed for the right reason and will stick with us. But all that being said, it's like anything else, you don't want somebody to join your team that doesn't have both feet in. That's not good for anybody.

**Q. What are you expecting number wise for this class?**

KIRK FERENTZ: For December -- overall I would say 19 to 21 something like that probably. Somewhere around 20, give or take one or two.

**Q. What would you say your identity is on defense? Last week -- Purdue was bombs away, last week was a rushing thing. I think the adjustment Phil made at safety worked. You have a bunch of linebackers now who don't get on the field as much. Is there an identity there with the defense?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's interesting you say that because that was part of the discussion last night when we were talking, and it just so happens he had a frame frozen up on his screen that kind of led right down that road. It's really interesting, I think I mentioned this a while back, that we all kind of knew in the room here what it looked like up front. We knew what it looked like back at the safeties, although that's changed now with Geno in there and Hooker down below.

But really, it's kind of corner to corner in there right across the board, the corners and three linebackers, we didn't know coming in who was what, and certainly didn't have anybody that was -- had returning -- significant returning experience. So my thoughts, and I told you back in August, I really thought by the end of September, mid-October we'd kind of have a grip on it. Now you factor the injuries that we've had and the rotation we've had, and we're sitting here in November now, and it's still a little bit of a jump ball. The good news is that I think we've seen all the guys play well, whether it was Jack settling in at mike, but Welsh has really done a nice job in there. We've got Neimann who was hurt, now he's back, and Colbert has done a good job. So we're just trying to figure that whole equation out and what's best.

In September we weren't fooling around with Hooker

down below, so now -- it's a whole new dynamic, and then we have two freshmen corners that I think have done a lot of good things out there.

So I guess it's not a quandary, but it's -- I guess the good news is we're deeper than we were two months ago, so we've just going to figure this out.

**Q. Do you feel like you need two defenses, like against Wisconsin you have a philosophy --**

KIRK FERENTZ: That is going to be an interesting -- if you're going to play Hooker in that position, you probably don't want to line him up against a tight end. That's probably not a smart thing.

That's going to be a whole separate discussion and figure out how we adjust it. It's kind of like he'll be adjusting opposite of what we did three or four weeks ago. But that's a separate time, separate discussion unless we hook up somebody like that in a bowl game, and then it'll be Neimann for sure at that point. But anyway, we've had a lot of guys play, and now I think hopefully over the next couple weeks we'll figure out who we are and what we are.

**Q. How about Amani Jones? The guy kind of lost his job in the first quarter of the first game, but you thought he would be a factor all year. How was his progression and would you think about putting him back out there?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It's possible. He's kind of more of a situational type guy, if you will. I think we're dealing with that the right way right now. We've really encouraged him to just embody the special teams role that he has, and he's done a great job with that. His attitude has been great. He's practicing really well out there and really bringing a lot of energy, which that's just his nature. I think we're in the right spot with him, and then we'll just figure that out later, but right now his main role is just to help us on special teams and give us some energy out there.

**Q. You mentioned Nate. How much has that altered the game plan the previous couple weeks?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It hasn't altered the plan at all. The question was can he get to the game and be healthy, and just for the record, I've been saying he's been throwing the ball the last two Tuesdays, maybe three -- I can't remember how long it's been now, but he's throwing it well every Tuesday and Wednesday, right on through the week.

It's been fine.

**Q. Tristan Wirfs, what is his progression, especially from a year ago? What have you seen maybe from him at the tackle spot?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Really tough for a first-year player to get thrown in at any position, especially the offensive line. We're playing Big Ten teams now so we have a lot of clips from a year ago when you look at our cut-ups, and he's a more confident player. He's more technique proficient now. Last year I'm not sure he understood totally what he was supposed to be doing. He might know his assignment, but he probably had no idea what his neighbor was doing, that type of thing.

That's part of the beauty of experience. He's not there yet, but he's got a great attitude, works extremely hard, and he's out there every day just with a good attitude, so he's got a chance to be a really good player. He's playing well for us. But he's got a chance to be a really good football player here before his career is over.

**Q. There were a couple players that mentioned maybe the last couple weeks, they've been feeling kind of maybe tense in practice, but they said yesterday was the first day they kind of felt like they got back to having fun. Have you kind of sensed anything different from this week than the past couple weeks?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Not necessarily. I hope nobody is feeling tense. You should be feeling focused. I think that's a better word. At least that's what I hope players are, focused and intense but not tense. But that's easy for me to say, too, right, because I'm not the one out there doing what they're doing. It's tough.

But that's the beauty of experience. That's the beauty of repetition. Probably the biggest thing maybe to that point is just this hasn't been fun, losing is never fun because you work so hard to have success, but it's a reality of if you're going to go out there and put it on the line, it could happen, so that's the reality of life. We all face things that are tougher than losing football games at different points of your life.

So what do you take from that, how do you respond, and again, I think the point I said earlier, you learn from what's happened in the past, but you've really got to focus on what you're doing today because that will affect what happens down the road here. Right now we can't worry about the last couple weeks. We've got to worry about what can we do to give ourselves a chance to be victorious again, and that's the goal right now. So it really gets down to us practicing well, and you can't do it being tense. You have to be intense, but you've got to let it rip a little bit, too. You can't squeeze the bat when you swing it.