

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here.

Just taking a look back at the weekend and then obviously turn our attention to Saturday.

Just coming out of the weekend, we talked after the game and after seeing the film, no question I think it was our most complete football game as a team so far, so that was good to see.

Offensively I think we showed more growth, played with good balance and just seeing some good efforts out there. Good to have our receivers get involved, more involved. I think we're improving up front, so those are both positives, obviously.

Defensively I just thought the guys were really focused and really played tenacious defense start to finish. Guys up front did a great job, linebackers, and the back end. Just a really, really good team effort against a very good offensive football team.

Special teams, especially considering the circumstances, happy with the way they produced. So for the most part pretty good there, as well. A lot of positives coming out of the game. Congratulations to Kaleb Johnson for his recognition from the Big Ten, well deserved. He's doing a good job. Again, I think it was our best effort, and that's the good news.

The rest of the story is we're going to have to play even better this weekend to have a chance to be successful playing against Wisconsin. We'll turn our attention towards them now. Our captains, same four guys seemed to be locked in with Jack Campbell, Sam LaPorta, Kaevon Merriweather and Riley Moss.

And then injury-wise, couple guys banged up Saturday, as expected. But I think everybody has got a chance to be here. Brody Brecht is back on the field today in practice, so he looks like he's ready to go. It's always good to pick somebody up along the way, so that's a good thing.

This is a rivalry game, has been for a long time. One thing that's been pretty consistent over the years, it's usually a really hard-fought game, very, very competitive against a really good program.

Been probably about 30 plus of these now, and it's been pretty much that way for most of the time other than maybe the late '80s. Wisconsin is a program that we've had a lot of respect and admiration for. When I got back here in '99 they were at the top of the league and then clinched that Rose Bowl our first year when they beat us in their last game of the season.

They've been good, really as far back as you can think. A lot of commonalities team to team. They're strong, very physical, very fundamentally sound, and typically play really smart football on top of it. Very opportunistic.

This year is really no exception from my vantage point. They've got a veteran quarterback, outstanding running back, and he's got a good backup behind him. The receivers and tight ends are doing a good job, and their offensive line is one of the better ones that we're going to face, if not the best one. It's going to be a challenge for our guys there.

Defensively they've played several different styles over the years but they've certainly settled into a 3-4 front and it's been really productive for them. They've been great defensively. Now for quite some time they got some new faces out there, but production seems to be the same, so they're really doing a good job there.

And then good on special teams like you'd think. They really work hard, play hard, and have a really outstanding punter, veteran guy who does a good job. So he'll be a factor in the game, as well, I'm sure.

Just all in all, got our hands full there. It's going to be good to be back in Kinnick certainly. Should be a great environment, good football day, so looking forward to that.

Our kid captain, is eight-year-old Tate Manahl of Cedar Falls. Tate experienced an accident when he was three years old I'm told, and underwent 30 surgeries. Great attitude, doing very, very well. It will be great to have he and his family here on Saturday.

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And then the last thing, just want to pay my condolences to the Brashier family. Bill passed over the weekend. Bill is one of the most outstanding coaches I've ever worked with, but also one of the most outstanding people I've ever worked with, as well.

I got to spend nine years on the same staff as him. Just nothing but great respect for Bill as a man, as a person, as a coach. Really lucky to be around a guy like that during my career.

Condolences to the entire Brashier family there, and I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. When you look at this series over the last five years, their ability to capitalize on a lot of your mistakes has really turned out to be a difference. I think they have nine touchdowns after your turnovers. You always put a priority on not turning the ball over and ball security; is there an extra emphasis that you put on it this week, or do you take it back just to not put any kind of pressure on your players?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you don't want to overdo it or oversell it, overstate it. But it is true. It's true pretty much in every game for us, is that statistics are really big. And then to your point, they've done a good job of getting takeaways against us. I would attribute part of that to their style. It's a little bit unique in terms of what they do defensively.

They're always aggressive, physical, and opportunistic, so it's certainly going to be a factor in this game, like all of our games. But certainly when we play Wisconsin it's going to be a big deal.

Q. Do you see anything differently in their offensive approach now that Jim Leonhard is in charge versus what Paul Chryst's offense presented?

KIRK FERENTZ: No. I mean, to me they look pretty much the same in all phases. They're just playing at a really good level right now. They had a couple tough losses a while back, but they're three out of four now and playing with pretty good momentum. Looked really good against Maryland.

For whatever reason we've been kind of following Maryland, or at least our opponents have been playing Maryland, so we've been watching them, and they've got a good football team this year.

That's the worst Maryland has looked, and I think it's got probably something to do with the opponent. I think

Wisconsin did a good job of taking some things away from them and making it difficult on them to be successful.

Q. Long-term injury standpoint, any update on Terry Roberts and Keagan Johnson?

KIRK FERENTZ: No. I mean, they're both trying to work back. If they're getting ready to get there, we'll let you know, but nothing new.

Q. Seems like in the last few weeks the offense has played a lot cleaner; thinking back to the Illinois game, seemed like there were a lot of early down penalties that set the offense back. To what would you attribute the fewer penalties in the last few weeks on the offensive side?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not smirking at your question. Said that a little while ago. And that's one thing we've done a pretty good job of this year. We've done a decent job with ball security for the most part, and when we don't we pay for it.

Then on the penalty front, couple that, they're not quite the same in terms of importance, but they are. We've been a pretty good penalty team this year outside of one game and you just nailed it. A lot of those came on the offensive side. I don't know if it was crowd noise, the defense we were playing. I'm not sure what I would attribute it to, but it certainly factored into the game.

We could never get any traction really going in that ballgame, and I think that's a part of it. It's tough to overcome five-yard penalties for anybody, and certainly where we were at then and where we're at just in general, we don't want to have enforced errors, false starts, things like that. It makes it too steep of a hill to climb.

Q. How valuable has it been to have a guy like Kaleb Johnson who seems to keep on gaining yardage even after he gets hit?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you know, that's everybody's best friend, if you have a back that can do that. We see him improve each week, we see him improve in practice, and it's really started when he got going in August. It's been fun to watch him.

I think probably the -- don't get me wrong, I don't mind -- didn't mind watching him get yards the other day and score, but the other thing about him, I always think first he's just a delightful young guy.

Our younger guys are in the early group in summer training, and Rai would tell me both he and Jaz Patterson

come by every day, 5:40, 5:45 smiles on their faces, hey, Coach, how you doing, all that kind of stuff. That's really unusual for young guys to be on top of things on a consistent basis like they were.

It's kind of really how they operate. They both operate the same way. They practice well. Got a really good attitude, good demeanors, and yeah, it's been great to have them on our team.

Q. What's the importance of election day to your program?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, to our program, really I don't think it impacts our program as a football program, if you will. But we place a value on that. They had a seminar for our guys last Thursday. I believe it was at 9:30. Went about 40, 45 minutes. People on campus came over and just did a little voter education program for our guys, and we've talked to our guys about that.

Everybody is -- we've got a great country and probably the greatest -- not probably, we do live in the greatest country, and one of the rights we have that's so valuable is to get an opportunity to go vote. We live in a country where a lot of people have opinions but don't really back it up with anything, so this is a chance to go back it up. If you have an opinion about something, go vote and try to be part of the process.

Q. Two years ago you wouldn't have been able to practice today; what do you think of the NCAA changing their civic engagement rules?

KIRK FERENTZ: It really caught me -- you know, I understood at the federal election level, presidential election, but when I heard last year that I think dog catcher was like the most prominent office being voted on, it seemed a little strange.

I think we've caught up, yeah. I think this is a better approach. I think the program last week was great. Nobody would disagree with that. But it's nice to be in a normal routine, especially when we're in season.

Q. Do you have good stories -- how did you find Nico Ragaini and Diante Vines, two guys from Connecticut talking about how they're leading your receiving room in a way? It's kind of unique.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that was Ken's (O'Keefe) specialty was Connecticut since he's a native of the state. Probably the thing I would add there is the state, at least in my opinion, has changed a little bit. There's a lot of players up there now and they play -- the prep schools in Connecticut

play pretty good football and they attract guys from other states, as well.

It wasn't that way a while back, although we've had guys from the state, good players certainly. But yeah, it was kind of a Ken connection there, and both those guys are really good players and they're both just really good guys on the team, too.

Q. You referenced Jaz earlier. What's the health update on Gavin and Leshon, and how prepared is Jaz to step into a role if those two can't go?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that was his first carry the other day. I'm pretty sure it was. I don't mind telling you I was a little nervous just because going back to ball security. He passed with flying colors. Yeah, he's a tough guy. He's a tough runner. Has been that way at least in practice. It carried over to Saturday.

The good news is both Gavin and Leshon are 100 percent better than they were last week. They were really kind of touch-and-go and we weren't sure if they'd be able to play. At least they were there and they were able to step in in an emergency, but they both feel great now, so that's good.

Q. When you look at their defense, it's so unique compared to just about everybody. They still also seem to be really gap sound in how they attack. Also, they loop and stunt in a way that really throws people off. How do you feel about your communication up front, and is there anything different that goes involved just because they'll loop a standup defensive end inside and do some things that other teams don't do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, some of those stunts that you're referring to are not totally unique, but they're challenging just because they do a really good job. I said in the opening statement they've typically always been a very fundamentally sound team and they are -- it's no different now.

The defense has morphed. Used to be a four-man line going back, and then that changed over when Coach Anderson got there, and then Coach Leonhard has taken it to a whole different level, I think.

It's a little bit different preparation because it's a three-man front, but their backers are capable of rushing very well and they've hurt us. And then they can also get back and do a good job in pass coverage. So they've got a lot of moving parts, and they swap out or sub out, if you will. Dropping an outside guy and bring somebody from the inside, and those guys have been pretty effective, too, and it looks like it's kind of the same thing, even though there are some

new faces involved.

Everybody has got to be on the same page, communication has to be good, and that's just the starting point. Then the execution, picking up those stunts is where it gets challenging.

Like most good defensive teams, they give you enough to -- you kind of think you've got it and then you don't got it because they've got something else that comes off of that and makes it a challenge.

Q. With the level of progress your offensive line seemingly has made over the last two weeks, what's your level of concern, because of again dropping somebody --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's just another step up. It's a challenge. Every week is a challenge, but this one is -- I'll throw this out: I don't know, you guys know the numbers better than I do probably, but I'd venture to say over the last five years, Wisconsin has been right up there in the top one, two, three defensively pretty much in anything that counts.

I think if you look at some programs, I think that really kind of identifies some things why they've been so successful. I think Wisconsin, it fits them to a tee.

Q. If you look at your early 14 years in your career, about .500 record in November but it's really changed in the last seven years, eight years. Any reason for that that you can point to maybe?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know. I mean, two thoughts on it. For the first part, we've always emphasized November football because that's what defines you typically in college football and the NFL, it's December. And then program-wise I really think the '14, '15 seasons were kind of a pivotal point for us as a program. We spent a lot of time -- 14 we won seven games but it didn't feel good.

So we went back to everything, so I think we've been a little bit more productive, a little bit more efficient probably since then just in general terms. Part of the discussion being November football.

But it still gets back to players. Players drive the car. They're the ones that make it go or not, and credit goes to our guys for doing a good job there.

Q. Talking to Jack Campbell about this, it's just like the quality of individual almost. Just what happened recently, fighting through adversity and playing your best, is it as simple as having pride, determination, all

those buzz words?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. It helps to have some good ability and talent, too, but that's a big part of things. The reality is it's a long season. It's a long season for these guys. They start the early part of August, and there aren't many days off or times to really catch their breath and relax.

It doesn't sound that hard, but it's day after day after day, and it's mental, it's physical, and then once school starts they have expectations academically, they've always got expectations socially.

I think it takes a special guy to be able to handle that. We're not ready for Senior Day yet, but to make it to be a senior and to go through that for four to five years, I think it's really something to be very proud of.

It's a tough march. I think that's one of the things about football, though, just like the games are long, 60 minutes, and they feel like five hours, you're getting tested every step along the way. You have to realize there's going to be bad moments, bad steps, et cetera, and then can you keep pushing forward.

There's always a challenge. That's one thing about sports, one thing about football.

Q. Noah Shannon said you had talked about the fact that the trophy case was empty, maybe as a point of motivation, I guess. How much does that really matter, playing for a trophy?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, whether you have it or not, it's a jump ball on Saturday. They're one-year rentals.

About trophies, and I didn't think much of them until we lost one in 1981. That was like the first time I really lived through that experience and better appreciated what the trophies meant.

It's all about what they stand for. It's about every game you want to win the game. That's why you line up and play and that's why you invest all that work during the course of a year.

It's a lot better to have them in your building, that's for sure, but the only way to get them, you have to earn them. That's especially true in this series, because both teams, whoever has been the winner, has typically played the best and really paid a price to get it.

Q. Running the football still seems to be the true hallmark in your career against them. The winning team was out-rushed only twice out of 21 games or

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whatever. How do you feel about your running attack now that Kaleb has seemingly taken a step forward and the line is solidified? Do you think that's going to be a similar type impact on this game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think it's going to be a factor in the game for sure. Going back to the defensive stats, we have tried to pride ourselves on doing a good job on rush defense. To me that's where defense starts. If you let a team just run the ball at will it's going to be tough to be any good.

And then but the other side of the coin is they've done the same thing. They've been really good on that front. I'll go back to when Barry won up there in 1989, '90. That's something I know he placed a value on.

That's kind of a program going I'm sure on both camps. Barry was a defensive guy; Coach Leonard is a defensive guy. Anybody that knows defense, it starts right there.

It's going to be a challenge for us. Hopefully it'll be a challenge for them. We both have our work cut out. They have a really good offensive line. This will be, if not the best line, it's certainly one of the best lines we've seen this year. So it's going to be a good challenge.

They have two strong backs, so they're going to keep coming at us, and it's going to be a real test for us. And then hopefully we can do our part on the other side, but it won't be easy. These guys have done a good job that way.

Q. Iowa and Wisconsin seem to be the only two programs to still use a fullback. Why do you think that's died out elsewhere?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't really speak to that other than it's maybe not fashionable. I don't know. It's all about what works for you. It's certainly worked very well for them. They've won a lot of games over the years, and we've won pretty many, too. I don't know if it's a regional thing. I am not quite sure. But it's just something both of us are comfortable with.

Ultimately you try to figure out what's going to work for you and your program, and that's kind of where you take it.

Q. A bit of a two-part question on quarterback Graham Mertz. What have you seen in terms of his development over the last two years? And for your defense, what do they have to do in order to make it difficult for him on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: You can't let him get comfortable. Starts there. With any quarterback that's a big thing. Because

he's a good football player. Feels like he's been there for like five years, six years. I know he hasn't, but it feels that way.

He's played really well for them. They have good receivers, too. They do a good job off the play action. But he can make every throw there is. It's going to be a challenge.

Then they have the balance, the ability to be balanced and the ability for play action. He certainly knows what he's doing. He's got a good feel for the game. Hopefully we can get him off his spot a little bit so he doesn't get comfortable.

Q. What were your impressions from Herbig on film?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're all good. These guys are active. They have some new faces inside, and those two guys were really good football players. But the other guys are doing a good job, and then they do a nice job on the edges. He's been tough to block. He's a high-energy guy, good effort, and doesn't quit on plays.

Q. Your defense continues to lead the country in average yards per play allowed, and considering the struggles on offense, is that a statistic that really makes this defense unique or special, just simply the ability to get all this done even though the offense up until the last few weeks --

KIRK FERENTZ: They've been on the field a lot, is that what you're saying? They have been. Knock on wood, so far, so good. But we still have games to go. That's the test, is to run the whole course. Yeah, I can't say enough positive things about our defense and the way they've played.

Maybe as impressive as anything in my opinion is just the way they played in the game we gave up the most points. We put them out there in tough circumstances; really couldn't get anything going offensively. They kept competing against a team that has a lot of really good players. There's been nothing that's disappointing about them. They show up every week ready to go and they take a lot of pride in that.

Just everything about it has been good so far. We're going to need them, and that's clearly one of our strengths as a football team -- we're not totally veteran there, but we're a little bit more veteran there, and those guys are doing their part to try to push us forward as a football team.

Q. The other day, the way the defense was able to contain and dominate a prolific offense that's really

been tough for anybody to contain and then limit the yards after catch, the run kind of leaked out a few times, but three points. Where does this kind of fit? Is this at or near the top of the list from what you've seen?

KIRK FERENTZ: It was a really good game. You can't argue three points against anybody. We have a lot of respect for these guys offensively. It was a really good effort.

You can see the guys preparing during the week. They were very intent, took a lot of pride in it. The coaches gave them a really good plan, and then most importantly they went out and executed and they did a good job. There was a lot of guys involved. Great to see Aaron Graves shoot in there, make a play.

But a lot of little things that we did well, a lot of good instances where we were covering well so the guys up front were able to get to the quarterback. The line was able to affect his comfort level during the game, and that was helpful.

And then when they did get a completion, outside of one play, we really didn't let them have a real big game.

Q. I think pass protection looked good the other day --

KIRK FERENTZ: It was better.

Q. It seemed like you had a good pocket. When you're coaching offensive line, is that last to come in a way, just because --

KIRK FERENTZ: I know this year it is. It's been a while. But it gives you a chance to do things that you want to do. I mentioned these guys are balanced. We want to be balanced. You'd like to have that flexibility.

But yeah, we like to be able to drop back, play action, move the quarterback a little bit. But you only go as far as your players are going to let you go.

I think we're gaining some traction. We're not there yet, but I think we're gaining traction, and our defense has improved, and hopefully we're improving every day in practice as long as the guys practice well and have a good focus.

But again, it's going to be a whole different set of circumstances this week, another challenge because we're playing a really good defensive team.

Q. Two weeks ago you didn't know who the

quarterback was going to be until about an hour or two before the game. Seeing the way the offense has played the last couple weeks, do you feel like you made the right choice sticking with Spencer?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we've won both games and we've played better offensively, so yeah, I think we do. But that's not a knock on Alex. I think Alex would have done a better job. I go back to the discussion of those weeks prior to that. It was more than just one guy. It was a collective effort.

That was the hard part -- for lack of a better term -- pinning it on one player. It's not that easy. It's not that easy when you're looking at the whole picture. Our thought was let's try to get the whole picture corrected, in a little bit better shape, and see what it looks like after that.

For the most part it's been pretty good, and hopefully we can keep getting better.

Q. The move for Connor Colby from tackle to guard seems to have worked out really well. What do you think is the driving factor for that?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's more comfortable there. I think I said this the other day, I go back to the first 3rd down we had against Ohio State. He's set like a guard, and that's okay if you're a guard; it's not good if you're a tackle.

We're seeing improvement in practice, but then it didn't show up when we were going full speed. That's not to say he won't ever play tackle in his career, but it probably won't be the next couple weeks unless we just get stuck.

He seems to be more comfortable there, and Jack has done a good job jumping in there at tackle. As you go through the season, you learn more and you figure out where guys are at and try to get them in the spots where they can use what they've got the best.

Q. With Gavin and Leshon back full speed, how do you envision the carries?

KIRK FERENTZ: We don't have a quota or number on those things and haven't had that discussion; probably won't. But I envision all three of them playing. Jaz probably won't be, but both those guys back, we have total faith in both guys, just like we did a month ago.

The only thing that's really different now is Kaleb has inserted him a little bit in the discussion, but we'll play all three guys, I'm pretty sure of that.

Q. Do you feel like Kaleb has kind of separated

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himself a little bit as the No. 1 guy now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Short-term, yes, but not ready to ordain him as the next Shonn Greene or something like that. But, he's doing a good job. My experience is we'll probably need all three before the season is up, so we'll keep pushing for it with all three guys.

Q. Seemed like Leshon has done a nice job pinch-hitting in that 3rd down role; do you see that, as well?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there was a time where we didn't envision him playing on 3rd down a lot, so he's improved, too, and that's what you're asking all the guys to do. Yeah, he's made himself a little bit more of a flexible guy, dependable, and we can count on him. Yesterday morning he said he felt great, so that's really reassuring because we didn't expect him to be as sore as he was -- I thought it was going to clear up by the end of the week, and it was slow.

Q. How do you get Gavin's confidence up when the numbers haven't been there for the first half of the year?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go back to the summer. He had mono and then somebody fell on his ankle at the end of camp. You talk about just having rotten luck, because it's nobody's fault you get mono; certainly nobody's fault somebody falls on you.

So he's had a tough road, but he's a quality player. There's a guy who had 99 yards in the bowl game that played really well, outstanding team member, just really respected by everybody.

It's been a tough road for him, but it's not going to last forever. He'll be fine.

Q. It may be dumb luck, too, but you've had probably more special teams mistakes and miscues against Wisconsin than pretty much everybody else combined over the last three or four years. I'm thinking of the ball hitting the leg, but then there was the punt returner who bopped it out here two years ago, and then up at Wisconsin last year. Is it because of the opponent, or is it just -- that just happened that day?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't say 100 percent, but when you play a good opponent, things like that happen sometimes. I think our record over five years is the same as it was the team we played last week. The good news is this year is this year and it's our '22 team and their '22 team playing, so you've got to be mindful and respectful of the past, but also this is a whole new season, new opportunity and you

can't dwell on it.

But the point you're bringing up, ball security, special teams, miscues, to think that we're going to experience those Saturday and be victorious, that's not realistic. That's every game, but especially when you're playing in a game like this where you've got a team that's really good at capitalizing on things you do wrong.

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