

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: Just wanted to start out by congratulating some people on their awards and recognition. Phil got bumped up to the Broyles Award finalist. That's great. Tory Taylor with the Ray Guy, and Cooper with the Thorpe Award, being finalists. Happy for those guys.

Some of the All-Big Ten stuff came out. For Tory to be the punter of the year is a great thing. Cooper being the defensive back and return specialist, also really nice to see. So I think it's the fifth time now in nine years that we've had the DB of the year in the conference, which is some good trivia there.

All-Big Ten stuff came out with Tory Taylor being first team; Cooper DeJean, Jay Higgins, Sebastian Castro second team. And Joe Evans and Nick Jackson being third team.

Just really happy for everybody that's been recognized. They certainly work hard. It's not easy to play at this level, certainly, or coach at this level. All those guys have done a great job performing.

Regarding the game, we're locked into our preparation now that basically began on Sunday.

Looking at Michigan, no surprise they are very talented at every position. Really well-coached and play extremely hard. It's tough to find any kind of weakness or things that they don't do well. It backs up the way they've played over the last three years. Now it's been very, very impressive. A lot of good players. They do a good job defensive, offensively and special teams, an impressive group as well.

Our players are excited about the opportunity to be in this game. I am proud of them for earning their way into it. It's going to take our best football on Saturday to have a chance in this.

Captains this week are Joe Evans, Jay Higgins, Luke Lachey, Logan Lee.

One nice thing about this game is that we'll have our

normal travel team go over. We'll have everybody on the sidelines. So everybody who has been practicing -- doing all the hard work that they do during the course of the year -- everyone has a role, so it is nice for them all to be included in this game. It really is the only game this year where they get to travel and be part of it. That's a special thing there.

Q. QUESTION: You have been in -- not necessarily Big Ten Championship -- games like this before, specifically Michigan here seven years ago where they were a 20-point-plus favorite. The world seemed to be against you, and you came up and had one of your great wins. Is it going to take an effort like that in order to pull that off? And what do you recall from that situation that maybe you could pass on to your team as just a "we've been here before" moment?

COACH FERENTZ: Probably the thing I recall the most is the week before. The feeling flying back here Saturday night, after a really tough loss, just one of those games, nothing went well. We didn't play well and then fully aware flying back Saturday night that we had a big challenge on our hands.

And I don't know if it's representative but it is when you play -- and we're underdogs a lot -- when you play in a game like that, you pretty much have to be on top of your game in each and every way and some way you have to try to force something, maybe a mistake or try to do something that maybe gets the opponent off schedule.

If they do make a mistake you've got to capitalize whenever that come available. I think outside that game we blew a two-point conversion, it looked like it was going to be pretty good. Outside of that we didn't do much to hurt ourselves and we did some things to help ourselves, too.

And the bottom line you'll just have to compete as well as you possibly can and that's certainly what we're looking at this week. And I guess if it's a good thing, this would be the third time in three years that we played them. So there's some familiarity there.

The bad news is there's some familiarity. And you have a real respect for the way they are, the way they're coached at every position and the way their guys play. And a lot of familiar faces, a lot of new faces, too, and those new ones

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are very impressive.

Q. You're mentioning on Sunday having a little more of an injury update this afternoon. Are you able to comment any more on Diante Vines and Logan Jones?

COACH FERENTZ: They both practiced two days now, so keep our fingers crossed, but it looks like they'll be able to go.

Q. Talking with some of the guys now, they were saying the one-on-one relationships that you've built with not just players but guys in the building, why is that something that's important for you to do?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're trying to put a good football team on the field. That's first and foremost. But you have to build a team, and building a team that's the fun of this whole thing is just getting a chance to know each other a little bit and learn more about each other.

And the nice thing, I've said this before, one nice thing about football is, as diverse and different we all are, the backgrounds are totally different; there's an age differential, too. But there's a commonality, too. There's a common goal, common purpose.

And so that part makes it a little bit easier as opposed to, as I said before, teaching an English class -- a little different they're there because they have to be there.

That's the fun of it, getting to know the people involved a little bit. One thing that's lousy about being a head coach is you have a hundred-plus players.

I found that out the first time I was standing in front of a team at the University of Maine. It was weird after being in a more intimate working relationship where you have 14-16 people. It's a lot easier just to feel the room and get to know people. That's one of the biggest challenges.

It's the downside to having five kids, too. You only have so much time. It's a challenge, but the fun part about sports and life is getting to know people a little bit.

Q. Gennings Dunker. Is he good?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's going to be able to go. He didn't practice yesterday. He practiced today a little bit. We're hopeful he'll be able to go.

Q. Kaleb Brown talked to us. It's usually a good sign he's going to play. He says he's good. How has he helped elevate your passing game in the past month, this month, to maybe give you a chance on Saturday to

move the ball that way?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's representative of our team. We found ourselves short of some veteran experience real fast this year, and then it seemed to compound itself.

So, the next guy in. Deacon hadn't played a lot, high school or college -- hadn't played at all in college. And it's been a while since he played in high school.

Kaleb, as I said, two years ago he was playing running back, good running back in Chicago, and goes to his next school. I don't know how much he did last year. I doubt much because I know the guys that were playing for them.

So that's the first time where he's getting extensive work at the position. We've seen him improve each week. And he looks like he's having fun now because he's starting to figure it out. And he's done some really good things.

One of the best plays he had the other day was the block on Stilianos' run, that run he had down to our boundary.

He's a good skill guy that way. He's had the ability and skill. Now I think he's starting to learn how to play. And to each of those guys, must be nice to know what it feels like to be a good player. He's starting to experience that. I never had that experience as a player.

So it would be pretty cool. I think he seems to be enjoying it.

Q. Just the kind of culture you've built in terms of -- seems like maybe this year more than ever you've really locked into people inside the building and shutting out the noise; and a lot of the players have commented on that. Is it just the culture you've built? Do you attribute it to the type of guys you get in the program? Or is it just maturity of guys going from freshman to senior year, maybe they stop searching their name on social media?

COACH FERENTZ: Not everybody does that. I heard this morning someone who has an unhealthy habit of maybe being too active on that. It's nothing but a waste of time, in my opinion, if you're serious about competing.

That's maturity too, trying to get a guy to understand it's not going to do a hell of a lot of good for him.

But I've been saying it gets back to having the right guys on your team. And I'll take it a step further. We talked about Kaleb maturing as a player. He's starting to get a good feel for things and having some fun doing it.

Maturity is people, too. I think back to last year, which was a really tough year, it was a challenging year for all of us, and proud of that team, the way they fought through.

We're sitting there at 3-4, and I know everybody was probably dumping on us a little bit. But that's not a new phenomenon. But we had two choices last year. The guys chose the right path.

I bring that up in that clearly some of the younger guys on our team right now were paying attention to the older guys last year. You think about Campbell standing up in front of everybody and saying, hey, we're a team. Seth Benson, his running mate, you have Kaevon in the back end, you had Riley, LaPorta. You have a good group of guys who knew how to act and how to do things.

And clearly the guys that have stepped up this year that maybe weren't as prominent last year as leaders, they're watching those guys. That's something I talked to the guys all the time; if you want to be good, look and see how good people are doing whatever the profession or vocation may be.

It's part of plan, part of the planning how they train and the mental side how they handle things. We're fortunate we've had guys teaching each other a little bit.

Q. Sebastian and Nico I believe both told us something to the effect of, we're going to have the gas in the fourth quarter. We like those knock-down, drag-out games. Why do you think your team is well-equipped to win a game like that, because on Saturday, if you win, it will likely be a close game and a low-scoring game that will come down to the fourth quarter?

COACH FERENTZ: Which will be a challenge, keeping them low. But I mean part of it, that's out of necessity because we don't get way ahead too often. Doesn't happen much. It's just the way it's been for 25 plus nine years.

So that's the beauty of football, but the challenge this week is going to be to get it into that fourth quarter where it is competitive.

At least we've had experience at that. That maybe one of their downsides; they haven't had a lot of that experience. Although, obviously the last three weeks they've been in some pretty good ball games, too. But they've had a lot of them where they just hit the gas and went.

If you don't have a respect for their ability and their talent the way they play that can happen to you real fast. First

thing we have to do is try to get it to the fourth quarter and then we have to try to find a way to win it.

Goes back to Chad's point earlier in '16. Couldn't have gone any better at the end, but I'll tell you, it was tight. It was really tight. And if we end up being the winning team, that's probably about how it'll have to go.

Q. Obviously you've got a few guys from the team two years ago that did contribute on the field. One thing that Quinn Schulte referenced was the routine and that some of these guys know the routine of going to Indianapolis and preparing for this game. Have you noticed a different level of comfortability and confidence because of that routine going into it this time?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll find out. We'll find out how we handle it. I told the team yesterday, it's a little bit unique. Regular season is regular season. This is obviously immediately following the last regular season game.

Where it's different is we were in Lincoln last week. It was pretty quiet in the hotel. Two weeks, three weeks before, even in Chicago, it was pretty quiet where we were at.

This is more like a bowl game where everybody, half the state of Iowa, is going to be at that Marriott or around that Marriott in the area. It's a very festive environment. It's very different that way.

When you go in the stadium, it's a different feel than maybe just playing on the road where everybody's against you. We're just preparing for that, getting them thinking about that.

The other thing that happens in a game like this or bowl game somewhat, but a game like this especially, you hear from everybody and then some in your family tree and your friend tree and all that jazz. If you're not careful you end up wasting a lot of time during the week, you don't really prepare the way you need to because you're chasing down tickets and doing all that other stuff.

At some point you've got to be a little selfish of your opportunity because this could be a once-in-a-lifetime thing for a lot of the guys. I've never taken it for granted. It's my third time and I feel fortunate going three times.

You just don't want to jeopardize your performance based on trying to help somebody you haven't heard from in four years, stuff like that, or five years, maybe eight years.

It's tricky a little bit. It's hard when you're young. I think everybody's trying to be nice. They have to be a little

selfish here, too, and make sure they don't get off their routine of preparation and what they have to do to be ready to play.

Q. You've been underdogs in a lot of games. I get the sense from your guys they kind of relish that, being an underdog. Have you noticed that with some of the guys in your program that they kind of relish that role? And why do they thrive in that position so much, being an underdog?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it's kind of the way we are and have been as long as I've been involved in the program. Even in the '80s. It's the way it is. And that's okay.

And when you play in real big games, chances are we're going to be -- I say "big games," like a big bowl game or a championship game like this -- I think historically that has kind of been the way Iowa is.

If you don't embrace it, you're probably going to be a loser. You may be a loser anyway or come out losing the game -- not be a loser but lose the game.

You have to relish the opportunity, the challenge, and understand just how significant the challenge is going to be and appreciate that and respect it.

That's the great thing about sports, too. You just never know what's going to happen. That's why all the prognosticists, they get a little frustrated because you can't predict even a regular season 100 percent, because people are people and a lot that could happen.

Q. Let's say Saturday we stand here and you guys are our Big Ten champions, what do you think happened in the game to get you guys over the finish line?

COACH FERENTZ: What we've been saying. We'd have to do everything right and probably force a couple mistakes. You can't worry about all those things. You have to worry about what you can do and your performance. That's what the week's for. It's us trying to know our opponent really well.

I'm not too worried about us having the respect it takes to win a game, in this game. I'm not worried about that one, but just knowing our opponent, knowing what we have to do.

And doing it with real precision, like a real high level of precision. I think, too, when you get into a game like this with an opponent like this, it's got to be right on the -- Raymond Berry said, you don't aim for the bulls-eye; it's the center of the bulls-eye.

And it's really appropriate in a game like this, because if you're off a little bit, chances are it's not going to be good for you.

A little bit of heightened awareness, I guess, and not so much appreciation but awareness and detail on what you're doing -- steps, footwork, eye discipline -- all the things you have to do to be a good football player.

Q. Remembering back to, even like 2015 when you were at 12-0, you seemed to have more scrutiny attached to your program, more than any other team in the country for whatever reason. And it seems like this country loves underdogs and Cinderella stories except for the Iowa Hawkeyes. Can you figure out why? Is it because you're not flashy?

COACH FERENTZ: People love not to love us. That's okay. It is what it is. I don't know. Maybe it's me. I think I'm a decent person. I don't know. But whatever.

We don't broadcast. We've had some success, but we just try and let our play speak for itself.

And I'm extremely proud and I think all our players are proud of what we've done here the last three, four, five years. If you look at the numbers, they're not bad.

I think there's also a stylistic part and maybe we're not pretty enough or whatever it may be. The objective is to win games. Try to find a way to win, that's what you try to do. Our guys have done a pretty good job of that.

We're proud of what we've done and proud to have earned our way into this thing. And now we have a hell of a challenge on our hands.

I don't know why. We've got great colors. Iowa's easy to spell. So I don't know. That's a good question.

Q. Drew Stevens is the kicker for Saturday on the depth chart. I assume he'll be the guy that we'll see out there. After having a couple of rough weeks for him in the kicking game -- special teams is such a head game, seems like it's a mental aspect where you have to build up confidence in those guys and they have to keep that confidence. How do you build up that confidence with Drew after what happened on Friday and after the last couple of weeks he's had?

COACH FERENTZ: It wasn't a real long talk, but my encouragement to him was just to recognize the fact that he's performed well. Feels like he's been here three years or four years, but he hasn't. He started in January.

Think about how bad he was a year ago spring and how good he was last fall. He was excellent last spring. He's had a good year this year. And my encouragement to him was to just recognize the fact you've done it at a high level here at this level.

Whatever happened Saturday, put it behind you and move on. It wasn't a great day. There were a couple of things involved but bottom line it wasn't that good, and that part of our performance.

