

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 16, 2021

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: To start out, a couple words about the weekend and then certainly turn our attention to Illinois. First of all, just good to get the win. Hard fought the other night and proud of our football team.

Statistics are important, I guess, but the bottom line is trying to be successful in the game. And we made it difficult the other day. You think about time of possession, rushing yardage, those types of things, we lost the turnover battle. Yet we were still able to come out on top. Happy for our football team. Proud of their effort there.

A couple of things that probably counteracted some of that, the turnover thing, red zone defense really helped us out keeping them out of the end zone. They were down there three times, we got three stops. Forced them to kick field goals. Came up with some critical plays -- offensively, some big plays, cashed in on some opportunities. And then certainly in the kicking game Caleb with a 50-yarder. And then the one at the end from a little bit of a challenging angle.

The blocked field goal certainly was big. And then we turned that into a touchdown after that. And then certainly Tory's punting in the fourth quarter gave them a long field. I think all those things allowed us to be successful.

I wanted to especially mention Caleb and Tory, the job they've been doing all season. They've really been dependable and a big part of our success, the successes we've had.

And just an overall team effort. Like most of these games, November Big Ten games are going to go down to the wire. You've got to expect that each and every week.

And that being said, turn our attention to Illinois. First of all, just very sorry to hear the news about Coach Bielema this morning. And he's -- certainly not a good thing. You don't want to wish that on anybody. I wish Bret the best for a speedy recovery.

Probably just continues to serve as a reminder for all of us

that this thing is not over yet. I think all of us have to be mindful and as diligent as we possibly can because it hasn't gone away.

Seems like you read a lot about it in pro football. That's kind of enough for most of us to be aware. So thank you all. Everybody just take the necessary precautions and be as smart as you can. There's still no guarantees, obviously.

And I'm guessing his life is a little bit like our life -- not much going on other than being in the building or being at home. So it's a real part of what we're still experiencing.

Regarding us for this game for captains, it will be the same four guys. Tyler on offense, Linderbaum. You've got Hankins, Koerner and Campbell defensively.

And injury-wise Terry Roberts won't make it back. Maybe, I don't think so, maybe some special teams, I don't think so. He hasn't been able to hit full throttle yet. Ivory Kelly-Martin might be able to do a little special teams, but they're kind of in the holding pattern. And Spencer, I think, has a chance to be fully healthy. He's had two pretty good days of practice. So we'll see how it looks here this week and go from there.

Like most teams we've got a couple of guys that are nursing some injuries right now and hopefully they'll be ready Saturday. We'll keep our fingers crossed on that.

When you look at Illinois, obvious, big first obvious thing it's a new staff. So whole new system, new philosophy, et cetera.

And then it's interesting, like last week, these guys have a really veteran football team. It was in the mid-20s, the amount of super seniors that came back. They've got a lot of veteran players at all positions.

They're really an experienced team but new to the system, if you will. Looks like things are merging and meshing pretty well. From what we can tell it's been well-received. And I think that was really signaled by, they got a victory in the first game of the season, Big Ten opponent.

And I think that kind of said it all right there. Then you look more recently, two out of the three last week say they've been on the road and beaten good teams in their stadiums

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

playing good football.

Doing a really good job running the football. It's clear they want to do that. It's a point of emphasis. I think they've got a really good offensive line and good backs. They're doing a good job there.

Quarterback is a good player. They've got good receivers, tight ends, really active in the passing game.

Then defensively it's a whole new system. Coach Smith had a very distinct way of playing. This is totally new. And I think their players have really embraced it and done a really good job there.

When you look at special teams, you talk about the super seniors, their specialists are just outstanding. They've got a really good kicking game. The punter's outstanding. Kicker's got a really strong leg. We could probably take the week off from our kickoff return team. They've had like four returns this whole season. They've got a couple of guys there that are really good football players and they do a good job overall with their core guys. That's where that's at.

Bottom line they're a tough Big Ten football team. I think we're looking at another one of those Big Ten contests in November. It's going to go right to the wire.

