

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Thursday, November 19, 2020

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Brian Ferentz

Press Conference



Q. Describe a little bit of the running game, how that's sort of progressed so far this season. It seems like the offensive line has been consistent, Tyler Goodson, Mekhi Sargent, Ivory Kelly-Martin have all done their thing. How would you assess the running game halfway through the season?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, we're pleased with the running game. I feel like everything starts and ends with our ability to run the football and establish the run game. You look at the last two victories, we were certainly able to do that. You look at the games we lost, I thought we ran the ball pretty well at Purdue. Didn't run it quite as well against Northwestern and certainly that hurt us.

But I think you bring up an interesting point when you talk about why has it been successful. You mentioned the offensive line. I feel like they've been playing pretty well and certainly played at a high level last week. You mentioned three backs also playing at a really high level. But one thing it's important to think about when you talk about the run game, it's always a team effort. I've been around a lot of really good offensive lines where we weren't doing much but averaging about four yards a carry, which isn't enough because when you talk about how do you have that success running the football, obviously the line has to do a great job to get it started. Backs have to do a good job.

But when you think about team football, we've got nine guys on every play that we're capable of blocking unless you're talking about wildcat or quarterback run game, right. So one guy is handing the ball off, one guy is carrying it. Only nine guys can block, which means there's going to be two free guys on defense, and the goal on every play is to put the ball in the least dangerous unblocked player that we can. Hopefully there's one guy way on the backside of the play and then hopefully the guy on the front side that we can't get blocked is the least dangerous, the secondary support player.

But that's going to take the tight ends, the fullbacks and then most importantly the perimeter players, and when you

look at the success we were able to have Friday night, certainly the line played well. Certainly the backs ran the ball well and were seeing things. Tight ends I thought played well.

But probably underappreciated was the value of the receivers in the run game last week, finishing blocks, starting blocks, sustaining blocks, and if you look at any of the big explosive runs from last week or the season, chances are you're going to see a couple receivers in that picture allowing us to go from 14 yards to 46 yards or 12 yards to 25 or whatever it is.

Certainly those things are important in the game.

Q. You mentioned the receivers. Brandon Smith was pretty important, I thought, across the board in the running game even when he didn't get any targets. How do you feel he is right now within the entire offense, and do you expect him to get more targets going forward?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, we'd certainly like to get everybody involved, whether it's Brandon, Ihmir, Tyrone, or Nico on the outside. You have four guys right there that you certainly want to have the ball, then you have three good running backs that you want to have the ball and then you've got tight ends that you want to get involved, as well.

Certainly you want to get everyone involved. I think Brandon, what you've seen through the first four weeks is just his value in our offense. He's come up with a couple key conversions on 3rd down. He's done a nice job single width into the boundary when we have that match-up. And then last week as you alluded to, certainly no targets in the throw game, but if you look at what he did in the run game, he had as big an impact on that game as he's had all year. Certainly want to get the ball in his hands a little bit more.

But football is an interesting game; you never know how it's going to go. Going into the game Friday night, the way we had game planned, certainly we wanted to put the ball in the air a little bit. I have to be honest, I didn't expect to run it as effectively as we ended up running the ball. So that changes the game as the game goes on, right.

You want to make sure that you're not making things too complicated or reinvent the wheel. The way that game



went, the way the weather was, our ability to run the football made it pretty easy to just keep going back to that well, but that's not going to be the case every week, and certainly Saturday in State College we're going to be presented with a whole new challenge, and at some point during the year everyone is going to be called upon to pull their weight, make those plays as far as targets go.

I fully anticipate him getting the ball a little bit more as we move forward here, but you never know how those games are going to turn out.

Q. As you know, the backup quarterback is one play away from being called on. We haven't seen a lot of Alex Padilla. Would there be a major dropoff if he had to come in, the state of his progress? And then as you might imagine, a lot of fans ask us about Deuce Hogan. We haven't seen a look of him so maybe you can give us a progress report on what he's doing behind the scenes.

BRIAN FERENTZ: I'd start with Spencer because I think Spencer, his progress is indicative of Alex's progress is indicative of Deuce's progress from this standpoint. It's been a unique year, obviously, and it continues to get a little bit more unique by the week.

But I know we've talked about it in the past, when you look at the calendar year, right, so you lose all of spring ball, you lose 15 practices. You lose a lot of time in the weight room from the course of May to late July going into August.

You lose all that time but also in that time you lose in the weight room, you lose a lot of time on the field doing skills and drills, working on routes on air, 7-on-7, all the things that go into the skill development that the quarterback, receiver, tight end, running back, anybody who's touching the ball, those skill positions.

When you lose all that time, unfortunately you don't get it back. I'll tell you, I think it's difficult to become a great quarterback on Zoom. I think Zoom is important. It's allowed us to communicate here today, whatever video service we're using. But you can't become a great football player. You can't become a great quarterback certainly on Zoom. You can get better, and those guys that we're talking about right now all got better during that period, which is a testament to their work ethic, a testament to their commitment to being good football players.

But the reality is without being out on the field and throwing and catching that ball, you're losing time in that skill development.

Now, the only thing you can do is try to make up for lost time once you get going again, which for us was briefly in

August and then again really in late September and October.

What I've tried to do and what we're all trying to do as a staff is look at our progress and try to be realistic about our expectations and what we're trying to get done as we progress through this period.

I think Spencer has done a tremendous job of growing and maturing and becoming a better player regardless of those circumstances, but you can't ignore the detriment that the lack of time is going to have on your development, and then I would say the same for Alex. Been very pleased with his development and the things he's done. But like a lot of guys, giving them these reps for the first time in the last couple months has been really good, but you're starting behind the 8-ball a little bit, and same thing with Deuce. Unfortunately for Deuce, he wasn't even here in the spring. He had no basis. His first opportunity to really go out and practice with our football program was briefly in August and then mostly in September.

Those are all the things you're trying to deal with in this period, and all three of those guys have handled it well.

Q. A couple games ago you had to make some changes along the offensive line due to injury, illness, and the offensive line has taken off a little bit. Are you tempted to if it ain't broke don't fix it and ride this for a while or will those guys get back in there?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, shoot, we'd like to have everybody available. If you look at us the first couple weeks we were rolling guys through anyway. The six guys that are playing now, they were playing early in the year. We were looking at more of an eight-man rotation. Certainly that rotation has been slowed down a little bit without Coy and without Kyler but we're looking forward to getting those guys back, getting them healthy. Like we always do, we're going to try to get the best guys on the field. That's our goal, whether it's match-up related, whether it's health related, whatever it is. But very pleased with the guys that have been out there and really felt like we were making strides those first two weeks, too.

I'd go back to my previous answer, the question about the quarterbacks. It's true of any position group, and if you want to get specific with the offensive line or the tight ends, the guys involved in that core blocking, another learned skill. It's skill development is a little bit underrated these days, but when you talk about blocking, that's about one of the hardest skills that you can try to develop in a football player. It's not an easy thing to do to move another human being against their will, and it takes reps, it takes time, it takes repetition, and then when you combine that with the

fact that you're going to ask five, six, seven guys to work together on every snap, it gets even more complicated.

Just feel like the guys have done a good job of taking advantage of the practice time. A lot of times you get in the season you've had a bunch of practice time so that it becomes a little bit more about polishing or putting the final touches on the game plan, matching up against the opponent.

This year we've had to try to keep the emphasis on skill development as we moved into the regular season, and I think they've done a hell of a job as far as going to work every day and trying to get better, and now I hope we're starting to see the results on the field. But I'm also a realist and I've had enough experience to know that you've never arrived -- you're as good as your last game, and right now it's pretty good up front. But we've got a pretty stiff challenge ahead of us on Saturday in State College.

We need to take the next step.

Q. I'm just wondering from last year to this year, has the way in which you call or manage a game on offense changed at all with obviously Spencer taking over at quarterback and Tyler Goodson at running back with another year under his belt?

BRIAN FERENTZ: That's a good question. I hope so. I hope the way I've managed or called a game has changed every year. I've tried to evolve within the role and tried to get better at my job. I know the results are probably always debatable, but I assure you that my emphasis is on growth. If we're going to ask the players to get better and improve then that's something I want to do as a play caller.

With Spencer, I don't know that it's changed that much. As far as what we're asking him to do in the run game, what we're asking him to do in protections and just with the plan, not a drastic drop-off or difference from what we asked Nate to do a year ago. So certainly haven't changed in that regard.

But whether it's Tyler or the other two backs, I think we've tried to be cognizant of the fact that we have good guys in the backfield, and we want to make sure we get them involved. Sometimes that means maybe having one or more of them in the game at the same time. I think we've had a couple snaps where we have a least two of those guys out there, certainly have Tyler taking the snap from time to time, it's a little different. And trying to evolve within that package, as well, as we move forward to see if we can grow a little bit there.

But as far as managing the game or calling the game, I

think it's different because I'd like to hope that I'm getting better at it or getting a better feel for it. One thing that we've talked about a lot in the off-season and one thing that I've been very pleased with through the first four weeks is just the tempo of which we're playing. We're not a tempo outfit. We're not a hurry-up outfit. We like to huddle, we like to change personnel, but that doesn't mean we have to play slow, and we're not trying to slog through the game. We want to make sure we're getting snaps and getting plays run and trying to push that tempo in and out of the huddle, changing personnel, getting people on and off the field and still trying to put pressure on the defense in that regard.

I've actually been very pleased with how Spencer has managed the huddle, gotten us in and out of that thing and gotten the play called and gotten us to the line of scrimmage in a timely fashion.

Q. Two years ago when we were at the Outback Bowl you said you felt like Jimmy Johnson with that great train robbery of getting rid of Herschel Walker and kind of compared that with getting Tyler Linderbaum on offense and to my novice eyes it seemed to be what Jimmy Johnson did almost with a Super Bowl type of player. How good is he? How has he performed, and in space he seems to have very few peers. What's kind of been your assessment of Tyler midway through his sophomore year as a center?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't remember that comparison, but I look smart now so I'll let you give me credit for it. Tyler is playing at a really high level. If I had to single two guys out up front right now, Tyler is playing at an extremely high level and so is Alaric. Those two guys are really setting the tempo for us up front and some other guys aren't too far behind. I think Cody Ince is a guy that if we keep him healthy, he's just going to continue to grow. Cole Banwart is playing his best football of his career. Mark Kallenberger is another guy that since the bowl game has continued to grow and continued to mature and take on a bigger role, and then Justin Britt played his best football Friday night of his career. If we can get Kyler back and Coy back I feel confident those guys will continue to grow, as well.

On the offensive line everything is going to start at the center position. The guy is going to be your tone setter, going to be your tempo setter, and he's going to be your bellcow. Going back to my last answer, talking about getting guys in and out of the huddle, nobody can get to the ball faster than the center. He sets that tempo right from the start, and when you're talking about Tyler, yes, athletic, strong, has all those measurables that you're looking for, but the level he's competing at, his desire to compete and to line up and beat the person across from

him, it's as high as I've been around. He's a pleasure to coach. He's a pleasure to be around. If we can steal some more guys like that from the defense, we'd certainly love to do it. Guys like him are few and far between.

Between him and AJ, our leadership up front, it's showing up. There's a great shot last week where those two guys end up leading the way to end up right out in front of the ball, finishing blocks into the sideline, and when you talk about bullying or being the bullies of the Big Ten or being the most physical team or any of this stuff that we've talked about in the past around here, right now those two guys are leading the charge.

Q. How did the wildcat kind of come to fruition for you guys and do you like it?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, it looked pretty good when it scored. Yeah, I like it when it works. But I think the idea has just been trying to expand what we're doing. I think there's really two things about the wildcat that were intriguing to us. One was just snapping the ball to a guy that can run. Obviously you're eliminating part of the operation. It opened up to us some of the read game, the gap read stuff. Just felt like that was a better guy doing it than the quarterbacks that have been on our roster, that are playing for us, not true runners.

So that was certainly part of the equation. And then the other part of the equation was we see a lot of defenses are going to defend formations. Forcing them to defend a formation, evening those numbers that I talked about earlier, run game, typically we can only block nine of 11. We feel like if we can get people to defend those formations, that's one less player to block. And we're just trying to even numbers out, create advantages for us in the run game, and so far we've been able to do that. But I do anticipate as we show more of it as it becomes a bigger part of the offense, certainly people are going to defend it and have creative ways to try to take those things away. So we need to continue to evolve there and make sure that we're staying ahead of the curve.

Q. As a coach and as part of the coaching staff, what's been the hardest thing since the season began in regards to dealing with the COVID as sort of always in the front of your minds?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, that's an interesting -- it's been an interesting year as far as those things go on, and I think first of all, it's a very good question. I'll try to answer it as concisely as I can. You open up a can of worms.

Number one, I just feel fortunate to be standing here in front of you guys today. This world, things are certainly

getting a little bit more serious here in the Midwest, and you worry every day just about the safety and the health of our community. You want to make sure we're doing the right things to protect people. And so that's always a concern.

But as long as they say that it's safe for us to play football and operate and do what we're doing, then you follow those guidelines and then you follow those protocols to the best of your ability and you try to take this as seriously as you can.

From a football standpoint, I referenced earlier the difficulties earlier in the year as far as not having a lot of the preparation time that you're accustomed to having. And as it's applied to the season, you wake up every day and you're really not sure what your roster may look like by the evening.

And that's challenging, but you know what, we're in the business of dealing with challenges. We're in the business of handling these things as they come up typically in the year you're going to have injuries, you're going to have guys get hurt, which we're still having. You need to adjust. You need to accommodate your plan for those things so that you can adjust if necessary.

And right now, it's just a different challenge. That's okay. Everybody is dealing with the same challenges. Everybody is playing by the same set of rules, and so what we're trying to do is just do it to the best of our ability every day, improve a little bit. Really the core messaging, the core belief structure doesn't change. But certainly the COVID protocols, the COVID restrictions, it forced us to be a little bit more creative or a little bit more open minded in our planning.

But I would just reiterate, again, what we're dealing with is really minor on the scale of things. We're fortunate to be doing what we do. We're fortunate to come in here every day with these players and have a chance to compete and do the things that we love to do. Not everyone has been that fortunate. Not everyone is that fortunate. I think the important thing right now for us as a coaching staff or for our players is to be grateful and to be appreciative of the opportunity that we do have every day to do this because nothing is guaranteed.

We need to continue to do the best that we can to protect everyone in the community.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports