

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: I'll talk a little bit about Saturday and then look forward to this week. First and foremost, as I said after the game, good to get the win. Troy competed hard. We expected that. They really did a good job in certain areas, made some big plays, and credit to their execution on that.

I thought our guys handled adversity pretty well. It wasn't great at halftime, they came out and did a better job in the second half. It's certainly good to get some points, finish some drives. That being said, we left two of them on the table out there with a lack of a conversion on 4th and 1 -- that was really communication more than anything else -- and then missed on a makeable third down that led to our field goal. Certainly some things that needed to get cleaned up.

Then the big plays, both fundamentals, but communication, as well. So a couple things involved in that.

The one thing I do know is giving up big plays makes it tough to play winning football, so it's something we have to get corrected. We've been victimized by that now two weeks in a row.

Again, it's really not a matter of effort, it's a little better job with communication and a better job with good fundamental play out there. We're certainly going to have to improve as we start to move into conference play now.

Now we head to Minnesota on Saturday, first league game and first road game. Big on a couple fronts, and most importantly we're playing a really good football team, a veteran and confident football team. They play extremely hard and they're playing really well right now.

Our captains will be the same four guys: Jay Higgins, Quinn Schulte, Luke Lachey and Cade McNamara, so we have those four guys leading us again. Injury wise, Leshon left the game on Saturday. I don't see him having a chance to return this week, so hopefully we'll get him back soon in the future. But I don't think this week is reasonable for him to be in there.

It's a rivalry game, trophy game. That says enough right there. But most importantly, if you look at the series the last three games, they have been decided by 10 points.

I think that just kind of tells you the nature of the series and what it's all about. My guess is this game will probably fall in line with that. As I said, they have a very good football team, they're veteran, play extremely hard, well-coached, and they're playing with a lot of confidence right now, and rightfully so.

A tough loss in the first game, they come back, and they've looked really good the last two weeks. They have good experience across the board and I would include the quarterback. He's a new player, but he is an older guy and is experienced. He's playing well for them. He's fit right in with, I think, what they were looking for.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention their kicker and punter. They have two outstanding specialists. The kicker was the kicker of the year in the Big Ten last year, and the punter is a veteran guy, very talented, very strong punter. They're really good in that area.

Again, back to back shutouts, tough to beat that.

The Kid Captain this week, I know we're going to be on the road, but Aiden Washburn will be with us from Keokuk. Had a rare heart condition, had a couple surgeries, basically his first week on earth here, and had another one at six months and another one at three and a half. As he tells his friends, he has a special heart. He's fought some issues there and is on the transplant list.

But right now, a healthy and happy third grader. I've been told he likes science, likes reading and swimming, as well. He'll be in our thoughts as we travel up to Minneapolis.

Q. You've integrated Brendan into that goal line package. Would you ever think about maybe 3rd and short, those 4th down plays, maybe integrate him into that, as well?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. Right now we haven't given it a lot of thought, but we'll see. Just happy to get him involved. He's practiced well, done some good things. Certainly gives us a little different dimension. Those are



things we might consider as we move forward.

Q. Quite the first three games for Jacob Gill leading the team in receptions. How have you seen him adjust from not being here in the spring to kind of getting up to speed so quickly and adding a different dimension to his offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a credit to him because to your point, I think the most significant point is he got here in June, late, newcomer, wanted to finish up school at his previous stop. I think it's a real credit to him. He's a little bit like Nick Jackson or Rusty Feth a year ago, came in after spring ball, but those guys really got up to speed fast, and I think the biggest thing is everything about him is really impressive. He's just a very mature, serious, focused guy, and that's a room that was lacking of experience and lacking production.

I think as much as anything, we wanted to get a guy who's been around a little bit and has gone through this, and he just really operates at a really high level. Most importantly, practices really well, and that's how he plays, as well.

Q. Have you ever gotten any answer why you guys always start on the road in the Big Ten? Eighteen out of 26 now, including three in a row. But anyway, you guys have been a good road team. You've won six of your last seven on the road. What does it take to be a good road team, and you obviously have to be this year if you want to accomplish your goals.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if you want to be a really good football team at our level, you're going to play at least five away games. Typically it's 7 and 5. That's just part of the deal.

First thing, you can't worry too much about it, where you're playing. I think you have to worry about the game.

Then to the point about being on the road, sometimes it's almost good in a way because it really forces you to be even more focused, if that's possible, and not just assume, hey, we've got the comforts of home and the crowd is going to be behind us and all that. We know it's going to be exactly the opposite of that.

That's the great thing about playing in our conference. Everywhere you go, it's good venues to play in, historic, and a lot of tradition. It gets down to being able to focus on what is important, realize it's not a field trip. We're going up there to do something, and there's only 72 of us, so it's a little smaller number. That's what you have on the sideline.

It's basically us against whoever is there in the stadium, and most importantly the opponent.

Q. I know you've said the last few years about you can't microwave, offensive line, it has to develop, and it seems to be developing to that level that you want, at least the way it appears. There was a block I think it was on Kaleb's second touchdown where Nick DeJong was able to go from right tackle to execute a reach on a linebacker which is almost impossible. How has the line grown now? Has it kind of reached that point that you want it to reach, and is that why it's executing at a high level?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a process, and we are gaining ground. We're not there yet.

But I think we're getting better, and the things that you referenced takes some experience. It takes a lot of work on the field and in the meeting rooms, too. Guys have a real opportunity to really learn and move and improve in the meeting rooms.

But the most important work is what they do on the field, and thinking about some plays that didn't look so good today, frustration, and failure is part of getting better, though, too. You've got to go through some things and sometimes try to match what you're doing against maybe what they're doing, and it doesn't always look pretty at this, but if we can get there by Saturday it would be a good thing.

I think the thing is the guys are more confident right now. They're certainly more physically mature than they've been, and we're healthier, too, so all those things help. George does a great job with those guys.

But it's a process, and if we're doing it right, we'll get better week to week, and hopefully by mid-season or so we're really starting to have some proficiency.

Q. After the Nebraska game last year, you had mentioned that no official had gone up to you before the game and said, you can't do this, this is an invalid fair catch. I was curious since that play happened last year, has that come up in a pre-game talk with the officials, and is it clear to you now what an illegal fair catch is?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we're all on the same page on that. I go back to Michigan, I think it was '06, we were up there, and there was like a six-minute review, and that's where the issue starts, coming to play, and then when you're told we're reviewing one thing and then we get a different interpretation about something else, those lacks of

communication, or that lack of communication I think is a little disturbing afterwards.

I do think we addressed that in the out of season as a conference. I think we're in a better place right now.

Bottom line, I think that play was open for interpretation, but it was more about the process afterwards that was kind of troubling. It is kind of what it is.

But I think we have in the out of season cleaned that up a little bit.

Q. I know through the first few weeks part of the conversation around Cade is him getting back into game shape and really feeling like he's in the flow of a game. He made it sound like he feels like he's there or at least it's progressing. Do you feel the same way?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. I don't mean that in a negative way by any stretch. But we've played three weeks right now, and I can't stand here in front of you and say we've played a complete game start to finish yet. I wasn't here for the first one, but I watched it.

So we've had peaks and valleys. As I said, the good thing is we've faced some adversity the other day, and it could have gotten worse after that muffed punt, too, just for the record. Nestor did a good job being there and scooping that thing up, but that could have been interesting. We're at 17-14 at that point and the ball is at mid-field.

Those things are going to be good for us in the long run. I'd just as soon not have to go through all of them that we've done.

I think to the point, whether it be Cade or the offensive line, hopefully our best football is in front of us. That's the way it's got to work and does typically work for us. I know more about our program than I do others, but that's usually how it works.

But we have to be working at it and doing right, and I do think he's more comfortable now, and now the challenge is can we keep it going week to week knowing that the degree of difficulty is going to get a little tougher, too, because these guys -- two straight shutouts in a row, so it's going to be a big challenge for us.

Q. Last week I know we talked about Jay a little bit, but today Jay Higgins told us that the game at Minnesota in 2020 was the first game in which he got defensive snaps as a Hawkeye. He's kind of reflecting on just his career a little bit, a full-circle moment here this season. Can you reflect a little bit on what he's

meant to this team over the last few years especially?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first comment is a rare regular season game played in December, not to mention at night in Minnesota.

But yeah, Jay has been great. I can't say enough about him. I said this back in the summertime, in this modern era of cut and run, not that everybody does that, but it seems to be pretty popular, he ends up sitting behind a guy named Jack Campbell, who's pretty good, and Jay recognized that, and instead of running from Jack, he went and ran to him and listened and really watched him, most importantly. I think he watched how Jack operated, not that Jay didn't already know how to operate. But good players tend to gravitate towards good players, and Jay was always eyes and ears, and he's learned from the best of the guys in our program.

Now he's become one of the best of our guys ever. He's always had a great personality. Does a lot of football, which as silly as that sounds, it's a real starting point to being a great player in my opinion. Lives for it. Last night I think I saw him going downstairs about 8:30 p.m. I'm sitting at my desk and if my door is open I can watch guys go up and down the steps. He's going home at 8:30, so he's back there watching tape. Good things don't happen by accident.

I'm not trying to compare him to Ray Lewis but Ray was a rookie all of our first years in Baltimore, and you could hear Ray just about anytime, anywhere, but the one thing about him, boy, I'll tell you, nobody worked harder than him. Same deal like early in the morning, there late at night, that type of stuff. You wonder why great players are great players, there's a dedication. Just the way they study it and the way they approach it. They've also got some humility, and Jay has got all those things. He's done a great job, and we're thrilled he's on our team.

Q. You mentioned with the explosive passing plays you guys have given up the technique and communication. Can you maybe expand on where the breakdowns in those two sectors you've kind of seen to allow that?

KIRK FERENTZ: The one was just a mental error, and to me I attribute that to being a younger guy and forgetting first things first and also forgetting that the guy across from you is trying to win, too. As a defensive back you've always got to keep the ball in front of you. That's just paramount.

So you can always recognize that they may throw it deep. That's the way it is.

Then the second one was just there was some fuzziness with the communication, and pretty much everything we do offensively, defensively and special teams, involves everybody. Everybody has got to be on the same page, and there's certain leverages or techniques that have to be used, and it may move more than one guy. Quite frankly, quite typically it does. So that was the second one.

Then the punt return, it just looked like junior high coverage, quite frankly. We had about 17 guys over on this side of those two hashes, and everybody had the wrong leverage basically. I've never seen a game where a guy scored three touchdowns. That's rare. I don't think he had a finger on him in any of the three plays, threes TDs. That's hard to do, really hard to do. Hopefully we get that out of our system.

Q. Offensively over 400 yards so far per game, over 30 points. Have you noticed maybe a confidence and an understanding of the offense continuing to gain momentum on a weekly basis?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think a lot of things were better Saturday than they've been, but each game has been a learning process. First game it was choppy water and then things came around. Second game, they throw a lot at you and a lot of really unusual looks, so it was hit or miss. But when we did hit, it was pretty.

Yeah, I think last week we had more good maybe than bad, that type of thing. But each week is going to be a different challenge.

The good news is, as has already been discussed, I think we're a little better up front now than we've been the last couple years, so maybe we can handle some things, not only ability to block but also the ability to maybe be in the right spot to block the right guy with the right leverage, and then our quarterback play, if we can get consistency there, too, those two things really help dictate how an offense goes.

I mentioned we missed a third down that was makeable. Part of that was just lack of a little bit of two guys on the same page, and probably more because a young guy wasn't quite sure what to do. There was no question that'll get better as we just keep going and learning there.

Those little things make a big difference in games. Maybe not as much last Saturday, but you get in a one-score game, those things are really big. That's where that precision has got to come in, and that's where experience -- everybody just getting it done is important. It's easier said than done because every week you're playing a

different team with different challenges.

Q. How important is next-play mentality next game moving forward? How important is that to your culture because it seems like your team is always on the same page when it comes to that. Does that start with the type of guys? Does it start with molding them when they get on campus? How have you established that culture and how do you reach your team being able to really embrace it?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think probably the best answer to that, like part of it's learned. A lot of it's learned. A lot of what we do is learned. That's the nature of any -- I think you go to a program that's different than what you came from, you have to learn. Jacob Gill has had to learn what we do technique-wise and all those kinds of things.

Yeah, part of that, and it is kind of what it is in college football, and it's going to be different next year or whenever when we get to 105, that next man is going to be a little closer to being in then over there. Like you're right here now because there isn't a lot of next men anymore. It's like they're incubating.

The reality of -- and it's a phenomenon in football, too. I've always thought guys on the second team can get relaxed if they're not careful because they're really not down there doing dirty work with the scout team, yet they're not having the pressure of having to be ready to play 70 quality snaps. So if you're not careful, you can be lax there.

I think the guys that have stepped in, it's a real credit to them for preparing the right way, even though they may not really play a lot of significant reps.

Those things are all taught, and we just talk about them, and some guys listen better than others, and they're probably the ones that improve quicker and end up being on the field faster.

It's what it gets down to. You never know when you're going to get called. That's one facet. Then as far as moving on to the next game, you have to, because it's all there is. Whatever happened last week, it really doesn't matter at this point.

I had to go back and look up who picked up the muffed punt because I had already moved on from that one. So give Nestor a shout-out on that one. The guy hustles and works hard.

But you're on to the next one.

Q. This particular trophy game is almost 90 years old.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

How much do you emphasize the history of this, and don't you have a player that gives a presentation during the week of this week of practice?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, thanks for the reminder. That's for tomorrow, and I had forgotten about that. It's in my notes; I haven't looked that far ahead. In 1981 I had no idea, although I was telling somebody yesterday when I got here in '81, like Johnny Carson was on TV, and he was funny. He was really funny, in a good way.

Anyway, I remember on his show or whatever there was a feature about Iowa and Minnesota, and I didn't know how it was at that point, so it was like pre-1981. But what I do remember is there was a real rivalry, and when I got here in '81 there was. I was kind of naive to it until they came across the field after the 12-10 win out there in 1981, and I thought, boy, they're pretty enthusiastic about shaking hands, and then I realized they wanted to come get the trophy that was right behind us.

That was my introduction to the trophy game, and once you're here for a little bit, you figure it out real quickly and what it means. I think this particular one there's a real deep history, certainly, so yeah, we'll do that, give the guys a chance.

We haven't seen the pig in a while, so we'll have pictures and all that and see if we can do something about it.

It just never seems to come easy. I remember going up there in '82 after we got beat in '81, 12-10, and that was one of the most physical games I can ever remember being involved with. Maybe that's just me, but that's how it felt. It was a really hard-fought game, and both teams really went at it, and we were able to come out victorious. But I remember that being a real -- it was back in the old dome -- a tough, tough ballgame. That's ancient history, not just history. It means I'm ancient, right?

Q. You're not going to wear flannel like Hayden did that year, are you?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, I don't have any bib overalls or a straw hat.

Q. Last year against Western Michigan, you gave up two long passes, two explosive plays. One was 50 plus, one was 40 plus, and then the rest of the year there might have been one, maybe two more, really very limited. Then you look at what happened the other day, two long explosive passes, one against Iowa State. In one respect are you happy that these are correctable mistakes, these are just communication errors, these are things that can be

taken care of, or on the other hand it's not like Plaxico Burrell is out there and you're just getting dominated

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KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, we'll see. That's the bottom line on all this is we'll see. To your point, they are correctable, so the key thing is are we going to correct them.

The good news is we've played good defense with all the same guys on the field, but then we can't have those lapses, and usually whether it's communication, just like the 4th and 1, I think it was two guys didn't get the same call the other nine did, and you've got a play that's dead in the water. You just don't get those back. It's like losing a game; you don't get it back. That's the hard thing for a player. There's a lot going on out there. There's a lot of communication. But you've got to be able to be on the same page. If you're not sure, you've got to give ground or somebody has got to contain a punt or whatever, at least get it turned back again so we might have a fighting chance, but just to let a guy come down the sideline, boy, is that hard.

Hopefully we're learning as we go. Good teams do learn. To your point there, that's the good news. We've had success with the same guys. Now the challenge is let's tighten things up a little bit and make sure we're really -- if we're going to get beat on something, let's get beat, because it is Plaxico Burrell or the other team makes a great play, but let's not help them out.

Q. Talking about Yahya Black, obviously size sticks out, but what do you remember about recruiting him, and what does he bring to this team?

KIRK FERENTZ: I remember him coming to camp. It was pretty easy to spot him, which makes me flash back to a thought, Tristan Wirfs committed, coming back from another Big Ten school, and nobody knew him. It's like, how can this guy walk in your room. Is somebody going to walk over and say hello to you? He said no. So might as well welcome to Iowa. I'm glad he did.

But Yahya is a really good football player, we thought a great prospect. He's kind of quiet. I don't know how he is with you guys, but he was kind of quiet and reserved and almost held back a little bit, and quite frankly for three years I wasn't sure if he liked it here.

But he's really come around on that front. He's emerged as not only a good player but as one of our team leaders, and it's been fun to watch that, where he's involved with the other guys and really encouraging with them. If he's got to say something, he'll say it. It's really been fun to watch that part of the evolution, as well.

Q. Back to the defense and giving up explosive plays, Jay said the message from the coaching staff was the problems are from the neck up. What's the process of fixing those kinds of issues, and is that alarming with the veteran team that you have?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it kind of ties in with another question. I'll share an analogy with you. We have nine penalties right now as a team, and I don't want to talk too much about it and jinx us, but technically 10. We took a delay out there near the end of the half a week ago or two weeks ago.

To that point, we had nine -- five or six, six in the first half of the first game, so the last five halves we've had three. So apparently we got that straightened a little bit. Sometimes it's just a matter of, hey, we've got to concentrate better and we've got to be a little bit more tuned in to what's going on.

Penalties are usually a lack of ability or a lack of -- just being lazy and sloppy, quite frankly.

The lack of ability stuff you can't do anything about, but if it's being sloppy, that's not a good thing. Then the big play stuff, if a guy gets beat, a guy makes a great play, what are you going to do? You try to defend it the best you can, and if you get beat, you get beat, congratulations to the other team.

But if it's something you can stop or at least make it tougher on them, then that's what we've got to be doing, and those are the things we have to really try to coach, and most importantly, that's what the players have to do is make sure that -- they're making the other team have to work a little bit, not just, like I said, that punt return is just so easy to cherry pick because that guy could have had a cup of coffee and stopped at our bench, had a cup of coffee and then kept going. Nobody was even close. That's just bad football.

Q. I want to ask about cornerbacks, but point of clarification, Kamari Moulton came out, looked like he got his bell rung the other day. Is he okay?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think he's going to be fine. We expect him to be out there.

Q. What is the pecking order at cornerback? You have TJ Hall still atop the depth chart, Nestor came into fall camp it seemed like the starter. Where is he at? Two, three, four, where do you see things?

KIRK FERENTZ: All four are really close. I would say

Jermari is the guy that has the most experience and obviously made a really nice play the other day, and he's getting better and better, I think. But I think all four guys are really close, and I feel confident with all four -- we don't know as much about John in game competition yet, and I think that's just something he's got to work through. We feel like all four guys are pretty close, and probably see all four of them through the course of the season would be my prediction.

Q. I'm curious as a competitor, you've obviously won a lot of games, lost a lot of games. Are there certain losses that years down the road end up sticking with you, and would the game last year at Kinnick be one of them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, when it's all said and done, I'll probably reflect on that a little bit, but you just have to try to move on. Some are harder than others, there's no question. And losses, I guess it's a sickness coaches have, or at least I have, they tend to linger more than the wins. Like wins, you move on. But when you lose, it's hard. All losses are hard, and some are harder than others.

But I don't want to categorize them right now. Whenever it's all over, we'll go back and play that game maybe, 1 through 50 or whatever it would be. I don't know. So we'll see.

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