You have to move on. It's like being a relief pitcher, left tackle or quarterback, if you had a bad play, everybody in the world knows it. And you've got commentary on it.

But name a great player in those positions who hasn't missed them. And as good as Nate Kaeding was, he missed a few too. Just gotta move on. Block it out. It's the trick. It's not a matter of can you do it. Can you block it out, move on? The game in '16, Penn State, that wasn't much fun.

But if you dwell on that, forget about next week because you're going to be terrible. And we'll find out next week, hopefully he has a great week of practice.

Q. Four of your last five games have been decided by three points or less. Going off the last question, how important has special teams been, especially that kicking unit Drew Stevens, Tory Taylor and Luke Elkin?

COACH FERENTZ: Let me interject. The last field goal, Tory did a heck of a job. Snap was low. Great placement. Emblematic of his growth, too, not just as punter, but everything he does, he's doing it really well.

For us right now everything is critical just because we've got some pretty good players that aren't playing. And with those guys, I don't know how good we'd be with them, but it doesn't matter because they're not here. I do know there's a void there.

But also you see guys -- Addison made a couple of really good plays the other day. That's part of the fun of it, see who responds and grows. That all being said, we know it's razor thin. So everything we can get, if it's a field goal we should be able to make, then we need to make it. And if it's a first down, we have a chance to convert, need to convert it decent percentage. Chance to get them off the field, if we don't do it, and all those things will play into the outcome of the game. We're not giving up a big play, whatever, start doing that, it really makes it tough.

Q. I think you've mentioned Sunday, like this season has brought more hurdles maybe than any other seasons of your coaching career. In what ways has this season challenged you as a leader? Are there ways you maybe feel you've grown as a leader with having to deal with what you have throughout the season?

COACH FERENTZ: Good question, I think the only one that would be remotely comparable would be '04, injury-wise, but this one is more significant, I think. And then to your other point, yeah, everyday challenges, you hear, quite frankly, if you're thinking about things. That's what I try to think about stuff.

And there's a lot of days -- I'll say this publicly, there are a lot of days where I have, over 25 years, wonder do I have any idea what the hell is going on; is anybody hearing anything that I think is important?

And it's kind of like being a parent. Same way. Then your kids surprise you every now and again. But a lot of stuff, there's no concrete answers. So you just have to do what you feel is right and try to get input and feelings from people in the building, people you work intimately with, and your players, too. You just try to get a gauge of what might be realistic and try to shape it in a way that's good for everybody.

But you think about it all the time. And I'm telling you, I have doubts all the time. It may not look like it, but you don't want to know what's going through my mind, it's not good, probably not healthy. Somehow some way we're still here.

Q. Speaking of 2015 a couple of questions ago, do you see any other parallels between this season and that season and what do you remember most from that first trip to Indy?

COACH FERENTZ: '15, the season in general, just a lot of close games. And again that's probably not totally shocking for us, but that team had a lot of resiliency, too. Think about going over to Northwestern -- I don't mind telling you, I had my concerns, like from grave concerns in that one.

And then the team surprised us in the other direction, and C.J. Beathard couldn't walk that week. That was part of the creation of my indigestion. Man, this isn't good. But somehow some way you try to find a way to get something done. Again, that ties in with the sports part about you don't know what's going to happen.

We're here day by day and I couldn't predict the outcome

of that game. A lot of close games. A lot of resiliency, and certainly those teams had to demonstrate that.

And then we're playing a Michigan State team that is awfully good. We're 0-for-2 over there, and both teams went on to the College Football Playoffs. That's a commonality, too, when you get in this game you're going to be playing somebody, if they're victorious, that's where they're going. If we would win, that would screw really things up, I'm guessing. Might be kind of funny actually. That in itself. But that's a whole different subject.

Q. I know your focus is Saturday and a football game, but portal is going to be opening up. Guys announcing all the time. How are you guys approaching that internally? Is that Tyler and his group that are kind of monitoring things and getting some ideas put together?

COACH FERENTZ: We get some notices from other people about -- so, yeah, obviously the season is open because we've heard from some people that so and so just came up.

We haven't talked to a great extent about our roster. We normally would be doing that right now. We'd be talking to our players a year ago, that's what we were doing this week.

We're in the middle of game competition. I'm one person that believes, state and church, whatever they say, keep them separate.

But right now we're just in a football mode. We'll start having those discussions after this game, find out what's going on. The guys in personnel are keeping track of that. We don't even know what we're interested in looking at at this point.

Obviously if there's somebody that's out there that's a good player that has an interest in us, those guys will deal with that. But that's a story for a different day.

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