

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, October 15, 2024

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good Afternoon. Good to see everybody. Just talk a little bit about this past Saturday, then we'll focus on the upcoming game.

Again, really happy to get the win the other day. Happy for the way the team really responded to a tough week, tough outing the week before.

I think it's fair to say it's our most complete game thus far. Played some good complementary football. Happy about that.

Like always on Sunday, a lot of things to clean up, a lot of things we can still get better at, which is good to know, but also got to be working on that.

Six weeks into it right now. Doing a lot of good things. Certainly some areas we can improve on, try to focus as we turn the page and move forward.

Captains this week will be the same four guys: Jay Higgins, Quinn Schulte, Luke Lachey and Cade McNamara.

Injury-wise what we went into the game is where we're at right now. Addison Ostrenga is going to be out several weeks. Beau will not be able to make it this week. Maybe it's not as bad as we thought earlier in the week, but he definitely will not play Saturday. He was out there today walking around. He has a ways to go.

On the positive front, looks like Hayden Large will be able to play if he can make it through the week. Optimistic about that. That's some good news at least.

Right now biggest thing for us, our focus is on the challenge waiting for us in East Lansing Saturday night playing Michigan State. They typically have a talented team. That is certainly the case. A lot of good players in all three phases.

They're really well-coached. Got nothing but total respect for Coach Smith. Only got to meet him this past summer. I've known about his career and admired him from afar,

also as a player. Always have a little affinity for guys that walk on. He walked on at Oregon State, led them to an awful lot of success as a player.

His coaching career has been very impressive. Some of the people he worked with I have tremendous respect for, Mike Riley, Coach Petersen. Has done a great job at Oregon State when he went back there.

I think you're looking at the same thing at Michigan State. A lot of guys that worked with him last year are with him now.

Defensively a little bit different, like last week, where you have predominantly the offensive staff from the previous school with the head coach, then definitely Joe Rossi has taken over the defense. We certainly are familiar with him. Did great work up at Minnesota. Got a really good coaching staff. Again, a lot of good players.

You look at the roster and they have a significant amount of transfers. They're all impactful as you look at it.

Start with the quarterback. Dual-threat guy, can run the ball, throw the ball effectively. Very dangerous player. They had a good running back last year that had about 200 yards on us, put a hundred-plus yards on us. They have another guy to go with him, another transfer.

A couple good running backs, a couple good receivers. Tight end has been good in the passing game. Came from Oregon State as well. Center up front joined them as well. They have a really good group.

Defensively good up front. Linebackers are very active. One from last year, one who transferred from Wisconsin. The back end they're good as well. No. 43, one of their safeties, is extremely talented back there. Good group.

Maybe the two best specialists in the conference, excellent punter, excellent kicker. Unfortunately the kicker had a 58-yarder against us last year. They're a good football team.

It's kind of tough to judge them. You look at their record. There's a lot of teams 4-2, 3-3, 2-4 in the Big Ten. You consider they have played arguably two of the best teams, if not the best teams, not only in the conference, but in the



country their last two times out. It's going to be a big challenge for us.

Our Kid Captain this week is Hudson Ferris, a 12-year-old from Eldridge, Iowa. Hudson was a normal nine-year-old Iowa kid. Started experiencing some pain. The doctors unfortunately discovered a big tumor back on his spine. So anyway, the name of the disease is neuroblastoma, which I'm certainly not a doctor, but it's stage four.

He's undergone some real extensive treatments over the last 18 months. Two rounds of chemotherapy, some stem cell transplants, then radiation followed that.

Next month he'll celebrate his second year of being cancer-free. Happy to be able to represent him this weekend. Want to congratulate Hudson on that.

Last thing before I open it up, Scott asked a question the other day about lessons learned from players. It's a pretty reflective question. I'm not so sure I was in a reflective mood the other day. It stuck with me a little bit, thinking about it later that afternoon.

First of all, if you're open to it, I think your players teach you all the time. The one email I would reference that I got last year, you get things coming in from former players all the time. Will Lack was a guy who is one of my favorite all-time players here. Never started a game, was a walk-on, a great young guy. Only guy to my knowledge that we've had go to Harvard Medical School. He's ironically now on the faculty out at Washington.

He sent an email last year which was six words, which I thought were pretty good. Kind of just summed up his feelings about playing in the program, things he learned. The six words are basically, Show up, work hard, never quit. I think that's kind of what the game teaches you. Will coincidentally just referenced those things again yesterday. Sent me a nice text message.

I'll open it up for questions.

Q. Talking about Brendan Sullivan, a special role with this team. Seems like he has a really positive attitude about the whole thing. Brings energy when he comes into the game. How unique is it for a guy to embrace a unique role like that and have such a positive attitude?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's been great. As you know, we didn't do a lot in the transfer portal this past year mainly because we had so many guys come back that were on the team already.

So glad to get he and Jacob both joined us on the

offensive side. Both of them are great young guys. Brendan has a great attitude, good work ethic. They jumped in in June and kind of ascended.

They stood out in terms of the way they worked, their competitiveness. He's done a good job on the field, too, as we transitioned into August. Has a lot to learn, like all of us, with the new offense. Done a good job with that.

He has some attributes that maybe Cade doesn't have, which we thought would be potentially impactful and helpful for us. Happy about what he's doing so far. We'll see if his role can grow and increase. But doing a really good job.

Q. Back to Saturday. Drew and his team shared the post game video from the locker room, Jay giving you the game ball for win 200. He said, He's five away from Woody Hayes. I guess you're not telling them where you are. What does it mean to you that this team knows where you are and the history that's on the table?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, not to be a smart aleck, you can't help it. All this stuff is out there all the time.

It would be great to get all these things done just to get them done. But as I said the other day, I feel fortunate to be at a good place. You just have to have a lot of things fall in place to have something like this happen.

A couple thoughts. First of all, I never got into it for that. I got into it because I like being around young people. I still want to retire as a line coach. That's my real secret dream. That's what I enjoy as much as anything, coaching guys in a small room.

I've learned to love this job, too. It's a different job. There's some things about it that are really neat and cool. You've got to be at the right place and with the right people, as I said the other day. That's one constant. If Coach Hayes were still alive, I'm sure he'd say the same thing. You have to be around good people. I feel very fortunate in that regard.

Caveat, year one, 2-18, because the body count was out there weekly, nobody would have envisioned that. Go back to Will's point that you just never quit.

Q. Dayton Howard, I know you were his only offer across the board. What made you decide to pull the trigger when other schools wouldn't? You said he's a pretty solid prospect. What has given you that level of encouragement, looking towards the future for him?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, I didn't know nobody offered



him.

It's like most of our players when they come in. This is very different and very new to them. It's just the way it is. It's a big step. If our guys go to the NFL, they experience the same thing. Things happen a lot faster. Keeps coming at you.

He came in, did a good job last year. Nothing to distinguish himself good or bad. But did a good job, very solid.

Right now, the one flashback at last practice we had out there in the spring, you have little things that you remember about players. He made a couple plays I think, one in particular over on our bench sideline. It was like, Hmm, maybe he's getting it. That type of thing. It was one of those 'a-ha' moments, if you will.

He's had ups and downs since then because he's young. He's going into his second year. He's not developed physically yet like he will be. We've seen a good attitude and a guy who just shows up and works hard.

It's good for him to have some experience on the field. Again, you can't hand that to anybody. They have to experience it and go out and do it. Good for him to be involved in a play like that. Good learning experience at the end of that play 'cause he can't do that either. That's part of the road.

We're encouraged because he has a good attitude and good ability. Why people didn't recruit him, I'm not sure, but we're glad that we did.

Q. You as an offensive line guy were probably pretty impressed about how the line played them against Washington. PFF graded them as the highest offensive line of the week.

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm standing here thinking about how glad I am, my six years in the NFL, there was no PFF. As far as I know, no experts were evaluating my work every week, except for my boss (laughter).

Q. They graded out especially well in pass protection. Do you think that was their best week of pass pro this season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think it was our team's best day collectively. Yeah, we're improving up front. We were all cautiously optimistic again because we're more veteran, a little bit more developed than we've been.

We've gone through a couple tough years up front.

Nobody's fault. It's just how it's gone. I think we're closer to where we want to be.

It's fun to watch the guys' confidence grow a little bit. They deserve it. They did a good job Saturday, they really did. A lot of respect for the defense we were up against for obvious reasons. I thought our guys met the challenge, pushed. This is going to be another type of challenge but another challenge nonetheless with a lot of good defensive teams in this conference.

Q. On the outside, see some similarities to the 2008 team, a little bit quarterback iffyness early in the season, great running back performance, a one point nonconference loss you'd like to have back probably, a trip to East Lansing. Do you see any similarities to how this team is wired, because that '08 team is one of your better stories?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's one of my favorite teams to have worked with. It really was. It's kind of like what I said to Kaleb the other day: You're off to a great start. At this point that's pretty doggone good when he's done, but Shonn Greene did it for 12 games plus one. That's the race we run.

We were sitting pretty good in '12, same record actually after six games, next six didn't go so well. I can say the same thing about '06; I think we were 1-5 down the stretch.

This is a week-to-week league. It's a challenge playing in a conference like this. How can you meet the challenge each and every week, as different as they are.

So far, the attitude has been good. Now the question is can we maintain it for a couple more months here, knowing we're going to hit some walls here. How are we going to push through that and keep going...

Q. Aidan Chiles was voted a captain before his first game as a true freshman. He's a guy with a lot of different attributes. Something that strikes me is when a play is broken, he'll do everything to make a play downfield. How important is for your defense to stay in keys and align knowing there could be opportunities at hand?

KIRK FERENTZ: You just said it. Is exactly what you have to do. You have to stick with your position, stick with your responsibilities. If you're in the back end especially, you can't be coming out of coverage because a guy looks like he's pulling it down, because he can do both certainly.

To be voted captain as a newcomer is pretty impressive. Tells you a lot about the way he carries himself. That's

what you hope for with a quarterback also, is a guy who is not only a good player but has the right demeanor and leadership capabilities.

We watched him when we were preparing Ohio State. That's the first time we saw him. He's a real dangerous player, can hurt you in a couple different ways.

Q. The 2012 team, the last team that beat the Spartans in East Lansing. When this team won, it ran the ball really well, not unlike this team. What does that say about the eternal principles of winning in the Big Ten? Another walk-on, Mark Weisman, what did he bring to the program?

KIRK FERENTZ: Mark was a great player for us. He's a tremendous young man. Did a great job. He was big in that game, too.

To your point about running the ball, if you can run the ball in this conference, especially the wind was kicking up two days ago, a reminder on Sunday that we got that coming down the road here today. A little chilly out there in practice.

We're getting ready to head into that time of year where that helps if you can at least run the ball semi-successfully. You have to be able to throw it, too. But you have to learn how to handle the elements. I think it rained up, too, that day.

It's going to take everything. That was a good memory certainly that year.

Q. About Logan Jones, coaches sticking with him even when things, as he said, were ugly two years ago. What did you see from him? What's it like to see him reap the rewards of that?

KIRK FERENTZ: With all due respect to Logan, I don't know what he heck he's talking about. Never looked too ugly to me (smiling).

He's the kind of guy we want on our football team. Everything about him. Everything he does is with purpose. He's really wired in when he's working. He's very popular with his teammates. He's so invested. Comes from a great family, mom, sister, really good people.

It may not have gone perfectly for him, all that kind of stuff. He was such a good prospect two years ago. Now he's a really good football player just because he's got every attribute you hope for, hard worker, very selfless.

He moved over to the offensive side. Again, I don't know if

it said it publicly, but I screwed that one up. We should have done that in December. We should have approached him then until waiting for spring ball. That slowed his progress down, too. We could have done him a favor by getting over there quicker. He can blame that on me.

I'm just so glad he's on our team. He's playing really well. No big surprise. We were certainly counting on that.

Q. With third down, one of the really big improvements this year. What do you attribute the greater ability to move the chains there?

KIRK FERENTZ: If you can manage the situations, that certainly helps. To that point, I think we are protecting a little bit better, probably getting the ball out a little bit quicker. All those things help out. Somebody has to get open. Yeah, that's something we're going to have to keep working on.

I'm getting ready to walk into a meeting and we're going to talk about that more in about a half hour just because these guys have some looks that present some challenges, guys that can get back there pretty quick. We're going to have to try to figure something out.

Q. I'm curious about the red zone package. Was it Tim that came to you first and pitched that? What was your initial thought when that became a possibility?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, Tim is the coordinator. That's his deal. Pretty much everything we're doing is stuff that he brought. I mean, plays are plays. Everybody understands that. There aren't a lot of new plays in football.

The way he calls them, names them, all that stuff, we've all learned. We've taken what he's got as his playbook and gone with that.

Then the next step beyond that, every step of the way going back to I think it's February when we really started meeting as a group, 'we' being coaches, not the players, everything has been collaborative.

Tim, that's one of the things I'm really impressed with him, he's a good communicator, collaborative with everybody. He wants ideas from people. He's trying to actively get that, which I think is a really good thing.

Every time we walk out of the room, I think there's a pretty good consensus that this is the best thing for us to be doing right now. That's important when you go present to the players. It's been that way every step of the way.

Yeah, we bounce ideas around in there. I say 'we', I'm probably like in the back of the room more so than anybody. Yeah, we talk about things. You're always looking for things that might be able to threaten the defense a little bit more.

Brendan does some things that at least will give them some things to think about. Hopefully we can just expand on that a little bit.

Q. I want to hear about the Michigan pipeline. You got six guys on your team as Michigan natives. What has made that pipeline so successful? Desmond King being someone go from Detroit to Iowa. When Phil Parker was playing in Michigan State, you were the O-line coach. In two games had an interception, punt block for a touchdown. Do you remember game planning for Phil Parker?

