

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: We have a big challenge on our hands. Excited about the opportunity. Excited for our players to have the experience of playing in this game. We've only been there one time (2015). And it's a tremendous environment. Great experience for everybody. So really happy for our guys to have that opportunity.

Couple of words about Friday. Obviously, proud of our guys, the way they played, the way they continued to fight. And they don't know how to give up. It was great to get the win. Pleased about that. Overall they've been determined all season long. It's one of the characteristics that stands out.

They work hard. They compete hard. And also they've shown great character and they really do care about each other. They like each other, trust each other and care about each other.

So those things are really certainly traits you hope for a football team. And it's an extension of their families, their parents, reflective of the kind of support they get at home. And that's something we all appreciate.

This is really is a tight-knit group of parents as well. And it probably started a little bit maybe during the pandemic just sharing information, because certainly we had a bunch of unknowns going on 20 months ago.

And they seemed like they rallied since that time. So as a coach, I'm appreciative of the support that they've lent, the fact that they trust us and let us work with their children. Really important.

I think anybody that knows anything about sports, it's not just football, I'm sure, but if you're a college football player, it's going to be hard. You're going to experience disappointment, setbacks, all those kinds of things. It's part of going to college. Certainly if you're competing in this sport, it can be disappointing.

I've always felt like it's really beneficial, if a player has someone they can reach out to and get words of

encouragement and support, because hardship comes your way, it's just part of the deal. It's kind of been my experience. Just appreciate the way that parents have supported our players and support us.

So our guys were off Saturday and came back in Sunday and got back to work. It's going to be a normal game week for us.

Just a couple words about the honors that were announced. Certainly glad to see Caleb recognized as a Big Ten special teams player of the week. Certainly worthy. He's had a great season. Not surprised or disappointed, but maybe a little disappointed he wasn't in as a finalist. But bottom line you'll probably see two of the best place kickers in college football in this game on Saturday.

Michigan has an outstanding kicker. We feel the same way about Caleb. Happy for him to be recognized. Coincidentally, the other two players that you probably noticed play for our opponent. So it's kind of a reflection of the kind of team they have.

We have two players of the year in the Big Ten with Riley Moss and Charlie Jones. More to be mentioned tomorrow. But happy for those two guys, that's a special honor for both players, well deserved. Really hard earned and for all the guys that got Big Ten recognition, happy for them as well. And ditto for the same guys to get recognized tomorrow.

So we'll see where that all goes. Then just for the Michigan game, looking ahead, the same four captains: Tyler Linderbaum, Matt Hankins, Jack Koerner, and Jack Campbell. Those four guys will go out for the toss.

And Matt Hankins, unfortunately, will not be ready and probably is going to miss the bowl game, too. He's not going to be able to go. He'll be with us, obviously, but not able to participate. So it's disappointing, especially for Matt.

I feel badly for him. He's done a great job, had a great career. This would have been a great feel for him to be in this game, certainly.

Looking at Michigan. My first experience in this game was



in 1981. They were awfully good then. And they had a lot of good teams in the '80s. Since I've been back, they've had a lot of good teams, too. This team certainly looks like they're right at the top of that list from what we can tell.

They're extremely talented in all phases. They have good depth. Very talented and well-coached. And to me this is typical of good teams. But Michigan has a real identity, offensively, defensively, special teams. You can tell their players fully believe in what they're doing. They do it well and they do it with a lot of energy and play at a high level.

So it's a real credit to their football team. They've had a great season. Got off to a good start. Had the one bump in the road and came right back and finished out the season in impressive fashion.

I can't imagine them playing a lot better than they did this past Saturday against a team that's extremely talented and a very good football team. They played a tremendous football game.

It's going to be a tough challenge for us. We're excited about it. It's an opportunity, certainly, but we've got a lot of work to do in the meantime to get ready. I'm proud of our football team.

They've earned the right to play in this game, to compete in the championship game. It took them all 12 games to get there. We talk to our players all the time. That's why they keep a clock on it, 60 minutes a game, 12 games a year, see where it's all at. We have a lot of work to do between now and Saturday night.

Q. Your decision-making process about quarterback, what ultimately led you to the decision you made?

COACH FERENTZ: It was a gut feeling Saturday. We just went with it. And we'll continue to do that moving forward. But we'll start the game with Spencer. I thought he did a good job. He's done a lot of good things for over two years right now, and we haven't forgotten about that at all.

Q. Will Terry Roberts be available?

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. He's been able to practice. We're not out of the woods yet but we're getting close. It's been a long tough path. Bone bruise, basically. And it's kind of hard. And there is, at least my experience, no way to accurately predict how long a guy is going to be out. But he seemed pretty functional yesterday and today. And seems like his spirits are up. So that's good.

Q. If he's available could he jump there at corner ahead of Terry?

COACH FERENTZ: That's something we'll talk about. But Jermari has done a good job. He went from being a young kid who has never played and now he has a couple games under his belt. From my vantage point, only really made one critical error. That one a couple weeks ago. Those are good learning experiences. He's done a good job. So keep our fingers crossed, but hopefully we'll have three guys at least that have some experience. And Terry will help us on special teams too, get him back there will be a real bonus. But has to finish the week out. But looks good.

Q. Hutchinson, the D line.

COACH FERENTZ: I've noticed him.

Q. Probably stands out a bit.

COACH FERENTZ: Yes, and he's got a running mate that kind of gets your attention.

Q. What do you do to neutralize him, where he's at all times?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know what you do to neutralize him. He's an outstanding player. And better know where he lines up.

And it's fairly predictable, but the only problem is the guy on the other side is, I don't want to say equally dangerous, but it's pretty close. It's a 1-2.

I was thinking this morning, I don't know how often we've faced a team that has two guys outside like that that can be as disruptive as they are.

And I said to somebody in the last 48 hours, when I was in the NFL there were two guys -- there a lot of good players in the NFL, needless to say, that's an obvious statement.

A guy like Reggie White doesn't count because he's so freakishly talented. His size, speed, strength, just extraordinary, plus a better person than he was a player.

Two guys that always stood out in my career, my time, at least my six years, my long career at six years, right, but Howie Long was one of them. And John Randall played more inside than outside, he was a Tasmanian devil. Howie Long the same way. If you relaxed one play, he was going to be in there wrecking the play and really causing havoc.

They're not the same players, those two guys I described. Hutchinson is not. But he doesn't stop. And that's part of

the reason he's so good. Plus he has a good skill set. He has a motor that's really impressive.

Q. What is your opinion on kind of what's going on out in college football with coaches starting to -- greener pastures, I guess -- big ticket schools?

COACH FERENTZ: That's probably unprecedented. I'm not a historian, but I can't remember this much activity. It's a flurry of activity. It started early, needless to say. So it's like a lot of things it's a sign of the times.

Our world's changing, certainly the world I live in is changing pretty much day to day. So I'm not quite sure where it's going to land, or end, what it's going to look like five years from now, talk about NIL transfer portals, all those things. But I think this is one more step. And a lot of it, it's like anything else: As the dollars get bigger, the stakes get a little higher.

So it's changed. It has changed the whole landscape.

Q. Your recruiting director tweeted something out --

COACH FERENTZ: Do I want to hear this or not?

Q. Breaking news, Coach Ferentz isn't going anywhere.

COACH FERENTZ: Glad to know that, first of all.

Q. You'll be here a while.

COACH FERENTZ: I was hoping here to be for a while. That's been my plan for about 23 years now. Just trying to make it to the next step, that's kind of what I've been thinking about. I think I made it to this step.

Q. Deuce, transfer portal out there. What were your conversations with him regarding that?

COACH FERENTZ: It's unfortunate. We don't want to lose any players. We've had a couple choose to transfer out. Usually when players have that thought, my first question would be, have you thought about it, spent a lot of time thinking about it, who have you talked to, those types of things. Then the second question is, do you need more time to make a decision?

And then the only other thing I'd add to it is with the quarterback situation, it's a little different as we know. I know the portal has changed the world a little bit. But I've always looked at quarterbacks separately. We have had three guys.

I've talked to Deuce about this, we've had three guys who left here, did well at their next stops. My guess is he'll do the same thing.

But the quarterback position is unique. It's unique in recruiting, as you know. They commit earlier, typically, because there are limited seats.

I know they used to call them the point guard in basketball.

So I fully appreciate it. He wants to get somewhere where he feels like he has a little bit better opportunity, and fully support him. He's a tremendous young guy. He has a really good arm. And I joked about him last Tuesday, but he made some really good throws that day. Probably been more appropriate if I said our third quarter instead of naming his name.

But I'm not real comfortable with any third quarterback being in the game until they get to work as a 1 or 2, but he's a talented young guy.

Q. More guys now going into the portal earlier because of the early signing period or maybe wanting to get someplace earlier.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't follow it that closely. But it's funny you bring it up. I have received a few texts in the last several days mentioning 230 people entering the portal yesterday. Is that possible? I assume that's a high number. The guy wouldn't have mentioned it. I'm not following it. I think that's the world we're living in right now. It's going to be part of the train we all have to navigate.

Q. Speaking of your comment the other day, of course you mentioned you were joking. It seemed like you were joking.

COACH FERENTZ: I hope you took it that way.

Q. But if your quarterback, third team quarterback who feels like he's not getting an opportunity, probably doesn't take it as such. Did he ask you about that? Did you bring it up to him?

COACH FERENTZ: I brought it up to him. In retrospect I wish I had not named the name. In the team meeting, that might be -- hopefully everybody laughed, that type of thing, because the bottom line, I'm not going to coach a player through the media or say something that's hurtful or malicious towards a player. To me, it's not appropriate. I did share that with the team on Sunday, that exact point.

I wanted to make sure I understood, if I have an issue with any player, we'll have a private visit. That's where that will

be, because I don't like to air that kind of stuff out in public. It was by no means that way, but in retrospect I wish I hadn't said it, quite frankly.

Q. Saturday will you go into the game with the same approach, with the quarterback situation that, hey, if it's not working --

COACH FERENTZ: We'll keep every option open in all positions. One thing we want to make sure Alex understood, whenever Spencer was healthy, I guess it was two games ago, seems like a month ago, we didn't want him looking over his shoulder. Same thing for Spencer. Whoever is in there has got to play, and we'll handle it as we went. Or as we go.

We don't want a guy looking over the shoulder, start that kind of situation. It's not good for anybody.

Q. What's it going to take for you guys to win this game?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm still trying to get my head around that a little bit. We've played in some games, I'm thinking, just off the top of my head, the last, what, two times ago, when we played these guys in '16, I think we were 34 underdogs, 26, something like that.

I think back to the Penn State in '08 game where they were second or third in the country, whatever they might have been. The thing about LSU, which I know it was a miracle play, at the end, the miracle was that after 59 minutes that we were even in the ball game, if you really looked at their personnel. You go back, look at who is on that roster.

I look at those three games, and I told the team the fun part about these games is you really have to be at your best each and every play. And those axioms or clichés about you never know if six plays or eight plays are going to define a game.

They are true. In games like this, they're certainly true. But these guys are just so good in every position. They just put a lot of pressure on you. And I don't mean like blitzing pressure or tempo pressure, you just know what they're capable of. You really just have to try to make them earn everything. It's easier said than done.

And then we're going to have to come up with something. Somewhere along the way, create a break or whatever. And somehow some way find a way to get it done.

Q. Do you have a different feeling going into this game than you did in 2015?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. I don't think we were feeling pressure back then, that undefeated thing. We just wanted to go there and win the game. It was a hell of a game. It's ironic. We went 12-0 that year, but I got more compliments about our team after that game than I did any of the other 12 or maybe those other 12 combined, just because both teams competed so hard. And I think that's what you hope for in a championship game. Obviously if you're on one sideline, you're hoping your team is on the right end of the score.

But that was just one unbelievable football game. So before you can win a game, you've got to play and be in it like that. And we just couldn't come up with that last stop or that last cash-in on something. But I don't know if there's any difference here. There's similarities. I know we're playing a really good team. We'll have to play our best football of the year to have a chance to be in it.

Q. What has Jack Campbell meant to this defense?

COACH FERENTZ: Outstanding. That position, like the quarterback, it's a position where things emanate right from there. Just kind of starts things. We've been so lucky. I know Chad didn't play the middle linebacker position. If you think about Chad and Abdul, what a combination those two guys were. And Abdul was an outstanding middle linebacker. Slide up to Josey Jewell, all three have different personalities, but really good players at that spot.

Probably leaving some guys out but those three pop off. Jack's done a great job, too, to build a good defense, to build anything, it helps to be good up the middle. I believe that -- I'm a baseball guy -- good to be up the middle.

Q. Did you expect him to have that kind of season coming into the year? Second part of the question, what makes him so good at that job?

COACH FERENTZ: We thought he'd play well. We were expecting that. And it's nice to have he and Matt, the two senior cornerbacks, experienced and really good players. And they both have great attitudes. They're guys everybody on the team respects. Riley has a little different personality, as you know. Kind of lighthearted. But I'll tell you he loves playing, though. The sad part is that both of them had to fight through injury this year and missed significant time.

So that part is hard, but both of them kept supporting their teammates and were helpful and kept their attitudes in a really good place. And so it's really good to see his efforts get recognized the way they have. And I don't think you can ever predict the kind of statistics, the picks that he's got and all that kind of thing. Really lofty to predict that.

But real credit to him, works hard at it, has worked hard at it and has a lot of fun doing it and we're thrilled he's on the team.

Q. Is there a way to quantify what Spencer brings from a mental approach to a game like this, especially when getting in the right pass pro is going to be real critical against a team?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm still not sure what the right pass pro is, unless we don't want to have any receivers go out. I know we can block them up, but that's going to be unrealistic. We'll have to be smart about that or as smart as we can be.

I think his experience certainly helps. He's played more than Alex. That's a benefit, potentially. And he's been knocked around. He's had success and been knocked around, too. And just kind of built a resumé, if you will. That's got to help. It's still going to be a real big challenge. These guys are really good on defense.

Q. How do you establish a run game against such a good Michigan front?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll have to bang away at it, see what we can do. Starts with blocking. Try to block them and pick runs maybe that are smart. And we're still working on that part of it. These guys, they're really big inside. They look like a pro defense. They've got big, strong players inside.

They roll a lot of guys through, depending on your personnel. The outside guy, 97 is not coming off the field. But on the other side they'll put a big physical guy in there if you're in a run group, if you will.

So they match up strategically. They're smart that way. So they pose a lot of problems for you, they really do. We're going to have to -- and I don't think we'll be running for 300 yards. That's not realistic. But we have to try to find a way to run efficiently.

Q. Back to the earlier topic on this, I asked a bunch of your players, kind of facetiously, but do you ever think, worry about Coach Ferentz leaving for another job. Of course they preach the stability and, et cetera, that you've created here. In your mind how important is that to a successful program?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's everything. It's one person's opinion. And I've said this before, it kind of goes back to my roots, growing up in Pittsburgh, where as bad as Iowa was in 1981, the Steelers were worse, they were just so bad prior to 1969.

And I have long admired the Rooneys, the Rooney family, and I've met one or two of them, but I'm not personal friends. But anybody I've known through the years who has worked in that organization, always picked their brains about why does it work, and what's it like internally. Bottom line, there's a good chain of command, there's good communication, this is my opinion, between the head coach the general manager and the ownership.

And that sounds really basic and pretty undramatic, but it's so uncommon in probably a lot of corporations, just, quite frankly, not just football. And so at least I think that -- I don't want to speak to any of the guys that coach there -- I'm guessing when they went to work there they knew what the expectation standards and what they were going to accomplish and also knew they were going to be supported. And in this world of microwave decision-making, they don't abide by that philosophy.

So I feel fortunate. And to me it all started here, two people with Coach Fry and Bump Elliott, those two people really set the bar for what was going to follow here. And if you look at all our programs, there's a lot of stability in all the programs here.

And we compete in a tough league. This isn't the NFL, the Big Ten is competitive and tough. And you're not going to win every year. And some years aren't going to be much fun. That's the reality of it. Nobody wants that. To me it's all about the people in the building and it's all about addressing the issues you have or whatever needs to be shored up. And I look at the world pretty simplistically.

The Steelers have grasped that concept. They probably invented it in pro football. If you look at the other teams that are successful you'll see a model similar. Thinking about a couple organizations off the top of my head. Funny how they're always at the top and the other ones flounder, spike up and down.

It's not that hard, but it takes some patience and takes some good communication, those types of things, which nobody wants to do that anymore, right? I get all that.

So me personally, I appreciate that. But we all are different, too. Just like you guys. And we're all looking for different things in life. And so you chase the path that fits you the best. And from my standpoint, I've been fortunate, totally coincidentally, to land in a place that kind of meshed the way I like to look at the world. A fluke. Took one guy who never should have interviewed me to hire me, not only interview me, but hire me in 1981. Who would have thought it and here we are.

Q. The players talked about getting to the goals they want. And emotions as a coach, for you, to see the hard work and everything turning to fruition, seeing the joy on their faces, could you describe the emotions? You've been through this a lot. What are the emotions like?

COACH FERENTZ: It's getting there and winning, that was part of the goal. It's getting to Indy but also winning in Indy, which we haven't done yet. But it's just kind of follow up on the point that was made, it's still more to me -- and I'm old-fashioned or whatever -- but to me it's more about the pursuit. It's how you run the race. And that's really what it's all about. Because there are a lot of good teams out there, a lot of really good competitive teams. We're playing a team that's extremely -- they belong at number two, and maybe they should be number one. I don't know that. I'm not that smart. But they're certainly a top-ranked team for good reason. We have a tough hill to climb here. But it's more about how you do things.

So that's really what it is. And I'll just share this, so it's important -- Friday was a really good day. Maybe as good as any. We came out, got our Chick-fil-A snacks, not sure if I'm allowed to say that -- I'm not trying to advertise for anybody -- got our snacks. The guy that does the meals complimented me a couple of times in a row now, just about how well our players act.

Q. How are you seen --

COACH FERENTZ: It's just as important.

Q. How have you seen Tyler progress this year?

COACH FERENTZ: He's been patient. Talking about patience, right? He's been patient, too, because we've been a work in progress and still are up front. Like our whole offense. But as I've said many times, he shows up every day the same guy. Just has a really good attitude. I appreciate guys -- not that everybody's got a smile and all that -- but I appreciate that guys look like they're excited to be doing what they're doing. That's what he looks like, he hits the field. He likes practice, has good energy.

Same way in the building anytime you see him. I can't remember many times, if any, where I've seen him where he looks like he's down. He's a positive guy that works hard and he's a really good football player.

Q. How much more space does a guy like Linderbaum, specifically asking about Linderbaum, when he's blocking for run or pass, can you tell a major difference in terms of space he's creating for a running back versus an ordinary center because obviously he's

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COACH FERENTZ: The thing that jumps out most to me about him is his consistency, maybe more so -- his production is really good. Not minimizing that -- but consistency is really uncommon. And I go back to growing up as a young person. Mike Webster was a guy, boy, was he a good center. I remember going up to Latrobe and watching them practice. He made everything look easy. You know it's not easy. Blocking a guy like Joe Greene. After practice Joe Greene and he went one-on-one, what do you think a ticket like that would cost if it was for public consumption?

Two of the all-time great NFL players. Just the things he did, the work, the consistency. Just looked like it was almost easy. It's not. There's nothing like that especially in the NFL or what we're doing. That's how I would describe Tyler. So efficient. So focused and usually pretty sound fundamentally. He wins a lot of battles because of that. And it sounds simple, again, but it's easy to say but it's really hard to do.

And that's the thing. And the other part I would just say about him, you meet him. He's, I don't know if low key is the right word, but he's not an outward rambunctious guy. He's ultra competitive. Most good players are. They know how to go.

Q. Jack told us about your message to the players after the Wisconsin game, overcoming adversity, how it takes being humble. What prompted you to leave that note at that time and when you make those decisions, how do you determine what outside motivation as a rallying tool?

COACH FERENTZ: For the record I steal everything. I haven't had an original thought in about 50 years. It was probably a bad thought, too, whatever it was. But that actually coincidentally was Coach Bennett from UVA, after they lost. They were -- UMB was 64, whatever. UVA was number one.

I've never met him. But I really respected his dad as a coach. And I don't know anything about basketball. I just know if I like it or not, what I see.

I had a lot of respect for his dad. A lot of respect for Coach Bennett. So I thought, because maybe not have been there for that extreme, number one, I don't know about number one, but to have that heartbreak, I thought he handled that well. A great quote. A year later they came back and won it.

The message is there's all kinds of people you steal things

from, but you just push through. You push through, just like Michigan did. They had a disappointing loss and won the game statistically. If you look at film, you'd say how did it -- it didn't, but they kept pushing. And looking at the other, playing really good. Beat their arch rival pretty soundly. Always stealing thoughts because I don't have many original ones. So just look around, keep your eyes open.

Q. You had to deal with a lot of turmoil and adversity a year and a half ago. And you're at this place now where you're in the Big Ten Championship, players didn't want to -- they could have mass exited and all that kind of thing. What do you think helped keep everybody together and is this program a better program today than it was 18 months ago?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's evidenced by the way our guys have played and responded. And I'll go back, just stealing thoughts. Steve Banick talked to our team eight years ago, talked about believing the impossible is possible and doing the next right thing.

That's really kind of what guided us through that whole period. Just all about trying to do the next thing. Trying to figure out what's the next right thing and make sure we're doing it. And the credit goes to everybody in the building because everybody had input, what do we need to look at. And I've quoted Jim Caldwell, too, on the advisory board saying that Kirk's players will tell him what needs to be done and that was great advice, really good advice. It was players, staff getting together and working through things very methodically and thoroughly.

And then most important thing is following up on a consistent basis. And I think we've done that.

And it's like football, you're never done. Our season will end here at some point and we'll relax and all that stuff. Seniors, it will be done for them, unfortunately, but then you move on to the next phase. And that's kind of what we tried to do, is just try to keep handling the next phase as smartly as we possibly can.

Q. Saturday's game, what will it mean for you emotionally when you step foot in the stadium on Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: First of all, it's a long day, first thing that comes to mind. '15 was like that, the Orange Bowl was a really late kickoff. But it's just -- it probably won't be so much Saturday, but after we're out of there, maybe, then you start thinking about things a little bit. I've tried to tell our players the same thing.

The real key, because when you play in a championship type game or a bowl game that's marquee, all that stuff -- they're all important to us -- but the more stuff there is on the outside that comes with it, we've had a lot of media obligations here the last two days, want to get those done. So the players, they were done last night so the players can focus on the game.

But really it gets down to just trying to manage your time and energy because you've only got so much of that and make sure you've budgeted if you have to deal with tickets, which thank God I don't.

But one benefit of marriage, but one of many, especially being married to my wife, one of many benefits, but every player is confronted with some of those challenges.

So just got to remember what's going to help us win is doing our jobs and playing as well as we can. That's the trick. That's easier said than done. You've got to stay focused on what it is that you have to do that day that night, et cetera.

Q. Any extra excitement from Tracy, Britt, getting to go home?

COACH FERENTZ: I think those guys are fired up. We have a couple of guys. Craig's from there, too. It's all good. I was teasing those guys, the downside is you get more ticket requests when you go to your home state. But they're certainly willing to trade that off.

Q. Following up on Wisconsin. Has everything that's gone on kind of -- seems like it's deepened your emotional connection to this team in a lot of ways, is that fair?

COACH FERENTZ: We've got a close team. We've got a close team. And a good staff. Really good staff. And I think we've all done this all together. So it's been good.

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