

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon, everybody. As you might imagine, it was a tough trip for last the weekend. Coming back, was just tough to go through. We do as we do every Sunday, came in and looked at the tape, dissect it, and then hopefully learn from it. Now as we turn our attention towards this week, it's all about us trying to improve on very obvious points right now.

Just going down the list, obviously ball security, the turnover issue is something we're going to have to address, handling the blitz, and then just overall developing a kind of confidence and grit it takes to be successful home or away. But that was our first away game in Big Ten, and I don't think handled the whole thing very, very well. That's part of the equation with some newer players. I'm certain that factored into it a little bit, and we're going to have to get over that and learn how to play a little bit better, so that's the next challenge for us.

Now moving on to Illinois, the first thing on the list is that we have to get ready to play every game in the Big Ten. Conference play, you expect it to be challenging and tough, and that's got to be our approach certainly. Obviously we've got to be a better fundamental football team this week. That's something we'll work on like we do every week in practice. Take every rep and hopefully start building a little cumulative advantage on that, and then the other part is just being ready mentally to go kick off. I'm not sure that we were last Saturday for whatever reason, so that's a challenge, and that's something we'll have to learn, as well, but it's all about being ready, preparing during the week, giving ourselves a chance to be fundamentally sound, and then most importantly be ready to kick off and execute and handle whatever challenges pose at us.

It's good to be back in Kinnick certainly. Excited about that. We're looking for our first Big Ten victory, as is Illinois, and that's really what it gets down to at this point.

Our captains this week, we'll have Josey Jewell, Matt Vandenberg, Parker Hesse, and Kevin Ward.

Manny Rugamba hasn't practiced yet. I think he's improving. We'll see how it goes the rest of the week. At this point, O.J. will start and then we'll just kind of take it from there.

Q. You didn't face them last year, but you have tape on Jeff George, Jr. How is he different from Chase Crouch and what does he bring to the Illinois offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, Crouch caught our attention last year, I believe it was in the Purdue game he came in and really ran the ball effectively. So you know, that's probably the best thing he does. George was more of a thrower, so we got to see him last year, and then he played the second half or most of the second half of the South Florida game. He throws the ball well.

They've got a couple good receivers, they've got Dudek back, No. 18 is a really good player, No. 4 is a good freshman, they've got some good skill players, and we don't have a lot to tape to base it on, but we'll have to just be ready for everything and my guess is maybe be ready for multiple quarterbacks.

Q. How much of a concern is that that you really haven't been able to hit the deep ball in stride and you've had a lot of good opportunities so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: We've had some that have been really close, long foul ball is what most defensive backs call those things. But that's just one aspect of improvement that we need to make, and hopefully we'll start connecting on a few of those. I like the fact that we're throwing it down there. I like the fact that we've been close, and at some point you've got to start executing it, though, and we've gotten away with some, but other ones have come back and hurt you, so at some point we need to start hitting those, and it'll be a good thing. It's just like anything else, we've just got to keep practicing and hopefully get that timing down that it takes.

Q. What do you guys coach Josh to do inside the 10 when he's receiving a punt? What is that instruction?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't want to get into specifics, but as you might imagine, we try not to field the ball on the 1. That's pretty obvious. There are certain parameters that you give every player, and in that circumstance certainly they were well-spelled out. I think what you saw there was just inexperience there, too, so we're paying for that a little bit. But he's doing a good job back there.

Q. What makes you say you weren't sure if your team was mentally ready Saturday? Was it the errors?

KIRK FERENTZ: I thought we got off to a slow start. They took the ball and drove it right down the field. It really doesn't matter, a touchdown is a touchdown, but to start the game that way is not what you're looking for certainly, and we had that same issue up there in '03. We chose to kick to them because of the wind, and they drove the ball (75) yards into the wind back then. We kicked the ball to the end zone because we had the wind at our back, but they took it 80 methodically. I think they ate about seven, eight minutes up on the clock and scored a touchdown. It's just kind of a demoralizing fact. And it's going to happen so you've got to come back from it, it doesn't decide the game. But you'd like to start out with a little bit better tempo and try to force them to punt the ball and give you a little bit of better field position.

Q. What's the key to the run game not being where you need to be the last couple weeks? What do you see as the key for getting that back on track?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just repetition and keep working on it. There's no magic formula. In part, it's two defenses that are really good against the run. Michigan State has been building on that since 2007, and they did a good job taking that away from us, made us play left-handed the other day, and the week before we hit our hit-and-miss type plays in that game. It's just all about trying to develop more consistency, being able to sustain a little bit, and part of that is we've just got to keep working and get our lineups settled in and get the guys working together a little bit more cohesively.

Q. I'm sure CJ had an open book when it came to plays, but how much is available to Nate?

KIRK FERENTZ: A fair amount. You can't play with handcuffs on totally, but we're probably not asking him to do as much as we will later in the season or certainly next year moving down the road, that type of thing. It came up on conversation, I think, last week, maybe on the teleconference, whatever, my flashback moment to CJ was burning two timeouts on the goal line to Pittsburgh. Those things happen with young quarterbacks. It was in a goal-line formation, there's only so many things that can happen on the goal line, and we still burned two time-outs, but I think it's just kind of emblematic, if you will, or symbolic of what happens with young quarterbacks sometimes.

I think Nate has done a pretty good job overall with that stuff. Handling things, feeling things, that should improve with each week, too.

Q. I know the situations aren't exactly the same,

but in 2004 you guys weren't able to run the ball, but you showed that you can move it through the air and be a pass-first team, how did that come about, that season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that year we didn't really have much option. As the season went on, we had injuries up front, we were pretty thin up front, and then the running back situation, I know we had, I think, three ACLs if I'm not mistaken that year. So Sam Brownlee ended up being our premier back, and his yards per attempt was roughly -- it was probably a little better than mine in high school, but that's nothing to write home about. But he did a good job in terms of pass protection, all those kinds of things, and was secure with the football.

But I don't envision us being on that path right now, and our goal is to be balanced. It always has been. You go with what you have to go with and whatever is working, and if you're in a game where you just can't run it, and that happens sometimes, then you'd better be able to throw it or you're going to be in trouble, and sometimes it goes the other way, too. But over the course of the season, our goal is still to be balanced, and at this given point I don't see any reason why we shouldn't be or couldn't be.

Q. How deep do you think you are on the offensive line right now? Are you getting more comfortable with maybe going to Tristan Wirfs or somebody like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, you've probably been paying attention. We're not as deep as we thought we'd be or hoped to be. We're down -- obviously Ike is not coming back this year, so that's a loss. Cole Croston is gone. Boone is not at 100 percent or he'd be playing every snap, and we lost James for a little bit, too. We're going through a little bit of a shuffle, if you will. But we'll keep pushing. We've got enough there and we've got the right guys and all that type of thing, so it's just a matter of pushing forward, and we're open to anything right now to help the team in any phase. We're looking at every possibility.

Q. How is Tristan coming along? Now that you've played him, does it feel like he's making progress?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's getting better. Every week in practice you see him improve. The biggest challenge for him was when he got injured in camp. I can't remember if he was out there for the kids' day scrimmage. I think he was. I can't remember. But anyway, he missed about probably eight, ten days in camp, and that's like missing two months. That really kind of pushed him backwards, but I think we've seen him improve now the last couple weeks.

Q. Some of the players have kind of a mantra for

the defense off a turnover when they have a short field. Do you remember when that started here and kind of who was --

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm sorry, defensively? Yeah, that was Norm's catch phrase, put out the fire. Norm had a lot of them, but that's one that really kind of says it all. That is your job on defense. You can't predict what's going to happen, and I alluded to the opening drive. Now it's the offense's job to come back and answer, and we've done a pretty good job responding this year, up until Saturday. We weren't real good at that. But that's a big part of games in particular, if you look at games, the ball gets turned over or a big kick return, something of that nature, big play, defense has to get back out there and do what they're supposed to do. They can't dwell on the circumstances. That's kind of what our team has to do right now, too. We're coming off two disappointing losses, so we've got to compartmentalize that and worry about doing all this Saturday.

Q. Back to the line, Boone looks like he got pulled in that series the other day. Would there be some advantage to maybe giving him some time off to see if that ankle can get better?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. We're working with our medical people, obviously, hand in hand with them, but it's a tough thing because nobody wants to be out there more than Boone, and Boone is one of our best players coming back this year. He's trying, everybody is trying. It's just not quite there the way it needs to be, and it's tough. It's toughest for him just because he's got so much pride and he's worked so hard. It's like sitting out; he's a senior who can't help our football team right now. You can imagine the emotions he's feeling right now, too. Injuries are tough to deal with.

Q. Do you see Brandon Snyder coming back this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's been cleared. He was cleared last week, so we're trying to move him forward. We'll see what the week brings here. He's doing a good job in practice, and I think it's fair to say he may be out there. How much, I don't know yet.

Q. You've had a good amount of guys come through that were lightly recruited and turned into really good players after they left here. Does it surprise you anymore when you have a guy like Josey that barely made it here, had one offer, and all of a sudden he's turning into an All-American?

KIRK FERENTZ: The thing that -- I'm just thankful that we didn't totally blow it. We tried to, but we finally decided at the end that we needed to give Josey a shot and the rest has been history, so to speak. But that's the neat thing about sports in general. I don't know as much about the other sports, but in football you hear --

at least I've heard about things in baseball where a guy is 28 years old, been in the minors, and then all of a sudden, boom, he hits stardom or whatever. Pujols. I think he was the 402nd pick, only because that's a clinic point for me, the year he got drafted, so I don't know about the other 400 guys in front of him. But those are things that make sports kind of interesting. Josey is a really good story, and what a good football player he is.

Q. The punter, have you made any progress there in practice this week, any determination?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we're keeping an open mind to everything right now, and we'll let the guys compete again in practice, see how it goes, and then just kind of push forward.

Q. Is Levi close to playing?

KIRK FERENTZ: Levi? He's probably in the top seven right now, I think, based on our situation. He missed some time, he's back, and he's fine physically now, it's just a matter of -- he's in the equation for sure.

Q. Why have 1st downs the last couple weeks been such a struggle on offense, to get chunks of yards?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we're searching for that answer. If we could have found it a week ago, we would have hopefully shown better progress. But that was definitely a factor Saturday. Our 1st down efficiency was not good. It really wasn't all that bad at Penn State, but last week it was -- it hurt us and put us behind the 8-ball.

Q. T.J. Hockenson seems like he really belongs. Did he start stepping up in the spring or has it been an evolution the whole time he's been here?

KIRK FERENTZ: I would say we started to notice him on the scout team last year, and talk about some players that just kind of pop up, Ross Reynolds kind of made his move last December during bowl prep, really started to show some signs. I think T.J. is a guy who caught our eye last year, just working against our defensive football team. He did some really good things, made some good grabs and catches. He's got a good attitude, good enthusiasm. Had to grow physically, and that's just ongoing with him.

But we saw that, and then in spring ball he did a good job with the opportunities he had, and he just keeps on climbing with every week actually, so I think he's got a really good future.

Q. You said James Butler was out for the bye week; is that still where you're at?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they're going to reassess it next week and see where it's going to go, but it could be a couple more weeks I'm guessing, yeah.

Q. When you look at the passing game on Saturday, there seemed to be a lot of times when Nate was making good passes. Is it close? Is it just that people are concentrating too much on the overthrows and long passes, that he's actually hitting a lot of really good targets?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I'm not sure what people are concentrating on. We've all seen some of those near misses on the long balls, the deep balls, and you'd like to think in time -- you're never going to hit 100 percent of those. That's probably unrealistic. It's like three-pointers in basketball. But we'll improve in that area. I've got every reason to think that we will.

But I think he's done a lot of good things. He's made a lot of really good throws and some tough throws and done a lot of good things from the checks and all those types of things that you talked about earlier. It's part of the process, and there's certainly obviously some plays that he would like to have back. And then how that affects momentum, and really I alluded to the start of the game the other day, we did not start well offensively, and just as a team we didn't start well the other day.

But if you can take away what you can't, that's not football. You're not allowed. But if we can clean up our ball security issues -- we had two opportunities there in the second half, two drives, get the ball down on their side of the field and hope you come away with points, at least three points if not a touchdown that first time, and then you've got a chance for 3 or 7 on the next one. But those turnovers just kill you, and those are really hard to overcome. In a game like that -- Big Ten games are going to be tight, they're going to be competitive, and if you're turning the ball over, it's like the NFL, you're just going to have a hard time unless you're that much better than your opponent, hard to survive those.

Then what's that do to affect the momentum in the second half? That's the other part of the equation. None of us can ever answer. We'll never know the answer to that one. But I just know from experience, turnovers really -- they make the degree of difficulty that much tougher, so that's something we've just got to focus on, and we're going to work on. Traditionally it's been something we've been pretty good at. Our bad teams have been good ball security wise, but hopefully that's not going to be -- we'll get this, hopefully it'll turn.

Q. Speaking of the receivers --

KIRK FERENTZ: Ironically we've probably worked harder on ball security, like going back to spring, than we ever have, so maybe that's where we're screwing

this whole thing up. Maybe I'll just say, hey, the hell with it and throw it out there, have some fun.

Q. Speaking of those, Brandon Smith, how has he responded to what happened?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's been fine in practice. He had a really good practice today. Again, that's -- and not to write it off as being a young player, but young players are going to have some bad experiences. That's at least been my experience, and it bothered him certainly and should bother you, and then you move on, just like the team has got to do from that game.

Q. When you start off the way that you didn't want to start, 0-2 in the Big Ten, is a lot of it keeping the guys up mentally as much as physically?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, hopefully nobody was looking big picture. They shouldn't be. We don't need to be. The best we can do is come out of this thing with one win before the bye, and that's our goal. That's the best we can do this week regardless. We just need to -- we need to worry about this Saturday, playing better football, first and foremost, and then if we do that, hopefully we can come out with a victory. And then, you know, to me the conference stuff, you worry about that in November, at least you start being more aware of that. But it's really simple. If you're doing well in the conference early, that gives you a chance to be there in November. If you don't start gaining some traction, that's going to be a discussion for somebody else.

What we need to do is just worry about getting our feet and doing a better job this week, coaching and playing.

Q. Were there enough positives and enough things going right, you're not at the point where you're reassessing the quarterback, are you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we're assessing everything, but I think all of us are really impressed and pleased with what he's done so far. He's working hard, he's conscientious, he's made some errors that are going to come with inexperience in my mind, and that's kind of been our judgment. So yeah, there's no reason to hit the -- get worried about him right now. I think it's just a matter of what can we do to clean him up, and Tyler keeps improving behind him, so that's what we're focused on there.

Q. When you look at the series historically between you and Illinois, the '80s was a really competitive rivalry, maybe one of your more intense series, then it's fallen off from time to time, then you didn't play them for a while. What's kind of your assessment of Illinois, the program, historically since you've been involved and just the series?

KIRK FERENTZ: To your point, it's interesting,

especially since we're border states and schools. But I do feel discombobulated that way. You feel like Wisconsin and us, we have a pulse for each other. It kind of goes back to the fact that we played there in '08, I believe it was, when we had that big gap, so it's almost like we're in separate divisions, right? I can't keep track of that stuff. But it just felt like, yeah, there's some separation there, and I can't explain it. You just kind of play what's in front of you, and they haven't been in front of us, so I think they were over here and we were over there. It's kind of strange actually if you just think about it from a geography standpoint, but that's a byproduct of expansion and progress.

Q. With Brandon, it's been less six months since he tore his ACL. What's he done to --

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, as you might well imagine, the medical guys downstairs and the guys that come over here and work with our players and really are the ones who are signing off, the hospital folks, the doctors, that's their level of expertise. That's what they do, and they work with our strength staff. So every player goes through certain protocol to get back from any injury. They've got a very specified plan that everybody follows. I think when we talk about injuries in general -- might be two weeks, might be four weeks, all that kind of stuff, but everybody is different, you just never know what's going to happen. So obviously Brandon must be a quick healer. He works really hard and has worked hard in the rehab part of it. But, he's cleared the hurdles a little faster than the average person, so at least he's going to affect those numbers when they're doing their studies. But everybody goes through a really extensive protocol, and that's way out of my realm. I just listen, and they tell me what's okay, what's acceptable, what isn't acceptable, those kinds of things, and we've been tuned in here for about a month on this thing.

Q. You seemed a little bit irritated Saturday that Manny got out of the locker room against Penn State without you guys detecting it.

KIRK FERENTZ: I was irritated about other stuff but not that. Yeah, and that kind of ties in with that question. He experienced the injury in the first or quarter, I believe, somewhere in there, and played the whole game, and then it didn't really present itself. It was kind of a weird thing. So full disclosure here, it was more like mid-week where he just wasn't responding, and much like Greg Mabin, if you remember last year, we thought Mabin was coming back, and then by mid-week it wasn't, so now I was fearful that maybe Manny had what Mabin had, and when they did further studies, after a couple things aren't responding the way they should, now they dig a little deeper and found like a really random type injury that one presented itself. So now you're starting to think mid-week, okay, has Manny got that same deal.

Good news is they did the test, everything is fine, so it's just a matter of soft tissue healing.

Injuries are really hard to predict.

Q. You have such a good history of sending players to the NFL. A lot of times they're unheralded two-star recruits. Micah Hyde is leading in the NFL in interceptions now. Do you keep in contact with him in the off-season much, and what's kind of your level of pride over somebody like that's growth?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you're really happy for those guys. In the last 48 hours I was talking to somebody about Jovon Johnson. But Jovon, Micah, and Desmond King, three guys that were a little bit alike in that. Jovon didn't quite have the physical attributes that they wanted in the NFL, last-cut guy a couple times I think with the Steelers. Still playing in Canada. He's like 45 years old, right, and playing in Canada. I guess you stay colder up there, it keeps you preserved, right, physically? (laughter) But anyway, those guys, just they're football players, and they just did things -- they caught balls, got their hands on balls, all that kind of stuff, and certain things you can't teach, and that's really what Micah brought to us. He was under-drafted in my opinion. I think Desmond was under-drafted, and he'll have a really nice career, too. So yeah, you're really happy for those guys.

And then on the other side, though, there's a lot of other people doing really neat things, too. Jay Bickford is teaching somewhere, I think Eastern Illinois. I don't want to screw that one up. Will Lack is over somewhere doing a mission; he and his wife were doing a mission in Mongolia maybe. I got an email maybe about a month and a half ago from him. I think he was at the game two weeks ago out here. And Will got beat up, and it's kind of funny when Fred Barr was talking about Will Lack and how much respect he had -- okay, Fred is a starting linebacker, four-year starting linebacker, the respect he had for Will Lack, who basically got beat up every day by him and Colin Cole. So those are the neat things. So you've got guys like Colin and Fred that really had prominent careers, but a guy like Will Lack, who just being part of the team was so important to him, and now you look at what he's doing, he does a lot of good things, he and his wife are really community oriented, that type of thing. So happy for all the guys that come through here. We've had a lot of really good stories. Not all of them get to play in the NFL, but they do a lot of neat things.

Q. I know you've kind of blown past the fact that James was in your plan, he was getting 10, 15 touches a week. How much has that left a hole in what you guys want to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just a matter of shifting things around. The other backs have to get involved and more involved as we move forward. The receivers, same way. So you just kind of spread those touches around and just got to improvise. That's part of coaching, though.

Q. The lack of experience with the other two backs

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KIRK FERENTZ: Well, it's just like you hate to lose a guy like Ike Boettger, who's an established offensive tackle in the Big Ten, a really good one. You lose those guys, you don't have them sitting on the shelf, and a guy James Butler who's really played well at the college level, same thing, you don't have another guy just like him. But with that comes opportunity for somebody else to step up and hey, where did this guy come from, or boy, we didn't see that coming, that type of thing.

That's part of coaching. You never know what the challenges are going to be during the course of the season, but you know they're going to be there, and how we can navigate through those things, that's going to be the things that's going to determine our success this year.