

# University of Iowa Football

## Media Conference

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## LeVar Woods

### Press Conference



LEVAR WOODS: First off, I would like to thank you guys for being here. It's a beautiful fall day out today. We had practice this morning. Noticed all the leaves changing colors. The reds, the yellows. Fall is coming here.

You guys could easily be out at Wilson's Apple Orchard or out at Kroul Farms getting a pumpkin with your kids. If you had that, that's what I would be doing if my kids weren't in school and I weren't here.

Kind of just appreciate you guys being here and your interest level always in Iowa special teams.

Kind of where we're at right now as far as special teams go, happy with kind of how the units have been playing. Definitely not satisfied. There's a lot more out there for us. There's some things we've had some really good moments so far this year and then some moments that -- some near misses where we felt like we could have impacted the game but didn't do it.

We always talk about here being championship level, talking about championship-level practice, championship-level play in games. Again, we've seen that so far this year at times, and there's times where, again, near misses where could have, should have, would have.

The goal right now is trying to eliminate the could have, should have, would have and more being happy and satisfied with the results.

Happy with how the guys are playing in general. Starting off with the punt game, I think Tory is punting the ball well for the most part. There's some things consistency-wise I know that he is not happy with. I'm sure he has told you guys that. If he hasn't already, I'm sure he will.

As far as coverage goes, I've been happy with the coverage. I think you have seen this in games already. You've seen Cooper flying down the field making tackles. You've seen Terry down the field making tackles. You've seen Jack Campbell down there making tackles, and Xavier Nwankpa is a freshman that happened to join the

unit, which is hard to do as a true freshman, to play here on our punt unit. But he is doing it and doing it well, along with the rest of the guys as well.

I think it really speaks to the culture that we have here and the way that this team operates. It speaks to the character of the guys.

It's very rare you have an All-American linebacker like Jack Campbell flying down the field, making tackles and not just doing it willingly, but wanting to do it. You guys saw that in the game last week.

He was the first guy down the field. Ball pops up. Bang, he is the guy that recovers it. Again, I think it speaks volumes to his character and what he wants to do on this football team. That's set by Coach Ferentz. The culture and what we try to do within this building and within this team. Just happy with that. Again, some things we still need to clean up.

Ultimately, you talk about Tory, and I think he will be the first to tell you, he is getting some really good snaps. Some things that are kind of hidden that people don't really notice, he is getting some really good snaps from Luke Elkin. Something that I think maybe as a younger coach I took for granted, the snapper position and how critical that is and how much it can help a punter.

I think I've called Luke the ultimate setup man. He is the ultimate setup man, good snaps, puts the ball where he wants it, and also, he is getting done. You've seen that as well this year. Getting down the field and tackling guys and making tackles, which is pretty rare for a snapper in college football or in pro football.

As far as that goes, field goal units, I think Drew is coming along as a player. He is definitely young. He has had -- every game is really like a new experience for him in some way because he was a high school kid a year ago. Really less than a year ago.

I think he has made a huge transition since spring. We've all kind of seen that. He missed a kick, his last kick, against Illinois, which I know is just eating at him, but to me that shows the guy is a competitor. He may be young. He may be inexperienced, but he is a competitor, and he has that drive inside.



Again, helped again by a new holder with Tory. The first-year holder. Tory has done a great job with that. Protection has been good. I go back to the ultimate setup man with Luke. Again, stuff that you don't really see.

A lot of times if you really pay attention and watch NFL snappers and where the laces are coming and where the operation is, that's what we are trying to get to. If you ever watch that on Sunday. I don't pretend that you pay attention to that stuff, but as a special teams coach, I definitely do, and we do. I think we're getting some of that right now from that position.

As far as those two units, kick off has been good. So far I've been happy with that. Some guys flying down. Jay Higgins playing a lot on defense, but also getting down there, making some tackles, making some big hits. It's been good for our football team.

The return game is a position -- both kickoff and punt return, both of them we're still working to improve. I think we've seen -- in kick return we've seen Kaleb Johnson, flashes of him as a potential exceptional returner, but there's still -- he is still a freshman. Some things we're still cleaning up. The things we're working on, we worked on this week during the bye week: communication, better understanding, alignments, finish. Some of the little things that can either make or break a big return in either punt return or kick return.

Those have kind of been the focal points for us so far this year. Then also during the bye week. Again, happy with where we're at. Definitely not satisfied. I think we can help our football team better.

With that, any questions you guys may have.

**Q. Your kick return unit, you have Louie Stec kind of on the back end. He was like the third to the back. I don't know how you call that, what position you call that. It's unusual to see a defensive tackle back that far. What does he bring in your kick return unit that puts him in that position, and how comfortable would you be if the ball came to him?**

LEVAR WOODS: I'm glad you noticed Louie back there. It's another position on our team that kind of goes unheralded, but he brings -- packs a big punch and really helps our unit.

Another guy that played there was a defensive lineman. Oh, my gosh. His name escapes me right now. Oh, my gosh. Loved him. 53 from Pella. Oh, my gosh. Thank you so much, Garret Jansen. Very similar. Mobile. Can

move. Can strike guys on the run. Hard to do. Typically it's fullbacks that play that position. A defensive lineman plays that position. You see it a lot more in the NFL than you do in college football, just based off the roster size.

I think Louie has done a good job with that position. If you saw the first kick return against Illinois, it was literally right in front of me, and it sounded like a car crash. That's not something that's easy to do. It makes you realize why people are talking about eliminating kickoff from football because it was a collision. It was a hit. They knocked that guy silly.

That's what Louie brings to the table. He is a lower guy to the ground, bigger guy that can pack a punch and move people out of the way.

Yeah, he has also had in practice not in games where he has had the ball in his hands and can move with it. He does a good job. Not only that, if you pay attention and watch us and study us, he plays in our punt shield. An unheralded position nobody wants because they're sending some guy straight through him, right through his face, and Louie is a stout, powerful, tough guy that handles that dirty work.

Part of special teams I feel like there are some positions that the job is the job. It's sort of like playing fullback on offense, right? Okay, my shoulder is sore, my neck is sore. Someone still needs to go to slam into a linebacker, and I think that's the position that Louie played and played really well for us.

**Q. When you look at a lot of special teams metrics, you have consistently been in the top 20 despite losing Charlie Jones, despite losing Caleb Shudak. What's the key to having that consistency?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think it goes back to the culture that Coach Ferentz sets within this building. Not just what Coach Ferentz sets, but what our guys are trying to do. I go back to the character of the men on this team. I keep bringing up the same guys. With Campbell and Benson, Roberts and DeJean, those guys are playing every snap on defense, but yet, they're the first guys to run down on punt coverage. That doesn't happen on a lot of teams.

I can tell you when I was a player, I wasn't signing up running to the coach saying, put me in on punt. It was, fine, I'll let you do it.

These guys are different, high-character people, high-character individuals that want to help their football team and make plays. We're reaping the benefits of that right now, but again, all that is set from Coach Ferentz at

the top and the culture within the walls of this program.

**Q. I have a question about specifically last week, the last one after Illinois' last field goal. I think it was Gavin who caught it and then just kind of took a knee really quick. Was that designed to try to get the offense the ball really early even though he was a deep back, or was he just --**

LEVAR WOODS: I don't like the ball hitting the ground. Of course, we don't ever want that in kick return, but we are trying to conserve time as well. The thought is to not let it hit the ground. We want to catch the thing and get down as fast as we can, as much as we can, as fast as we can to let the offense go.

The timing is thrown off. You've heard me talk about kick return in the past, like a symphony, right? The timing of all the strings and the cords and each instrument that's played at what time it's played. Timing gets thrown off when the ball is on the ground or the kick is short. So in that regard we want to get as much as we can to get down and let our offense have the ball with as much time as possible.

I can't remember if there was one time-out or no time-outs left in the game, but that's what we were trying to do.

**Q. Wouldn't it make more sense to go get eight more yards in that second?**

LEVAR WOODS: You are taking four, five seconds off the clock. Potentially, yeah.

**Q. First down.**

LEVAR WOODS: Eight yards is it not a first down. I know what you are saying. I know what you are saying, but I don't know that there's eight yards out there either based on what we're trying to do return-wise.

I can tell you I wasn't disappointed by the decision. I was disappointed the ball hit the ground because you don't ever want that.

**Q. Would you rather have him fair catch that in that case?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, if you can. Sometimes it's a tough kick when you are running up. Here's the other thing that's unknown in college football. You have the fair catch rule. A guy can signal fair catch, but if it's not a clean catch, the ball hits the ground. You don't get the ball at the 25. You get the ball wherever it's down.

It's part of, knock on wood, why I don't like returners doing

this in the background because it's not a clean catch. We've benefited from that a couple of times. I think it was Northwestern last year and I want to say either Nebraska in '18, Purdue in 2019 I want to say. They tried to fair catch and then ball is in the ground, and we get it at the 4. You don't want that at all.

Again, strategically the play is you don't want the ball to hit the ground for sure, but how many yards are out there, the journey is over at that point. We just want to get the ball and give it back.

**Q. Do you still consider it an open competition at kicker between Drew and Aaron, or are you more set on Drew for now?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think Drew has done a good job with the opportunities he's had so far. I know that Aaron is working his butt off and same thing with Lucas Amaya. He is working as well.

I think Drew has done a pretty good job with that role. I'll never say never or anything like that. As long as the opportunities keep coming and he keeps taking advantage of them, I see that going for him.

Aaron is right there as well, and he has been busting his butt and working hard too. Coach said this in a press conference. I don't think we've seen the last of Aaron Blom. I would agree with him on that. Whether it's in place kicks or kickoffs, somewhere in there, we're still working with that.

**Q. What goes into the calculus of -- you've seen Drew can obviously kick touchbacks consistently -- between whether you want him to go for the touchback or whether you want him to try to drop it in kind of inside the 5, inside the 10?**

LEVAR WOODS: Hang time is taken into account. We're striving for four-second hang time. 4-0 hang is what we say. Anything beyond that is a bonus.

Drew has done a pretty good job with that. He is not totally at 4-0 hang time on his kickoffs, but he is pretty close. Again, I go back to the timing of kick return. The timing gets thrown off when the ball is hanging way up in the air, like Michigan did to us. Kicked the ball I think it was 4-2-8 hang, and we tried to return it, and we found out real quick it's hard to do.

Then conversely, it's why you see at the end of half when a team kicks the ball on the ground because the timing gets thrown off, it's hard. You may get five yards or even eight potentially, maybe if you are lucky. Very rarely do you see

it take off and go the distance.

Timing just gets thrown off by high hang and then ball is on the ground.

**Q. How happy are you with punt return right now?**

LEVAR WOODS: I feel like we can be better in all regards. Again, that was the focal point of today's practice and today's meeting, was it comes down to the little things, the details with how we're -- it's one thing, hey, I have my man, I'm running with him. Well, if you are the returner back there who is like this, his eyes are up and he catches the ball, and all of a sudden he looks forward, all of you guys look the same. You could be media members, football players. It's all the same to me. I don't know who is on my team, who is not.

When there's a seam, when there's a separation created, when someone is I'm running with my man, and I actually move him out of the way while I'm running with him, that opens a seam for the returners. That's what we're trying -- that's what we focused on today, is just trying to give the returner better vision, more opportunities that way.

As far as -- I don't know how many -- we face some pretty good punters so far, and we've also faced a couple that eliminate returns based off not great punts. I think the things we need to improve upon are keeping the ball off the ground, fielding the ball. Same thing in punt return and kick return to eliminate some of that bleeding yardage.

Then also finishing some of our blocks. I feel like the guys that have been working there with Bruce and then also with Cooper, I think we've got two pretty good candidates there with Witte coming along as well and some freshmen that are still -- they're not primetime-ready yet, but they're working well in practice and anxious to see them as we continue to move forward.

**Q. You look at the officials on special teams, and now they're getting over well on defense. Who are those guys (indiscernible) I know you mentioned Xavier earlier, but who are some other guys across the special teams unit that are impressing you and might be able to parlay that into play at their own position?**

LEVAR WOODS: I'm glad you brought that up because those are two guys with both Jay and Kyler who have done exceptionally well on special teams. They're the bell cows for us, if you will, as core players on special teams.

You're seeing it translate into roles for them on defense. You mentioned one already with Xavier. I definitely see Xavier with that. Terry has done that as well, right, playing

as a gunner and then transitioning into a corner. Cooper has done that. He did that last year. Played mainly for us on special teams. Then it just gave everyone confidence, like, hey, put him in the game on defense, and he hasn't come out since.

Those are kind of the guys right now as far as younger players. I could see right now in that role -- there's a guy that I've kind of got my eyes on and fixated on. It's not just myself but the people I work with, Brock Sherman and Arash Asadi. Deavin Hilson has done a really good job on the scout team and does a really -- he is making it really hard for us in kick return and in the looks he has given us flying down the field and getting in on tackles. We've transitioned him. Okay, you're not doing it on the scout team for us. You're doing it for us. He played us one snap in punt coverage last week as well.

That's a guy I could see transitioning his role, becoming a little bit bigger, not only on special teams, but on offense as well.

I don't want to speak for Coach Betts or anyone on offense, but I could see that.

Some of the other guys I mentioned previously. I think Louie has done some of that as well with Coach Bell. Some of the toughness he brings to us on our football team. I'm glad you pointed him out because, again, both those positions are not very glamorous positions. They're dirty-work positions that need to get done, and he has been getting the job done fairly well.

Appreciate it. Thank you, guys.

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