

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Welcome to everybody. Welcome to the start officially of the 2019 season. It's my 21st year doing this, and like every other year, there's a lot of excitement this time of year, a lot of anxious feelings, as well, and probably some nervousness, too, as we get closer to game time. That doesn't ever seem to change. Bottom line is it's a new beginning for our team, for our season. And probably like most teams in America, all of us kind of feel it's probably time to get going and get on the field and play.

First of all, Kinnick Stadium, a couple fronts there. Last Thursday night, we had a chance to take the team to see the tunnel that's been redone, thanks to the Hawkeye Legacy program. It's first class. Players were excited to see that. It's something that kind of lifted their spirits at the end of camp. They're eager to swarm out of that tunnel. So we're very appreciative of everybody that made that a reality.

And same comments about the north end zone. Obviously it was there last season, but now it's completed. After picture day, we had a chance to go through it, and it, too, is first class. It looks fantastic from the field. It's already added to the environment in Kinnick, certainly from that perspective, and being up in it, it's something we'll use for recruiting. But more importantly, our fans will enjoy everything about it. It's first class. Again, we're very appreciative of everybody that put efforts into it to make it a reality, whether it was the fundraising efforts, the people donated that donated so generously, all the people that designed it, and obviously executed the completion of the project. We're very excited about that.

And then I think it's a good reminder for all of us that the guys out there playing on Saturdays are students, college students, and we have 10 players with graduation decals on their helmets. It's something new that we'll start this season. As I mentioned, we have 10 guys who have already graduated, a bunch more that will graduate at mid-term, and a few next May. But it's a good reminder that these guys are here for a bigger purpose than just playing football, and we're excited about starting that new tradition.

A couple things about football, our team and the challenge ahead right now. We've had a good summer conditioning period and then we had a good three-

week camp. You always have highs and lows, a couple peaks and valleys during that time. But the guys have worked hard. It's been productive, and we've seen a lot of improvement from a lot of players. Not just younger guys, but a lot of our players have improved, and we're anxious to see what they do in game competition.

And to that point, the one thing that's certain right now, we only have 12 opportunities that are guaranteed where we're going to a chance to compete, and it's important our players understand that. And the bottom line, that's all you can do is worry about one week at a time. All those clichés in football that you hear are true. So right now the challenge for us is -- was to have a good camp, which I think we've done, now transitioned into game preparation, and hopefully be ready to match up against a Miami of Ohio football team.

They finished last season with a 6-2 record in conference. They were 16-6 right now, the last 22 games, which gives them the best record in the MAC over that time period. So they've done a lot of good things, and I think they're a different team than last time we saw them in that Coach Martin was trying to build his program back at that time. And they've clearly established an identity and done a lot of good things in their program.

Like a lot of first games, there's a lot of variables, a lot of unknowns. You never know what any opponent is going to do in the first game. They've got a lot the new players just like we'll have new players, but both sides are going to experience the same challenge that way.

They're a good football team, and we're really expecting a tough contest on Saturday night.

A couple quick items regarding our roster. Injury-wise we've come out of this thing really healthy right now at this point, and the only guy in the two-deep right now that I would say is doubtful would be Cole Banwart. We'll see how that goes, but right now I'm not optimistic that he'll play based on practice this morning.

There is no announcement on Oliver Martin. We do hope to hear something this week. That would be great, and obviously timely, good, bad or indifferent. That will be nice to hear something. I think that's realistic, and when we do, we'll make an

announcement on that, but at this point there is no decision.

And then needless to say, Nate Stanley is our quarterback. If we were playing tomorrow, which we're not, Petras would be the next guy in the game with Mansell third. But we'll play the week out and see how that goes, too. In that competition as you can read between the lines, it has been pretty close all the way through. We'll wait and see on that one. But right now Spencer would be the first guy in the game.

We had the officials here a week ago Saturday, they came in and cliniced our staff in the morning and then worked the scrimmage that day and it continues to be a little bit confusing, a little bit troublesome, I think, some of the rule changes that we look at every year. And didn't seem all that controversial this year, but I think it is kind of interesting. To me, we've gotten the target rule where it probably should be. After a couple years, I think that's made some good gains.

