

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Brian Ferentz



BRIAN FERENTZ: Obviously we're excited about moving into the fifth week of spring ball, four weeks of practice in the books. Making some progress. Still have a long way to go in a lot of areas, and hoping to finish strong with the workout tomorrow and Friday night. With that, I'll open it up to questions to you guys.

### **Q. How much of what you hope to get installed have you gotten installed this spring?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: We've gotten what we need to evaluate guys and to find out what we're good at. Certainly don't get everything put in in the spring, but in some ways the spring is difficult because you have so much in.

Just like camp, you have a lot of things at your disposal. There is a pretty big arsenal of plays to draw from when you go into those live situations. I think in some ways that's more difficult for the players and the coaches because we're not as focused as we would be in a game week on this is how we're going to attack. This is what we're going to do. It's a little more we want to get these things evaluated. We want to get these things on tape so we can coach off of it.

In some ways it's harder than for the players because there is so much. But on the other hand, not everything is in, either. But the things that need to be in right now that need to get installed, those are in.

### **Q. You're not worried about metering things at all? Check that off that they've done this or they'll do this? It sounds like you're just throwing everything at them, whether or not they have it down 100 percent, it doesn't matter?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Every time you go through an install, you try to be logical and organized how you put things in. And everything has a role, everything has a package, everything is within a family or a system, and you try to install those day by day.

But, no, we're not trying to limit the install as far as building it up over time. The difficult part is when you start stacking concepts upon concepts. So to say that we're throwing everything in, that's probably fair from this standpoint. We're trying to get as much on tape, as much evaluated as we can. We try not to throw it all at them at once, but it has stacked up over four weeks.

### **Q. In spring, putting in the concepts you wanted and seeing what the players are good at?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think that's a big part of it every year. Certainly when you're trying to put a new system together, it becomes even more magnified to do things like that.

### **Q. I think you now have seven tight ends on scholarship and three QBs. Are you comfortable with that?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Sure. Let's get eight tight ends. Tight ends are a good thing, and we feel like we have good guys at the position. If we had eight guys but we didn't feel good about them, I think it would be concerning. But right now we have eight guys that we feel pretty good about it. We like watching more. Drew, he's a guy that jumped right in, and his attitude alone has helped him improve dramatically. It's amazing when you come to work every day, a little excited about getting better. You tend to get better, and he's done that.

So, no, we feel good about those eight. Certainly you want a balance on your roster. We talked about all those things. We have numbers. We have maximums and minimums for scholarship count at every position on our team. So, eight is a little bit on the high end, right? And three would be, perhaps, a little bit -- well, it's about right. Three to five, somewhere in there, depending on where we're at in the year and how many guys we've got on campus, leaving, coming in, all those things.

### **Q. What is it about Drew that makes you think he can help you at tight end? I know he's never play the position.**

BRIAN FERENTZ: He's a big athletic guy. We liked him in high school as a basketball player. We liked him as an athlete certainly as a football player and certainly as a quarterback, but seeing him move around. You get to see him move plenty in high school.

And all those things, with that size, and that frame, that's always something you're keeping in the back of your mind for anyone you recruit at any position. Ike Boettger was a similar story. Obviously, not a tight end, but here's a guy that's playing quarterback in high school. Brought him down, put him in camp, let's have him catch some balls and play tight end a little bit. We

watched him play tight end, we liked it. It was good.

We didn't tell him at the time; I've told him since. Probably didn't see a really bright future for him at tight end, thought he could have been serviceable. But, man, he had a chance to be a good tackle and you let things play out naturally. But you're looking for athletic ability, frame, size. But most of all, and this is what's always stood out to us about Drew, you're looking for guys that think the right way. Guys that approach things the right way. Guys that are improvement driven, detail oriented. Drew Cook is that kind of guy.

So when you talk about moving positions or making a change, he's not a guy you worry about. He's a guy that you know will jump in and he's going to do the best you can. He does have physical attributes and he's got a real chance to be successful there.

**Q. Seven scholarship tight ends but only three scholarship wide receivers, do you think about that?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Certainly, you do think about that. Really we have four; we have one guy who is on hiatus right now. But we have four on the roster, and again, that's a number.

That's a good question. It's a number we look at, and frankly, what we're trying to do at that position is build. It's kind of like the quarterback position. There are no incumbents. We're not married to anyone, and we're going to do what's best for Iowa football. What's best for Iowa football is great competition.

We're looking for guys to step up at the receiver position. If you put a gun to my head today, I would tell you our best receiver out there day-in and day-out at practice, obviously we know what Matt VandeBerg can do, but Nick Easley has done a nice job. He's not on scholarship, but he'll play, and he'll play more than maybe he even anticipated. Because we're looking for the guys that can go out there and do things the way we want them done, and I mean that 24 hours a day.

So we're trying to build there a little bit. The number is low. But based on where we're at that that position, I prefer the number to be low, frankly. Let's get some young guys in here, and go to work, and see who wants to be here and who wants to do things the Iowa way.

