

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Phil Parker

Press Conference



Q. Every year is a new challenge, you have people coming and going. This year in the back end you had to replace two guys who were on NFL rosters right now and having a very short window to try to put everything together. How much have they grown, first of all, over the last three weeks, and in what ways if they have?

PHIL PARKER: Well, let's go back and start. I think we've gone back to August where these kids were just starting to get back into it and were going to have a season and the preparation, what they did there and what they were trying to do in the summer had a little bit of carryover. We had no spring ball so you really couldn't tell about all the kids that you had or how they could have developed into where they're at now. The last three weeks I would say this: Our kids have been practicing really hard. Every kid is really into it. It's nice going to meetings. You can see the development, understanding the game of football and the tightness and tight knit group they are right now. Really pleased the way they've developed into playing consistent football. We've tried to eliminate the explosive plays. We probably don't have many explosive plays that we've been giving up but we have been giving up some big chunks at a time and I think we're trying to narrow that down, which I think guys are doing well. I think Merriweather has done a good job at safety along with Belton. They both have been playing in there, and Belton has also played back in the backside as a strong safety. But then Jack Koerner is a guy who keeps on developing, keeps on improving every week. He's taking more of a command back there. That's what you need back there as a safety. You need to know what's going on just as well as a coach does.

And then obviously Matt Hankins, really up and beyond what I thought he would be at this time. He has been such a great leader to all the guys not only in the secondary but I think the team. And I think the development he's had just watching him practice and competing every day whether it's in the special teams aspect of it, maybe he's not even on the first team or second team special teams, but when we go down and work the other side, he's working his best on working on releases. So I just see the difference that

he has there for the leadership that we need and continue to do that. So I'm very happy with what I've seen with Matt. Matt has been very, very good for us.

Q. I wanted to ask about Jack Campbell and what he brings to this team and kind of what you saw from him in the game Friday and what we can expect from him moving forward.

PHIL PARKER: Jack is a very special kid as far as person, great kid, nicest kid you want to be around outside the facility, but once he gets on that field, it just seems like he turns it up a little bit. Josey Jewell was very similar to that. I'm not saying that Jack is that, but I'm just saying Jack brings a little bit of energy, some toughness, old school maybe as far as I remember -- I remember I had a roommate Jim Morrissey. He reminds me of Jim Morrissey when I played at Michigan State. That's kind of who he reminds me of.

The only thing about the differences between those two kids is they're guys -- Jack probably weighs 30 more pounds than Jim Morrissey did.

But really like his intensity. The attitude that he brings, such a positive kid. I'm excited to see what he can really do.

Q. The first couple weeks of the season maybe you guys didn't -- I don't want to say you guys played bad defensively, maybe not up to the level that you're used to. The last couple weeks you hold Michigan State and Minnesota both to seven points in each of those games. What big improvements from the first two weeks to the last two weeks really helped sell the defense into really starting to lock down and force more turnovers?

PHIL PARKER: Well, I think it all starts with your preparation. Obviously we weren't happy the last two weeks giving up that many points, either, with seven apiece. One was on the second teamers but we expect them to be at a high standard, too.

But I think when I noticed it was after the Northwestern game. You could tell the difference in the practice tempo and the energy that was coming out to practice. I think the last three weeks we've been practicing at a high level, and



I feel very confident in that the guys are going to go out and play hard. Might not play as clean -- we didn't play as clean in the first two games, but I think these guys are all set on going out and giving their best effort, and you see it in practice. You see it in meetings. To me that's part of the battle. Doesn't guarantee a win or anything like that, but our kids are invested and they're willing to keep on investing, and even if they don't know the outcome, all they know is they're going to invest of their time, their effort and prepare the best that they can and see what happens. And I think the guys have been doing it, and I think the team is actually getting closer and closer as we go.

Q. You talked a little bit about the turnovers, the interceptions. I think it's 11 straight games for you guys. The amount you've had just going back three, four years, can you explain the volume and consistently being able to get interceptions?

PHIL PARKER: I think it has probably a couple different things. We're mainly a zone type of match-up team that we are in the back end for many reasons. I like to have more zone eyes than man eyes, and what I mean by that, a lot of people that played man-to-man, it's very hard to get interceptions when you're playing so much man-to-man, and the way we've done it has been in a lot of quarters, a lot of quarter match, opportunities of guys the way they prepare, they study, they understand the game, they understand the splits, they recognize formations. They understand tendencies.

It develops from guys preparing, but they're preparing -- some of the freshmen right now are preparing for their junior or senior year, and people don't understand -- it's not like you just go out there and say, hey, this is my first year, I picked up all this information and gathered it and everybody has an opportunity to go out there and play.

But what happens is you start seeing, recognizing things a lot easier the more film you watch, and then you start -- the more you focus in on the game plan during the week and understanding what somebody is doing to you, you start seeing things that it's hard to describe to just the average person as far as the preparation-wise. They see the games on Saturday, they don't understand how much knowledge or how much preparation that somebody has put into it, and the ability to see things and be able to make that decision, are you going to go for the pick, are you going to go for the interception -- go for the interception or are you going to go for the tackle.

I think our guys have been pretty good at matching routes. With a lot of zone eyes you have a lot more opportunities to catch interceptions and turnovers than you do in man coverage, strictly man.

Q. On a side note, Jim Morrissey, is he the one who wore 51 for the Bears back in the '80s?

PHIL PARKER: I think '84 was his last year at Michigan State. Yeah, he was 51 -- the first thing he said to me when he called me back, I'm probably going to get cut from the Bears because they gave me 51, but he ended up lasting about eight years, and finished his last two years, year and a half I think was with Green Bay. But yeah, very good player. Yep, that was him.

Q. Kaevon Merriweather, an interesting background, basketball player, you obviously knew something or heard something about him. What did you hear when he was in high school, and what did you see, and then fitting in he had a really big stick in that first game against Purdue that really elevated him as a player or maybe it was the Northwestern game. What has he shown you in the last two games at strong safety?

PHIL PARKER: Merriweather is a very smart kid. He's done a lot better job of preparation time, putting in and asking the right questions. You can tell when somebody is watching film when they come in and ask a question, hey, Coach, what are we going to do here and what are we going to do here if they do this. So you know he's been studying the game, not only -- on his own, and that's important.

I think the confidence level of going through the game, I think he's getting used to making the calls and being a dictator back there. You've got to make sure you're the one that's got to make the calls, you and Jack and everybody has got to be on the same page, and it makes you play faster.

I think he was very athletic in high school. Obviously I think before he transferred over to Belleville he was at Romulus, and I actually watched him in a workout, saw him, and then he ended up transferring at the end of the year, so he was at one school in the springtime and then in the summer he was actually Belleville. Really did a good job, really good kid, from a good family, and I'm happy where he's at. He's not satisfied where he's at, either. He's looking to grow and improve his playing ability.

Q. I actually wanted to ask about Penn State specifically. I know they've been a little bit of a source of frustration, 0 and 4 the last four years. What's the biggest challenge trying to stop a Penn State offense, especially with that dual-threat type quarterback?

PHIL PARKER: Well, they always have good talent, but watching them, and if you never look at the scoreboard to

see what's on the other side, these guys are very athletic, very similar system that they had before a new offensive coordinator came in. But they're still Penn State, and as far as that means they have their system. There's a little bit of tweaks into it. It's going to be a challenge for us. We're going to have to play clean football. We're going to have to be able to communicate and anticipate things before they happen. That's the only way you're going to beat these guys is understanding what you have to do and recognizing things before the play happens. And I think our guys have been doing a good job. I think the last three days have been really good of practice. We've got one more time, looking forward to the preparation. I really commend the players for how they're going about their business, and when it's time to go out there and practice they practice, and there's nothing wrong with having some fun, too. When they've got time to have fun, but when it's time to go and the play starts them guys are moving and I'm really excited to see what happens.

Q. Who do you think is going to start at quarterback for them?

PHIL PARKER: I'm sure either one is capable of doing it. 14, was it Clifford? I think it's -- he's won a lot of games last year, didn't he? I don't know, what was their record last year? I think they won a lot of games. So he's already been the starter for a lot of games. It's hard to say -- maybe he had a bad day or maybe something is wrong with him, who knows. But I think both guys are capable of running their offense to their ability and it's going to be a challenge for us to make sure that we can play our best. I just want to make sure that we give the best shot we have.

Q. I think Riley Moss was the first guy that mentioned what you've been talking about, guys kind of changing the tempo in practice and flying around a little bit. Was there something said? Was the leadership group with the defense saying something that kind of said, hey, we've got to amp it up? Did you say something? How did this happen?

PHIL PARKER: Well, you know, it's your job as a coach, you've got to make sure that what you're seeing on the film after the first and second game over there and evaluate your practices, everybody has different tempos. And on defense, we just thought that some guys needed it, and the guys that got to take control of that are the guys that are out there.

We can sit there and talk about it, but the one thing that I saw was the leadership between the linebacker group and the defensive backs with Matt Hankins and making sure that the growth was there, and then all of a sudden it took over from one position, the linebacker position, then it

became contagious.

It's really been exciting. I think at all levels right now, everybody is holding everybody accountable for what they do on the field. If somebody is loafing on the field, the players will call them out. If somebody is not giving or finishing a play, the players will call them out. The coaches don't even have to say a word. And that's the best thing about it.

I told somebody the other day, I was on the phone with somebody, and I said, I'm not coaching effort anymore. I don't have to coach it. You evaluate it, look at it. At least the last three days. It could change tomorrow, but I doubt it.

I think these guys have gotten a taste of what it is to prepare and how to do it and hold people accountable, and they're doing that, so it's self-imposed. I think they've done a great job. I can't be any happier in what I see with these guys right now.

Q. I was wondering Tory Taylor has done a great job this year backing opposing offenses up inside the 20. How does that set the table for you guys on defense and what things have you been able to do when offenses have started in such bad field position?

PHIL PARKER: Well, there's a couple times I think he's done a great job. For what he's done and accomplished so far this season for us. Obviously when you back somebody up inside the 10, the odds of them guys driving the ball and scoring is very, very low.

So we're very pleased to have that weapon. We're excited about that. Sometimes we're not always doing such a great job on defense. It's going to take them a little bit longer to score and take some time off the clock. You know, so that's a different way of trying to burn the clock. Trying to get less plays.

But anyway, I think it's been really tremendous. I think he's doing a good job. Knock on wood, to make sure he keeps on doing that, and I think he's been really good for our whole team.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the impact Daviyon Nixon has had on the entire defense and especially the last couple weeks of Zach VanValkenburg?

PHIL PARKER: Well, Daviyon Nixon, he's very athletic, very energetic. He's a guy that has a big motor that likes to go, and when he's going it's hard to block him, and he has that little bit of excitement to the things he keeps things fresh. It's kind of funny, we were going at it pretty good

yesterday, and we hit the quarterback and put the quarterback out of -- our scout team quarterback. We only had maybe one or two plays left. I think it was one.

So it's funny, he jumped up as the quarterback and played the quarterback. For a 300-pound quarterback I thought it was pretty good that we let him do it because it was a pretty good throw downfield even though he threw an interception, but it was a nice spin on the ball and all that.

The energy that he brings I guess I'm saying, kind of bringing guys together, you've got to have fun, and I think they were having fun, but as a player he's a very impacted player for us obviously, and then Zach, he's done -- last week was awesome for him. I'm happy for him. He's a hard worker. He's grinding all the time. You know, that's a guy that's experienced. He's played the game for a lot of years in college and he's done a good job for us and we're happy that we have him.

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