The blind side block is something new, and I haven't seen much NFL preseason games, and I guess there's been a few calls that have been a little bit questionable there, and it's a really tough rule for the officials to officiate. I think we're all for player safety, everybody is, but this one is going to be one that we'll ride the roller coaster on a little bit just in terms of the way it gets interpreted. I think you can anticipate that already, and we saw that in our scrimmage a week ago Saturday.

And then probably the most confounding one is what they're calling a wedge, and to me it's a double team. To me a wedge is what used to be on kickoffs, three guys or four guys joining, and that was a very dangerous play, really not -- I don't think it had a place in football. But we've taken a step further now where even if you line up like it's going to be a double team, they're going to call a penalty. Most interesting part, they had seven illustrations, seven or eight on the tape, and there wasn't a collision on any one of the seven or eight that they showed.

You get curious about how they come up with some of these tweaks that they make to the rules. And my only concern is it just makes it a really difficult job that the officials already have, it makes their jobs that much more difficult, and I think we've seen that over the last couple years, too. I empathize with the guys that are working the games. They do a great job. They work extremely hard, and I wish we'd quit making their jobs so difficult or so challenging.

Last thing here before I take questions, I want to recognize there have been a couple passings here in the last several days. I think that you may or may not be aware of, but certainly Dick Woodard passing away.

Dick just a tremendous guy, 93 years old, and four-year letterman here back in the '40s. Dick was at every I-Club breakfast from day one. I think they used to leave the Quad Cities around 4 or 4:30 to be here. And we don't have those breakfasts anymore, but he was a positive, encouraging type person, and has always treated me so well. Obviously, sorry about Dick's passing.

Same thing with Larry Smith. Larry Smith was a long time academic adviser on campus. A lot of our former players have a real close relationship with he and his family, and Larry just passed way recently too, so our condolences certainly to their families and our thoughts are certainly with them.

That being said, I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. When you look at this waiver process for transfers, specifically transfers, does it seem too complicated, and if so, what would you change about it or --

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm smiling because I was in the car about three different times, just short bop around town here on Saturday after we finished up. So it was in about a two-hour period and I had about three channels. I get impatient. But every channel was talking about transfers, so that was the topic of the day on Saturday certainly. I'm not sure I have the right answers, quite frankly, or what are the answers. I don't know what they are at this point. But, certainly, the biggest thing all of us would hope for is just some consistency in whatever it is what we're going to do moving forward, just so we can kind of know what to count on, what not to count on. And not only in terms of interpretations but also the timeliness of the process. But it is interesting it is a hot topic right now, and I haven't thought a lot about it in the last couple weeks, quite frankly.

Q. Can you get any information from the NCAA, like if you call, do they ever give you a timetable?

KIRK FERENTZ: I wouldn't have the number, so yeah. That's our compliance office -- that's their job and that's what they do. They're the conduit to the organization, which is good. That's how it should be.

Q. Do they give any timetable?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, not specific. I appreciate that every case is different, too, but just talking as a sports fan now, reading what you read and hearing what you hear. It seems like there's a lot of inconsistencies -- or different scenarios is probably a better way to put it. But the one thing for sure to try to predict what's going to happen in any case, it sounds like that might be impossible, and we learned that a couple years ago firsthand.

Q. If Oliver is cleared this week, will he play Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's definitely in our plan to play him, and he would be on the travel team if we were traveling. Yeah, if we get the green light, he'll be in there playing at some point, absolutely.

Q. Is it frustrating at all that it's game week and you're still kind of waiting -- he is in the plans if he can play, but you're still not sure if he can play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I never set any expectations on this whole thing only because of what I've witnessed and read from other cases. We'll play it by ear. Obviously, in a perfect world, you'd really like to know -- probably yesterday would have been better or even today. But just the way our depth is right now, it doesn't impact us, and if he's able to play, we'd love to get him in there and get him going. If he can't, then we'll keep working him in practice but not necessarily in the game plan.

Q. You guys had already set the tackles for the season. How is the interior of the offensive line coming along? With the injury to Cole Banwart, how has the interior of the offensive line kind of progressed through camp now into game week?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we've pretty much gotten better at every position over the last three weeks on our whole team. I've said this earlier, I could see a lot of competition going on through this month and maybe all season long. There's some close battles right now. And in the area you're talking about, we have a lot of guys that are probably capable of playing guard for us. So we'll work through that and see how much, who, and all those kinds of things, and not really have any -- same thing, no definite expectations. We'll see how it all plays out and how it presents itself as it goes along. But I think over the next three weeks for sure we'll learn a lot about our football team and probably know a lot more next time we have a bye week.

Q. Ihmir said he had a season-ending meeting with you and that it is time to grow up, can you talk about his transformation?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we've always liked him there. That hasn't been the issue. It just his work habits or practice habits and just paying attention to certain details. But this was a transition for everybody that comes here, most everybody. I'd say 98 percent of the guys that come in here have a lot of -- either a lot of learning to do or some things to adjust, that type of deal, and there's a lot of reasons for that. Ihmir has always been a great guy. He's got a good football intellect, is really spirited and he's extremely likable and he works hard, all those kinds of things. So it's a matter of really directing his energies and focusing his

energies a little bit better, and that's part of maturation. Every player goes through it.

I guess if you're just talking in general terms, to me, once a player starts heading into their third year after they've been on campus for two years, if they're not really kind of getting the hang of the way things need to be done, then you have some concerns. But that being said, I tell our guys all the time. I coached three guys in the '80s that didn't start until their senior years that all played in the NFL. You never know when a player is going to hit stride. But that being said, they have to be working hard and they have to have a good attitude for that to happen, and then hopefully the football part works for them, too.

But yeah, Ihmir he's done a good job, and I couldn't be more complimentary of what he did during the summer. He was in tremendous condition, the best condition we've seen him in, and same thing during practice over the last three plus weeks, he's really done a good job out there.

Q. You have running backs that kind of took unconventional roads here. Toren has had to wait his turn, Mekhi coming from a junior college. Does that earnestness kind of show up in how they do things and how they present themselves in the room? It seems like it's a room devoid of any individualism.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's really a good room. And when I was driving into work this morning, I heard somebody on the NFL Network talking about the Patriots running back room. And the guy -- whoever was the expert guy -- he had played, I guess, in that division and followed that division pretty closely and went through the whole group of guys they have.

And it got me thinking about our room. Quite frankly, we've got a really good room of backs right now, and Mekhi is a good place to start. It is a good story because he was not heavily recruited. I think Louisville might have been sniffing around a little bit there about the same time we started getting interested in him. And the number one word I would use with him, he's been very appreciative of his opportunity here, just to be in a Big Ten program and to have an opportunity to get on the field and work. He's a tremendous teammate.

I would use the same word with Toren, too. Toren has just been a guy that works hard. He's very appreciative of the opportunities in front of him, academically and athletically, and both guys have improved a great deal. I really think they were better players in the spring than they were last fall, and I think we've seen growth and improvement this August, as well. So I'm really anxious to see a lot of our guys on the field just to see what

they do in a game atmosphere.

Q. What does Nate need to do to take his game to the next level as a senior?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think his game is pretty good right now. He's done it very quietly. I'm almost amused by it in some ways, because he's done some pretty heady things in terms of statistics and what have you. Most importantly he's been a really good leader. He's only the second guy going into his senior year as a two-time captain in the history of the program. I think that speaks volumes about him. I think the biggest thing he has to do this year is just, first of all, try to enjoy it, the fact that he's a senior, and then just go out and play the best he can play. He doesn't have to be John Elway or whomever, name any great quarterback that's played before. He just has to go out and play his best, and if he does that, it'll be plenty good enough. I really believe that.

Q. What are you seeing with the true freshman class at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of twofold right now and then maybe threefold even. Our defensive guys right now, I don't know how many, if any, will really enter into play this week or the next couple weeks. We'll wait and see, but right now it may not be any.

But defensively right now, I'm not sure I see anybody playing. Offensively, I think we have a couple opportunities perhaps. And then the third tier of guys to talk about are the newcomers. Certainly Zach VanValkenburg is going to be playing. Michael Sleep-Dalton will be out there. And then if Oliver is cleared, he'll be in there, too. So the three guys that came in as older players, we expect all three of those guys to contribute Saturday. It's going to be interest to watch.

Q. Is there a legitimate concern about endurance with A.J. Epenesa?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not endurance at all. He's in great shape. As you know, we like to rotate our guys. We're hoping none of our guys play 80 snaps out there on a Saturday. That's just not what we're looking for. But if he had to do it, he could do that. That wouldn't be the challenge. He's a good one to talk about, but it's just kind of football in general. To me, sometimes it's good just to let things happen, and anybody that's seen him play, he's got some rare abilities and talents. He does some really good things on film, and the exciting thing for all of us is he's got the potential to continue to improve, and that's what we're hoping to see.

So that being said, nobody is denying the fact that he's a really good player. Is he the fifth-best guy or the tenth-best guy in the country, all that stuff that people are trying to categorize, I'd like to see the efficiency

rankings on those. But you know, he's a really good player and we're excited that he's growing. Hopefully he'll be better this year than last year, and he's going to play more. I'll go out on a limb and say that for sure.

So to me, let's just let this story unfold, kind of like Brad Banks in 2002. Nobody knew who he was and it just turned into a great story. And to me that's the fun part of sports. Really none of us know the answers at this point. There are guys on our team we are hopeful and pretty confident they're going to play well, but they've still got to do it. And that's the bottom line, and that's the challenge every week. A different challenge every week, as well.

Q. What are the biggest challenges of preparing for two or three quarterbacks you basically have no film on?

KIRK FERENTZ: It might as well be a first game, right? That's kind of part of the whole equation, you're just never sure who's going to show up first of all, who they are going to play, and what amount. And then what will be the package for those players. So it's kind of that way in general, and really kind of minimizes -- you have a game plan certainly. It minimizes some of the things you may do or may not do, and you kind of get a little bit more generic. And I think the bottom line, especially early on, is let's make sure we're really solid, make sure we're fundamentally sound, and everybody has got to be on the same page just to avoid -- even if we knew who they had at every position, you just never know what new things they've put in over the course of the offseason, et cetera.

I'm standing here thinking about our Nebraska game in '81. We threw a little bit different defensive look at them than maybe what they had prepared for and it was pretty effective that day. So you just never know what's going to happen early season. I think for us we've just got to be really prepared and solid.

Q. How are you going to handle your kickers?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a really good question. We're probably going to talk about that in about three hours here. They're both really doing a good job. They both competed. It's been neck and neck. And I looked at the stats the other day, you can almost flip a coin. So it might be fair to say we'll let both guys play and see what happens. And they both did a good job this morning in practice, which is certainly encouraging. Caleb will be kicking off, though, I will go out on a limb and say that one.

Q. You've been head coach longer than some of your players have been alive, do you interact with the players the same as you did in 1999?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I don't think it changes

quite frankly. The world has change obviously and the world they're living in is a lot different than guys back then. But we've raised kids, my wife and I have raised kids, so I'd like to think I've worked with young people every day of my life. You know, hopefully, you're paying attention a little bit to what's going on in their worlds. I don't understand a lot what goes on, but I have paid attention. Yeah, I don't think a whole lot, no.

Q. The other day Brian deferred on Tyler Goodson and Shadrick Byrd questions to you, so it's your chance to talk about what their contributions might be on Saturday and beyond.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, what I kind of alluded to earlier about that whole group. Really been pleased. Shadrick got here in January and came a long way from home, so a little bit of concern there. He may have had some bumps. You never witnessed them at all. He really did a good job and proved he was tough. Because when you're running behind the second line, especially in the spring, it's a little bit like running behind a 99, you know a little bit like that. He proved that he was a tough kid, and he just kept coming back, and he just had a really nice demeanor to himself. He's been great.

And Tyler, obviously, we learned a lot more about him in August here when we started practicing. Really pleased with both guys, and I think they both have opportunities. They're guys that we're definitely considering playing, both offensively and special teams. We'll keep talking about when we do or don't do that, but they're both in the picture right now.

Q. When you look at tight end, I think Shaun Beyer was not on at least the official two-deep, sometimes you move guys around, but is Drew Cook ahead of him, or is it just a matter of he's --

KIRK FERENTZ: I would say they're similar, and I'll detail that a little bit. Shaun lost some time back in the spring. And same thing in camp, he missed, I don't know, probably about a week plus, which seems like three weeks in camp because it's all so condensed. So that's the only reason. But he's back practicing. Actually a little bit before I anticipated. Got back, I think, on Saturday or Friday, so he's back in the mix. He'll be playing Saturday. It's pretty close with both those players.

Q. Both Leroy Smith and Jeremy Allen are going into Hall of Fame this weekend, can you share your thoughts on them?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, start with Jeremy because he was the most recent, and what a great young man and what a great job he did in two sports here. Was so easy to coach, and was a fullback, obviously, which we certainly appreciate that position. And then just had tremendous success in track, too, was just an

outstanding performer. Great to see him recognized.

And Leroy, unfortunately I missed his best years. It's ironic, we had a visitor in camp here who tried to recruit him to Miami back in the '80s. This coach happened to be on Jimmy Johnson's staff there, and he told Leroy that he'd be a linebacker in their 4-3 defense down in Miami, which is a defensive football team. And Leroy came here because he wanted to be a running back. So ironically, he's going in -- I think he led the Big Ten in sacks, whatever it was, '90 or '91.

So it's funny how things turn around some times. But Leroy's a tremendous person and obviously had a tremendous career here, so it's great. That is such a nice honor to be picked in the Hall of Fame. It's not easy here, there are a lot of really good players that haven't made that and will in time, I'm sure. But it's a really elite group of folks, and to me where you were raised, it's really meaningful, so I'm just really, really happy for both those players.

Q. Is there any reservation about putting Ihmir back at punt return just because if you drop a punt, that could change the dynamic of the game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, initially we were because it's not the same as kick return. It's just a different feel, different target, but he's done really well at it. And right now we have confidence in Ihmir. We have confidence in Nico, and then Max Cooper is working his way back in too and we have confidence in him. It's a real critical position as we all know. We've had really good luck for the most part at that position. I think right now those three guys have demonstrated that we can draw some back there, and hopefully they'll continue to improve.

Q. Do your punt return guys tend to be your slot guys, do you run things through one or the other, is it just one of your more consistent guys getting open?

KIRK FERENTZ: It helps if you've got some of that, but there have been guys that you would think, boy, this guy would be a good punt returner and they really aren't. It's just something that -- I don't know how to describe it. But I know Nico's dad was a really good baseball player. I think he told me he quit in sixth grade. I asked him that the other day coincidentally. So I can't attribute that. Micah Hyde was a great baseball player and had great ball skills. But there is a feel about it. It takes a little bit of courage to stand back there, too, although guys are protected right now. Some guys do it and some don't. I can't really articulate why.

Q. Gary Dolphin hasn't called a real Iowa game since the basketball season. Seems like you've been pretty supportive of him, at least behind the scenes. Can you just speak to his return?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're looking forward to that. Gary has been at practice a couple times. Ed Pololak was here last Friday, as well. I think Gary was here the day before.

It's great to hear him back on the air. We're all looking forward to that, and I think we're all looking that direction right now, what's in front of us. We're excited about the season, and we're excited to have Gary be part of that.

Q. Is Julius Brents healthy?

KIRK FERENTZ: He is, yeah. He's been on and off. He's had some injuries. That goes back to the tight end thing, too. That affects the depth chart a little bit. But right now as of probably Saturday or Friday last week, just about everybody was back working, just about, and so that's how I said, the next three weeks here we'll just kind of see. We have a lot of really close competitions going on at a lot of different positions.

You go through practice, that's one level of competition and evaluation. Now you start playing games, this is where it really counts. And the truest way to evaluate players is what they do. I think back to '08 where Angerer and Stanzi were both second team, and by the end of the month, they were starters and the rest was history. We'll keep an open mind and believe what we see and just see how guys react to being in season, and that might impact some first-year guys, especially the younger guys. Because all of a sudden things happen a little quicker. So it's going to be interesting. I'm sure every staff in America goes through that.