

University of Iowa Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate your coverage of the team. Good news right now is that it is game week. I don't know if any of us thought that was ever going to happen, so certainly we're excited about that -- the fact that it's going to take place.

I think for all of us, not only in sports but just in life, it's been an interesting path for sure, a strange path. And the bottom line is as we move forward, it's going to stay abnormal for sure, and everybody is going to have to just stay very vigilant in the program and outside, and we're all going to have to continue to adjust and adapt as we move along. That's certainly been a big part of the last several weeks and several months. Don't see that changing a lot.

Certainly we had our challenges during the summer from a training standpoint, and then when the season got pushed on August 11, that really was a low point from a football standpoint for our team. It was obviously a significant change when the season got reinstated, and I can't say enough about the players and what they've done since that time.

That being said, we still have serious concerns about our conditioning level and have had through this entire time just because of the lack of consistency and getting the guys in early. For the most part I don't think it was until last week where we really felt were at a level where we could practice as long and as hard as maybe we would like to. At least we were able to build up to that point, but all that being said, all along the way, the players worked hard, they had a great attitude, and they're clearly excited about having a chance to play football, and we're excited about having a chance to coach them again.

That part is all good, and I'm really proud of the guys' efforts.

As we shift our sights to Purdue, the first thing I want to do is extend on behalf of everybody in our program, our best wishes to Coach Brohm. Very sorry to hear that he got hit by the virus and hoping that he has a very quick recovery. It's just a reminder just how real this is. It's everywhere, so

nobody is immune from it, but certainly wish him the best as he moves forward.

We can only have one captain go out for the toss, but we have five, Keith Duncan will represent the special teams, Chauncey Golston, Nick Neimann on the defensive side, Mekhi Sargent, and Tyler Linderbaum on offense.

Like every first game, it certainly presents unique challenges. This one is a little bit different. I can't remember the last time we opened up with a Big Ten game in the opener. That's going to be different for sure, raises the stakes. This season is very different playing nine straight Big Ten opponents.

Going into Purdue we're going into this first game with a lot of unknowns certainly, but one consistent thing you can say over the last three years since Coach Brohm has gotten there, he and his staff have done a great job. They've always had talented players and they've got some very talented players right now.

They're very well-coached, and they have a clear identity of what I think they want to be as a team. If you look back at his track record, they've always been a very explosive productive offensive outfit, and that's certainly the case. That's what we expect from this year's Purdue team, as well.

Offensively they have a system in place. They've been doing it for a long time and they've been extremely successful. They throw the ball as well as anybody that we'll face, and they have two of the better receivers that we've probably ever gone against at any one time.

I think back to last year about Minnesota coming in here with a quarterback that could really throw it and two outstanding receivers. But beyond that, a really good group of skill players. And Purdue has good running backs, they have other receivers that are really good, but they have two that are as good as you'll find anywhere in the country. That's going to be a real big challenge for our defensive team and our team in general.

And then it's interesting on the defensive side and special teams side they have two new coordinators there. Not only is it a first game, but we're looking at film of players playing in different systems and what we're going to see this week

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coming up. On the defensive side, Bobby Diaco, an Iowa grad, has done an outstanding job in his career coordinating defenses, and now he's at Purdue. And then the special teams coordinator came from North Texas, and he's had a very successful career, as well.

On both sides a lot of unknowns. We have a chance to see some of the players that are going to be back, but we're going to be playing different schemes, so we have a lot of projecting in that regard.

One thing of note on the special teams, Rondale Moore is a returner as well, besides being a great receiver. Had a 28-yard punt return against us two years ago, the biggest one we gave up that season. He's a very dangerous player in that regard, too.

That's kind of a little bit of a nutshell there.

The bottom line is, we're playing football and that's the best thing right now. I'm sure it's not unique. I know all the way through this it's not going to look the same, the crowd won't be the same, home or away, very different experience that way. It's just been an unusual path for everybody involved in college football.

Common denominator is we're all excited to have a chance to get on the field and compete. That's the exciting part. We're looking forward to the challenge on Saturday, and also just want to thank our fans. I know they won't be in the stands, but I'm sure they'll be watching, and we should just continue to appreciate their support of our team.

