

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Tyler Barnes

Press Conference



develop and come along.

Overall I am excited about the entire group. It is different, a different time right now, the way recruiting is going, but I think one thing that hasn't changed, it's still about fit for us, and we're trying to do the best we can in terms of evaluating prospects or their families' backgrounds, etc., and the themes really don't change.

We're looking for players that we think truly love the game and love working at the game, guys that have a high level of pride, guys that are willing to put the team ahead of their own wishes and desires. Obviously it takes physical and mental toughness to do anything that's hard to do, and being good in college football is that.

Not only handling the work but also working through tough times, that's a big part of the game.

I am excited about the guys. First taste we got of it last week when we had our first team meeting a week ago, 15 days ago. Welcomed 11 newcomers, which is a higher number than what we've had the last several years. It has been probably three to eight, something like that, and all those guys were early entries from high school.

This time was just very different. We had two early entries, two guys coming that were Iowa high school football players that played at Iowa Western, and then seven newcomers coming from four-year schools, so clearly a contrast from my years past.

A little different dynamic for us in terms of chemistry, how they come into the program, the levels they're at. Typically obviously coming right out of high school it's a different level of training when you start in with the strength and conditioning program. It's a whole different deal, and I think the bonus from our vantage point is you're getting some guys, especially the guys from the four-year schools, that are a little bit more mature, a little bit more further down the road than maybe someone just coming in a semester where they might be finishing up their high school year and going to the prom.

It's a little bit different from that.

The other thing I'd just add, I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about recruits. I think probably our three best recruits were

KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon to everybody. Appreciate you being here, and it is good to be here for us. We finished up a couple weeks on the road, so it's always good to get back and kind of get reacquainted with everybody in the building.

That always happens at a bad time. Our players get here and then a quick team meeting and we depart. It's kind of the way it works.

Anyway, as Steve mentioned, I'd like to have a chance to talk briefly about the recruiting class in its entirety. I'll give you some details about that group and then talk a little bit about last year and move on to this coming year, give you some information.

First and foremost, obviously I feel good about the entire recruiting class. As you guys are well aware, the whole process has changed a great deal and continues to change, so it's a pretty fluid process.

I am happy about the guys that we've been able to put together in this class. The major announcement was back in December. This is more of a formality, this signing date, the traditional signing date, if you will.

There's still some movement. We've had some players join us that we can't talk about yet and then other guys that have signed their papers from a walk-on standpoint.

One thing I would emphasize is that's an important part of our recruiting. I think all of you know that have been following the program historically just the kind of success we've had from walk-ons. It starts with the recruiting, getting the right guys.

I've had a chance to meet several young guys that we're impressed with just to have a chance to do some really great things. Once our guys are in the program, they're in the program, so that's something we always try to sell and that's something we really look forward to seeing how they



Nico Ragaini, Noah Shannon, Joe Evans. Having those three guys come back as sixth-year players, be tough to first of all, recruit players like that with their experience level, and I think the other part about it that's key, just the leadership. That's something -- we had a good football team last year, a team with very strong leadership, to get guys back.

That's really big, and it's critical if we're going to move forward and have success. I am happy about that.

Again, I'm pleased with things. I want Tyler to come up and elaborate a little bit. But again, I think we've had good success. Happy where we are. Basically it's 10 guys that are a little bit older, and then 34 guys coming from high school.

I'll let Tyler elaborate a little bit.

TYLER BARNES: Good afternoon. Just to touch a little bit on what coach said, obviously we signed a bulk of our class in December and had a chance to meet with everybody and talk a little bit further about that class and signed a few guys today.

But in between there, not really lost in the mix but didn't have quite the fanfare, we had six more guys that started in January. Now we have a five-day open period early January, so as soon as we get back from the bowl game where mid-year transfers have a chance to visit us and have a chance to continue that recruiting process. And those three scholarship guys: Seth Anderson, receiver from Charleston Southern. Actually same high school as Tyler Goodson, former running back here, so a little bit of connection here. Deacon Hill, quarterback from Wisconsin who we've had some familiarity with. And then lastly, Dajion Parker, who is from Detroit area was actually headed to Virginia. Was trying to educate you guys on the rules in December on how that worked. I told you we weren't quite done yet and we felt pretty good about Dajion. He had a connection to Kaevon Merriweather, they actually played AAU basketball with him growing up the whole time. He was a kid we felt really strongly about on film.

And then three, a walk-on transfer, you know, Jackson Filer, who is an Iowa kid. Dowling Catholic from Iowa Western. Austin Kutscher, a wide receiver from Ohio State. We've had some connections with his high school staff from Massillon Washington and Ohio. And then lastly, Hayden Large, who is originally from Grand Rapids Michigan. Was at Dordt. He kind of fell through the cracks a little bit, Hayden did. He had an injury his junior year in high school, which kind of put his recruitment off the rails a little bit. Ended up at Dordt, and a big kid felt we good

about taking.

So those are the six that joined us in between the two signing periods, if you will.

Obviously we get to today. We announced two guys we signed today scholarship-wise, Grant Leeper, tight end from Fort Wayne, Indiana. Grant was somebody Coach Bell saw early in the fall. He was a former basketball player. Had played football like peewee days, but hadn't played in high school at all. Coach Bell caught his eye a little bit, kind of liked what he saw. As we got through the season, started talking a little bit more and more about our needs and where we were going.

We had a chance to get Grant in the boat. He was here this past weekend and is a great kid from an awesome family. He's going to be a big kid and was a really good basketball player, as well. You guys follow our tight end recruiting history, typically our best ones are pretty good hoopers. It's a good thing to have.

And then Rusty Feth, who was an offensive line graduate transfer. He's actually finishing his degree this spring at Miami of Ohio and he'll be out here in June. Coach Barnett recruited him out of high school when he was at Miami as the O-line coach coaching for a couple years, so once he hit the portal, we tried to move kind of quick on that. We brought him out this weekend and got that done there.

As coach said, we had a few more walk-ons today that we announced, and there are a few we can't talk about just yet, but what's been unique, since I've been back here, 44 guys, new guys that will be on the team from start of January to June.

That's a big, big number. And have different categories. As I was telling Steve earlier, as we were going through announcing all these guys today, it's interesting, because it used to be two categories. Used to be the guys you sign in December, the guys in February, you had your scholarship guys and your walk-ons, and now we've got the transfers that signed in December here and January. You got the guys that were here in January that started in January during what used to be a dead period.

And then you have your mix of guys here, and just the way the portal is working, the way recruiting is shifting, it has been a long year but a fun year. It's different kind of putting together the roster this year in terms of years past, just kind of how we're putting it together between the portal guys, the grad transfers, all the portal windows, the new open periods, dead periods.

It's been something we've had to shift to a little bit, but you

adapt and adjust, and I think our staff has done a really good job. Just echo what coach said, I know everybody loves who's coming out of the transfer portal, what are the high school kids you're getting, but I'm with coach, the three biggest recruits I think we got are Nico, Joe, and Noah.

Those are three guys that are going into their sixth year here that have given their blood, sweat, and tears to this program. I can't take credit for recruiting those guys back, but I was certainly in their ear the entire week down in Nashville and for a few days post bowl game.

But when you can get guys to come back like that, that speaks volumes to who we are as a program, and then just from a leadership standpoint, what those guys provide. They know our program. They can help bring along young guys. I think that's really important and pretty special.

I think you guys can probably help me, I think we have two more years of guys with COVID years left, I believe. So once we get to that, we'll see what the next rule that changes is and getting guys an extra year. It's certainly good to have those guys back.

With that, I'll open it up any questions you guys have about really anybody in the class either way from December or the guys that have joined us just recently.

Q. Seth Anderson, how did that come about, and what do you think he brings to this team?

TYLER BARNES: Yeah, so Seth is interesting. He was up for the Jerry Rice Award, FCS Receiver of the Year from North Gwinnett, so it was nice to have that connection.

When I'm going through the portal and digging through guys before I went to the coaching staff, I'm a big production guy. It's a little bit different with offensive lineman. They don't really measure production, but everywhere else there is going to be some type of production, numbers to back up your production, and Seth had a really good year down there.

As we dug more into background and what he was about, he was a high school wrestler. I think we were talking with coach, I think Chic Ejiasi was the last skill guy to come here that was a high school wrestler. Typically you're semi-skill and your big guys are the wrestlers, not very often are your skill guys.

But his dad was a high school wrestler from the northeast, so that's kind of where it was engrained into him. I really didn't think wrestling existed in Georgia, so that kind of surprised me. His dad, Flipper Anderson, played in the

NFL for a long time. Played at UCLA with Troy Aikman. Still has, to this day, the single season record for most receiving yards in the game, which I think is like 336. I think that's probably safe for now.

But then when you meet the family and you talk to the kid, he's a great kid, big smile, big personality, and the type of guy we like to go after. He's a guy that he thought he could play at a higher level. He has a little bit of a chip on his shoulder. He has something to prove. The production, again, this past year was something that we liked, and getting him out here, he's been here now two weeks, seems like everything is good so far.

Anytime you can add any type of depth into that room and create competition in any room, that's a good thing.

Q. How did the Deacon Hill situation come about?

TYLER BARNES: Unfortunately Carson May decided to transfer after the bowl game, and with Cade coming off an injury, I'm not 100 percent sure when he's going to be ready, so we were down to one quarterback again. Tough to go through spring ball that way. You always like to have four scholarship quarterbacks in your room, so obviously when Marco gets here in June we'll be at that four number. So we had kind of had conversations if somebody leaves we're going to have to be ready to bring in another guy, so we had our list of potential guys quarterback-wise that maybe we can call on there.

It's somebody that obviously he was in the Big Ten. We knew a little bit about him coming out recruiting wise. It's tough when you take a guy like Cade, it's not like you can go out and find just another bona fide starter. You are going to have to be realistic about what you can go out and get, and Deacon is still young. It's just his second year in college here, just finished his second fall.

I think he liked the fit and kind of the opportunity here.

Q. How much did his familiarity with Jon Budmayr play into effect?

TYLER BARNES: It certainly did. Yeah, it's a familiar face that he knows. Recruited him out of high school and coached him up there for a year, so I think in this day and age, relationships is huge in any part of the recruiting process, whatever you can have.

And that's whether it's from a high school coach to you coaching a guy somewhere else or you just recruiting a guy somewhere else. Relationships are always going to be -- usually they get you in the door with most guys, especially in this world where things move really, really

fast.

If you don't have any familiarity with a guy or his high school coach or somebody in that region, it's going to be tough the way the portal works these days.

Q. The portal process, it seems like speed dating --

TYLER BARNES: Yeah, it can be.

Q. How does that work? You guys are very thorough in how you approach a recruit. It seems like it's just sped up so much.

TYLER BARNES: So it's interesting. As we were finishing our season and we were getting into the open period and the contact period, that was my biggest thing to Coach, is we're going to have to move fast on some of these guys; but we also can't get away from how we operate normally.

We've still got to dig on guys. We've got to ask the right questions. We've got to talk to as many people as possible. But there's definitely a sense of urgency that you have to move within, because if you don't, in the portal you've got one or two days to get the attention of a kid. If you don't, they're on to whatever next school or the other 15 schools that offer them.

I think you guys have seen, if you have the tiniest bit of production at the college level and you enter the transfer portal, you're over-recruited realistically. You're going to get offers from schools that you probably could have never dreamed of coming out of high school.

There is a sense of urgency, but my biggest thing is we're going to have to act fast to get the relationship started, but we still have to dig and make sure we're doing the right things before we decide we're going to sign this kid or take this kid. There's a balancing act to it for sure.

I still don't think -- I don't want to name other schools, but there's some schools that offer 30 receivers in the portal, really the 30 best guys out there, and just kind of throw darts. We're still trying to take a targeted approach to finding the right guys and moving at our pace.

It's probably faster than it has been, but it's kind of the world we live in and we have to do, it but we have to be diligent we have to be thorough. We can't trade that for just bringing in a guy that we just don't know a whole lot about. If he doesn't fit in our locker room, if our players don't like and respect him, it's a wasted scholarship and it can lead to worse things.

Q. As you guys evaluated the portal, when did you

decide to take two offensive linemen and just kind of how that process fit in, and were there any other positions that you're still kind of looking around?

TYLER BARNES: Yeah, so it's always a fluid process from whether you're recruiting high school kids to portal kids. Your board changes all the time. You get through certain portions of the year. Bowl prep is always a good time where you see some younger guys kind of develop and make strides.

We had always kind of talked about it a little bit. Obviously losing Kaydn kind of shifted our focus a little bit on what we were going to do in the portal at that position, so it provided a little sense of urgency.

Again, Dajon was a guy we had been talking to prior to that December signing period that we felt pretty strongly about. And then we still had an open eye. There's always going to be a portion in the year where we may need X, Y, and Z positionally. If a guy pops up and we think he can help our team and provide depth or push guys, we've got to talk about it and make sure.

That's where Rusty came along. This is a guy that Coach Barnett had a ton of familiarity with. Recruited the kid, coached him, knows the high school program extremely well. So when Rusty became available, it really was kind of a no-brainer for us. If we can add to the team, we're going to add to the team, and Rusty is a great kid. He's going to fit right in. The offensive line this weekend, they enjoyed him.

So it's very fluid. As me being the guy that has the budget for our scholarship numbers every year, I would love if we would just stick to what every number said. That's just not realistic. But again, if we can add somebody that we feel really strongly about and is going to help us as a program regardless of position, then we're going to talk about it as a staff and we're going to move that route.

We have a couple spots left. I think you guys can probably figure those out from social media and the other offers that have come out. But again, that doesn't mean those are the two spots we're going to take.

We'll kind of see what pops up in this next transfer portal window that comes at the end of the spring here, kind of see who's available, and we'll kind of go from there.

Q. How difficult is the scholarship path? Seems like some schools are kind of loading up and then eventually hoping the math is going to figure itself out.

TYLER BARNES: I'm a finance guy. I love numbers. I



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love it. I have a scholarship grid that Coach Ferentz probably hates because the writing on it is tiny, because everything that's going on on the roster is on there.

I think it's fun. It's not hard. You've just got to be reasonable. Probably the hardest is when you're going in to talk to a position coach or a coordinator and they're really sold on this guy, but I've got to tell them like, hey, we're already two over that spot. I love them too and I love you, but like you're already credit card spending.

When you take one away from one spot, when you're over spending your spot, you're taking that spot away from another position. There's a give and take with it, but our staff does a great job. They know what they have. They know where we are at. I try and over-communicate as much as possible with them so they understand that, and obviously I'm not doing anything without Coach Ferentz saying okay, or Phil or Brian.

It's a constant communication, but I enjoy it. It's one of the parts of the job I do really like. It's different. But you kind of see -- I see the roster from a 10,000 foot view, where the coaches are coaching their position rooms or their side of the ball. They see it a little bit different, but that's kind of the recruiting process in general, honestly.

Q. Every year you guys seem to be able to pull several walk-ons who have D1 offers elsewhere and get them to come and walk on at the University of Iowa. How do you guys do that? Is that just because you guys have traditionally -- is that part of the sales pitch?

TYLER BARNES: I think that certainly plays into it. We're unique. You look at our two deeps at any point in the year, it's littered with walk-ons. Some guys that are still walk-ons, some guys that have been put on scholarship. I think we recruit walk-ons a little bit different than most places. We recruit walk-ons just as hard as we recruit scholarship guys, especially those guys that are giving up full rides to other places.

But then again, you look through our history, and when we bring these guys on campus and they have a chance to sit down with Joe Evans, Monte Pottebaum, some of those guys that have come here, given up money to come here and chase their dream and have had success and worked their way towards getting a scholarship and having a chance to play at the next level, it's a selling point.

We're probably not as successful as people say we are. There's some walk-ons we work pretty hard on and we never pressure them. It's a financial decision. We get it. You're giving up a lot of money to chase your dream or prove that you can play at this level.

But we also I think treat walk-ons very differently than a lot of places, too. When these guys step foot in this building, we will have 125 to 126 guys, nobody knows the difference between the walk-ons and the scholarship guys. Really the only difference is one kid paying tuition, the other is not. In terms of the opportunity they have here, all the resources they have within this building, at Gerdin, everything on the field, it's all the same.

I don't think that can be said for a lot of other places, so I think that's part of our Coach Ferentz has built this program, and I think it's definitely a positive for us when it comes to recruiting walk-ons.

Q. Anything that's really kind of stood out to you or surprised you now that you've had the first transfer portal window complete?

TYLER BARNES: No. I wouldn't say anything surprised me. I think at this point you've got to be ready to adapt and adjust. As Coach Ferentz has said and I'll stand by, too, we're going to build this roster through high school recruiting. I think that's the best way you can be sustainable.

I think if you live in the portal and take 8 to 12 to 15 guys a year every year, you're always going to have holes, and it's really hard to sustain a roster that way. This so happens to be a year where we were a little bit more aggressive in the portal, but I can't say it's going to be the same every year moving forward.

Again, we're constantly evaluating our roster and what our needs are and where we may have holes. It depends on your high school recruits, too, and kind of the readiness of those guys, but I don't think there's anything challenging about it.

I think you have to be ready to adapt with the times and kind of figure it out however it can work.

Q. What was it like to talk to Parker and Hill who were committed to other schools, and how did you maintain that relationship through everything because a lot of times maybe high school kids you'd probably just back off for a little while?

TYLER BARNES: Yeah. We will recruit committed guys, whether high school or portal guys, but there's got to be a two-way communication street. Some guys will tell you, hey, I'm good. I'm solid here. Which Daijon did tell me. I was like, again, I'm a numbers guy. I go pull up a lot of comparisons between UVA and University of Iowa. Not just wins, but offensive line development, how far it is from

home, how easy is it for your mom to get here and watch games, cost of travel, hotel, all that stuff and send it to him and say, hey, just take a look at this and let me know if this maybe gets your interest.

Then I also hit Kaevon and told Kaevon to get on him too. Assist to Kaevon there.

But it's got to be a two-way street. We're not going to go out and just try and constantly poach guys, but if we have a need and there's some type of interest, we're going to pursue it until they tell us no, or we get their attention where we get them on campus and continue to recruit them.

Q. Several receivers in that 6'2", 200 plus range, couple guys in the '23 class that you signed in December. Is that body type something that you saw as a specific need, and what are you hoping that they can bring to the receiving room?

TYLER BARNES: I mean, I don't know if we were specifically targeting walk-on receivers in that body type. It always helps to have bigger guys, obviously. But you look at Nico, Nico might be listed as six foot. Nico is 5'11" realistically and he's going to have 120 plus career catches once he starts next fall.

There is a certain body type and skill set that you need for outside versus inside. When it comes to walk-ons and really any of our scholarship guys, we're trying to find best available. Some of these guys, do we need five walk-on receivers? Probably not, but some of these guys, they're recruiting us, and they think they have a chance to come here and play, and when you watch the film, they're probably correct.

Certainly it's good to have length. I think it's good to have length across the entire program, every position you have. Quarterback might be the one kicker where it might not matter that much. The rest of it you obviously want length.

But I think everybody has been talking about that's a trend, are we going to bunch of bigger receivers. We are just going to the best football players we can find realistically.

Q. For Austin Kutscher, coming from Ohio State that catches your eye even if he only played in a couple games. Was that him looking for an opportunity to play, because Ohio State has got some pretty good wide receivers?

TYLER BARNES: I think it was a change of scenery for him. He was a, really, really productive player his junior and senior year in high school, and we have a GA on our

staff who works with the receivers who's from that high school as well, so he had some familiarity there.

I had talked to a couple guys on the Ohio State staff and they have nothing but great things to say about him. I think he just wanted a change of scenery, and maybe in his mind a chance to compete, and we'll see if he can do it here.

Obviously that Ohio State room is a little loaded so I can see why he'd want a change of scenery. Yeah, once we did our homework and checked it out, he was adamant about trying to go somewhere in the Big Ten and just kind of worked out where we were the place.

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll be happy to answer any questions after we talk a little bit about last year.

Like any year, a lot of things we're really proud of this year, and there's certainly things we can improve upon. A couple things just put out there right away, right now we're one of five, one of six, now down to five teams in the country that have won eight games or the equivalent of eight games now consecutively since 2015. So we don't look exactly like those other four, but we're proud of that.

The other component right now over the last five years, we're third in the conference. There's a bunch of teams behind us, two in front of us. I do think that's significant. It's hard to do. Winning is tough at any level and certainly tough in our conference. Everybody in this building can be really proud of that.

Just really complimentary of everybody in the program that's been part of that, and keep pushing forward.

Specifically to the last year, I'll start with the offense. The first eight wins of 2022 in a nutshell was not good enough. It's the bottom line. It wasn't good enough.

The bottom line is the offense is about moving the ball consistently, scoring enough points to win, and the numbers bear out that it wasn't good enough. And the other part about that is we're well aware of that and we own it. Nobody is running from that by any stretch of the imagination.

The whole idea right now is to move forward and fix it. That's where our thoughts are.

Statistically, it's all about winning and losing. At the end of the game that's really what counts. The two things that contributed to that the most are scoring points and stopping points. Then the other thing that's second on the list in my mind is turnover margin and everybody has got a

hand in that stuff.

So those are the ones that we really deem to be the most important thing.

I'd like to talk a little about some of the contributing factors, as I see it, things that affect my thinking and my beliefs as we look forward to improvement as we start right now.

First thing you have to do offensively is start up front. That's where we began in '99 trying to put a team together, was building things from the front, then on both sides of the ball.

If you look at our offensive line right now we weren't where we needed to be a year ago and felt the same way this year. I think we had -- I don't want to say suffered from -- but we were forced to play some guys that probably weren't quite ready to compete at the level we're looking for. It's been part of what we've been battling a little bit.

The facts are that when you can't do things up front, kind of cascades to the entire offense. It's hard to run an offense when you can't block with proficiency. But the one thing I will say about our guys last year is they worked extremely hard. I know they're being well-coached and they have a high level of pride in seeing improvement in both seasons.

I think all you have to do right now is look at our situation last year, in my mind a couple things that stand out. You go back to the COVID class, our first-year guys two years ago, brought six guys in in the class, and Connor Colby is really the only guy that could practice consistently. Fortunately he was here in the spring.

He's the only guy that we really went start to finish. We had an inordinate amount of medical issues to deal with. Basically all five of the guys were affected pretty seriously, in my opinion. One of the six, who we thought had a great future here, couldn't play due to medical reasons and he's done with his career.

So those things have factored in a little bit. I think about a guy like Cody Ince, who is a really good player, good prospect. Chose not to come back for a fifth year, and that was tied into medical issues, too.

We've had some tough circumstances up there, but again, I'd just point to the way the guys have pushed forward, what they've done moving forward, fighting through some tough times, and right now they're poised to really turn the corner and do some good things.

Excited about the two players with college experience, both Daijon and obviously Rusty joining our group. I think that's

going to put us in a better position.

It's something we've tried to address, and we've had a healthy situation. Time will tell on that.

Next thing you can look at are the receiver position, and I would suggest to you right now, if you look at us last spring, we were feeling pretty good about our group. Quite frankly, since that time we experienced a transfer of one of our best players, if not our best receiver transferred out.

You had a guy who showed a lot the previous year as a true freshman who played 13 snaps last year. You have Brody Brecht that we think is a really good prospect, but he's an unusual prospect.

We have a guy with Ben Kueter coming in kind of a similar situation, a multi-sport athlete who's really good in both sports. The bottom line is we didn't have Brody last spring. We didn't have him June, July, or August due to injury, so his practice really started basically our first game week. That was a factor, certainly.

You think about two veterans who came in and ended up with fractures at the start of the season, both Nico and Diante, two guys who we have high aspirations for.

So you factor all that in, that left Arland, of our top six, to shoulder the load out there, if you will. Again, the guys that played did a good job, but it was certainly a challenge.

Tight end, we had one of the best tight ends in the country with Sam. I think we all saw a guy really ascend, Luke Lachey, something we thought we saw in the recruiting process and really got to see it come to fruition last year. Ironic, when Sam was out he really just kind of took over for him right now.

Happy about that, certainly. Encouraged about Addison Ostrenga, his development this year, and then getting Eric in the portal, just an extra benefit. So I feel like we have a really good situation there.

Quarterback situation, I've said this all year pretty consistently, Spencer is a guy we believed in, continue to believe in, but I thought it was really a tough thing to do is evaluate our quarterback with all the moving pieces that we have.

Certainly unfortunate that Spencer has suffered a tough injury, but we feel good right now about Cade joining the program, Deacon joining the program, and I want to compliment Joe one more time for the job he did throughout the month of December. Really did a good job in that game. Experience is going to serve him well now as

he starts to move forward.

I skipped over the running back position, but I thought we were pretty stable there. Of course we had an injury. Gavin had an injury in camp. Had mono during the summer. So the good news is at least two guys emerged and did a good job with Kaleb and Leshon.

But you get the picture. There's a lot of challenges, a lot of moving parts with that group, and you can't predict the future. I think we've done things to help ourselves moving forward, and now we have to do the hard work that's involved.

Defensively, we had a lot of guys play exceptional football. The group collectively played really well. Something I tried to point out to people in December, if you look at it, each group had veteran leadership at all three levels. Our defensive backs, you got a couple guys like Moss and Merriweather, the linebacker group with Seth and Jack.

And then up front had a good group of seniors playing their best football, and it's great to get two of them back.

But you wonder why things worked, that veteran leadership is just so important, that production, but also the leadership that those guys provide. We'll have some work to do as we move forward in that group, but again, getting a couple guys up front back, that certainly is going to help us, and excited about that.

Special teams, I thought we played well for the most part. Certainly, played great in the bowl game. Tory played as well as he's played for us, and great to have him and all of our specialists back.

Great to find a kicker. Drew did an outstanding job, and Luke has done a great job snapping. When we met about our personnel three weeks ago as a staff and detailed everybody out, we have a lot of guys that can contribute and do a good job with our core special teams, and that's paramount for us being successful.

Just like building the offensive line.

So all in all, as I look back, that's what I see. That's what I saw. I think the other thing I'd be remiss if I didn't just talk one more time about the leadership this group gave us or the leadership that they enjoyed, the entire football team enjoyed. Had a bunch of guys that did a great job. When we were sitting there at 3-4 and it was a rough 3-4, not a pretty 3-4, if there is such a thing. To come back and win five out of the last six games, and you could argue those two injuries were pretty critical in the loss. It doesn't just happen, and that's, again, leadership. That's players

taking ownership and doing a great job. That's part of the thing that we have to build as we move forward here trying to get back there.

That's kind of where that's at. We did start our transition, 15 days ago. The guys had our first team meeting. The guys reported first day of class. Winter program is two weeks into it now.

I think you understand and I believe we have a really good environment here that we've created, and it's been great to hear that come back from some of the newcomers. I want to compliment the way they've worked and joined the team, and also want to compliment the way the guys have supported each other. The older guys have done a great job embracing the new guys and supporting them, and certainly looking forward to them starting this process now that we're back on campus and having some time to spend with our players.

That's certainly the best part about what we do.

Coaching staff update: As I stand here today, I anticipate no changes in our staff moving forward. That's my plan certainly. I think we do have a terrific staff, and I thought they did a terrific job last year in tough circumstances and navigated us through I think some big challenges. I thought our guys really coached at a high level, and these two guys have been for getting reacquainted with our players, sitting down individually with all of them by positions, having one-on-one talks with our players.

We'll give the coaches a couple days off and then start the next phase of our program, which is program review, program research, and start planning for the season ahead.

We'll get into that gear on Monday. I'm looking forward to that. I think everybody on the staff is.

Lastly, I'll throw out a couple last thoughts for you. In my office, taped to a pen holder, it's actually something Andy Piro gave me -- I don't know how many years ago. It's the '99 Big Ten standings and to save you the research, we had an upside down perfect record.

We were an 0-8 team in the conference. Had that dramatic win over Northern Illinois for our only victory. I have that there and I see that thing every day. I'm not going to say it motivates me, but it reminds me where we started this whole thing. We were at the bottom looking up at everybody.

It's a good reminder just to in this day and age everything is about microwaved instant gratification, all that kind of

stuff, and the bottom line is back in '99 we started building. We are a little further down the road than we were then, but that's the way we operate. That's the way we have operated, and it's been that way in this program. I can speak to 33 years of the past 40 whatever it is.

That's our mode of operation. I'm really proud of what our guys have accomplished, not just this year, but over the years.

I do believe our best football is in front of us, and that's what we're working towards. That's our goal. That's what we'll start focusing on when we get together here next week, and excited to start the work. That's the best part about it and being around the players.

I'll share this with you. I was a little frustrated in December, portal, NIL, just all the stuff that's going on, and there's days where you wonder, what are we doing here. But the single best thing about what we do is be with our players, and the nice thing about bowl practice is you're on the field a little bit more than a game week, and we needed that time.

But that is the best part, and you guys saw how they handled the challenge down in Nashville. They did a great job.

We're right back to square one, getting ready to start, and happy about that and looking forward to that.

On a more somber note, on behalf of everybody in the department and certainly our football program, express our condolences to the Hansen family. We lost Stew and Lenore this past year, but Stew most recently, and wouldn't be standing here right now in this building certainly without the Hansen's involvement and support.

I think the best thing, and this is something I've experienced over 24 years, not only great supporters and interest in our program, but they've been great friends, just really supportive in a positive way. It's always great to see them and visit with them, things you look forward to.

It's a tough thing for the family, certainly, but I just wanted to express my condolences on behalf of everybody in our program and our department just for all their generosity. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Kirk, you look at the statistics for offense, and 130th in the country, it's the lowest amount of yards for a Big Ten team since you've been here. Why keep the same scheme? Why keep the same people calling the plays and organizing that offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, first of all, I didn't say the same scheme, but it's not going to look radically different. I don't predict anything wild or absurd there. I think we've been pretty consistent in our approach really for 24 years. We own it. We own the stats.

The thing I'm most focused on would be the points because that is what points. Obviously, everything you do offensively goes into that.

When I look back, we've had years like this, and it's not much fun certainly, to win eight games, that's no easy trick when you score 17.8 a game. That's not easy. But I'm optimistic. I think I know the causes, as I covered, for our challenges this year, and we've taken steps already in terms of addressing it.

It's going to help us to be a more veteran line, start right there. It'll help us to be a little bit more veteran outside, and having two tight ends that we think are pretty good football players will take some pressure off the guys outside, and I think we've got a pretty good quarterback right now to help us.

I think we have the right coaches in place, history would prove that. I think we've seen success with this coaching staff, and plan on moving forward. I think we're prime to have a good year.

Q. Is it fair to say you still believe your way on offense works if you just have the right pieces, right personnel? Because there's this narrative that you're going to announce sweeping changes with everything. What do you say to fans that are expecting --

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't pay a lot of attention to what's being said out there, but I am aware when things are being said just because people are telling me. I think a bigger part of the problem probably is how we play. The Purdue game might be an illustration.

We'd built a pretty sizable lead. We were playing well on defense. Really a major part of this you can just put on me, because in my mind right now, it was about winning that game, getting out of there with a win, which we had not done very well the last two times against Purdue.

Looked to me, the way we were playing, the best thing we could do was play fairly conservatively, especially after we got the 24th point. And unless we handed them something easy or gave up a big play, blew a coverage, something like that, it felt like we were going to get out of there with a win.

That's really what I focus on as a head coach, and you play



every circumstance a little bit differently. We were over there a couple years ago, and I can't remember the exact score, but we came out on the short end. It was in the 30s both ways, I believe. There are games you're going to have to play like that, but that's really not to me winning football over a long haul.

I'll share a stat with you. When we score 24 points coincidentally, do you want to venture a guess at our record the last seven, eight years?

Q. It's probably pretty good.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's 55-3, which I think everybody would take that, but nobody likes the 24. That's where the rub really is in my opinion. I'm more focused on the winning, me personally. Until somebody tells me that's not important, that's where we're looking. That's kind of where I operate as a head coach.

Ultimately that's my direction. Just I'm not calling plays for Brian. I'm not calling defenses for Phil. But I think they understand if they're throwing the ball over our heads, that's not a good thing. I think Phil knows that better than anybody.

Q. You're not going to be switching to a spread offense anytime soon?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's probably fair. I would give you another stat, but I don't want to give you that one.

Q. I think along those lines, at 8-5, you've had eight wins since 2014, at least eight every year, but if you had an offense that could have moved the ball a little bit better, might have been in the 10-2, 11-2, 10-3 type of season. What does Brian do well that you think enables you to take these bullets for him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure. First of all, eight is not the goal. I want to go on record saying that. eight is not the goal. 17 is hardly the goal.

I'll transition into one that's kind of interesting. Last year -- and again, I don't listen to a lot, but it just felt like we were on the defensive. We won 10 games and we're on the defensive; 23 points a game last year.

If you look it up, in '09, 23 points, we won 11, won the bowl game, won 11. Everybody seemed like they were pretty happy in '09. Maybe I have dementia. I'm getting a little older. That was my recollection was a happy time, and the parallels are pretty close.

It's interesting in that regard, and the big difference there is

we got beat in the championship in '09 at Ohio State. We got beat last year by Michigan in Indy. Probably the biggest difference is we beat Georgia Tech. It wasn't a great offensive showing, but we played great on defense and gave one up on a pick six.

Last year we didn't win the bowl game, and here's where I am going to go on this whole thing, so I think it's just a better understanding of what functions in a game. Last year we got a four-point lead, we got them at their end in a pretty good position, not a lot of time on the clock, and we give up a big play. Uncharacteristically we gave up a big play. I'm thinking about Purdue in '02, short pass, long run for a touchdown.

So we give up a big play, we get a stop inside, and historically we have done a pretty good job forcing field goals there. Obviously they had to go for the touchdown, and we gave it up, drove the ball, threw a pick.

But I'd also suggest, too, our kicking game was the exact opposite last year. Plus 50, we didn't punt well. We ran a kickoff return out to the 13, one to the 18. Your chance of scoring a touchdown starting on the 13 and 18 go down dramatically.

So my point, I hate to give a long, winding road, but there's a lot that goes into winning besides point stats, all that stuff. Again, I'm not negating the points. Not minimizing that. Not minimizing the yardage. It's important. But I would also look at the first four years he was coordinator, and we averaged 29 points a game.

Based on the stat I gave you earlier, that puts us in a pretty good position, and we had pretty good success in those four years. I'm looking at the players, I'm looking at everything involved, and we all can get better, starting with me. I'm not walking away from that at all.

But I think we've got the right guys. I guess that's what I'm saying, whether it's players, coaches, and eager to get to work.

Q. What was that process after the season? You were talking about going through an extra rigorous evaluation process. What was the process specifically for evaluating Brian?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, yeah, what I just rehearsed right there, just reviewed. Those are the things you look back at.

I'll throw another one at you. I was here in '81, historic year. We go eight years, everybody is happy for the most part, and then 5-6, my last year in '89. The next year they

go to the Rose Bowl, next year they're 10-1-1 to be specific, top-10 team.

If you look back 24 years we've had down periods, years that have been disappointing. We normally rally back. We normally rally back and fix it, and that's always kind of been my attitude. We're all products of our upbringing, I guess, or influences, and I worked for a guy for nine years who there was never a coordinator fired here during my nine years with Coach Fry, and I don't think the next 11, or two and eight I guess it would be, I'm not planning on doing it. I haven't done it.

I grew up in Pittsburgh where they had pretty good success. The thing you learn from the Steelers is they fix things. They don't panic, they fix things. As long as you got the right people. It's like players, too. Good attitude, good work ethic, and you've got to be competent to do what you're going to do.

I have no reason to think there's anybody on our staff that's not competent or not working at it. So what can we do? And the review process of the whole program is starting Monday, but obviously evaluate your staff all the time. That's part of my job.

Q. What does Brian do well when it comes to breaking down a game and calling plays?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I'll lump him and Phil together. Both these guys operate at a real high level. And LeVar has learned to do the same thing. Phil has learned to do the same thing too, I'll preface that. He started in '12. Being a coordinator is a tough job. There is a lot going on. You're responsible for a lot of things, and I think there are things internally we can do better, and we'll start that Monday, too.

But yeah, you've got to process a lot. There's a lot to cover in a week's time, and there's an inordinate amount of work that goes in year-round.

We have football guys on our staff that are all pretty good at that. The rub is recruiting, and I don't expect either coordinator to be real entrenched in the recruiting, especially in-season, because it's impossible. Really impossible.

And quite frankly, we probably all slack a little bit or give something in the recruiting front to make sure we're coaching our team as best we can. I think all the guys are highly capable.

Q. Process-wise, is there anything you anticipate kind of doing behind the scenes differently to kind of right

the ship this time?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think there's examples of us doing it well, and to me, you get tired of hearing me saying it, but it gets down to execution. So either we're not coaching it well enough, we don't have the players capable of doing it well enough, and part of that is how do you help them along a little bit, how do you try to compensate for areas where you know it's tough.

You saw it offensively early in the season, it was difficult. We didn't have a lot of ways to threaten people. That's a tough situation to be in. I'm not sure we've got answers for that. Hopefully we won't be in that situation. It'll really help us if we can control things up front a little bit better.

And we ran that journey two years ago defensively, too. We were pretty young up front, but then mid-season those guys started coming on. I thought this year we were able to operate up front the way we wanted to, and that's a big key of how we play.

Maybe there are ways, go to a spread offense, you take some pressure off your offensive line, but it's just not -- that's not who we are. I've got to see people that are really consistent that are doing that, winning consistently.

And then the other part is you'd better have guys on the outside that can really -- I think if you look at us, we're probably better off, have a better chance of getting where we want to get on the interior.

Q. Just prior to the bowl game Brian was asked if he would give himself a self-evaluation, and he said he believed he did the best with the pieces they had in place. I want your perception of that now that we're about six, seven weeks post.

KIRK FERENTZ: That's what I was alluding to. I think the staff did a great job, because it wasn't easy this year. Not only the challenges I listed for you but also psychological part of the whole thing. When you're 3-4, getting slaughtered from the outside I'm guessing. It doesn't take a genius to figure that one out.

But that's where having a guy like Jack Campbell stand up in front of the world and say, we're together. To have winning teams you have to have guys like that. He's gone, but we've got other guys coming that are really good. I get excited about looking at guys like Deontae Craig, who I think is just getting ready to take off. I look at a guy like Jay Higgins who we've had a chance to see him a lot and he got called into action this year and did a great job.

Saw him make probably the play of the day in our little



dodgeball thing this morning. He made the play of the day. Not that that counts towards football, but winners win. That's just kind of the way it goes.

Q. Looking at Jon Budmayr, somebody that heard from players that has made an impact, what do you foresee for his role going into next year?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't really expand too much, although there's some debate, I guess, in the NCAA about what analysts are allowed to do or not allowed to do, so we'll see where all that goes.

He's been a great resource just for our whole offensive staff, certainly for Brian, working with the quarterbacks, and that was our goal and aim. I didn't quite know what to expect. I know Jon from 100 years ago in recruiting, disappointed we didn't get him, but now he's been here ample time. He's first class. He's a really good man, good coach, and his expertise has been really helpful.

I think it's going to be fun for us Monday, we get to go into the workroom, if you will, and really start kicking things around. We want good debate and good discussion, and if there are better ways, better schemes that we can implement, we're going to do that if it's realistic, and we'll look at that.

It's not like there's a lot of new schemes out there; I'd just qualify that. But it's what fits for us, and I think there are some things that I'm anxious to talk about and look at a little bit.

Q. What are some of those specific things?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, one thing, how can we play action better. I'm a line coach, so that's always my first. Then run the ball better and then build from there.

You have to be -- we're not exactly like a wishbone or a wing-T offense. We'll empty it out and do a lot of things, but I think it's just a better -- you get guys in better positions maybe, and that'll be a discussion, are we doing that, how can we do it better, how can we make there be more clarity in what we're doing for everybody involved.

It's like anything, it's going to be the guy that's the most challenged has to understand it as well as the guys that maybe aren't.

So it's every year there's always something to do, and plus it's 15 days ago was the first time this team has been together. We're entirely different. Have some similarity but very different than a year ago.

Q. There's some unique challenges in the zone blocking scheme, especially now, especially the way it's been interpreted, to also having inexperienced players trying to block that way. Do you anticipate -- obviously not scrapping it, but altering the percentages between gap --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's a really good question, because I'm not anticipating the cut rule to get changed, so it does impact us a little bit, especially on the outside zone, more so on the backside. That's on my list actually about maybe we want to -- we're not going to -- just in simplest forms, you can man block it, pin pull everybody calls it, but man block it, which we'll do some of. It's not our primary but we'll do some of it.

Maybe there's a way to integrate some of that on the backside because you can't -- we're basically the rules makers let defensive guys just run crazy and not play defense, which I'm fundamentally against, only because I'm jealous. I played linebacker, and if you're as slow as I am, you need every edge you can get.

But these guys right now don't have to play blocks, so maybe we need to look at it a little different. Thinking on that, and that's on my list of questions actually.

Q. I know public relations isn't really your job, you're supposed to win football games, but what would you say to fans that were expecting major changes because of stuff they've read on social media, and it's not just the fans saying that, there's been some of us saying it.

KIRK FERENTZ: My wife Mary said it four years ago; if you win, everything is great, and if you lose, it ain't so good. Hate to say she's smart, but she's pretty smart, especially when it comes to football and life.

We're just going to keep trying to get better at what we do. I think we've had a fair amount of success. I just want to make sure everybody understands, we're taking ownership. Nobody is running from this; that would be ridiculous. 17 is not the standard, eight is not the standard.

We started work two weeks ago. The idea is to be a championship-level team, and that's easier to talk about than do, but it takes a lot of things falling right, especially here. It's not easy. But it's doable because we've done it.

That's what we're trying to do. Part of my responsibility is to make judgments on things, and I've never claimed to make 100 percent correct judgments and what have you, but I think we've done enough things well to at least keep going forward. This is just a judgment I made not only on

our offensive positions but our entire staff.

I think we've got a great staff, and I think we're growing, and I think we have a chance to move forward, and we're excited about that.

Q. The fact that Cade has got some mobility, not knocking Spencer, but will that kind of loosen things up for you a little bit, make you more flexible?

KIRK FERENTZ: If you watched this weekend, you could make that argument. You see more of that, but I don't think anybody would turn down Brady or Elway, either, like if you had one of those guys.

We won a lot of games with Nate, who was not the most mobile guy, and then Spencer, we won a lot of games and had good success with him in '20. Our offensive numbers were good in '20.

You do things based on -- but one thing I do know, the quarterback, whether he's mobile or not mobile, has got to be able to make some throws. If he can't do that, it's going to be tough. You think about a guy like Beathard, you had the best of both worlds. CJ could make plays with his feet. Probably the smartest play he made was getting down, calling the time-out as he's going down. That's what a quarterback does, whether it's athletic or not, and that was just a great quarterback play.

But yeah, we were always going to try to get the best guy and fit what he can do best.

Cade is a little bit more mobile, so yeah, will look a little different. Joe is certainly a little bit more mobile and, he'll probably know the plays better next fall, so that's a good thing, and Deacon is probably a little different and somewhere in between.

Q. Cade is a pretty veteran guy, so are you going to kind of pick his brain maybe about things that he likes to do or things that he's good at when you're kind of formulating what you're going to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure, absolutely, and not to give too much commentary, but their offense, the offense he played in two years ago and looked the same to me this year, hopefully there's some parallels between the way we like to play and what I saw those guys do.

But first thing I'll tell you about the last two years, they've been blocking guys on both sides, both years. Different players. They had a portal guy who ended up winning the Outland and the Rimington; that's a pretty good deal. As I understand it, he's a walk-on, I believe - I think that's

correct - at Virginia. I think that's correct.

Yeah, I mean, that's where it starts, though. You have to do that. But every player in our program, they have some ideas, and I tell our guys on anything in the program, you got ideas, bring them forward. We'll consider them and talk about them.

Certainly the quarterback, there's got to be a comfort level. But I think as he was selecting schools, he had choices, too, and I think he was looking for a place where he felt like he could be comfortable, and I think that meshed out pretty well for us.

Q. Any players that you've been able to elevate from walk-on to scholarship?

KIRK FERENTZ: A couple in the process, if you will. Our specialists, the guys that were not on scholarship, we're going to do our best to get them on there as soon as we can. Obviously Drew has earned it, and Luke Elkin, both those guys, and that process is ongoing. But we try to treat every walk-on -- if you're in our program, you're in our program. You eat the same food, same locker room, and we coach everybody the same way, so it's all about what you do with the opportunity, and I think that's one reason we've been able to attract good walk-ons is because they know they're going to get a shot here and they'll get treated fairly and coached.

One thing I'm excited about with us this year, too, our recruiting is just so different now, but I've seen underclassmen the last two weeks out there and in my time in December, but there are two separate high school coaches I have a lot of respect for that told me two guys that are walking on here are as good a players as they've ever had in their programs.

Things like that resonate with me. I guess I learned that from Reese, when people say things like that. I've just got a feeling we'll see that when the guys get here, probably not next year but in time if they've got the right attitude and take advantage of the resources that are here.

That's how these guys become good players. Same thing with our scholarship guys; they've really got to take advantage of resources and work hard. That's what it comes down to.

Q. This is probably I'm assuming the most active that you've been in the transfer portal in your tenure. What has been your vantage point of navigating it this season at this point, and how do you feel about the holes that you've filled, and how much of the experience you gained in December will help you in



spring practice?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, I'll just say this on the front end: It's hard to make sense of this right now. If you factor NIL in, it gets even harder. So you just start from that starting point.

But, and it's dawned on me somewhere during the season, probably by week or whatever, as crazy as the world sometimes looks like it's getting, there's always an opportunity. I talked to our staff about, well, yeah, it's going to be tough, but then you think about, okay, guys in the recent years that we've added to our team, Jack Heflin, Mekhi Sargent, you think about Zach VanValkenburg, and I'll throw another name at you: Coy Cronk. I got a text picture from his dad whatever night that Jacksonville played in the Thursday night. It was Coy's first snaps as a pro. Like he had a bad foot when he was here, and I didn't think he'd ever have a chance. He's hung in there, three years later, so he finally made it to an NFL field.

But what I told the staff is like think about those three guys and what they did for our team, Mekhi, model guy, got beat out, yet stayed positive, great special teams guy, becomes a team captain, basically won the Penn State game for us in 2020, he was the reason we won that game, him and Daviyon.

So there's opportunity, and I think it gets back to what I said earlier about just making sure we do our due diligence and try and find guys that are really are going to be good fits, and I can cherry pick an easy one that I talked about is Daijon Parker. I looked at several guys that are offensive linemen that were being heavily recruited, and thinking about a conversation I had with one guy who was going to an SEC school. But anyway, like George and I are both on the same page; we really liked Daijon and then we met him and talked to him and got his story, it was even better. Basketball guy -- like Kaevon, basketball guy. He thought, he figured out there aren't many 6'5" forwards in major college football or certainly basketball, certainly not in the NBA.

This guy is serious. He's got his degree. He's serious about what he's doing and seems very motivated in the right way, and he's a great young guy. It's like, huh, he's too good to be true. I'd say the same thing about Rusty this past weekend with him here.

Our approach is going to be the same, and it's just part of the world we're living in, so we're going to embrace that and try and do our best job.

Then if NIL gets involved and all that stuff, well, it's the same thing with high school players. There are certain

tiers we're just not going there, and that's been that way in recruiting forever. That's no big deal.

Q. My question is about medicals. Davidkov, is he on medical --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he is. He's not coming back unfortunately.

Q. Justin Britt?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, J.B. is on a medical and will finish his degree. He's here in town. He'll graduate in May. That's the victory there.

And David is doing great in school. He's doing awesome. It's just unfortunate he can't play.

Q. Any others that --

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's it. Hopefully no more. We've had enough medical activity. I hope part of that is pandemic related, but I can't prove that. But it's been a really strange -- the offensive line, I think five out of six guys.

My point there, I'll finish up with that, you think about Jennings and Stephens, like it's supposed to be their redshirt year, back in the day of redshirt years, and then you go five, or four total. It is what it is, and they're both going to be good players, but it just wasn't -- they weren't there yet.

They did some good things. I don't want to sit here and dis them, but just some of the snap decisions you have to make on the field at every position, it takes work. It takes experience, and you've got to be on the field -- Logan Lee is a great example. Logan has been a great kid, good athlete, all that stuff, but he really didn't become a good player until this year because he finally got out there and was able to practice and get the work he did, so he went from being a mechanical guy to now a defensive guy, and that's how this whole thing works, at least here.

You play Georgia, you knock out their running back, that's probably a bad deal because they've got a better guy coming in. Ohio State, the same thing with their receivers. We don't live in that world. I know we're in that list of five, but we don't live in that world. Never have, and I don't have any illusions of us going there unless we -- we're not doing that.

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