KIRK FERENTZ: The play he remembers the most is not being in there when we were in the bootleg because he claims he told Coach Perles it's coming. He's on the sideline.

I have tremendous respect for Coach Perles. What a great defensive coaching staff they were. That's pretty stupid not having Phil in on the goal line defense. Not sure why you wouldn't do that in retrospect -- 40 years ago. I remember all those games.

The thing I remember about Phil mostly, don't ask me why it's funny, we ended up working together for a quarter of a century. I remember watching him, he had has to be a cousin to the Stoops. To me the way he played is similar to the three Stoops. Obviously Mark hadn't played at that point. All three of those guys were smart as can be, tough, good players.

You could tell watching him play, I got to be on the field with the Stoops, how they were mentally, how they communicated with everybody. Phil is the same way. He's a three-time All-Big Ten player. He wasn't the fastest guy, certainly not a combine guy. He still says Nick tried to run him out of there and all that stuff as a player.

Phil doesn't go away. He's one of those guys. What a great career he had.

As far as the players from up there, Hayden Large, I've talked about that, I'm still not sure how he got here. I'm really glad. Him and Van Kekerix were friends, the families. That opened the door at least.

If you want to call it a pipeline... Historically back in the '80s, we see guys from Jersey. The common denominator

is once guys come out here from an area, have success, really like it, they recruit the guys that come afterwards. I think that's what we've seen in Detroit. We've been lucky.

The other thing I would say, Phil has been the guy who has done most of the work there. He sees things a little bit differently. I remember with Desmond, I was in seeing another guy on a recruiting visit. The guy ended up not visiting us. We made a last-ditch effort, Friday morning. I flew out of there. He dropped me off at the airport.

He said, I'm going to see this other guy. It's Desmond.

I never even saw him. Next thing he's on campus, we offered him. The rest is history.

My point there is Phil is willing to see things in players maybe other people don't see. He's not a guy who copycat recruits where so and so offers, so we're going to throw one in there. He makes his own evaluations. Boy, he's been right on in a lot of them. Desmond, Micah Hyde, another guy going to the MAC. What a career he's had.

Phil has a rare ability that way to see things that are pretty good.

Q. I wanted to ask about that new 4-1-6 package that you ran with Zach, the will linebacker, how that came together. I know Phil talked to us last spring with Zach starting to stick out. How has he stuck out in practice, earned that trust to get on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of the same as Brendan's package. You kick ideas around, everybody's thinking about things. You got a guy who has done some good things.

Zach has really done well. Defensively he's done a good job. Special teams. You get into such situations where maybe plug this player in, it can be helpful for us.

It comes down to what is the job responsibility going to be and can he fit that, can he play that role. If they have three tight ends in the game, we're probably not going to have him out there. Somebody else.

Yeah, I think it's just good to be open-minded, be creative. Guys that seem to be ascending, and Zach is certainly doing that.

Q. You talked about maturity on the offensive line. What does that maturity look like when it's out on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's something you feel I guess more than



anything else. Our guys look really good, the kind of line we want to be right now physically. You can't hand that to a guy.

Some guys walk in here - but not here - we don't get many guys walking in that look like that. When they finish, hopefully they climb that ladder.

It's a lesson I learned watching our wrestlers, the way they operated back in the '80s. They still do. Back in the '80s, how can't we recruit this three-time state champion, they took this guy instead.

Part of is a feel, too. Maturity I think brings confidence sometimes. Usually you got to go through some bad experiences to get there. That's usually how the path works. Few guys walk in.

I worked with John, like I said, coached Jonathan Ogden, worked with him three years. He was so good. Most guys go through some growing pains.

Q. Between how Drew Stevens ended last season to now, what's the biggest areas of growth you've seen?

KIRK FERENTZ: As you well know, he had done pretty well. Last season was a crash landing. Talking about some of those bad experiences. Same thing. It wasn't bad, it was really bad.

You have to wonder: Is this guy OK? You hear about it more in baseball where a guy can't throw from second to first after playing Major League Baseball for nine years.

I was kind of wondering where is he at, is he going to be able to come out of this. He's done that tenfold. January, when he got back here, went to work. That second-, third-year thing. Again, I'm talking in generalities. That seems to be in general where guys start to get traction.

I think he better knows how to approach things day to day, week to week. He's playing with a lot of confidence. He has had good ability. That's not an issue. Although, he is a lot more mature and stronger when he first showed up here. Used to joke about what he looked like when he got here that first spring. He looked like a 14-year-old.

He's done a really good job, and that's a credit to his hard work, it really is.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports