

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon to everybody. I thought we had a productive bye week. I think it went smoothly. Needless to say we turn our attention now to the challenge that awaits us in Columbus this weekend. I'll say three facts about Ohio State. First and foremost, they have really good players in all three phases and I think are deserving of their ranking. They've had great production in all three phases, and they're really well-coached in all three phases. It's kind of what you'd expect of them, a top-ranked team like that, very impressive in all regards.

On top of that, we're playing in a very hostile environment. The Big Ten is full of a lot of tough venues to go to, and certainly Columbus fits that bill.

Against that backdrop, we have a big challenge in front of us right now, and the bottom line is games get played on the game field, so it's all about the players and what they do, and as we move forward here and kind of message we've tried to convey to our team is it's all about our preparation and it's all about the way we practice and put study in on film, that type of thing. That's what's going to lead to good execution, and that's what it takes to beat a team of this caliber.

It's dependent on how we prepare right now this week, and that's where our focus is as we move forward. I think we all have a good grasp for what's in front of us there.

Finish our preparation, make sure we go in there with the right mindset and know that it's going to be quite a challenge for us, and that's kind of it in a nutshell right now, where we're at as a football team.

Captains are Jay Higgins, Quinn Schulte, Luke Lachey and Cade McNamara.

Our Kid Captain this week is 16-year-old Haidyn Ulrich. She's a young lady who at age 7 was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia and underwent treatment over at the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital, and happy to say right now she's doing outstanding, a 16-year-old doing well. Outstanding student, aspires to be

a nurse. She's very involved in show choir, gets straight A's, and on top of that is taking classes at Kirkwood for her nursing degree, so she's just a tremendous young lady. I'm told was named after Hayden Fry, as well. Unlike Hayden Large, who wasn't named after Coach Fry. We'll be thinking about her this weekend, and I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Tons of weapons on this Ohio State offense between Emeka Egbuka, Jeremiah Smith and then running backs TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins. Looking at film, what's the strategy in facing a team that has this many weapons?

KIRK FERENTZ: Needless to say they're balanced and they have good talent at all positions. It's not like you can load up in any one area, you just have to play great team defense. It's probably the only way you have a chance to slow them down.

They've had a lot of big plays this year, and they have really good players. You just named four of them that are talented. They're really good up front, as well. Very veteran up there.

That's their whole team. They've recruited well historically, and now they've done a good job with the portal, as well. A couple key additions on the offensive side, running back and center to name two, and then obviously the quarterback on top of it, so right up the middle three really good players. So there really is no weakness there, and it's just a matter of trying to compete with them each and every down.

Q. I know the off-season you wanted to bring in an offensive coordinator to bring in some new ideas while also respecting complementary football in all three phases of the game. It seems like the players really enjoy working with Coach Lester. You guys scored 30 in three of the first four weeks, the statistics are much different than they've been. What has he brought to this program and how have things been so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just like when we announced him back in February, I feel the same way. Just first and foremost a quality person. I've been here 34 years now I think I've worked with a handful of coordinators in my time here. Fortunate that we have good stability, and I think



Tim is a great fit for the program. Tremendous person, as I said. Outstanding football coach on top of it. Just very positive and has good expertise.

His passion and love of the offensive side, he's a former quarterback, and I think he's really fit in well with everybody in every regard. I also respect the fact or appreciate the fact that he does have, I think, a real perspective of the value of team football, and that's always been important here, at least during my 34 years. I think he has an appreciation for that, too. So he's been a great fit.

Happy with the stats so far, but at this point we've only played four games. It's kind of like rankings; I think everything pans itself out or bears itself out a little bit more once you get into the latter part of the season.

Q. Leshon Williams and Seth Anderson, are either of them back now after the bye week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they both came back at the end of last week. I think they were both on the field full speed. Yeah, it's good. We're probably about as healthy as I can remember ever. Yeah, we had a record short medical meeting. Every Monday night we'd meet medically, myself, Ray and the medical staff, and happy to say it was short and quick. That's good. Our body weights are good. We're doing pretty well that way.

