

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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LeVar Woods



LeVAR WOODS: We have a good group of young tight ends, a bunch of guys that are working really hard. This is spring football, so we're developing skills and things of that nature. We're also trying to develop the room and develop a deeper pool of tight ends.

We have one guy that started -- two guys that have started some games here at Iowa that are in the room and a couple other guys that have played some snaps. We're still trying to develop that room. It's incredibly competitive right now with all the competition. Everyone is getting reps. Everyone is out working to compete. We're also working on our new system as you guys know with the new offense, and it's a little bit more multiple. Tight ends are asked to be in different spots, different positions a little bit more than we have in the past, which is, I think, to our benefit. We have some talented guys in the room, some guys that can do some really good things, and we're trying to get everyone on the field.

The guys have been working really hard, and it's sort of a homecoming of sorts for John Wisnieski with us playing in West Des Moines, his home stadium, this weekend, so I've trying to hammer that home with him about it being homecoming.

Speaking about special teams, we're working diligently to develop a culture. Here at the University of Iowa, when Coach Ferentz came in and took over this program in 1999 he had three pillars. He talked about winning with defense, winning with great special teams, and winning with strength and conditioning, those being our edges, and that's what we've been trying to hammer home this spring.

We've been working hard on drills, working trying to develop a culture, trying to get guys to understand the importance of special teams and the enthusiasm about special teams. Also trying to develop our mantra or what our identity of tough, smart and physical. That's what we want the special teams units to be made of.

Talking particularly about specialists, we've got to replace three really good players in Ron Coluzzi, who graduated, and then also Desmond King and Riley McCarron, two returners that were very good returners, very capable guys. We're working hard to identify those guys and try to develop a good solid pool with

that. Some young guys in the mix, some guys that we're still trying to identify with that.

Q. When you say that the tight ends are asked to do more and be more multiple, you ran from a two-tight-end offense probably 40 percent of the time last year. Is that about similar, and are you asking them to maybe move into even a fullback's role from time to time?

LeVAR WOODS: A little bit. We have some guys that are capable of doing more than just playing tight end. We have some guys that can flex out at receiver, we have some guys that can play in the backfield as a fullback, do some kick-out blocks, some lead blocks, things like that. So we're a little more multiple with that. We do like tight ends here at the University of Iowa. I think that's commonly known.

I'm a proponent for as many tight ends as you can get on the field, let's get them on the field, selfishly, obviously, but I think we have some guys that have more talent than just playing in-line tight end, so we're trying to get those guys on the field.

Q. Do you see more plays for them downfield as opposed to shorter routes?

LeVAR WOODS: I think so. Again, we have a couple guys that can stretch the field that can do that, so that's what we're hoping to do.

Q. A couple young guys that are both freshmen technically, Noah Fant and TJ Hockenson, very similar size. What do those two bring, and do they seem like they're in the mix?

LeVAR WOODS: Sure, they are in the mix, as is Shaun Beyer. He's still young. Across the board, we're all young, inexperienced I guess is a probably a better way to put it at the tight end position. But Fant played some last year, had a couple of big catches. Hockenson spent the year on the scout team along with Beyer, who was a receiver last year on the scout team.

But I think all three of those guys are good young prospects. All three can stretch the field a little bit, developing as run blockers. Again, they're not there yet by any stretch of the imagination at either spot, either as a receiver or as a blocker, but I think they're really working hard.

A couple things that you guys have seen already from last year, you've seen Noah be able to stretch the field. The guy can run, flat-out run, and I think he's developing. He's underrated a little bit at the blocker. He needs to refine his technique, but he has the ability to stretch the field a little bit.

TJ is kind of unknown because he spent the year on the fine scout team. I think when you watch, you'll notice he plays with a little bit of an edge, a little bit nasty, which I like, and I think he's a very capable receiver, as well.

Q. With Peter primarily as a blocker for you guys last year, how can you incorporate him more in the passing game?

LeVAR WOODS: With Peter Pekar it's more the scheme what we were trying to do. Obviously we lost George from last year, a talented receiver and blocker. He was our feature guy as the receiving tight end. I think it'll be more evenly distributed this year, just trying to work on -- everyone is working on our techniques and being able to get open, starting with the releases and how we run our routes, so that's primarily what we're trying to do with Peter in general.

