

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Saturday, August 5, 2017

Kirk Ferentz



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Just start off by thanking everybody here for your coverage of our football team through the years. I really think the special relationship our fans have with our players and our team is the direct result of your stories and your reports. So we appreciate you taking the story to our fans.

It's really hard to believe four weeks from now we'll be kicking off in Kinnick against Wyoming. So certainly we've got a lot of work to do, but I think all of us as coaches right now are excited. We're encouraged by what we've seen in just a short window. We've had six practices now, four in pads, two in shorts, and seen some good things out there that really traces back to January. The team has had a good attitude, good work ethic right from the git-go. So I think we're off to a decent start that way.

Certainly the quarterback competition is something that's going to be of interest to everybody. The good news right there is both Nate and Tyler are doing a nice job competing. They're making good strides. They've made strides since the spring, certainly, and improved in the last couple days as well. So happy about that. Both those guys are getting first-team reps. I hate to talk for other people, but I think all of us as coaches and players feel good about both guys and feel like they both can lead us to good results. So I'm happy with what we're seeing so far.

Certainly we're not new to having new quarterbacks. That's not a new phenomenon in college football. It's just part of the game, certainly. Whether you look at Brad Banks, Nathan Chandler, Drew Tate, Ricky Stanzi, C.J. Beathard, I think history has proven you can be successful and have a successful team with a new quarterback taking snaps. So that's how we're looking at this whole thing.

This is my 28th year now at Iowa, 19th as a head coach. It's like every year, every time you start a new season, you have new challenges, new opportunities. It's a different equation, certainly than any other year, and the trick is to put it all together. That's the beauty of college football in my mind. It's probably why it's such a popular sport with the fans. We're only a week into it as I mentioned. I think thus far we're pleased with what we've seen from our newcomers. We had a

chance to watch them in the out-of-the-season program with Chris Doyle and his staff. We're very impressed with them. We like the way they worked thus far, the way they listen and pay attention. So we're seeing good things there. They're off to a good start. More importantly, our older guys for the most part have taken a step since April. That's just imperative for us to have a good football team, a successful season. Everybody's got to be moving in the right direction, and that means improving.

Certainly we have a lot more of that going on as we move forward here. I think the players overall are wired in. They've been very attentive. We've had some ups and downs, but for the most part they've been attentive. I think the new staff is really meshing right now. A little different dynamic out there, little different energy level, and that's been a positive.

But most importantly, the guys are working well together. I think they're sharing ideas and really everybody's kind of aligned with our philosophy of having a team that's going to be hard-nosed, physical, and tough-minded out there and play sound football. So that's really what we're looking for.

Steve mentioned next Saturday we'll have Kids Day, so it's first exposure for anybody, and hopefully a good day for the young people as well. Gates open at 11 o'clock, and 11:30 will be autographs and we'll get going at noon.

I'm sure our players will be anxious. It will be the first time they get to perform in front of a new crowd. First time they'll perform in Kinnick with the Tigerhawks, lot of firsts for them that way, and I'm sure they'll be excited to be out there. But between now and then we'll have some work to do. With that, I'll throw it out to your questions.

Q. What have you seen out of James Butler

COACH FERENTZ: I'll preface it by just the way he got here. Everything about it since we got the release has been very impressive. He did a tremendous job academically at Nevada. Not only graduating in three years' time, but also violating the Buckley Amendment. He's got a 3.12 grade point. So this guy's really been on task academically. His statistics in football are impressive. But certainly to have him here on campus

and have an opportunity to work with him, I think all of us are enjoying that, really pleased. Anytime you can add a good player, a good person, a high-caliber guy to your roster, that's a positive.

Q. Your defensive secondary this year is not going to have Desmond King, obviously, and Snyder is out. How do you feel about your secondary coming into this season without those guys? Do you still feel good about your players coming back? Because I know you have good players coming back, how do you feel about that? And secondly, it is your 28th year, just as far as your job is concerned, anything you miss about being an assistant coach?

COACH FERENTZ: Oh, yeah, absolutely. One of the things I really enjoyed about going to Cleveland, instead of 115 guys or whatever we had on our roster that you're responsible for, watching bake sales and all of the stuff you've got to do when you're a head coach, all that stuff was off my plate and I had a room with a small group of players. So it's a lot more intimate. It's a lot easier to develop relationships. I hate using that word, but that's really what you're doing. Getting to know your players and all that kind of stuff.

So it's a whole different challenge as a head coach. You learn to enjoy both things. There are challenges in both jobs, pluses and minuses in every job. But, yeah, it's pure teaching, it's just a smaller group. So it's fun. Secretly that is my retirement job. That's a job I want one of these days.

But I like the job that I've got a lot. The funny part about it is 28 years ago I had no idea. I was really off the pickle boat. I had no idea what I was walking into, where I was, all that kind of stuff. I had no idea what was about to happen historically at the University of Iowa. I consider myself fortunate from day one in 1981.

The DB position is kind of interesting. A year ago or eight months ago it looked like it was going to be pretty solid back there. I think Brandon's injury really changed the complexion of that whole thing. There's a lot been written about our youth at the receiver position. I would say that's who we are on the back end too.

Like I said in Chicago, we're really young on the perimeter right now. I say young/inexperienced at the corner positions. Basically safety and receivers. So I would not include the running backs in that group or quarterbacks. That's our team in a nutshell. That's where this important work is really going to help us out.

Q. You've had numerous quarterback competitions

which is what happens in college football. All of them but one, you had Ken help make that decision. What's your level of trust in Ken this time around? What can he see that others don't or don't see quite as good, I guess, as he does?

COACH FERENTZ: The one time Ken wasn't involved Greg was involved, you're talking about two guys that are master coaches, really veteran guys. Guys that thoroughly understand that position better than I pretend to. So I think that's a real plus for us. That's what, just as I mentioned team work, we have team work on the staff too. Ken's in the room with those guys every minute. He's the one in their ear all the time. He's hearing the feedback. He hears things that the rest of us aren't privileged to hear.

But ultimately it gets down to leading the team. That's what it gets down to. All of us have an opinion on that certainly. We'll keep observing, we'll watch, we'll pull information. At some point we'll have to make some decisions and go from there. But it will be a group effort. But Ken is the primary point of contact.

Just like if we were talking about the right guard position, Tim Polasek would be the main authority on that.

Q. How many true freshman do you expect to play right away?

COACH FERENTZ: We don't have a number in mind. It's really important to determine in the next couple weeks who we think can help us. There are a couple guys right now - we've only had four days of shoulder pads - I would say have a realistic chance. Then there are other guys that might. And there are a couple guys that we're not thinking about now that may surface here once they figure out where they're at and what they're doing.

Then there may be some other guys that look like they are and might slip off and flash back to the days when you had three days of freshmen practices. You guys remember that. Was that an interesting concept. But you'd always come off the field the first day and make judgments on guys, and nobody had shoulder pads on yet. It's probably about a 10 percent accuracy rate on that one. We'll just kind of let camp play out, but we've got an open mind certainly, and if a guy can help us at any position, we're letting him go.

Q. Manny Rugamba got valuable experience late last year. How do you think that will help catapult him to be on the field?

COACH FERENTZ: It's got to help him. He made some really big plays in a big game at critical times. Maybe as big a play as we've had in the season, quite frankly. That's got to be good for him as long as he

keeps his feet on the ground and keeps thinking about getting better and working hard. I have no reason to think that he won't. If his attitude stays the same, he's obviously going to be physically bigger. He was like a rail last year.

But there is a lot of upside for him right now. Getting out on the field and doing some good things, Josh Jackson has done the same thing. It's funny, I talked to Scott this morning who couldn't say enough about Riley McCarron, who I understand is doing pretty well in Houston. And this guy has obviously done his homework. I said Riley's an interesting guy. Walked on here, played quarterback in high school. Walked on, learned how to play receiver. But really made his mark on special teams, and Josh has done that same thing. He really became a really good receiver for us those last two years. From what I'm hearing, he may be hanging around Houston for a while now, which is really great.

It's just a real illustration of a guy that comes in, pays attention and works hard. That's what I've seen from Josh too. I was teasing him at the end of the summer. Got to watch him his last couple workouts and told Chris Doyle, Josh is laughing at you. This program is like elementary school for him. He really had a good summer. So he couldn't have done that two years ago. To see his growth and his confidence is really encouraging for all of us.

Q. How can the running backs share carries if they stay healthy?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, that's a really good dilemma I hope we have. First of all, Akrum is one of our best football players. We've seen him, we've witnessed him, and he is, you know -- boy, he's right on task right now. His weight's good, his attitude has been tremendous. He's practicing really well. Again, only six workouts, but he's looking like a senior player and a good senior player, and that's -- referencing the quarterback, we know whoever it is, we're getting a new quarterback. So our best guys better be out there doing it. He's on the right track.

But like last year, we were better when we had two guys that could help us there. If we have three, that would be great too. So that's just going to give everybody a better chance to play better. That will be easy to have those guys complement each other. We've got to make sure all three are ready to go.

Q. How do you see the role of the fullback change at all under Brian? And how is Drake Kulick right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't, really. And Drake's doing well. He's back. I don't know if he's 100%. That's a long, windy road. And tough thing. He's doing well.

Practicing full speed, looks good. With he and Brady, I think we have a good one-two punch with those guys like when we had Cox and Plewa. That was a big part of our team's success in '15.

Q. Is Matt VandeBerg back?

COACH FERENTZ: His foot's fine. We have a couple of guys with camp injuries already, soft tissue or bumps and bruises. But right now nothing that's significant, so that's pleasing for us.

Q. How do the players respond to adding a coach that has been here and players that have experience, but have not been here?

COACH FERENTZ: It's not the same, the comments on that, but anytime you can bring a quality person into your program, whether it's a running back or certainly a coach, that's impactful. Ken's just got a tremendous attitude. Probably the one difference and one thing that makes it unique, as opposed to James (Butler). James is from the Midwest and wanted to be in the Midwest. Ken has been here, to your point. He's got experience in the program. He's seen the highs, the lows. He understands what the challenges are certainly, and what our advantages are. So having that expertise, that wisdom, it's tough to get that anywhere else. I mean, that's insider information, if you will, that nobody else probably could have had.

So you add that part, that's a real bonus. We've been good friends for a long time. But it's more about a mutual respect for the kind of coach and kind of person he is. It's one of those things that was a lucky turn for us.

Q. The offensive staff, pretty much different offensive staff, and a lot of kind of open positions, what have the personnel meetings been like? I imagine you've got to be open to every idea?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely. We haven't gotten to the nitty-gritty about personnel. It's too early. My point earlier, let these guys practice for a while. But there is always banter in the room. Every time you're watching a practice tape or what have you, it's just been good. Sometimes I've worn this record out, I'm all about stability. I think that's a really important thing. But a little spice in the recipe doesn't hurt things.

A little change here and there, tweaks, we can go through coaching changes a couple years ago, but we changed our practice, approach, that type of deal. Anytime you look at things from a different perspective, certainly defensively, we had a good year last year, and our staff's back intact. We had some things on our board that, boy, we better get better at these or we're going to pay for it moving forward. We've had plenty to do on both sides of the ball.

But offensively it's been different because we're getting to know the players a little bit better. Even Brian who is at a different position, so it's a whole different dynamic for him. I think it's probably been healthy, quite frankly.

Q. During your career, to be a play caller, you have to want to call plays. Is that something you want to do or are you ready for that change with Brian?

COACH FERENTZ: Did I ever want to do it? I did it one year in my career. I mean, it's all right. You know. But that was never on my dream list. Ironically being a head coach was never on my dream job list either. So you never know what's going to happen. But I think, yeah, Brian's been intrigued. A lot of that goes back to his time spent in New England, worked on both sides of the football. That's a pretty cerebral outfit up there, certainly, with their quarterback starts there, Bill O'Brien as coordinator, and then Coach Belichick. He's run some guys. I think he's very inquisitive that way. I was more of just like a line coach, just block that guy or whatever.

So we're cut from a little different cloth that way, and I think he's ready for it.

Q. Do you go with offensive coaches and offensive personalities that have been coaching forever, does it take a certain personality to say I want to call the plays?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so. Again, I think head coaches, coordinators, position coaches, everybody has their -- you've got to be yourself, you know? You've got to be yourself. It's true of any job, you better want to do whatever that job is. You're certainly better at it if you're enthused about the initiative and the challenge of it.

Q. The defensive front has an interesting group. Jaleel is gone. How do you feel about the progress there?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're moving along. Cedrick's doing a good job up there. Brady Reiff missed some time. He had an injury, but he's been back at it this summer. This work is going to be really important for him. It's really kind of an open book right now. Garret Jansen's in the mix. We have a bunch of guys competing.

My guess is Nate's going to play as much as he can play, but we'll rotate through. I think that was really effective for us last year to rotate. We basically played six defensive linemen on a pretty consistent basis. Jaleel, in favor of the two that come out of that equation. So it might be the four guys playing inside with Boettger, we know what he can do, and kind of measuring the rest of it out as we go.

Q. What do you look for when you consider moving a newcomer over someone who has some equity in the program?

COACH FERENTZ: They've got to play better. They practice better and they'll be out there. Like Akrum, I'd say that about any of our returning guys, guys like Boettger who has been here, Sean Welsh, Josey Jewell. Those guys have played good football, but if they don't play better, we're not going to be a good team. That is one truism here. We've never had a really good football team if our seniors aren't huffing it and not playing their best football. All you got to do is go back to 2015, every guy on that board, not that all of them started, I think it was 10 starters, I'm and splitting two guys for one in Plewa and Cox, but Dillon Kidd punted his best, our punter. I forgot about that a little bit. Marshall Koehn did a good job as a kicker for us. Jordan Canzeri, that was by far his best year as a player last year. Look at LeShun Daniels, Jr., that was his best year for us.

That's what we need from our older guys. If they do that and a younger guy beats them, that means we've recruited somebody pretty good, probably.

Q. Watching guys progress, do you have a specific time line or benchmark that you need to reach? Does that change by position?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, yeah, it depends on what the depth is all that kind of thing. What the competition is. There are times where guys probably aren't as good as you like, you know, at that point in their careers because you have to put him in there. He's the best guy at that spot. That's, again, where other people have to help compensate. That's why good players better be playing their best. You're always going to have some spots that are trying to catch up or something happens in season which it always does. They get hurt, whatever may happen. Somebody has to be ready to go. To count on a new guy coming in to play as good as a guy who has already played three years could happen, but it doesn't happen often. The other guys have a sense of responsibility in that whole thing. They've got to share in the equation.

Q. What are your impressions of the wide receiver corps so far? Any concerns that you see in that group?

COACH FERENTZ: Concerns, yeah. I think all of us have been impressed with what we're seeing. They're better than they were in the spring, and we're better with the new guys in there. So now the question is how fast can we get where we've got to get? Can we do it before September 2nd? The good news is that that's a group that will continue to improve. But I think they're off to a good start so far. But we've got a lot of

work ahead.

Q. Moving Drew Cook to tight end, how has he looked?

COACH FERENTZ: He's doing a nice job. Drew's a tremendous young man. Obviously, great attitude and all those kinds of things. Looks a lot better than he did in the spring for obvious reasons. He made the switch on the fly. But he's got all summer to work on it, study it, and those types of things. I think he has a good future in our program. Where it ends in September, we'll see, but I think he's doing a good job.

Q. Was Drew Cook happy to move to tight end? That's where his dad excelled at.

COACH FERENTZ: I hate to rank guys, but he's up there pretty high on all-time attitude list. You could hand him a bucket of whatever, and he would say, "That's a great bucket, Coach, thank you." One of those deals. He's that kind of guy. He's a team guy all the way. His dad was the same way. I hope lightning strikes twice. His dad was a high school quarterback, too, as I understand it. So got to be great. He's got a tremendous attitude.