Q. Just curious, obviously not many people go into Ohio State and win a game, but that's the only stadium really you haven't won in in the Big Ten as a head coach. You got it done in '87. But is that something you'd like to accomplish at some point in your career?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, yeah. Winning this week? Yeah, absolutely (laughter).

I don't look at it that way, like haven't done this or haven't done that, but do we want to win this week? Absolutely. Yes, we sure do, and we're trying to prepare for that right now.

There's probably a reason to say the facts that you just gave. Historically they've been really good, and they're tough to beat there. We all know that going into it. It's all about what we can do to try to get ready.

I don't want to say it took a miracle play, but it was close to that back in '87 over there. We were close in '09 and played a heck of a game there in '13, so we've had some times where we've made it competitive.

I think there's some parallels between all those games. You're going to have to make some plays. You're going to

have to compete for the full 60 because they were awfully good in '87 and they were awfully good in '13. Some similar challenges back then; it felt like they had 12 guys on the field offensively. Somehow, some way you have to contain them a little bit, and then also try to muster up some plays on your end, and it's always a challenge.

Q. Back a few years ago when the NCAA allowed a four-game tryout, I guess it was, for freshmen or whatever, to allow them to play but then maintain their eligibility, at least you seemed to be in favor of that, and then a couple of years later you kind of said, I wish we would just go to five years to play football. It sounds like there's kind of a growing support -- the coaches are coming on along with that. What are your feelings on this because we've seen it kind of manipulated, if you will, a couple of different situations.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's a new wrinkle what's happening there. It's a new wrinkle to some degree. Nothing surprises me. For a long time, but especially nowadays. But yeah, I still feel the same way. I think to me, it would make sense just to give players the option to have five years.

The trend right now is to be at a place less than longer as it was maybe 10 years ago. So yeah, I'd favor that. Certainly I'd favor that. Then what you're referencing, what happened last week at a couple places, it's just a reflection of the times. It is kind of what it is, unfortunately.

Q. You guys beat Penn State in 2021 at Kinnick, but since then haven't beaten Ohio State, Michigan or Penn State. From your perspective, where do you feel like that gap is maybe between where you're and they're at, and what needs to be done to kind of close that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I'm not looking at it that way. We just take each week individually.

But it kind of goes back, we've been playing pretty well defensively. We've had issues with the offensive line. Then last year we obviously had some challenges at the quarterback spot. It's yesterday's news. If you're going to play a team that is nationally ranked, top-10 team, and those teams you mentioned typically are in that neighborhood, I'm not saying you've got to be firing on all three cylinders, but it certainly helps. It gives you a chance.

I guess I look at it the other way. I look at last year, I'll go back to that because I know has been written about how many points we scored about whoever it was a year ago,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and I think maybe you look at it the other way, maybe we did a hell of a job winning 10 games. There's two ways to look at every coin.

Talent ebbs and flows. I've been here 25 years, going on 26 now, and it's true every year. Every year has got its own challenges. You deal with the challenges that are in front of you, try to play to your strengths and do the best you can on an annual basis.

Over the long haul, we're proud of our record. How it all pans out, it's a year-to-year basis kind of thing.

Q. Last week we got the chance to talk to Tim (Lester), and he said he felt like the passing game timing-wise was maybe closer than it appears. I think some of the players have kind of felt that, as well, Cade and a couple others said they really utilized the bye week to haul up and continue to work on that timing. Just from your vantage point, what's your assessment with the passing game right now as far as timing and trying to piece everything together as the season goes along?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's going to be a little bit of a challenge there. Just part of that, too, is blocking their guys up front. They've got an outstanding front. I think they have eight or nine all-conference players back on defense. They have really good talent.

Their back end is really talented and veteran. The front guys are the same way.

