

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Saturday, April 22, 2023

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, thank you for being here and covering this. A little bit brisk out there today. Kind of ironic that I would classify this as one of our better weather springs. I think we had five straight days we were out. Pretty tolerable, pretty nice. Not today, not so much. Appreciate the fans that came to be out there, too.

I see two of your associates out there right now on the field wearing sport coats. I think they stayed that way the whole practice. They deserve a medal or maybe they need to get their brains checked. (smiling).

Spring football is a really important phase for our team. Everything we do has purpose. Spring football is an important phase, an enjoyable phase from the coaching standpoint to see guys get a little bit of measurement in terms of what kind of improvement they've had, what kind of growth they're showing.

We finished up the season last year, you come back in in January, a big training period. It's fun to be able to get on the field, see how guys are growing, improving. It's always kind of fun. It gives us a chance to evaluate not only how their football skills are going, what their attitude is, their work ethic, those type of things, ability to concentrate.

One thing I've always enjoyed about spring practice is it's pure football. We're not game planning, not in a rush to get to Saturday. That part is really nice. It's really deliberate. You're teaching football. There's a lot of good meeting time in between workouts, more so than even August. Probably the purest opportunity to get guys to learn. It's fun to see how they respond, improve.

We're hardly a finished product right now, but I believe we have improved. I think the last couple weeks we're seeing things, sometimes just little things, on film, but things that maybe give you some indication that the players are catching on from something maybe they weren't doing well two weeks before or even one week before that. Seen plenty of those things.

It's probably more about the individual growth of a guy, not

so much a cohesive thing. You always have a fair amount of guys that are not practicing in the spring because of injuries, surgeries they may have had in January, that type of thing. Seems to be par for the course. You got that going on.

Even the guys that weren't practicing, there's still an opportunity to get better and improve. I always go back to the Bryan Bulaga illustration. His first year, we didn't play him in our first game, in Soldier Field, going to start him the next game. Shoulder injury. Next week, shoulder. Three or four weeks. I remember distinctly he came back on a Tuesday, made a blitz pickup. Impressive for a kid who is a true freshman. Just told me that he's really paying attention. I always use that illustration to our players: they can be getting better and improve if they are paying attention and taking the coaching that other guys are getting.

Those are the things going on right now. We are a new team, no question about that. We have a lot of work to do, a lot of big leadership void to fill, then obviously we lost some really good players. We're going to see that coming up with the draft this week. Certainly, we wish all the guys the best. Riley Moss, out there talking to him about it. That's a reminder of the leadership we graduated, the quality of players we're graduating. That's the thing we're trying to work on right now, just the chemistry.

Spring ball is a big part of that. It's been fun to watch the newcomers, the 11 guys that joined us, two guys out of high school, then everybody else obviously a little bit older. Interesting to see how they filled in some of the new guys coming up that are going to be filling the voids, see how they progress.

The areas where we were young last year, some of the guys, I think about a guy like Logan Jones, Nick DeJong, they're relatively young as players, the kind of improvement and confidence they have now compared to a year ago. A lot of moving parts. It's been good.

One real positive, I thought about this this morning, last year at this time I don't know if we've seen a worse place kicking exhibition over the course of the spring. This spring has been a flip, both those guys have done a great job. Drew played really well for us, Aaron had a good spring, as well. Last year we weren't sure we had anybody. Now we

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have two guys performing nicely.

I'll field questions about the team but briefly, the next two weeks our guys will finish up the class work and finals come after that. A big point of emphasis for us. They'll be training, but it won't be real intensive. The big thing we want them to finish up academically. They'll get a good break and come back in June. We'll get that next phase started when they get back here early June.

Last couple things just touch on real quickly. Sorry to learn about Don Lund's passing. Our thoughts to the family, certainly.

Also, I want to recognize Steve. I think you guys are all aware he's heading down the homestretch. I want to say how appreciative I am, 33 years that he's been at the university. Done a first-class job. It's been great to work with him the last 25 years. Wish all the best, Steve, congratulations on it. Always good to get out alive (smiling). Congratulations.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. When you look at the offensive line, how much were you able to work? Was it more individual-based work this spring or do you feel there was a cohesion? Was it as much as you wanted?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's probably a mix. You think about a guy like Mason, probably our most experienced guy, being out. Connor was back briefly. Had another mishap. He'll be back. That's good news.

Myslinski was out. We had several guys. Daijon Parker, unfortunately, had one practice, then had an injury to deal with. He'll be back in June, good news there. Kind of a mix of probably four or five guys that would be potentially in the two-deep that weren't able to work.

But the guys that were out there, I thought, did a good job, I thought they made strides. Probably our biggest concern going into spring ball. I think our first practice we had eight healthy linemen, then seven after day one. We've gained some ground coming back. I think we're seeing good, incremental progress.

Beau Stephens and Gennings Dunker, guys we think are good prospects, but they've missed so much time. Fortunately, I think Beau was out there every day. When Gennings got back, he was able to sustain whatever, the last three weeks now. You see the guys growing.

That's what they need, to be on the field practicing, learning how to play. Nick played a lot last year, but finally

he's getting confidence. I thought he practiced really consistently for 15 days and showed good growth.

We haven't seen the whole group together yet, but I'm certainly encouraged with what I've seen. There's still potential for a lot of growth up there, too. I think we're closer to being where we'd like to be. We're not there yet, but we're closer.

Q. Seems like despite not doing 11-on-11, Cade is firmly at the top of the quarterback room. Seems to be a presence. How did you evaluate him this spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go back to December when the whole thing got started. Quarterback is interesting anyway. We've had three guys I can think of real quickly that have left here that were very successful at the schools they went to. There's only one that gets to play. However it shook out where he was at, he became available.

I think personally we were all excited just 'cause we had firsthand experience playing against him. When you're on the field with players, it's kind of like NFL prospects, sometimes you get a really strong feeling about a guy. We had great respect for Cade, the way he played going into the game. We played him in December. Certainly had even more after that.

Now we get to work with him, get him in your building, get to be around him firsthand, on a personal level. To me, he has a lot of the characteristics and qualities you're looking for in a quarterback. You can see why he was successful where he was before.

The fact that he's been on the field and done it, doing it... There's something to be said for doing it. He's got that on his résumé. So he's got a confidence that I think is earned. He's helped bring that to our football team. He has a little edge to him, which is good. Good at every position.

So far so good. He's been a really great addition to our team. I won't speak for everybody on our team, but I think they've all really embraced him, are really glad he's here.

He clearly is our starter right now. It is not a debate. Real happy about him being there.

Q. The tight end room, just watching today, you have so much depth at that position.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we all got to see Luke really start to ascend last year. I'm not saying Sam's injury had anything to do with that, but sometimes law of compensation, whatever. When Sam came back, we had two really good tight ends. But Luke clearly did that.

We thought when we recruited him, he had a chance to be a really good player. He looked like he was 15 when we recruited him. He looks like he's at least 18 now. He's matured physically. I think he's got a confidence that he didn't have before. Talking about Nick DeJong the same way. Saw that last year, just finished.

Erick in that room with the two of them, they've really hit it off well. Seems like they really get along well together. I'm hopeful. Last year we ended up with two really good tight ends. I think you got a chance now to start a season with two guys like that.

Luke is really just climbing the ladder each and every step. It's fun to watch him.

Q. On the defensive line, what have you seen from Pittman and Graves?

KIRK FERENTZ: A little bit like last year where the linebackers were. Some guys out with injury. Both Logan (Lee) and Noah (Shannon) coming off surgeries right now. Aaron is a guy who played well last year. Now year two he's really moving forward. He just goes so hard. It's unusual for a guy that young to have that kind of tempo. That's just how he's wired. It's every day. Like, he has one speed, which is fun.

Then, yeah, Pitt is one of our more improved guys on our football team right now. Great young guy, all that. He was a ways away a year ago at this time, even the fall. But he's taken some good steps. We have good confidence in him now. He's in the mix, so that's good to see.

Q. How did Hayden Large...

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a great question. It's really random. You think about Dordt College. He's from Grand Rapids. With his name, first question for his dad, Is there some Iowa connection? When I met him, I guess in January. Maybe it was December, I can't remember. Anyway, none at all. Just kind of random that that's his name. Usually if a guy is Hayden or Kinnick, there's got to be some Iowa connection.

We were happy to have him join us. I really wasn't quite sure where it was going to go. Unfortunately we've had one injury this spring that Eli Miller is probably not going to be able to play in the fall, out of surgery. He was really doing well. All of a sudden we've got a void there. Hayden was doing okay at tight end. Give that a shot. Seems like he has a feel for it.

Right now I think he can really factor into this whole thing.

Funny how you stumble into things sometimes. Great young man. Very enthused about being here. Great attitude. Really glad he's here. It's kind of random that it all happened.

Q. When people look at football teams, the quarterback is looked at as the leader. With Cade being here, how have you seen him earn the title without pressuring the issue as a transfer?

KIRK FERENTZ: My only encouragement to him when he got here was just to be himself. In short time it will work itself out.

I think we got really good guys on our team. I think they recognize if you're good, you don't have to advertise it typically. Cade has a résumé. He's an assertive guy just by nature I think. My encouragement was just to be who you are, let the process take over.

He was elected as the captain in the Hawkeye Championship competition. We usually don't do that until early February, give the guys a chance to be working, be in the building, everybody get a feel for each other. He did that in pretty short time. I think it's all been pretty organic.

It's just the way he is. I think the guys all respect him. He's totally committed. Works really hard. He's not full speed health-wise, but he's really made a lot of progress. Again, I think the way he does things, the way he is as a football player, really embraced that.

Q. When you look at the secondary right now, year after year they seem to be able to replace the guys ahead of them, one of the best units in the country. What do you see out of these guys now? Jermari is back. How does he fit in?

KIRK FERENTZ: Start with Jermari. He got back. His biggest challenge early was trying to do too much. He was just trying to do way too much. He missed a lot of time. That's the thing we had to remind him of. You miss a whole season, that's a long time no matter who you are. He was away from the game. It almost felt sometimes like he was trying to make a play on every play. Sometimes you just got to play, then plays come to you.

I thought this past week especially he really was kind of looking more like he did when he left, that type of thing. We liked him in recruiting. Took a while to get him to the field. Young guy that was kind of developing. Played well when he was in there. He got better a year ago.

Unfortunately he couldn't be with us last season due to injury. Comes at a good time getting him back. Riley is

not coming back. He'll be going somewhere next week. That's good. Now we just got to figure out the depth part of it, kind of like last year.

Q. Hill getting the first snaps, is that indicative he's at the lead for the No. 2 spot?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's still wide open. As of today, it would be him. That could go back and forth. It's like a lot of stuff right now: nobody's got any jobs locked up right now. Everybody's going to keep working here, keep competing. We'll see who improves and what things look like in August.

He's made a good showing for himself. A big, big part of his struggle, he can throw a ball obviously, but the language, the nomenclature, being able to call plays. At least he was in a system, but he wasn't really working with the ones or twos. I would say he's been in a system where you go in the huddle and call plays instead of holding signs up and everything.

As simple as that sounds, it's different.

Q. A lot of walk-ons in that wide receiver group. Are you comfortable are you with getting them on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: Seen some improvement. Jack made a good play today. Osgood was out, did some good things. Hopefully we'll have a good story emerge from that.

I think Nico is out right now with an issue, a sprain. I think that room's going to be okay. Those guys have worked hard, made strides, improved. Hopefully we'll keep pushing that forward as we get through August.

Q. Spencer Petras was with offensive line today; he helping those guys this spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's kind of helping everybody. It's like a whole brave new world for him. He's been over there watching those guys a little bit. He's also been helping, just talking about the quarterbacks, getting the nomenclature down, getting the calls in the huddle. He's been helpful with that, too.

We'll see where he's at. He still has a health issue. Good to have him out there, he's a football guy.

Q. Ever-evolving roster, portal is open. Are you looking to add?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, absolutely. We're always going to be doing that. We're always going to be looking.

It's interesting. I had a really interesting conversation with a young guy last night actually. So, yeah, we're always going to be looking to help our football team. I don't think we have a lot of areas right now we're focused on where we would be interested, I'll put it that way.

The biggest takeaway I'd give you is the world does change. It continues to evolve. We're definitely more interested now than we would have been, say, a couple years ago, whenever it became the portal. I think there's some benefit, there's some opportunity there.

My biggest takeaway still is I think what you really have to do is try to be cautious about the players that you do bring. If you can get guys to help you, I think a lot of guys that have entered our room, our team, are going to help us. Eager to see Seth Anderson practice. Eager to see Daijon. Only got one day in.

The thing I can say about both those guys already is they've been really good additions to our team, just the kind of people they are, the way they go about their business.

We're going to keep looking, but we'll be protective of making sure we bring guys that aren't going to set us back, just take away from the group, that type of thing. You want to get a good player, but you want to get somebody that is going to add to your team.

The 11 guys that joined us, one thing I can say about all 11, two high school guys, everybody in between, they've been good additions to our team. Just good guys that are going to add to it.

Q. (Question regarding the portal becoming too much pay-for-play.)

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, yeah. It's a mess. The NIL, it's a mess. It's great in concept. When you think about someone like Caitlin Clark, that's the original intent in this whole thing. There's some good things about it.

But my biggest fear on this, there's no structure at all that I'm aware of at least. Maybe you guys know more than I do. There's no structure, there's no cap on how much money can be spent, things like that.

Again, you just equate it to the NFL world where there's a salary cap, clear rules of demarcation when a player can go into a portal or free agency. All those things are spelled out. All 32 teams operate by the same rules. There's enforcement that's consistent. That's what you would call like a normal world to operate in.

If you do a good job, you have a chance to benefit from it. If you don't, there's just no... The fact we don't have any structure, good luck making that make sense. That's the world we're living in right now. We're going to do the best to operate in the world that fits with what we think is best for our program. So far so good.

There's a lot of guys that have joined the team that don't have any NIL tags with it. They're coming for opportunity. That's okay, too.

Q. What was the thought process of the position move for Kyson?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's a prospect. I don't mean that in a derogatory sense. He's really young, kind of a young football player, too. If you met him, you might want to check to see if he has a driver's license. Look at his size. That's probably going to be his best long-term. The other fact is we had eight or seven linemen at one point. That helped out, too.

Long-term if he's going to play, that's his best shot.

Q. Justice Sullivan out there, COVID issues, is he still on the team, medical now?

KIRK FERENTZ: They just approved his medical. He has long COVID. As I understand, a couple athletes have had that on our campus. One of those rare things.

Great young guy, just unfortunate. Great story. Very young guy.

Q. Are there any other medicals?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not that jumps out at me right now. I mentioned Eli. Eli is probably not going to be here in the fall. He'll be with us, but not able to play.

Q. Is it safe to say receiver is a target area in the portal? Brody Brecht, how did that come about? I assume you're supportive.

KIRK FERENTZ: What he was trying to do, I'm sure we've had other athletes, like Danan (Hughes), who has mastered both of them obviously. I coincidentally saw him in the regionals up in Connecticut. I know Georgia was in that regional. I was at Maine. It was Georgia, Maine, Iowa. Danan was playing. Maybe pitchers it's a tougher thing. It's tough to do two sports in college. Track might work with football.

Anyway, he's doing really well. I think it was getting to be

too much to balance. Personally unhappy for him because he's trying to please everybody, and that's a lot to do. Really good football prospect, a really good baseball prospect. I think it's better for him to have clarity so he can go full speed.

It gives us clarity, too. Last year really until we started the season, he wasn't healthy. I think it was a by-product of trying to do too much. We wish him the best. Definitely an area that we'll look at if we can help ourselves on the perimeter. We're not deep at corner, either. Probably the two areas we're kind of looking at.

Q. Going into the spring, if anything, there seems to be a big leadership void because of your exits. Has that gap closed this spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think so. I mentioned a year ago, typically at this time of year you don't have a lot of personality on the team. Last year we had a bunch of guys. Those are the guys that are going to be getting called off Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Really good group that way.

These guys have been really aggressive. This team has been really aggressive off the field with their ownership, I think. Cade is part of that. Talking about guys like Jay Higgins, a bunch of guys. I could name all of 'em.

We're not there by any stretch. It's a big challenge to try to be where last year's was. That's how you dig out of it, three and four situation. It was an ugly three and four at that point. That's player driven. We had the right guys.

I think these guys are emulating, trying to emulate, what we had last year. We're not there yet. But, yeah, they're working at it. I feel good about that.

Q. How would you size up your running back room?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're never out of the woods, but I feel good about it. You like to think Kaleb is going to be a better runner this year. He did a nice job last year. He did it kind of by plan. He didn't understand what he was doing half the time. He's got a lot more to really benefit from. A good skill set, learn how to use that, block a little bit better.

Leshon was a good player a year ago. I think with each step he just keeps getting better. Thought he had a really good spring.

Jaz has really done a nice job, too. He impressed us last year. That run he made in the bowl game I thought was really good. We're seeing more of that, too.

Then Terrell has been a good addition, too. It's been good to watch him work out there.

I think it's a healthy room right now. Hopefully there's room to keep getting better. I think they're all pretty young players. It's exciting actually.

Thank you.

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