

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Thursday, April 18, 2024

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

LeVar Woods

Press Conference

LEVAR WOODS: First and foremost, thank you guys for being here. I know a lot of you guys, see a lot of faces. A lot of you guys are doing extra work, been spending a bunch of time covering women's basketball, right, and watching our basketball team. Phenomenal run, awesome to see all that. I know a lot of you guys pulled double duty away from home for quite a while. It's a pretty cool experience as an alum, as a fan of Iowa sports, and as I mentioned as an alum watching that whole thing. I know you guys were all front and center for that.

But a little bit, we're in practice 14 of spring football; we had that this morning. I thought it was a good practice overall from special teams standpoint. We saw some guys make a jump.

It's a different year, a new year, new room that we have in regards to the specialists. Have six players within the room replacing three players. Only two guys that have any playing experience at the college level, so that's interesting, as you can imagine as a coach. But I feel like we have a really good strong culture of special teams here at this university within the program but then also within -- strong culture within our specialist room right now.

I think just want to try to keep that going with the guys that we have within the room.

Anytime you lose a player of Tory Taylor's caliber, you can never replace a player like that. You can never replace the player or the person, but the role does need to be filled. So that's going to -- there's a battle for that right now, obviously. We have that going on.

We have the battle at long snapper going on, and then also at kicker. So again, new faces, all sorts of stuff going on.

Phil just talked about a gunner and Cooper DeJean that's also leaving us, so there's plenty of opportunity out there. Anytime there's change that we have going on, there's an opportunity for growth. So we're looking for that right now, and that's what we've been focused on here the first 14 practices of spring, and hopefully have a good one here on



Saturday.

A lot is going on on special teams. Any questions you guys may have, happy to answer.

Q. Before we get to the other guys, the guy who did hold last year, Tory Taylor, how many calls have you been fielding for him on the NFL Draft? It's crazy how much love there is out there for him at the NFL, but not surprising, I guess. What do you think he's going to be like at the next level?

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, quite a bit of calls on the guy. More so about what is he like as a person. I think you watch the tape, you watch his workout at the Senior Bowl, you watch his workout at the combine, everything I've heard has been nothing but positive.

I think it's going to be really what it comes down with the market, at the pro level, at the NFL level, and what jobs are available, what's opening or what is open currently for him.

The sky's the limit for Tory as a player and as a person, and you guys all got a chance to see him, watch him really grow right in front of your eyes. Even though he came here at 22, he was still very young and very green. A lot of opportunity for him ahead of him.

Q. Rhys now, you've had 14 practices with him. What's stood out to you the most about his punting?

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I think with Rhys, he and Tory are very different. I think a lot of similarities are going to try to be put on them because they're both from Australia. They're both from Melbourne. They both came from the same coach. They're very different.

I think what we've seen so far with him is he's a very talented young man, but he's also young and green. You think about the differences, Tory came in at 22 years old, and a lot of us graduated college at 22 years old. He was beginning college.

As you can imagine putting yourself back in those shoes at 22, you're much more mature at that age than you are at 18 or 19 when you enter college.

Rhys is entering college at 19, so some of those immaturity

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

things in comparison show up. But I think Rhys is going to be fine. He's incredibly talented. He has a very bright future.

Q. In so many ways, strategically, Tory was even more than a weapon. He was part of the game plan it seemed like for the entire team, not just for special teams. In what ways -- it doesn't seem right that you would apply that type of pressure to a punter to do the same things Tory did, but also it's part of the overall team plan. How would you be able to entrust a punter like Rhys to do some of the same things, or if it's not Rhys, and in what ways could that punter -- I guess some of the angled punting and that sort of thing, how do they fit into the scheme right now?

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I think both Ty Nissen and Rhys Dakin, both of those guys have capabilities to do the shots the Tory did. Now, the difference is going to be Tory has done it a lot longer. He was a little bit more skilled, a little bit more adept at it at this current moment.

But I think it's all out there. They're all capable of doing it.

As we get going, get a better feel for their shots, the shots that they prefer, I think we'll put a good game plan together.

It's kind of likening it to golf. The Masters was just last weekend. You're watching. Some guys are playing a 50-degree wedge, some are playing a 52, some are 48. Those things are different.

It all comes down to the punter or the golfer, if you will, and what their best stroke is. When you talk about angles punting or pinning people inside the 10, whatever their best shot is that we figure out over 15 practices and then through the summer, that's how we'll build our game plan moving forward.

Q. LeVar, with Drew Stevens, great first half of last season; a little bit of turbulence down the stretch. How have you helped him navigate that come into this season and I guess the competition that he's got at that position going into the fall?

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I think with Drew, what we're seeing right now is a much more mature version of Drew, as it stands today, a much more humbled version of Drew. He got humbled very hard last year. You guys all saw it and you all watched it, but I think he's a different kid right now.

I say, use the term kid. When Drew first came here, he began when he should have been in high school. He came

here as a second semester -- his first semester on campus would have been his last semester in high school. So he came here as an 18 year old kid, and then all of a sudden he comes in and kicks really well as a freshman. So he had wild success right away.

I think that can fool a person very quickly. You see in pro sports all the time, a rookie comes in, sets the world on fire, and then all of a sudden the sophomore is not quite the same or their second season not the same. I think some of that happened with Drew.

But I think you're seeing a more mature version of him, the way he thinks, the way he talks, the way he approaches his business is much different than last year.

So I think over the course of time, 14 practices now, 15 on Saturday, he's definitely working through some things swing-wise, but I think as we get going, we're going to see a different guy with Drew.

I think the things we've been working on more so are getting better consistent ball contact. The strength is there. Again, looking at it like golf, he can smoke the ball.

But you watch some of these guys that get in those long drive competitions, sometimes it's straight, sometimes it's left, sometimes it's right, but they're smoking the ball. Now we're trying to get a guy to play in the fairway more consistently all the time.

I think it's in there with him. The leg strength is in there. Now it's the maturity of not having to hit a 65-yard field goal every time he lines up there.

I think it'll be fun to watch with him because again, he's talented, he's capable, and the culture within the room I think is going to push him forward.

Q. Wanted to ask about return game with kicking and punting. I know Kaden held that down especially after Cooper got hurt last year. Is that the expectation going into this spring game on Saturday and maybe potentially the fall, and who else is in that mix if not?

LEVAR WOODS: I think the position is open. Both kick return and punt return. If you look at kick return, the first return of the year last year went for, I think, 52, 54 yards. That was Kaleb Johnson. It was the longest one we had of the year.

So Kaleb Johnson is definitely capable. We also saw that from him his freshman year. Then he got nicked up, banged up, and Kaden Wetjen stepped in and did a really good job with that. But the competition is open. Those two

guys, I think they're competing for that position.

I also think Terrell Washington is a young guy that you see him with the ball in thinks hands, he does some good stuff. Kamari Moulton in that mix. Zach Lutmer is a new name that could be in that mix, as well.

If you're talking about punt returning, Kaden Wetjen has been back there the most so far in spring. Kaden, also Alec Wick, and then the same cast of characters I mentioned before as punt returner.

It's a thing that's ongoing. Again, we don't install scheme right now in the return game during spring, but we work on the fundamentals and try to push that forward to get into fall camp.

Q. I want to ask about Rhys as a holder. With the punter that comes in, assuming he gets the starting punting job, is he automatically going to be the holder right away, and how much of your practices go into helping make sure that that transition happens, that he's a capable holder versus transitioning to just being an American football punter, as well?

LEVAR WOODS: As far as the holder goes, the best guy is going to get the job. It's not going to be because he is the starting punter that he is the starting holder, sort of like we flirted with Cooper years ago, right. Some other guys we're flirting with, okay, just so you know. Some other guys we're flirting with.

But it's going to come down to can they execute and is the kicker comfortable with him holding to make place kicks.

But overall I think guys that are working at it, Ty Nissen has done a really good job. I'd say currently right now, he he has the upper hand.

And then Rhys has done a fine job with it, as well. It's going to take reps for him because it's not something he's really done in a game before. Neither has Ty here at Iowa, but he's done it before in both high school and junior college.

Q. Gunners, is John Nestor a guy you're looking at there?

LEVAR WOODS: John Nestor has done a really, really good job this spring. It's been fun to watch him grow. He's still a freshman in college right now, right. But just watching him each practice, whether it's on defense or on special teams or working as a gunner, he's growing tremendously. He's a guy I could see out there. Zach Lutmer is a guy that played in the bowl game, did a really

good job at the gunner position, as well. Koen Entringer when he makes his return, I think we all saw his effort and his energy and his speed at the Big Ten Championship game. I really wish he tackled it on the other 6-yard line rather than our 6-yard line, but you can see the ability there.

I think those three guys, and before he got hurt last year, TJ Hall, believe it or not, was actually leading the gunners in tackles in front of Cooper. So those are four guys right there that we feel really good about.

I also feel like there's other guys in there, Deshaun Lee is a guy working at that. I mentioned Terrell Washington before as an offensive player. I think Jarriett Buie is coming along at that position, as well.

There are guys out there, and it's been fun watching. I think as we get into fall camp and things pick up, the pace picks up a little bit, it'll be really interesting to see how it goes.

But again, that's a good list right now that we have, guys that have been busting their butt, and the other guy in there, I truly overlooked was Deavin Hilson, played for us there last year. Deavin if you haven't heard already had like a career day in practice today, so it was fun to watch him and see him back there.

Q. When you go about evaluating kick return, punt return, what are some of the criteria you look at as, hey, these are really important when it comes to who we're deciding is going to be back there?

LEVAR WOODS: So punt returner, kick returner, first and foremost how you field the ball. That also comes into decision making; do you make a good decision, particularly in punt return, should I fair catch this or field this and go, and as a kick returner, we're looking for guys that can field it and hit the thing as fast as they can because it's a little bit different game, different hang time, different return opportunities, but those are first and foremost the things we're looking at.

Then it comes down to how hard they run and then can they make yards and do they have the ability to go the distance.

Q. We didn't see any fakes last year --

LEVAR WOODS: They were called and then the look did not present itself.

Q. My question is on Drew Stevens. Obviously he got benched, or whatever, in the Nebraska game, and then

you guys didn't score another point or even attempt to kick the rest of the year. What did you see in that process because we didn't get to see him kick other than warm-ups from Nebraska until now. How was that mental growth up until the bowl game? Did he make that progress you needed?

LEVAR WOODS: I think what you're talking about as a kicker and as a competitor, which Drew is an ultimate competitor, if you know anything about him, if you ever talk to him, there's a little fire in there. There's a tiger inside Drew Stevens, and that's tough for a competitor.

You ever talk to elite specialists, like Nate Kaeding is a good example for that. Missing a kick and then not having another opportunity for a game, let alone for months, it's hard to deal with. But I think Drew has had a very mature approach to it. I think he's really dialed in. I think he's trying to figure it out, and he's done an excellent job with that.

I think he's also taken a better approach to the mental side of kicking, and a lot of that work has come with Carmen Priebe-Tebbe, who's our sports psychologist; does an awesome job. Players love her to death. She's been very instrumental within our room, and so I think he's really taken to that, which maybe he didn't before. He wasn't quite a believer in some of the tactics that she uses.

But I think he's doing that now, and we're seeing growth.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.