**Q. How do you emphasize the tight ends?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: We try to emphasize the tight ends as best we can. A lot of that is personnel driven. It's forced us to maybe get to certain concepts more ways to try to be a little more creative with how you're featuring one guy or one concept. Because you don't want it to look the same every snap. Right? Even

though it is the same every snap. So just a little bit sleight of hand. I think that's been good for us. It's forced us to be a little bit more diverse in our formations probably than you'd like to be when you're just trying to get things installed.

So, in a way, it's been a blessing in disguise. But in other ways you do wish you had a little more depth than at other positions. But I know this, when we get to September and November, there are going to be issues. There are issues every year. We had issues in the offensive line last year. We've had issues in the running back room in the past, and nobody reschedules those games. Nobody's willing to take a week off and say, hey, go get healthy. So you just try to do the best with what you have every week.

**Q. When you guys sit down in the offensive room, what do you identify as areas where you guys can improve from previous years you've been here or change? Maybe give different looks or switch what you want to get off the play formation exactly?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think we want to improve everything. I really do. I think that would be true if you asked me next year too. We should be trying to get better at everything we do. But certainly, if you look at the numbers, we've got to be better at throwing the football. There is no way around that. We've got to be better at protecting the quarterback.

So whether it is a formation, whether it is a way we personnel something, we have to look at everything, and we have to be open to everything. That's been the good thing about bringing some guys into the staff room. Certainly Coach O'Keefe has a lot of history here.

So for him to come back, that's a little bit natural. But he's also been five years in the National Football League, and in about four and a half offenses. So there is a lot more there that even in the last four or five years I think he's been exposed to. He'd probably tell you the same thing. So there is a lot of good knowledge there. Nobody was more effective than Tim Polasek as an offensive coordinator, and certainly with a similar mentality. Perhaps some of the schemes are different. But the mentality what they were trying to do is very similar to what we believe in. So there is another good resource.

Kelton Copeland has been around some really good programs, some really good offenses. Again, a little more diverse than maybe what we've done. So you get good input coming in that way. So when you look at it and how can we get better in all these areas, it's been nice to have some voices in the room where we can have some discussion and really have some brain storming, if you will. But the hard part about that at the

end of the day you still get a consensus. If there's not consensus, there has to be closure, and that's what I'm learning about.

**Q. Is that sometimes including the NFL match-up game with your background there? Is that something you're trying to incorporate?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Sure, I think all football's a match-up game anymore. Now that the NBA playoffs are going on, right, and I don't know much about basketball, but I know when I watch basketball, it's about match-ups. Football's the same way to me, whether it's college football, pro football, or high school football. All you have to do is go watch a good high school football game, and they're still creating match-ups.

So, certainly we need to think about doing that. What this spring has been good for is finding out who are the guys we want to create match-ups with. I think we have a better idea of that, but I think it's going to play out into summer and into camp.

**Q. You guys recruited a lot of taller wide receivers and maybe larger wide receivers in the last couple of years. Some successful teams of the past in the Big Ten this year had taller wide receivers, one of them McNutt, for instance. Without being too specific and wonky, I guess, what kind of football concepts are you trying to do with the wide receivers that's maybe a little bit of a deviation in the last four or 5 years?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't know how much is deviation. But certainly we want to be able to throw the football down the field, and to do that, you better be really fast. You better have enough size to win and come down with the football. So we're trying to do that. We want to be able to win against man-to-man coverage on the outside. Again, that comes down to the same things, how fast are you, how big are you? And hopefully we can get a little bit of both. That's when you get really good guys.

So without being too specific, I'll say if you look at it in that way, we're looking for guys that are going to be competitive, tough and physical. And they don't all have to be big guys. But when we talk about our outside body types, we certainly would prefer a little bit of size there. When you look at the guys they're playing against, that's what it really comes down to.

When you talk about match-ups, most corners are not big people. And I think Coach Parker would be the first one to tell you, there are certain things they're looking for. 6'2", 6'3" are not one of them. When you look at those match-ups, size can be a real advantage on the perimeter, just like I think it gets overplayed a little bit

on the interior of the offensive line. Or maybe it's not as important. But on the perimeter, you prefer to have a little bit of size.

**Q. Is there one 1-B running back position up for grabs, and does that crystallize at all for you this spring? Last year you had Leshawn?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I'd say Akrum is our starting running back. He's our most productive guy. He's got the most experience. We feel good about the two young guys. They've gotten plenty of work, which is a real positive. But between Toks and Toren, we like those guys. We think they can carry the ball in the Big Ten. Is there going to be a 1B? I don't know if it's going to be what you saw last year. Boy, you'd like to get Akrum a lot of carries, and we talked about match-ups. But Akrum's a guy that's good in space. So maybe you create some match-ups where he's in space, and you have another guy in the backfield that can carry the ball. So I don't know if it will be true 1A, 1B, but we anticipate those guys carrying the ball a whole bunch. And based on my experience, we're going to need them all. That's just been the way it goes.