Q. I had a question kind of about the late-week testing process, and that's when do your players get tested, on Fridays and then Saturdays? And is there a fear of fake positives or false positives -- kind of like what happened with Nick Saban last week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure, our routine is that we all have a set time during the course of the week that we get tested, and then on Friday my understanding is it's obviously going to have to be before we travel. So it'll be Friday and Saturday morning. I assume at the hotel on Saturday. I haven't looked that far down the road.

But that being said, the question about the false positive, it's always a remote possibility. I think I heard somewhere in the last 24 hours that right now we're conference-wise about 98.9 percent accuracy. So no system is 100 percent perfect that I'm aware of. I think certainly we're all learning daily and continue to learn daily, but just my brief knowledge of this whole thing looking across the country, I don't think anybody has got a better system in place right now, including in the NFL, than what we have.

To me it's been the game changer that's allowed us to start practice. I think it was on September 30 when we started testing. It's what allowed us to start practicing, to limit the contact tracing issues that were causing so many problems and so many challenges.

That's been a big game changer, and it took a long while for us to get there. It was a long bumpy road to get there, but to me at least it's allowed us to have a chance to go forward. That being said, there's no guarantees on this thing. It's just I'm guessing the President has got pretty good security and pretty good insulation. Anybody can get it; that's just one reality unfortunately that we've all come to realize.

Q. Are you guys traveling bus or charter? How healthy are you guys? Is everybody going to be able play that you expected to play this weekend?

KIRK FERENTZ: As far as I know we're chartering. That's the plan right now.

Injury-wise I'm really not going to disclose anything right now. It's like any game -- we have some guys that are out. Once we get through the first game I'll talk a little bit more about that. Other guys wait and see, so we'll see how this week goes.

You throw the virus in on top of it, who knows who's going to be there on Saturday.

Q. You had mentioned in your initial comments the concerns about conditioning and maybe kind of starting to be able to practice the way you want to. Just curious what do you think the level of play is going to be not just with your team but just around the other teams starting in the Big Ten, based on maybe what you saw in some other conferences that started late but before you?

KIRK FERENTZ: I haven't watched a lot of football, but some of the football I've seen I've actually been kind of surprised. I thought there might be more turnovers, more missed tackles, all that kind of thing. We'll keep our fingers crossed. I think our guys have practiced well. I thought we gained some ground a week ago. That was really the kind of end of our preseason, if you will. It's hard to say. It's really hard to say.

But one thing that became very apparent when we started talking about practice and actually practicing, it was so different than what we would normally do in August just because of we were at. We had to be guarded, cautious just how long we were out on the field, how many things

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we did with our players, just for a fear of breaking down.

All that being said, we still had more soft tissue issues than we would like to and we've even had some surgeries on bones in a foot, those kinds of things. More younger players. I don't know what you attribute that to. But there's a reason why you train. There's a reason why you train, and it allows you to practice better, and hopefully practice allows you to play better. One thing about that topic, everybody has dealt with the same challenges.

Q. One follow-up on that. A lot of teams I know in some other conferences earlier in the season struggled a bit on special teams, and if you notice that, did that at all change anything that you did in preparing your special teams, maybe giving a little more emphasis to it given the odd practice structures that you've had since spring, summer, and fall?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's early-season football, whether you have camp or not. A lot of times, turnovers, penalties, those kinds of things are bad news for us. Any time you enter a season or any time you play in a bowl after a delay, I think those are always weighing heavy on your mind. We try to make sure the players are mindful of that. I think we've done the work to be solid in those areas, but you never know. They have a returner, and that makes it even -- there's a lot of things that can happen just if you're not quick that can really change and impact of the game.

Q. We get these updates every week from the sports information office on how many tests and how many positive tests, negative tests were received by the athletic department. Can you roughly estimate what percentage of your players and staff have had COVID, and what you've heard maybe around the country?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think I just heard Florida is having further issues. First of all, this is a very real thing. I think everywhere around the country you're seeing it happen, you're seeing games cancel. The fact that the NFL has had some issues the last couple weeks, it just illustrates nobody is immune to it. NBA had the best setup because they could create a bubble, but to expect to do that with a college football team I don't think is realistic.

We've had our share of numbers, and I won't get too specific, but we've had our share. The one thing I would share with you and talk freely about this is I think when we got the news on August 11, I thought our players dropped their guard, and maybe we did as coaches, as well.

But I think a lot of it is a mental attitude. It's not that you're going to out-tough the virus. I don't mean it in that regard.

I'm not talking about that. But what I'm talking about is just being smart about what you do. Again, nobody is immune from this, but I think all of us can try to do some things to give ourselves a chance to be somewhat protected or at least minimize the risk. And I think when the news of August 11 got passed, I think everybody just had a little bit of an, Ah, hell attitude. Like what the hell? That was a hard thing to go through. I think we also went through a period back in June where for a lot of our players I'm not sure it seemed real, and then we got some guys that tested positive.

But since we've come back and gotten going when the season got rebooted, I think everybody has been as vigilant as they can. We've had very little activity in that regard. Very thankful for that. And all that being said, I know the one thing I know is you can't rest, you can't drop your guard, you can't go, okay, we're out of the woods. Just like life, you're never out of the woods, and we're certainly not out of the woods with this virus deal.

Q. Tyrone Tracy said earlier that players are going to have the option to kneel or stand for the National Anthem. Can you confirm that's true, and tell us how that decision came about, I guess?

KIRK FERENTZ: Our players do a great job of listening. I told them I thought it was best just to let it happen, but I guess that cat is out of the bag. But the real story behind that is we've had discussions going back the last couple months. I say we, the leadership group, the leadership group and myself, where we've talked about the subject three different times and shared some information with them and shared a letter from a veteran who felt very strongly about nobody should kneel.

And then I'd fast forward about 12 days ago. We had a Navy seal, 20-year Navy seal who served in two White House administrations and strategic planning, that type of thing, also led missions in South America, the middle east, Asia, give an answer that was very, very different. His spin on it was in his mind it's all about Americans being their authentic selves, doing what they feel is best and stay true to their beliefs.

In his words, that's what people like him fought for, so that our country can enjoy the liberties and freedoms that are very unique to our country. As it comes home to our leadership group, the discussions I listened to and participated in, on three separate occasions were extremely impressive. Everybody was respectful of each other's opinions, and I'm convinced right now that we'll see a variety of stances taken by our team.

But I can also tell you that what I've heard from three



separate meetings is everybody is respectful of each other. Nobody is judging each other. Nobody is taking roll, any of that kind of stuff. They're acting like a team should. I'm extremely impressed with the way the guys have handled it.

Q. In the past some of your best performances, some of your team's best performances have come on the heels of some adverse situations. That includes the Penn State and Michigan turnaround in 2016, among several others. What is it about your team, your program, possibly the way you coach, that enables your team to be able to move past those tough situations and put themselves in a position to compete and a lot of times win games after adverse situations?

KIRK FERENTZ: I remember hearing Aaron Kampman years ago quoting the late Ed Thomas, his high school coach, about there are two things that can happen when you face a tough situation. You lay down and get in the fetal position or you get up and go back into the fight and you go to work. There is no option.

The bottom line is there is no option, and I think in any circumstance, whether it's a tough thing off the field, a tough thing on the field, it just gets back to reassessing what happened, where are we at, and what do we need to do to move forward. I think the common denominator in at least my 22 years here, and I'll extend it to my time as assistant coach, common denominator is we've had really good players here. Like Andre Tippett, a pro Hall of Famer, but good guys, good people on top of it. And a guy like Andre Tippett who's zoom call with our linebackers 40 years later zooming with the linebackers here this past off-season.

So there's just the quality of people here, be it our players and our coaches, support staff. I think that's been a common denominator, and I think we've all worked hard to assess what needed to be assessed. And then more importantly, how do we move forward, how do we better things, how do we improve things. I stand here today and feel very confident about where we are and feel like we got a great group of guys. I can't say enough about the way our players have handled the last however many months it's been. Left here March 13th. They've done a great, great job. That's kind of something I was banking on all along. We've got quality people here.

Q. Given what happened in June and such, we haven't really seen mass transfers out of the program; is that a good sign for you, and how have you held things together given what happened this summer?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, you know, around June 6th I think

it would have been, I don't do a lot of texting. Obviously I did send a text out to our staff just saying that we had good people in the program, what I just said, we have good people in the program and we'll work through this, and I'm confident in the people that we have, be it our players, support staff, our staff.

And that's exactly what we've done. All the things I've said publicly we've tried to put them in action, and that's the important thing. So we've tried to do a good job of listening, what are our players saying, how were they feeling, and then we've tried to find solutions to make people feel like things are a little better, but better here we can improve things, and we'll continue to do that and continue to listen to our players. That's the important thing.

But I also think they have a healthy respect for what has to be done, and I don't think anybody has lost sight of the fact this is a competitive game. And as I've said publicly at some point, you either measure up or you don't. You make that first down or you don't. You get the stop or you don't. Field goal goes in or it doesn't.

They understand that. I think they have a good understanding of that, and we'll see how it looks over the next nine weeks. It all gets back to the quality of the people, and that's one thing that's never changed. We've got really good people on this football team, and guys that want to do things right and do them together, and that's the thing that helps me sleep every night.

Q. I've been talking to Spencer Petras' high school coach and a teammate of his. Can you elaborate on some of the things he's been doing at Iowa?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, Mazzy (phonetic) first of all is a great guy, great story. He's got a tremendous story if you've got about an hour to listen to it, on a lot of levels. Spencer is a great kid. He's just done a really nice job. We obviously liked him when we recruited him, and everything he's done since he's been here, he's grown, he's developed, improved with each opportunity, and he's practicing well right now.

So we have every confidence he'll play well this year. He'll have some ups and downs. He is a first-year player. Everybody does. He'll be anxious and nervous on Saturday just like all of us will. That's competition. But I think he'll do an outstanding job, and he's worked hard. He acts like you'd want a quarterback to act. But it's all genuine. It's not for show or any of that kind of stuff. It's just who he is, and we're just thrilled he's on our football team.

Q. Following up with Spencer right there, he's a new quarterback coming in, but he certainly has a lot of

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weapons around him. How much has that helped him throughout camp in taking over that starting role where he's got so many weapons at receiver and experienced running backs and a good O-line? How much has that helped him in preparation?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's got to help, and then the other part of it is we have to live up to that. We should have a good receiver group, but we've got to go out and play, and I have no reason to think they won't. They've been practicing well. It's a good group of guys. Our tight ends are doing a nice job. I wish we had two more. But we've got two that have played and done a really good job, and they've grown and improved. And hopefully we'll be able to put an O-line together that can protect him and help us be effective in the run game, as well.

So I think we have a chance to have a suitable offense, but it's still got to come together. It's a matter of still working hard and we've got to finish this week up at practice, but I think all the -- we've got some experience at a lot of positions. I left out the running backs. We have three guys that we have a lot of confidence in, some younger guys doing a good job. Now it's just a matter of pulling it together and going out and executing and playing well together. It's a good group of guys, and that's got to help him a little bit.

Q. Offensive tackles with 40 starts at Big Ten schools don't grow on trees; what does Coy Cronk bring to you right off the bat?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, as much as anything, just what you referenced, the 40 starts, the experience. You talk about a guy like Spencer who's never played, Coy is at the opposite end with 40 games under his belt already. That will be helpful to our team just to -- we lost a really good player in Tristan who's doing really well right now, but when you lose a guy that you could really count on who had that experience level, it's nice to have another guy who's also pretty experienced.

I'm not comparing the two players other than that way. So it's good. It's certainly good. AJ on the other side is a really experienced player, too, and he's done a very nice job throughout this whole preseason preparation. I've got to tell you it feels really strange seeing preseason when guys are taking mid terms during preseason practice and we're wearing winter coats out there to get in your car, so that's kind of strange. But we're thrilled that Coy is here. He's a tremendous young man.

Q. When you look at Purdue and specifically the two receivers, they always seem to have three or four or five that are pretty good. They provide probably a greater challenge than even most that you've faced

recently. With your secondary do you anticipate playing five or even six defensive backs throughout the game, and how does Julius Brents kind of figure into that right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, as far as Julius, he's had a really good preseason, so we're excited about that. He's doing really well. Last year he had a hard time getting things together, injuries and different -- just never kind of got in stride, but he's done a good job here this year, this preseason period.

I was trying to think about their two receivers. I was going to say they're the best we've faced except we've faced Landry and Odell Beckham. Those two guys are pretty good, they just couldn't get the ball to them. I'm thinking about Minnesota last year where they did get the ball to both those guys and they had other guys that were good, too, so it's kind of a comparable -- there's a reason why Minnesota scored as many points as they did last year and you look at Purdue and they've got a bunch of guys that can really go at the receiver position. But those two guys are marquee players. We tried to recruit Bell and just didn't have any luck, but what a great player he is, too. We had a hard time defending him last year alone, same thing with Moore the year before that and now you've got a couple quarterbacks that can play.

They're a good -- expect them to be a very explosive offensive football team. And to answer your question, we'll play -- I'm sure we'll play some five and six DB stuff.

Q. It seemed like you had a pretty good battle at guard that Cole Banwart and Kyler Schott ended up getting the starting jobs. What separated them at the end, and are you going to think about maybe using a rotation during the first game to kind of get some of those other guys out there, as well?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, so Banwart started because I left him off the two deep last time we met, right, and I apologize for that. But yeah, to answer your question, we have some competition going on, and I really don't know who's going to start on the offensive line, but you've got those guys, you've got Kallenberger, you've got certainly Cody in the mix, Justin Britt. So we've got a handful of guys, and I'm not sure what the starting lineup is going to be.

But to your second point, I think, yeah, you'll probably see some rotation going on because I think those guys are so close there's not really a reason not to play some of the guys some multiple reps.

Q. A lot of times you'll kind of joke that you'll sleep

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well on weeks you've practiced well. Do you think you're going to be sleeping well this Friday night and what are you worried about the most?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, the one difference is I didn't have to worry about taking a COVID test on Saturday morning, for myself or anybody else. That's a new dimension. And those things you can't control, but I guess we've had people get appendicitis before and things like that, random things. But you're never out of the woods. That's one thing life teaches you.

Certainly the virus has taught us that. But all we can do is worry about what we can control, and as I told -- referenced in the answer to Mike that I'm really proud of our players. There's no guarantees, but I think they've been very mindful about how they're doing things and trying to stay as much out of harm's way as possible.

But as football players and a football team the best thing we can do is try to practice. I thought we had a good day today. It was a first really heavy workday of this week. Hopefully we'll do it tomorrow and hopefully -- just got done watching the film, a lot of things we need to clean up, so hopefully tomorrow a lot of those things will look a little better than they looked today.

We'll be saying that in week nine. I'm guessing this is one of those years where because of the circumstances it probably won't be as crisp as you hope. Hopefully we'll be able to gain ground each and every week and that's going to really come back to how we practice each and every day, whether we're going hard or just out there going light. Either way there is certainly an opportunity to improve every time we're out there.

Q. When you look at some of the young linebackers you have, Justin Jacobs was a guy that you highly recruited, Ohio State came in late, but you were able to keep him; and then Jay Higgins in Indianapolis was a tackling machine his last couple of years. If either one of them have to play and potentially play a lot, do you feel like they can do the job, and what do they bring to the field if they are on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they'll both be there Saturday unless something happens between now and then. My guess is they'll be on the field in some form or fashion, special teams, you never know. But both have been guys we've really enjoyed working with. Jay has only been here a short while, and certainly Justin has been here now for a year plus. Happy with the progress. Happy with what we've seen. I'll throw Barrington Wade in there who's kind of an older guy, kind of forgotten in some ways because of the Cash position. I think he is one of our more improved

players playing with a real good confidence right now. I think it's fair to say that all those guys have a chance to be on the field and really pleased with the progress all three of them have made, Jay being the youngest of the group and probably the most to learn still.

Q. You mentioned how this is unusual having a Big Ten game to start off with. Sometimes that even increases the urgency for some players, but I'm curious how that affects your evaluation. It's still a first game, unusual circumstances, but obviously jumping right into a conference opponent.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's just the stakes are a little bit higher because if you want to win the Big Ten West or the Big Ten East, it helps to win those games. That's just simple math there.

It's not like playing a non-conference team. Not that those games don't mean a lot, too, but they don't apply to the conference race. Everything this year being condensed is just that much more significant.

But all that being said, you can't change your approach. Our opener last year, the year before, we were trying to win, trying to play our best football, and that goal remains the same. There's only so much you can do in a given week, no matter who we're playing we want our guys to try to prepare as well as possible. I expect the coaching staff is going to do the same thing and hopefully we'll go out and play as well as possible. The difference this year is there's no really mapping out of the schedule.

It's not like three games, a bye week, four more games, another bye week, all this and that. It's a nine-game march. That's all it is. You don't really have to think too hard about that. Only variable this year is we've got three short weeks, two Friday games and an election-day game. That's a little bit of a wrinkle in there, make an adjustment on that, but it's basically nine weeks straight ahead, don't look back.