

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Thanks everybody for being here. We can talk a little bit about this past weekend and get our eyes forward to Wisconsin. First of all, before I do that, I want to take a minute and congratulate Dan Gable. What an outstanding day that was yesterday, such a prestigious award for him to get the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Truly amazing.

I was here in the '80s when Dan was coaching our team. I just have had tremendous respect for him, obviously as a competitor when he was competing collegiately, in the Olympics, and his coaching career is absolutely phenomenal.

Every time I get a chance to listen to him talk, it's just a treat. Basically what stands out is his love and focus mainly on his family and his athletes during his entire career. Boy, just talk about doing it at the highest level, he's done that on both fronts. Really happy for him there.

He has a deep love of wrestling and the University of Iowa. Really appreciative of that. Just wonderful that he and his family can be involved in such a really prestigious ceremony yesterday. Congratulations to Dan and his entire family.

Looking back quickly, really happy to get the victory the other day. Nothing easy about it. We knew it was going to be a challenge going down there. We knew it was a challenge all week. We had a lot of respect and continue to for the Illinois program, the job Coach Smith does.

After the first 20 minutes, it was not looking so good. We certainly weren't ready and they were. Appreciative of the fact our guys fought on, kept playing. That's why you play 60 minutes, it's a full game. Our guys got back on their feet, were able to do some good things after that. Happy about the win.

Got back here semi-late Saturday night. Turned on the film. Sunday there was a lot to work on, a lot of things to clean up and improve on. That's been our task since we got back here. Needs to be the task as we move forward

towards Wisconsin.

Captains, Chauncey, Nick, Matt on defensive side. Mekhi and Tyler Linderbaum offensively. Duncan as the special teams rep.

Injury-wise we are doing fairly well. Mark Kallenberger dressed out a little bit last weekend, could have gone in if we had to. Now we get a chance to let him work a little bit in practice. He'll be out there playing a little bit Saturday as well. Not sure the rotation yet.

Just a couple words about Wisconsin. Doesn't change year to year. A tough, physical football team. They're extremely well-coached. They have good players every year. They have a good coaching staff. Coach Chyrst and his staff do an amazing job.

Probably if you go back to the early '90s, almost the same script each and every year. Some faces have changed, but they just play good football. They make you earn anything you're going to get. That's the case this year again.

They're big, physical. They play hard, extremely hard. Don't make many errors. On top of that, they play really well. They have a good offensive line again, a good running game, a quarterback who looks very impressive, and good receivers.

Defensively I think they're leading the league in just about every category. What you'd expect. They're a really tough football team. It's going to require us to play our best game. We haven't done that yet. We've done some good things, been really good at times. For us to win this game, it's going to take our best effort, take it for the full 60. We're going to have to earn it, that's for sure, if we're going to get it done. That has kind of been the history of the series. That's what we're looking at right now.

Last point, I want to say thanks publicly to our seniors. Twenty-two guys being recognized Saturday, potentially their last day in Kinnick. It's not going to be a normal Senior Day on a lot of levels, the virtual world we're living in. Nonetheless, it will be really good for them to get recognized.

I'm just sorry first of all that the fans won't be there to be

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able to salute them, say good bye. To that point, really feel for the fans as much as anybody this year. They haven't been able to be in Kinnick. We've missed them. Appreciate their interest. Look forward to getting them back hopefully soon.

Again, the seniors, it's always a bittersweet moment. Really happy for them, the growth, things they've done during their career, appreciative. You hate to think about them not being here for another year, but that's college football. That being said, we wish everybody all the luck in the world if they choose to transition on.

It's just a great group. Like every year, a lot of good stories beyond the football. The football stories are probably more well-known. Fans get to follow guys, especially the guys playing prominent roles. Out of the 22 guys, each guy has a great story, a different story.

That's the beautiful thing about team sports. For coaches to have that window, see guys over the course of four years, five years, just how they grow and develop, it's a lot of fun.

Certainly just want to thank them for all their contributions. Hopefully they'll have a great day on Saturday as well.

That being said, we feel fortunate we're continuing to move forward without too many consequences or bumps in the road, knock on wood, because I know it's all day-to-day. All that being said, we know we have to be our best at 2:30 Saturday. Looking forward to the challenge, know it's going to be a good challenge.

Q. The 22 seniors, they're listed in the game notes as playing their last game. Have you had any conversations about who could come back? It's an unusual year. Duncan told us he's not coming back, same with Niemann. Do you know who is coming back or not?

KIRK FERENTZ: To answer your question, no. Back when I sat down with all the guys individually back before we got going, that's probably September I'm guessing, I mentioned to each and every one of them at that point that it looked like they had another year available to them if they wanted. Really hasn't been appropriate for me to talk about that with those guys during this time. We've just been focused on our week-to-week preparation. No different this week. If we end up playing next week, we'll do the same thing.

Whenever the season ends, we'll sit down and visit with guys. Looks like you've already done some homework for me. If you don't mind sharing notes, that would be great.

I'll still want to talk to them individually and get their feelings.

It's been a unique year. What hasn't been different this year? Strictly up to them. We would welcome all of them back. There may be a few that will be interested. But I also know everybody has a clock. I think we've seen that clock change a little bit in recent years. There's a time for everything. The old song: Turn, Turn, Turn. There's a time for everything. Whenever guys feel like it's a time to move on... At least they have an option this year so it's a nice change.

Q. You talked this summer about a coaching approach that was demanding without being demeaning. Since the summer, how have things gone in that regard in the building? Any issues there, concerns? What have you observed? What you heard feedback-wise from the players?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can only answer to basically what you just mentioned, the feedback part. It's been positive. I check with the leadership group weekly about issues, things that we need to be aware of, things we need to address, et cetera.

Everything has been very positive. I think you're seeing that with the way guys are playing on Saturdays. That's your window. The media interviews you have on Tuesday, then what you see Saturdays, talk to them after the games. Usually to me that is the best window you have.

Seems like things are going pretty smoothly. It isn't perfect. Nothing is perfect. I think we're being diligent in all regards, everybody involved that's working with our players. Think we're all aware of what we've been through over the last six, eight months, whatever it may be. I think everybody is doing a good job putting a good foot forward. As far as I know everything is going well.

Q. How challenging is the balance to be demanding without being demeaning?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think it's all that tough, me personally. Like anything in life, most of us have stepped over lines in anything we do typically. I'm just guessing. Relationship with your wife, you say something to one of your kids out of anger, whatever.

Real key point is if you do step over the line, you circle back and make amends. That was an emotional thing I said, I didn't mean that, et cetera. Here is what I was trying to get across.

It's not good if it happens all the time, but if it does, you try

to address it in that way. It's what I've tried to do throughout my entire career. First thing you want to do is not step over that line. If you do, you acknowledge it, correct it, don't repeat it. It's a pretty simple policy.

I don't think anybody feels like they're on eggshells or anything like that. We're just coaching football, enjoying our players. We have a really good group of guys to work with.

Q. Today Michigan-Ohio State got called off. Indiana-Purdue is on the ropes. Several other games as well. How fortunate do you feel you can actually have played every week and haven't had any interruptions? How cognizant are you there could be some strange scenarios coming up?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the key word there is 'fortunate'. I've been saying that for a long time now. To me the biggest break for us was the rapid testing. Otherwise there's no way I can see us playing this season realistically based on contact tracing. That's given us all a chance realistically to do a team activity, pull it off over a prolonged period of time. That's one component.

The other component is personal responsibility. That's definitely huge. I've told you I witness that when we drop the season back in August, we dropped our guard. It was all directly related to attitude.

Third ingredient is luck as much as anything. I don't mean this in a political way. I'm saying if the President of the United States can get COVID, it means anybody. I'm guessing he's pretty well insulated and protected. Nick Saban got it. There's two pretty prominent people that are pretty insulated, I would assume.

It's part of what we're dealing with now, not only our society, but everybody in the world is dealing with this thing. It's tricky. There's an element of luck, there's no question about it.

Back to the rapid testing. That opened the door for us as a conference. It's given us a chance at least to feel like when we're at work here we're safe, on the field we're safe. Biggest risk is when you get in your car and go home, our players go back to where they live.

It's all day-to-day. It's been that way since we got going. That last day of September, it's been day-to-day. My guess is until January 2nd or 3rd, whenever that is, we have to put COVID on the list of things that we really need to be mindful of because it's the biggest challenge out there quite frankly, bigger than any opponent.

Q. One of your seniors in particular, Nick Niemann.

You had a lot of Niemanns here, his dad here. What has the whole family meant to your program?

KIRK FERENTZ: Made me think I probably should say to Jay what I told Jerry Hilgenberg about 35 years ago. I told Jerry, I wish you and Joanne would have more boys. Each of them went through, were captains, played well, centers. You think about what both them and Nick have done during their time here. Both really good players on the field. Ben has continued to improve, sort of like George Kittle, gets better with every year, now that he's a pro. Nick has done the same thing. His career has gone like that. He's playing at a really high level now as a senior. One of our leaders certainly, a captain every week.

The other commonality with both of them is they're tremendous people, great young guys to have on the team, great guys to work with on a daily basis. You love having them in the building.

I think that goes right back to mom and dad. They did a great job raising those kids. I remember it like it was yesterday calling Jay, talking about Ben, we were getting ready to offer Ben. I felt like a kidnapper because he was going to go to Northern where Jay was coaching at that time. I remember exactly where I was, when it was, I remember that conversation vividly. It's all worked out. Funny how that was not the master plan but a pretty neat deal.

Q. I think while you were talking Julius Brents made it official or announced on Twitter that he was transferring. Did you get to have a conversation with him? And thinking back to Josh Jackson, Michael Ojemudia, is that some information you shared with them as well, that they matured later in their career?

KIRK FERENTZ: Those are two great illustrations. As far as I know Mike is still starting for the Broncos. He's clearly playing his best football probably after he left college, but last year was his best here as a Hawkeye. Something I share with all our players if they're thinking about leaving.

To answer your first question, I did talk to Julius. He came in Sunday and told me his intentions. We had a fairly thorough conversation. I asked him to sleep on it, come back the next day, just to make sure he was sure. But he had already given it pretty extensive thought, that was apparent.

Long story short, I'm a little perplexed by his reasoning. To your point, the timing is a little bit interesting. That being said, I respect his honesty, his courage because that's how he's feeling right now. He's going to follow his heart.

I wish him nothing but the best. Have nothing but respect for Julius. Tremendous person, a good guy to have on our team. Playing special teams for us, that's the first step before a guy goes out on the field and competes well.

Whenever he chooses to go, I know he'll do a good job. He's a first class guy. Really interesting right now. I guess basketball has been experiencing this for quite some time. Talking earlier, it's been 121 players that have entered the portal in the last eight days, 31 alone yesterday. That phenomena has come to our sport.

When they do make the first-time transfer, a free transfer, I guess that's going to become official here soon, we'll probably see those numbers go up. One more thing we have to deal with and manage, just keep pushing forward.

Q. Do you feel confident the five transfers you've had so far are outside the racial disparities conversation?

KIRK FERENTZ: All I can do is share you with the conversations I had with them. I'm not going to get into that full extent. That's one of the questions I asked each and every guy. Do you feel you weren't being treated fairly, et cetera? Everybody gave the proper answer. You have to go to the source to get the honest answer there.

That was not the case with any of them. We stayed in contact with the other four to make sure they're following through, finishing their academic work here, so they can go wherever they choose to go. We've offered to help each and every one of them. All five guys are great guys. Got no issues with that. Wish them all the best as they move forward.

At the end of the day it's a player's choice to decide what they want to do.

Q. I know you guys are focused on Wisconsin, but is it a little bit weird that we know probably even less about what's going to happen next week than we did back in September? You want to play somebody, you don't care when or where it is? Would you like to get some details about next week?

KIRK FERENTZ: It would be nice. To your question, Is it weird? Yeah, it's definitely weird. What isn't this year? I think if we've all learned anything, not just football obviously, every walk of life, what has been normal. There's been nothing normal I know about my life. I'm not the Lone Ranger there. You get in your car, you go home. You come here, you go home.

I'm glad I got someplace to go, something to do. A lot of people aren't that lucky right now. For us to complain or

worry about that, I mean, hopefully they will know by the end of Sunday night. There was a game last week I guess, right, where they found out Wednesday. I know the Pac-12 did a switch on Friday, played Sunday. I'm not really paying attention to that stuff, but people talk about it in our staff room, whatever. It could be a lot worse.

I'm just thrilled that we're playing. Hopefully we get this eighth game in. If we do, boy, that's a big, big chunk of the original goal. If we get to play a couple afterwards, that's great, too.

We don't need a lot of advance notice. It would be nice to have five, six days. Right now we're just happy to be together, doing what we all like doing.

Q. What is the smallest amount of time you would need to feel comfortable?

KIRK FERENTZ: The craziest one I heard of was the teams were Arizona State and Utah, UCLA and somebody else, right? You know what I'm talking about, a couple weekends ago? I think that was a Friday, I think they played Saturday. I can't imagine that. It would be almost the equivalent of just playing without really practicing. Coming into the season like this year, it was so screwed up. It was better than nothing. Didn't always look so pretty at times.

We being football coaches, we're such creatures of habit. We do things by the week. It's just the way it works. Again, anything less than five days would be a real scramble, but we'd find a way. We'd find a way. Hopefully we won't get to that, but we'll see what happens.

Q. Obviously you've talked and we've talked about the development of Daviyon Nixon as a football player, what he's accomplished this season. Talking to him about the things that he's overcome personally with the learning disability, to get to this point, how much appreciation do you have for that part of it as his coach?

KIRK FERENTZ: Again, he's not a senior, but I mentioned about the seniors. Every guy has a story. Most of them involve some kind of adversity, hardship, whether it's in their personal lives, families, might be academically, whatever. That's kind of the nature of this thing.

Going to college is not easy for a lot of people. It wasn't for me. I know that. Playing football, major college football, which I'd never experienced, that's hard. I look at the work our guys do compared to when I was playing, that was a hundred years ago, I get it. Both of them are full-time activities. Then you factor in other things that are real life

things.

That's why you have such respect for the players that play. I'm not talking about guys like Daviyon, very well-known, but guys that aren't so well-known that haven't even played, but they do all the things that everybody else does. This is not easy. That's again why I have such great respect for anybody that becomes a senior.

Going back to Daviyon, he's just done a wonderful job. I think I mentioned last week, maybe I didn't, after the game, I remember watching our game against Illinois a year ago, watching he and Zach VanValkenburg out there when the twos were out there. Both of those guys looked fairly pedestrian. I don't mean that in a negative way, but they just looked okay. They were out there killing time while the other guys were resting. Got the varsity back in there, played a little defense.

Neither of those guys are playing pedestrian right now. Daviyon is playing as well as anybody as an inside player for us, extremely disruptive. Just doing a really nice job, giving us a lot of life, energy, leadership out there on the field. Zach is playing at a high level, too.

We just talked about Mike and Josh Jackson. Doesn't always click for guys at the same time. That's the interesting part. As long as they're trying, as long as they're giving the effort, making the effort, you stick with them because you just never know what's going to unfold. Doesn't always. Sometimes you have stories like this. Daviyon ends up on an All-American list or two, legitimate first team, that wouldn't shock me because this guy is playing really well.

It's a real tribute to him to stick with it. His family has been really supportive. We're just thrilled he's on our football team.

Q. When you look at Wisconsin, I don't know that any team reloads better than they do defensively over the years. All-American linebacker in the NFL, bring somebody else in just as good or better. They've held their opponents to 263 yards or less. What is the challenge for you in the run game? You got a quarterback that's going to see a different defense that he's never experienced before.

KIRK FERENTZ: Broader base perspective on them, to me one of the most amazing things I saw with their defensive program, they've been good for 22 years since I've been back here. When they shifted to a 3-4 front, I figured that was going to take a couple years. It took about two weeks because they were right at the top of the league first year. They had seven or eight, nine seniors on that

team. Okay, they got some good seniors. Maybe that's why.

Three weeks into the next season, with all these new players, they were higher ranked than they were the year before defensively. There's something in the water up there. They're just playing defense. They've done that very well all 22 years. Probably why they've been so successful for so long because it's consistently good defense.

It's going to be a big challenge for us. To your point, they don't give up many yards, many points. They make you go a long field typically. That's a by-product of what they do offensively, by-product of their belief in special teams.

It's amazing how often you're starting down inside your 25. You have to go the long field. Then you go to look at red zone snaps of their opponents, you don't see many because they don't get down there. It's hard to drive the ball, possess the ball against a good team like that for 55, 70 yards. They know that.

They play it really smart. It works to their advantage. They've had great success doing that. Going to be a challenge for Spencer, each and every one of us, coaches included, because it's not like we've been running up a lot of points against them.

Q. Last year you rolled out the 4-4-3 defense against Wisconsin. Three guys out there really hadn't played much. This year you would seem to have a lot better personnel at that level. Is that a possibility on Saturday or scrapped after they rushed for 300 last year?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think anything's possible. Probably what we ought to look at is a 12-man defense. That would be better. It worked for Kansas, I alluded to that, against Penn State, whatever it was, '69 Orange Bowl. Worked for a couple plays, they caught it on the third one. I have a feeling this day and age, they'll catch it quicker.

I'm not sure we have an answer at this point. We'll see.

Q. You were talking about Daviyon. I'm sure he's attracted some NFL attention from scouts. How does the scouting thing work this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's why I'm laughing (laughter).

Q. They're around, in the building. Are you talking more to them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really be an interesting thing. I've kind of laughed about that. It's 'welcome to our world'. We're recruiting guys younger around younger. We don't get to

watch practices this year, can't watch a game. The NFL is going through the same thing. I know they did the draft virtually last year.

At least they have been on campuses. Typically I don't know how many times one team will be on campus, five or eight during the course of the season. Not the same guy, a lot of different people coming in and out. They don't have those exposures. They may be talking to people in this building. They're not talking to me, I know that. Typically you visit with them when they're here on campus. I imagine they'll probably do that part of it after we're all done playing. I imagine they're just watching game film.

I do know they've been in some stadiums, I don't know if they're in all stadiums. At least they get live exposure on game days, certain instances in the south they can. They don't seem to have fan limitations in certain parts of the country.

Bottom line is good players are good players. Funny, there's a GM that I talked with a little bit, shared a text with, first round draft pick had a big game a couple weeks ago, months ago. He just said, gave me the guys stats, said you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out he's pretty good. Good players are still good players.

The better scouting organizations will find those guys heading out a little bit. That's their challenge to worry about, not ours. We have our hands full with Wisconsin right now.

Q. Is this a program you measure yourself against? They have been kind of the flagship program of the Big Ten West since divisional play started.

KIRK FERENTZ: I told that story many times. 1989, we'd love to play them twice, play a doubleheader. They were really down and out for whatever reason. I can't explain it. When I got here in '81, they were outstanding. But that was not a good decade. By the end of the decade, they had really struggled with the football program.

Barry got hired that year. It's been really good since then. Took them two, three years to get where they wanted to get. They've been doing it well ever since.

Back to when I got here, that was the first team we looked at. Not that we live in the same neighborhood, but we're a lot more like them maybe than we are an Ohio State. Let's see if we can't try to get to that level.

We've been there. We went ahead of them for a little while. It's kind of gone the other way. We've had some great games over the years. I do know this from experience: If

you're going to beat them, you have to beat them. It's not easy. We have to play our absolute best game.

We have a tremendous amount of respect for what they've done. Obviously several coaches since Barry's transition to the athletic director position. They've all been outstanding people and outstanding coaches.

I have a great admiration for what they do, great respect for what they do. Bottom line is they're the winningest team on our side of the bracket last five years. That says it all right there.