

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon to everybody, I appreciate as always you guys following the team. It's been an unusual year in a lot of regard and now for the first time we have a couple games scheduled in December, so one more optic that we're all dealing with that is different.

Looking back to Friday, it was good to get the win. It was a 60-minute effort, like you would expect. I was happy for our football team. We got off to a good start in the ballgame and our opponent closed the gap right before half with a touchdown. Then they took the lead to start the second half, so really pleased with the way our team responded. Little bit of adversity there and a little bit of a challenge and the guys just kept playing and did a good job to finish out the game. It gave us an opportunity on Saturday to recharge a little bit. Everybody was off, so a good time for the players to get away from everything a little bit and get recharged for the last two weeks here.

We came back in Sunday. Plenty of work to do, looking at the tape, going through that with the players, a lot of things to clean up and that's where our attention was Sunday. A lot of positives from the film, but also a lot of things we can get better at.

We had way too many third and longs on Friday, and probably gave up too many chunk plays on defense, too. Those things both affect you. Again, a lot to cover there. I think we did that and then we certainly moved on to Illinois as fast as we could.

Before I close out, want to congratulate Keith Duncan for being recognized by the Big Ten special teams Player of the Week. Certainly well-deserved. Keith has been a really good football player for us and is a tremendous individual. He gets good assists there, and I am happy for those guys to be recognized for their efforts. It certainly was a big part of the day.

Moving forward our captains are the same, Nick Niemann, Chauncey Golston, Matt Hankins over on the defensive side and Mekhi Sargent and Tyler Linderbaum on offense and Keith Duncan special teams-wise.

Not a lot medically. I think Coy Cronk might have an opportunity to play some. He was dressed out the other day, just didn't really get any action. It was probably better for him to not have to play. So hopefully he's moving forward here and we'll just kind of see where that all goes here.

But moving on to Illinois, obviously the biggest thing there is we have a lot of respect for them and their program. I think they have done a really good job over there. They were not a real strong team four or five years ago, and they have made just nothing but steady progress, steady improvement, and we witnessed that firsthand last year.

The biggest thing that impresses me, Coach Smith is very established, tremendous football coach, great human being and clearly went in with a vision. They have recruited well, and they have had a vision building the program and when you look at him, to me, the thing that really stands out is they have a system in all three phases.

Obviously defensively Coach Smith has a strong background there and that's been pretty consistent over the years, although they have changed a little bit. They clearly know what they believe in. Offensively they do a great job, especially running the football, and special teams same way there.

So when you watch the tape, there's a lot of consistency and it's clear to me the players understand what they are being asked to do and they play really hard and they play fast, which is what it takes to be successful. We are going to have our work cut out for us in that regard.

I think the other thing that's interesting, last year we saw their improvement. You think about a couple years ago when the game got out of hand, the second quarter, the block, special teams defensive play, just a weird game in a lot of ways. But last year, you know, it was a whole different outfit that we played, and it was a 60-minute ballgame. They have made tremendous progress and I think that's what you're seeing right now.

This year, to me, it's a little bit strange just because if you look at how they have been affected by the virus and what-have-you.

But I think in a nutshell, the last time out when they had their quarterback back in and were able to do the things they wanted to do, they did them extremely well against a team that we struggled to beat the other day. It was an impressive outing when they were with Nebraska, and that's the Illinois team we're trying to get ready right now. So we know we have our hands full and a lot to work on there. That's kind of where it is right now.

And then the other obvious ingredient, we are going to go on the road and again you're not fighting crowd noise but any time you travel there's some logistical issues to deal with and that will be a little different because the State of Illinois has restrictions on meetings, so we'll have to improvise a little bit.

But bottom line is we get a chance, hopefully, we are not there yet, but hopefully get a chance to play another football game, and that's probably the most important thing of all is we feel fortunate that we're able to be practicing every day and hopefully get to continue to compete next couple Saturdays here.

Q. Ball security is always important, when you look at Illinois, the way they take away the ball, particularly number 35, Jake Hanson has been around the ball as much as anybody, but has there been any discussion about just what they are capable of doing when they are talking to your backs.

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go back to our last game. We had a turnover and we had the ball out twice, so that's two too many times and one too many turnovers, and I know they have done a great job of emphasizing that. Coach Smith, historically in the NFL and in college, has a really good turnover takeaway team. Last year, I remember going into the game, they had an inordinate amount of takeaways. They are a good football team. They are opportunistic, fundamentally sound. The middle linebacker is a tremendous football player, very active. He's all over the place, and it's every game.

We have to take care of the ball. If you're going to have a winning team, a consistently winning team, you have to do a really good job in that and any time you play an opponent as good at getting the takeaways as these guys are, it's a point of emphasis, but honestly in every game we line up for, it's important.

Q. Obviously how have you seen of Tyler and Mekhi in the backfield and how much does it help you that you have both those guys back there rather than just one featured back?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really, this year, outside of one game

we've run the ball fairly effectively. We struggled the first half last week and came out and did a better job in the second half. It's a great room. Derek Foster does a great job coaching those guys first and foremost, or the whole group is just a really good group. They are very unselfish. They pull for each other and I say it frequently, I look at Ivory Kelly-Martin as a starter, too. In most years he would be starting. We have three guys that are veteran guys and have been around, played a lot of football and really good players.

Both Tyler and Mekhi, last two weeks are good illustrations because last week it worked out that Tyler got more yards than Mekhi. Week before it was the opposite. The guys are positive and work with each other and help each other and that's what you hope your whole football team does. Anybody wants to model their behavior, it's a good thing for our football team, it's good for our young guys, and again, I throw Ivory in the same group.

Q. Illinois offense does a good job of running the ball. What does that mean for the defense on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, to me it start up front with their group, and I felt that way -- it's interesting, I think it was 2017, four years ago, where they played a lot of the guys that were playing now, a couple of them, I remember those guys playing as freshman. I want to say it was their first start. Don't quote me on that.

Anyway, they played some young guys four years ago and it's really paid off. Those guys played well last year and they are playing really well right now. These guys are really aggressive, very physical and that's going to be a big challenge for our defensive line. It was last year and it's going to be again. They do a good job and they are patient with the run. If they run for two yards, they don't abandon it. They stick with it. They do a really good job. They have a really good scheme.

Again I go back to the system; they have a system and believe in the system, and it's been very effective for them. Not saying that we know what to expect. We know they are going to run the ball. Their guys are going to come out and get after our defensive guys. Those backs run really hard. Those are really good backs.

Q. Have you heard any guidance from the Big Ten on what Champions Week is going to entail for you guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably the last time I've heard anything about that would have been, I was going to say August but it wouldn't have been August, probably September.

You know, I've never been in a season where it's really truly been more day-to-day, week-to-week than this year and that's kind of how it should be anyway, but this year, especially. You know, there's so many moving parts out there; a lot I'm not aware of, but we'll just take it a day at a time and selfishly, we want to make it to Saturday and be able to play Saturday, when both teams are healthy and able to play and then next week, as that comes, too.

It's been, you know, for all of us, it's just been a year like none other, and that's one more illustration of just the uniqueness of this whole thing.

Q. Would you be open to hosting a game?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm hope to anything. Selfishly, if we can get these next two games in, I think that's great, and win, lose or draw, but just a chance to compete. I've said that to basically anybody I've talked to over the last couple months.

Three months ago it looked like we had no chance of playing. Just the fact that we are playing, we appreciate that and if we can get to the end of the regular season and have a chance to play one more, we'll play anywhere. It doesn't matter to me. Just a chance to play would be great.

Q. Two-part question really quick. How have you guys managed to stay healthy COVID-wise, when you look across the rest of the Big Ten right now and half the league has had at least one game canceled. How have you managed to avoid that?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of the question they give you on turnovers and takeaways. I don't know that we are doing anything magical or anything like that, and I don't want to make it sound like we are doing something nobody else is doing because I don't think that's the case at all.

I think part of it is luck, I really believe that. As a human being and coach, I certainly believe there's an element of luck involved. That's just a non-scientist, non-scientific background looking at this whole thing.

The only thing everybody has been hearing since March, just try to do the obvious things. Try to practice good hygiene. Try to keep your distance from people. And I don't want to speak for all of our players, but I think most of them are probably doing what we do as coaches: We come to work and go home. I don't think anybody has got much of a social life right now.

But I would also say this, when they dropped the season or punted the season back on August 11, we had a big spike

right there, and I think that was a clear indicator; the players basically said the hell with it, and we were feeling the same way as coaches. Fortunately didn't get COVID at that point but that caused a spike and guys said, hey, screw it, we're going to do whatever, whenever we want to do. Not everybody, but some guys did. It opened the door for the likelihood maybe of contracting this thing a little bit more.

It hasn't been much fun for anybody in America, probably the world, the last X amount of months and you just do what you do. If you want to play football, which all of us do, you just try to live like a hermit. And probably the best thing is, again, the testing that we're afforded. Safest part of my day is probably in this building, on the practice field or the game field because everybody has been tested on a daily basis. But it's not practical for the whole country, unfortunately.

Q. Do you feel like a true champion will be crowned in the Big Ten with the discrepancy in games played?

KIRK FERENTZ: No idea. Not to be smug, but I really don't care quite frankly. I just hope we get to keep playing games. Looked like we weren't going to have that opportunity. Just the chance to practice, to compete, to be with the team on a daily basis, this is what we all like doing.

Coaches and players, this is what we like doing. So selfishly, I'm looking at it kind of selfishly right now, but we have been given an opportunity to do that and it is an opportunity and appreciative of that knowing it could end tomorrow. We'll just try to enjoy every day and all that other stuff, got college football playoffs which I guess Gary is involved with. But like all this rhetoric and all this chitchat you hear, it really doesn't matter right now. What matters is playing the next game.

Q. What was it in the recruiting process you liked about Jack Campbell, first of all, and how impressive is it that he misses three games and is making an impact already?

KIRK FERENTZ: To answer the first part of the question, everything. Everything about the guy, and I'm not saying he's Chad Greenway. But you guys have heard me tell the story when Chad was in our locker room 2000, it was the Northwestern game, and we won the game. It was big win for us; we didn't have many back then, that's for sure. And I just remember seeing him in the back of the locker room, and seeing his face, looked like he had played in the game; he was so wrapped up and so enthused.

There's some guys that just kind of strike you that way and it's like, I don't know who that guy is but we need him on



our team and it worked out pretty well. Jack Campbell has kind of got that same -- he just really enjoys playing and he enjoys competing, whether it's football, basketball, whatever he's doing, he's fully focused on that, he gives a hundred -- more than 100 percent.

It's fun to watch him train in the summer. He trains so hard when the guys are out running. He's one of those guys that really takes great pride in doing his best. He missed that early part of the season but we were pretty confident whenever he got the chance. First game he was a little rusty but we felt like when he got the chance, he would look like he did in practice, which is pretty good.

So it's a really -- we talked about the running backs. You got two guys like Jack and you've got Seth Benson who has really played well and Seth was under-recruited. He's not the biggest guy in the world but he's a heck of a football player. Same thing, he's got the right mentality to play. You get guys like that, it makes your whole team better and both those guys do that.

Q. In 2016 in your tight end room, you have the highest-paid tight end of all time, two first round draft picks, and Shane Beyer makes a catch like that the other day that kind of adds to the legacy, if you will, of that room. Did you know what you had at the tight ends that year because really, late in the year, you're going with walk-ons because George was hurt and the others weren't quite ready.

KIRK FERENTZ: That's part of the game and no, to answer your question, we couldn't have known at that time respectively that those would happen. Potential was there but potential is a scary thing. So I'll kind of weave your question, I was just tell a couple of the guys in the offensive room, spent last year's game defensively, our defense against Illinois, and there are a couple guys playing really well for us right now at a high level defensively that when you look at them last year, I don't want to say they were pedestrian but they weren't jumping off the screen at you, I'll just put it that way.

So my point there is that players improve. Good players improve. Guys with good work habits, good attitudes, they typically get better, hopefully week-to-week but especially when you go back 12 months and then fast forward and see what they are doing 12 months later. If they are doing things right and the program's good, hopefully they are showing improvement.

You've heard me say that before but I can think of a couple guys in particular on defense that have really done that and they are just kind of like holding the fort there a little bit while the ones were getting a drink of water and the ones

came back in and looked like the varsity again. But now those guys are the varsity and same with the tight end.

All of them had different paths to get here and a couple of them had different paths as they ascended, but the key thing is they have all ascended, and that's really neat to see. Happy for Sean, that was great effort the other day, so really great to see that and that should give him some confidence.

Q. T.J., I heard stories he torched the first-team defense quite a bit that year, and if you would have had that four-game block, would he have certainly played at that point that year?

KIRK FERENTZ: He probably would have got some snaps for sure. He did a good job, and that tells you a lot about a player, too, when they are on the scout team. Some just disappear and other guys keep playing and compete. So he definitely had that aspect. He was trying to make those guys have to work and he was successful quite a few times. That was his first year on campus.

I think I head somewhere, you probably heard me say this, he is probably like the 19th-ranked guy in that class. So much for those recruiting rankings. It's like us not recruiting Nico first time around that. Was really smart on our part, too.

Q. Any follow-up on clapping-gate, and do you realize you've become a viral sensation with your post game commentaries?

KIRK FERENTZ: Things must really be slow in the world today, whatever. I've certainly moved on. We turned the page. Didn't work too hard Saturday but we turned the page Saturday and on to the next one.

Q. You talked a little bit about Illinois having different rules as far as gathering. Does that mean team meetings and things like that, you have to split up?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, exactly. I think you can go outside and have them. I don't think that's really too well-advised in December, right, we talked about that a minute ago.

We'll basically take what we did for the Penn State schedule. Only thing we won't do is go back and forth to the airport a couple times. We'll just try to be more efficient and do the meetings we normally do Friday in the hotel, we'll do those here and hop in a bus, shoot over there, get in there at a decent hour, that type of thing. The meetings we have over there are just going to be in and out, yabba-dabba-do deals, and just kind of go from there.

Q. The question earlier about Jack Campbell, do you envision rotation the remainder of the season with Seth, and how has that benefitted you thus far?

KIRK FERENTZ: We haven't really talked about it. I don't know how you sit either of them down. It's a good problem to have. It's a bit like the running backs. We feel like they are both starters and doing a lot of good things and bring a lot of energy to the field. It's good. We feel the same way about Nick Niemann and Barrington Wade, too.

So we have four guys that we have a lot of confidence in right now, and that's probably two more than we had a couple weeks ago, so that's a good thing.

Q. And on the mono topic, is Tyler on a pitch count this week or is he back to full go?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think he's fine. It's not real hot out and doesn't seem to be affecting him at all, so I think we are okay to go. Same thing. He was out, we had other guys playing well, so I don't know which one we sit down at this point. I really think between the three of those guys we'll just rotate them through and so it shouldn't be an issue.

Q. After your second loss, you made a comparison to the 2008 team and the parallels could not be more similar. You lost three really close games early in that year. Still trying to find your way and then once it clicked, it seemed to really, really click. Did you say anything to your team about that team in particular and how do you feel maybe some of the parallels line up?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's one good thing about being somewhere for a while. You get a little history at the place and you always try to draw back on things that maybe are beneficial or could be a parallel, certainly. So yeah, we did. We talked about that a little bit, and the two key points I'd bring up, well, you touched on one of the points, so I'd skip that one.

Wasn't like we were getting clobbered. We lost three very heartbreaking losses and we still felt like we had a good football team and had the potential to have a good football team. So we weren't ready to pack it in. Back then that would have been early October, mid-October, and certainly this year after those first two games, I don't think anybody was ready to pack it in unless they wanted to.

I think the two things that are key moving forward, first of all, took great leadership in 2008 and that team had great leadership internally. Those guys just decided they were going to get it done and they did; they drove the car. This group's done that. They have responded in the right way.

The other difference -- that's a parallel I guess, so far. The major difference is that one is in the books. That team finished it out. They did a great job right through New Year's Day and finished it out pretty emphatically. We are not there yet. We've still got two games to play and then hopefully something after that. We are on the right path. We have responded the right way but it's going to be another tough one Saturday and we've got another one after that.

So we'll see how it goes but I'm really pleased and happy with the way the guys have responded. They have carried themselves and acted like a football team and that's what you're hoping for.

Q. Follow-up to that. That group faced a lot of adversity going into the season. You had off the field issues with some players and you had a couple of struggling years, but then also at the end, I remember you on the field at the Outback Bowl and you got dumped with Gatorade and you were very, very emotional being around Rob Bruggeman and Matt Kroll and those guys, how much did that season matter to you just to know where you came from and what you faced to where it ended and with this season, if things continue to go in the right direction, kind of carry the same meaning?

KIRK FERENTZ: The downside started after the sixth game in 2006. I think we were 5-1 and then we finished 1-5 and lost in the Bowl game. A game we could have won, should of, all that stuff. But at least we had a good month of practice for that game.

You know, 2007, I think we were on the slope half-as sending but it was slow. So yeah, we were at a tipping point probably in October of 2008 and we chose the right road and the guys drove it home. That's always the challenge, what do you want to do, how do you want to respond if something bad happens; and if you do this long enough, if you play in any league competitively long enough things aren't going to go your way, so what are you going to do when it doesn't.

Thus far, the team has chosen the right path. We had a good practice yesterday. There's no guarantees on Saturdays, but you've also heard me say it before, I know you guys have to evaluate wins and losses; it all starts there.

For us, it's more about how guys handle themselves on a daily basis: How they are living, going to school, practicing, playing, competing, treating each other, and this team is definitely a close-knit team.

Going back to the health thing all that, I'm just enjoying every day being with the team, and that's all you can ask for in coaching, you know, is to really enjoy the people you work with every day. We'll see what we can do with the rest of this week and hopefully we'll get another chance and one more week. Hopefully get a good workout tomorrow morning.

Q. When you're here 22 years, you're going to get a history question. You just completed your fourth undefeated November. The other three were '02, '04, '15. Pretty special company this team is in. What does that say to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, that's one more weird fact because, again, the season should be over. Nothing is really registering or clicking logically this year. But again, it's what I just talked about. This team, has chosen the right path after two tough losses, they have chosen to keep pushing forward and they are enjoying it with each day a little bit more and hopefully they are just also realizing that each week it's a challenge. We talk about that all the time. Respect what it takes to win. Especially in this conference.

And when I look at last year's game with Illinois, that's exactly what that was all about. That was a tough, hard-fought win down to the wire and that's what we need to be prepared for again this week is based on what I saw when they were at Nebraska, they have got it humming pretty good.

Q. At quarterback, what did you think of Spencer's game plan the other day, and would you feel comfortable if Alex had to go in for a series, a half, for whatever reason?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, he's good enough to win. That's the No. 1 goal. That was good and he's continuing to move forward and continuing to improve. Every game he's got good plays and every game he's got some I'm sure he'd like to correct or do a bit better.

As far as Alex goes, I think he's been improving significantly over the last, whatever, it's back in the preseason, actually, looked like it was starting to click for them a little bit. I'm never anxious to see the second guy in there unless it's for a good reason.

So keep our fingers crossed that we can keep playing with the guys that we have. If he goes in there, I think he'll do a good job. He's worked hard for it and seems a lot more comfortable.

All that being said, though, it will be the first time he's been in there when it counts and that's different for anybody as a

quarterback. Any position, it's hard first time do you it, and we'll see what happens.

Q. There have been a couple of quarterbacks, Nebraska ran two quarterbacks. Illinois goes with two, three, four quarterbacks. Do you ever anticipate doing that at Iowa where you shuffle guys in and out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not this week. I didn't mention that and I should have mentioned that, this is like week three where we are probably going to see two quarterbacks, I should have mentioned that little fun fact.

But the major difference is from my vantage point, at least, the last two weeks, both quarterbacks have been similar in terms of what they do, so it wasn't like, you got this over here and that over there.

In this case it is very different. These two quarterbacks are very much different that way. So that is a little bit of a challenge for our defense for sure. It's one more thing to try to be ready for and prepared for, whatever.

In 1981 my first year here, we did play two quarterbacks, Pete Gales and Gordy Bohannon. Played it successfully and it worked out just fine.

I've been around it, but you know, I don't know that that's an optimal situation, but we'll cross that bridge whenever we get to it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports ...