

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon, everybody. Appreciate the flexibility on changing today's time. It's a little bit different kind of week for us. Appreciate you bending with that.

Just wanted to start out, congratulate Tory Taylor on being Big Ten Special Teams Player of the Week. Had another great performance. He's had a tremendous year. Nice to see his efforts recognized.

Then also Phil Parker being a semifinalist in the Broyles Award. It's 15 high quality coaches. Just happy to see Phil and the job he's done for a long time be recognized. Keep our fingers crossed often that one.

Just talk a little bit about last Saturday. I think the win was emblematic of Big Ten football in November. Full team effort, full 60 minutes, the whole nine yards, another close game. Really proud of our guys and the things that they did especially in the last 15, 16 minutes.

You think about getting the stop on third down, great play by Castro coming in to get the quarterback and giving up a field goal instead of a touchdown. Certainly was pivotal at the end of the game. Two good last possessions by the defense certainly to get off the field two times. Good punt return by Wetjen, and then the offense taking advantage of that. One of the few times in the second half we had decent field position and capitalized on that.

Then the last possession, we converted a third and eight to be able to keep the ball and run the clock out. Just a really good job by the entire football team. I'm guessing it will be the same thing this week, same type of game as we move to Nebraska.

Captains are the same four guys as we've had the last couple weeks: Joe Evans, Jay Higgins, Logan Lee and Luke Lachey.

Injury-wise, about the same as last week for the most part. Looks like Diante Vines and Beau Stephens will not be able to make this one. Outside of that, everybody's got a

chance. We'll see what that looks like, short week here.

Talking about Nebraska, Coach Rhule's done a great job. Basically a new staff, one holdover. They've done a great job in a short amount of time, 5-6 right now, playing good football. It's kind of interesting, if you look at their schedule, they lost the first two games, won five out of the next six, really looked good, and now they've lost three straight. You look at it, it's two three-point losses, last week in overtime it ended up being a seven-point game. They're playing well, playing competitively and doing a heck of a job. My compliments certainly to the staff and also their players. Their players have done a really good job.

They have a lot of new faces but also a lot of guys who have been there, and they're playing at a really high level. It's a real compliment to them.

For us, it's going to be another tough challenge. Tough venue going over there. 80,000-90,000 people over there. Just looks like another Big Ten football game. It's going to be a tough challenge. The team that plays it best will come out ahead obviously.

Last couple things. It's the Heroes Game. It's a great concept to recognize two citizens from both states, a citizen from each state. I think the whole part of that is good. As it turns out, we have another 25-year teacher up in northwest Iowa. Everything I've heard, just made a tremendous impact. I think two of the most underrated professions probably law enforcement and teachers. I'm happy to hear about that recognition.

Then the other aspect on the other side is just the Kid Captain. We have Nathan McDonald, who's a young guy from Delta, Iowa. Had a rare condition causing a lot of tumors that's cleared up for him. He had a surgery to repair scoliosis. Everything is moving forward for him right now. He's been doing well for five years, seizure free. We'll be thinking about him and his family certainly on Friday.

We have a lot to play for. Certainly by the time you play any conference game, there's a lot to play for. We'd sure as heck like to get our tenth win. We know it's not going to come easy over in Lincoln. Look forward to that. Hopefully we'll finish strong and play our best football of the season.

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Q. I wanted to ask you just about the strides that Deacon Hill has made. His first three starts and then the Michigan State game, he completed around 36 percent of his passes. He's kind of flipped that around to 63 percent the last three games. That's the huge strides. How much of that has to do with him just being more comfortable in his position versus you guys devising a plan to emphasize his strengths and get the ball out of his hands more quickly?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's probably just a combination of both. When we threw him in there, we all knew he had basically zero experience, game experience. I mentioned that. Scout team a couple years up in Wisconsin, and then got his first work starting last spring with us.

So it's been a process all the way through. Mentioned his tempo wasn't the greatest, certainly in August, and a little concerned about that, but he's improved each and every week. Then got thrust in there the Michigan State week with Cade going down. It's been a long haul. I think the credit goes to him. It's everybody working with him, though. We know him better. He certainly has improved dramatically. I knew the stats weren't great, and that reaffirms it, the suspicion. It's just a credit to him sticking with it, just kept on going. Certainly his ball security has gotten better too. That's the other part about it which is important, and his awareness. I thought the last two weeks he's made some really nice throws, some clutch plays. Probably goes back to the two-minute drill against Northwestern. We were hoping he'd come out of that with a little bit of confidence because that was a good football play, certainly a big part of that game, that victory.

It's been a process. We're not out of the woods yet certainly. I can't say enough about his attitude. Easy to get down, and that's a position where everybody notices, everybody's got an opinion. It wasn't going great. He could have gone south on that one, but he stayed positive and kept working. Just nice to see him get rewarded a little bit, kind of a little bit representative of our whole football team.

Q. From an injury standpoint, Logan Jones, how is his recovery progressing, and what's kind of his chances of playing on Friday?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. It's one of those injuries that's not going to go away. He's not going to get 100 percent healthy. Maybe in the bowl game he'll have a chance to, but next couple weeks, that's not realistic. It's improving weekly. That's the good news. If he does have a setback, he bounces back quicker.

To quantify it right now, probably can't do it. Probably be the same thing next week too, just keep inching along. He's got a great attitude. I know he wants to be out there.

Q. Matt Rhule during his press conference yesterday said that, when you guys get in games that are 7-3, 10-9, Iowa's heart rate doesn't go up. What can you attribute the comfort level of your guys when they get thrust in those close games because it doesn't seem like they panic?

KIRK FERENTZ: As much as anything, it's the neighborhood we live in. Wouldn't mind trying a different neighborhood at times. When we get there, it just doesn't seem to last long.

And it was pretty much the same way in the '80s, a lot of close games. There's a lot of parallels between all of us in conference play with the exception of a couple.

First thing is you have to be in the game to win it, and then if you can be in it in the fourth quarter, you have a shot to win it. So it's kind of the way we're built. Some years are better than others. Some teams are better at it than others. And the ones that are a little bit proficient and have a chance to be successful, and this team's proven to be that way.

It goes back to the players, guys that believe in what we're doing and believe that games are full 60s. If they'll stick with it, maybe something good will happen. Last Saturday is a good example of that. Two weeks ago up in Wrigley Field, kind of the same deal. And really the week in between, the score ended up being better, but it could have gone either way too for quite a while.

We're used to it, I guess. As long as you're coming out on the plus side, more often than not, that's a good thing.

Q. Obviously you're joking when you're talking about resting the starters this week. That's not in the plans, right?

KIRK FERENTZ: NFL flashback.

Q. A lot of guys talked about the importance of getting a ten-win regular season. There are a lot of programs that have never gotten ten wins. You've gone it seven times. This could be your eighth, I believe. But only four have done it in the regular seasons. Can you speak to the importance of that and what your message is to the team.

KIRK FERENTZ: I was wholeheartedly joking on Saturday. When I was in the NFL, we were never in a position to sit

anybody down. We were always fighting for our lives there too.

I've always looked at it every game is important. I know it's not always that way. When I coached at Worcester Academy, that was the most important thing going on at that given time when we played, and it's just how people are wired. We have every intention of doing all we can to win Friday knowing it's going to be really tough.

To the other part, with all due respect, I think people don't understand how tough it is to win games at any level. I had to jump in my car a week ago Monday -- had to run out and do something real quick. Brady was on. They got that show with apparently him and Jim Gray, and there's about a 60-second clip in there, where you wonder why this guy is just the greatest. Just talked about how everything is just so close in the NFL, and people don't appreciate what it takes. He talked about how the team he played for is going through a tough spell right now.

He said it's an organizational thing. When teams win, there are a lot of people involved. Same thing when they lose. Big picture, he talked about the NFL where it's geared to bringing you back towards the middle. College football, it's kind of the same way. It's hard to win games. Sometimes we get a little spoiled and think it's going to be easy or we've done this before so we'll do it again. It just doesn't work that way. It's really competitive.

Nebraska is a great illustration of it. They haven't been to a bowl game in a while. I don't know how long it's been, but they're playing like a bowl team right now. They're playing well. Yeah, I think sometimes we all lose sight about how tough it is and how many things have to go right for you to win.

I can't think of too many times, at least hopefully, where I've ever assumed things are going to happen. It's usually pretty tough. If we could get ten, that would be really special, but it's not going to be easy, that's for sure.

Q. Two-parter for you. One, are you familiar with Clint Eastwood by chance?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, absolutely.

Q. And the second part of the question, of course, is sometimes on these road games it seems like you'll stand in front of the team before the swarm and you've got the look, you've got the stare down a little bit. It seems like the guys kind of get fired up from that, some of the coaches do. Is there a little bit of a Clint Eastwood element to that in terms of intimidation or just getting the guys ready to rock and roll?

KIRK FERENTZ: I just do what I do. I don't beat my chest, I'm pretty sure I don't do that. (laughter) I don't carry the flag coming out or lead the team. It's a players' game. It's a players' game.

The way our guys walk out of the locker room, they're incredibly slow. I turn around, and they're way the heck back there. It's not intentional. You get out there, and what else are you going to do? I don't know what I look like or any of that stuff. It's not an act of bravado. I'm not Clint Eastwood, I guarantee you. I wish I was. It's the first time I've ever been compared to Clint Eastwood, just saying. That's good. (laughter)

Q. Talking about the injury to Cooper, obviously devastating, but team came out, was physical, and won the game. Obviously you don't want to run into situations like that. But what kind of challenges does that present for the defense as a whole when you lose an All-American guy like that? To follow up on that, I know John Nestor moved up into the two deeps. What have you seen from him? Xavier Nwankpa compared him to Riley Moss.

KIRK FERENTZ: John's a football guy. He's got a temperament a little bit like Phil's, so it was kind of love at first sight, those two guys. He likes playing football, and he goes hard. He's been playing some special teams. So he might be in the army here pretty soon. You never know.

And to the other point, it's two Wednesdays in a row we lost a starter. Actually Stilianos got hurt the week before, lost him for that middle game, the Rutgers game. Any time you lose anybody, we're not deep enough to not be affected by it. When you talk about a guy like Cooper who, he's not only a good corner, but one of the best in the country. And he's one of the best, if not the best, returners in the country. Beyond that, what he means to our team emotionally, guys that are really good players add that component.

If there is a blessing in this whole thing, there's probably two, his recovery will be very predictable and very clean. That's the good news. The other good news was it happened Wednesday, so we had some time to emotionally recover. It impacted everybody. You could feel it that day on the practice field. So the team moved on from that, and they did a great job there.

But it hurts. Any time you lose one of your top guys -- and I say top and one of our leaders. But then Jermari stepped out there, and I think he played his best game as a Hawkeye Saturday, and Deshaun came back from injury and played a good game.

You're not going to replace a player like him with one guy. It's got to be a team effort. Everybody's got to amp it up a little bit, and that's the only way you can overcome losing some guys.

We've done the same thing offensively. We lost some key guys there, but the season wasn't going to get cancelled. We just kept going. Deacon's improved. Addison's doing a really nice job. That tight end group is doing a really nice job. You're not going to replace two guys like we lost, but they're doing a nice job, and some other guys are starting to emerge too. That's how you keep moving forward.

Q. Tyler Elsbury, a guy who's played at guard before, almost used him at tackle earlier this year, now at center. How much of an asset has he been to have a guy that you can call on in a situation like this?

KIRK FERENTZ: Same story. You lose Logan Jones, who's one of our best players and one of our best guys, to a core guy. You lose that, and you wonder how many of these pings can we keep taking here? As I said the other night, me personally, I think Tyler's been capable of this, but now hopefully he's seen himself for himself that he can do this because I think there's a little shadow of a doubt somewhere in the back there.

At some point you have to get in the water and swim, and he's done that very well. It's a tough position to play. So just a lot of credit to him. You touched on he's one of the few guys that we've had that can probably play all five positions. That's rare.

The thing that was lacking for him was that confidence. I'm not saying he's there yet, but he sure should be further down the road now.

Q. It seems like there's a lot of just interesting personalities on the O-line. How would you describe the kind of dynamic of that group?

KIRK FERENTZ: Offensive lines tend to be like that. They're a different group. Different group just by nature of their position, first of all. They don't get a lot of credit. They get a lot of blame, but they don't get a lot of credit. It's been fun to watch these guys grow and develop.

It hasn't been smooth for us the last couple years. I think now we're starting to get some traction, so they're taking a lot of pride in that and showing good about that.

They have a lot of fun together. They kind of spend a lot of time collectively as a group. You think about it, it's kind of like coaching a basketball team. You have five guys out on

the field, a lot of coordination between them. And then the key reserves, you've usually got eight, nine, seven guys that are interchangeable, if you will, that way. Then younger guys will learn from those guys.

It's kind of a neat little society amongst the team, if you will. They've all got different personalities for sure, but I think they have fun together.

Q. I was told by Mason today, speaking of the O-line and personalities, what Daijon has brought to that room. Transfers in from Saginaw Valley, has all the experience in the world, hasn't been on the field a ton. He tweeted out after the game Saturday, best decision of my life, referring to the program. When you have a player who hasn't been on the field that much, and still has that sense, what does it mean to you as a coach?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't want to speak for Daijon, but I think he is enjoying this. I'm glad to hear that. That's kind of my read on it. We're equally or more so glad that he came here.

It's kind of interesting, going back to December, January, the portal, it's a new sport now. So evaluating some guys and looking at them. Both George and I were in agreement, we really like this guy an awful lot. He's playing Division II football, same with VanValkenburg and a couple other guys we got. Just liked him when he came out to visit campus. We were very, very impressed with him.

The sad part is he's had some injuries that he's been dealing with since he got here that haven't allowed him to play the way he's capable of, but his attitude has never changed. It's hard when you're not playing. It's harder when injuries have basically kept you out of the lineup, if you will.

But the thing that hasn't changed is his attitude. It's been great. He's brought a lot to our team, brought a lot to that group, maturity. Rusty Feth, the same way. So you've got a couple guys a little bit older, been through some other things that maybe the younger guys haven't, and that's really valuable.

I remember in 1994 when I was in Cleveland, we had a really young group who was getting ready to become pretty good. One of our key guys was a guy named Doug Dawson we got from Houston. Probably 36, 37, he had arms about as long as mine. He was a competitor. He taught the young guys how to act and how to be pros. Sometimes it's not about getting the marquee player, but getting guys who really add to the mental part of things. Older guys have to teach younger guys, and Daijon's been

first class that way.

Q. We asked Cooper DeJean what he thought about Clint Eastwood, and he said he never heard of the man and didn't know who we were talking about.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think they've heard of Brady. Johnny Unitas, no way.

Q. I wanted to ask about Phil Parker, a semifinalist for the Broyles Award. What he means to you, what he means to this program, just an assistant coach, doesn't get all the recognition, all the accolades as a head coach, but how much he's brought to the University of Iowa.

KIRK FERENTZ: I swear this is true. I'm not making this up. When I was an assistant here in the '80s, certain players jump out at you. Michigan State was a team I was in charge of scouting, so I followed them through whatever it was, the East Lansing Journal, I believe. I followed their team closely. When we played them, they're a tough defensive ball club. That's kind of my connection to Norm, if you will, because he was part of that staff.

I always watched Phil Parker back there on the back end, and he always reminded me of a Stoops. He could be a cousin of the Stoops family. If he came here, he'd have to be a Stoops, so there would be four of them starting at safety. So they're similar, outside looking in. He's a smart player, a tough player. He was a three time All Big Ten player. That's hard to do, guys, throwing terms around. There aren't many guys who are three time All Big Ten. I don't think he was a combine guy, but, boy, he was a football player.

I just kind of followed him for whatever reason. Move on. He got done coaching. He went to Toledo, first full-time job. It's the only job he had until he came here. I didn't hire Norm with this in mind, but after we made the decision to make Norm our coordinator, we started talking about secondary coaches. First position you talk about, and he brought up Phil's name. I was like I'm all for it. Let's bring him in here.

And that was based on just watching the guy and how he operated. I personally like the fact that he was a stable guy, like he wasn't jumping around to this job, that job. It worked out well. Long story short, we've had two coordinators in 25 years, and I go back to my time here. I think one of the great unsung heroes of our program under Coach Fry was Bill Brasher.

He was an assistant. I thoroughly appreciate the value of assistants. One guy can't coach a football team. It's not

like a basketball team. You have 100-plus players. If you don't have a strong coaching staff, you're dead in the water.

Phil's been great. He's the best secondary coach I've dealt with bar none. Now that he's a coordinator, he's fantastic too. We're lucky. We've got a great coaching staff. We've got a bunch of guys who care about the right things. They're team guys, not me guys, which is what I had in the '80s when I was an assistant. We had a great working relationship and environment, and it's huge.

I'm so appreciative that Phil's been here all this time and can't say enough about the job he does. If he was here right now, he'd tell you it's his whole staff, and that's true too. Somebody's got to lead them, though.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Kaleb Brown. Was there a point when the light turned on for him, or was it just a matter of once he got the opportunity, he made the most of it? 14 targets, 10 catches the last two weeks has been incredibly productive.

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think it's accidental. It's been a process. It's not the same as Deacon, but similar. I think I said this a couple months ago. You consider him, he was a good prospect out of high school, but he's a running back. He's going to be a conversion guy, go to receiver. There's no doubt in my mind that's where he belongs. He'd probably be a good back too, though.

He was okay, like in August, he was okay. He was good, but right now he's playing really well. I think it's just a tribute to his hard work. He's really paid attention. He's got good ability. He works hard. He's smart. I think right now it's just starting to make sense to him, like it feels like, okay, I should be doing this and all that, whereas I'm not sure it was that way in September or August.

Again, that's the fun part about coaching is watching guys push away, whether it's Elsbury or Deacon, they're pushing, pushing, and all of a sudden they start having success. I was teasing, I actually walked in with him this morning, and I said, it must be good to have a chance to be a good player. I wouldn't know. I never had that kind of ability. It must be fun. I assume you're having a little fun, and he said he was.

But that's the fun of it. They have to figure it out. They have to learn it and get a taste of it. If they're football players, I think they kind of like that, and he's on that path right now.

Q. Throughout your career, we've had these fourth and fifth year guys that really don't play a lot, and as

their last year, they play some of the best football, all conference football. With NIL, with the transfer portal, kind of with everything else, feels like it's very much an instant gratification era of college athletics, but it seems like with you and your team, they trust the process and the long term plan that you guys have set in place.

I guess, given everything that's happening in college athletics, how have you sustained that culture of these kids understanding there is a bigger plan in place, you just need to wait for your time to kind of break out?

KIRK FERENTZ: A couple thoughts. It's a little harder now, no question. If you're a parent or a teacher, parents are a lot bigger group, it's a tougher time to be a parent or a teacher or a coach because we're not really advertising some of those things, those values of working hard, sticking with it, all the stuff that a lot of us grew up hearing from various people we respected. So it's a little tougher.

With all the ESPN coverage and all that and I made a comment to a couple guys on the staff this morning. I was looking through there and saw three faces on the left of the ESPN site where they get the videos. Three guys that are basically coach killers or player killers that are just like all they're trying to do is stir up controversy. That's kind of what's out there now for people to take in. You wonder why there's so much negativity.

I learned a lot during the '80s. One takeaway I took was I coached three guys -- I being the line coach -- three guys that started for us in the '80s that all ended up being NFL players that didn't start until their fifth year. Chris Campbell came into camp second team. I remember Bruce Kittle was advocating for him. I said, if you love him so much, you coach him. Should have kept my mouth shut. He ended up starting, even won a job in camp, and got drafted third round by the Colts.

Three guys that had NFL careers, Brett Miller didn't start until senior year in '82, and Ron Hallstrom never played a lick and then first round draft pick, 13-year NFL career. So the lesson there is guys develop and they hit stride any time in their careers.

You just track any college player, but certainly in our program -- I think my takeaway was, as long as they work hard and just keep trying to get better, you just never know when a guy's going to hit his stride. Some do, some don't. It's all about what you do and investment. Those are lessons that's are a little tougher to sell right now.

Then I flip it around to NIL and the portal. Rusty Feth didn't make any headlines when we got him to commit here, but

boy, he's been an extremely valuable player not only on the field, but also the maturity and kind of giving that room a little confidence because they needed that. So I think there's opportunity if we're looking for the right guys.

Nick Jackson, talk about a home run there. Really good player, productive player in college, but also a really good guy who's, again, one of those guys, if you get him in the room with the guys that are younger, pay attention to him because he knows how to operate. That's what you're looking for is guys who are going to be teaching other guys, this is how you do things the right way, whether they're here for a year or preferably four years would be even better. That's what you're hoping for.

Q. My question is you mentioned you're extending the 24-hour rule. What did you see from a response like, say, Sunday from the guys? Business as usual? What you wanted to see, I guess?

KIRK FERENTZ: I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't confident that these guys could handle it. This team's changed so much since September. We were playing statistically good defense back then, but we're playing so much better now. That's game to game too. We've got another challenge here.

The whole team has just improved and grown. You develop a level of trust with anybody, and the team's the same way. First of all, they earned it. Secondly, I figure they can handle it. We used to do it a lot back in 2002, Hawkeye Sundays, just cutting the times down and rewarding guys for working hard. These guys have earned that.

They were 100 percent on task Monday morning when we came in, so that's really all you need.

Q. Along those lines, is there anything that you have to do even to really maintain that sense of urgency, or is it just kind of an automatic thing?

KIRK FERENTZ: It depends on the team. I may be wrong right now, but one thing I'll be surprised if we're not focused and playing hard on Friday. Part of that is survival instinct because we have no other choice. We're not going to line up and just beat people. We can't do that, and our guys know that.

I don't mean that in a negative way because that's normally -- I'll go back to '02. That's the one year we had it rolling. We needed two red zone picks, and I think Steen got both of them against Indiana, who hadn't won a game. That's conference football. As soon as you start thinking you've got it figured out or you're good, at least here, that doesn't

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work so well.

There are a couple places in the country where you can get away with that and still turn it on at the end. But I'll tell you, if we're in that situation, that's not good. I think our guys know that.

Q. So what do you remember from Deshaun Lee's recruitment and how has he grown?

KIRK FERENTZ: First impression, not very tall, but I could say the same thing about Jovon Johnson. The difference is Deshaun wasn't talking from the time he walked in. Jovon walked in talking, and he left here talking. Sent me a very nice text on Saturday, still talking, but proud to be a Hawkeye.

The other thing I remember about him was he got his hands on a ball every damn practice. So he backed it up. He was a really good player.

Deshaun's done a really nice job too. It took him a while to get his feet on the ground, but he's really developed. When Jermari was out earlier in the season, stepped in and did a great job. I thought he did a really nice job Saturday.

We'll need him down the stretch. I'm confident he's ready for that. He studies and works hard. That's a good room. Those guys all take a lot of pride in what they do as a group.

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