But I agree with what the players said. I think we're making progress. I was not overly concerned about the statistics coming out of the last game. I was really pleased with the way we played and just the way we responded in that game.

You play the way the game is going, too. That's the other part of it. Personally I hope we don't have 60 pass attempts this week because if we do, I know what the outcome is going to be.

But we're making progress, and I feel like we're progressing pretty much in every area over the last four weeks, and now the challenge is we've got an eight-week stretch right now where it's focused on the next six, but that's the challenge is making improvements every single week.

Q. I think it was LeVar Woods last week who was talking about Drew Stevens' growth and in previous years maybe him having false confidence and this year kind of growing into what is earned confidence maybe. Is that kind of what you've seen in him, too, because

he had a pretty clutch kick against Minnesota at the moment and hasn't really missed -- hasn't faltered this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's night-and-day difference, and just in general terms, and I can only speak to Iowa because it's the only place I've been in college football, certainly in major college football. For us, three-year is kind of a magical number, if you will. It seems to be where guys start to get traction, as a rule. There's exceptions to everything. I think there's probably a classic example, but he did a nice job, and two years ago really did a nice job, last year kind of tailed off at the end. I think all of us were wondering how he'd respond to that, but he's really come back just extremely, extremely impressive and in impressive fashion starting in the spring. Like he practiced well in the spring, and he's doing a really good job right now.

The kick that he made up in Minnesota was impressive. I think LeVar put it well. It's a true confidence now because he's earned it and he's more mature physically certainly, so he's better able to execute his job.

He's a whole different person, not only as a football player, as a person, too.

I thought he did a good job early, considering, but now he's a much different person and football player on top of it.

Q. I wanted to ask about the line of scrimmage. I think most people will jump to the skill position players, but this seems to be a real classic line of scrimmage game. What do you see specifically on their defensive line that's veteran and tough? What can you do offensively to displace the line of scrimmage and give your team a chance to win this game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's going to be a challenge, a snap-to-snap challenge, and on top of that they're deep. They get ahead so many games early. So their backups are good, too, if you want to call those guys backups. They've got about at least eight, maybe 10 guys that play and play effectively.

Even when games in the first ten, they'll roll some guys in there, keep their other guys fresh. But they're physical. They've got good size, and they use that size. They play physically aggressively. They make you block them, and it's easier said than done. It's going to be a good challenge for us, and their backers are very athletic and very active, and they do a good job letting those guys roam and get to the ball, and they're good tacklers when they get there. Their stats are really impressive defensively, and it's for a reason.

Q. Deshaun got to start against Minnesota; do you anticipate him being out there to start the game, as well, and where the position opposite Jermari is right now.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think he will. But again, it's a position where there's a lot of equity in there. The gap is fairly close with all four guys that we listed back in August.

It's week to week. We'll just let the guys keep playing, keep maturing, and see how they do. Jamari is playing really well, and he's healthy, so that's a good thing for us. He's a really respected guy and a leader for us.

Q. When you have a guy at quarterback who's beaten Ohio State, how much value do you put in that going into a game like this, that it's somebody that's done that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think the bigger picture is what I referenced earlier; he's got experience in the conference and major college football. There are quarterbacks that transfer, too, but he's had really a lot of success playing at a major college, Power Four, where he's played in the big time.

But that's helpful. It's certainly helpful. It's better than go in with a true freshman. So now I'm triggering thoughts here. I mean, I remember going in there, talking about near misses was '09, where a really young quarterback who had never started a game went in there and I thought played an outstanding game and probably deserved a better outcome than what we got that day.

Yeah, experience is good at every position, and you can say about our team last time we were over there we were really young offensively. A lot of the same guys are back, but they're certainly different players, and this is a whole different circumstance, different teams, all that stuff.

In my mind, it's better to have experience than not have experience, certainly in a case like this.

Q. Talking with Kaleb a little bit this morning he had said being from Ohio that though he didn't get the offer from Ohio State, he didn't really feel like he had a chip on his shoulder, he just always wanted to beat them. That type of mentality. I'm just curious as to what having that type of mentality from arguably your best player does for your offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I hope all of our guys have that attitude because that's what it's going to take. We're playing a really outstanding football team.

I don't know how big a factor that's going to be, but he's been running well this year, as all of us know. He's been focused and motivated. I'm not saying he wasn't motivated before, but I think he's really focused on the right things now, and it's showing up in his performance, and we just talked about Drew Stevens going into year 3. I think that's a factor here, too, just better understanding the challenges of college football. It'll be one this week; nobody has run through these guys very effectively. It's going to be a real tough challenge. The holes are going to close quick.

I'm just standing here thinking about a particular play in '08 where we were playing Penn State, where I'm standing there watching, I think we've got about an eight to ten-yard gain and ended up being a four-yard gain because Navarro Bowman closed the gap. That's when you play a team like this, those gaps that look pretty good all of a sudden shrink fast. So it's going to take everybody's best performance and certainly Kaleb can help us out. But he's doing a really nice job.

Q. Along those lines, how do you evaluate the run blocking through the first four games, and is there anything else that you kind of attribute in terms of the really much improved rushing offense, top 10 in the country at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: All of our backs are running well, but Kaleb certainly is running as well as anybody we've had in quite a while. But we're four games into it, so we're not ready to have a parade quite yet.

I said this back in August; I think we're a little bit more mature, certainly up front. Certainly we've been the last couple years. No knock on anybody or anybody that's been out there playing the last couple years, but we've had our challenges, and fortunately we've been healthy with these guys. They've been beat up a little bit, and they've experienced disappointment on the field, and now they're starting to have some success.

I think they all realize this is going to be a huge challenge for them, but I think they're ready for it and eager for it.

It all goes together, and having an experienced quarterback helps, too, and he's starting to look a little bit more comfortable out there, which is something we were concerned about after a two-year gap. So I think it's a positive, as well.

Everything kind of has to go together, and at some point the passing game will complement the run game a little bit better, and when you get that going, then you've got a chance to have a good offense.

Q. Like you mentioned earlier, games do get played on Saturdays, point spreads don't determine the outcome of games. Just talking to the players earlier today, they seemed to really lean into the underdog mentality of a team. Do you encourage your players to lean into the fact that it's like, hey, nobody is picking us to win, let's go out and see what happens?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're pretty smart guys and they probably know spreads a lot better than I do because I don't know them. We're playing a top-5 team, so we're underdogs. I get that.

But no, I think the important thing is for guys, whether it's a chip on the shoulder or the point spread, whatever, the important thing is just to understand what it is, what it's going to take in terms of execution to have a chance to be successful.

First thing is you can't squander any opportunities. You really can't do that. There's examples of their opponents, and Ohio State has got a lot to do with it. They force mistakes. They force turnovers or takeaways, things like that, and that if you do get an opportunity, you got to cash in on it, and if you leave things out there on the field, chances are you're going to pay for it, and that's what happens anytime you're playing in a game against a ranked team, whether it's this game or I'll reference the Penn State game in '08 game or the '09 game. Those little things, it's the old cliché. The five, eight plays on Sunday, you look at those and say, hmm, that's kind of where it's at.

Q. When you look at Ohio State's defense, giving up less than a touchdown a game, 60 yards on the ground, you guys counter with the rushing attack, when you have a game where they may force you to try to pass, do you still try to stick to your guns and run the ball, what you do best? Or do you have to kind of alter sometimes when they're really good on defense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's part of the -- as I referenced a little while ago, stats can be a little misleading four games into it. Sometimes they're right on, but I think in their case, what it reflects to me is if you look at the halftime scores pretty much, first time it was a 10-point game and then they rolled the second half. I think Marshall had 14 points at half and then Ohio State scored right off the bat to start the second half, so all of a sudden you're back up 21.

I know this: If we're playing in that hole of a hole in the second half, it's going to be really difficult. It's going to be hard to stay in any game plan other than you've got to score quick, and that's good for the defense typically.

The first challenge is try to keep it where you have an opportunity to be balanced, and against a team that's this talented, just in general terms, I guess my belief is you can't just be all pass or all run, unless that's all you do, and we're not an option team, so you've got to be able to pass the ball a little bit.

So that is going to be the challenge. We're going to have to find that right mix and try to be effective in both regards to have a chance to be in the ballgame.

Q. I know we've asked a lot, especially to Coach Lester, about the new headset communication deal that goes off when the play clock gets to 15. Knowing what happened last week at Minnesota, basically with the added context of that headset, does it change any preparation with how you go up against the crowd of 100,000 that frankly is going to be the loudest crowd you'll see all year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't think so. I think, again, it's just very helpful. We still have the wristband stuff and all that just in case, I think, because you have to be prepared if it goes down. That's the bad side about technology. Power failures are a challenge. If it goes down, you have to have plan B ready. But I think it's helpful. We're a very wordy system now because of the West Coast offense. I think it's been helpful.

To me it's just better for the game, so I'm all for it. I think it's been good for everybody.

Q. I wanted to bring you back to the 2013 game over there, which was very competitive all the way through the fourth quarter, and I think their athletes kind of paced the rest of the game. But you started out primarily running a lot of 13 personnel and really battering them, and Brandon Scherff played maybe the best offensive line game I've ever seen by a lineman, when you look at that game, how do you analyze or can you project anything like that again into the future in this type of environment, or is it just the game has changed too much?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I'm only smiling, how old was I in 2013? I was a lot younger then. That's good.

Anyway, I mean, yes and no. Philosophically that was our plan, to try to keep the ball out of their hands a little bit and eat some clock and score some points, and Duzey had that long reception which really helped the cause a little bit.

So I think we pretty much got what we wanted accomplished, but to your point in the fourth quarter, we

felt like there were 12 guys, as I said, with Carlos Hyde and then Braxton Miller was the quarterback who could run and throw. Long story short, I don't think it's going to help us. This is just a whole different outfit.

We're trying to get a feel for them a little bit and how we're going to face up. It's nothing new, but it's always a challenge when you try to think about yourself formationally, what you're doing versus what you see on film, and we're a little bit different than most people.

You're doing some projecting and there's a lot of guesswork that goes into it, and it's been that way forever.

Yeah, at some point we'll kind of do what we do and try to match it up with anticipation with what they may do. The good news is they can only do so many things, but it's more certainly just about how they do it. They do it really well. They're pretty effective. Since Coach Knowles has gotten there, they've been good on defense. Not that they weren't before, but yeah, they're pretty good right now.

Q. I'm just wondering what you remember about Jim Lachey's playing days. I think you would have seen him a couple times back in the '80s, and what's the relationship been like with him now that Luke is here?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, so we have a mutual friend that -- I guess he was kind of a late bloomer, which is interesting, because he was a first-round player and a really good player at Ohio State, and they've had a lot of really good offensive linemen. Outstanding pro career. I really didn't know him as a player. I knew a couple guys on the Redskins that had gone through Pitt that were teammates of his, and then he ended up in San Diego.

But I know him as a parent, and he's been just tremendous. Really great. They're a great family. Unbelievable family. Very close family. Do a lot of things together. I think Jim has had a great life, and he's had a great life professionally being around football, and that's a cool thing.

It's been great having Luke in the program. He's just a stellar young people, been a team captain every week, and my guess is that'll continue. He's a great leader.

That's really the fun part about all this stuff is getting to know the individuals and then the players' families on top of it and all the good things that come with that. So yeah, they've been great parents.

He's in a little bit of a dilemma. I think Luke told me he's going to see three games this year. Obviously this will be one of them. He'll be working it. But they're bye weeks,

and I guess we have a Friday night game or we have one where he's able to get to it, so that's cool, too.

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