

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon, good to see everybody in person. And obviously good to get going here.

So it's game week finally. And it's always an exciting time to get to the beginning of a new season. It's a big, big deal for sure. And I think we're coming off a pretty productive camp. It's good to get back to work with the players, be on the field and be in a good routine.

I think we've seen a lot of growth both individually and collectively. But really now the big question is how is it going to translate to playing a football game?

So it's an exciting time for all of us. With that excitement comes a lot of anxiousness and just some nerves as well. And probably feel like most coaches in America, most players in America, we need to play a football game right now and find out where we're at and learn a little bit more about ourselves.

It's also going to be good to be back in Kinnick. And not only good but unusual to have fans in there again, too. So that's going to be special.

I think just a couple things. Really pleased with the veteran players that we have. We've got some guys coming back that have played really good football for us. And we knew that coming in. I think they've improved as football players and they've also given our team a good foundation of leadership. So that part's been good.

And then we had a lot of guys that haven't played or haven't played in front of fans, live fans. It's going to be a new experience for them. And just really eager and kind of anxious to see how they respond on Saturday, see how they play. And especially considering who we are playing against.

The bottom line is it's all about us being able to concentrate on what it is we have to do Saturday and put circumstances aside and try to get ready for a good opponent.

To that point, captains this week, we've got Tyler Linderbaum and Matt Hankins, Jack Koerner and Spencer Petras. Those are the four captains who will go out for the toss. Kyler Schott, as you all know, has been injured and he'll be injured here for a couple more weeks, I believe. He'll not be playing. Everybody else has a chance to make it.

Turning our attention to Indiana. We're looking at a veteran team, a good football team. And they're good in all three phases. So they've got a lot of good veteran players back. They've also added a significant amount of grad transfers that we don't know a lot about and how they'll factor in the equation.

But what we do know these guys are a really well-coached football team in all areas. They've played extremely well, had two very successful seasons the last two years.

And it goes back to Coach Allen when he took over he had a clear vision. And he and his staff have done a really great job not only having a vision but they've developed a really good football program. And we're going to see a really good team on Saturday. We know that. That's what's waiting for us.

They're good in all three phases. Quarterback is an outstanding football player and clearly a leader for them. Bunch of experience and size up front. Good receiver corps. No. 3 is a really good football player.

Defensively extremely aggressive, very, very aggressive, very attacking, have done a great job with the turnovers, takeaway margin and also the penalties. And good on special teams as well.

All in all, just sizes up for a great challenge for us in our first game. I think we're all eager to start. Gotta finish the week here, do a good job there.

And last thing before I open up for questions, just to say that we're thrilled to have Drew Hennigan will be the kick captain this week. A young man from West Des Moines who has proved to be a fighter. Will be good to have him with us on Saturday as well.

Q. [Question about Indiana screen plays and passing

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attack].

We don't know much about the running backs and who will be in there. They lost a really good player there. But, yeah, they do a good job in the throw game too. Really good. And they have good receivers. No. 3 is as good as we're going to play against. But the guy that really makes them go is the quarterback. And having him back, we expect him to be a challenge for us.

Big part of that is the passing game. He's a good thrower. He's very poised. And also can pull down and run if he has to. But he's a really good passer. They can hit you in a lot of different ways.

Q. How has Spencer, where he's now from this point last year, because he didn't have a lot of reps?

COACH FERENTZ: It's night-and-day comparison, really. Last year he went into the season pretty much cold -- no spring ball, no camp. And now he's got eight games under his belt. But he's also had a lot of time to practice beyond those eight games and watch himself perform and learn more about himself.

And he really has done a good job in all regards, starting with the leadership part of it. He's totally committed. Has been. And I think that experience has just allowed him to play a little faster now, a little bit more decisively. And for the most part he's been pretty accurate and done some good things.

It's interesting during camp, you've got ups and downs and we're playing against each other every day it's a little bit of a different challenge, unique challenge. But he made a couple of throws a week ago, I guess, it would be tomorrow, that we -- we had a couple of plays in that practice that stood out. It was like, wow, these look like good football plays here.

I think he's gained some ground, and I think everybody is doing a good job around him. Anxious to see him play this Saturday.

Q. What's the status of the defensive line? Noah Shannon wasn't playing on Kids Day. And they kind of struggled a little bit. I'm just wondering how their growth has been the past couple of weeks and who has been taking those spots in the interior?

COACH FERENTZ: One of the -- first of all, I don't know the answer to that question. It's like a lot of things right now. I can say this on both lines: We'll probably play more than five guys or four guys. We'll be rotating players in and out, because we're still learning. We're still learning about a

lot of our guys right now.

Part of that is just the guys in the equation. The other part is injuries. And that's part of every camp I have to remind myself. It's frustrating, especially the end of last week. We had a lot of guys in and out and the week before, too. We were kind of in the same situation.

So it just makes it tough to really gauge where guys are at, how well they're doing. We're hopeful we'll have everybody at full speed outside of Kyler on Saturday.

And those guys, some guys we have a pretty good feel how they'll play. But a lot of guys we don't know. I think it will be interesting to see. I think Noah will be fine when he's in there.

I feel pretty much that way about Joe Evans and John Waggoner, along with VanValkenburg. We have a lot of young guys in the mix. It will be interesting to see how they play and perform.

Q. Couple hours ago, when we were talking to them, they said -- they're hot to play a good team right off the bat. They said they are. How do you feel about it?

COACH FERENTZ: First of all, your schedule is your schedule; you play what's in front of you. But the fact is we're playing a really good football team. Right now good in all three areas. I think there's no downside to it, in my mind. And we all knew this back in January that we were playing a good football team to open up the season.

You hope guys worked with urgency regardless of who you're playing or what you're doing. But I think the reality is we all realize there's not a lot of wiggle room this week. And we've known that starting spring practice back at the end of March. So we'll find out.

Q. I know last year was last year and everything. But there are certain tangibles you can carry over, positively and negative, confidence among them. The players seem to have a confident aura about them. And a lot of it stems from the way they handled adversity and played well through the course of the season. And they've developed it in the offseason. What's your vantage point of the way they've performed since last season, what they've dealt with? And do you think it will have a positive impact on them just in the way they carry themselves?

COACH FERENTZ: It's interesting, because you never know how the season -- you can argue it both ways. You finish up with some momentum and maybe that carries over. And then conversely if you finish poorly, you want to

rebound from that.

So I think probably most of all it's a new year right now. And like I said earlier, we've got a lot of guys that know what it takes to win. They fully appreciate and understand just how tough it is to win each and every week.

And then you always worry about the guys that haven't played, just not quite grasping it. How important every detail is. This goes well beyond this week. It goes back a ways.

But the better guys pick up just the knowledge that it is important that everybody does well each and every day if we're going to have a chance to have a good football team. Winning teams understand that and they pick that up as you go. I'm hoping that the older guys -- I know they've worked to be good role models. Hopefully the guys are paying attention.

Whenever it hits the fan Saturday, it will hit the fan at some point in the game, hopefully those guys will help pull the younger guys up, because we have some guys that aren't sure what is going on at times or how we react in this situation. You hope the older guys help pull them along a little bit and help support them.

It's going to be interesting to see how this team comes together. They've done a lot of good things, the team's done a lot of good things, they've worked hard. They don't have the consistency, but I don't know if you do in the preseason.

Q. Can you kind of expand on, you talked about rotating the offensive line, what positions you might rotate who might be in there?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not sure. I really am not sure what it's going to look like. I'm pretty sure Linderbaum will be playing center.

And we'll play probably 6-8 guys during the course of the game. And we need to learn more about them and how they're going to perform.

And this is quite a test, because (Indiana) is very multiple in what they do, and they're very aggressive with what they do -- they bring a lot of pressure, add to the mix. So it puts a little bit of pressure on those guys up front. It's a tough preparation. It already has been. It's going to be tougher on Saturday to see how they execute against a very aggressive defensive team.

Q. How do you feel about your running game right now?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it depends on who we block. I feel good about our backs. And there's some depth there. And probably the thing we're most pleased, we knew a lot about Ivory and obviously Tyler. But Leshon Williams and Gavin Williams have both done a good job. I think we have four good backs.

But, again, it's being able to put things together against a team like this. And when you play a team like this as well, because of their style, we'll probably hit some good plays and we'll probably have some ugly plays too. Our guys need to understand that and help play through those ups and downs.

But if we're going to be good, we have to run the ball successfully and effectively. We have to do both. But part of that depends on how they want to play, too. If they want to take the run away they can do it and we will have to throw it.

Q. At this time what percentage of your team is vaccinated?

COACH FERENTZ: It's probably in the upper 90s right now. We've had people jump on that train. It's been a big month moving the needle that way.

Q. What do you think the main key to victory this week, some of the more intangibles or some of the more execution pieces?

COACH FERENTZ: One of the things that comes to mind is playing clean. And that's true, you watch any early season football. You consider the turnover/take-away margin, this Indiana team was so good at last year.

They forced a lot of turnovers, to their credit. And part of that is their style, the way play defense; they come at you aggressively. We have to really protect the football. True in any game but it's going to be important in this game.

First games are all about unknowns. We say they have an established staff. I can't imagine they'll change dramatically because they've been so successful.

We have an idea at least of what they do. You still never know quite what they'll do. Then they have unknowns in terms of personnel. Ours, as they look at us, it's probably more young guys they don't know a lot about.

When we're looking at them, they have some of those guys but they also have a lot of grad transfers we haven't seen playing their system. I know this, a lot of them have good credentials. So it's trying to piece all those things together,

too.

Q. Jack Campbell said that Tyler Linderbaum is the most consistent player he's seen in his life. Do you echo those statements?

COACH FERENTZ: Consistency is one of the first things you think about. Not only as a player but just as a person. He is the same guy every day. At least he presents himself that way. And whether you see him in the building here or out on the field, there's just a real consistency about him. And he certainly carries that over to the way he practices.

And I told a couple of the NFL guys that have been coming through, I can't remember him having a bad moment during spring practice. That's unusual.

He is steady and quality. And part of that, though, he's a competitive guy. And he takes a lot of pride in what he does. Those are two common traits of outstanding players, at least the ones I've been around -- despite whatever personality they may possess; those are two traits that most really good players have.

Q. How does he handle all the attention he's gotten?

COACH FERENTZ: He's totally unaffected by that. With all due respect to the NIL he could care less. He's just not interested in that. He's focused on what he does and what he's trying to be good at. And that doesn't mean you can't do both, I'm not suggesting that. But that's just how he thinks.

And I think people I've been around in my life that have been really good at what they do, they have an ability to focus in on things that they're trying to do and do well. And he certainly is in that category. He just doesn't listen to a lot or doesn't pay attention to a lot. Just kind of pays attention to what's important to him.

Q. Seemed like it was trending this way, but are Keagan Johnson and Arland Bruce in the wide receiver rotation?

COACH FERENTZ: Definitely. I don't know if we've got five or six in our rotation, but they're definitely in. And just pleased with the progress they continue to make. Jackson Ritter has entered that group. And I don't know if he's on the depth chart. I think he is. I can't remember. But he's definitely made some steps forward, too.

And Charlie Jones, I'll throw him in there. He's been a good returner, obviously, but he's done a nice job at receiver. Who does that leave us? We also have Tracy. That's a start.

Q. How about backup tight end, Lachey?

COACH FERENTZ: He's firmly number two right now.

Q. What are you seeing from him?

COACH FERENTZ: He's a young guy, second year. But he's done a good job. Steady out there. Just keeps working. Has done a good job. He's different than Sam. Different kind of player, but he's done a quality job.

Q. You have a consistent assistant coach available to the media tomorrow. There's been a lot of accessibility with your assistant coaches and media, a great deal in the offseason. It's not a brand new thing, I realize, but it's evolving, more and more. And for a long time it was almost zero. What has made your change about the merit of it? Have you seen anything from it?

