

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Kirk Ferentz

### Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon. I'll talk a little bit about Saturday a game, then turn to the Northwestern game. As I said, Saturday, tough loss to a very good team, very talented, well coached and thought we saw some good effort out there.

The film substantiated that and especially defensively. I thought there were some really good stops and good individual efforts.

Offensively, turnovers, you can't win football games turning the football over like we did and had protection issues especially up front early.

So we had it tough in that regard and special teams outside of that field goal. Nothing really distinguishable there either.

Certainly a lot to look at, a lot to work on. And the biggest thing coming out of Sunday after watching the tape is just staying together and staying focused on transitioning into this week and getting ready to win a game, which we expect to be very difficult.

Captains this week: Jack Campbell, Sam LaPorta, Kaevon Merriweather and Riley Moss. Injury-wise it doesn't look like Terry Roberts will make it back. I think it will be at least another week.

The quarterback situation, we haven't made a decision yet I'm not sure when we will. We'll let both guys working with the 1s rotating them in and out and playing that out and making a decision here during the week, kind of going from there.

Northwestern, the first thing I'd say their record is very misleading from my standpoint. Outside of one game, they've been extremely competitive and in every game.

And not surprising, they're playing with great effort. They made a quarterback switch last week, which seemed to give them a little bit of a jump on the offensive side. Played a really good game against Maryland.

The bottom line is this: Coach Fitzgerald, ever since he's been there has built a really successful program. Been very good since '06 when he took over. Clearly have an identity. And their guys understand what they do. Their players understand very well what they're being asked to do and they do it very well.

They play the scheme extremely well and they consistently play hard and tough. That hasn't changed. They've won two of the last four Big Ten West Championships.

It's a real credit to the way they've built the program. And the one thing, they're going to play hard and they're going to play well and that's what we expect coming into this football game.

As it pertains to the two of us, we've had a history of really close 60-minute games. I expect this one to be another one of those games and that's what we're preparing for.

This week's Kid Captain, Elyna Clements. She's a nine-year-old. Had a brain tumor removed about a year and a half ago about the size of a golf ball. She's on the road to recovery doing really well and getting great care across the street.

Sounds like her ambition is to be a child life specialist. I think those people have had great impact on her just happy to have her and her family with us on Saturday. And again, we expect this to be a tough football game and we're excited about that opportunity. Be good to be back in Kinnick.

**Q. As you're evaluating quarterbacks how much do you factor the results in Saturday in Columbus versus this week in practice versus what you've seen cumulative before?**

COACH FERENTZ: Really wasn't much good Saturday, in general. Didn't matter who was in there. So that's part-everything is part of the evaluation to answer your question, what we saw in practice, things we saw on Saturday and the past. Keep pushing forward. It's not like we have a scientific formula. We'll see how the week plays out.

**Q. With your decision, do you anticipate whichever**

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**direction you go that that person will be in there, not necessarily looking over their shoulder, or do you think there will be some sort of rotation or something?**

COACH FERENTZ: We're not planning on rotation at this point. But anything's possible. Not going to rule it out. But preferably wouldn't want to do that. And whoever starts hopefully not looking over their shoulder. We also have to get it going offensively and show some production, too. So hopefully whoever is in there can help us do that. That's the team goal.

And there's I guess a balancing act that goes on with it because you don't want to make a decision based on one play. Something like that. We'll kind of see. Make a decision and ride with it for a little bit.

**Q. Going back to the game on Saturday, you said judging Alex's performance was tough considering the circumstances. His last appearances were similar, the championship second half deficit, does that make it more difficult to evaluate how much progress he's made out there?**

COACH FERENTZ: I said the same thing about Spencer too. It's complicated. And when you evaluate any player, there's pretty much a lot of circumstances and things around what their responsibility is that factor into things. If there's no hole for a running back to run through chances don't look very good unless it's Barry Sanders. I do remember the first time I saw him. It was against Nebraska the hole wasn't there. Looked like a 1-yard gain bounced it out made 12 on the left side. That's something I'll remember my entire life.

But basically everything affects everything. For quarterback play, it's really complex. So it's not a simple equation. Those guys out there are just humming, but usually if a guy is humming means he's getting good teamwork and good help around him too. There's a lot that goes into good quarterback play, just like every position.

**Q. At what point this week would you like to have that decision made of who is --**

COACH FERENTZ: We haven't made a decision yet. Today and tomorrow are big work days for us. We're not going to do anything between now and then. We'll see how we feel coming off the field and maybe take it to Friday, we'll see.

**Q. Does the sense of urgency change when you're on a losing streak?**

COACH FERENTZ: I hope not. I hope everyone has a

sense of urgency, purpose, whatever. I prefer to call it purpose. That's something that we try to encourage all of our players to have each and every time we're practicing, whether it's a light workout or a heavy workday like today. If you're going to get something accomplished, you better have something on your mind you're trying to get done.

So I don't think it changes. I hope it doesn't change. And just to tell you this, one thing that doesn't change too. Losing. Losing doesn't feel good. It affects you. There's nothing good about it. I can say the converse about winning.

Everything is pretty good when you're winning. Hopefully our guys, hopefully everybody involved in this organization is tired of losing. It's just not fun.

**Q. At this stage how often do your 1's go against your 1's?**

COACH FERENTZ: Not a lot.

**Q. How hard does it make you to evaluate?**

COACH FERENTZ: We still have good players, we'll go 1's against 2's and let the guys compete really hard and we did some of that this morning and tomorrow again. You can evaluate players. Even against air, sometimes, it can be telling. Not that it's competitive. Just how guys operate and how they do things.

**Q. When you look at the offensive line they're young, they had it happen before you see them grow and take leaps. Have they been able to make enough growth to where you think, okay, a leap is coming or is it just stagnated in key positions?**

COACH FERENTZ: It's a little bit of a mixed bag to that point. I thought we made strides a couple weeks ago. I said that after whatever game it was, game four or five. I thought we made real strides and stalled out a little bit the last time out then we had a bye.

Last week was a tough outing. And so we'll see how we bounce back this week. The guys are practicing well.

I do think we're seeing improvement on the field day to day. And so we'll just keep pushing forward and I wish I could give you an exact answer when it's going to happen or a timetable. But I'm confident the guys are working hard. They've got good attitudes. They're good young people. We're going to get there. It's a matter sooner would be greater than later, that's for sure.

**Q. When you look at Connor, in particular, he was very**

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**young playing inside last year. Now very young playing outside. Seemed to really struggle this year. The other day was probably not a day he'll want to remember. Do you look at him maybe with a back inside because of confidence or keep him out there and let him take his lumps?**

COACH FERENTZ: He actually played inside some later in the game later in the day. I think one of the takeaways if you looked at the first third down we had, he didn't get out. Didn't get out well.

That's something he struggled a little bit. It's a technique thing. It's not ability or mental. My takeaway on that would be that's really been improving in practice. Like we've seen improvement. Been focused on that.

He's been focused on it. He's been working on it. And then Saturday, that first third down, it didn't happen for him.

So as a coach, that's our job to figure that out and say, maybe this isn't the time for it because it's not happening the way it needs to happen under game circumstances. Going back to the point of competition and live work versus lower tempo work.

So we're definitely looking at that and considering that. And that's our job is to get guys in the best possible positions and ask them to do things they can be successful at. So we're definitely looking at that.

**Q. I didn't see Gennings Dunker on the two-deep. Is that injury related?**

COACH FERENTZ: He wasn't there last week. I probably should have announced that. He had an injury. He's not sure when or how it happened. I know it happened on the football field. So I guess maybe that's a good sign. But anyway he has something that's going to hold him out another couple weeks probably.

**Q. Arland talked about holding guys accountable on offense. Being hard on each other. Have you noticed that in practice? How is it possible to hold guys on balance accountable while still supporting, kind of balancing, you don't want to be Mr. Nice Guy?**

COACH FERENTZ: Sure. We have all expectations. That's part of being a team. We've agreed on as a team players and coaches what we think the standards are, what we need to be doing.

That's what he's striving to do. And you can hold each other accountable, nothing wrong with that, still be supportive of each other too. It's like a family. Families

argue and quarrel, typically. And first time I agreed with my wife too much about her side of the family, I learned a really important lesson, don't be too agreeable.

But anyway, don't state the obvious. But you can do both. That's one thing that's really shown true with our guys. They're close with each other. They care about each other. But they'll tell it like it is too.

**Q. Any examples in practice this week, anything different?**

COACH FERENTZ: I thought we had a good practice today. I thought the guys were focused on the offensive side and defense, thought they were focused, doing the things they were supposed to do.

Hopefully we'll continue that and hopefully we'll see some growth and improvement come out of that.

**Q. Arland says he feels like we're letting the defense down in some ways, what do you do as a head coach to keep those guys motivated?**

COACH FERENTZ: Couple things. Football is a dynamic thing. You never know how things are going to go, how a game's going to shake out. It could be week-to-week. It could be season to season. Every year is a little different. Every story different. Good teams understand. It's really about the effort and commitment you make, the work you're putting in, and sometimes conditions will dictate. And '04 is an easy one to pick. We weren't going to run the ball well, not good up front. Lost a lot of running backs due to injuries. That wasn't going to happen. That wasn't realistic, but everybody was cognizant of that.

