

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Phil Parker



PHIL PARKER: Thank you for the opportunity to be in here today, to talk to you guys a little bit. We're 4-2, which everybody would like to be 6-0 at this point in time. The defensive effort-wise, I'm pleased with what they're doing out there. Obviously we've got to play cleaner football to win games, and I think the depth of what we've been doing with rotation up front with the eight guys up front, it's given us some more experience. I think the linebackers inside, obviously this week we're getting a lot of work with our linebackers in the backup position, and we've finally settled down in the defensive backfield of getting the guys in the right places. Obviously getting Brandon Snyder back has been a plus with his leadership and his communication in the back end.

To me, I'm encouraged for the second half of the season. We're looking forward to the up front guys. I think they're getting some guys like Epenesa some reps in there, 34 reps it was last week. I think our guys up front will start getting a little bit of disruption up front, and obviously we're not doing a bad job with sacks right now. But the linebackers are playing solid, and I feel very comfortable where we're at in the secondary, and I think it's going to be a great challenge.

On the start of the season, starting out with Wyoming obviously was a challenge trying to defend an NFL quarterback that's probably going to be a first-rounder, and then you go in to play Iowa State, a rival game, which I think they had some very talented wide receivers that gave us a challenge, and then you go obviously into Penn State with Barkley and the quarterback. That combination that gave us some issues, and I thought we played them very tough.

And then Michigan State is a typical game against two teams that play very physical.

I'm excited about the second half. I'm looking forward to it. Obviously to me, I look at where we're at statistically. Everybody has statistics. The only one I worry about is the wins and losses, that's one, but I do have some -- our third down is right around 67. We want to be 68, so I think that's good. The red zone, we kind of look at it different ways of how many times they actually get a possession in the red zone, and we figure the number is right around four points. If you're

giving up four points per possession in there, I think that's good. I think we're at 4.3, not good enough.

I think another place where we can really improve is not giving up explosive plays, and ironically the explosive plays that we gave up, I think we gave up four explosives in Iowa State, and we gave five up in the Illinois game, and we happened to win both of those. That's very uncharacteristic of the statistics in that part of it.

And probably the most important stat to me is how many points you're giving up, and right now we're at 18.7, which compared to the last four years, I think that's right on the mark, so that's interesting. Our job is to keep them out of the end zone. I think we have done a better job the last week getting takeaways, and we were down on that, and I think somewhere right around five or six last week helped us out a little bit. We've got to continue to do that better.

From that standpoint, we're just looking to move forward, and it's a great week to have some guys get some rest.

Q. You mentioned AJ in your opening remarks and pass rush situations where you expect the team to throw the ball. Is stopping the run kind of the next step for his progress as a player?

PHIL PARKER: I think he's doing a little bit better job of that, and playing on 1st and 2nd down, he's understanding that. Obviously the reps he's been getting from camp and all the last six weeks of the season here, I think it's really going to help us later on in the run game. I think he's a good run player. I think he can help us in the pass rush on third downs.

Q. When you look at somebody like Miles, who's built up a lot of equity in the program, been a three-year starter, but then you have somebody like Amani who just seems to be playing and progressing, maybe unexpected for his age, how difficult of a challenge is it for you to look at somebody like Miles who has been in the program for so long but yet has somebody that's outplaying him in a little younger player?

PHIL PARKER: Well, the great thing about it here at Iowa, my job is to put the best players on the field that can help us win, and I think the leadership that Miles

brings in the back end of understanding the game, I think him helping out Amani Hooker and the way he does and how positive he's been during this time, the last couple weeks, I think it's been really good for our team.

Q. Do you anticipate Amani being the strong safety going forward?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, as of right now I think he's doing a good job, and to that aspect, as long as he can keep up with what we're doing on defense and understanding what he has to do, I think he's been doing a good job. We've got three good guys that can play there, maybe four, so I'm very comfortable with the guys where we're at right now, but obviously I think Hooker has definitely earned some playing time.

Q. What impresses you the most about Amani's progression from last year to this year?

PHIL PARKER: Well, last year he really didn't understand what was going on on the defensive side. Very good athlete, has very good skill. He has the ability to move and run, and he has a great feel for the ball, where it's at, obviously, and obviously last week's game, understanding how to get underneath that route and picked that interception off. He had an excellent play over on the sideline when they threw a ball to the flat in the Illinois game. The way he closed and to be able to track the ball and be able to tackle, and go back to the Penn State game, there's one play on there I just looked at last week, I mean yesterday, that he made when Barkley was coming out, and he was a one-on-one, and he tracked him down and made a tackle that was surely going to be a touchdown, and it just shows to me that he's progressing every day, he's getting better. Think with Snyder there to help him out, it's going to help us be a lot better in the back end.

Q. With Brandon coming back, what does he add to the defense, and could you tell something was missing when he was missing all that time in the first five games or so?

PHIL PARKER: Well, obviously his experience of being back there and the commitment that he's been to understanding the defense and understanding what we have to do and understanding the offense that he sees. He has great communication. The communication has really picked up since he's been out there, and you can see him directing traffic out there and understanding not only what the plays they're going to run but making sure that everybody is in the right coverage, in the right defense, at the right time.

Q. How do you feel about what you're getting from your pass rush right now?

PHIL PARKER: I think we're doing pretty good. You look at it and say, I think they've been putting enough

pressure on them. I think we've got to do a better job in the coverage a little bit. But I think our pass rush with Anthony Nelson and AJ has been doing a good job. Right now we're not as bad as I think people think we are. There's a lot of pressure on them. You look at how many times we hit the quarterback at Penn State, I don't think he was even hit twice before we played him. We hit him four times, I think.

Q. You talk about Brandon; how difficult is it for somebody who's been out for six months not just to be able to walk on the field and play a few snaps here and there to get his feet wet, but he went in, started and excelled in just that one game?

PHIL PARKER: He's been progressing ever since he's been really working hard to come back from that injury, which is hard to come back to in a short period of time. But once you understand and you've been through and you've been playing and all of a sudden you take time where you go back and you can sit there and watch as a coach or watch on the sideline, seeing the guys play and practice and go through a game and mentally, you're taking the mental reps and he so much became such a better player by watching. He's a guy that can sit there on the sideline and absorb what's going on and what somebody should do at his position, and he encouraged the other guys.

When Jake was in there, he was trying to tell him, hey, you've got to see this a little bit faster, can you get this key, know the splits of the wide receivers. He's a guy that's into it. He's a guy that studies the game a lot and spends a lot of time in the film room.

Q. Josey came out of the game for a little while with his shoulder. Is he good to go?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, I think this is a perfect time for the bye week. He's a tough player. That's what we're about, and I think for us, how many snaps he's playing and how many plays he's making, your body takes a toll, and obviously we have to give him a break of contact and let him rest and once again, I think by standing and watching, his game is going to become more better -- he'll improve this week just by watching, and I think he's done that. So I'm excited about it. I'm not worried about it, and we're expecting him to be ready for Northwestern.

Q. Manny turned the health corner, will the bye week --

PHIL PARKER: It definitely gives him another week. I played him in one snap, probably shouldn't have. That was probably my mistake putting him in the game based on the personnel that was on the field, and I think another week would help him, and he's doing a good job with that. Obviously he's into it, and he knows what's going on. He's a very sharp kid football-

wise, so I don't think not being on the field mentally is going to bother him. Him getting that thing better where he needs to be able to run and cover guys.

Q. Are you happy with the overall secondary given the amount of turnover you've had this year due to injury, whatnot?

PHIL PARKER: Well, you're never happy. There's not a game that you go through and say, hey, we played well. There's always issues on the field that you say, hey, we could have played this better, and I think you can look at that from the defensive line all the way to the linebackers and all the secondary. We can play better. Everybody can play better. And we can coach better. We can make better calls. We can prepare our guys better. You evaluate everything during this period of time, and I think that's really a plus for us going to the second half of the season with all this time that we can sit back and look at some of the things, how people are trying to attack us and to shore up of that stuff and obviously you get some guys some rest this week.

Q. How would you assess the development of the backup linebackers?

PHIL PARKER: It's been pretty good. They haven't had much chance to be in there at live competition. Towards the end of last week we got them in there for the last eight, nine minutes of play, probably wasn't enough. But obviously the biggest focus is trying to win the game at hand first. They've got to earn that spot. They've got to get our trust to get on the field, and obviously this was a big week for them to get out there and move some guys around and figure out who's going to be the next guys in at Mike or Will back or the Leo backer.

Q. I think your perimeter defense has been pretty good but you're getting attacked more and more there. How would you assess it?

PHIL PARKER: There's some things where we think we're pretty decent on the outside. Obviously there's two games that stand out that we gave up too many yards rushing, and obviously Barkley is a good player, but I think we gave up one explosive play. If you count when his knee was down, that wouldn't be an explosive play, so we gave up really one explosive play to him.

If you look at how many explosive plays have we given up in the games, and then we lost -- we're 2-2 in that, and then the ones we gave up more, we end up winning. Sometimes stats are stack up on a number or something like that, I think our deal is to improve on that, be a little bit more disciplined in tackling and our penalties and making sure that we're all on the same page with communication, which I think has really picked up since Brandon has been back on the field.

Q. When you look at the way Josh has played, he started the bowl game, he played a little nickel and dime before in the last couple years, but he's really seemed to jump like three levels, and he's one of the best in the Big Ten and even in country in pass breakups and he's physical. What made you think that he could make those kinds of strides so quickly, and how has he been able to do it?

PHIL PARKER: I think the way his work ethic has been since the start of last January, how he's been preparing in the weight room and how he's been working out in the off-season and doing the seven-on-sevens that we have during the summers that the kids go on, and he's pushing it, and he's come to a point in his life that it's time to grow up, and now he's a full-time starter. Now we expect more out of you. I still think he has a lot more upside than how he's playing now. I think maybe towards last week, I think he played okay. I think he's been playing well, but I think he can even play better for what he has.

Q. What are those areas that he can improve on?

PHIL PARKER: I think sometimes setting the edges on the outside. We lost contain one time on the Penn State game where he was playing cover two, he should have support outside, he knows better to stay outside, and he let Barkley outside on that play and gives up a touchdown. I mean, that's just common sense things. Keep the things inside and in front. I think he's learning from those aspects of it. I know he's got a lot of tipped balls, that he gets up there, looks like he's going to intercept it or something. I'd like him to have two hands on the ball, and he might have a couple more interceptions. So he always needs to improve. His ability to go ahead and keep his focus during a game and make sure he doesn't get distracted by anything and make sure he can do his job within what we're asking him to do.

Q. How much does the defensive line rotate -- when do you decide who you're going to play and how much has that helped your defense?

PHIL PARKER: I definitely think it's helped us. When you go with a lot of plays on the field and you get those guys and you're confident and putting them in the game, and I definitely think the ability to have a rotation going where you can have a guy that has a little bit of rest to go back out there, and they're getting close to where like, hey, doesn't really matter who's in the game as long as they can go hold their point, I think we have a chance. A lot of you guys are surprised I brought up the pressure stuff. We're not a big pressure team. We pressure when we have to, when we feel like it, and it's selective, and it's more of a feel thing than where we're at. Our guys up front have done a good job of rotating in. I think moving Matt Nelson inside has really helped us tremendously, what he's added to it, and with his

leadership and Parker Hesse on the outside, I think we have a good group of front eight guys that are doing a hell of a job.

Q. Has that group made it so you don't really need to use the raider package, or is that something that's still kind of in your --

PHIL PARKER: Well, the idea of getting speed on the field, and when you go ahead and put your -- sometimes we put four new fast guys on the field, and when you've got Anthony on the field and you've got AJ on the field and Parker Hesse with that speed up there, that gives us a little bit of advantage of, do you put another backer in or do you take a defensive lineman out, so I think it's a choice that we kind of made and said, hey, we still have a four-man rush and still can defend the run because just because you go over there and start playing the pass too much and don't have your defensive linemen in there, now all of a sudden somebody pulls out a run play on you and you can't defend it as well.

Definitely that is a thing that we lean more on nickel with four defensive linemen than our bandit or raider package.

Q. When you look at your backup linebackers again, Hockaday went in the other day for Josey Jewell. You also have Mends and Jones and Welch, and on the outside who's kind of after Ward, and is there potential for guys moving around? I'm working ahead a little bit here.

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, Nick Neimann is out there and he's done a good job, and I think he's got some temperament that we like, and we see some good things out of him, so we're really pleased with his progress, and can he jump inside and play inside? Maybe. But I think even when you say just for the starting row, I think you can put Ben maybe inside. We'll look at that. I think Jones maybe can play Mike. So we've been mixing these guys up sometimes, and you've got to remember, hey, this guy is in here at Mike and this guy is at Will, so some of it's not all going to be perfect because there's definitely different reads. I mean, if you're a Mike or you're a Will backer, yeah, they're both inside backers at times, but obviously you're getting different looks.

When they've got different schemes, they don't play as fast, and it's just like seeing flashcards of really what kind of play is it, you've got to diagnose it within a second and make sure you know where you're going. I think this is a good week to -- what we've been doing, trying to switch some guys in and out of that and giving those guys have been playing a lot some rest.

Q. How do you inject a little more stuff into the

blitz? I know the argument you have there is probably is it worth giving up something, an opening to the back.

PHIL PARKER: There's always a trade-off, and obviously we've been hurt for a long time, and we're a bend-but-don't-break type of defense, and I think when you get down in the red zone and you can hold those guys to three points, you're doing well, which obviously paid off in the Penn State game as far as giving up points. I think there's times and places, and it depends on the down and distance. You get 3rd down and 3, 3rd down and 2, really there's not much you can do. 3rd down and 1, you want to bring it, a run stopper, that's great. If you start getting down 3rd down and 7 and 8, you might want to try to bring some more a little bit of pressure, make him make a decision, play tight coverage, and then sometimes you get back when it's 3rd down and real long, it all depends where you're at in the game. Sometimes that might be the best time to bring it all because they've got to get rid of the ball fast.

You kind of weigh all those judgments when you're going through a game and where you're at and how you feel your guys are covering and how they're switching maybe formations, are they trade shifting motion and stuff like that? Are we going to be able to adjust to all that stuff? That's been one thing that's always stuck in my mind, let's make sure we know what we're doing in our assignment.

Q. What percentage would you say you guys blitz?

PHIL PARKER: I don't know exactly, probably about 10 percent or something like that right now, but we're usually 17 to 19 percent. We blitzed 4th and 1 or something like that and we give up a touchdown at Iowa State, but then the next time we came back 4th and 3 against Wyoming, we run the same blitz, and it's minus two. It's a guessing game. You've got to keep them guessing.

Q. Speaking of which, with Bo's experience and with Josey's experience, do you ever want to trade off between the Will and the Mike?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, we've done that. We haven't advertised it, but we've done that, just kind of switch it up. Sometimes we play right and left, and so this guy has to be the Leo. There's been times, and as a matter of fact in the Wyoming game -- you guys probably didn't notice it, but we kind of switched their responsibility, and one really was the Leo and one was the Will. But it's just our adjustment where nobody is seeing it, so one guy -- Bo was playing outside backer, the Leo backer, and then we have -- sometimes we have Ben Neimann in the box, so he's like a Will backer. So it all depends what formation, it's FSL, formations on the sideline, so they're getting that reps anyway. They're getting some looks, but sometimes

we do switch them around.

Q. How close would you say that trio is to being the three seniors you had in 2013?

PHIL PARKER: Three are still playing, right, three of them were in camp, so -- I don't know if they're -- it's hard to say that. I think the aggressiveness of Josey, I think he's very comparable to a Pat Angerer type of guy, really impressed with him, and Ben Neimann has done a great job. He can play in space like Kirksey. I don't think he is Kirksey. And I think Bo is a good go to work guy, get things done guy like James Morris.