

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, October 30, 2018

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. To Steve's point there, certainly great to have Josey back next week. Sounds like he's doing a great job in Denver, and then Quinn Early is just a tremendous former player, a tremendous person and really kind of a neat story about his whole deal. It'll be great to have him back, as well.

Just looking backward for a minute or two, just a couple thoughts about Saturday's game. Obviously the loss was disappointing, and a little bit frustrating for everybody. But the bottom line is good teams learn from their mistakes. We came in Sunday like we always do, looked at the film, looked at the good and bad, and that's true, win or loss, it's just how we do things.

The big thing is to really examine the things that did work well, why they worked well, the benefit they produced and then also where we came up short, what the causes were and how do we move forward.

A couple obvious observations from the game, our communication and ability to handle the environment wasn't always what it needs to be, so that's something we can certainly improve upon. I think Penn State's defense certainly played a really good game, and didn't allow us to really play with the kind of consistency we'd like to offensively, so it's a credit to them.

And then we had some opportunities for some big plays, and it's true in every game, but when you lose a game, those things are magnified a little bit more and become even that much more important. I think that was part of the deal, as well.

As we move forward right now, I think every good player I've been around, every good team I've been around has tough days, and that certainly was the case the other day. The other part about that, good players and good people move forward and they learn from those mistakes, and usually those things will benefit them if they take them the right way, and that's really the challenge that our football team has right now.

Looking forward to Purdue, same four captains will go out for the toss. You've got Parker Hesse, Jake Gervase on defense, and Nate Stanley, Keegan Render offensively. I do have one injury to report,

Shaun Beyer was hurt yesterday in non-contact practice, so he'll definitely be out this week. It may be a couple weeks. I'll know more here as we go along, but I'll keep you apprised of that as we go along.

And then to turn our attention towards Purdue, basically it's much like last week. We're playing a really good football team, a team that's very, very dangerous and very explosive, very capable, and then playing them on the road in a tough environment. A lot of similarities there.

Purdue plays good defense, and I think that was probably the biggest story about their success last year. New staff comes in and I think the defensive success -- they had really been struggling defensively for years, and they did a great job last year defensively, and then beyond that, I think certainly with Coach Brohm's reputation, it's back up to the way they play on offense. They're very innovative, very explosive and very, very productive. So they've got a good offensive football team with a lot of big-play capable type players, so it's going to be a tough team for us to defend.

A lot of those guys are on their special teams, as well. We're going to have to be at our best in all three phases to have a chance. Bottom line is we're going to have to be focused, disciplined, play good team football, and then obviously be able to handle the challenge of being on the road and playing in front of a lively crowd.

That's kind of where it's at right now, and the nature of college football, every game is extremely important. We don't play 160 of them, so every game is important, and this week quite simply for us, there's nothing more important than playing this ballgame. That's where we're at. We'll try to finish up our preparation and travel over there on Friday and put a good game on the field Saturday.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Is Nate Stanley going to start?

KIRK FERENTZ: I hope so, yeah. He's fine. He threw the ball well today, and I think he's good to go.

Q. When a captain like Nate struggles in a game, what do you tell him mentally to kind of bounce

back?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, it's kind of the point I made a little while ago. I think all good players have tough days, and I talked to him about that on Sunday. I mean, I haven't been around a good quarterback or a good player at any position that doesn't have a rough outing. It's just the nature of sports, especially when you're playing against a good team, and Penn State is very athletic, very aggressive. They had a great effort, made it tough on us, and it wasn't like we played a perfect game as a unit offensively, so a lot of that goes into it.

Quarterbacks obviously garner a lot of attention, and it's just part of the deal. But probably the best story I can give you, somebody pointed out, Chuck Knoll made a reference one time about Bradshaw had had a tough day, and he mentioned Nolan Ryan, who in the '70s and '80s was a pretty good pitcher. So he's out there on the mound. The distance to the plate never changes; the ball is perfectly round, and if you get a scuff on a baseball they put a new one in there, somebody sneezes on one they give you a new one, and you've got all the time you want in between pitches. Nobody is going to hit you in the face when you deliver the ball. He threw no hitters, he also got knocked out in the first inning. To think of a quarterback is going to go out with a ball that's not real symmetrical and in conditions that are very, very tough and challenging, to think quarterbacks aren't going to have struggles at some point, that's probably not realistic.

That's how I look at it, and we don't have a better guy on our football team. Nobody works harder, more invested, so he'll bounce back.

Q. What has LeVar Woods meant to the specialists in developing?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think LeVar is doing a great job, first and foremost, and I think just the ability for us to have someone totally focused on that and devoted to that, I think that's a real benefit, and I applaud the NCAA. I criticize them at times, but I applaud them for that move. I think that really helps.

And it's kind of been a position in years past where that position gets neglected a little bit, so I think just having a full-time coach for all of our specialists has really been big. I would throw Colten in there the same way. Colten was very inconsistent a year ago. That was a real challenge for him, and I don't know that he's All-Big Ten right now, but he's been very steady, very consistent, and we're standing here on Tuesday and I feel pretty confident I have a good idea what to expect from him this Saturday, and I think that's a feeling every coach appreciates.

I just think them being coached and getting the full-time attention, that position might in some ways require more attention than others because, just talked about the quarterback and how fragile an existence that is, I think being a specialist is kind of the same way. It's a little bit like being a relief pitcher; you're not in there a lot, but when you're in there everybody is watching, and if it doesn't go well, boy, what's going on with that.

It's all been very, very positive, but both Colten and Miguel, really the credit goes to those guys. The way they've worked through some adversity, some ups and downs and persevered. Miguel had really some nice kicks again last Saturday. It's been pretty much a trademark of him the last year.

Q. In what ways has Noah matured maybe emotionally as well as a player? He said before that he kind of wore his emotions on a sleeve a little bit too much in the past and to try to be a leader he wanted to set a better example. Has he done that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think so. I said it a couple weeks ago, he's a really good teammate, he's a good person to be around on any level, any capacity, and yeah, he has matured as a football player. I think it's kind of funny, when we talk about Noah or Nate, you forget these guys are third-year guys. We all think of them as fifth-year seniors. And part of that, I'm not blaming the draftnik stuff, but that kind of perpetuates -- we all want to move the scale up on these guys too fast. I mean they're in their third year in college. You think about a guy like Chuck Long, who was in his third year of college, he was a sophomore I guess at that point, got two freshman years so he got five. But it's amazing to me.

I think he's like most of the guys on our team that are in their third years. He's matured. He's gotten better. Out on the football field he's always had really, really good talent, but you have to learn how to play, too. I think he's doing that like a lot of our guys, and we're pleased with the way he's coming along.

Q. What about from a leadership perspective? He is a face that people recognize and he's had a lot of production. Has he taken that step up to being a guy who everybody looks up to?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think people look up to him and respect him. I don't know that I would say he's a prominent leader. I could say the same thing about Keegan Render; a year ago in his fourth year, he was a really good player on our team and positive attitude, all the things you want, but I don't know how many people would have said Keegan is one of our strong leaders. I can say that about him this year. In his fifth year he has really developed into that role, and he's right in the

center of things, too, which helps. It's a position that kind of dictates that. It doesn't really -- nothing is guaranteed or handed to you. I mean, but yeah, he's a leader -- everybody is a leader if they're positive and doing things the right way and coming out and working hard. Yeah, to answer the question, yeah.

Q. I don't want to get you in trouble, but you talked about the cut blocks as a complaint earlier, but RPOs have seemed to have a blocking --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's acceptable, though. We look the other way, in a nutshell. Yeah, it's a real -- it's a hotspot with all of us over in our camp, yeah.

Q. What do you do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Nothing. You just -- we recognize it. We turn those plays in in advance because teams that run that frequently push the envelope, and I think three yards is kind of -- pro football it's one yard. I just read something in the last 48 hours about that. I think they've got a one-yard firm cutoff, and then they supposedly throw the flags. They probably do a better job.

I think in college we talk about three yards, but four or five, you've got a good chance of being -- getting away with it. It makes it harder to play defense quite frankly. But it's kind of like tempo, a little squawking about tempo a few years ago and there was reaction and all that stuff. You know, if you're in the right camp you get responded to; if you're in the wrong camp you don't. That's really about the most plain way I can say it. We're in the wrong camp on that one, and we're in the wrong camp on cut blocks. Nobody really cares. Being downhill is in vogue, cut blocking isn't. Case closed. That's an opinion, not a -- just an opinion.

So what do we do about it? I try to encourage our coaches, don't worry about it. Let's not focus on it. It's so easy to get focused on it and especially when you get those yards called back. But the reality is that's just how it's being officiated. And again, I don't blame the officials. It's a tough job. Really tough job. Yeah, we don't help them enough.

Q. Almost like if you're not doing that, then you're not taking advantage of a hole in the rules.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's a little bit like the punting thing, that I so detested and now we're doing it because at some point you just realize you might as well, and that is legal, though. That's the difference. But yeah, you can kind of the push the envelope, you might as well because you can get away with it. You can say the same about defensive holding. There's a lot to be said for just grabbing like crazy on defense because -- the Steelers -- I don't like to reference the Steelers. They used to teach Joe Greene to line up

over the ball. How many times can they call you offsides in a game? Twice? It's worth it. That was kind of their attitude. Yeah, that's a good question.

Q. Back to Noah, he didn't catch his first pass until later in the game. Is that more what Penn State did or what you guys were doing or both? How do you explain that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we're not intentionally not trying to get him to not catch a ball. That would be pretty dumb on our part. Yeah, it's a lot what they do, and we have two pretty good tight ends. So I think if you're looking across the ball at us, if you're going to defend us, you're going to try to minimize their activity. I think that's a good plan.

We're going to see more of that as we go along, too, so yeah, you try to design plays for certain players. Everybody does that in the game plan if you've got good players, and then it's a challenge of do you get that opportunity to get them free, and that's always the cat-and-mouse game that goes on.

Q. How impressed are you with Moore and what he's able to do week to week, considering six months ago he was in high school?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's awfully impressive, and I saw most -- not most of the Ohio State game. We must have had a day game that week, right? That in itself was enough to impress anybody, not only playing the way he played but playing against that type of competition, it's pretty unusual. For a guy that's a senior it would be really impressive; to consider him being just out of high school, it's awfully impressive. So he's a very dynamic player, very explosive and very, very dangerous in a lot of regards.

Q. One thing I've noticed is kind of the inconsistency in spotting the ball, especially in late-game situations --

KIRK FERENTZ: Where are you guys getting all this stuff? This is good. Yeah, this is good.

Q. I think it was on your second to last drive, Noah gets a 1st down, the clock -- I think there was four seconds, the clock starts ticking again, even though it wasn't marked ready for play, the ball wasn't set, the chains weren't set. Do you pass that along to anybody?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, any observations we have, we always try to submit them. Knowing that they're not going to get reversed or we're not going to get a letter of accommodation or anything like that, but just for future reference because I know the office uses those for teaching tapes, and it's a hard job being an official. It's a really hard job. Since we're talking about pet peeves and stuff, sometimes the question is when does

it get reviewed and when doesn't it. That's pretty subjective. That's open for discussion, yeah.

Q. The last couple years the trick plays have become more apparent. Did it take you a while to kind of come around to those to use them so often? It's 50/50 whether they work or don't work --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's the danger zone, but that's like a lot of plays. When they work, they're great. If they're timed out properly -- you know, the Ohio State game we just felt like we needed that to really jump ahead. But yeah, I'm definitely more open to them now in the last four or five years than I was say 15 years ago for sure. They have advantages, but the key is still execution like anything, offense or defense, same deal.

Q. Why are you more receptive to it now than 15 years ago?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just conversation, staff conversation. We do a lot of that more so in the out of season, but just our approach, how we want to do things in general just in principle and philosophy. It's got to be calculated and you just can't do it at an emotional time, which some of those come that way. But you want to try to have a good plan, good place for them.

Q. If you look at how you've kind of targeted Indianapolis recently in recruiting, and obviously it's important on Saturday with who you're playing, but I think you had like a 10-year period of maybe three guys from that region, but just this last year -- was it an area you felt like you were underserved or an area six-hour radius from Iowa City, and do you think there was potential there?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think all those factors really pertain, and another area that's kind of frustrating a little bit is Kansas City, because of proximity, and Ladell Betts, one of the best players we've had here in the last 20 years in my opinion was from there, but we haven't had a lot of luck down there.

The thing I would say there, 20 years ago at least, it was more of a Big 8, Big 12 area. I think it was Big 8 back then 20 years ago. I lose track. But anyway, that was kind of more -- but that stuff is kind of all getting cleaned over a little bit now.

But again, that proximity, yeah, anything within a six-, seven-hour driving limit is -- to us we ought to really be working it hard and trying to do what we can do. And then the other part, too, I was really amazed the first time I spent some time there, you'd think of it as a basketball area, basketball strong state, which it is, but the football programs there are really good, a lot of really good coaches in the state, a lot of good players, and the schools, you go in the schools, I'll tell you, they're very, very impressive. It makes sense for a lot

of reasons, and we've tried to establish some ties there. I think Kelvin has done a great job with just working the area.

Q. The fact that you're playing teams at least Purdue every year, Indiana every third year, Illinois is close, you've got the potential to go to Indianapolis, does that make it kind of a natural road, plus there's an interstate that --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there's no traffic lights between here and there, so that makes it easy for people to get back and forth. So yeah, it's logical in that way and it's in the Big Ten area, so at least people there grow up hearing Big Ten names and all those types of things. There's some familiarity.

Q. Ivory Kelly-Martin, I think the radio said he left with an injury. Is he okay?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's a little sore right now, but we'll see. I think he'll play. He should be go to go.

Q. How about Brady Ross? What's his time frame?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's still -- next week would probably be pushing it. The guys that have been out are out still. I don't think I'm missing anybody, and then Shaun is really the only new guy where I know he won't be there Saturday. Yeah, I know that.

Q. Middle linebacker is an "or" right now. What are you looking at there?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. We'll see how it goes. Kristian started it out, and then he sprained his foot a little bit, so he had to come out. He's been practicing now, so we'll see how the week goes, but we feel comfortable with both those guys playing that position, but Kristian and Jack, too, has played the other position, too.

If there's a silver lining for all the shuffling that we've done, at least I think we're developing some position flexibility, and Nick the same way. We're probably healthier at that position than we've been since the start of the season.

Q. Along those lines, with the personnel that you used it's kind of hard to remove Geno Stone from the lineup, Nick Niemann didn't play a whole lot, and you've kind of regarded him as one of your best players. Is there any kind of look at maybe sliding him inside especially because Purdue you're probably going to have to go --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll look at that for sure, and like I said, the good news is we've had a lot of guys play that we weren't sure how they'd play, and they've played pretty well, including Djimon. So we'll try to -- the more flexibility we have, the better it is for us, and we'll just kind of take it week by week here.

Q. Can you talk about Brandon Smith's progression on the field, you brought him a long way from home here. In year two in that regard how much more comfortable does he seem?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's kind of like the discussion with Noah being in his third year. Brandon is in his second. You can see him playing better now, including Saturday. I thought he did some really good things again this past Saturday. He's using his attributes and his -- the things that his strengths playing towards a little bit which is always a good sign. He's playing with more confidence, and I think those things a lot of times do dovetail. You see exceptions every now and then where a guy is really doing good in this environment, then he goes out there and goes into his shell. But yeah, Brandon -- I thought last year he made the adjustment really well, and he's done well academically. He's got a great personality and seems really comfortable in all environments, but I've got to think he's just feeling better about himself now, and that's part of growing and growth. Individuals do that, and I think it's really key to remember teams do the same thing, at least I think historically that's what we've witnessed. If we're going to have a good season this year and a good football team, we need everybody to be growing like he's growing right now, and that's our hopes. Those are our aims.

Q. Mekhi seemed to really kind of pick up the game last week. It seemed like he was very patient. Does he bring that, and does he now become the hot hand?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, yeah, we'll see how that goes. We're open to anything there. To your point, kind of like Brandon growing, Mekhi if you think about it just got here in June, and I was teasing him a little bit about that. I said, was that like playing at Coffeerville or Hutch? How did that compare? A little different environment, right? But he didn't seem fazed by that at all or the competition. I think those guys he was playing against looked a little different than maybe what he saw last year, too.

To his credit, I thought he looked his most comfortable out there. He blew a couple plays, but that's to be expected at this point of his career. But his attitude is great. He's really into it. He's learning, eager, and shows up every day with a great work ethic. He's been a really positive addition to us. I don't know who's going to do what on Saturday, but all three of those guys, we're counting on all three of them to play well for us.

Q. When you look at their quarterback, last year they had Sindelar probably more of arm guy. Blough is a little different in the way he runs the

offense. What are the challenges with him? Is he the type of guy you'd rather contain than allow him to run around and make plays?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's interesting, they had good success with both those guys offensively, and I don't know how they pick them quite frankly, other than -- one thing about Blough, he did the talk at the Big Ten luncheon two years ago maybe, I don't know, but that's an interesting thing because it really gives you a window into a young person, and I haven't heard a bad talk yet. I mean, every one of them has been fantastic, but I thought his was excellent. You can see why he's a quarterback, and I'm guessing that the players really gravitate towards him.

I don't mean anything against the other quarterback in contention there, but you can see why he moves the team -- A, he's a good player, but he just seems to have something to him that is what quarterbacks have. He poses some problems. And I think the biggest thing is his confidence level. It seems like it's really, really high right now.

Q. Last week talked about sports psychologists. I know you have guys available. In-season wise do you see value in it? Are there quick fixes or things they can focus on?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's a key thing is a lot of times eliminating clutter. For all of us, not just players, but yeah, I think it's really important. Baseball probably led the way in terms of usage of, but yeah, I think it's a really good thing, just because it's -- all of us that are busy and every one of our players are busy. Those guys that are especially playing on Saturdays, you think about the pressure they put on themselves, a lot of them do. The obligations they have are many and all that kind of stuff, being college athletes, and it can get tough to just keep things really in focus that are important and keep the stuff that isn't important out of the way.

So I think that to me is the number one attitude those guys have is just trying to get them to really be focused on the important things so they can play with confidence as opposed to worrying about all the what-ifs. We all go through that in life. It's not easy.

Q. Kind of all the headlines got to Moore, but it seems like DJ Knox has been a really underrated part of the team. What have you seen out of him?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's just a really good player, and he plays on special teams, too, which is impressive. I don't know how many guys that are doing what he's doing offensively are like running down on kickoffs, but that tells you a little bit about his attitude and his toughness, that type of thing.

He's a really good player. They just have a lot of ways to hurt you with their offense and they're veteran up front, good tight ends. Really balanced and complete.

Q. If Mansell had to play Saturday, how far along is he in his development?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, that's something we'll find out, because again, you never know until a guy really gets on the field and starts playing. But last year it would have been scary, last spring, and I think he made a big jump in August, and I'd say the same thing about Petras. He made a big jump from spring ball to August. But that's the next step is getting on the field and seeing where they're at. They're doing a good job in practice and hopefully they'll be ready to go because they're all one play away from being out there.

Q. How did you approach following this loss knowing there's still everything on the table for you guys? Do you bring in more big picture stuff, or do you stick to -- how did you --

KIRK FERENTZ: Very briefly, every week I just talk about the big picture, but that's brief. Like it's hardly worth talking about because whoever played Arizona last week, if they were talking about the big picture, that picture changed. That's college football. I mean, Oregon State beat somebody, too. Every week you see a handful of scores that, boy, how did that happen. So the experts aren't always right.

And really the best way to do anything is just try to take things a step at a time, as mundane as it sounds, and a week at a time, because that's really all we have any control over right now, and to worry about anything else at this point -- and it's pretty simple. The more you win, no matter what happens, it's better, and the more you lose -- that's why I always get a chuckle, this is the week of the College Football poll thing, right, the power poll? Like Alabama, they'll probably last all four weeks or however many weeks, but outside of that, that thing is really wrong frequently.

So wasting time on that stuff, it's great for fans, it's great for the media, but it's not really productive for players and coaches to focus on that because it's going to change anyway, and it really doesn't matter, and if you end up one out or whatever, you're still in a pretty good neighborhood if you're up in that discussion.

Bottom line, one thing I've learned is there's no downside to winning games. If you win games, then you figure it out from there. We didn't get to go to the whatever bowl in 2002, right? Ohio State went, we didn't. I didn't lose a night's sleep over that one, I'll promise you. I felt pretty good about what we had done that year, and that's the goal is just keep playing better every week. That's the goal.