

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Welcome, everybody. Hopefully you guys can get out of here before you get trapped in here, but good afternoon, and again, thanks for being here.

Just like Steve said, we'll hit a little bit about the bowl preparation, the Music City Bowl preparation, and then comments about recruiting, and then Tyler can give you all the details he has. They do an awful lot of work. Everybody does. But let him cover the fine points there.

First of all, just about the bowl game, it's always interesting with bowl preparation. You go through a series of phases early before you even know who you're playing or where you're playing, you start practice a little bit to keep the guys fresh and obviously going through some phases now.

We gave the guys a couple days off. They're back in this afternoon, and certainly we're eager to get it going here as we look toward Kentucky.

First thing is the roster postseason. We had some movement, and I think that's just standard operating procedure right now in college football. That movement sometimes goes through December and even later.

I think right now as we move into this next phase, I think we're firm with our roster, feel good about the guys, and give us a chance to start focusing on preparation and also work together as one team. Again, I think this is just going to become and continue to become a more fluid process as we move forward in the years ahead.

The good news is guys that have been training with us have been doing a great job. Whether it's the strength and conditioning work or the times we've been on the field, the energy has been good, and I feel like we're making good progress, and it benefits both the younger guys, obviously gives them a chance, a real opportunity to get some quality work that they haven't done, and certainly older guys. Our real purpose is to try to keep them sharp but also get them refreshed and recharged and give them a chance to be ready to play as the bowl game appears.

That's kind of where we're at right now. We'll introduce Kentucky, start that work today. We haven't done a thing on them yet with the players, so we'll begin that, and it's been a little bit of a different phase, if you will. Last year, last several recruiting years when our guys have been in finals, the staff has been off the road. It gave us a real chance to get our preparation jumped up and moved on.

This year was a little different with the calendar. I don't know if the recruiting calendar was longer or just the way it fell, but we were on the road last week. It has been a busy couple days for everybody, just trying to get ready for Kentucky.

The bottom line is we'll get some guys out there, start practicing, and start to turn our sights toward there, and again, as I mention, it's good for the old guys, good for the new guys. I think about certainly Joe and Carson; they've been doing a good job, but they need each and every snap they can get to try to bring them up to speed.

That's kind of where we're at right now. The good news, I just think you've got a bunch of guys that love football. They respect the opportunity in front of them. They respect what it takes to beat an opponent like Kentucky, and they work hard. So that part is all good.

Just not to get into great detail about Kentucky, but they're a good football team, excellent program. Mark Stoops set a record this year for career wins, I believe, and it's a real testament to him and the work he has done and his staff has done. They have a good coaching staff. They're well-coached. Big, athletic football team, like we saw last year, and we've got a big challenge on our hands.

Look forward to that, and just kind of turn the page now.

Yeah, today is signing day, and needless to say this has changed a little bit, too, going back from when we just had it in February. It's not totally new, but recruiting just continues to be almost a day-to-day process, if you will, and it's really ongoing. With that, certainly the challenges that come with that are a little bit different, trying to coach your players, also recruit and do a good job of that.

As you might imagine, it takes a lot of effort by a lot of people. I'll start out just by thanking our coaching staff and obviously the recruiting staff for the work that they do. It's



really extensive. It is nonstop and takes a lot of hard work, not only time but hard work.

That's where it all starts, and then obviously when players come on campus, prospects come on campus with their families, there are a lot of other people involved, our support staff, people on campus, faculty members, all kinds of people, and just generally the community, the community and the state. The feeling people walk away from I think is really, really important for us, and it's a great advantage.

So we try to expose them to as many people as we can and just appreciate everybody helping out in that regard.

Just in general, really pleased with the '23 class. Each and every player involved in this class I think has a good appreciation or understanding of our program, our history, the traditions here, and really happy about that. I think two things that probably are attractive to them are the stability of the program over time and that's certainly unique, and then obviously the opportunity, mostly the opportunity to develop, grow and develop in the program. That's what we ask our players on our team to do and focus on.

Same thing with our recruits. That's what we're looking for, guys that are really hungry to do that.

Needless to say in recruiting, you're looking at athletic ability, measurables, things like that. Certainly skill levels are important, but I think beyond that, it's the kind of person, the character that we get exposed to. That goes beyond the player. A lot of times you learn about the player's family, people that have been influential in their lives, impact that they've had, and I think that tells you a lot. It tells you a lot about the entire picture, and just, again, feel really good about the guys that we have.

College football is changing. I alluded to that. The portal is out there; it's growing and will continue to grow I think as long as the rules stay as they are, and we're not blind to that or against that, but I do want to just say our goal is to grow our own team, to have the core of our team be guys that we recruited to the program and have them in the program so they can develop to the maximum.

Yeah, if we have our opportunities, as I think I've said in the past, you look at guys like Mekhi Sargent, look at guys like Zach VanValkenburg, Jack Heflin, that joined our program and had real positive impacts, those are the kind of things that we're looking for, and if we get those opportunities, certainly we're going to pursue them and follow them.

But again, I think the core of our team hopefully will be built

on campus here, and with that comes a chance to watch guys develop and develop relationships that go beyond. That's really what we're looking for.

The bottom line, our goal is to provide a real true team experience for all the players in our program where they join us for one year or they're here for four or five. That doesn't change, and to do it with the values that we think are really important.

I think we've communicated that well with the prospects and just, again, really happy with the class. Again, different than years past where a lot of guys were already -- a lot of prospects were committed back in June or even earlier and then you move forward and think about things as recently as this weekend, a guy like Terrell Washington coming up basically for not quite a 24-hour visit. Got in real late Saturday night, Sunday morning, and left here Monday morning via car. We weren't allowed to have any contact with him. All kinds of twists and turns, stories there, and Tyler can fill you in on some of those, but again, just really pleased and appreciative about this class.

I'll throw it out for questions and go from there.

Q. On that topic of the transfer portal, you bring in Cade McNamara. What attracted you about bringing him in? What is his timetable for recovery? What can you tell us about plans for Cade McNamara?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure, obviously had a medical situation. That's something we wanted to check thoroughly. But it was really kind of an easy decision just because of -- we got firsthand exposure to him, saw him prior to that just going through the season's film, but we got firsthand exposure to him a year ago December and had great respect for him and the entire team coming into that game for obvious reasons, and left the field feeling even -- it more verified, if you will, those thoughts and suspicions.

I'm not a quarterback expert, but just watching what he did a year ago, just struck me as a winner, and that's what you're looking for at that position, a leader and a winner, someone that's going to move the football team. He did a great job of that at his previous school, and yeah, whatever the details would have been this year and how things fell, to me it doesn't matter, but it was a real opportunity for us, I think, to maybe attract a guy who saw an opportunity and is excited about it.

Q. Health, will he be back this spring as far as you know?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see how that goes once he gets here, but we're very confident he'll be fine. I don't think it's

uncommon, and it's just something you factor in. But you talk about a guy who's been on a Big Ten field and had very -- a high level of success, it's not quite as big a factor as how much repetition he's had. He's obviously going to transition, but confident that it's going to be okay.

Q. What about Erick All and the combination there? How will he fit with a two-tight-end set? You had pretty good success with that four or five years ago. Does he kind of add to that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's not the same discussion but similar in that we got to see him firsthand, too. Several games prior to our game really caught my attention there, so it's just sometimes you just notice players. He was one of them.

So it just turned out that he became interested and available, and he and Cade have a good relationship, I believe, so I don't think it hurt us at least in our attempt to try to recruit him.

We're losing a top-notch tight end in Sam LaPorta, outstanding, and then you think about the way Luke Lachey is ascending, has ascended, so we go from I think having two really good tight ends to hopefully the same situation, and that's certainly a good thing for us.

Q. Is All ready to go, medically?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, he's not ready today, but we're very confident he'll be fine, so again, not too worried about it.

Q. Every program it seems like people have opted for the transfer portal. I did notice that Dallas Craddieth was still listed on the two deep. Is he practicing? What's kind of his status compared to maybe some of the other guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he is practicing. He's in the two deep. Obviously we have a little bit of a void back there, but can't say enough about Dallas. This is one of the advantages of the portal, too; it's not just up and above and all that stuff, but I think he has interest in going to a smaller program, smaller level program closer to home, and finishing out his career there where he can really hopefully play a major role.

But I think the story with Dallas is he's done great job, especially this last year. He's been running on scout team, running offenses, being a receiver against a defense, that type of thing. Anything to help the team. I think he literally kind of -- just team behavior, if you will, team attitude. Can't say enough about him. He's grown in the program. Certainly we wish him all the best in his next home, but

glad he's going to be with us at least for this year.

Q. Sam LaPorta is back on the two-deep. Is he playing in the bowl game then?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. He's back on the field and seems to be doing great, so happy about that certainly.

Q. With the secondary and no Kaevon, how do you see Sebastian Castro as the first team strong safety, he's also at CASH. How do you plan to navigate that?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll determine that the next week and a half here, but the guys are still back there. They're going to be in the game, and we're going to have a combination. A good thing that typically works as safeties, so he'll be able to get some position flexibility there.

Just figure out what the best combination is and keep our best guys on the field hopefully. All that being said, we're losing a team leader, a guy who's really experienced, and just try to absorb that. But if he twisted his ankle, it would be the same thing; we'd be dealing with the same issue.

Q. Is there a chance Xavier Nwankpa could play strong safety?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, again, it's not as big a deal I don't think who's in the game, but we're always going to have two safeties at a minimum in there. Yeah, he's right in the thick of things. He's doing well.

Q. I know it's still a little bit early, but have you spoken with Nico Ragaini about essentially returning next year and what are those conversations like?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we've had conversations with several of our guys, and I think they're all kind of weighing and measuring. It's not the same as but a little bit like last year at this time Riley Moss was trying to figure out was he going to go to the NFL.

Yeah, those are decisions some of the older guys make, and with the COVID year, a couple of them have more options now. We're not pressuring them, we're not trying to encourage them to hurry, but we want to make sure they know they'd be more than welcome back. Love to have guys come back. But want it to be right deal, not ours.

Q. I know this is a perfect opportunity to talk about the guys who aren't signing with your program, but there is one prominent player who chose not to be here. What are your thoughts now a couple of days removed from when he decommitted and now signed with Alabama?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's recruiting. I really haven't read anything or heard much, but one thing I think I've said before, you can't lose what you never had, and recruiting is not over until someone signs, actually signs, and not only commits but actually signs.

The other part about that, the prospects, people have the right to make up their mind right until that time. So I respect that, and I'm sure that prospect had his reasons for doing what he's done. We'd have loved to -- if we've offered somebody, we've done our research and homework. It was nothing on our end, like we didn't want him here. But yeah, it's up to a prospect to decide what's best for them, and that's really how the process should work. When it comes to our recruits, we're going to hopefully never be presumptuous and act like we know what's better for them than what they know.

Q. Joe Labas is listed No. 1; is that any indication that he has a big lead, a slight lead?

KIRK FERENTZ: It means he's No. 1, Carson is No. 2, and your guess is as good as mine on No. 3.

Q. How is it going out there at quarterback?

KIRK FERENTZ: Good, good. We've talked about it before, it's hard to work more than two quarterbacks during the course of a season. That's where this is a really unusual situation, and yeah, the person who suffered the most here is Spencer just because it ended up being an injury that needed surgery. So that part is really hard. It's hard for him to be out there watching with a sling on and all that.

But he's done a great job helping and really coaching Joe up, and those guys all get along great. So that's where each and every snap is really important for both those quarterbacks.

Q. What has December been like for you? You have to go out and recruit; you have bowl prep; you have the portal; and you're having to recruit your own roster in a lot of ways to stay at times. What is that like for a head coach?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, so I'm only smiling -- well, yeah. It's crazy. But that's the nature of the job, first of all. Tyler can answer this. I don't know if there was an extra week of recruiting in December. He can give you the date. It's just like we do what we're told to do, so if we've got to recruit this week, then if we can recruit, then we're going to go out and do it, and you go where you're needed.

But don't worry about calm things, just do them. It's like running sprints back when you were playing or whatever.

But yeah, it's the nature of what we do. I've said before, I've got some concerns about where college football is right now and where we're heading and who's directing it.

But I'll give you a quick side story. I'm going over to our recruiting breakfast Saturday morning. I was on my way over and had the college station on, and somebody, I'm not sure who he was or what his authority was or his expertise was, was basically just throwing out the usual... why would a prospect play in a bowl game? Everybody has a right to their own opinions, but there's a lot of reasons why a guy would play, too, as a senior, and Jack Campbell would probably be a guy to ask about that. Everybody has a right to think about what they think. But all that being said, to your point, yeah, the world is getting a little crazier than it used to be.

Q. I'm assuming Kaevon is going to be the only one opting out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we've still got seven days, six, seven days until game time, but I've seen that movie across other places before. You just never know. But I assume everybody that's here right now is ready to roll.

Q. Did you ever think you'd be a Brock Purdy fan? How cool has it been to see George Kittle and Brock playing together with the 49ers right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they played a week ago Thursday night maybe? Is that possible? Of course it couldn't have been because -- how would I have seen it because we don't have any like NFL Network and all that stuff. But I thought I saw an interview with him teasing him about records, that type of thing.

But no, it's great. They're both really good football players. It looks like they've got it going pretty good.

Q. How do you evaluate offensive line right now, and do you see the portal as a solution for that or more so sticking towards traditional high schoolers?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think they're growing, and I think they're improving. I referenced that a year ago, as the season went on. So this has been a good month for those guys. I think they're practicing well and focused and showing growth and improvement. We're going to need that to have a chance next week.

Really pleased with it, and they're on the field every day, and that helps, too, when guys are healthy and they

develop.

As far as the portal guys, if we can find something that we think would be a benefit, we'll keep an open mind for sure, but really nothing to report right now.

Q. You guys have always been known to find the right guys that fit your culture. You guys have obviously attacked the transfer portal pretty aggressively this offseason. How difficult has it been for you guys just to find guys who fit your culture versus guys who are not?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think part of it works itself out. Kind of like high school recruiting, too. It's kind of the same way. I think as it goes on, they figure out, boy, I can really identify with this program and the way they do things or maybe not, and then other factors can get involved, too. But it's just the way it is.

I think I've said this before, you think about I mentioned the three guys, Mekhi, Zach and Jack, those guys were appreciative of the opportunity when they got here, and you hope everybody is. I'd want a little bit more information when it's Power Five to Power Five, but sometimes they're compelling stories. I think that's certainly the case with Cade. There's only one quarterback, so he's hopeful for a place maybe where he can have a good opportunity, too. If it matches and you really believe this guy is coming for the right reasons, yeah, why not. There's all kinds of examples.

But yeah, we're going to try to stay true to who we are and what we are and hopefully that is attractive to some people.

Q. When you look at the wide receivers, you have had four in the last year transfer out. I know you're in the process of trying to acquire more talent. Do you see a common denominator on maybe why they've transferred out, and is there something schematically or coaching wise that can maybe prevent or keep those players in house?

KIRK FERENTZ: I would just say in general terms, and I don't know if Kaevon was one of the guys you're referencing, but sometimes distance is a factor, being away from home, et cetera. Sometimes just a role on the team or the offense, that type of thing. The facts are you've got 11 guys out, whether they're three wide, four wide, two wide, one wide. The ball can only go so many places, and that is what it is.

But I think there's an opportunity for everybody, and if you're a good receiver -- we've had a lot of good receivers

play here, go through over the years, and we've had good running backs, and right on down the list. Shonn Greene is an easy one to cherry pick when he was here; we're going to get him the ball X amount of times.

You go back to 1982, nobody had to tell anybody who Ronnie Harmon was. He quickly appeared to everybody. I'm talking about the public, not only the coaching staff, just like Bob Sanders in 2000. You talk about guys like -- good players just have a tendency to get noticed.

I guess the challenge for any player is to earn it and get noticed. It's not like we're intentionally not throwing to a player or specific position. That's hardly the case. If you can get open, hopefully we'll get the ball -- it doesn't always go where it's supposed to now. I'm sure you get the drift of that.

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