

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, August 28, 2018

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Welcome and good afternoon to everybody. On the topic of class conflicts... I've been joking about we had our first practice a couple Friday nights ago and Mike Ojemudia was taking a thermodynamics final exam. I'd much rather have been on the practice field than doing what he was doing. He got a B+ in that, also, by the way. Just so you know that.

For us, it's the best time of year. It's good to get started. It's an exciting time for everybody, and we're all looking forward to a competitive football season again. Hopefully we'll put a team out there that can match that.

Shared with our team last night in our team meeting, this time of year there's always a lot of excitement, also anxiety, some nervousness, that type of thing. I think that's pretty common for everybody, especially for younger players, and really the key thing is to try to find a way to channel that and put focus on your preparation. That's the best thing that any of us can do right now.

But all that being said, it's always a time of great excitement for everybody. No matter how many times you do it, the opportunity to come out of the tunnel and swarm in Kinnick Stadium is a special thing, and the same thing on the road. That's kind of where we're at at this point.

As far as preparation goes, I think we've done a fairly good job. We've had a productive camp for the most part. We've been able to avoid serious injury, and that's always significant. You always have people that miss some time, and it's always a little bit disappointing, but that's part of football.

But I think as a rule, we've improved pretty much at every position. I think we've seen our leadership base grow at all positions, and that's certainly important if you're going to have a winning team, and then obviously for us to have a good football team, our best guys have to play their best, and I've said this many times, but they've got to play better than they did last season, our returning players that are experienced, and then you need to have guys rise up and fill the voids that were left by graduation and guys that departed.

Those things have all been kind of going, and again, we've made progress in those areas. The other thing of note probably to you would be newcomers that we're planning on playing right now, and as we stand here today, and this is a little different world than years past with the redshirt flexibility rule available to us, but it's probably more prominent for us on defense right now. We have four true freshmen we plan to play, starting with in the back end where we're a little bit thin, Julius Brents and Riley Moss have both done a good job, and we expect them to be in our two deep and playing on special teams. Same to be said about Dillon Doyle, linebacker, and then Tyler Linderbaum up front as a defensive tackle.

Then offensively we have two guys that aren't true freshmen but they're new to our program. Nico Ragaini joined us last January. He's done a nice job and has improved greatly the last couple weeks. Seems to be more comfortable. And then Mekhi Sargent, who I mentioned the last time we got together, he's done a really nice job, and he certainly will help us in the running back position. I feel good about that.

We had four guys that were awarded scholarships this past camp, three of them being seniors. Dalton Ferguson, an offensive lineman; Austin Kelly, fullback; and then also Kyle Groeneweg; and then an underclassman, Nate Wieting has done a good job at tight end, continues to improve, and has been a good guy. Happy to have that opportunity certainly.

And then moving to Saturday, we're playing against a team that's highly competitive and very well-coached. Our relationship with Northern Illinois goes back a ways, but if you think about it most recently, they've had an outstanding football team since Coach Carey took over five plus years ago. He's done a wonderful job. We have two coaches on our staff that coached in that program, and we have great respect for them, and if you watch their team on film, they're a really good football team. They've got good players. They play extremely hard but also play and attack aggressively. What they do mentally is aggressive, as well.

We know we are going to have a battle on our hands Saturday. Provided hopefully we'll be up for that match, and that's the thing that we're working on

currently as we get ready for the game Saturday at 2:40 p.m.

To that point, it's obviously great to be home. It's been exciting for my office to see the north end zone renovation. That's been fun to watch, and it's even better to be on the field. I understand you guys got a tour of it today, so you got a little taste of what we've been able to sample during the two times we've been down on the field. But it's been fanless, so it's going to be really nice to be in there Saturday and see the whole stadium going hard.

It's always great to be in Kinnick. That's never been any issue there. But the bottom line is it's about us playing well because our fans can't play; they can't go out and take care of business for us. That's our job. It gets back to our preparation, and we have a lot of work to do still between now and Saturday, but we're looking forward to it and looking forward to being in Kinnick on Saturday afternoon.

Q. You said this is the first time in 20 years you have at least three linebackers with zero starts running out there; what's your level of concern about that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's part of college football. It's a challenge. I feel good about the way the guys have progressed. Amani Jones has certainly done a nice job, and that really began a while ago. He's played really well on special teams for us, and he's getting a better picture of the whole taking command in the middle, and that's an important position. Anywhere up the middle is important, offense or defense. He's a good building block for us to start with, and then we'll go with Walsh and Niemann at the two outside backer positions.

But at this point, I see it kind of being a four- or five-, maybe six-player competition, and maybe a little bit like '08 where we had some things happening during the course of the season, I think Angerer emerged as a starter in late September, early October. That's a possibility, as well. It is like anything; you never know until you get on the game field how guys are going to play. But they've practiced well, and we've got some good guys around them right now. We're not deep at any position defensively maybe outside of our defensive line. But hopefully it'll be a good team effort and we'll be ready to play good defense.

Q. Are you comfortable kind of rotating linebackers because you guys have not done that the last two years, and most teams don't do that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, just depends on who your guys are. If you have clear starters, which we certainly had last year. We had a group that all three of those guys

had really distinguished themselves. It wasn't realistic or maybe the smartest thing to do. '13 was probably the same way once we got going. But if it's even, I don't know if we'll rotate, but there are going to be opportunities for guys, and guys in practice are still impressing us or not impressing us. And same thing on special teams, and most of the linebackers are involved in special teams, too. Obviously, if a guy is out there Saturday and playing well, he's not coming out, and that's the best way to keep a job or earn a job I should say.

Q. What's the level of concern at offensive tackle when you're missing your two starters going into week one?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, any time you go in shorthanded at any position, it's a concern. To have two guys out at one position is not ideal. The good news is right now we have three guys that I think have practiced well. We consider all three of them, I kind of look at them all the same way, and they'll probably rotate through a little bit, be it Dalton, and be Levi Paulsen or Mark Kallenberger. Those guys have practiced well.

We've got great respect for Northern Illinois. Their defensive front is veteran, and they're very good at the defensive end position. Probably the only thing that helps a little bit there is I told our guys, you've been practicing against some pretty good guys, too, with Hesse and Nelson. At least they're going against good guys in practice on a daily basis, and I can throw Epenesa and Golston in there, as well. But they haven't played. The bottom line is they haven't played a lot, and their guys are veteran, the guys from Northern Illinois are. It'll be interesting to watch, but I think they'll be prepared.

Q. What have you seen from Mark Kallenberger throughout this camp, and looking back and seeing what's happened, maybe knowing that he might get to play sooner than later, have you seen improvement throughout camp?

KIRK FERENTZ: Needless to say, Mark impressed us in high school. We really liked him as a prospect. And then once you get a prospect on campus, you learn a lot more certainly, and you get little windows, but after they've been on campus for a couple months, you really start to see what you have there. Mark really impressed us last year. He competed well. Had we had that redshirt rule, I don't know if he would have played, but he might have been a candidate. He worked with our twos quite a bit in the fall. He's had his ups and downs since then, like every guy on the team, but he really has rallied the last two weeks, practicing well, and he's got a good future here. So hopefully he'll play well Saturday and carry that all season long.

Q. With the walk-ons, other programs make really big deals about them. Seems like you guys really keep it under the radar. Any reason for that, or what's your approach?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a big deal. It's a huge deal for anybody to earn a scholarship. You talk about truly earning a scholarship, we award them during the recruiting season, but when you come here of your own volition -- and every one of those guys is a good story. I'm not sure how Austin got here. Nate Wieting was on his way to Missouri, I believe, to look at their school, interested in premed, Sean Considine knows him a little bit, and Sean told us about that, and said, well, we've got a medical school here, too, and it's pretty good, actually. So we finally got him to come over here and look. But he's been here, he's been going through injury, all those kinds of things. Same thing with Dalton. Dalton's coming off a knee injury. And then Kyle, Kyle came here out of good faith a year ago and has done a really good job. When those guys have been in the program, they've paid their dues, more than paid their dues, and we have a lot of other guys we could have rewarded. It's really gratifying.

Those are private moments, and those are really nice things, and it's a great feeling to tell a young guy that he's earned a scholarship. It's a really nice thing. Not everything has got to be out there for public display I don't think. It's just how we operate.

Q. Northern Illinois' defense made a tremendous stride from '16 to '17. What do you see from their defense that makes them so successful?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're in my mind schematically not a whole lot different than they were when we played them last year, and Jay Niemann was the coordinator there. Seems to me they've got a good idea of who they want to be and how they want to play things. That probably starts right at the top with Coach Carey.

But the bottom line is it all gets down to your players, how they play the scheme. They have a certain DNA in terms of the way they like to do things, and then the guys play and really make the difference. They've got some really good active players, and it's always good if you're active and tough up front. I certainly would describe them that way.

