

University of Iowa Football Media Conference Monday, March 20, 2017

Kirk Ferentz



THE MODERATOR: Welcome back to football, everyone. We'll get right with Coach Ferentz.

COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon to everybody. Good to see everybody and talk about 2017 season.

First thing I want to do is congratulate the winter sports, men's and women's basketball, all really had outstanding seasons. The wrestling season. I know Lisa and her team are still going. I'm really happy for them.

I think what we've seen with the Hawkeye fan support the last couple days has been unbelievable, too, both in Carver, down in St. Louis, just fantastic. We certainly appreciate all the great fan support we get in all of our sports. All of our athletes certainly enjoy that. They feed off of it. We're very appreciative of that. Great to see that.

We start practice on Wednesday. Excited about that certainly. This weekend, we'll host our on-campus clinic. Joe will be the headline speaker for us. Some outstanding high school coaches from our state as well as some surrounding states. Our staff will be featured, as well. It's always a big event for us.

We have Pro Day on Monday coming up. It's a real exciting time for the guys that are hoping to continue their careers with the National Football League or other places.

Just want to take the opportunity to get off the pad for a second, congratulate Chad Greenway on such a tremendous career. Certainly appreciate the comments he made about our program in his speech last week.

As Chad said, I think he touched on about everybody. It's been a part of his life. He's appreciative of all the things that have been done for him, the support he's had starting at home, right on through with the Vikings organization.

It's phenomenal when you think about the kind of career he had. Right along that same line, a guy that hasn't retired, but got a chance to play in the Super Bowl, Jonathan Babineaux. Jonathan, who is a year older in the league than Chad, what a career he's had,

as well. To play in the Super Bowl is a rare treat for any player. He's done a wonderful job. Part of a great organization there. Really happy for him, as well.

The Swarm Des Moines event, we're excited about going back to the central part of the state on April 7th. Should be a really nice event. Hopefully a bit less windy, a couple degrees warmer. We're hoping for that. We're looking forward to being in Des Moines again.

Again, it's a small way for us to say thank you to the fans, all the people that venture over to Kinnick on the weekends in the fall, for them to have a little shorter drive maybe. Some people a home game. Even people on the western side of the state, surrounding states, give them an opportunity to see the team without traveling as far.

We also shifted the spring game to Friday night. Thought that would be something our fans would enjoy also. Probably kick that off around 7 p.m.. Just something a little different from that standpoint.

Right now our attention certainly is on the 2017 football team, as I said. One good thing about graduation, it does create opportunity for other players. You always hate to see outstanding seniors leave the program. That's part of coaching in college football. But it does create a new opportunity. Certainly starting in January, had our first team meeting. That was a new football team that we met with.

As we move forward right now, I think the big thing for our players is to understand everybody has an equal chance to create playing time for themselves. Basically it boils down to the hard work that they put into it, the commitment that they demonstrate. If they'll do that, they give themselves a chance to be part of the program, be part of the contributing group of players.

The work really began with strength and conditioning work in January. The guys did a great job as a whole doing that. Now we shift our focus to 15 workouts on the field. One thing about football, our opportunities to practice football, to be in helmets, is so limited. This spring, certainly preseason, those opportunities are limited. Each and every workout is important, each and every practice. The meetings we have that go

along with it, as well as our strength and conditioning work that continues. Every opportunity is very, very important for the players. I think they understand that.

Beyond that, it's a chance for our team to be together, work together out on the field. Certainly our level of teamwork won't be near what it should be or will be in September, but it's a starting point. So that's important. Gives us a chance to really assess the players' weaknesses, what their strengths are, get a better grip on that, since we haven't seen them on the field since December basically.

Again, everybody's got a chance as we move forward right now. We're excited about that opportunity.

The positions, I think a couple things to look at. If you look at our perimeter, we're obviously very young to all those positions right now, and very inexperienced. That's a starting point for us, whether you look at the receiver group, the defensive backs, especially on the outside, the corners. I'd throw the quarterback situation right in there with it. Certainly it's part of the perimeter.

If you look at seven-on-seven drills, we will have a new quarterback. We're not sure who that is going to be right now. We'll let the guys compete at that position. That's something that's always of note to everybody.

I think if there's any good news there, we've had great success. Our five nationally or top 10 ranked teams all basically had a new starting quarterback. Rick Stanzi was a carryover after earning the job midway through the 2008 season. All our guys were first-year starters, all did a great job. Of those five guys, coincidentally four of those were coached by Ken O'Keefe. So that is a little bit of an interesting point.

Another thing that I think bears mentioning is our position. It's part of our special teams group, needless to say. See how that materializes. At the opposite end of that, who is going to field punts, return punts for us. Desmond did such an outstanding job for us. Those are things we'll be looking at, on our radar as we go along.

Just in conclusion, I think right now the biggest thing for us as a coaching staff is to go into it with an open mind, let our players compete, let them do what they're going to do over the next 15 practices. We'll judge the guys based on what they do out there on the football field.

I think if you look historically, it's good to come into spring with a good résumé. We have several players that have a strong résumé, but we expect them to continue to grow, continue to improve. You look

historically, Bo Bower is a great illustration, a guy who was a starter two years ago or three years ago, lost his position, kept a great attitude, came back last year and won it.

Then, conversely, in that equation, Cole Fisher, Cole is a guy who emerged two years ago to take that spot, then ended up being our starting Will backer in his fifth-year.

Things constantly change. Players change. How they perform changes. It's our job to keep a fresh eye and evaluate what we see and go from there.

We're very eager to get on the field obviously. I'll mention it's been a lot of fun offensively. We certainly have a new room that way. It's been enjoyable to just take part and listen to the guys go back and forth a little bit and discuss as we're putting the playbook together.

The energy has been great in that room. The exchange has been really good. Eager to see the guys out on the field, see them work together as a staff coaching the offense.

Q. Is Manny Rugamba set to go 100%?

COACH FERENTZ: As far as I know, he'll be ready to go, yeah.

Q. Update us on Matt VandeBerg.

COACH FERENTZ: Matt reinjured his foot unfortunately. Some of the guys won't be out there. Matt is one. Drake Kulick is still recovering certainly.

We're not going to let Akrum get hit. He's not fully healthy. He's pretty healthy. He'll be doing everything but live contact. Those three are seniors, we've seen them play, we have a pretty good indication of where they're at. If there's a positive thing in this, that's it. We expect them to be ready in June. That's kind of where we're at there.

Q. Matt was putting weight on it too early?

COACH FERENTZ: No. He really had a chance to play in the bowl game. That thing was well healed when he got back in January. It's just one of those things that happens occasionally. Not much what we can do about it.

Q. No concern about the injury throughout the season?

COACH FERENTZ: Nothing I'm aware of. You're always concerned any time a guy reinjures himself in any particular case. There's nothing they're going to do out of the ordinary or anything like that.

His rehab was actually on the conservative side.

Wasn't really tied into that. We'll let it play out.

Q. You said the conversations have been enjoyable in the offensive room. How will the playbook look different?

COACH FERENTZ: That will all pan out. Part of that will be who wins the jobs, how things pan out personnel-wise. You're not going to see a dramatically different team. Certainly some of the terminology is different. As you can imagine, when Greg came in, we pretty much rolled with his lingo and dialect. That's usually what you want to do. You want to try to make sure the play-caller is comfortable with what terminology you're using, whether it's for personnel groups, plays, protections, all those types of things, routes.

One thing about football, there's not a lot of new stuff out there. But the way you call things, it varies program to program, place to place. I think the big thing was everybody getting an understanding of what we wanted to feature, how we were going to name those things, talk about those things. Getting even on the same page that way has been a little bit of a process. It's been fun. A great exchange. A lot of guys contributing in the process.

Q. What are your first impressions of your new hires, and one old hire?

COACH FERENTZ: It's interesting. All but one is in the same seat basically, or different seat I should say. LeVar is the only guy that is in the same seat, which I skipped right over that note, too. I'll come back to that. Everybody else is in a different seat or they're new to the room.

It's been really good. It's like putting a team together. The staff has to learn what language we're going to use, what are we going to call this play, et cetera. How things flow together, piece together logically. It's been a good exchange.

You come in with guys from different perspectives, different backgrounds. Ken has been here, but he's been gone for five years, five years in the NFL. So he brings a little bit different perspective certainly than what he left with. That's been really helpful.

You have different levels of experience, levels of experience in those positions, too. The guys were former coordinators, as well. So that's been beneficial. I think it's really come together really well.

I skipped over a important note talking about LeVar. LeVar will become officially our special teams coordinator.

Obviously we'll have two plans in place, whether or not

the 10th coach gets passed in January or April, we'll have a plan for each.

Q. What do you think is a reasonable workload for Akrum? You kept him fresh. Is it going to be similar to that? You push him a little bit?

COACH FERENTZ: Ideally we'd like to have two backs that can go in there and play well. We had that situation last year, which was really good. You saw it in the game. It depends on what the opponents give you, who is doing what in a particular game.

I'd like to have two guys that can go in and play well. We feel that way about Akrum. One thing I can report to you positively, he's over 190. He's actually starting to get a little bit bigger and more robust. That's going to enable him to play more. That's the reason we've been trying to encourage him to really take his training seriously, to make sure he can get himself to a point where he can play more reps.

He does a pretty good job making yards per carry. If we can get him more carries, that's a good thing for us, more chance for making a good play.

Q. Your preference is usually always to play one quarterback. Is that kind of how you look at it going into spring?

COACH FERENTZ: We haven't had great discussion on it at this point. That's usually the plan. I mean, I know somebody last year played two quarterbacks and played them pretty well. As a rule, I think that's the best way to go. I think teams just play better that way. There's always exceptions to every rule.

Right now we go into it with an open mind. Clearly at this point, Tyler Wieggers and Nate Stanley have the most experience working with the twos or ones. Those two guys will be at the front of the group, then we'll let it work from there.

Q. What do you expect to see out of those guys?

COACH FERENTZ: It starts with the huddle, right up through taking the snap. First of all, calling the play in the huddle, then taking the snap and making good decisions after that point.

We realize all the guys are inexperienced. None of them have been in a game very much. As I mentioned, both Nate and Tyler have more snaps with the twos and ones than anybody else in the group.

That should give them a little bit of an advantage over the other guys. But we'll let them go and see how they perform out there.

Q. Quarterback juggling you went through in

2014/'15 that led to C.J. starting. Have you taken some notes from that going into this quarterback situation?

COACH FERENTZ: It was a wide-open competition really in '13. The guy that ended up starting that year is playing in the NFL right now. The guy that ended up taking the job later, '15, I think he has a chance to be an NFL player. I believe he's going to be an NFL quarterback. Turned out we had really good quarterbacks. When Cody was here, same thing. We had three really capable guys.

So, yeah, you're always learning. No position race, the same as last year, that type of thing. It's always a little bit different. Just going to let it play out, see how things materialize as we move along.

Q. With the newness you're talking about, do some of the performance aspects take a backseat?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I don't think so. To me the most important thing is what our players are doing. Hopefully what we're trying to do is simple to grasp, easy to understand. It is for us, we've been looking at it for three weeks, four weeks. It's a little bit different than our players.

Hopefully they'll be able to grab onto it. The concepts are kind of concepts. We called that a Ford last year, now we're calling it a Chevy, those kinds of the things. They got to make that transfer.

But the concepts I think are typically pretty similar. You may accentuate this more than that from last year, those types of things. Hopefully if we're doing it right, what we're trying to teach is simple enough to grasp. The real challenge is going out and doing it, doing it against good competition.

Q. Has Brian made a decision if he's going to be upstairs, downstairs?

COACH FERENTZ: No, we haven't gotten that far. My guess is he'll be down. We talked about that for two minutes. We got plenty of time. He'll be downstairs during the spring.

Q. Will you have a game coordinator?

COACH FERENTZ: Not right now. I think we're pretty much status quo at this point, with LeVar's addition.

Q. Regarding Nathan, how did all those extra snaps help him as opposed to him redshirting?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, the level of work that you're doing. In other words, when you're a scout team quarterback, unfortunately, I don't know if this is a secret or not, but the defensive coaches are on that guy just to throw the ball, throw it up there. An offensive coach will be telling him to throw it out of

bounds. Our guys don't want that. They want him to throw the ball. It's a whole different level of coaching. Basically you're down there to service the defense when you're on the scout team. You want to essentially keep the ball in play.

But the guy working at the offensive end, he's getting reprimanded if he throws it where the defensive guys are, Throw it out of bounds. There's nothing there, just throw it out of bounds, we'll live to fight another day.

He's actually getting coached. He's in the system. Again, names and some of the terminology will be different, nomenclature. But it's still football, making reads, that type of thing. It's better to be on the end of the first and second offense certainly if you're a quarterback. Any position, for that matter.

Q. Have you found yourself sort of maybe gravitating toward wide receivers? Really new group, new coach?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if I've gravitated. We haven't done anything football-wise. Certainly when we get on the field, we'll watch it closely.

I try to watch as much as I can everywhere. You can only be so many places at one time. But it's a great opportunity right now for those players. We've got a couple guys, like Jerminic Smith, Adrian Falconer that have been here. They're going into their third years now. They have a chance to take dramatic steps forward.

Historically in our program, when our team does well, we have guys in the second, third, fourth years that are really starting to reach, really starting to show they can go out and play successfully in the Big Ten. That's kind of what we're hoping to see, those guys take those kinds of steps.

We threw a little curve ball in there, we put Nick Easley's name on the depth chart, get something going there, stir it up a little bit. Here is a guy who did really well at Iowa Western. He's come in and done a nice job in the winter program.

Who knows what he's going to do. He has a chance to go in there and compete. Especially with Matt being out, it's wide open right now for everybody to have a chance. Just basically the goal is to demonstrate they can play and help us win football games, then we'll figure out where they belong afterwards.

Q. How is the number issue at wide receiver in the spring? Nearly half the guys in that room aren't on campus yet.

COACH FERENTZ: We pick up four certainly in

August. We're thin at corner also, yeah. That's the way it always works, right? We don't have numbers either way.

We'll be able to get good quality work in there. We'll be fine.

Q. When you're putting together that playbook, Brian probably has some definite ideas about what he wants to do. Is Tim bringing some stuff in...

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. Stuff from the NFL. Talk about that process.

COACH FERENTZ: The goal is really to figure out what it is we want to do for the Iowa offense. It's not so much reshaping or retooling, but it's just what we want to do if we're starting at ground zero.

We've always kind of believed simplicity is better, if we can, in all regards, run or pass. It's most important that your players understand what it is you're asking them to do, then secondly how do they adjust to all the various situations that can come up that a defense can present them with, that type of thing. It starts with that.

But nomenclature, whether you call a play 99, everybody running straight deep routes, or all up, whatever you want, the play is the play. How you coach the play may change a little bit. We've had those discussions, too. You want to call it all up, or 99, everybody deep, whatever, all go. All those kinds of things.

It's just kind of starting with what we want to do, how do we want to call it, how do we want to coach it. I think things are moving along. Some things are going to change here in the next couple weeks as we start delving into some things.

A situation occurs, this happens all the time in football, you think you've seen it all. Boy, I never thought about that one. But somebody in the room probably has dealt with it. Here is what we did at such and such.

Q. I know you can't predict execution. Will the casual fan be able to notice a difference with the offense with Brian running it?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see. Hope it looks like the '15 offense, how does that sound? Obviously our passing game was not where it needed to be at the end of the season last year. But we had the same coaches, a lot of the same players, we did pretty well in 2015. Not a lot of the same players, I take that back. The scheme is pretty much the same in '15.

Personnel is a big part of challenges in football. We had two good running backs last year, pretty capable

line. Our running game was going pretty well. But the passing game was lagging behind a little bit.

The kind of balance we had in '15 really is what we'd like to have. It may not look exactly like that. The plays may not look exactly like that. We were at a pretty good place offensively in '15 where we could run and throw, do some good things that way. From the time we got here, it's been a key thing for us, balance.

Q. That out-of-season program is so important for you guys. When you get reports from Chris, are there some guys you see that kind of made that leap during this winter program?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, most definitely. Nick Easley, one of the reasons he's on that list, he's made jumps. Connor Keane tested out really well. I talked to our players about this before break. It's kind of like the combine. There's a huge fascination with the combine, maximum testing. Angela Duckworth, that book Grit, most of that stuff you can throw out the window. Once you get on the field, it's really good, it's important, it's a measurement. Usually it shows commitment and effort, level of commitment and effort.

I'm not knocking that. But the ultimate goal, that's one reason Chris is such a great strength coach, in my opinion, he understands it's all about what you do on the football field. Everything he does is geared towards making guys more functional at their given positions. To me if it doesn't translate from the weight room out onto the field, the Wall Street Journal, anyway, an article about guys that ran the fastest 40s at the combine. Pretty good rule, don't draft those guys, not high, because it doesn't work out.

The point, again, it's more about functionality. That's why I think Chris does such a great job. The work that our guys do typically translates out there to the field. It starts with if a guy is doing well in that program, just his confidence, how he feels about himself. That's a big part of playing good football.

Q. Easley, what do you think he brings?

COACH FERENTZ: The numbers are good. Just like I said, that it is not important. No, I'm teasing (smiling).

His numbers are really good. The guy came in and went to work. He really impressed us that way. He's got a really good attitude. He's a hard worker. Doesn't talk a lot, but he just shows up every day and goes hard.

I'm not saying numbers mean football, but he fits on our football team that way. I would be embarrassed by my numbers. He can feel pretty good about his. I'll be curious.

The other part is he had a lot of production at Western as a football player. We're eager to see him on the field. Say the same thing about Noah Clayberg, another newcomer that just joined us in January. Watching him operate, handle himself, Nick is older than our young guy. Noah has a semester under his belt academically, but he's been impressive, too, the way he carries himself. We'll be eager to see how he does out there.

Q. Noah, listed as DB.

COACH FERENTZ: He's going to be playing running back. That's where he wanted to start out. Akrum is not going to be working full speed. I think it's good to get a good look at him. We'll see from there. We'll let him start there. That's what he's excited about.

Q. Speaking of good winters, the defensive tackle is going to be different this year. Did you see what you needed to see with Ced, some of the younger, newer guys, Brady?

COACH FERENTZ: That was one of the compelling reasons to push Cedrick forward, we thought. It's kind of like the qb discussion. Go back to Nate Stanley, we were on the fence on that one, too. We decided it was going to be more valuable for him to be working with the defensive scheme than being on the scout team because we thought he had a chance to play a lot.

Whether or not he can start, how many snaps he'll play, that remains to be seen. We think he has an opportunity. Everything we've seen him do on the field so far would indicate that. To think he'll play like Jaleel, that's not going to happen. Obviously our more experienced guys are going to have to step up their performance while he's getting his feet wet.

Brady Reiff was one of our more improved players during December. Not that he'd not been showing up. He'd been doing fine. In December he kind of really flashed at times. He's quietly working his way up physically, too. He's a tough-minded guy. I think it will be interesting. It will be fun to watch those guys compete.

Jake Hulett was out all of last year. Jake is another guy that has been quietly pushing forward. We're eager to see all those guys out on the field.

Q. Do you see the defensive line getting to the point where a guy like Matt Nelson can play inside or outside?

COACH FERENTZ: That's a good point. Some players can, some players can't. We're not sure if he can or can't right now. That may be something we toy with. It would be part of the equation. Looks like we have a little depth right now. He's on the second line. I think

all of us consider all three of those guys to be starting players for us. They've all played really well.

That's something we'll look into and see if he can move inside there and do it. He may be able to. If he does, that gives us a little bit more flexibility. I know mentally he can handle both, that's not an issue. Physically, can you do both? That's a different story. It's different playing inside.

Q. Ryan is not here until the summer?

COACH FERENTZ: Who is that?

Q. Ryan Gersonde. How do you factor in somebody who isn't here but will be a potential guy?

COACH FERENTZ: It's really pretty simple for Colten right now. He's our punter. All he has to do is go out and play, play well, consistently. If he does that, get out front. It's better to be out front, better to be on the inside lane. That's what I've been told. I never was. Start out on the inside lane, have a chance.

It's a great opportunity for Colten right now. His biggest challenge is consistency. I'm not comparing him to Jason Baker, but I would have said the same thing about Jason in 1999. The guy has potential, has a good leg. But consistency.

I know nothing about kickers and punters, but it seems like that's the career path of those guys. They tend to be a little bit erratic. At some point they start developing the consistency. That's what Ron had last year. He's a fifth-year guy, too. That's kind of like the quarterback situation right now. We got to factor that stuff in as we assess the inexperience, the youth, that type of thing.

Colten has been here a couple years now. He's at that point where it's time for him to go. It's his job to win right now.

Q. Michael Slater isn't listed.

COACH FERENTZ: Mike left the team. Didn't go to the bowl game. He was not with us in Florida, hasn't been on the team since then.

Jay Scheel, I don't know where the paperwork is at, but Jay is not coming back, which is unfortunate on a couple levels. That's one of the reasons we're inexperienced at receiver, too. We were really counting on him. He can't play. It's unfortunate, so...

Q. Toks and Toren, seems like those two would be the next in line at running back.

COACH FERENTZ: They've got a great opportunity. They're both different types of backs. It's not like we

have to have a guy like Toks or a guy like Toren. We'll let them both go. We liked what we saw last August and last fall with both of them. Good there.

Noah might factor in there. Marcel. Those guys have worked hard. We typically don't let guys get tackled anyway, guys that played a lot. Akrum will not be tackled. Give those guys a chance to get a lot of good quality work. Eager to see. All the first-year guys especially.

You think about last winter, what they were doing February, January, March, compared to what they did this year. So those guys will look a lot different than they did certainly in August and probably look a little different than they did in December. We're anxious to see all the first-year guys.

Q. How much does that carry over to a guy like Josey Jewell? Does he need to be in there running things?

COACH FERENTZ: Not every snap in spring, no. Not every snap. Hopefully we'll be smart about it. We have a pretty good idea about what he and Ben, even Bo, all three of those guys, returning starters. We need to see who else is going to step in there if something happens.

If Josey's helmet breaks or something like that, who is going to go in and take control of that middle linebacker spot. That type of thing. Forget about heir apparent.

Q. C.J. was your leader on the offensive side. Who is emerging at this point? Could be different positions even.

COACH FERENTZ: That's part of the teamwork aspect. Things shift around a little bit. I'm not saying a first-year quarterback can't be a leader, because the guys I mentioned earlier led in their own ways, different ways certainly, their own personalities.

But command is really important at that position. It's nice to have experience, too. First things first, take care of your spot. Yeah, it's going to be incumbent upon some other guys. Matt VandeBerg is one of the stronger leaders on our football team. That hurt us a little bit last year, him being off the team physically, but not being in the huddle from a mental standpoint as well.

Q. The offensive line, do you feel the depth is starting to come along, young guys coming up?

COACH FERENTZ: I think some guys started to come along certainly. Levi Paulsen going in there. The Michigan game, I'm not so sure that was a great moment for us. He did fine. The way he played the next week, I mean... I just mean that in the sense of

none of us were confident when he went in there in that Michigan game. Whoa, that is not the best time. The next week had to be the best time. I thought he really responded well. The way he played over at Illinois was really encouraging for a young guy. He's done nothing but build on that.

A guy like Cole Banwart was redshirted, but we saw him do some good things, especially in December. It's really important because we have some good seniors graduating, good seniors playing next year. We have to keep bringing guys along. Every snap out there is really important for the linemen.

Q. How is Jake Newborg coming along with his switch?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's doing fine. He's had some injury issues, too, that have kept him off the field. We talked about the defensive tackle spot. May be a committee playing in there, you know. Certainly Nate is a very experienced guy. Could be a committee. Hopefully he can get into that rotation.

Q. At tight end you had a lot of young guys last year you were trying to develop.

COACH FERENTZ: Peter Pekar played a lot last year. I think we got a good feel for what he's going to do. After that, you have successful really young guys with Noah Fant. Hockenson is another guy who did a nice job redshirting. We'll see what he looks like.

It's an important time for all the young players as well as the older guys.

Thank you. See you guys in a couple weeks.