

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here.

So before we start here, just to say it's not lost on me. We're here today doing business as usual. And in Charlottesville, Virginia right now, those folks aren't quite as fortunate. University of Virginia, the football program there, and then the families involved too, are spending this time grieving right now.

It's just really sad, the loss of three players. Had their entire lives in front of them, the best part of their lives in front of them. A tremendously sad thing and our thoughts with everybody there. I just really can't imagine being in that situation. So just wanted to say that.

And just circling back to the past weekend, obviously was really happy to get the victory on Saturday. Hard-fought game as we knew it would be. It's great to have the trophy back in our building.

And really as we anticipated, it was two really good defensive football teams battling out there. And it was really a hard-fought game both sides, physical game, kind of Midwest weather, all that stuff.

Thought we did a lot of good things out there. Certainly things to improve on. But came up with big plays when we needed to.

Special teams did a great job. Defense set us up. And the offense did a great job of cashing in on opportunities.

Probably one of the biggest sequences in my opinion of the game was us killing the ball on the 1-yard line. They got 12 yards and then we got the ball.

You figure you're getting it back in pretty good field position. Cooper had a good return, got it down, I believe, inside the 20. And we knocked it in to go up 21-10. That was just really good, complementary football team. The more we can play like that the better off we'll be. A really good sequence for us.

Obviously our attention turned to Minnesota, a really good Minnesota team. They're 7-3 and playing on a roll. They, too, have a strong defensive football team. They've run the ball extremely well.

Our conference is full of really good backs. Just seems like everywhere you turn there's some really exceptional backs. And Minnesota's back is probably the most proven veteran of the group. And overcome hardships, injuries, et cetera. And he's just an impressive guy.

A veteran quarterback. They're big and physical on the offensive side. They do a good job running the football and good job with the play-action, et cetera. So good on that side also.

And special teams are good, two good specialists do a good job. And they've got a lot of starters involved on special teams. They really play hard on special teams.

So the success they've had, it's earned for sure. And bottom line is we're going up there, it's a November road contest, a rivalry game, and we'll have to play our best to be in this thing.

A lot of respect for them, 20 wins in the last two regular seasons. Subtract the COVID year, so they've done a really good job.

Captains are the same four guys -- Jack Campbell, Sam LaPorta, Kaevon Merriweather and Riley Moss -- put them in alphabetical order.

And injury-wise, I think we have a chance of getting Arland back. He has practiced the past two days and hopefully going to be okay. And Beau Stephens I think is questionable at best. We'll be prepared to go without him.

And then last but not least, just compliment Cooper. He was named the Big Ten Player of the Week by the Rose Bowl. So he just had a fantastic game both on defense and special teams. Tremendous job out there.

And then our kid captain this week will be Veronica Sullivan, a 7-year-old from Marion. Was born with some heart issues and then developed some issues with her spinal cord inflammation, but she's doing great. Second



grader right now, healthy and vibrant and has a goal of becoming a doctor down the road. I wouldn't rule her out on that. We'll be thinking of her this weekend. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. When you look at Mo Ibrahim, who's overcome a lot of adversity. He tore his Achilles after 200 yards in three quarters against Ohio State. What special gifts does he have that makes it challenging to compete against him down in and down out --

COACH FERENTZ: Like all good players, you have to defend him every play and until the whistle blows. He's just tough, hard nosed. He's not exceptional size to where -- he's fast, but I don't know if he's like a 4.3 or anything like that, but he's just a tough football player.

I'm not saying the same as Michigan's running back, but there's some similarities to me. Looks like maybe there's nothing there and next thing you know he's got a 5-, 8-yard gain. If you don't tackle him get him down he's not quitting.

Same thing, bigger question, when you think of him coming off the ACL and the way he did it. As I recall he announced that pretty quickly that he was going to be back for another year and he's a really veteran player. Got a lot of respect for him. This guy's a winner.

Q. You went back and looked at the Wisconsin tape, what were some of the main takeaways about the struggles that the offensive line had?

COACH FERENTZ: They did a good job with their plan. They had some movement involved and did some things that maybe we didn't anticipate. And it's usually little things add up to big things. That was certainly the case.

And the other element I would throw in, there were a couple of sacks that were a little disappointing. Just thought we could do a little bit better there. We'll have to do better in there, most of it on third down. Just losing some one-on-one matchups, I'd like to think we can do better at.

Felt like we took two steps forward the previous two weeks and then lost a little ground. But we did some good things, too.

And I didn't mention but the end of the half or end of the game there, being able to hold on to the football. We didn't cover a lot of real estate, but got a couple of first downs and made them use their timeouts, those types of things. That was big too. Wasn't all bad. The effort's good. Just gotta keep pushing forward.

Q. Snap timing has continued to be an issue at times, even in November. Why do you think that's taken a way to get that kind of down? And what can you do in these next two weeks to get that better?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll just keep pushing forward. Part of that may be a little bit of inexperience, inexperience with each other. But you'd like to think in November you're past that. But I think the wheels were turning a little bit and affected the timing. And it was a little bit of a factor the entire game.

Q. Will you keep Cooper at punt return this week?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see. Chances are -- it's funny thing about that, Saturday coming into the game on the bus, and it just -- he does a great job back there, obviously, but the bad news is we lose one of our best corners, the guy who blocks the gunner.

So you win back here but you lose, maybe Arland can do that, I don't know. But you get spread a little thin, but we'll wait and see. We'll make a decision on it later in the week.

Q. Dunker seemed like he was playing well earlier then he got hurt. He's back in the depth chart. Could he be a factor at right guard?

COACH FERENTZ: He'll end up playing some. I don't plan on him starting necessarily. But he's a good prospect. We think he's a good talent and prospect. Kind of the same challenge that Beau had or most of the guys that are second-year players right now.

I think I'm correct in saying other than Connor, I think the rest of those were out a majority out of the fall. There's second-year players that are really like first-year players, and then he missed spring ball for the most part. He's playing catch up in terms of learning how to play football in college.

Q. Right tackle is obviously where you lost a lot of one-on-ones. You said Jack would probably be okay, but is he okay and will you change there?

COACH FERENTZ: He's practiced both days. He'll be in there unless something happens. He's had a good week so far and he'll bounce back.

Q. DeJong at right guard?

COACH FERENTZ: Most likely.

Q. When you look at the weather and what you're probably going to face is similar in some ways what

you faced Saturday, how much do you do outside work this week versus inside work, because you don't get a lot of good reps outside but you've got to get used to it too. What's the balance you strive to get?

COACH FERENTZ: Friday we're always inside, regardless. It's September, any month. And yesterday we were indoors, shorter practice. It's more just about introduction, information, that type of thing. Then really 100 percent timing, those sorts of things.

Our work days are Tuesdays, Wednesdays, like most people. Unless it gets crazy out there we'll be out there. That's the routine we use. We do the same thing in December, typically. The pandemic the same way.

We were out there today. It was fine. It was good. I don't think it was as cold as it was Saturday. And the snow was pretty and all that. Guys could take pictures.

But it's funny, you look at the tape, and it looks like bad weather on the tape, but it really didn't seem that bad being out there. It wasn't. No wind and all that stuff. Unless it's just crazy winter, something like that, we'll be out there.

Q. Minnesota's secondary is probably among the best in the conference. What sticks out about them and how do you guys, after maybe a little bit of a rough patch offensively, how do you get that momentum and what are you planning to do against Minnesota?

COACH FERENTZ: We just go back to work. They're a veteran group. That's a big part of it. Usually when you have a veteran group, it gives you an edge. And all their guys back there have played a lot of football, and good football, not just played football. But they're good football players.

And they're aggressive. They're physical. And their whole defense, I hear people talk about our defense in these mid-week press conferences, I kind of throw it right back at them. They clearly have an identity. I don't want to say they've morphed into it, but you can see a developmental process over the last three, four years in what they did.

The bottom line is they play it really well. They know what they're doing. There's not a million things going on but enough to keep you off balance. And from my vantage point it looks like their players really understand what they're being asked to do. And consequently they play fast.

And they're aggressive and physical and tough and it's going to be a challenge for us. Last year they had the ball 40-plus minutes. And it's a complement to both sides, their

offense as well as their defense.

Q. You mentioned this year first overall in the NCAA in third down percentage offense, second in defense. How do you combat that especially with a team that's so good at controlling the clock?

COACH FERENTZ: You've got to try to take advantage of your opportunities. And so each and every week there's a challenge out there. And statistics matter, but they -- still, about this game, and you just never know how things are going to go. But obviously our guys are aware of what we're going up against.

I don't want to say it's every week in our conference, but it's more than once, we've got a defense-minded conference if you look at it. I haven't done a study of all conferences.

But to your point we've got several teams that are nationally ranked when it comes to points given up, a lot of the critical statistics defensively. I don't know if it's our weather or whatever, but we're just kind of geared that way a little bit more than track-meet football.

Q. Some of the players credited your leadership for really galvanizing this team and getting things back on track. Is there a season in your almost quarter century that you looked back on and use it as an example to the players?

COACH FERENTZ: There is a ton of them. That's competition. Unless you're really fortunate and there aren't places left anymore where you -- pretty much every week you've got the edge. And that's competition. It's the real world.

You've got two choices. You keep pushing forward or you surrender. Got 12 games scheduled, so have a bad one or a real good one, you've got to move on and see what you can do about the next opportunity. That's all we've tried to do.

There's a ton of examples, whether you talk about a position trying to develop or certain challenges the team might face and all that kind of stuff.

That's one good thing I guess about being around a while is you have -- I can go back to the '80s, Dave Browne was our captain last week. His senior season, '84, and we were 0-2, I think we were -- I can't remember, 5-3, whatever it was. Ended up winning eight games.

I was there for a pretty good stretch in the '80s, historic time. That year I remember after we won the Peach Bowl, maybe it was as gratifying a win as I can remember

because where that team came from at the onset. Talk about two bad offensive performances, Nebraska and Iowa State to lead it off. Look it up. I mean, it's ridiculous.

So to end up being a pretty good football team at the end of the year it was really gratifying and the players felt good about it. That's the most important thing when it's all said and done.

Q. A lot of Kaevon's experience maybe in areas that don't show up in the traditional defensive stats. What do you see from him this year?

COACH FERENTZ: First thing I would say is leadership. There's no tangible way to measure that. And I've referenced our older guys, not just our seniors, but our older guys being just good core guys and setting the tempo and setting the way. Kaevon has done a great job of that.

Safety is a critical position in our scheme as you know. There's a lot of communication back there and it kind of goes through the two safeties, he's done a good job. Schulte is playing in his first year. He's our veteran back there, clearly, in that regard.

And just most importantly, those things you're supposed to do on a daily basis, whether it's in the classroom, on the field, certainly. If you're going to have a good team, you have to have veteran players that do a good job. He's certainly been one of our leaders.

Q. Entering the season a lot of talk was about the linebackers, rightfully so; secondary, rightfully so. Seems like the defensive line is respectfully almost a third fiddle. How have you seen them progress this year because it seems like to be a group that continues to be better and better and younger guys are stepping up every week?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not a prognostic -- whatever you call them -- you saw that one coming. A year ago we were pretty young in that group, experience-wise with Zach being the most veteran guy. But the good news is Zach is the only guy that graduated at the end of the year.

We saw those guys improve during the course of the year last year. You fast-forward now, I'm pretty confident that we're going to have a pretty good group in all three areas. I'll get to that in a second.

But the guys have kept developing. That's a good thing. Some were pretty obvious, we knew who John Waggoner was, Joe Evans, the older guys. Noah is really playing well. We felt like we knew who they were.

But then you see a guy like Deontae Craig, who is just quietly climbing the ladder week-to-week, not day to day, but week-to-week.

Lukas Van Ness, had a feeling he might develop into something pretty good. He's on that path right now. So that's the fun part. I'd tie that into the linebackers in that those guys, our starters were out last spring. So you get to watch those other guys working with the 1s. And they look a little typically.

No one gives up scores faster than our second defense traditionally. Doesn't take a long time for the other team to move down the field. When those guys are working with the 1s it's a little different picture.

And Jay Higgins is another guy I'll throw out there. He's doing a great job on special teams and playing really well. That's not a surprise. Most years he'd be a starter for us right now. He just has a couple guys who are more experienced in front of him.

That's what you hope to see with a football team as they're growing, either both in the game field but behind the scenes too during the course of a week.

Q. A couple guys (indiscernible) prior watch a little bit (indiscernible) Michigan and Illinois. They played -- some said I don't want to know what's going on, that game factor. Do you feel a feeling whether the players should pay attention to other outcomes before the game? And do you have the game in the background or anything like that?

COACH FERENTZ: Last thing I really want to do is watch Big Ten football, quite frankly, on Saturdays, only because it's our bye week. I didn't watch much of that either, for the reason I don't want to get emotionally involved with anything.

And usually everybody looks unbeatable to me. If I see four games, there's eight teams we're not going to be able to beat this year, that's usually what I see. But me personally I'd rather keep my thoughts still and just worry about what we're going to do that day.

I'm not going to tell our guys what to do. But bottom line is this, I'm pretty sure everybody in the Big Ten wants to win their division. I know this, we're not going to win six games. It's as simple as that. The best we can do Saturday is match what Minnesota has already done. They have seven. We'll try to get our seventh and after that we'll worry about next week next week.

Q. When you recruited Cooper DeJean, was there a

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

point where you were thinking, wow, why aren't all these programs also chasing him?

COACH FERENTZ: We pretty much make our minds up for ourselves. We don't copycat recruit. But you always wonder -- and Josey Jewell is another example: Where is everybody?

FCS schools really weren't knocking the door down. But you have to believe what you see and believe what you feel, too. I think the bottom line probably seeing Cooper play basketball live is the one that really kind of -- you just can't deny what you're seeing, he's a really good athlete, super competitive. What we didn't know is, he's just a great guy on the football team. Unassuming is not the right word. But he's not overly impressed with himself. He just tries to go out and compete and seems to do everything really well. I'm impressed by a lot of things he does.

Probably the most impressive is he does whatever we ask him to do he just kind of handles it. He's not grinding coffee on it at all. I'm sure he is internally. Never would know it. Just goes out and does it.

Q. Recruiting has changed so much in the last five, 10 years. How are you guys approaching now with recruits who might be committed to take visits elsewhere?

COACH FERENTZ: Our guys?

Q. Yes.

COACH FERENTZ: There were different cases, individual case. And just weigh it all out. And ultimately prospects have all the rights, we have none. It's kind of like the new world.

A guy could be committed to us, and we've already experienced that with one member of this class. We chose to take one player at his position; that was his preference. And he pulled the plug, had a change of heart whenever it was. So you move on. You move on.

Bottom line is we're not -- I don't think the fate of our program is hinging on one person's decision. We'll try to recruit around whatever happens, like you would with an injury, and go from there.

To the point of recruiting changing, most interesting point about Cooper in my opinion, in this day where there are no secrets, everybody's got video. In the old days you could hide guys out. He might lose -- not lose, but misplace a film so the coach can't get it back and share with somebody else. But those days are gone like the past 30

years. That's the amazing thing. Nobody really tended to attract any attention.

Q. You talked about Jack Campbell every other week. As far as his career, is there somebody that comes to mind that you coached that you compare Jack with at that position, or is it just in general?

COACH FERENTZ: He's a different guy and a different linebacker than the ones we've had. And we've had some really good ones. He has a different skill set, which is really unusual for a player here, the linebacker to be his size, have this kind of range.

But I think the commonality, the best guys we've had in our program, just seems like they all think the right way, take great pride in what they do, and are humble guys for the most part.

They all have egos, I know that, because they want to be good, and you have to have an ego to be good. They're all about team. Put that first. They go out and play. And I think about Jack, he is all about the team. He's doing it for the right reasons. And, boy, he does it well.

His heart and soul, toes to the head, it's all about football and what's best for the team. As a coach, you appreciate that. And if you could measure it in recruiting, it would be a great thing. Most teams that have success have a couple of guys like that setting the tempo for everybody else to try to emulate.

Q. You had many preliminary conversations about people using the COVID year, current seniors; are you kind of waiting until the end?

COACH FERENTZ: Not yet. All that stuff will probably be another 10 days or whatever. And we'll start surveying all that stuff. But no, not yet.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about just the resilience of this team? You guys go to Ohio State, you're and (inaudible) and then three straight and Big Ten (indiscernible) is back. Insights?

COACH FERENTZ: Let's go back to the point I made earlier. One thing I wanted the guys to understand. It's a 12-game schedule. And nobody knows. It was easy to say several years where it was looking pretty gloomy, some good things happened.

Again, it's so simple. If you give up the fight, then it's more than predictable what the outcome is going to be. So at least you've got to give yourself a chance and give yourself a chance to see what you can do.

And there's not much you do in life that's worth doing or feeling good about that you're not going to have setbacks. It's just the history of the world.

Edison light bulbs and all that stuff. I think it's Edison, right? Whatever. Ben Franklin. It's typical of doing anything well. Usually you're going to get set back and hopefully learn from it. That's the key thing. Improve day to day. It's all day to day.

Q. What can you do to establish the run going up against another formidable defensive front?

COACH FERENTZ: We know where they're going to be. I'm pretty sure of that. I'm sure they'll have a wrinkle or two. I really admire them. They're that way in all three phases. They have a clear identity. They've morphed into that, and they've had great success doing what they do. So I think wrinkle here, wrinkle there, that's football, but ultimately the game will get decided most likely with the team that's most solid fundamentally.

The turnover takeaway battle is going to be important. And just handling whatever conditions that are out there and expect them to go the whole game. That's probably what it's going to come down to.

Q. What stood out to me about Kaleb Johnson is, over the last couple weeks he had the 200-yard game against Purdue and 57 against Wisconsin, you really couldn't tell a difference based on his attitude. Have you seen that sort of maturity? Is that a big reason why he's continue to ascend up the top chart in terms of --

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. You go back to the recruiting component, you think you know prospects. You hope you know them. And you don't know as much as you used to because of the nature of recruiting. Guys were committing earlier and earlier. The thing about Aaron Graves and thank goodness he's exactly what we thought he was plus better.

But there's a lot of variables. And then the next thing you don't know how are they going to handle college. That's a whole different chapter in their lives. A lot of decisions they've got to make they've never had to make before and all those kinds of things. But I can't help but lump the two running backs together to include Jaz with Kaleb.

And going back to summer when I have Ray telling me those guys are passing by his office, 4:45, upbeat, ready to go for a 6:00 workout, not jumping in there a minute before we get going, that type of thing. They get their shoes

laced, ready to roll.

Sounds simple, but it's really unusual for a first year player. They're upbeat. They like working. They like practicing. They like football. That's where it all starts. Even this morning, Jaz out here, first time he's practiced in snow or really seen it and been in it. It was fun to see -- it was fresh and new to him. It was kind of fun.

But my point is like both those guys just have good attitudes and they're thinking the right way and thinking about improving, which young players should be thinking that way. But they don't always do that.

Q. Couldn't help but notice at the end of the day, when the trophy was getting carried off the field, that Keagan Johnson was right there with his teammates. He was smiling and as happy as everybody else there. What's his attitude been like since he's been out and what kind of teammate is he?

COACH FERENTZ: That's probably representative of it. And I've said it before, I'll say it forever, as long as I'm in coaching. The worst part about football is injuries. It really is.

And just being out. And if it's a day, you feel like you're an outsider if you miss one day. When you're talking about a series of injuries, it's been a long, windy road, extremely frustrating.

And so you get the frustration part because you're not playing. You're frustrated because you don't feel like you're making progress like you want to. And then you're frustrated because you don't feel like you're part of the team even though you are. It's still not the same you're not in the huddle. Not in drills, things like that.

It's a credit to him staying upbeat. All you can do is try to make lemonade out of lemons, I guess, that's about all you can do. But to try to deny it or say I'm fine. He's not fine. Nobody is when they're out. It stinks.

Q. Tanner Morgan is a quarterback you know well. But his stats are still kind of up in the air. Are you prepared for seeing for both quarterbacks in the situation, what are you seeing out of the freshman?

COACH FERENTZ: We tried to recruit him. We were very impressed with him. Obviously we were unsuccessful. He's done a good job. He's played two, three games now.

My guess it's not going to change a lot, what he chooses to do. What you do lose is that veteran leadership and also the composure that Tanner Morgan has. He's a really

good quarterback. He's done a lot of good things in the conference, very experienced. So I guess given the choice, you'd always rather go with the younger guy, but sometimes watch out what you ask for. Look out there because he's a good player.

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