It takes 11 guys to play good defense, but when you can generate a little bit of juice up front, that certainly does help.

Q. The Sutton Smith kid is a running back; kind of sounds like one of your type of stories, comes over to defense and here he is one of the -- an All-American. Other than his motor, what does he do that makes him so powerful?

KIRK FERENTZ: They had a first-rounder out of there whatever year that was, the defensive end that went to San Diego, I believe. I think that's one of the neat things. You think about some of our best players here historically were MAC, going to MACs and then we snatched them, whether Hyde -- guys that have been in the Pro Bowl, Hyde, King, right on through.

He's an active player, and you can see where he might have been a running back because he's really slippery. He's a very disruptive player, and that's not luck. It starts with a good motor, good energy level. But he knows how to play. He's got a certain way of operating out there, and it causes problems for any offensive team.

If you're going to game plan, you'd better start right there and have an understanding of what challenges he presents and then hopefully have some answers for it.

Q. What did Ivory show you that earned him a job as the starting running back?

KIRK FERENTZ: I want to be careful on that one just in the context that we look at all three of those guys -- kind of like I talked about our tackles a minute ago, I think all three of those guys, if they're in the game, we're going to feel okay about it, based on what we've seen. With Ivory and Toren, obviously we've had a better exposure over a year, Toren with two years and now Ivory with one, Mekhi not quite as long of an exposure, but really like what he's done the last two weeks in particular. He's an older guy.

But I think Ivory has got a really diverse skill set, if you will. He can run the football, run inside, run outside, catch it, runs good routes, those type of things. He's done a nice job. I can't tell you we have a specific amount of carries designed for all guys, but I think you're going to see all three of those guys play a role in the offense for sure.

Q. How much does that big of a shift in philosophy with a guy like Akrum that can catch the ball in the backfield, Ivory can catch the ball, versus kind of the bruising running backs you used to have?

KIRK FERENTZ: It depends on what you have, and everybody has got a different skill set certainly. When we had Fred Russell, Fred wasn't dynamic as a pass receiver, but he was an awfully good back, and wasn't a big bruiser but kind of got hidden back there a little bit and found holes and took off through them. Sean was a physical, tough guy. LeShun (Daniels), physical runner, that type of thing. You try to recruit good players, and then you match up with what they bring to the field and try to do a good job that way and be mindful of those things. Again, you see a little different

attack with all three of those guys, but we really feel good about any three of the players being in there.

Q. What have you seen from the development of Sam Brincks? He's kind of an interesting story.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if you asked about guys that have improved, Sam certainly to me is in the top of the list, and talking about walk-ons again, a guy that was hurt in high school, Reese really had good feelings about him, Coach Morgan did, and just he was kind of the guy that Reese was focused on, and I'm not sure I saw it the first year quite frankly. Not that I didn't see him as a good kid; I'm not saying he wasn't, but he was okay out there. But boy, he has improved. He just has really -- he did a nice job last year, and I think he's taken a big step since that time. He's got an unbelievable attitude, very unselfish, and he's really cognizant of technique, works hard on it, and he plays hard. So he's a really dependable guy, and I think probably better than we give him credit for, and just really been impressed with him. That was in the spring certainly, and he's continued that the last three weeks, so I think he's just getting better and better with every snap out there.

Q. Getting back to the freshmen, you mentioned Dillon Doyle and Riley Moss getting on the two deep. They weren't on the two deep yesterday --

KIRK FERENTZ: Sorry about that. Yeah, we're going to play them on special teams for sure, and they're right in that discussion for sure. We do have a little flexibility, and it's kind of -- we'll see how it goes week to week, but pretty much the way our schedule pans out, we'll come up for air here in three weeks, four weeks and reassess everything. If they just fall on their face, heaven forbid, we can pull it back right now, but our plan is to let those guys operate the next three, four weeks and see what happens.

Q. At backup quarterback, is there a distinction between two and three? There is on the depth chart, but --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, right now it's two and three, and we're really pleased with them. The key thing there is that both of them have improved since the spring, so I think we're a little bit more comfortable now. It would have been a little concerning last April if we had to play a game. But I think we're a little further down the road, and you hoped that would be the case with that time allotted to you. We feel good about both those guys, and right now Peyton would be the first guy in the game.

Q. I know you're probably a little burned out on questions about the 20 years and all that good stuff, but the idea of back-to-back coaches putting in 20 years at the same place is simply unheard of.

Is there one thing or one aspect that you feel like you and Hayden Fry are really similar?

KIRK FERENTZ: You may find this hard to believe. We're probably similar in a lot of ways. We just have very different personalities. He's charming, witty, and got me right down the list. And I mean that in all sincerity. He captivated this state. That was very clear to me. I came here year three. It was very obvious that -- boy, I didn't know all the details, but just like this guy, he did something to really rally the troops here.

But at the end of the day, the big games we won in the '80s got down to playing good, solid, fundamental football. I think he fooled a lot of people with the white pants, the sunglasses and exotics, but when it came down to really winning big games, it was all sound football. That's usually common everywhere you go, and pretty much any generation, I really believe that.

But the common denominator really, besides I think we are similar in certain belief sets, is the place. It takes a good place and really unique people for good things to happen. Iowa is a great, great place, and my 29 years, 28 plus, the commonality is just great people to be around, whether it's players, coaches, support staff, fans. It's hard to find a real negative here. It really is. That part has been fortunate.

Q. Is it only fitting that he is expected to be here on Saturday for what could be a very big deal?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, as you might imagine, I really don't want to talk too much about that right now, and for a couple reasons. I acknowledge the potential of the historic moment, but this thing can go either way. We know that. And then the other part is just like -- the thing I've asked our team to do is let's just focus on what's going on right now. That's what I'm going to try to do, too. This is our only opportunity for the 2018 team to kick it off and have our first game, and it's going to take every bit of our preparation, our focus and our effort to come out of this thing on top. That's really where I'm trying to focus right now.

Q. A couple of players had no idea. Does that make you happy to know that they had no idea?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, because what's really important is us trying to figure out how to beat Northern Illinois. That's really all that matters this week, and then if something good does happen, we can celebrate it, one of these days when I get done. But right now, we're just trying to get a little bit better here and hopefully practice good tomorrow.

Q. You said your position groups have been decimated by injury or whatever. Have you seen maybe leadership bubble up from other places because of --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first of all, I think the guys involved in having to go out and play, I think they see it as opportunity. Dalton is a good example. He's a fifth-year guy. He's done a lot of good things here. Unfortunately Rob Bruggeman went through the same thing, had a knee injury later in his career when he was just getting ready to -- we were hoping to blossom. But now he's coming off that, and this is a great opportunity for him to go out and play. We got five spots out there, so anybody can start the rest of the season. So it's a wide open field, and Mark the same way, Levi the same way. That's what they came here for is to play football, so I think they get it. And then the guys you're counting on, guys like Render, guys like Reynolds, I think they've been doing a really nice job -- Cole Banwart has been practicing well. So it's still about being a cohesive unit and playing well together, and I think same thing on the defensive line, and we've got guys that have been -- I mentioned Sam. Sam has been working inside anyway.

It's an opportunity to go out and play and show that you belong out there on the field and you can do some good things. It's just like injuries, you just have to -- they're unfortunate. That's the way it goes, it happens, and now it's an opportunity for somebody else to step in and really show that they can play and do a great job and help us win.

Q. You had arguably the top cornerback in college football on your team last year. Now he's gone. What can you expect realistically from your cornerbacks?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we just want them to play well, and if they end up playing like Josh did last year -- nobody would have predicted that. Nobody in their right mind would have predicted it last year at this time. But it happened, and that's one of the beauties of football. Not every guy up on that wall but a lot of the guys up on that wall over there -- it's kind of their stories. It's interesting, you go down and look at our Pro Bowl jerseys in the weight room, I think I'm correct -- well, if you look at our Pro Bowl players since 1981, I think four of them were recruited by big schools. So the rest of them were all just really good stories. Certainly the guys down in the weight room, I think Aaron Kampman was the only guy that had legitimate offers. Maybe Casey Wiegmann did. I doubt it. He's like as tall as I am. A guy that played 15 years, right, and had a great career. That's how you look at it. Just like, hey, go out and play but play your position. Don't try to be an All-American.

Q. Is that just trying to deal with the pressure of --

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think so. Those stories just happen when you're playing well, and again, nobody would have predicted Josh's ascension, or Josey's for that matter, right? Yet he's one of the best guys ever to

play here.

Just go out and play, play within the system, play as best as you can play, hopefully your teammates help you, and then if some good plays come out of it, that's a good thing. That's usually how good things do happen. It's just usually an organic effort.

Q. When you look at last year at running the football, you had really yin and yang in a lot of games, and a lot of that was depending on the opponent, some really good run defenses like Michigan State and Wisconsin. Other ones you were able to go the other way. What did you see in terms of the self-scouting process to maybe some of the --

KIRK FERENTZ: You're going to hate my answer, but it's execution, it's consistency. If you leave the door open -- Akrum had an ability to make some guys miss, just like Ronnie Harmon did 100 years ago. He could make some guys miss. Barry Sanders, they used to leave one guy unblocked; basically it was his guy. But certain backs have that ability; other guys might run through them. It's part of the running game. But just doing the things well that you can do, that's the biggest thing.

We didn't do it as consistently as we would have liked last year. Hopefully we'll be better this year. You think, again, not to make an excuse, but I'll give you a reason. The day I walked up behind Boone Myers and Ike Boettger, two 300-plus-pound fifth-year guys, they're both dressed in sweats like I am, and I'm thinking, boy, it would be nice to have those guys playing for us.

That's just part of the deal. I think that factored into it, certainly, and we really didn't throw the ball very effectively, so it's easier to run the ball if you can throw it a little bit, and I think we'll have a better chance this year maybe than we did last year.

Q. With Smith-Marsette now, he's down for both punt and kick return. What did you see from him to make you want to make him first?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we've really like Ihmir from day one. He's got a lot of personality, good personality, and he's a football guy. He's a football -- he's actually over 170 now, which is really nice. I happened to walk out with him this morning, he was 159. I asked him what he weighed last year at this time. He's almost college football weight now, but he's just a football guy. He's got a little wiggle to him, and part of being a return guy is you've got to want to do it because it takes a little courage, and he's really excited about it. Kyle is excited about it; Groeneweg, I think he's got a chance to be a good return guy; Ivory Kelly-Martin has done a

good job in that regard, also. I think we've got some guys that maybe can give us a little octane back there in the return game.

Q. Then the punter with Ryan, how did he end up getting that job?

KIRK FERENTZ: Boy, I've got to check that depth chart. Have you got a copy of one of those? Right now Colten will be our starter. That shows you how into depth charts I am. Anyway, but yeah, right now Colten will be our starter. But I see that thing being fairly even, also. I mean, as we get on with the season, we're going to let guys compete. Not much written in permanent ink right now, but it's that way every year. The good guys gotta hold on to their jobs and other guys gotta fight for them, and hopefully that will make us a better football team.

Q. In that regard, are there --

KIRK FERENTZ: I apologize for those mistakes. What else did I put on there? Hopefully those guys are on our roster that are on there.

Q. In that regard, are there other true freshmen that are kind of still in your thinking?

KIRK FERENTZ: Potentially, but right now not likely. But potentially. We've got a couple guys.

Q. Just because you guys have a lot of guys --

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just kind of the way it shakes out, I guess, yeah. The way it shakes out.

Q. Could you see two punters playing Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there's a potential for that, yeah. Only because Ryan -- I think both of them are much better. It's kind of like the backup quarterbacks. They're much better players now in August than they were in April, and that's a good thing. That's how it's supposed to work, as guys get older and work at it and all that type of thing. It doesn't always work that way, so there's no guarantees. Whether it's younger guys like that or a guy like Sam Brincks, who's a fifth-year guy, I've always believed players can improve, and it's the same way in the NFL. Guys that are 30 can get better if they've got a good attitude and they work hard at it, but some guys just kind of cruise through.

Q. What do you think about the new north end zone?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, I think it's awesome. Yeah, unbelievable. I think you were going to ask about the headsets. We got a memo two days ago on that. So whatever it is, it's August 26, can you imagine us getting a memo on headsets on August 26th? Is that the dumbest thing in the world? Not to bring that up, but I just did intentionally. How ridiculous is that?

But as cool as it seems from the field, it's really awesome on the field to see it, and it was good in April, but it's like way better now. Probably the neatest moment a week ago Saturday we were watching our scrimmage tape, and to watch the end zone cameras just looking -- I can't tell you why, but seeing it on video was like, wow, that looks really -- it's imposing. I can't wait to see the fans in it. Hopefully we're going to make them be loud and not sit on their hands. That's a challenge for us.

Q. Do you want to say the captains?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I do, thank you. We've got Parker Hesse on defense; Jake Gervase; and then offensively Nate Stanley and Brady Ross. Those are our four captains for Saturday.