It all sounds good right now. 1A, 1B, 1C. And pretty much November, you've got one. Whoever survived the landing, you know.

**Q. What's impressed you most about how Akrum has grown as a player entering his senior year?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: He's a guy that's become more reliable. And the question mark with him was never ability or talent. The question mark was ball security. Being in the right spot, just trust issues. We always had that conversation. We continue to have that conversation, but he's done a nice job of growing.

Really the ball security issue was always a focus thing. What are you paying attention to? What are you working on? He's done a nice job in growing in that role. Really, you look at every aspect of his life, he's grown up a lot, but he still has a long way to go. We have that conversation a lot.

My job is simple, is to keep pushing him. As I think is any coach's job. Our job is to teach. Our job is to bring these guys along. So, yeah, I'm excited about a lot of things. But I would tell you, he has a long way to go and he's going to get there. We'll keep pushing him.

**Q. What have you learned about Tyler and Nathan? Where does the race stand at this point?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: They're competitive guys. It's pretty even. It's been well-documented. No one has really separated, and I think it's good. Again, it goes back to there are no incumbents. Nobody is owed anything. No one deserves this or is entitled to this. Everyone

has to earn a spot and earn playing time. They've both competed hard for that job, and neither one of them has pulled away.

So at this point, we'll let them keep competing. We'll take it into summer. We'll take it into camp. At some point we're going to need to make a decision, and some separation would help. But right now I'm encouraged because they're both pushing forward. It's not a matter of neither of these guys are really coming along, so we don't want to play with them; it's a matter of both these guys are doing a nice job. No one's a clear-cut favorite. Let's continue to work them and push them forward.

**Q. Are you looking for somebody to elevate themselves?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think that will be out there. What do guys do? We go on and compete, we scrimmage. We've been live, we've done some of those things. It's been closer to a game atmosphere. A little more distraction. A little more going on. I thought we had our best practice in West Des Moines that we've had in five years, shockingly. Because we're about as young as we've ever been.

So it's going to be interesting what happens Friday night. But whether it's at the quarterback position or anywhere else, how the guys handle that environment and how they perform once we ratchet up the competition just a little bit.

**Q. The numbers you have at tight end and the younger talent, probably 40 percent of your plays the last few years have been 12 personnel, and Ohio State a few years ago you went 13, and really successful in that. Do you anticipate maybe the same type of personnel? Maybe 13 or 23 if you need to?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't know if it's 23. We haven't been too much of that in the field. Nebraska in '13, and Iowa State in '15, and both of those were close-out situations. As far as putting multiple tight ends on the field, we'd like to do that. I think football is a pretty simple game.

Whoever your best players are, you should probably play with them, right? I don't know much, but I remember being a player. We went over to Northwestern maybe in '01, and all week we just practiced a base defense. At that time, they were pretty unique because they were spread -- they would spread that floor open. They were out there, and they were chucking it around. We went over the base defense, and all week, Norm Parker is saying, hey, we're going to be fine. We're going to keep our best players on the field.

That was always a thing in the NFL. Why would you take off one of your best 11 to put on a lesser guy just to match personnel. So, offensively, it's the same thing. Let's keep our best players on the field. If that means we're going to have multiple tight ends or multiple tight ends and a fullback in the game or multiple half backs or whatever it is, let's make sure we're doing that.

Because at the end of the day, the only thing that matters is did we give the players the best chance they had to win the football game? Certainly having the best players on the field would be a good start. Absolutely. That means on third down, if it's 3rd and nine, and we have to have two tight ends out there, then we'll have two tight ends out there and make it work.

About 40 percent in 12, and I don't know what the exact numbers are. About 100% of our snaps, not quite, but when we had Jacob Hillyer, we fooled around with no tight-end snaps. But like 95 percent of our snaps, probably, in the last five years, there's been a tight end on the field. We're not in a hurry to take those guys off. If we can have more on, great.

We played with three tight ends in the bowl game some, too. So when we have the personnel available, we like to do it.

**Q. How are you able to evaluate tape and see what you guys can do, but how much time, and how do you evaluate the big picture, getting your offense in, and you kind of have an idea of what your experience might be?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: That's part of what we're doing right now. That's part of what we're doing right now. You evaluate the players. You evaluate the strengths and weaknesses. As things go in, you're evaluating what you like, what you don't like, what we're going to be good at. Most of the time, it's pretty simple.

You can take any passing-game concept or any run, and you can fit it to your personnel. Once you have a pretty good idea of what you want to do, it's a matter of just tweaking a couple things to get the concept to fit a personnel group or formation. Really, you try to be as multiple as you can without being complicated. So there is the illusion of multiple looks, but there is the reality of three or four concepts, whether it's run or pass protection, all that good stuff. So you try to get the base stuff in, and then you try to show the variations based on the formation or the personnel.