COACH FERENTZ: No, it's evolution. I'm trying to get another new Kirk round going. That one year we had the new Kirk thing going. (Laughter.)

Just seriously, we're trying to, just trying to do what we think is good for everybody. And it's one more step to access.

There are other suggestions that have been made that I'm not as keen on. But we're going to try to do our part and share information as much as we can that's going to help us and help everybody else, too.

Q. What persuaded you to go the other way? If I remember correctly, and tell me, it was you felt like they had enough on their plates. It was your job to face us and not theirs and so forth. What persuaded you the other way?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm going to throw more in there, too. We're letting the first-year guys talk. If they're in the two-deep during the season, have at it.

I think part of it is self-serving. I think we've got great bench strength. We have a great group of coaches what have you. I do worry about the responsibilities. Part of my job is to interface with the media and that's part of the head coach's job, I get that.

We're trying to get a little more exposure, a little bit more perspective for not only you folks but the people that follow you to learn a little bit more about our program.

So it's a little more sharing of information, sharing of people in the program and trying to do it in a judicious way.

My number one concern right now is everybody doing the job they're getting paid to do during the season, especially. And so I'm not against access, but, boy, I tell you, everybody's busy right now.

Q. Considering what Indiana does on offense, how helpful is it to have somebody like Jestin Jacobs? And how have you seen his maturation over time?

COACH FERENTZ: For us to be a good football team, you graduate a guy like McNiemann. McNiemann is a really good football player. He was climbing the ladder. Similar to Justin. The thing about him, he was playing, made some really nice plays in the bowl game in '19. And played really well for us last year. Now hopefully he makes it with the Chargers, and haven't heard how that went.

But that's how teams continue to be good. You have to have people coming up the ladder. And Justin's always been a very talented guy. We knew that when we recruited him. He's just playing more comfortably now. And a guy who knows what he's doing.

So that gives us three guys that we feel are capable starters with he and Seth and Jack. We'll need more than that. We're seeing other guys develop, too. Certainly Jay Higgins has grown a lot. Kyle Fisher has grown a lot.

That's how teams get built and that's how they become good is guys developing. We're going to need everybody on defense up front and certainly in the intermediate, back end.

Q. Couple of books players read this offseason "The Program" and "Never Enough," speaker Mike Hayes came to speak to your team. Why did you choose those books for your team to read and what do they mean to you?

COACH FERENTZ: The program was a suggestion by one of our coaches. And actually a couple of them had read it and thought it would be good. If you read it, it's what we do. Although nobody's lives are at stake. And the same thing with Mike. I had the pleasure of meeting Mike a couple summers ago. He wanted to come last year, and obviously COVID made things really difficult. So he Zoomed, and this year we were able to have him here in person.

And in that time he wrote a book, which I highly recommend. But it's just a good life book. It's not just a football book or a military book. But just outside perspectives, outside voices, people have had really unique experiences. I think it's helpful for all people.

Q. How did you meet Mike?

COACH FERENTZ: Just at an event, one thing lead to another and we had a chance to visit. He's a really unique person. Just a really unique person. And it's interesting, you meet a person like him or a person like Dan Gable. If you think about them in a different environment, you would have no idea who they are. It's a good rule in life -- you never know who you're talking with when you talk with people, what their lives are about. And he's certainly a good example. I've always thought of Dan Gable that way, too. You might underestimate if you saw him on the street, not knowing about his accomplishments. He's not going to tell you, but neither will Mike.

Q. Spencer, from what other guys of said, has been playing really well. How has that played out, is the playbook more open to him?

COACH FERENTZ: He's operating quicker and more decisively. I don't know if "relaxed" is the right word to describe him. He's got a hyperactive note to himself. But he's doing a good job. He's doing a really good job.

And the fact that he's one of our leaders, voted as a captain, that tells you how people see him too. He's done a really good job. He's totally invested. There are many things that I appreciate about him. That's one. He's totally invested. All four of those captains, plus a bunch of other guys are in that boat, that's for sure.

Q. Obviously he's the No. 1 quarterback, is there a clear No. 2 or No. 3?

COACH FERENTZ: Right now it's clearly Spencer, Alex and Deuce, it's one, two, three. We like Joe as well, he's a good young prospect.

Q. What about Charlie Jones returning kickoff, is that a full-go ahead?

COACH FERENTZ: It's unique. Special teams is unique. Outside of the kick return position we return starters basically at every position. I consider Shudak to be a starter. It was that close with he and Keith (Duncan). We feel good about our specialist. Austin Spiewak is in that equation as well. Our core special teams have impressed with what we're seeing during camp. And we'll know more Saturday.

But I think we have a chance to be pretty solid on special teams. The kick return game, Charlie's definitely in the mix. I think we actually have several good candidates back there. And the same thing with our gunner position. We

probably had four or five guys that really could do it capably. So that's a good thing, that's a good sign. And hopefully they don't make me a liar on Saturday.

Q. NFL cuts are today, you've got a few undrafted free agents who are at worst on the bubble, some fifth and sixth rounders making teams, are your guys getting short-changed in the draft and if so, why?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if they're shortchanged. The good thing about football, and the NFL especially, there's a lot of things about the NFL that were really calloused and hard, but if you go in and perform, you've got a chance. I don't know how many jobs are like that. But you have an opportunity and you typically get judged on your merits and what you do, what you bring to the organization. The one little caveat there, it's a benefit to be young and cheap. So that gives you a little better chance to gain traction as one of the last five spots on the roster. Certainly a practice squad deal.

I've always told our guys, it doesn't matter how you get there. It is just is a matter of what you do when you get there.

If you do quality work, chances are you'll get an opportunity. And the other good thing about the NFL, there are 31 other teams that are evaluating you as well as the team that you're on. So at least you know there's opportunity there.

But all that being said, it's hard. And the guys that typically end up sticking are the guys that figure out that you've got to work hard and show up every day and do your absolute best and show something for the team or organization to invest the time.

And I like to think that our guys at least understand when they go in what they need to be doing and hopefully won't self-destruct.

Q. What's the challenge in defending Indiana's receivers, particularly Fryogle?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a challenge. There are a lot of good receivers in our conference. He's right at the top of the class. He's an excellent football player. It's going to be a big challenge for us. They've got other guys too, and picked up at least one who we expect we'll see out there. So they don't make it easy on you. That's for sure. And on top of it, they've got a guy that can get the ball to them really well. It's a challenge.

Q. The goals you've set through the course of the year, when do you start setting those goals? How

often do you visit them through the offseason and even during the season? And are they on a wall or they just in everybody's hearts?

COACH FERENTZ: We pretty much do it offensively, defensively, special teams. I'm not overly great on like a team goal, win or losing, that's the first goal. But there are certain things that we deem are really important if we're going to have a chance to be victorious.

And those things we talk about on a pretty consistent basis. They get broken down a little more specifically by the three people in charge of those units.

But going back to the part about playing clean, again, we have a lot of respect for Indiana because of the job they did with ball security and takeaways last year.

That's where it all starts. Over 20-plus years, if I could only pick one stat, that's the one I would start with right there. But these guys, they don't do dumb penalties. Like they're batting fourth in the league or something like that last year. They're not going to beat themselves -- we had 10 penalties in our first game last year, as an example, and two fumbles.

I know this, if we have 10 penalties and two fumbles on Saturday we'll be on the short end again. There's certain basics we try to reemphasize time and time again. And usually on Sunday those things come up, right along with that, giving up big plays and hopefully creating a few. But if we are giving up big plays, it's tough to win.

Q. Is there room for growth in red zone production?

COACH FERENTZ: I didn't mention, but these guys are number one defense. Speaking of things that are important to victory. It's going to be a challenge for us. But one thing we, right along with some of the other key points, is there's a huge difference between touchdowns and field goals. And three points are better than no points. But scoring touchdowns, we really just try to keep emphasizing that with our players the value of that.

And if we get that opportunity, that's really important. And conversely, on defense, if we can keep people to field goals as opposed to touchdowns, that's what really helps over the long haul.

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