

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs Tennessee

Monday, January 1, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Joe Evans

Press Conference



Tennessee 35, Iowa 0

KIRK FERENTZ: Okay. Well, certainly disappointing end to a really special season and a really special group of people. Our players, our staff, just thought they did a phenomenal job all year long. I am just really proud of their efforts, going back to January, but certainly, since we got going in August.

Yeah, we competed. I thought we prepared well. Obviously, we just were not up to it. Tennessee played an outstanding game. Awful lot of credit to our opponent. Clearly the self-inflicted things, the things that you cannot do if you are going to win football games, whether it is not making the makeables offensively, penalties, penalties at inopportune times, and turnovers is as important a stat as there and certainly back to the game today.

That part was disappointing. Their offense, they are really well-coached, and they really present some unique challenges for our defensive football team. I thought we gave up a couple drives there, but settled in and were doing a lot of good things there. They are a tough challenge. There' is no question about that.

So just questions about the future, all that stuff, really not worried too much about that right now. Do not want to get too global with my thinking, but my thoughts are really with these players and the stories that they are, especially our senior class. It has been a great, great group of guys, and Joe is representative of that, stayed for his sixth year. Just hard-working guys that really care about the right things. They have been great teammates, and then these guys have been great, great leaders.

It is always tough when you have to say good-bye to the guys that played their final game. Some guys are going

the NFL. Some guys are going to certainly attempt for that, and wish them the best.

At some point everybody gets on to their adult life and their life's work, and I am really confident that they will all do really well. They are all just top-notch guys. Just appreciate their efforts, the leadership they gave us, everything they have done.

Yeah, just really proud of our football team. Disappointing today. Never feels good after a loss. Cannot remember one. If you do this, compete, any time you go out there, it could go this way. The game is humbling. Always has been. Always will be.

I have to encourage everybody to step back. It is a ten-win season, Big Ten West champs and a lot of really good moments, and these guys have really overcome a lot of adversity and a lot of unique challenges. Those are things that will really serve them well moving forward as they go into their adult lives. For the guys coming back, we will build off this, but just really proud of everybody.

Q. Joe, this one is for you. What more could you have done defensively as a unit?

JOE EVANS: I think we could have, honestly, handled their tempo better. We tried to emulate that in practice. It is a tough thing to do. When they are getting a play off every 10 seconds, every 15 seconds, definitely think that we could have done a better job of that. Stopping the run. We were playing with a light box, but I think we could have done a better job there. From my standpoint and the defensive line, just playing better with our hands the fundamentals and stuff.

Q. At what point were you thinking at all about -- at halftime about inserting Marco Lainez into the lineup, and what did you think of the spark that he seemed to provide for your team once he was playing?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I do not know if it is critical when we thought of it. We came into the game considering it. Marco has done a really good job. The improvement he has made, he basically started with us in August. So the

improvement he has made, it has been really impressive. He us a great young guy. Great attitude.

It is hard to practice three quarterbacks. He certainly got work as the season went on, but he still has a lot of learning to do, a lot of time in front of him and all those types of things.

Yeah, he went and competed like you think. He has some things to learn. All this will be good experience for him. Something to draw upon and does not burn a year of eligibility, so that is a good thing.

Q. What you said there, you thought about playing Marco in this game or start about starting him in this game?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, not starting. He has practiced well. So, you think about that with all your young guys. We played a couple young backs a little bit today. You think about all the guy, but, obviously, we felt our best chance to win, because we started Deacon and played Deacon the majority of the game. We thought that gave us our best chance to win. At some point, you just felt like making a change to be the best thing. That is what drives every personnel decision.

Q. With a quarterback like Nico, obviously he's well-regarded, five-star coming in, what kind of challenges did he present in terms of the fact of just how mobile he was? And then to follow that up, Kirk, speaking about Marco, did you like that added dynamic he brought in terms of the mobility there as well?

JOE EVANS: Yeah, he definitely presented a lot of challenges. When you talk about you have to defend two facets, whether it be in the passing game or in the running game, it is definitely a lot tougher, and he is a very mobile guy, and you were able to see that today.

I mean, hats off to them. Hats off to their team. They played a really well-played game.

KIRK FERENTZ: Do you want me to finish that question, too? Yeah, anybody that can run at any position is a good thing. Again, he is a young player. He has lot to learn. He has a good future. Got good throwing skills, running skills.

Deacon has, obviously, got a lot of experience through the season. Deacon has done a lot of good things for us. That was kind of the decision. We will let everybody compete in the spring and see where it all goes.

Q. I believe it's 14 quarters that you've been scoreless

against ranked opponents. What do you attribute that consistent problem from this year to last year? What do you attribute it to offensively?

KIRK FERENTZ: Offense is pretty complicated. It is a team effort. I will just say this, and again, I do not want to get too global on things. We have played some top teams and we have been a Top-10 team, so I think we know what it takes and what is required. Typically for us, at least, the last 25 years, everything has got to work together, and certainly it did not and did not today; it is pretty obvious out there.

Usually, whether it is this year or 1999 if you turn the ball over, if you have negative yardage plays, if you do not make the makeable plays, it is going to be tough, unless you have great personnel. That is kind of the nature of football. It starts with those things, but, obviously, the players and experience all factors into that.

We have played at that level. We have played teams at that level. We have beaten teams at that level. It is not like we are talking about something that none of us are aware of. We have to better, and we will. That is the plan. We will start work in about two weeks.

Q. That first opening couple of series, great punt from Tory, and then pinning them deep and then getting the ball back inside their 50-yard line and you able to drive downfield, and pretty much almost put it in. How big was that interception?

KIRK FERENTZ: That is a real good example, that is who we are, our margin for victory. This year – it has pretty much been that way for 20-some years. This year, for sure, we have to thread the needle.

When you do get good field position and then take it down inside and give yourself a chance to come out with a touchdown, and do not, that is not good, and the worst offense was not getting any points. Big difference between three and seven – it is obviously four – just to start building some momentum. That is a good example.

Then I think it was shortly thereafter, we missed a chance to pin them down, which is uncharacteristic, too. They get the ball at the 20. Little things like that are big factors in football games. The world we live in, we have to really pay close attention to that so when you do get down there, it kills momentum and that is where those turnovers – there is no good place for a turnover. We had one at the other end, and that was kind of the game was over at that point, and we give them the ball on the two-yard line.

All those little things are really critical.

Q. Nobody in the history of college football has more punting yards than Taylor. How impressive is that feat to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think I have said it many times. First of all, Tory is just an exceptional young guy. Came here, was really naïve to college football. There are not many of them around in our country. Just fans, everybody, everybody was an expert on football. This guy had no knowledge, so I will never forget that, the first game at Purdue during the pandemic.

He has a strong leg. Obviously, could kick a ball. Punt a ball. But what he has done over four years' time, the way he has refined his skills, the way he has developed just the repertoire of different ways to punt, it is very impressive. Then most impressively I think is the work ethic that he displayed, because you do not do those things by accident. It is true, at every position, to truly master what you do, it takes a lot of work. I do not care if you're 34 years old and still playing, there is always work to do.

I think that is the biggest thing I will take away with Tory is his work ethic, his attention to detail, the pride that he has, pride in his performance. By doing all those things, he is like all these seniors. He is set a great example for younger guys, not just punters, but anybody that's paying attention, I think this guy is the best in the country.

So how did that happen? Did not just fall out of the sky. That is what you learn in the game is people get good through hard work, through detail, perseverance. Not everybody has a great day. That is how you get good at anything. When guys, Joe, Tory, I can go right down all these guys as seniors, that is the bar they have set. They have been really good examples for young guys. I just hope like hell the young guys are paying attention. Some pay attention a little better than not. Jay Higgins is a great example. He learned a hell of a lot from some is of the guys that were in front of him and playing his tail off.

Q. I noticed after the quarterback change, Hill took off his helmet and put a metaphorical arm around Marco and stayed that way. You've been around football a long time. Is that significant? And if so, how significant is that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that is who our guys are. It is who our guys are. I will go back to earlier, when things were not going as good, Deacon struggled, obviously, it was tough for him. It is a tough thing. You have to understand, he did not have much experience. Explained that earlier.

The one thing that is pretty consistent I think from all of our

players is what they have said about Deacon. Those guys all had respect for him, cared about him. If it was not going well, they supported him. Again, that is part of being on a team.

Today was not his day, all right. The new guy goes in and he is right there. It is about being aware of things, and, again, that is the great thing about football. Like you are not the only guy on the team, and you are not the only guy that is important.

I think for the most part, our guys at least figured that out a little bit, especially these older guys, again. Deacon is not an old guy. I am just really proud of that. That is what you expect and that is what you hope for, but you do not always see it.

Q. Not trying to antagonize you after what you said at the opening remarks, but we are looking ahead after Bowl games every year. Do you know what you want and need the most from your next offensive coordinator?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, things really have not changed much since whatever I said in December or two days ago. First of all, I want a guy who is going to be a really good team player. Obviously, they have to have expertise in their area, like all of our coaches, and they have to be good people. They have to be guys that are going to mentor the players they work. They have to be people that understand a team is a team.

I go back to my time in the '80s, the thing that made Iowa so special, I came from a place where we had ultra talent. We coached a National Championship team down to No. 2, and I will go on record saying that one, mainly, because we had phenomenal players. Marino, you go right down the list. Phenomenal players, but a dysfunctional coaching staff. A lot of guys worried about themselves, their professions, their careers, all that stuff.

I came to Iowa in '81 literally off the pickle boat, and it is just the opposite. We had talent, but not the kind of talent we had at Pitt. We had a staff that was just unbelievably cohesive. The bottom line is the guys all cared about one thing: the players they coached and the team being successful.

That is what the game is about. That was as good a nine years of my life as I have had being on that staff.

When I came back here 25 years ago, one goal I had was trying to get people, good coaches, but people -- and you know, couple experts killed me on our first staff, right, Joe Philbin, Norm Parker, Vanderbilt, all that stuff. You try to

hire the right people, that is all, and then everybody has to work together and move forward.

What we do is not rocket science. Again, we are not saving lives or any of that stuff. We are coaching football.

How they are in front of the players, critical. How they are with each other, critical. Obviously, they have to be great representatives of university. We coach in college, not an NFL team, so there is a responsibility there. What you do in the community, go right down the list. That stuff is important. There are a lot of things that are important.

Read somewhere earlier that voices are big, you have to get it done, all that kind of stuff. I just want to get it right. That is my responsibility as head coach is to get it right, period. Get the best guy we can get.

And I feel like great about it, but that is another story for another day, too, and get back to Iowa and start working on that in earnest as well. My focus has been more so on our team, because that is really my No. 1 responsibility.

Hate to keep saying "me" or "I," but anyway, you get the idea. Thanks.

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