Q. Seth Wallace has moved up quickly since he's been here. What have you seen from him and where do you see him in five years?

COACH FERENTZ: It's no slight on anybody on our staff. I think we have a tremendous staff here. But pretty much whatever we've thrown at Seth, whatever task we've asked him to take on as a challenge, he's just taken it and done a great job with it. Started out as a recruiting coordinator. The job he did from that point on helped out the defensive line, and the linebackers have done a great job with those guys. The punt team kind of grabbed that thing by the horns and did a good job with that.

He's been a coordinator. You just kind of see some of that. In his past, you'd see the leadership traits. He's one of the guys that looks for things to do. I can't keep up with him. Those are good guys to have on your staff. He's always throwing stuff on your desk. Not bull crap stuff, but good stuff to look at, contemplate and that type of thing.

So, you know, there are some guys that are just doing that. They're always thinking about the next move, they're staying a step ahead. Without doing a haphazard job on what it is they're supposed to be doing.

So I just thought we've all been really impressed. I don't want to speak for Phil, but I think the fact that he has been a coordinator, and he knows our system, kind of like Brian and Ken in some ways. Guys that really

had a little bit of deeper knowledge of the system and the program.

So it's nice to have that to bounce off of when you're a coordinator and have that, what do you think here? What about this situation? What would you do? What kind of tweaks can we make, those kinds of things. So, as far as the future (indiscernible), he's an excellent coach, and I'm really pleased he's on our staff. All of us are.

Q. Who do you see developing as kicker and punter right now?

COACH FERENTZ: That's a wide-open book too. We haven't talked much about that. I talked about the perimeter, so I guess those guys stand away from the ball, too, and we can include them, and they touch the ball. That's a big equation right now.

I'd say it's a coin toss at both spots. We'll let both positions compete. Colten was better at the end of spring than he was in the beginning. I think all of us would agree he's a better player than he was in April. But it's all about consistency now. You know, Ryan's putting some pressure on him, too, which is good. Competition makes everybody a little bit better.

Q. Having Coluzzi last year as a grad transfer, and now with Butler, with the graduate transfer route, is that something you've been open to recently, or you've had it in the past but there's never been opportunity?

COACH FERENTZ: I've never been necessarily against it. It just seems like it's becoming a little bit more frequent now. The run thing worked out really well on a couple levels. First of all, he really punted well, but all the things I just used to describe James, Ron was just a solid guy that was experienced. Knew how to act, knew how to handle himself like a real championship type guy. So that impacted the group in a real positive way.

So all that being said, it's a role right now that's available. We're not recruiting guys, but if there is that opportunity, we feel like they can help our football team, not only as football players, but also buy into our culture and what we think is important, then we're open to it. I know Jerry ironically is on the committee. I think he just moved into that this spring. He's looking at that topic a little bit. One of his thoughts was if a guy really wants to transfer and they graduate, great, but they've got to sit a year then they can play. So it may be their sixth year. I don't think it's a bad concept. In other words, are you really going there for the right reasons or are you just taking advantage of the rules as it is?

So that played to our benefit with Ron last year. But I

think ultimately it's probably something that's going to have to get looked at. Thank goodness I don't coach basketball. I don't know how they do it in basketball. It's like watching the waiver wire in the NFL now they just wait until the end, it's pretty interesting.

Q. How does Noah Fant compare to the starting tight ends you've had recently?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's a little different than Alton probably, I'm going right back to George and Henry, our last two guys. He's kind of a blend of both in some ways.

But he's off to a good start. You talk about guys that have made -- I think all of us are pleased with what we've seen about Akrum thus far since we've gotten going. I'd say the same thing about Noah. Last year Noah had really big guy eyes, and most guys coming out of high school are like that. It was really big for him, but this summer, this spring I think helped him. This summer, you see him -- just in general life, acting like he felt more comfortable. Like, hey, I've done this before. I can handle this and all that. It's carried over to the practice field too. So we're encouraged with what we're seeing right now. We really are.

Q. Big game on the schedule is Ohio State.

COACH FERENTZ: I'm thinking Wyoming. Actually the big thing right now is tomorrow's practice. We've got a lot of work. But Wyoming, I don't know how we scheduled that one, but great timing.

Q. What do you say to a young player who has to go up against someone intimidating like Ohio State?

COACH FERENTZ: That's what they signed up for. I think other than Amari Spivey, and this is a true story. One of my friends has a son who knew the AD at a bigger high school up there, so he was in after Amari had signed, he was visiting his buddy that coached basketball, he was talking to Amari and said, You've got to be excited that you guys go to Iowa, you play Ohio State, Michigan. He was like, what? He had no idea. And if you ever lived in New England, you'd understand that. It's kind of provincial thinking, like Pittsburghers.

But, yeah, I think most of the guys sign up for that opportunity. That's what it's all about. Having a chance to play in our conference. We play a lot of really good teams and we have some challenges on our schedule right now each and every week. That's how I'm looking at it, starting with the first game.

Q. So much experience at linebacker, how much of a benefit is that for you? Are good going into the season knowing that position has that experience?

COACH FERENTZ: It's nice to have experience everywhere, it's nicer to have experience with good players. That's something we can say. We've got that. That's pretty well situated right now. It's a little bit like '13 when you had Morris, Kirksey and Hitchens, that was a good group of guys there.

But we're not going to win with just those three guys. That's one of those areas we're having to count on. We'd be foolish not to. Those guys have to play their best, just like I'd expect our line to do the same thing. Our fullbacks, our tight ends. That's where we've got more experience. That's where everything has got to kind of generate from, and then we'll go from there.

Q. Your depth at that position beyond those guys?

COACH FERENTZ: That's what we are trying to find out. Back in the spring we were working on that also. First thing to see where those guys are from April until now. See how they handle camp and where they can go. One thing I'm pretty sure of, we have four guys that won't be here next January or whatever. They're gone. Four linebackers are out of there. So we'll have to replace them at some point.

Q. Three true freshmen came into summer, and another one started practice in spring. How are they fitting in? Do you anticipate one or two cracking through maybe beyond the depth chart, if anything, nickel back?

COACH FERENTZ: In the back end?

Q. Yeah.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, certainly. I think if you look at our corner position, start there. We really have three guys that have shown signs that they can go out and have a chance to play pretty good defense right now. So that's where we're at. We have three guys. The good news is we do have three guys that I think legitimately could be Big Ten corners for us.

So it's a wide-open book. That's what we were talking about earlier. That fourth guy may not be ready. But guess what, you're the fourth guy and you'll be playing. We may have to bring him along as we go along. Hopefully that progress will be quick enough. I'd go out on a limb and say we probably have to play two of our corners that are first-year guys. I don't know who those guys are right now. But I would say that's realistic to think two of them are going to have to play. Hopefully doing more on special teams than they will in the back end to start with.

Q. How much more difficult is it to evaluate quarterbacks when you have young receivers, and receivers when you have young quarterbacks?

COACH FERENTZ: You have to factor that in. You

have to factor that in. That's a subjective thing. But that's something we talk about. There are a lot of drills, too, that just start with the stuff that's not competitive. Just routes on there, that type of thing. If you can't do that, well, it's hard to think that you could do it when there is a pass rush or when guys are recovering. We evaluate everything and just kind of go from there.

Q. Lucas LeGrand moving around the depth chart, is that a reflection of depth at his position?

COACH FERENTZ: He's one of those guys that can float. He's played center for us in a game. He can play pretty much all five spots. So we're moving a lot of guys around, just looking at them right now to see what they can do, can't do. Levi Paulsen comes to mind, same thing. He's been playing guard and tackle. Hasn't played center, but he's been playing guard and tackle. So we'll go through camp doing that. At some point try to figure out what our best mix is. Who our top five, six, seven eight are.

Q. Depth chart is pretty fluid?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely.