

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Kirk Ferentz

### Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: It was certainly good, but a little bit unusual to have Saturday off. That's not something we get to do too often. Certainly gave the players a chance to relax a little bit and recharge and just enjoy a little break after doing a good job in a really short week and maximizing that out.

You know, that was great, and just looking back for a second, great to get the win, obviously. Our players worked hard last week and they did a good job out there on the field. Good to see their efforts get rewarded.

I think overall probably the biggest thing is we played clean football out there. We did a good job with penalties and the turnover takeaway battle, so that certainly gives you a chance. Certainly we have a lot to work on right now, but it is good to have Floyd back in the building.

Also just want to take one minute and congratulate Zach VanValkenburg for being recognized by the Big Ten as Defensive Player of the Week. Really good story, tremendous young guy. Joined our team two years ago from Hillsdale College as a graduate transfer, Russian studies.

And really the biggest thing I would say about Zach since he's gotten here, he really takes a mature approach, works extremely hard. Has a great attitude and work ethic and those things I think are what really surfaced on Friday night and he's really been playing better each opportunity. You can see him playing faster, more comfortable now and he really works hard. He is very well respected by everybody on the team. Happy to see him get recognized for sure.

A couple words about Penn State and the Penn State game. First of all, our captains are the same with the addition of one; Chauncey Golston and Nick Niemann will still go out for the defense. Matt Hankins has joined that group. The voting has been really close. And then offensively we have Mekhi Sargent, Tyler Linderbaum and Keith Duncan with special teams. So happy to have those recognized as our captains for the week.

Then basically on Sunday, our focus turned entirely to Penn State, trying to get ready for them. No big surprise when you look at Penn State, they are a very impressive team, pretty much talented at every position and that really comes as no surprise, and their backups look very much the same. They play a lot of people and have done that traditionally, so they are a good football team. Certainly a team that's better than their record right now.

You know, I've got 70 years history I guess watching Penn State -- not quite 70, but I do know this: They have recruited well for 70 years and been coached well, and that's been the same since I was in high school. They have Lydell Mitchell and Franco Harris in the backfield, two No. 1 picks. Kind of tells you a little bit about how they have been and how they continue to be. They have got a really good program. They have a lot of good players and they are well-coached. If you look at them statistically, they are a very impressive football team but for whatever reason have come up short.

We know it's going to be a big challenge for us. It's been a decade since we have beaten Penn State or close to a decade. We know we have a big challenge on our hands as we look forward, so we'll do our best to get ready for it this week.

Just the other thing of note, real quickly, we're at the halfway point in the Big Ten right now. I don't know, I don't want to speak for anybody else, but I doubt many people are doing anything differently than we are, just kind of looking at things day-by-day and not taking anything for granted and we are all getting ready obviously to try to prepare and compete for the weekend, the competition on the weekend.

There's a lot of variables right now, and I think real simply we're just trying to look out for our health as individuals and as a team and then also trying to improve on a daily basis. It has certainly been the most unusual season probably for any of us to be involved in and it's just kind of our reality right now. With all that being said, I'll just throw it out for questions.

**Q. I think you've had six different sophomores as your primary quarterback over your tenure, and they have all had their ups and their downs. What's kind of been the challenge with Spencer? Is he much different than,**



**say, Drew Tate, Jake Rudock, Nate Stanley and some of the others, and what have you learned over the years with younger quarterbacks or your primary starters that you may be applying now?**

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, they are all different. You know, they are all different kinds of quarterbacks and they are all different personalities, certainly. There are some similarities between some of them. Some of them are truly unique. But they have all had different paths.

I would say Spencer's is probably the most unusual. Just kind of sided with the pandemic. Nobody could have even dreamt how the road was going to be since March 15th when we left campus here. You know, it's just really been an unusual path.

You think about a guy, Brad Banks, first guy that pops in my mind. Brad at least had the luxury of playing a couple series in each game in 2001. We fully anticipated him being our quarterback in 2002 so we tried to get him in for at least a couple series per game. He had that, spring ball and a normal summer, and all those kinds of things to prepare him and well, the other guys, you mentioned, there's other ones, too, didn't necessarily play as juniors or play the year before they became starters. They still had more of a normal progression, if you will, mainly spring practice and a normal summer. We didn't have one day of spring practice. We didn't have a normal summer by any stretch and it got even more screwed up after August 11. When we actually got going, we had never gone through a path like that.

And I said this I think back in May. This whole thing, the way it shaped out, it was going to be a benefit to have a team with good genetics or an experienced quarterback, our both of those things, a combination would help you in a pandemic situation. So next time we're in one, we'll know what to look for.

I think Spencer has done a really good job. He's led our team and done a really good job out there and he's learning weekly and probably the most impressive thing about him is just his awareness and composure out there. I think he's done a good job that way. No game is easy, and there's always ups and downs, all the situations that happen, and he just seems to have a good feel and a good grip on things. And it's just like any position player, typically get better with experience and get better if they have a good attitude and good work ethic and Spencer has those things.

**Q. You got to see your second team defense out for 15 snaps. You mentioned the lack of spring ball. How important was that just to get to see those guys and**

**did anyone kind of pique their interest at how well they played the other day?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know, they have had a rough outing the last two weeks but the good news is they have been on the field the last two weeks and unfortunately we couldn't get the offense out there Friday night other than take a knee.

Two things about that when you get that opportunity, first of all, a reward for guys that have worked every bit as hard as the first-team guys, so it's a chance for them to get out there on the field and just kind of get a reward, a little bit of a payday for all their effort.

Secondly, those experiences are invaluable, regardless of the school or regardless of the situation, just to be out there on a game field. Doesn't sound like much, but it is. It's a big deal.

A lot of things to correct, certainly. We have a lot of things to correct with our first teams, but it was good for those guys to get out there and get some experience against really good players that are starters. They got schooled a little bit but hopefully that will make them better as they move down in their careers here.

**Q. I was wondering what it takes to be a good center in your program?**

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a good question. It's an interesting position, at least the way we do things. We prefer to get a center that can think a little bit, communicate, hopefully has a little bit of leadership qualities, those are good things, certainly, because he is kind of the hub of what goes on up front. He's got to have a connection with the quarterback and understand his language a little bit and they have got to be thinking the same way. That's kind of where it all starts.

Those are some tangible and intangible items and then there's certain blocks the center has, he's got a tough job because he's got to get the ball to the quarterback whether it's under center or snap, shotgun. Then also block. I've always thought he had the toughest job out there on the field, and there are certain blocks in our offense that aren't easy to execute.

So if you get a guy that has got that ability, it's a really good thing at the end of the day, centers are the MVPs. Quarterbacks think they are big shots, but if they don't get the ball, they are going nowhere. You can't play a game without a center, so it's just a really important position.

**Q. I know you've mentioned Zach to start the press**



**conference, but as a whole on the defensive line what sort of growth have you seen over these last couple games?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, Zach is a really good illustration of it, but I would say the same thing about Daviyon and I would say the same thing about Jack and I would say the same thing about Chauncey. That's one of our mantras in the program is if our best players are not playing their best and if they are not improving, we're probably going to be in trouble and Chauncey is a great illustration of the kind of guys that we typically work with.

Chauncey is a skinny kid out of high school, he and Cedrick Lattimore came here together. Ced played as a true freshman. Chauncey red-shirted. He's grown and developed and has really shaped into a good player, not just this year but he really started on that path a couple years ago where his hard work started to show up on the field.

And he's playing really well right now as a senior. That's certainly what we hoped for and expected, but he's playing at a high level and leading well. And then Jack, this is all new to him, our style of defense is very different than what he was used to. I'm sure it was the same way for Zach when he got here, and you know Daviyon is a guy who has been in our program and now you're really seeing him play with confidence and he's always play with a high energy and he's starting to develop a little bit of confidence.

The entire group outside of Chauncey was fairly inexperienced and we were just hoping they would come along and they have made progress, especially the last two weeks, but it's another big test this week. These guys have a good veteran line, very talented and very big. They know what they are doing. They have got a tough scheme and it's going to be a big challenge for us again.

**Q. I'll ask you the short question to set up my main question, but is it as jarring for you to see Penn State at 0-4 as it is for probably the rest of us?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, just doesn't add up, especially when you watch the film. Doesn't add up. Football, you've heard me say before, football is a strange game. You just can't predict everything that's going to happen.

**Q. Okay. That asked, how thin is the line in your sport? You look at Northwestern, 1-8 last year and you see what they are doing last year and at the other end, Penn State and Michigan, considered national powers, struggling like crazy. How do you keep the even keel? What happens to make those things happen at either end?**

KIRK FERENTZ: The first answer is I don't know; this year is going to have an asterisk next to it. We are all competing, we are all playing pretty much by the same rules, but as we know it, region to region, things are different. With the virus right now, you really don't know what's going on behind the scenes. You don't know if a team has had, you know, X amount of guys out and all those kind of pieces of information really, they are not out there.

So you know, to go through what all of us have gone through the last couple months, it's very hard to describe. It's just been very different, very unusual. I just think that casts a shadow over this whole season quite frankly. If you have an awesome team and you've got all kinds of depth, then it's really not that big a deal and there's a handful of teams like that in the country, but I think once you get past that group of people, it's really hard to say what's going to happen or predict what's going to happen. You've got to kind of throw that out.

As far as Northwestern goes, in my opinion, it's kind of like the record Penn State has right now. Northwestern wasn't that far away last year, in my opinion. But they are just kind of missing a little bit, something, and you know, we talked when we played them about them picking up the quarterback, a perfect fit for their operation, it's just that little variable to get over the top sometimes, and that's not surprising. They do a great job up there and they have for quite some time.

It's kind of almost two different discussions in some ways, but there's just a lot of strange things going on this year, and I'll go out on a limb and say there's going to be more strange things here in the next six to eight weeks.

**Q. Couple housekeeping things. Coy Cronk, John Wagner, what's your situation with middle linebacker this week, you played two series each for Jack and Seth. Are you going to continue to do that?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll start there. Probably. We haven't had that discussion yet, but Jack's only a week plus into it now so it's not like his conditioning base is all that good. We would like to have him for the rest of the season so we are going to try to be careful there plus he and Seth are playing really well. I would anticipate both them playing.

We don't expect John to be ready this week and Coy did start working yesterday morning. I don't want to judge him yet. We've had two days on the field. Hopefully he'll be able to help us a little but we'll see what it looks like tomorrow and see what it looks like on Friday.

**Q. When you look at Tyler Linderbaum at center, you've had some success moving defensive players or wanting to move defensive players. I remember I think you wanted Aaron Kampman to play center and it didn't work out, but your son was a terrific defensive tackle at City High and he's still in the NFL. At what point in that first year or a couple years ago did you look at Tyler and go, you know what, that might be his best spot and kind of have a soft spot for centers as it is?**

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, Aaron Kampman probably wouldn't talk to me today if I had done that. I'm glad we didn't make that suggestion. I kept that one to myself. I guess not to myself, and not so sure in the media, too. But anyway, we didn't make that decision, ended up being an all-pro defensive player, and what a great player he was.

The point there is the leadership qualities that he possessed and just his motor, his just desire that he played with on play-in and play-out, those are good desirable traits for a guy who is in the middle on the offensive line.

In James' case he is six-foot. He'll tell you 6-1 but he's six-foot. So what else is he going to do? It's one position you can play where you're not maybe as tall enough to get on the roller coasters at Kennywood Park. That's what it is.

But with Tyler, starting in high school, we all are in agreement, had a brainstorm on that one, we all were in agreement this guy is just a really good football player both sides of the ball. Good athlete in other sports as well. Wrestling, baseball. He's a football player that's got a rat, great love for the game and great love for his teammates and great leader in high school and certainly has been a good leader here.

It was kind of a natural, as I said before, if we had three of them, we'd had him playing center and the other two guys would be playing guards and he would be playing defense or tackle. He's one of those football players that can do a lot of things and he's just a delight to have on the team.

**Q. You had the opportunity to see Clifford in action last season, however, he was benched at halftime Nebraska and Will Levies relieved him. Is there anything that stood out to you from Levies to you on film or scouting report that you had an opportunity to see?**

KIRK FERENTZ: We actually had him in camp here. We might have been the first Power Five offer that he had, I'm pretty sure I'm correct in saying that. He was interested and enamored until Penn State offered him. That was the end of that relationship; and I say that jokingly. He's a

first-class young man and that was a delight to get to know a little bit.

We have very high regard for him back before his senior year in high school, so it comes as no surprise to us that he's a about player and Clifford is a good football player, too. I don't know if they have made an announcement who is going to start. We fully expect Clifford to start. If not, they are both good players and they are both capable of running and throwing and that makes them tough to defend.

**Q. You mentioned Penn State 0-4; that something that you have to guard against and your team not overlooking a team that's 0-4 and thinking, hey, we can just roll into Happy Valley and roll past these guys?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I thought about that a little bit and all you have to do is look at the film, and if that doesn't get your attention, because as I mentioned, it's been this way for, what's it, 22 years I've been back here now, but I go back to 1980, that was my first trip there as a coach. I was a grad assistant. I can't remember ever being on the field where their guys don't look good and play well and play hard and they are good at every position.

So when our guys look at the film, unless they are just delusional, they are seeing what we are seeing, guys that are a lot of good football players, things are not quite just clicking yet and my guess is it's going to at some point. I just hope it isn't this Saturday.

We have to prepare. We haven't beaten these guys there in a decade, right. That's a long time and there's a reason for that. They are a good football team. We are going to have to be at our best to have a chance to win.

**Q. This has been a difficult year for everybody and doing everything, you've got COVID, what happened over the summer and even into the fall, last week some former players filed a lawsuit, you have supporters who have withdrawn their support because of kneel. How difficult has this been for you on a personal level to try to coach your team when you have all these different factors, that confluence happening at the same time?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of like my whole life I guess. The thing I've enjoyed the most in my life is coaching, outside of my family. I enjoyed teaching when I was a teacher, and I became functionally illiterate in 1980 when I went to college coaching but I've enjoyed every bit of it.

Part of it is just because you're in a society, if you will, or a group, where everybody is kind of like-minded and we are all trying to do the same thing, so it's just something we all



enjoy. I think the people that play it, the people that work it, you do it because you really enjoy it and that's your No. 1 reason for doing it. You know, kind of gives you some balance, I guess, in some ways, but the other part about it, the things you mentioned, I mean if you learn anything in life, life comes at you. Robert Frost, "life goes on," that was his quote and I would add to it that life comes at you.

Nothing stays the same. Nothing's static. Life's not static by any chance, if you're living, if you're doing something. You try to deal with everything that comes your way as smart as you can. We've had the things happen that you've probably referenced and you just try to deal with it on a day-to-day basis, do the best you can and when you get up in the morning, you try to do the same thing over again. That's what you do and if you're around good people on a daily basis, it makes things a lot easier and that's one thing I've always taken solace, very fortunate in my life to be around good people in my network, if you will, whether it's personal life or everywhere I've coached. Particularly the 30 years here, we've had good people around us and good people that have been through this program that are supportive, and, to me, that's the beauty of sport.

**Q. You have a couple of kids from Cedar Rapids, who are just students that have helped, and one works directly with Brian. I don't think a lot of people know about what these kids do, maybe what their importance is to the program and what do you hope that they get out of their situation?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully it's a good experience for them. We had a guy 15-17 years ago, who graduated from the Wharton Business School, and is working in New York City, never left there. He took a sabbatical and came here for a season, it was 2002, I believe and at the end of the year he said that was the most valuable class he was ever been involved in. I was like, holy smokes, you've been wasting a lot of money or something is delusional there.

But all these guys that help out, young guys that are student assistant or whatever, they just have a love for the game like we do, and so it's a way for them to make contributions and help the coaches with paperwork, statistics, all those kinds of things. They can't actually necessarily be out there coaching but they can do things to help around the office, help with recruiting. It's a good life experience for them especially if they are trying to figure out if they want to get into this profession. That part is great.

But that's one of the neat things about this guy that I used to teach with, John Bridge was here back in '99. He was more of a basketball guy. He was amazed how many people were involved, and obviously everybody's football

organizations have grown since 1999. But how many people just help make this thing move forward.

I think about that a lot. You think about our student managers, the work that they do, it's unbelievable. It's extremely impressive. If you had a business in the private sector you would hire those guys because I tell you, they get up early, they work hard, they stay up late and we get back from a road trip like Saturday and you're unpacking things, but my point there is a lot of people have helped make the organization be successful. It not just the players and the coaches. They are out there in front but there's a lot of people working and I think they all find value in what they do, otherwise they wouldn't do it, because they are certainly not getting paid very much if anything.

**Q. What happened with Jack Heflin's elbow, and is he going to be okay? Looked like he had a sleeve on it after he got hurt and didn't come back in.**

KIRK FERENTZ: He's been practicing and he's fine. I'm smiling here. He's like a 45-year-old guy. Jack is another guy coming from the outside. He should be in one of those football movies -- I'm not very good on movies -- he would be a perfect character. He's like a 45-year-old guy that lives next to you, the kind of neighbor you want to visit with. He's awesome. He's brought good life to our team and he's a pretty tough, hard-minded guy.

**Q. With Hankins, you don't usually have six captains, this is new turf for you. Is there anything, like you said it was a close vote. How does that work exactly?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I think there's a rule, I think, I don't know, but I think the rule is five.

So I think we've had six at times and only five can go out in normal circumstances. We're in COVID now so one guy can actually go out for the toss so it's as simple as this. We vote every week, our leadership group, they vote and if there's a tie, you know, I've got to tell you, all the guys that are captains, like they are all in the same cluster.

But Matt rose up into that same cluster and is tied with some other guys, so how do you do a tiebreaker? I don't know, we're not going to flip a coin. Only one guy can go out, anyway, so Matt certainly is worthy of it. He's been playing hard, practicing hard, is a senior, respected and it's good to see his efforts be recognized by his peers.

**Q. When you look at Alaric Jackson and the way he's played this year through four games, is this what you would have expected last year if he had not sprained his knee? He just seems to be really competing at a high level and what are your thoughts on the way he's**

## **battled so far this year?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I talked about Chauncey earlier in the session here and same story, only a different story, because Chauncey came in here as a skinny kid. AJ was a heavy kid. I've been around linemen for a long time now. It's hard for big guys to lose weight and he's done an unbelievable job of that. I think he's shown extreme discipline and we've watched him grow every step of the way, too.

And made a key point earlier. Last year wasn't his best year when he came back, but I have to tell you, a year ago spring when we had spring and then a year ago August, he had unbelievable spring and August camp and was really playing well. Unfortunately he got hurt right of the bat and I don't think he -- it took him a long time to catch his rhythm coming back. Injuries are tough to come off of.

So, what he's done this year, it's probably what he would have been doing last year or at least close to. He's just playing like a fifth-year senior. He's playing smart. He's playing really great focus and concentration. He's got good ability but he's using everything he's got right now and doing it better than he has since he got here.

Goes to that point I made earlier. If our best guys are not playing their best, we're going to have some problems. He's certainly helping the cause on that front.

## **Q. The amounts of interceptions, the consecutive games with interceptions, you lead the nation since 2017. What do you attribute that to?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I'd like to tell you we have a drill for it. I've heard coaches talk about drills for turnovers and all that, different gimmicks and all that stuff, we don't do that.

But we do try to coach just good technique and fundamentals. And film study is a big part of it. A lot of it is being in the right place at the right time. And a lot it is being an in-tune football player and then hustling, working hard, hustling. And there's teamwork involved there, too. Tipped balls are great opportunities for interceptions, that type of thing. Obviously somebody has to tip it before you have a chance to go get it.

But I don't think we're any different than anybody else. We emphasize the same things I think and our guys have been playing well. They have been opportunistic. Certainly pleased about it, but I don't know if we have any magic potion or pixie dust or anything like that. Guys are doing a good job. Some guys, I'll also say this, some guys just have a knack of doing things.

Jovon Johnson seemed to get his hands on the ball every day at practice during his career here, so some guys have that little bit of knack. Some guys are working hard and hustling and really proud of them and certainly helps us being a successful football team.