

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, August 29, 2017

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Certainly overall we're pleased with the way preseason went. I think we made a lot of progress, got a lot of things accomplished. It was a little bit different this year having four weeks prior to the first game week, so it's a little bit longer than normal. The middle two were pretty normal, if you will, camp-mode type practices, and first week was a little bit different because we were practicing at night and meeting in the morning, so our schedule got flipped around a little bit.

But I think overall, we made progress. I think every team experiences injuries during the preseason. Made it a little bit tough for us to evaluate some of our depth and how some of our younger players are coming along, so it was a little frustrating, but again, I don't think it's unique to college football by any stretch.

As we head into this week, we're certainly excited and eager to get started. Also a little bit anxious. I think any time when you're getting into an opening ballgame it's a little bit unique for everyone, and basically we've been competing against ourselves since last spring. So it's about that time. I'm sure everybody feels the same way. It's time to get out and measure yourself against someone that's a little bit different and learn a little bit about your team, and we'll certainly learn this week, we'll learn each and every week following. So excited about that.

Captain wise, we've got Josey Jewell, we've got Matt VandeBerg, Sean Welsh, and then special teams captain will be Kevin Ward. Those four guys will represent us for the kickoff. Medically, pretty much everybody in the two-deep right now has an opportunity to play. We've got a couple guys nicked up; hopefully they'll make it back here by the end of the week and get ready to go. That's where we're at on that front.

And then turning our attention to Wyoming, they're a very formidable opponent. They've developed into a strong program in a short time. Coach Bohl has done a great job, he and his staff. Went there a couple years ago, they were 2-10 two seasons ago, and converted that into a season last year where they won their division, three points short in the championship game and came up three points in their bowl game, but they've got an excellent football team and have been

really impressed in their play.

They've got one of the nation's top players. Not only top quarterbacks, one of the nation's top players in Josh Allen, but they're much more than that. They've got a really well-balanced football team. Again, they're well-coached. They threaten you a lot of different ways. A lot of guys back on the defensive side. They're an aggressive group there.

So all that being said, we've got a big challenge on our hands right now. They've got good players. They've got a proven coaching staff, and they've really played well and come together. All you have to do is look at the tape, and you'd be very, very impressed that way.

We expect this to be tough. Every one of our games we expect to be tough. That's part of playing in the Big Ten. And this first one will be a big challenge, but we're certainly looking forward to getting back into Kinnick, getting in front of our fans, and hopefully be ready to go at kickoff.

Q. What did Nate Stanley do to win that top job?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, I think as the timing of the decision would indicate, it's been close all along. We've said that we've been pretty consistent in our remarks. Both Tyler and Nate have really competed well. They're both first-class guys. And again, we said it a week ago, we had confidence in both. We still do. They're both really good players. It was a close call. Felt like we needed to make a decision and start moving forward with the football team, so we did that at the end of the week, and we've pressed forward. He's done a nice job, Tyler has done a good job, and hopefully they'll both be ready to go.

Q. So he said he found out Thursday. What changed between Wednesday night and Thursday?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's 12, 14, 15 hours, 18 hours, whatever it may be. Again, it was never clear-cut, and it's really been that way the last couple times we've had to make a decision on quarterbacks. I guess that's a good thing because most of the decisions we've made recently have involved really good players.

But probably the timing of the whole thing. We had to do something in my mind by the end of the week, and we had a practice Friday morning, wanted to kind of get

that ball rolling a little bit before the weekend came around. So as much as anything probably, that was kind of a soft line, I guess, in the sand for us as far as making a decision.

Q. Who made the decision; was it you, Ken and Brian?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the whole staff chipped in, and I think we all saw it as a really close, competitive race, and I think right now we're all on board certainly with the direction we're going in.

Q. How did Tyler take the news?

KIRK FERENTZ: They were both outstanding. Tyler was great. I expected that, and he's practiced really well since that time and his demeanor has been tremendous. I think if it had gone the other way, I would have expected the same thing out of Nate. Again, they're both team-oriented guys and they both have really competed hard.

Q. When you look at Josh Allen and know a lot of people have looked at him at the next level, what jumps out at you, not only physically but what he's able to do when he's breaking the pocket and throwing?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the first thing that comes to mind, you just can't take a play off. I mean, there's no days off, no off days in this whole thing. Just a little while ago I was looking at -- they had 1st and 78 with like 50 seconds left in the San Diego State game there at the end, and next thing you know the ball is down on the opposite 35. He hit one down the middle, and now they've got plenty of time with short distance to travel. That's a pretty good situation to be in defensively. One play later you're on your own end playing with your backs against the wall.

I think that's kind of representative of the kind of quarterback he is. He can throw the ball down the middle, he can throw it outside really well, he can pull it down and run. I don't know if they necessarily want to do a lot of running with him, but he'll run the ball. If you're not on top of your game with the rush, keeping your contain and those types of things, you're going to get hurt, and then if you're not covering guys tightly, you're going to get hurt there, too. He's got a great arm.

Q. If you had last year's secondary with Snyder and Kane, you'd probably still be concerned for those same reasons, but now having an inexperienced unit in a lot of areas, that's probably heightened the concern?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think two things. Probably the last time we had a challenge, you guys probably know better than I, but I think back to 2003 when

Roethlisberger was playing here as a senior, third straight year we had played against him. Obviously a very accomplished player. We were fortunate that day, but they won out the rest of the way, and he kept winning in Pittsburgh and still is winning.

So you kind of look at it as a challenge like that, and then the other part of the equation I think with Wyoming is that they're a very diverse, balanced team. They ran for over 200 a game, threw for over 200 a game, so it's not like they're just a one-dimensional football team, which puts a lot of pressure on you defensively.

Q. Were you able to lean on Coach Polasek as far as his experience with them?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know he is kind of in the family tree, if you will, so I guess that's helpful in some ways. But we got a really good exposure to their program, Tim's program a year ago, and now you're looking at film. Nothing is ever exactly the same. It never is. A lot of that is dependent on personnel. One of the things that's tricky about a first game is you're never quite sure who some of the newcomers might be, what it's going to look like, but there's some commonality there, but still gets down to the game on the field.

The other little monkey wrench in this whole thing is that they've got a new defensive coordinator, so we're not quite sure when we look at their defense how the defense is going to change or tweak, and that's really true of anybody. You never know if anybody is saddled up with somebody in the out of season and borrowed some things strategically, that type of deal. That's one of the elements, I think, that make opening games pretty unique that way.

Q. You've shown little hesitancy to play key players in kickoff return and punt return positions, and you showed it again with the depth chart here this week. What is your thinking there?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's kind of twofold. First of all, Desmond did a great job the last two years really helping us with field position, in both phases. I think that's important, and then we've got a lot of new players right now, so we need every little edge we can get. I think we're all in agreement we need to do as well as we possibly can on special teams, all phases, and I think if we have an opportunity to use a veteran player where it might give us a little bit more octane than it would otherwise, then we really need to look into that, and hopefully that'll complement some of the inexperience that we're working through.

Q. The true freshmen, you've got I think seven on the depth chart. Do you plan to play all those guys, or does it go beyond that?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see how it goes. I mean, it could go beyond. It may not be all this coming Saturday, and we'll assess that every week, but right now we go in with an open mind. Those guys have done well in camp. They look as if they can go out and perform. That being said, any new player, whether it's a first-year guy or a fourth-year guy that hasn't played, you're going to have some ups and downs. That's just the way it goes. So we have to keep that in mind, bear that in mind, but we've got an open mind for everybody right now.

Q. Speaking of the true freshmen, what sticks out about Geno? He's on the depth chart there.

KIRK FERENTZ: He kind of made a later charge, if you will. Started out okay, but when we scrimmaged, especially a week ago Friday, my depth perception is not real good, I guess it was only a week ago Friday, when we finished camp up, he had a big night that night, and basically shows up where the ball is, and that's a good trait for a safety. We're still teaching him some responsibilities, some things he can't do before he starts attacking the football, but he showed up where the ball is in several ways, and I think Phil alluded to this last week in the press conference, he made some plays that you don't see guys make every day, too, just getting the ball out, that type of thing. He just seems to have a good feel for the game. We thought that when we recruited him, but you're never quite sure until they get on campus, but he's hit the ground running pretty quickly.

Q. The freshman Tristan Wirfs jumped into the depth chart; do you plan on playing him?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. That's one we'll probably tread water on a little bit, but right now our plan is to go ahead and push forward, but we'll see.

Q. What about Brandon Smith, Ihmir Smith-Marsette, and Max Cooper; do you see all of them playing a role?

KIRK FERENTZ: All three of those guys, you could see them out there in some capacity this Saturday. I would imagine somewhere in the next 13 weeks you're going to see them out there playing. Our plan with all three of those guys was to push them forward.

Q. How did Miguel win the kicking job? Keith Duncan was one of your heroes against Michigan and now Miguel has passed him.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's a little bit like the quarterback situation, probably not as much interest on it, but it's a little bit like that in that the competition has gone back and forth. Right now Miguel has got the edge in percentages, but Keith has done some good things, too, and that's one we'll just keep letting those guys compete during the course of the year. It's

possible we could use both of them. We did that last year, and we're certainly open to that.

Q. Matt Quarrels, he's moved up; is he starting to feel comfortable in the offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, a little bit better. You know the difference between he and James Butler is certainly that James was able to go from day one, and Matt is kind of late to the game right now, so he's really learning on the fly. Before he was accepted into school, he really couldn't do anything. He could come out and watch practice, but he couldn't sit in a meeting, learn the technology, get a playbook, all those kinds of things, so he's definitely in catchup mode right now, but he's learning quickly and doing some good things. He's been impressive out there. Like James he has a real good demeanor, I think both those guys are really good additions to our football team.

Q. You mentioned they have an aggressive defense, but they gave up a lot of yards last year, especially when they didn't turn the offenses over. Are you confident you guys can move the ball pretty effectively if you hold on to the ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we're going to find out. Again, we don't know 100 percent what to expect with a new coordinator. I think it's hard to imagine they would just do a wholesale thing, but that's part of first games, too. But they are aggressive. They rotate a lot of guys up front. They've got a lot of guys back up front, and I'll tell you, both their safeties are very active, both very good players. The one player has gotten a lot of notoriety. I think both those guys are really active in their scheme. They're guys we're going to have to account for. And the middle linebacker, No. 30, he played outside last year, he's a really good returner, as well. They've got some guys that are certainly capable of playing.

My guess is that the emphasis has probably been on eliminating the big play. They got victimized by that a little bit last year, and it's hard to be a good defensive team, the kind of defensive team anybody wants to be when you're giving up big plays, so I imagine that's probably where the focus is.

Q. When you have so many new players at wide receiver, right now are you going to try to rotate a lot of guys just to see who kind of steps forward and then solidify the rotation later?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we'll play it by ear. Certainly Matt is our most experienced guy and our most dependable, and Nick Easley has missed a little bit of time, but he's been doing really well, too. It's really close with a bunch of guys. They all do a little something different, a little something better. It's just one of those things we'll learn more each week. That's

kind of what I was alluding to with first games. You're never quite sure what it's going to look like, how guys are going to do once they get out there in front of the crowd, that type of deal. We've had a little exposure to that.

Those are some of the things we'll be learning as we go along, and I think the real trick is that our experienced players can do well enough to kind of hold the fort and go from there.

I'm flashing back to that '03 game right now. That was a little dicey, that early part of the season was a little bit dicey. We had some interesting plays from guys that hadn't played a lot, but we found a way to win. We found a way to win that first one. It was a tough one, but we got it done, and that'll be the goal this week and then hopefully just keep pushing forward and getting a little bit better as we learn.

Q. Regarding Brian, big decision of camp, is he going to be upstairs or downstairs; do we know yet?

KIRK FERENTZ: Somebody asked me that this morning, and I don't think we still have anything in writing right now, but it's almost -- it's like neck-and-neck with the quarterback derby, right, these two questions, so it's kind of interesting. I don't know, I wouldn't wage a guess right now. I really don't think it matters at the end of the day.

Q. Do you care?

KIRK FERENTZ: Do I care? I want him to be where he feels most comfortable, just like Greg or anybody else.

Q. Do you have a preference yourself?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't. Bill Snyder was up there for my first eight years here, and it worked pretty well. I've seen it both ways, and I think it really gets down to what the preference is, and it wouldn't shock me if he starts one place and ends up the other. Preferably not in the first quarter. We've worked it both ways during camp. But we'll see where it all goes.

Q. Do you share any kind of excitement that the outside world hasn't seen with what Brian's offense can do?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, probably the answer is probably not really, at least I guess I'm referring -- you're inferring that there's a lot of excitement in the outside world. I'm missing a lot of the outside world right now. But hopefully we're going to look like a good football team, but all that being said, we've got some young players right now, so there's going to be some growing pains. I'm hoping we put things together and look representative out there and do a good job of taking care of the football, getting the plays that are

there and then hopefully making a couple that will spark our football team. You know, it's going to be a process just like everything else.

Q. Brian talked last week, and he seemed pretty intent on finding a rotation in the offensive line, maybe just to get bodies ready. Do you see that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll see. We've always been open to playing more than five guys, and I think that just helps you when you have somebody that can't go, and that's the case just about every -- maybe not every week, but it happens every season. So you have to be prepared, and we've been rotating probably eight guys, nine guys around on the line. We're probably at a point where we need to kind of stabilize things a little bit, make sure we've got the chemistry going the way we want, but it's good to have versatility, it's good to have players that can play a couple positions. I think we do have that in a couple spots.

Q. You have Matt and Josh returning kicks and punts for you. Did you audition for that, or were they handed those?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, it's been all through camp. We've looked at it, and the good news is a month ago we weren't sure what we had. I think we've got some guys right now that are capable. Matt and Josh are both interesting guys returning-wise, and then I think our kick return situation is pretty healthy right now, too. I've got a couple of guys that have kind of emerged and looked good out there, and hopefully they'll carry that into game circumstances.

Q. Using VandeBerg in that spot, a guy who hasn't played since he broke a foot, is that simply a matter of you're healthy, you do it?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. He's dependable fielding the ball, and then even before that making good decisions. Judgment is a big part of being a punt return guy, so it starts there. He fields it well, and he's got some run ability afterwards, too, so we're hoping that we can get something. And Josh, I've talked a lot about Josh, just the strides he's made as a defensive player. I'd say the same thing about our return guy. He's always been kind of interesting with the ball in his hands, but getting it in his hands has been interesting in itself two, three years ago, so I think we're at the point right now where he's really fielding those things well, making good decisions on bad punts, that type of thing, and that's a really important position. Really pleased to see his progress there.

Q. James Butler kind of spoke about the kind of carefree underdog attitude that the Mountain West teams kind of take into a Big Ten stadium. Do you have to spend any time addressing your team about that?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, I think the theme there is just -- if you play college sports, you really need to respect what it takes to win and realize that we don't get to play Fort Couch Middle School here. They're not on our schedule, and they haven't been. Week in and week out, you've got to really understand that, that it's hard to win a college football game.

And then secondly, once you look at the film, in this case, you know, you're seeing good football, and we're watching these guys against BYU, San Diego State, who had a really good football team last year, Boise. So we're watching good teams against good teams, and unless guys are sleeping or unless they're just too young to know any better, they realize that we're playing some really good players, and I'm a dumb line coach, but I look at the quarterback and say, geez, that guy is pretty good, and it was kind of the same way with Roethlisberger. That in itself gets your attention. But as I said earlier, they're much more than one player. They're a really well-coached football team and have a lot of really good players on their team.

Q. With Allen, what's more important in your opinion, getting pressure, disguising coverages, or a combination? What's kind of in your experience been most effective against quarterbacks like him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if you give him a lot of time he's going to find somebody open, and somebody is going to be open because you can only cover for so long. So yeah, you want to disrupt him if possible, and preferably, like every coach, you'd like to do it with four guys. It would be nice if you could do it with three. But the danger is if you get out of your lanes and are reckless, he'll pull it down and run. He's done a nice job that way converting into good 1st downs for them. He's just a really good football player. And full disclosure, I didn't hear about him or know about him until watching the draft last April. After hearing what they said there, I can certainly see -- you watch tape, you can understand why he was being lauded so highly.

Q. You guys have always strived for balance on offense, but your foundation is in the running game. Having the two running backs you do in the offensive line so effective in running the football last year, is that an area ideally you'd like to lean on while your quarterback kind of gets some experience?

KIRK FERENTZ: It would certainly help us if we can do that. But then every opponent we play knows that, too. Even when we couldn't run the ball in '04, people played like we could. So it just kind of seems to be the way people play us. We're going to have to be able to throw it a little bit. But certainly that's what I was alluding to; if our experienced guys aren't playing their

best, giving us a chance to have some success, it's going to be a challenge. So we need that. We need to play well.

Doesn't mean we're going to run for six a carry, that type of thing. That's probably not realistic, but we need to at least keep doing some things that are effective for us so we can run and pass in a complementary way. We're not going to have him in a harness out there; Nate is going to have to throw the ball, we're going to have to catch it and get open, all those kinds of things, and there's no reason we shouldn't, but we're going to have to execute. It's not going to come easy, that's for sure.

Q. When you look at Wingard, their safety, who's the Mountain West preseason Player of the Year, what did they like to do with him last year, and do you anticipate any changes because they have a new coordinator?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not saying he's Bob Sanders, but I guess schematically they get him involved in the run game. They'll let him come down in coverage and go single safety, and the other guy does a good job, too. They both are really good at that. They're good tacklers. They come up and make plays, and they're up in there pretty aggressively. They're not doing that every snap, but they'll allow those guys to do that probably more so than maybe some teams you play. So those guys are part of the run defense just like the other front seven guys are. Not all at one time, but they'll be -- you can't do that if a guy won't come up and make a play, though, and make a tackle, and he certainly does that.

Q. The university renewed your contract today; looks like there's a \$50,000 increase in salary for this year. Why is that?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's actually 50,000 to the race, but it was something Gary and I talked about. It was a suggestion I made to just help our program, so we added another person to the program, and it was just something we agreed on. Thought it would be good for the program.

Q. Just to make a hire?

KIRK FERENTZ: Exactly, yeah, exactly. It wasn't parking tickets. I do earn my pass every now and then. Mary takes my car, and I end up getting a ticket.

Q. Any guys from Texas or Houston or Corpus Christi area?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, we don't. You hear about all the stuff, but last night I actually saw a little footage when I got home last night, and it's unbelievable, and I heard Coach O'Brien, I think I was riding in the car and heard him talking about it, and you know, just -- we had a

flood in Pittsburgh years ago back in the '70s and I was here obviously in '08, but the magnitude of this thing is just unreal. It's very, very tragic, and just your hearts go out to everybody down there. What a tough situation.

Q. Punter, we haven't talked about that.

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, same thing, it was fairly close, and Colten has done a good job, and we're really happy with Gersonde, too. He looks like a good prospect. We may split those duties just like the PAT field goal stuff. There may be some mix-and-match on that stuff, and see how that goes. Both the guys have done well.

The thing I'd say about the kicking or any new position, that consistency factor. Obviously all the guys have shown flashes of doing things really well, now how consistent can we be and can we do it when we're in a game situation. That's the next test.

Q. I can't imagine he'd care too much, but what do you think about the Tiger Hawk at the 50?

KIRK FERENTZ: It looks good. I'll give you an opinion. Every now and then I will. First time I saw it, I was up at the Children's Hospital looking down in July, I think we were visiting somebody down there, and I thought it looked great. At that point it was just kind of floating. But I think it looks really good, and we've been out there a couple times. It's like being a grandparent. I haven't heard anybody complain about it yet. Nobody complains about it being a grandparent, and seems like this one -- I'm not going to say unanimous, but it seems like it's been pretty popular, so I'm all for it. Hope it makes us play better; that would be even better.