Nobody complained about it, everybody it's the way it is and let's find a way to be successful.

I think that's typical in any season. Sometimes it happens during the course of the game where you can't -- neither team can stop each other and there's other days you can't, the other team can make a first down. You find a way to be successful.

The better everybody understands that, the better off we'll be. No sense worrying too much about what's the terrain look like right now. Hey, that's what it is. How do we come out successful as a result of that?

And if guys on the team understand that concept, then I don't think you have issues with the teamwork part, as long as everybody's doing what they're supposed to do, making the contribution they're supposed to make and putting the effort and commitment in that's part of being on a team.

**Q. Do you think it's sustainable to have the defense and special teams at the level they've been while the offense has been at the level it's been?**

COACH FERENTZ: It hasn't worked the last couple of weeks, no. So obviously we want to change that formula. Get offense in a place we can be successful and we've done that in the past.

**Q. Northwestern has won a few times in a row in Kinnick in 2016, 2018, 2020. Any comment on that that you need to correct?**

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so. I think the bigger picture is what I was alluding to earlier, whether it's home or away, it's never easy. It's when you play Northwestern, when we get together, it just seems to be -- I'm thinking about some of the losses up there, I guess they stick with you.

The one guy blew out his Achilles on the last play. What a great play it was. If he had to get hurt I wish it had happened earlier. I don't want anybody to get hurt, don't misconstrue that, but you understand.

I mean what a play that was. And those things stick with you. There was the one in '05 I think which it's tough to sleep after those. It has been the history of the programs, at least the last 20 years we've just had some crazy games back and forth.

And it's never over. It just doesn't seem like it's ever over. That's what I would expect here Saturday.

**Q. Diante Vines was a breath of fresh air today. Seemed like a confident guy. How much impact do you think he's been able to make these last five games?**

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see. I'm hopeful we'll see some impact. He's a good football player. We've known that for a couple of years. Let me rephrase that. We've suspected it and we got him out there especially last spring and this summer until he busted that bone.

It has been encouraging. He came in, just he's just had such a crazy, unfortunate path of just injuries and it's nobody can predict that.

But it's funny, I caught myself thinking about that last week. And I'm thinking about him in the same way as Logan Jones -- you're excited about him excited what you see them do in practice. You catch yourself this guy hasn't played a game yet as a Hawkeye and the same with Logan

coming into the season, hasn't played a game as a center but yet he gave you a lot to be excited about watching him in practice. I felt the same with Diante, hopefully he can help over the next five weeks, getting him and Nico (Ragani) back and that should help and help Arland out there a little bit and getting Brody (Brecht) back working. He's getting better every week.

**Q. There are a lot of times when you want, in a situation like this, to have the tendency to look under rocks we're doing it you're doing it, trying to figure out should you -- right now is it better to constrict the play designs and the concepts to just a bare minimum, something you can do or is it better to look around and say well maybe we should try something different?**

COACH FERENTZ: I think you look for some things that give you a spark or maybe something a little wrinkle or whatever. It has to fit in with what you do. It has to be somewhat similar to something you have done. You've practiced.

When you start drawing stuff up, that typically doesn't work so well. It's not something you touched on during the course of camp or spring.

There are a lot of things you can tweak things or come up with variants off something you do that will give you a challenge or a problem. So you're always looking for those. You can't stray too far away. Also you have to make sure number one make sure whatever you're asking the players to do they're capable of handling it not overload or affect something else that might be already established for you.

That's part of our job, too, to try to evaluate that. But we're looking for anything maybe to spark a play here or there to get us going ignite us.

**Q. You look at jet sweeps, up against Illinois they didn't seem to work even when you were motioning. And but they've worked in the past. They've worked from time to time. Is there a resistance to do it too often where they just become part of the normal motion or do you feel like that could be an area where you can grow and do something more to help?**

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think you can base the whole offense off of them. Some people I'm thinking more on coordinators, the NFL, do a really good job of that in college and Big 12 for a while and actually twice in the Big Ten. That was kind of his DNA like everything came off of that and seemed to work pretty well for him.

But in our case it's something that we talk about

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week-to-week. It's always a part of our discussion and then we try to figure out, okay, where does it fit, how much of it fits, that type of thing. And factor that in with everything else we're doing.

**Q. Screen passes haven't been very effective this year what do you attribute to that?**

COACH FERENTZ: Nothing has been consistent. That's the biggest thing right there on the discussion. Screen passes like everything else, usually takes a degree of execution unless you get lucky every now and then.

But whether it's tunnel screen, quick screens or the drop-back screens, there's coaching that goes into that. You can draw them up. You can do them, but do you really know how to execute them. I think that's probably the challenge. We haven't been really consistent.

**Q. In the running game, your running backs seem to be running hard and doing a good job of blocking the other day but there was some other -- seems like there are some holes but just one player's out of place. Is that kind of common place right now, where it's just one player maybe not getting vertical, all those kind of things?**

COACH FERENTZ: It is. I'm thinking of two plays right off the bat you bring that up. Things pop in your head. The Illinois game there's a play in particular we were pretty much one block away from maybe taking it to the house. But we weren't. We weren't there. So ended up being a five, six-yard gain. Thinking back to the second game, same thing, one of those where six inches more and maybe we're in the end zone but we weren't. That's a challenge right there.

And there's some plays where there's just nothing there. That's a big issue. But on the ones where you're making five, six yards, where you might have a chance to get beyond that, those are the ones that you've got to somehow some way find a way to convert and Northwestern does a good job. Their safeties are really involved in the run stop. They do a nice job. They tackle well. They've been doing that for a long time.

It's going to be a challenge there trying to, looks like you've got a chance for a good play, ends up being four yards, those types of things. That would help get us over the hump if we could hit a couple of those.

**Q. I realize there's always one game at a time. But team could go anywhere from 3-9 to 8-4, just the difference how important is it to generate some momentum for the offseason, what not?**

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not thinking about the offseason, I can assure you that. The goal right now is the same as back when we started out. Our goal is to win every game. Right now we've got five games left. Our guys are aware of that. I cover that every Sunday, big picture. But it really gets down to we can't win five if we don't win one. So that's really all that matters at this point.

And we're just going to worry about this week, figure out where we're at next Sunday and keep pushing forward just like we've done in the past.

**Q. With the way the offense is right now, do you sense any difficulty coaching the guys in terms of keeping the frustration level down and keeping their confidence up as you continue to go through the final five games?**

COACH FERENTZ: It's hard to have confidence if you aren't seeing results. We went through that in 2000. 1999, 2000. At some point you have to show that you're gaining traction. Gaining traction is really an important thing. There's no way to predict when that's going to happen. There's no guarantee it is going to happen either.

That's the other part of that equation. But you just keep working at it. There's nothing magic about it. You just keep working at it methodically, trying to get a little bit better and hope at some point things gel a little bit and something starts to take off. And that's the race we're running, to Chad's point and to your point.

And if you're not practicing well, if you're not doing things well, then that is frustrating. I think we're trying to get there.

**Q. You need three of these next five to be bowl eligible. In general how important is that bowl with those extra practices from a development standpoint?**

COACH FERENTZ: I'm really not thinking too much about that right now. It's obvious the more we can practice, the better it is. There's no downside to winning, there's no downside to ever going to a bowl. Bill Brazier said there's, no, such thing as a bad bowl. Some are better than others. No such thing as a bad one. Maybe out of vogue. One more thing.

All I know is playing well this week would be really good for us and that's all we're worried about at this stage.

**Q. It's interesting that your final five are all not only divisional rivals but they're ones against opponents you know pretty well. It's personal because you**

**probably recruited against most of them. You know their system. They know you. Is that better in some ways, because Ohio State you haven't played them since, I don't know --**

COACH FERENTZ: I'm only smiling, it dawned on me during the bye week when I looked at what's left. I don't know if that was done intentionally. If everybody is doing it. I don't look globally I look at who we have next obviously who is on the schedule but I didn't look at the whole master thing. I don't know if it was done intentionally or not. If there's a method to the madness. But it's kind of interesting because at least we know each other a little bit, whereas last week you just walk into something that was a little bit different for us, from a team standpoint.

**Q. What have you seen from Aaron Graves this year, he doesn't seem to be the average freshman from where the starting point is?**

COACH FERENTZ: That's really fair. He's going to graduate, I think, in like mid-year next year or whatever. Two years into it he'll be a graduate. He'll be certainly way more educated than I will be when he leaves here. All you have to do is get an undergrad degree, got me beat.

Unusual guy. Very mature, very focused, works extremely hard. That's what impressed me in August. He didn't seem overwhelmed. And that happens with freshmen at times but not many guys that are playing inside in the lines, just kind of an unusual thing. Not that he's not learning. He learned some lessons on Saturday. Got taught a few lessons. So that's part of the education. He's got a great attitude, great work ethic. He's a talented guy.

**Q. Have you ever had a guy who came here already with an associate's degree out of high school?**

COACH FERENTZ: Pretty sure Tyler Nielson had one or he was close. But I don't know if he had an AA degree. I don't know that. I can't say that. But he had a bunch of credits from Iowa Central. I remember that. I remember his going away present, we had a Friday night practice getting ready for a bowl. And it was like we did it at 7 p.m. because it was the last day of finals. His graduation present was a 7 p.m. final on the last possible slot. So I congratulated him for being a good student. That's the price you get, that's your reward right there for doing a good job.

**Q. Do you have an update on Keagan Johnson by chance?**

COACH FERENTZ: Yes. He's still working to get back.

**Q. Does the fact that you're getting close to the last four games, does that play in how quickly to kind of get him back?**

COACH FERENTZ: His health will dictate when he gets back. He's been trying. He's working hard. He's been trying. He hasn't been a go.

**Q. When you look at the quarterbacks again, is there a trait that you really want to see over the, whether it's yesterday, today, tomorrow, that you just really identify as something outweighing some of the others?**

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if there's one thing. And we've been watching the two guys practice and work basically since January. We haven't watched in football but we had all spring and August and certainly during the season.

I think we'll just see what it feels like. There's probably not going to be a concrete formula or scientific formula. Again, it's just going to be how we all feel coming off the field, be it tomorrow, or be it on Friday and then we'll make a decision.

**Q. Talked to you last Saturday, turnaround would be more player-led on the leadership of the team to kind of galvanize the group. How have you seen that manifest itself in the days following and how it's trickled down to the younger players?**

COACH FERENTZ: I complimented the guys on Sunday because during the questioning, in some cases interrogation, on Saturday that I experienced and the one good thing about that it dawned on me coming home. I said as bad as today was, it could have been worse because I could have been that guy. I could have been that guy. Had his job and had to act like he did.

Yeah, it could be a hell of a lot worse. All things aren't that bad. But one thing I did on Sunday was compliment our players, the way they handled it. It's not easy to stand up to tough questions after a loss like we did. Our guys handled it with class. Stand up for each other. It's worth complimenting our guys. I think it's genuine, it's who they are. And my experience, and we've been through two-loss streaks or three-loss streaks the last four years. We've experienced either two or three in all four of the seasons.

The only way I know to come out of it is everybody just has to work hard and it takes leadership and takes ownership and that's coaches and players.

And it just isn't going to happen if the coaches are the only ones invested, you're out of luck. We're fortunate four

years in a row we've had good teams, good character teams. I felt good about these guys, felt good about the guys since we started in January. I can't predict what's going to happen record-wise moving forward but I think we'll keep pushing and keep working and that's what we're seeing at least right now is Tuesday afternoon and we've been together three days now and the guys they're straight ahead. That's what they should be.

**Q. You look at the way Jack Campbell played the other day. Didn't matter what the score was, he seemed to be really standing out. Has he ascended the way you probably thought he would in this and how does this play rank against maybe other players you've coached and also throughout the country?**

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if I could have predicted what his career path was going to be. But all of us felt really good about Jack through the recruiting process, watching him in high school and just everything he did. And you get to know him through the recruiting process and then more importantly you get him on campus and watch how he does everything.

It's not just on the football field or in the training period. It's everything he does. He's a really humble guy, hardworking. And I hope everybody's enjoying watching him perform and compete because if you just focus on him, that's a pretty good day. Just watching what he does.

We're lucky because we get to interface with him on a daily basis. Everything about this guy is just from his toes to the top of his head, he's all football. All about being a good teammate and stands for everything that you want and we've got some guys on that wall over there, a lot of other guys, too, not just guys on that wall. I don't think Yanda is on that wall but we had a lot of good guys come through here. A special player. We're fortunate.

**Q. You said the offensive players of course they want the support of the defense but they don't want their sympathy. They shouldn't want their sympathy could you explain what you mean by that. It's all rooted in the culture of the program.**

COACH FERENTZ: Everybody is working hard. And appreciate everybody being together. And everybody being supportive. But we all have a job to do. And nobody's looking for anybody's sympathy. We just want to get better. That's what we want to do. That's how our players are thinking. There's only one way. You have to work through it and push and work through it. There's no easy way around it. And if anybody's waiting for that, it's like trying to win the lottery.

You're probably going to come up short most of the time. It's all of us trying to do what we can to get better and help each other out and the defensive guys, what they can do is encourage and they've been great at that. And keep playing the way they have been playing. Play better. I think that's how they're looking at it.

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