That's kind of where that's at. And the other obvious thing Saturday, we're saying goodbye to 16 seniors as well as some student managers and student helpers, video folks, all that.

A lot of people get involved to make this thing go and make the operations smooth. And really appreciate the efforts of all of them, especially our football players.

Just really happy to see their efforts, their dedication, all the contributions they've given us and all they've done to make our team successful, to see them be honored by the home crowd and have their families there. It's always a big, big thing. It's kind of a bittersweet day, because it's like your kid's leaving home.

At some point it's time for them to get off on their own and go to that next phase, next step. Yet during that time you establish bonds with these players. They're here for four or five years, typically, a lot of really interesting moments, that type of thing.

And this group is special. You think about all the crazy things going on the last two years and the way they've handled everything and helped us have success during this period, I think it's really a tribute to them. So their work is not over yet. Certainly they'll be honored before the game.

Most important is the game and we've got another game and hopefully another game. See where that all goes. So happy for all those guys certainly.

Last but not least, great to have Kid Captain. Brandi Gloeckner, from Robbins, Iowa, will be with us. And Brandi beat bone cancer about five years ago and most recently had a heart transplant about a year ago as a result of the treatments. And she's doing really well. This is her first college game, I understand. Really thrilled to have her join us.

So I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. If Spencer is healthy is he your starting quarterback or is it Alex?

COACH FERENTZ: We haven't had that conversation. Alex has been running with the 1s. We're just trying to get Spencer back in the groove a little bit. He's there mentally obviously, and just working through some missed time.

And he's missed some throws he probably would make. We'll see where it goes. We're real comfortable with both guys.

Q. How much is Spencer doing? You said he had two good days of practice. What does that mean?

COACH FERENTZ: Took all the reps with the 2s. He's gotten a lot of work done. Looks good. Key thing he wasn't sore today. Curious to see -- hasn't been tackled yet. That's another wild card, so there's a couple of wild cards out there. But he looks good. Hopefully we're gaining ground. I think we are.

Q. He has a big arm and he can hit just about any pass on the field, depth wise. Is that taking a hit, with his shoulder, working his way back?

COACH FERENTZ: I'd say it's more accuracy right now due to missing that time. So I think that's probably the biggest thing, timing and accuracy. That's probably the biggest thing he's got to get back. A week ago he couldn't throw the ball down the field. It's like a lot of medical things. It's day-by-day. You never know what the timing is going to be for the response, how guys heal, that type of deal. Looks like his strength is good. It's a matter of getting back in the groove a little bit.

Q. You guys have had a couple of injuries this year to the secondary, on the offense as well. One of those guys, Riley Moss, was out about a month. The progression of an athlete just getting back on the field

and just the challenge it is to just get him back, acclimated to playing, and how Riley played on Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely. There are a couple of factors involved. I think one, to start with, is, I think we just alluded to with Spencer, his position is a little different because there's a lot of timing with the throws and working the receivers, that type of deal. So that's one factor. The other is what position the guy plays.

The other big factor is the experience level of a player. You talk about a guy like Riley, who's played a lot of football, he was sore Sunday, not damaged but sore, which is natural because just the course of the volume of stopping and starting, all that kind of stuff, accelerating that he did Saturday doesn't compare to what he did in eight practices, a single practice. That was to be expected.

To your point, experience guys tend to come back a little quicker, they get sharper quicker than maybe a younger guy who hasn't played that much. We've had all the scenarios play out this year.

But it's part of football. I am kind of curious, I think I caught something from Mark Farley (UNI head coach), he talked about their injuries, and they played in a more condensed year, but it's going to be interesting when the season is over just to see what it looks like, college football-wise, what the injury situation is. I think the numbers are high, inordinate amount. You would expect that. We de-trained a year ago as a team, most teams did, because of the COVID interruptions and all that stuff.

Maybe some parallels to when the NFL had the lockout and shortened seasons. That's a whole discussion on a different day. I'm on a tangent. Riley is doing very well.

Q. How is Mason (Richman) doing?

COACH FERENTZ: Really good. Making really good progress. He might have a chance next week. We'll see. He's upbeat. Every test they've given him he's able pass and moving on to the next phase. That's encouraging. If he could make it next week that would be great. If not we'll have him at least after that.

Q. Whenever something like this happens with Coach Bielema, I'm sure every college has some type of contingency plan if a coach has to miss time for any reason. Is that the case as well with Iowa?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm irreplaceable. (Laughter).

No, the fact is head coaches -- you guys haven't figured

this out yet, and don't tell anybody -- we don't do a hell of a lot on game day.

But we always -- I think everybody has a plan, especially last year, you had to really check your blueprint a little bit because it was so prominent.

So, yeah, there's always plan A and plan B. But in all seriousness, I think things have run really, pretty smoothly if I wasn't there. Everybody's got an assignment. Everybody's got their deal and everybody works together, too. I think things would flow pretty seamlessly and you just hope you don't have to experience that, what the guy was going through last year when our game got canceled. But we were able to.

Q. What are the most important things you do on game day?

COACH FERENTZ: Probably not talk to anybody because that would bring everybody down. You've got all these negative thoughts in your head before a game of all the things that could go wrong.

But, you're trying to set the tempo a little bit for things. That starts on Friday. And really in all seriousness on Saturday I try to give everybody space, especially our players. We talk to them about how important it is they prepare every day of the week. But I think once they tell them a couple of things on Friday night, late Friday night and then after that, pretty much from dinner on, we kind of let them have their space, let them do what they have to do in their own ways to be ready. And everybody's got a little different mode and a routine.

So really it's just pretty much setting the table during the course of the week. And then you say a couple of things before games. But that's highly overrated, I think, in terms of the way a team plays.

And then pretty much during the game, the game's being played by the players. The coaches are orchestrating it. You offer a suggestion here and there to whomever or ask a couple of questions, that type of thing. But pretty much the coaches and the players are the ones really operating things.

Q. Looks like more than that. Looks like for three and a half hours it's pretty intense and you're pretty hyperactive.

COACH FERENTZ: But it's trying to be encouraging. Like 99 percent of it is encouraging. That's just me. I think that's what everybody needs on Saturdays in our critiques and corrections, all those things, we try to get them done during



the week.

But if you see something that's obvious, it might be a player's technique, or a suggestion about a call or something like that, you just throw those in. And that's pretty much it.

Like the other night, we had a clear decision at the end of the game how to play it. And we chose the latter, or option B or A. I don't know which one it was. For me it was A. So those kinds of decisions you're involved in.

Q. What led to the move on the depth chart from Tyrone to Keagan in the starting spot?

COACH FERENTZ: Keagan has been performing really well. We like both of those guys. Tyrone is a really good football player. It's not that big a deal, quite frankly. It depends on personnel groups, which we'll not list all of those.

But right now we've got a pretty healthy group of receivers, probably four or five guys that we have an awful lot of confidence in. And obviously Arland has made some plays. And Charlie has shown he's developed into a really good receiver too. Tyrone has been a good player. And Nico has been a good player, seems like forever. We have a pretty healthy group going there.

Q. You heard about his tweet with some frustration about the Swiss Army knife. What was your reaction to that?

COACH FERENTZ: Yep. I think that's a young guy who wants to help the football team. I think that's his way of expressing it. And it's the common way people express things these days, I've been told. I'm not sure I understand that part of it, but, you know, I'm not that interested in understanding it either.

Q. This is an interesting senior day, not simply because some seniors can come back next year. At what point will you start to have those conversations with the handful that have that opportunity to -- is that after postseason or is that in the interim between whenever the regular season ends and then the postseason?

COACH FERENTZ: I'll make the rounds, just touch base and go temperature check -- during our bye week with guys that -- where it might be appropriate. And we'll talk more specifically once the season is over. December, there's all kinds of time in December to start thinking a little bit more vividly about that or concretely about that. And it's almost just kind of get the temperature back in, whenever

that was, October. Now we'll talk a little bit more in December.

Q. Does the scholarship situation figure into this? Because you'll have a small class anyway. There aren't very many seniors going to begin with. How much does that figure into whether you want to bring back guy A, B or C?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we've got room to do whatever. You kind of guesstimate, I guess, what might happen, could happen, either way. And we've been mindful of that as we've recruited, too. I think we've got a pretty good plan in place. I don't think it's a big deal. There's a lot of talk in our group, the FCA, about this, that, all this stuff. I'm not sure it's as big a deal for us as maybe everybody else, or maybe it's not that big a deal for everybody. But seems like we're talking more about it than probably needs to be. That's just my observation from 10,000 feet.

Q. Speaking of seniors, how have you seen Kyler Schott grow into his current role from walk-on?

COACH FERENTZ: He was a walk-on that didn't look like much when he showed up here, but then three summers ago, coming out of camp, I just made the observation, you have to look beyond what he looks like sometimes. I don't mean that in a derogatory sense, but he doesn't look like Tristin Wirfs, I'll put it that way. You just watch him. The guy's really producing. He's really doing a good job. And he's not that freshman that didn't know how to do anything like most first-year guys don't. He just worked hard, clearly was listening and paying attention. And it was showing up in his play. It was at camp where it hit me, this guy is really doing a good job with his -- not that there aren't things that he can get better at -- but just keeps taking steps. So we're really glad he's back and back healthy.

Q. How helpful is it to have a veteran presence on a young offensive line?

COACH FERENTZ: It's huge. We're banking on he and Cody and Tyler as well. Gives you a good veteran group in the middle. You may break in a couple of tackles, we did that a couple of years ago. All of a sudden Tyler was the only guy with significant experience. So it's, especially at that position, it's nice to have some guys that have played and know the ups and downs and make adjustments, those types of things. Good to get him back in the lineup. And I think Cody has been able to practice as well last week. Had a pretty good week last week. And he's been practicing well so far this week. Hopefully that moment is building in a positive way.

Q. The improvement in Illinois' defense between last



year and this year is dramatic. How and why?

COACH FERENTZ: A lot of veteran guys start there. But I say that with an asterisk, because they're veteran guys playing different positions. And you start with their two outside backers, at least that's what they look like for us, they're playing on their feet. Last year playing in three-point stances and playing really well, not only on third downs, but good first-down players, too. Now they've asked those two guys to take a new identity. And they've done a really good job on that. That's impressive. But they've got a good scheme. It's a good system. We've got exposure to that with our bowl draw against Missouri. A game that never got played but at least we got some film studying on them.

The credit goes to the players because they've really, I think, picked it up pretty adeptly in a short period of time. And they lost one of their better players. That middle linebacker is a really good player. He's out with an injury. They've kept on playing well. That's a credit to them as well. It's a tough scheme to get ready for.

Q. They haven't had a winning season in 10 years. They haven't had a winning Big Ten season since '07. Do you think those days are going to be over soon for them? Is that a program that always maybe could have/should have been better than it's been?

COACH FERENTZ: That's probably an offseason discussion, too. But we've had a lot of tough games with them. And I think Bret knows what it takes to win in this conference, certainly. He's a proven -- he's had proven success in the Big Ten.

So that's a good starting point. And he's from the state, so I'm sure he'll do a really good job. And they've got a really good staff of coaches; that's very evident watching on film. The offensive coordinator spent time in this conference going back prior to the dates you're talking about and spent time in this state and did a really nice job at both places he was at. Those are probably the two guys' resumés I'm most familiar with. And the special teams coach was at Air Force forever. And he is doing a really a nice job with those guys. He's got good specialists on top of it. Their whole organization is really good. I think you could probably win anywhere, if you have the right people. That's where it starts.

Q. When you have a physical game like the other day, are there other games you've had in history where you tap into how you recovered from those games and tried to get ready for next week?

COACH FERENTZ: This time of year we're really mindful

anyway, whether you play 70 snaps or 20, really mindful of where we at. I may have mentioned a while ago that last year we only played eight games. That impacted me as well. It's not just November but it's November even for our older guys who aren't used to going the 12-lap race. We're trying to be mindful.

And we also encourage our guys to be mindful of their personal lives. You can't play Big Ten football and go to school and do the things you have to do if you're not smart about what you're doing pretty much every hour of the day. You've got to get your rest, get off your feet, get the right nutrition, all those things. We talk about that, the key is really paying attention to it. Because it shows up, good or bad, on the field.

Q. You've had really good luck with a lot of your grayshirt guys -- I remember Matt VandeBerg being one, but Riley Moss being another, where you paid his tuition in the summer and then you wrote him a letter and his folks a letter and put him on scholarship. What prompted you to do that with him, in particular, and kind of delay that? And are you going to just start grayshirting guys?

COACH FERENTZ: We probably should. I was talking to one of the NFL scouts. Reese kind of hangs out in that scout room. I guess they were talking about Marshal Yanda. And I told that scout, that shows you how smart we were, because we apparently offered Marshal -- there's so much luck involved in recruiting, quite frankly, a lot of projection and luck involved. But there are certain attributes.

I remember Riley, I think K.B. was at his game -- K.B. or whatever, it might have been -- I think it was K.B. -- but anyway, his senior year just kind of elevated his play. He was a good athlete that just kept getting better. I think he's done the same thing here, with every step of the way he impressed us his first camp.

I remember him coming off the edge and blocking a field goal in practice. Somebody probably screwed it up on offense, but still he got there and did it quick and that got our attention right off the bat.

You still keep seeing him doing things that allowed him to build a resumé. He's turned into a really good player at the corner spot.

The bottom thing, the one commonality, those guys, they get here and work hard. They really like football and work hard. If guys can have those two attributes, they have a chance. Then you've got to have requisite skills. And he can run. He can run. So that helps, too.

Q. Going into that year, if I recall, you had picked up like six defensive backs. You had some really high star guys, some guys who had big offers, yet he vaulted to the front first, and along the same lines of Kyler Schott, a walk-on, he's a scholarship guy. What does it say for your program that once they get here, it's kind of like all your starters are in the trash can?

COACH FERENTZ: You get judged on performance. I think most of us do in life, or at least you hope you do. That's a good thing. Guys come walk on, knowing they'll get opportunity. And really again it's just what they choose to do with it.

Some guys have a little better ability to work harder and pay attention to the little things that make them successful. We don't deal with this much, but I see some recruits where like the pinnacle of the athletic career is signing day.

It's a special day. I'm not minimizing it. It's a great achievement, really something to be proud of and happy about. But part of life is understanding, once you do something there's another step and you move on and if you're not trying to accomplish something, probably means you are retired. Not many people 18-22 are retired.

They are trying to reach further and see if they can't develop. The same thing we tried to do during the season. We want to enjoy a win after the game Saturday and sometimes it's a real small window. Nice bus ride home from Northwestern. But at least we got to enjoy it. Next you change the page and move on to the next challenge, obstacle. That's really what players have to learn too.

Q. Charlie Jones said today that he chose Iowa in part because it's a program known for giving players like him an opportunity. He gets here, meets players like Riley, Kyler, VanValkenburg, Jack Koerner -- a lot of similar story to him and other impact players. How have you seen this senior class embody what this program stands for in that regard?

COACH FERENTZ: And this season is not over so we can't say, boy, it was a great season. But our guys are doing a lot of great things. If you look at any of our successful teams and you're going to find walk-ons in that occasion them.

Cherry pick '04, you had Pete McMahon playing right tackle. And you had Tyler Luebke playing on the defensive line. And on the back end you had (Sean) Considine, I believe. There's three guys, you take those three away from us, and we're, whatever, like 6-5 team or a 7-4 team, something like that.

That's been the history of our program. You go back and look and look at special teams a little deeper. And if we lived in the world where we had all four- and five-star recruits, maybe it wouldn't be that big a deal, but we don't.

We just evaluate guys on what they do every day in practice and how they do things, and so there's opportunity for anybody that's serious about playing; you just never know who those guys are going to be. So it's always kind of fun to watch.

And I just think about some of the guys, Jermari Harris was in. Riley goes down, Jermari is in there. So Riley and Terry were down. Did a really nice job. He wasn't highly recruited. Terry Roberts wasn't highly recruited. So it's just what you do once you get there, your willingness to try to improve. And a lot of that is mental.

Q. Was Miamen departure a surprise, the timing of it? Did you expect it coming?

COACH FERENTZ: I said it in the team meeting. I respect anybody, if you don't feel like this is the place to be today -- I always try to caution people, when they're making big decisions, to take some time and be rational about it. You don't want to do things emotionally, if you have time on your side. He was comfortable with it. And we wish him nothing but the best. He's a fine person.

So I respect his candidness, and I think it's probably best for him and best for us, probably, if he's not 100 percent into it at this point.

Q. What are the similarities and the differences with this Bret Bielema and Illinois team compared to his groups at Wisconsin, anything you can draw from that this week?

COACH FERENTZ: Sure. The philosophy of the way they play. It's really clear right now they're going to run the football and try to eat the clock. Sound familiar.

And they also believe in playing good defense. And that's a pretty good formula for winning football games. That's what they're doing right now. And they've got good special teams. When he was at Wisconsin they did all those things pretty well.

It's not exactly the same scheme defensively, but they're playing good defense. They make you work real hard. That's what good defenses do, whether you're a three-man, five-man or four-man front, those types of things.

Q. Did you look and evaluate what Alex did after watching film? What were your impressions, and low completion percentage but the yards per completion were off the charts because of the way you attacked down the field. What was your overall impression?

COACH FERENTZ: Especially this year, we're not a big stat team and so you don't focus too much on that. If we want completions, more bubble screens, that's one way to do it, or whatever.

But I thought he played effectively. The first two things that come to mind, he just shows poise out there, which you hope your quarterback's got poise. It's easier said than done sometimes.

I think he's played with poise for as little as he's played for two games. I think that's been our impression. I was thinking about this a couple of days ago. One of the most impressive things, I think, and it sounds like kind of routine, but his ability to throw the ball away.

There were a couple of plays the other day where he threw it away. He was on the scramble or on the move. Got outside and just got rid of the ball instead of taking a negative yardage play.

Those are little things, but they're really big. Negative yards plays -- they hit you -- it's not only the yards, but there's an emotional tug to that that hits you a little bit. It shows an awareness mentally, I think, too, it's impressive. I'm not shocked because we've been watching him for two years now working a lot with the offense.

I think he's worked hard and paid his dues, and it's showing up with good, solid play out there. So I'm happy about that.

Q. How much difficulty is there when you have a player with as much equity as Spencer's had, and especially in that position, unlike the others because you can move guys around? You've reached this part where you've got two guys. But potentially something is going to be in play. You had the same issue seven years ago with Jake Rudock was kind of in the same position, really accomplished player. How difficult is that for you, especially with that position, to kind of deal with that?

COACH FERENTZ: If it's a problem, it's a good problem, because it could have gone the other way, too, where oh, my God, how long is this going to last?

So that's good. Right now we're kind of living in the moment. If it ends up being a discussion, we'll have that

discussion when it's appropriate. But it's a good thing. And it's not surprising again, just as the body of work, what we saw. But as you know, I've said before, you never know until a guy gets in a game what's really going to happen.

The way I'm looking at it, I think we have two guys -- I think I speak for everybody -- I think we all have confidence in both players. They're good guys; they're invested and good players. Spencer's got a good resumé and now Alex has got one started here and so that's a positive for us.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports