

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Postgame Press Conference



Iowa 24, Wisconsin 10

KIRK FERENTZ: I told the team, we've talked about November football, and for me it was a classic example of November football in our conference. Tough conditions weather-wise, and a couple things we really thought coming into the game, we'd have to play tough because Wisconsin is a really tough option. Playing clean football is huge for us and huge for them, and it's been that way historically in this series, and it's been that way for both teams really this year, if you look back in the stats for both teams.

Then the other thing is you have to make plays when they do present themselves, and our guys did a good job of that. It wasn't easy, wasn't clean, but overall did a really nice job. Just really proud of our players for getting the victory, proud of them for getting the trophy back and having that in our building for a while.

Defense played really well. Good job stopping the run. Outside of a bust we had in the coverage, pretty good job on pass defense, as well. That was good to see.

Had some ups and downs, but more ups on special teams. Obviously, the blocked punt was a big play in the game, and then really the sequence where we were able to kill the ball down on their 1-yard line, give them a long field and then Cooper followed it up with a punt return and then we were able to finish that drive off, that was a really big swing in the game.

Offensively, we have a lot of work to do still. I was kind of disappointed up front. It didn't look real good for the most part, but a couple positives there when we did get the ball inside the red zone. We finished, put the ball in the end zone instead of field goals, so that was a positive, and then the end of the game, to hold the ball and make them burn their timeouts, I'm not sure I saw that coming, so that was encouraging, too.

They're a good group. They need more experience, more work, and we'll get back to work on Monday with them.

Those guys don't give up, so we'll be okay there.

Just encouraged the team to enjoy this one. They earned it, it was hard fought and they earned it, so proud of their effort, proud of the staff and the plan they put together, and we'll enjoy this one and turn the page tomorrow.

Q. We talked to Cooper; he says he can't drop-kick a field goal. Are you amazed how he can affect the game in so many different areas --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there's probably not a position on the perimeter he couldn't play. You'd have to change your offense if he was your quarterback.

But I'm pretty sure he could be a pretty good running back, I know he could be a really good receiver, and you think about the four positions on defense in the back end plus the nickelback, the slot guy, so there's five right there.

It's just an unusual skill set, if you will. Micah Hyde probably the closest thing maybe we had, maybe Desmond, but Micah is probably the better reach there.

Then the most amazing part is he wasn't recruited, especially in this day and age where there's no secrets.

On top of it, he's a great young guy and just a great team member. Quite an effort tonight from him.

Q. He played some smaller class football; how much do you think the fact that he had to do a lot in high school, that it's an advantage when he comes here?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, just playing sports. I'll put a plug in for parents. Being a multi-sport athlete, it seems like anybody who's smart I talk to in football, they endorse that, the people in the NFL. You can usually go back and trace that; like the good ball skill guys, they played stuff other than just football growing up. Sometimes they didn't play football until later.

But yeah, just going out and doing stuff is overlooked right now. Everybody is in this age of specialization and all that crazy stuff. Just let kids be kids and let them go out and play.

Q. Today you had Cooper and Deontae make huge special teams plays. These are defensive starters, and I know it's nothing new for your starters to make big special teams plays, but how have you made special teams something that starters want to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: That goes back to day one, 23 plus years ago. That was one thing that was just a building block for our program. Two reasons for it. Number one, figured it was the first thing maybe we could get good at because we weren't very good at anything initially. So that was that.

Part of the reason is you don't have to be as veteran of a player, I don't think, to be a good special teams player; there's not quite as much learning. There is learning and there's obviously calls and schemes and all that, but it's not quite -- the experience doesn't factor in. If you have a good attitude and you're really a tough-minded guy, it gives you a chance.

Fast forward then, the dilemma becomes as you get a little bit down the road hopefully, thinking about guys like Abdul Hodge, Greenway, Dallas Clark, how much do you use them on special teams because they're so valuable on defense, too.

So now you circle back to Cooper who's easily leading the team in snaps right now. I think probably the only time he comes off would be kickoff, kickoff return. I think that's correct. And then the field goal teams, he's not on those. He's playing every snap on defense.

A, we don't have a choice right now. We're not the deepest outfit. But our guys take pride in that, and the good players I've been around want to play on special teams, and then we have to pull them back. But if there's a way to get a guy who maybe is a second team that can play as effectively, we're going to give that guy the opportunity. There's a little bit more buy-in and they're more part of the team, feel like they're more part of the team. That's kind of been our philosophy for a couple decades here.

But it's tough sometimes because some guys can really make a difference, and it's going to be hard to take him off any of these teams moving forward.

Q. I can't think of a time where you've had a defense where you could completely rely upon their game plan almost. They're just so dominant --

KIRK FERENTZ: '04 was a little bit like that, too, where we weren't where we needed to be offensively, and at least you go into a game thinking that you've got a chance with a

couple segments maybe and then if you can do something else.

But I don't mind telling you that was prominent in my thoughts today, certainly about how we approached the second half. Same way the last three weeks, actually. You want to be smart in that second half and not put those guys in a really bad position.

You can't pull it all the way back, but -- then part of that, too, is it's just a feel. I've been around some really good defenses that have tough days, and then you've got to play accordingly, but today our guys were really -- outside of that one pass, we were on to have top of our game pretty good.

Q. Since Ohio State, I asked you specifically if there are times when things like this could snowball one of two directions and I actually just said is it possible to go in the right direction over the final six games, and you said it's not only possible, I believe that it's possible and it's going to happen. Here you are three games later, your defense is dominating, you've won three games. What has led you guys to doing it?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the answer I'd give, there's a visitor in town here I'm pretty close with who really knows football, knows people, and he knows our program, and he was just in the locker room there talking about our guys and the way they are. He really likes our team.

That's what I'd go back to, and it's been pretty consistent since January. These guys have worked hard. Really like any team, we have the guys at the top that know how to act and know how to be leaders, and then you've got guys in the middle trying to figure it out, and then you've got some guys at the bottom that have no idea what's going on most of the time. But we have enough guys at the top that have been really strong.

I couldn't sign off on that three weeks ago, four weeks ago, but you bet on people, and you bet on people that you've been around and see how they respond.

I'm thinking right now about Jack Campbell. You guys trying to give him to crack. I don't mean that in a bad way, but that's the game that gets played. Not only did he deflect that question, he stood up and was strong. That's who he is. That's how he is, and we have a lot of guys like that on our team. That's really helpful.

Q. Was there chatter in the locker room about the Purdue game earlier and how that could impact you guys' chances of winning the West?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't spend a lot of time in the locker room. Today you mean? I just kind of get in and out. As the game gets closer, I try to give our players space, but I doubt it. I really doubt it. I don't think anybody is thinking about a pennant race right now. I think we're all thinking about trying to get our third win. We've got two left now.

So all that stuff, it's supposed to be -- it's like last year, it doesn't look good, and then all of a sudden we're in Indy. My experience is like, don't worry about it. Let's just worry about Wisconsin. We had our hands full today, and we knew that going in. We'll have our hands full again next week and the week after. I just try to keep looking at what's in front of us.

Q. You'll see some head coaches when their team is struggling they'll make big changes, they'll panic in some ways. You've never been that way. Why is that?

KIRK FERENTZ: It gets back to the people you work with. If you believe in the people you're with -- you're always trying to look for a better way. That's our job. That's what all coaches do. We talk about it frequently as a staff.

But as I said whenever, I believe we have quality people in the program. I think we have a pretty good coaching staff. Got a lot of guys around the game that know what they're doing and teach it well. They're good for our players.

I really believe in our players. Again, we have different levels on the team, but it's that way every team we've ever had, so as long as you've got enough guys at the top that are really helping drive things, then you've got a shot.

Q. A couple offensive linemen got banged up; what the latest with Stephens and Plumb?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think Jack is OK. I think he is. And Stephens, he came out and couldn't go back in, so we'll see. We'll know Tuesday probably.

Q. What about Arland Bruce?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't want to say I'm pretty sure he's going to play next week, but I'm hopeful he is. I think he had a chance this week and just couldn't make it as of yesterday morning. I think it's realistic to think we'll get him back.

That's the other dilemma with Cooper (DeJean) because I was thinking about that, you lose a really good corner playing the gunner when he's returning, but it turned out to be a good trade today, so we'll see what it looks like next week.

Q. On offense, it wasn't there in raw stats, but situationally they did their job and came away with 17 key points. How would you assess how they've improved in that area the last few weeks?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it was major because we've had situations where we were in great position and end up with a field goal. You just keep doing that, and at some point it's going to catch up to you, and it has caught up to us a little bit, so that was really encouraging. Start with that first one; I think it was two, three plays, and just were able to put it in there.

That's progress, but just the overall continuity today, cohesiveness, it wasn't there. It was hard to give Spencer a good pocket to work off of, and we never really were consistent in the run game.

But I'm sure it's addressable. Again, I think these guys have been improving week to week, and we'll try to shore it up next week. We're going to have to.

Q. To go back to Cooper, I think he's probably one of the most highly decorated high school athletes in the state's history, true sophomore, playing four, five different positions. I guess maybe a two-part question. Do people on the outside understand how difficult that is to go in there and to do that at such a high level? And two, how much of a testament is that to him that he's able to make all these different contributions in so many different areas?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a huge testament. I'm not sure anybody could appreciate it, and why would you, but we do as coaches. The other thing, he just makes it look easy, which is kind of amazing, too.

Good players have a way of doing that sometimes, but it's not easy. You're talking about all the mental intricacies because he can play in the safety position for us, too.

It's all a positive. And then fielding punts in November is not easy, either, and he looked like he was under control the whole way there.

It's just some guys -- I'm not saying you're just born that way, but his whole development, his whole lifetime has just been playing ball and competing, and go back to that state championship game where it was ridiculous what he did, recovered an onside kick, scored. It's just like somebody wrote a script on that stuff.

But one thing I've learned, I don't think that stuff is accidental. Jovon Johnson was the same way. My mentor basically screamed at me to -- you guys need to recruit this

guy, because I was too smart, and no, we don't need this guy; he's too small. All he did was get an interception every day in practice. That's just what he did. So sometimes you've got to believe production and what guys do.

Q. Do you see that day in and day out in practice, just the accumulation of --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he just doesn't screw stuff up. It doesn't sound very hard and all that, but he has to do -- he's playing a tough position to play. But it's really not too often when he makes a mistake mentally, and for a young guy, it's a big stage out there. He's playing on a big stage. To be that poised, to be that confident, at least seemingly confident, yeah, it's really unusual. Just really glad he's on our football team.

Q. The quarterback, I'd say other than maybe a basketball player or two, no athlete I've ever seen has got more battered in this school than him over the years. He's had some rough -- he got benched for a second half, still came back and started. Today he got sacked six times but he keeps coming back. What is it about him mentally that allows him to continue to just compete and not have it accumulate on him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think probably the number one attribute to be good, I think, in anything that's challenging and tough is to have mental toughness. Anybody can have that. Anybody is capable. It's not something -- you don't get it in the weight room or it's not a clock measurement and all that kind of stuff, but if you're going to do something that's hard to do, and playing quarterback at this level is really hard to do. Boy, if you don't have that, it's going to be tough to be any good because you're going to have tough times, and he's had more than his share. Some of his own accord and others things he couldn't do anything about.

But I'll tell you, he stays positive, he's a great teammate, and just keeps chipping away, and somehow, some way, we've won a lot of games when he's in there.

A lot of respect for him certainly, and this has not been an easy year for anybody, and probably he'd be first on the list, I think, for that. Really it's a credit to him just to keep pushing forward.

Q. In regards to special teams, you said earlier this week that was an area that you would need production out of. Maybe in past match-ups it hasn't gone your way, but they had two big plays that set up offensive touchdowns and Drew had the field goal. What enabled them to have such a productive day today?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we missed a couple opportunities which was disappointing earlier, some plus-50 stuff where you hope you make them go the long field, especially on tough, tough conditions like this. So that was kind of -- I always worry about those things; is that going to catch up to us as this game goes on. But then we were able to come back, and putting that one on the 1 was really big for us, just kind of gave us a boost.

Drew, I'm not going to say he's Cooper, but in some ways this guy just seems pretty unflappable, too. It's probably good he hit the goal post last week; it'll keep him humble a little bit. But he's done a pretty good job. He really has.

You get some good individual efforts and then the group collectively, and a guy like Jay Higgins, going back to the backup thing, Jay would be starting most years for us right now at linebacker, but you've got a couple guys that are pretty good, and so when we're in three-backer defense, he's in there, and then he's playing great on special teams, too, and he's a great young guy, too.

Going back to the leadership guys, you're not going to find a more positive and just totally invested guy. In his case, he could be pouting because he's not starting, but I think he's smart enough to know we've got two veteran guys that are pretty good.

All those things going together give you a chance to have some good special teams units, and he's clearly one of our leaders out there. Just a highly respected guy.

Q. To go out there and physically go toe-to-toe and win that battle against that team, what does it mean for you now today and the program?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's big. The way I looked at it and this goes back 23 plus years, they were at the top, they literally were at the top and we helped them do a victory lap up there in Madison. But that was good.

The one positive -- I tried to find positives that year, and the one positive I told our guys, that's how it's supposed to look like. That's what you want. That's where you want to be. We obviously had a long road, so it took us, whatever it was, four years to catch them finally.

And then the series has gone back and forth, but I've got a lot of respect for them as a program. They're built on defense. They're built on being physical. They play sound, smart football. I respect anybody that kind of fits in that category, and they've done it pretty consistently.

In fact, probably as consistently as anybody outside of



Ohio State in our conference over the last seven, eight years.

To beat them, again, that's the first thing I told our guys on Monday, Monday team meeting, was just understand, if we're going to win this game, we're going to have to earn it because don't expect any freebies. We're not going to get anything easy out of this. We're going to have to go out and play and win it, earn it, or you're going to go home sad. We've had a few of those, and it's not much fun.

Q. You haven't beaten Wisconsin since 2008 with fans in this building. I asked a couple players if they knew that, and they didn't. Was that a cognizant decision to not press that, and how good does it feel to get it done with fans?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two things. I didn't know it, either, so yeah, I didn't know it, either.

I'm acutely aware of our record the last five years against them just like Purdue's. The message there is this is 2022. We've got a new team, they've got a new team, and home or away, let's go play and see what we can do. I thought our guys were just taking advantage of it and doing a good job.

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