Q. Last year, I think defenses probably figured out it was a running play when Peter and Nate were on the field. Do you want your tight ends to give less of a tell when on the field?

LeVAR WOODS: I think somewhere I read that about when they were on the field it was a run. That wasn't by design, let's put it that way. I think it's just how the plays were called. But wherever we are, we want to be multiple. We want to be able to show run, and then also run routes and catch balls, too.

But I wouldn't narrow it down to just those two guys are on the field, it's going to be a run. I think that's more along with the game plan, particularly one of the games was the Michigan game. That's where we wanted to run the ball. That's what we were trying to do, and those were the guys in the game.

Q. But is that what you're shooting for with your tight ends?

LeVAR WOODS: Yeah, do both. To play tight end here at the University of Iowa, got to be a good run blocker and you've got to be a dependable pass catcher. A couple guys have a little bit different niches where they can flex out and go down the field. Those are special talents. But by all means, we want everyone to be able to run block and run routes, and also pass protect, too.

Q. What are you seeing from Wisnieski right now? I know he's been hurt. Seems like he hasn't really

had a chance.

LeVAR WOODS: Sure, he was hurt early on. I love having John in the room because he's an older guy. He's good for the room. He's good to help the young guys particularly. He's a very smart guy. We're working trying to get him in the mix, and I think right now John could be a really good run blocker for us. We're working to develop that, and then also like everyone in the pass game.

Q. How much do you envision flexing out personnel and the defense doesn't know you're going to flex a guy out? Do you have more freedom to do that?

LeVAR WOODS: I think so. It's more along how the system is built, the way we term things. The way we call a formation I think allows us to be able to put a guy, flex him out more like a receiver if we want to than in the past.

Q. Could you play Fant and Hockenson at the same time?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely. They're both freshmen. I know Noah played some last year but he's still a freshman. It's too early to tell who's going to be out there, who's going to play this, who's going to play that. It's way too early, but I could envision both those guys being on the field at the same time.

Q. What about the return game, obviously without Desmond, without Riley, maybe VandeBerg, but he's not available, Devonte Young. Who are some of the guys in the mix?

LeVAR WOODS: I'm glad you asked that because the one guy that's ever fielded a punt or a kickoff on our team right now has not practiced and that's VandeBerg. That was two years ago.

But we have some young guys in there, Devonte Young, Manny Rugamba, Amani Hooker have shown some good things, and then some guys that we're still working on. Nick Easley has actually done it in junior college. He's flashed a couple things here and there, so we're still working to develop that, but those are some of the names of guys that have been working hard.

Q. How do you go about developing that culture you're trying to do on special teams?

LeVAR WOODS: A lot of it's with drills, and just the enthusiasm about special teams. We're looking at everybody, okay. There's a sign down there by the locker room that everybody -- every skill player must attend all special teams meetings. So if you're not an offensive lineman or a defensive lineman, and the quarterbacks we let those guys go to their meetings, everyone else is in the special teams meeting. We're

trying to develop a culture of enthusiasm and understand the importance and the impact of special teams play in a game, and again, we're looking at everybody. It's not just, well, this linebacker has always played special teams, receivers are over here. We're not doing that. We're looking at everybody and trying to evaluate everybody.

Q. Is there something you felt like special teams needed to have added to it that wasn't there maybe?

LeVAR WOODS: I think to answer your question, more just looking at having open mind at everybody at all positions, regardless of tenure. You may be a four-year starter at receiver, but if there's a spot for you on special teams, we're going to use you there if you can help this team. Again, just being open and looking at everybody, whether you're walk-on, scholarship, four-year player, freshman, everybody, we're looking at everybody right now. That's what we're trying to evaluate. We have some drills that we do, trying to evaluate competitiveness, and then also enthusiasm and then teaching the techniques, working on coverage skills and then also our blocking skills.

Q. Is that a continuation after the 2014 season and some of the issues there, especially with Nebraska I think at home that Kirk mentioned that he was willing to take a starter and move him to special teams even if that meant leaving him off a play or two on offense or defense? Is this still kind of a continuation of that philosophy?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely. I go back to the blueprint of the pillars of this program from back when I was 20 years old. That's a long time ago. Defense, special teams, strength and conditioning, and that's what we're trying to get to.

Again, you can be a four-year starter, like I'll use Josey Jewell as an example, right; three-year starter, senior, has a lot of experience playing defense. Still the first guy in every line in every special teams drill. Setting the example for everyone, the younger guys. But then also the guy is going to play on special teams somewhere, not sure which unit or how many units but he's going to play, and he wants to. Other guys that are starters want to play. They come to my office all the time and ask, how can I get on special teams. Now, you have to be a little bit smart with where you use guys so you don't wear them out throughout a game, but we'll look at everybody right now.

Q. Are you the guy that makes the call on who's punting and who's kicking now that you're the special teams coordinator?

LeVAR WOODS: Yeah, I guess that falls with me. Coach Seth Wallace, runs our punt unit. He's done a

great job with that unit, so he's in charge of that unit right now. He's doing a really good job with it, so he and I will talk about it. Seth has his idea of what he wants in a punter, and I trust the guy. He's been doing it and doing it well. He'll make the call on punters and then kickers we'll come to consensus, with the best kickers. Competition is wide open. I'm still evaluating -- again, I'm evaluating everything right now from a field goal perspective. The protection, the operation of snap, hold, kick, all that stuff, sounds cliché, but we're trying to get the right guys on the field.

Q. Could this carry over to the fall? Will you have the kicker and punter identified by the end of spring?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely, you'd like to, but if it takes us through fall camp, it takes us through fall camp. We just have to find the right guys.

Q. How much have you and Brian put your heads together in terms of how Iowa uses tight ends? He's obviously got a tight end background and you're the tight end coach.

LeVAR WOODS: The conversation has been I take my lead from Brian. He's the coordinator. He makes the calls. But definitely we've had conversations about tight ends. I think we both share a passion of tight ends. He's coached them before in the past and I coach them now. We also know this program and how the history of tight ends -- the history and tradition has been using tight ends here, and that's what we're kind of looking at.

Again, if you played tight end in high school or -- this is a great place to come, right, not to sound like a recruiting pitch, but this is a great place to come. You're going to get to do everything here as a tight end. You're not just going to be hand in the dirt as a blocker. We're not just going to flex you out. You're going to do everything here. So if you like tight ends, you come here or you at least take a hard look here. It's part of the reason NFL scouts come and take a hard look at tight ends from Iowa, so they can move them around.

Q. How much is there a continuation of maybe the previous era when Ken was here? For instance, there's a concerted effort it seems to get tight ends more down the field, find the seams, Tony Moeaki, Scott Chandler, those players. Is there almost a return and thought and philosophy to maybe doing a little bit more of that to freshen up?

LeVAR WOODS: I think you could say that, and it's funny because we're watching some clips of we've done this in the past, as well, but with a different eye now watching Tony, watching Chandler, Brad Herman, watching Allen Reisner, some guys that have played here recently. Dallas goes back a little ways, and then

Brandon Myers, some guys that our players are really familiar with because they studied them. They've watched them, but it's funny watching some of those clips, you do see them down the field a little bit more, and that's kind of what we're trying to do. Again, we have capable guys, it's just a matter of putting them in the position, and then they have to make the play.

Q. Do you feel like it's advantageous to attack it more down the field?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q. How is the offense looking?

LeVAR WOODS: Beginning offense. Beginning offense. First week was really get everyone lined up in the right spot, know where they're supposed to be, formationally and all that stuff, and then getting them to execute, without getting guys to grind coffee, if you will, take too much time thinking about what they're doing. We're starting to get to the point now where we're actually moving a little bit faster. Now we need to move crisper and a little bit cleaner, talking about my room, the tight ends, and less thinking, more just getting after it and attacking.

Q. How challenging has it been, the vernacular of the offense, the verbiage? How challenging is it to change from what Greg had to what Brian has now?

LeVAR WOODS: It comes down to it's just football. It's just football. Again, it sounds cliché what's that X, Y, Z, 1, 2, 3 now, but if you look at it, to the defense or if you just look at the pictures and know the call, it would be the exact same formation as it was in the past.

I think that does play a little hard into guys' learning because it's like learning a different language. I've used the analogy before hold the water bottle in America, in English, this is water. In Spanish-speaking cultures, this is called agua. It's the same thing. It's the same thing, but how do you name it, how do you get it, and then it comes down to just playing football.

Q. How do guys like Noah and your other sort of receiving tight ends, how have they been receptive to the offense, what they've been asked to do?

LeVAR WOODS: I think everyone's been receptive. They have no choice because everyone is learning right now, which makes it fun because it's competitive for everybody. Everybody is starting off with a fresh slate. Everyone is learning. Honestly I think the younger guys probably had an advantage because they didn't know everything like the older guys who have been here three or four years. They knew the offense already. They struggle more because they're cursed with the knowledge of all these different terms, and they have to think, oh, it's like this old call, where

the young guys, they have no idea in the first place so it's new to them. It's fresh to them.

Q. Do their ears perk up a little more when the idea of going more vertical comes into the room?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely. They want to catch balls. That's all they want to do. We make them block all practice and then, hey, now you've got to go catch balls. Everyone likes to catch passes.

Q. The outside kind of perspective, the fan perspective, how much of a difference are fans going to see in this offense? Do you think it's going to be drastically different, moderately different?

LeVAR WOODS: It's been a long time since I've watched it from a fan's perspective, so I can't tell you that. Maybe you get stuck in watching it from a coach's perspective, so honestly, I can't answer that.

Q. Are fans going to notice a difference?

LeVAR WOODS: Come to me two months into the season. You tell me. Sorry, I just haven't been a fan in a long time.

Q. George kind of jumped off the page at Indianapolis, and I think he caused a lot of scouts to look at him and look at his film. Were you surprised with his numbers there, and what's kind of his upside at the next level?

LeVAR WOODS: I was not surprised. George is a great athlete. He can run. He can jump, all those things. George was banged up quite a bit this past season. Also I think he has a very bright future in the NFL, very bright future, and a lot of people have been calling and asking about him, coaches and scouts, and I think he's got a bright future.

Q. With him gone, who has maybe stepped up as the leader of the group?

LeVAR WOODS: As the leader of the group, I'd say the older guys, Pekar and Wisnieski because they're the guys who have experience. Wieting a little bit. Wieting has some natural leadership ability. But those are the guys that I'd say right now are the leaders of the group.

But again, it sounds cliché, but it's really too early to tell because everyone is focused on trying to do what they have to do and understanding the offense, being where they have to be and executing at a high rate.

Q. As special teams coach, it seems like you would want to have a lot of athletic guys, like linebackers group is really full right now. Is that an advantageous position for you as coordinator?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely. Regardless of which program you're in, whether it's the NFL or in college,

linebackers play special teams because they're typically the best athletes as far as speed and power goes. But we have a lot of guys in that room old and younger guys that are really good special teams players, and that's just the nature of the beast. Typically defensive players tend to be better naturally at special teams based on the things they do on a daily basis. We're also trying to train a bunch of offensive guys right now to have more of a balance so that we don't wear guys out on defense playing special teams and defense, trying to develop more offensive guys.

Q. Are you leaning in the direction on the kickoffs right now, who's kicking?

LeVAR WOODS: No, haven't got that far yet. We'll find that out as we get moving forward.

Q. Is that something that could wait until mid to late August?

LeVAR WOODS: Absolutely.

Q. You talked about Shaun; what stands out about Beyer? You mentioned that he could possibly be in the mix.

LeVAR WOODS: Shaun is a smart kid. It's kind of funny because I get mad at him in the meetings because he sits back and doesn't say a word, and then I get out on the field and I totally expect him to blow it, and the things we've handed him so far he's handled pretty well. Shaun is still an inexperienced player. I always joke with him, you're not a receiver anymore, you're a tight end, let's go. He spent that whole year running lines on the scout team.

But I think some things that stand out: He can run, he can catch, and he's not afraid to block. He's not there yet. He's still learning those things much like any of the freshmen are, but I think he's in good position.