

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Certainly good afternoon to everybody. Pretty sure everybody's interested in our program, and more importantly in our players, and just sharing information about them.

As you know, we've started camp. We just finished our ninth practice today, so we're really not quite halfway through, but I'll talk a little bit about the first nine days and then I'm happy to field any questions.

Just regards to camp, just in general principles, my 24th camp now being back, and each and every year it's kind of magical. It's always a fun time to start. Some years are a little bit more fun than others. But it's certainly good to get back with the players on a daily basis, get a feel for their energy and just kind of where they're at. It's fun to see them playing football again and all the work that they do.

I talk to our guys about every phase being really important. Now this is when the football things start translating to what they're doing football-wise. It's fun to watch them make some progress, and it's also good just to see them working together. That's what camp is all about, very few distractions. So that part is good.

It was a little frustrating back in the spring. As you know, we were really impacted by injuries quite frankly, probably as many as I can remember, and we've still got too many guys that aren't practicing. I was kind of reminding myself that's typical of August, but we are certainly in better position than we were in the spring.

On a negative note, I think I've already mentioned Justin Britt will not be able to play this year, Jackson Ritter, and one to add to the list, at least for the start of the season in our two deep, Diante Vines injured his wrist. He'll be in a cast. You'll see that, and that is going to impact the beginning part of the season for him. That's unfortunate. He's was really practicing well, and certainly would have been a guy who could help contribute to our football team.

It's not season ending, I don't think, but hopefully we'll get him back here somewhere mid-season whenever. We'll

just kind of take that day by day.

Regarding the squad just in general terms, as I said this spring, I think we've got a good group of veterans. We're certainly more veteran than we were last year at this time.

But right along with that, really see some encouraging things from the younger guys that we still don't know a lot about, but see some encouraging things. Both guys that were in the program and a couple guys that just joined us. So that's good.

Again, camp is all about competition. I think everybody is doing a good job of competing right now, and it's good to have that competition. I think that helps promote growth, and also seeing a lot of guys that look like they're determined.

That's really the cornerstone of our program is just our guys developing with each phase, and I think the guys that are out there able to work have done a good job with that, so that's been encouraging.

All that being said, we're still halfway through it, and we're still a long way from having the guys come out of the tunnel in front of 70,000 people and swarming out there. That's a little different experience, too. So we'll see where that goes.

I know there's a lot of excitement with our fan base and I'm really pleased about that, and I'll get back to that, and a lot of anticipation. We feel the same thing, but we also realize there's still a lot of work to do before we're even close to being ready to play.

You'll see that tomorrow, but the whole idea right now is just to push daily. Throwing new things at the team pretty much on a daily basis once we got started, and it's all about going through those steps and trying to get ready so you can look good when game competition really begins.

Offensively, we'll start there. The quarterbacks are doing a good job. I think Spencer (Petras) has really done a nice job out there leading our football team. I think Alex (Padilla) has improved. He's doing a good job, as well. And Joe (Labas) is still behind them. I think that's to be expected, but he's done well. Carson (May) was affected a little bit by an illness. He's back with us. Looks like a good



prospect there.

The offensive line, it's a moving target right now. We've got some good veteran play so far. Obviously lost a really good player with Tyler Linderbaum, but see some guys doing some good things out there.

We've had some injuries, guys in and out and moving around, and you'll see that tomorrow. Connor Colby has been working out at tackle the last couple days; done a good job there.

So a lot of guys in and out, but I think we're seeing some good things there, and if we can get everybody healthy, we'll have a chance to be decent at that.

Our 7-on-7 players, we have some experience now, a little bit more than a year ago. I feel good about our tight end position. Start there with both with (Sam) LaPorta and (Luke) Lachey. That's a good one-two punch.

Receivers, injuries have been part of the deal there, predictably. Hopefully we're making progress, but seeing really good performances from Nico (Ragaini), our most veteran guy, and then Arland Bruce has done really a good job, too. Of note, Alec Wick has done a good job. Young guys who we didn't know a lot about until last spring basically. He's really done a good job, as well.

And the running back position, I like what our guys that have been here, Leshon (Williams) and Gavin (Williams) have done, and our two young guys that just came in. Kaleb (Johnson) and Jaz (Patterson) have really made a good impression, too. They're off to a good start.

I think that's encouraging.

Defensively we have a lot of veterans back. Some injuries in the secondary, but I like the way those guys are working, the guys that we're seeing.

Our linebackers, all three of them were out last spring and it was really good for the other guys to get experience. I think they've benefitted from that. And then we've got our three starters back, and they're practicing well, so that's good.

And then up front we lost Zach (VanValkenburg), but basically everybody else is back, and feel like we've got a good nucleus there. Those guys have been practicing well, doing a good job.

And then on special teams, Tory has had a really good camp thus far, and that was to be expected.

Big variable right now would be the kickers. We haven't done a lot of kicking, but I guess it was yesterday they basically had a perfect day. Both those guys really looked well, looked good. Big contrast to the spring. It wasn't so good publicly or behind closed doors. Things weren't looking so good there just in terms of consistency.

That's something we'll watch all camp and know better, and we'll probably have to ride the roller coaster there a little bit.

And then as far as returners, we've got some capable candidates, and we'll just kind of see where that goes. But you've got certainly guys like (Cooper) DeJean. You've got Arland Bruce, Riley Moss, three guys right there that have the potential to be pretty good for us back there.

That's kind of the roster at this point.

Then just the last couple final points, obviously tomorrow is Kids' Day, so we're excited about that. It'll be good for the players to have a change-up, to be out in front of fans. I know it's not 70,000, but it still makes a difference to the players, and it's a good experience for them just kind of a good change-up overall and get a little exposure to the outside world.

Beyond that, just the Kid Captain Program, great that that's continuing. And what a concept that has been. It's just remarkable, and it'll be fun to have those kid captains with us tomorrow. The seniors get a chance to visit with them in the locker room and spend some time with them on the field.

Each and every one of them, just amazing stories, so it's really something good for us to draw from and really remind our players, again, how fortunate all of us are, players and coaches. How fortunate we are to be doing what we're doing and being able to be doing what we're doing. That's always a good thing.

Also, whether it's that or the Kids' Day, just the fact that athletes are role models. I believe that. Our players have done a nice job of accepting that responsibility, and I think it's a good thing. It just kind of takes them back to why do you play the game. It's really about the love of the game and love of being part of a team, and something besides what it is you're doing individually. To me that's a special part.

That's pretty much it other than, again, I just want to say thanks to our fans in anticipation of tomorrow, but bigger picture just the fact that we're sold out for the season, that's fantastic. We're very appreciative. We don't take that for granted. Hopefully we can make everybody's

experience enjoyable as we move along.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Considering everything you've seen in the spring, the injuries that kept a lot of guys out, you had a couple of guys leave, where do things stand with (the wide receivers) right now? Do you feel confident in this unit, or is it a long way from being confident? And what's the status of Keagan Johnson?

KIRK FERENTZ: Keagan is working back. He won't do a lot tomorrow, but he's working back. I think he's close to being where he needs to be, and hopefully the same thing with Brody (Brecht). They're really the two guys that have missed the most time now.

If you look big picture, you're including spring practice, too. So that's -- I don't know if concerned is the right word, but that's where my awareness is. They missed a lot of time.

To get them back and playing effectively with the right tempo and getting the timing down on the offense, all those kinds of things, and you've heard me say it before, meetings are important, they have value and all that, but you learn how to play football by playing it. You've got to go out there on the field and play it.

The sooner we can get them back, hopefully it's next week, that'll be encouraging. They're both -- in Keagan's case, he's played 12 games, 13 games, so he's got experience there, but you still have to play the game and practice.

Brody is a little different story because he hasn't played. We really liked what we saw when he came back in the fall, but we've got to get him going.

Hopefully it's sooner than later. I think it will be. But everybody else is doing a good job, and I think we've got some flexibility personnel-wise just with the tight ends. I think we've got a little flexibility there. We'll figure that out, but so far, so good.

I think our passing game, I think it's on the right track right now.

Q. How do you plan to use those three tight ends?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, if guys can play we're going to find a way to get them on the field. Right now the first two guys are the ones that we really feel good about. Opportunity, Johnny Pascuzzi did a really good job in the spring; continues to practice well.

We've got a freshman, Addison Ostrenga from Wisconsin

who's done a really good job. Caught our eye.

And then Steve Stilianos is still trying to get caught up with our system, but I think he's a prospect, too.

As you know, we like playing tight ends. If we've got them, we'll play them. Sam has got some position flexibility, so if those guys can do a good job, maybe we'd use Sam out away from the line a little bit, that type of thing.

We'll figure out a way to best utilize our personnel, that type of thing.

Q. Back in 2014 there was a game here against Nebraska that kind of stuck in your craw because the special teams was a meltdown and pretty much gave the game away. I would assume you feel much better about the whole special teams package now, and how much credit does LeVar (Woods) get for that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two days ago we had a really sloppy turnover in the red zone going in, and in the red zone you're always playing for a touchdown. You're trying to get a touchdown. That versus a field goal.

But you've got to come out with points, and if you turn it over in the red zone, just not good. It was a young player that did it, so good teaching example, but took me right back to '14.

And then kicking game, yeah, it's critical. Coincidentally just installed our kickoff team today, and lo and behold, Amani Jones popped out of midair and was at practice, like a total coincidence. But that was good. Good visual for everybody, because he was on the highlight clip this morning, teaching clip.

Going back 23 years plus, that was our first emphasis getting here was just special teams. Felt like we could get better faster in that area that we could defensively and then offensively, and then there's more opportunity for everybody.

You don't have to be a starter to contribute on special teams. Zach Gablemann was on that clip. Both he and Amani had one start in their careers, but were really dynamic special teams players, so we try to make our players understand that.

And to your point, that game, that was a critical component. We couldn't cover a punt that day and it just killed us. You win and lose games there, and we've always believed that.

Most importantly the players have to believe, and at least



in nine days we're seeing our guys with a good attitude, really working hard, and it's a great opportunity for guys that maybe aren't starters to contribute.

Q. How does Aaron Graves look?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really good. Yeah, he's an impressive guy. I was just commenting to Reese Morgan about that like two hours ago, I think. Just he goes hard. Really didn't know what he was doing a week ago, but he goes hard. He's got really good effort, and it was a quick study. We'll see.

We've got a lot of guys right now doing good things up front. That's good to see, though. He's got a little maturity to him, which is really unusual for a guy his age.

Q. How would you assess Logan Jones' growth at center?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, Logan is a good discussion, good illustration. He's been playing well, and a year ago the frustration was he was injured a lot. He works so hard, top condition, really trains hard, and just he's one of those guys. You watch our guys condition in the summertime, and he was always out front, he and (Jack) Campbell, kind of leaders that way.

What he lacked was playing, so at times he was kind of robotic. But I think he's clearly worked through that and now he's become a really good football player. But he's just a really mature, focused guy, a really great attitude, great work ethic, and pretty sure he's our only married player right now, too. He got married over the holidays, 4th of July week, so joins pretty elite company, him and Aaron Kampman.

Q. Do you have any idea who your No. 1 field goal kicker is going to be yet?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's wide open. They were both similar in the spring, other than age. Aaron (Blom) is obviously older and been around a little longer, but both capable, just inconsistent. And just judge on -- again, we're really young. Tomorrow will be good because we'll have fans there, which does change things a little bit. I think both of them are capable. They're both good candidates.

It's really going to come down to consistency, and we'll just play it by ear. I think with any kickers, punters, you have to just kind of sometimes ride the roller coaster a little bit at the front end, but I think both these guys are really focused and serious, so we're really pleased with what we're seeing so far.

Q. What have you seen from Tyler Elsbury so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: Tyler has done a good job, and he's playing primarily guard, but also playing some center, and he's done a good job. He's at that point now where it's his time. He's ready to go. He's worked hard, so hopefully he can just keep improving.

Q. Maybe it's me just overanalyzing the photo galleries, but I don't think I've seen David Davidkov practicing. Has he been practicing?

KIRK FERENTZ: He hasn't. He'll be out here today, tomorrow. Going through a medical issue, too, like several of our guys, so hopefully we can get him back. But no, he hasn't gotten any work this camp.

Q. Do you feel good at running back? Seems like you mentioned the two freshmen. Is Gavin okay? Is he practicing?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he practiced maybe half. He hasn't been the last week, so he's got a camp injury, too.

Q. I see you using those two freshmen quite a bit.

KIRK FERENTZ: Even in September Gavin and Leshon would do a nice job in the bowl game, and they did. Gavin has got a certain maturity about him for a guy his age. He really hasn't played all that much as a running back, but just you feel confident. A lot of it goes back to that 4th-and-2 conversion he had back against Colorado State. He got a little of my confidence that day.

Feel good about both those guys. They're both improving. Leshon has really grown a lot, too, especially in the last 12 months. So I think we have a good one-two punch there. (Deavin) Hilson has been out for a while; he's back now. That's good.

Just by virtue of our depth, it was a real opportunity for both freshmen to come in. We were going to find out what they were, who they were. I'll go back to the summertime. Our first year guys are in the first group. They train at 6:00, and Rai Braithwaite is telling me the guys are coming every morning, 5:40, 5:45, 'How you doing, Coach?', all that stuff, and that's really unusual for guys a month out of high school. That's really unusual.

They have good personalities. They really learn well on the field and they both have some talent, too, which always helps. But they've just got the right mindset.

So I'm feeling a little bit better about our whole situation than I was maybe a month ago or so when I saw you in

Indy.

Q. When you look at tackle, and you said Connor moved outside, worked outside, what do you like about him potentially in that position, and kind of where do things sit right now? Are they still really in flux?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we've got a couple tackles out with injury right now. You'll see that tomorrow. That helped expedite that process or that decision a little bit. What I really liked about Connor a year ago is just his competitiveness and his toughness, because it's really hard to play in the offensive line as a first-year player. That's really hard as a true freshman, which he was. We've had maybe two do it.

That's really a challenge. It's a real challenge. Not every day was a great day for him. Not every play is a great play. But his mental toughness and his ability to just keep competing really impressed us.

I think all of us felt like he's a guy that had position flexibility, but last year we weren't going to move him around.

Now we have that capability. I think that actually is probably going to help him be a better lineman, period, wherever he ends up settling.

The good thing for us is kind of like last year at the spring with the linebackers being out, now I think we have a whole new confidence in some of the younger linebackers. It's a whole different level of comfort than we may have had had we not had him in that role.

I think that's how we feel about Connor right now. We'll see where it all ends here in September, and health may dictate who's playing here. Hopefully we'll get all the guys back and get guys where we feel gives us our strongest lineup mainly.

I'll go back to the running backs, too. I mentioned tomorrow being a big day for the kickers. Tomorrow is a big day for those backs, too, because they really haven't been tackled. Although according to the offensive coaches, the defensive guys are at 89 tackles so far this camp even though we're not tackling.

That gets out of control. But tomorrow we'll be legitimately tackling, so it will be good for those guys to get hit by college players, and it'll be a big day for them, too.

Q. What are you seeing out of Logan Lee and what he brings to the defensive side?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just his maturity. Mentioned Gavin is one of those guys, and Logan is like a 40-year-old guy, too. He is married and you can easily see that. He's probably got three kids and a station wagon by now, too, three months later.

But he's just a really solid, hardworking, just an outstanding young guy. He's developed into a good player. I feel really good about that.

Q. Spencer Petras has had his highs and lows. Are you looking for anything specific from him his senior season?

KIRK FERENTZ: All he's got to do is play, just relax and play. He may press at times and try a little too hard at times, and that's a good thing, but it can work against you, too.

But from my vantage point just watching tape last year, I think the biggest thing is we have to help him a little bit more and support him. Hopefully we'll be a little bit better blocking this year. Hopefully we can run the ball a little bit better and get him in better situations, 3rd down conversions, those types of things. And just a little bit more clarity maybe in what we're trying to do so he can be quicker with his decision making and be a little bit more on tempo.

I think it all kind of goes together.

Then receivers running good routes and getting open, that helps, too. So far, so good. I think we're seeing some positive things.

All that being said, it's tough because you're going against your defense and they know you better than anybody. Sometimes those guys run our routes better than our receivers do.

It's one of those age-old challenges, but so far, so good. He's doing a good job.

Q. Do you still view it as quarterback competition or has Spencer won that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, everybody is competing right now. We'll just see what looks like, and basically after 20 practices we'll know a little bit more, yeah.

Q. What have you seen from Deontae Craig?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's had an injury too. Started off well, had a good spring, has got a lower leg injury. I think he's

probably going to come back sometime next week. It looks like that.

But again, another guy with great attitude, great work ethic, just a smart guy and great kid on our football team. Be good to get him back working.

Q. Lukas Van Ness really came out of nowhere, but a year ago spring kind of ascended very quickly and had seven sacks in rotation at tackle (last season). Seems like he has the potential to move outside and be a good player out there. What's your assessment of him, where you see him making the biggest impact this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's doing well. I'm smiling here because I'm thinking back to just college football in general, recruiting. 12 days ago I guess it would have been we had X amount of underclassmen on campus for a prospect day, like everybody does. I keep telling the staff, I'm still struggling knowing that the majority of the guys that were here that day were getting ready to go into their junior years.

They hadn't played a game as a junior yet. Two of them were getting ready to start their sophomore years. I'm only laughing because to equate that to Lukas, first time I met him or saw him was up in the library a year ago, two Januaries ago, I guess. He was kind of a tall guy, played hockey, and he had a sister that went to school at Iowa. I think she was in the business school, which is nice. But didn't even recruit him.

So that was in January, and then he comes to camp in June and looked a little bit different four, five months later, whatever the math is on that. Five, I guess. Five months later looks a little more like maybe a prospect instead of a high school sophomore.

Comes to camp, I guess that was going into his junior year maybe. He was in his junior year. Comes to camp and impressed us. It's the same night Yahya Black was here. That was when we offered him that night after the camp.

Obviously he's continued on that level, that plane of progress. He's matured physically, like most kids do. Most of them aren't Division I prospects in 10th grade, 11th grade, but he's really matured.

He's got a really good attitude, works extremely hard, plays hard, and I think he's got great potential. I'm glad he's on our team, and he's ascending.

Q. How much of a step up have you seen Cooper DeJean make this off-season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Cooper is just so raw. You know, coming from a small school, did everything for them, and we still haven't settled. He's playing corner, he's playing safety. We still haven't settled on one position with him. He seems to handle it well. Does a good job on special teams.

But he's a football player. Go back to the play that our opponent broke right there in their last possession, he went from over here to down there and knocked the guy out of bounds.

Gave us a chance to live to fight another day. We couldn't get the job done, but to me that was kind of a signature play for him. Like that's who he is. He's just not going to quit on a play. He's got good ability and a good mentality, real good mentality.

Q. I know you don't pay much attention to this, but earlier this week the coaches poll was released, and for the first time since 2018 Iowa is not ranked. Are you taking that as a disrespectful snub, and is your team using it as motivation?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like, oh, gosh, oh, gee. It's one of those deals. I think you guys know how I feel about preseason polls. You talk about a waste of time, with all due respect. And that was a coaches' poll, so I can say that and not offend anybody in the media. I do have feelings on that, too, opinions about coaches versus media.

I wonder how many coaches actually do the polls. That's the first thing. The bottom line is what's really important is where you are in January. That's still all that counts.

Those polls really don't start I don't think getting it right until probably November, somewhere in there. But it's all about -- like it's a long season, and, yeah, right now it's just about us trying to get ready for South Dakota State. That will be a challenge.

But right now really it's more about this football team, and that's what we're trying to do is get our team better and maximize our opportunities here at least through these first 20 days, and then maybe we'll start looking down the road a little bit.

Q. Kaevon (Merriweather) said back in the spring that he felt a little bit snubbed by people because he was the only member of the secondary that did not get a postseason all-conference honor. How have you seen him take the next step as far as a leadership role and how has he kind of attacked camp and the secondary

as a whole?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, if that motivates him, I'm all for it. I'm not for him not getting honors, but I'm all for him being motivated. But I think he was anyway. The NFL scouts started coming through here probably a week ago, whenever, and obviously he's one of the guys we're talking about with them.

Typical guy that Phil (Parker) had stashed, didn't say much about him, didn't say much about him late in recruiting. Brought him up, as you know, probably a better high school basketball player than football. But all he's done is improve. He's a tremendous young guy, great attitude, and a leader not just in the secondary, not just on the defense, but our entire team. Highly respected.

Like a lot of guys that Phil kind of soft plays and then brings them in, they seem to do that as their careers go on, and I expect that with Kaevon. I think he'll have a really good year, and that's good for us and that's good for him, but we just see him continuing to get better.

The biggest thing I appreciate is just his role as a leader. He's totally invested in that.

Q. Last year's defense was one of the best in the country. It seems like most people are back. Do you feel like this year's group as it stands right now can match what they did last year? What about it makes you feel that way?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see, and you just never know who the opponents are and what challenges are going to be there, what's going to happen during the course of 12 games.

I like the way our guys are working. I like the leadership we're getting to start there. Their work ethic is good. They're practicing well. The younger guys, as I mentioned, the linebackers, watching them, what they did, the guys that aren't the three guys that start, just how they operate.

A year ago we were really young up front and now we've got a lot of guys that have been around here, and they're playing better. You'd like to think you're going to be better, but we've still got to do it. That's the bottom line.

I'll take it a step further. I think that's one thing about our conference, there are teams in our conference that believe in defense. We certainly do and have for a long time. I think that's one thing that makes our conference a little bit different.

I think there's a little bit more emphasis on defense here,

so there's certainly competition just in the conference itself to be one of the better units.

Q. You seem to always have somebody on special teams, whether it be Henry Marchese or Terry Roberts or even Diante steps up as that leader. Do you have someone in that unit right now that you can target?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not quite sure yet who it is, but we've got a couple guys really doing a good job. That's what we'll find out in the games. But you hope you have that. We have a lot of guys that are non-starters that are really competing and I think are going to be able to help us.

Keep our fingers crossed, and we work a couple periods a day on that, so great opportunity.

Q. Dallas Craddieth?

KIRK FERENTZ: Could be. Could be.

Q. Can you talk about Alec Wick, going from a walk-on to now on the roster as a part of the two deep? Talk about the development you've seen from him in the spring until now.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's a really interesting guy. He's kind of -- I don't know if quiet or subtle is the right way to describe him, but if he walked in the room he is not going to jump out at you and all that kind of stuff, but everything he does, there's quality to it and consistency to it.

Due to our injury situation last spring he had a lot of opportunity to get a lot of work that maybe in a normal circumstance he wouldn't have, and the whole trick is when you have opportunities being ready to go, and he's done that. He's made tough catches. He's very precise with what he does.

I'm not saying there's a correlation, but the guy working with him is Ed Hinkel, who also had a knack of kind of looking nondescript and really making good plays, good mental toughness, and just understands the detail of things, and then also will go after it, go get the ball.

I'm not saying he is Ed Hinkel, but you can see some parallels just in terms of the way he operates, and it's a credit to him. Who knows. We'll see. But it's all good.

I do know this: What you see in practice as coaches makes you feel better or worse about predicting what a player is going to do in competition.

Q. Jack Campbell has had an outstanding career here. What's the next step in his evolution?

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KIRK FERENTZ: I laugh because when I talk to the scouts, I tell them as a sophomore in high school -- and you'll remember this, it took him at least three minutes to get his five fouls. He was pretty quick to get those.

By his senior year he was a pretty good basketball player, not a Division I prospect but he became a basketball player. To me that evolution, we've seen the same thing in football. He's tremendously humble. That's the first thing I'd say about him. But he goes hard. Everything he does, he goes hard.

I think he probably could play any of the three backer positions, and if we had two more, they might be our defensive ends. He's that kind of football player.

It's all good for him, and he's a strong leader on our team in a quiet way just performance-wise, but it's all good for him.

He'll keep getting better. That's the thing, if you've got the right attitude and you go hard, you're going to keep getting better. I'm glad he's on our football team.

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