

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference

KIRK FERENTZ: Good Afternoon. I'd like to start by congratulating Drew Stevens, recognized Big Ten Special Teams Player of the Week. He came up with a big field goal.

Also a couple guys made the semifinalist list. Cooper DeJean with the Thorpe Award. Jay Higgins playing great football, the Butkus Award. Then Joe Evans, the Burlsworth Trophy semifinalist. Just happy to see those guys, their efforts being recognized.

Saturday, certainly a hard-fought game, unique experience certainly for the team, unique environment and challenge that way. It was probably a pretty special experience for our fans. I imagine they had a good time. Certainly a novelty there.

Bottom line is it was a hard-fought game. Some good complementary football to start the third quartet. Certainly the good defensive stop, getting the punt block, then converting that into a touchdown. Goal line stand was just outstanding by the defense. They continued to play really well. That's certainly something we're going to need.

Thought the offense did a great job with the two-minute offense, executed it well. Good to see the execution there. Then the conversion by Drew. Special teams were there when we needed them. That's probably kind of representative of November football. Probably more of that to come here in the next couple weeks certainly.

Captains this week are the same as last week: Joe Evans, Jay Higgins, Logan Lee and Luke Lachey.

Injury-wise right now, I doubt Beau Stephens will be ready. Up in the air. Got a bunch of guys up in the air. It's that time of year. It was a physical football game. That's kind of the situation there right now.

Moving on to Rutgers. We played them last year. Certainly I think it's like night and day right now if you think about it. Played them the last week of September. First Big Ten game for us out there. So a lot of games have



been played since then. We're well deep into the season.

They were a team trying to get their footing last year, now they have their footing, they're playing outstanding football. Not a big surprise. Coach Schiano did a great job of building the program back in the early 2000s, put them in a state of prominence, if you will. Then he went off to the NFL, opportunities there. Now back rebuilding this program, and doing in exemplary fashion.

Again, not surprising. He has a good staff. They clearly have an identity, vision of where they're going, how they want to look like, how they want to play. Bottom line, it's working well. They're doing well. 6-3 record and look good on tape.

They have a good football team. One of the top running backs in the Big Ten. Big, physical offensive line. Receivers that will block. Veteran guys, all three guys are veterans. Quarterback is playing really well for them. Tight end is a dangerous player. They're playing good team defense. You can see it in the process last year. Now it's coming to fruition. Good job on special teams, kicker, punter. Overall is going to be a big challenge for us. We're in the process of trying to get ready for that.

Chloe Dinkla, an 11-year-old from Winterset. She's dealt with some spinal issues. Had 11-hour surgery, imagine that, where they took a mass out that I was kind of limiting her ability to sit and move. That was one thing. Then she's had multiple surgeries to battle the scoliosis. As I'm told, she's doing really well. She's a fifth grader now. Her family finds her to be inspirational. Just brings a lot of joy to everybody in the family. So it will be great to have them here Saturday.

It will be good to be back in Kinnick. Our fan support was outstanding in Chicago. We appreciate that. Look forward to being back in Kinnick and getting support there, too.

Q. As far as the offensive line goes, three guys who missed most of the game. I think Rusty came in late. Where did things kind of stand with Logan Jones who had a walking boot, then Mason who has been fighting through an injury?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, time will tell. We'll see how the week goes here.



It's November, so we're dealing with all that stuff. We had a lot of it going into the bye. The bye got a lot of guys cleaned up pretty well, so that helped mentally. We don't have the luxury of taking a week off now.

The guys are working back. We'll see who can do what on Saturday. But keep our fingers crossed.

Q. Seemed like to us Tyler Elsbury stepped in and played a nice game. What could he do for you this week if he had to step in at center or guard? Where do you see him contributing this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he did it last year a couple times, too. He's been practicing pretty steady. So, yeah, first things first. He did a really nice job stepping in. That's tricky, tough position, a lot of pressure. Thought he did overall a really good job.

Anytime you do that, helps get confidence first for yourself and then also I think the coaching staff, the teammates feel better anytime they see a guy out there working with them and they have confidence.

You never have enough depth. You never have enough guys that can play successfully. Hopefully this will help move him forward. I thought he did a nice job, handled himself well, played with poise.

We'll see how it goes with Logan. He may be in there again at center or, to your point, he's really a versatile guy. He can probably play all positions on the line. Just really proud of what he did Saturday.

Q. Up against a Rutgers team that can run the ball well, your run defense has taken another step the last three or four weeks. What do you attribute that to?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like our whole team: everybody is out there working every day in practice. We have good, quality guys, got good experience on the defensive side. The areas maybe where we had the most question marks, guys are doing really well. Jay Higgins there, then Nick is really comfortable now, playing well. For us, the way we're built, if our linebacker play isn't good, that's going to be an issue. Same thing at the safety play.

We have four pretty veteran guys in those spots, those critical spots. The guys up front are doing a good job for the most part. In our conference, you just got to be able to play the run. Any conference I think you have to be able to play the run if you're going to be good defensively.

This is going to be a different challenge though because

this back is a really good football player. He has a million carries. He's out there all the time. The quarterback is a big run threat, too. He's a guy that's a big part of what they do. A little different dimension. A little different division of labor out there.

Q. I wanted to ask about Cooper DeJean. He played a little bit on offense. What is your thought moving forward with him? How much can he play on offense? Max number of snaps?

KIRK FERENTZ: I gave the wrong answer the other night. I was reading a couple emails. People suggested, why don't you get Cooper on offense? (laughter) You're asking the million dollar question, how many snaps can a guy play. Nile Kinnick played both ways. Game was a little different back then. We didn't have TV timeouts and games didn't take six hours to play.

It's a tough one. I do know this, he's extremely valuable on defense, extremely valuable on special teams. So where do you give, where do you take? We have a pretty good thing going defensively right now. You're worried about disrupting that. Same thing on special teams. If we can get the ball in his hands, he gives us a chance as a return guy.

Obviously I think he could really help us offensively. Again, so could Micah Hyde. You have to wait things out and try to make sure you're trying to do for the overall picture. Nobody knows what the right number is, when a guy's going to get hurt. You don't know those things.

But I know this, we're missing some guys right now that aren't playing, that aren't coming back this year. We can't take another torpedo on that front, I know that.

Q. Kaleb Brown gets his first catch at Iowa wearing a different number. Thoughts on that play specifically, but also him getting his first catch at Iowa?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it looked like a football play. Good protection. Deacon stepped up and threw the ball, made a very nice throw. You hope a receiver, that's why they call them receivers, you hope they'll receive the ball and secure it.

I think the more impressive part, he fought for four or five yards after he got the ball. That was critical at that point. We were confident we didn't have to move it too far, but to move it without putting things at risk.

It was a great play. The play overall was a great play. It was good for him to break in, if you will. I didn't realize it was his first catch until after the game. That's a good start.

Hopefully more to follow.

Q. If you get Noah Shannon back, considering two weeks ago when they said two weeks, what would he really add to this team and this defense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, feels like Fantasy Football. None of us are getting our hopes up too high based on the way things go with the NCAA.

It would be great to get him back. He's a tremendous young person. You have Nico and Joe, who are both six-year seniors. Noah is right there in their class. They're all outstanding team members. Noah is a really good football player. He started practicing here a couple weeks ago, looks great. It would be great.

To me, it's personal commentary, I think it's the right thing to do. I'm not confident that's going to happen. But there's no doubt in my mind it would be the right thing to do.

We'll keep our fingers crossed.

Q. I don't know if Kaleb Johnson was out there for a snap on Saturday. Is he dealing with injury? Coach's decision?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's no drama or nothing going on. Just playing the guys right now that have practiced the best and practiced best through the bye week, in our minds have played the best at this point.

It's an open competition. Everybody has an opportunity out there. It's day to day, week to week. That's how we do things. Watching him on film against Rutgers last year, ran the ball well, so hopefully we can get him up and running here. Probably going to need all those guys.

Really proud of Leshon. He had one of the worst plays of the season, and since that play he's bounced back and really played well. That's what good players do. Proud of the way he's handled that. Hopefully he'll continue to keep playing like he has been, really help us out.

Q. Jack Campbell won the Butkus Award last year, now Jay is in that conversation. How much of that is the standard and the system you have here? How much credit goes to Jay for the exceptional performance he's had this season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, in our program, as I stated earlier, if our linebackers and safeties aren't involved pretty heavily, we're going to have a problem. That's a critical position in our defense.

All the credit goes to Jay, in my opinion. Just like Jack, Jay is a good story in that I don't think he had a Big Ten offer. Pretty sure he didn't anywhere. But he is just one of those guys when you meet him, he makes you feel good. You feel like this guy is all about football and all about team. That's what he's been.

I tell our guys all the time, if you're trying to learn how to get good, follow guys that are good, pay attention. He clearly paid attention to guys like Campbell, Benson. He's playing such a high level.

He's been bumped up during the season, too. You can't get him out of there. It's hard to get him out of practice. Great attitude. He's done a great job.

It's nice to see him get attention. I think he's more worried about Saturday than he is any of that stuff right now, like I hope everybody is.

Q. Your message for your team, three games left, all the goals seem to be out in front of you, but there's a razor thin margin. How are you handling this approach? Is it game by game or mentioning what the goal might be at the end of the rainbow?

KIRK FERENTZ: These guys are all in college, they know what is going on big picture-wise. We're not in the BCS title hunt, whatever that show is they got going.

My observations going back to '08, when you start getting involved in discussions about that, pretty soon you find yourself you're out of that discussion real quickly. We should be three instead of two. Two instead of three is what the argument would be. Remember that one in '08. You start getting distracted by that kind of stuff, next thing you know you get knocked right on your tail.

That's how this conference is, that's how college football is right now. There's nothing easy about any game unless you aren't competing in it. Razor thin.

I was thinking about that earlier when we were talking about Cooper. We live in the world of razor thin. For like 25 years, that's where we've been. Actually longer than that. Everything's important. We're not good enough to take our eye off anything, other than the target. That's really been the message.

We have to really worry about getting better, doing everything we can do to get ready for Rutgers, because we're going to have our hands full like we did last Saturday. I predict if we have three games left, it will be that way all three games.

Q. Jay Higgins, how have you seen him grow?

KIRK FERENTZ: You see him daily. We see him before you get to see him, so we watch him daily. Everything about him is positive. Everything about him. Last year he played significant reps. Besides special teams, he played significantly on defense. You're watching him in first time out there basically when it really counted doing a good job.

Now it's a whole different deal because there's a lot of pressure on that middle linebacker. There is a lot going on in terms of checks, calls, all those things. Those guys get loaded down pretty good. It doesn't look like we're doing a lot, but there's a lot of communication going on. The offenses are doing a lot. It's a really tough position. It takes a guy who has maturity, a guy who is really invested and works really hard. Jay is all that stuff.

We felt good about that part of it. Then how is he going to play. He's done a great job. It's a credit to him. He worked his tail off. He cares, truly cares. He's a great young guy.

Q. You've mentioned Kaleb Brown is young, inexperienced at receiver. You're leaning on him in one of the most crucial plays of the game. That's not a position that he's been in. Did that have to do with...

KIRK FERENTZ: And year past he didn't play (smiling).

Q. Did that have to do with Vines being banged up or some growth you've seen him? Why was he on the field at that point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, Diante was out at that point. It's next man in, next man up. We talk about it all the time. Some guys listen better than others. If you do get opportunity, you never know when it's going to come typically. It is opportunity, opportunity to do something, get noticed, get noticed in a positive way.

He came up big-time. That was a critical play in the game. It allowed us to be in a position where we didn't have to go into overtime, which is positive.

It's him working every day. He is not an infant as a receiver, but it's really the first year he's really been in the deal. Last year, I don't know extensively, where he was on the depth chart, but he certainly wasn't out there in critical times.

Right now he's getting the work. He's doing a really good job. He's got good ability, good attitude. Hopefully now it's just a matter of...

I got done talking about Jay, his ascension the last year and a half, hopefully we'll see the same thing with Kaleb. He's got an opportunity here.

Q. I want to dive into margin for error, you've talked about it being very thin.

KIRK FERENTZ: Always, yeah (smiling).

Q. Do you teach, coach guys to play in those situations where it's a one-possession game? You seem to come out on top of those situations. How does that happen?

KIRK FERENTZ: I guess the good news is we get a lot of practice at it, a lot more than some teams like Ohio State, right?

Again, that's the world we live in. I think a big part of anything you do in life is understanding. I couldn't run, I could not run when I was playing. That wasn't going to change. So you find a way to be successful given who you are, what your abilities are, what your conditions might be.

In football, they change them. Injuries change them. Weather might change them, whatever. You try to bend and yield toward who you are, what you are, what you can do. Our '02 team was very different than the '04 team, but they were both extremely successful.

You try to find a path that's going to work for you at that given time. As we know, it changes almost daily, certainly weekly.

Now that we're nine games into the season, every team starts to build an identity. I think it's pretty clear who we are, what we are. Let's embrace that and work on finding a way to be successful knowing who we are. That's pretty much all I know. That's how we've done things for 25 years. When I was here in the '80s, it was pretty much the same deal.

It's funny or interesting, when you get further away from something, I don't know if 'romanticizing' is the right word, but every now and then I keep a couple just for reality checks, like our depth charts from '02 or '04. You forget, that guy was second team, hold it, big dropoff. That's reality. It's not that way everywhere, but it's more that way at most schools as opposed to.

I was at Pitt in 1980. We were second in the country. Six, maybe seven linemen you could put into a game. You would think the No. 2 team in the country would be totally endowed, but that wasn't the case. You try to deal with that the way it is, the best you can. But it takes the right

kind of people, too. You have to have the right people. That's first and foremost.

Q. Marco Lainez took two reps at quarterback in the pregame. Can you share what growth you've seen from him the four or five months?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's done a nice job. I mean, it's not a deep pull there. We have three guys, 10 Tommy Poholsky, who I swear to God, I'm glad he is okay, but he had the flu for probably 10 days, I don't know, literally. At one point we had three guys out there on the field during the bye week.

Marco has done a good job. It's a position where we don't have a lot of depth or experience right now, so we're letting all three guys work. All three of 'em are doing a good job.

Q. I was talking with Kyler Fisher earlier today. He said you were the one who told him he would be on scholarship during practice. What do you remember from that day? What has he meant to this team?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we just got done talking about Jay. Not quite the same story. Kyler came as a walk-on. With each step of every phase, winter conditioning, spring ball, ever since he's been here, he's just been a quality guy. He's not played a lot of scrimmage snaps. Played more this year than ever.

Everything about him has been quality. A great special teams guy. Totally invested. He's matured physically and mentally, which is what college football is all about. It's the fun part about it.

There is no question in our mind at that time, like, he deserved a scholarship, had earned that just by being a good team member. We were kind of stacked at linebacker a year ago, so he wasn't going to be in that starting lineup, but he was every bit as important and invested.

Going back to how you build a winning football team. Not everybody is going to be a starter, but guys can still be like starters, act like them. That's what Jay did before he got his opportunity. We're all just really thrilled Kyler is on our football team. Fun to watch his growth and development.

I'm not a big one for popping out of a cake, 'You got a scholarship,' that stuff, social media (laughter). It's still significant. It's a heck of a deal for those guys, yeah.

Q. Addison Ostrenga follows a similar pattern than some of your tight ends have in the past playing as a

true freshman. In what areas have you seen him make strides? Each and every game he's doing something a little bit better than he did a couple weeks ago. What do you think his trajectory is?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't want to predict where he's going. Everything about him, as we were just talking about Jay, Addison was under-recruited. Probably some parallels between the two guys now that we talk about it.

He's got one of those attitudes that's infectious. He loves being out on the field, loves playing ball, loves practicing, loves being part of the team. Just loves everything about it.

He went through a little medical thing for a couple weeks where we lost him. But he's rebounded from that. He was positive during that whole time, as well. Compare him physically and all that. Jury is still out on all that.

The commonalities, just a football player, a guy that loves playing. There's nothing he doesn't like about this whole thing. It's infectious. When he's in the huddle, we're better off with him in there because of the way he operates, the energy that comes out of him just from being out there.

Some guys have that ability, just how they're wired. He just happens to be one of those guys. He's playing good football, too. Again, talk about limited experience, but he's really doing a good job.

For that position right now experienced, but college football not really that experienced.

Q. Have you seen the movie Money Ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. Winning in the margins, that was a movie about finding ways others weren't. Are there areas where you feel like you've honed in on who you are, punting, penalty yards? Does that movie resonate with you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I got to spend some days with Tony La Russa only because Cal Eldred asked me to camp in Jupiter 15 years ago.

I wouldn't say he's anti Money Ball, but just his mode of operation, like, I could identify with. I have unbelievable respect and admiration. I'm like a guy, and he's treating me like I'm a peer. Impressive guy. Super impressive guy.

You get me telling stories here. This weekend, outside of the win for me, I was getting to visit with the clubhouse guy, interesting guy, in Wrigley. Long time Chicago guy.

He's pure Chicago, proud of it. Colorful language. I think he's 45 years maybe.

I asked the obvious question: Visitor's clubhouse, who is your all time favorite? Guess who he said.

Q. La Russa?

KIRK FERENTZ: Even better. I'm from Pittsburgh. Jim Leyland. Heck, yeah.

During that trip when I got to be in the camp, there were several highlights, but one of them was getting to stand between La Russa and Jim Leyland. Leland was smoking butts. Probably got five of them done in the 25 minutes we stood there. Big college football guy. He's a teacher, a coach. He could coach football. So could La Russa. They think that way.

Yeah, penalties are really important. That's something we can control. There's certain things we can't right now, but that's something we have to be good at or we're going to be in trouble.

I'd like to see our ball security be better, obviously. It's been a factor, certainly a factor the last time we lost. Some things you can control better than others based on who you are, what you are, where you're at experience-wise, all those types of things. You have to be reasonable.

It was a fascinating movie. I really enjoyed it. You learn from everything. It's not always like 100% this, 100% that. You just try to pick and blend into whatever might benefit your program.

Q. Reports from late last week, a conference call with all the coaches and the Big Ten commissioner about the sign. Were you on the call and would you say it was spicy?

KIRK FERENTZ: I wasn't on the call. We practice in the morning, watch film at noon. Taking a little break right now. I couldn't make the call. I figured the game might be more important than a call since we're fighting for our lives. Got to have priorities. I did not partake in it.

I don't have a lot of comment. I read one article. I look at the headlines occasionally. I read one last night where they were fixated on who might have turned whom in, which I think is just like a such a statement on where we're at right now just in general. Like, it doesn't matter who turned whom in. If something's wrong, the issue is the issue, not all this other stuff. I found that kind of interesting.

Outside of that, I don't have any thought right now. There's a lot of stuff going on, just like in baseball. It's going on football, too.

As I understand it, they got it cleaned up in baseball, at least Major League Baseball. There's got to be a way for us, too.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the way Greg Schiano has built that program. It was as low as any program when he got there, and now they're in good territory. Are you surprised that he's been able to do this in a second act in a different league?

KIRK FERENTZ: Personal commentary. I thought a great hire. Whoever made it, smart. I know Greg. I don't want to name drop me and Greg, but I know Greg certainly. I certainly know who he is, what he's about as a coach and as a person. Got great respect for Greg in all areas.

I think if you just watch the evolution of the program and their team, to me, and I'm literally a thousand miles away, 800 miles away, he's been unflappable. He knows where he wants to go. It's coming into fruition now.

The improvement they've made in however many months, 14, 15 months, it's really impressive, not surprising but really impressive.

He's done a good job. They've done a good job recruiting. Coaching staff is clearly on the same page. They coach their guys. They're developing them. They're making them better. A lot of the same guys we played last year are playing now, and they're playing better. That's a sign of good coaching.

Again, I think, at least from my impression outside looking in, he has a clear vision of what he wants to do. I don't know the intricate details from '01 to '11, whenever he was there, my guess is a pretty similar approach.

He's a guy that always had a pretty good idea of what he likes, what he wants, what he doesn't like, not afraid to stick to it. Not that he won't adjust it or tweak it, but he doesn't bend to somebody saying this or that. He just does what he thinks is right, and it's paying off for him.

Q. Back to Jay and Kyler, how influential do you think that spring of '22 was when Jack and Seth weren't in?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it was a bonus. Hate to see anybody out, but that's typical in the spring. Guys have to get surgeries, whatever.

Again, the credit goes really to Jay and Kyler. Some guys

take advantage of opportunity better than others. These stories don't just happen. It happens because the right individuals make it happen. You just never know when that's going to come.

When the door does open, you got a chance to jump in there and do it. Just like Addy. Addy is doing the same thing right now. He would have been our third team right now. He's our nominee for the Mackey Award. That's what we got. He's done a good job. But he's been into it ever since he got here.

That's the commonality with all these guys. They're focused on the right things, they're serious about it, they work hard. Like we're talking about what's going on at Rutgers, they're growth with those guys on a daily basis. It's not really dramatic, but it is over months. All of a sudden, This guy is pretty good.

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