

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



are the same four guys; Jay Higgins, Quinn Schulte, Luke Lachey and Cade McNamara.

KIRK FERENTZ: Good to see everybody. Obviously this past weekend was disappointing. Tough game, and tough on everybody, the players, staff, and certainly our fans. Bottom line is Michigan State played really well, and they deserved the win.

I think we had a solid plan but didn't do basically anything well enough to expect to win a game like that. Probably the only positive I saw mentioned the other night was just kick return, but outside of that, we didn't have anything that stood out.

It was tough on Sunday to look at the tape. Always is after a loss.

But a quick synopsis, a couple things that stood out, offensively, third down in the first half we were 0 for 5, we couldn't sustain any drives. I think the bigger picture there, we had a couple negative yardage plays, something we haven't been afflicted by very frequently prior to that game. Had a few of those, and then also some makeable plays, whether it's third down or any down, when you miss some makeables, it's hard to weigh how much that impacts the flow of a team offensively.

Those are things you can't do, and we have to do a better job there.

Then defensively it was a tough game overall. Michigan State executed well, the quarterback played well. He had been turning it over. That's two straight games now he's done a much better job, and it makes a difference for them, but I think our biggest issue, we didn't tackle well. It's going to be hard to play good defense if we don't tackle better.

I think we tried to give ourselves a chance in the second half, but it's tough playing from behind like that, and they did a good job responding to whatever we came up with. That was Sunday.

Turned the page Sunday evening and got working on Northwestern. We'll transition into this ballgame. Captains

Injury-wise, nothing really to report. Addison is going to be out for a while and then Beau will not make it this week, so we'll see what next week brings, but he definitely won't play this week.

Looking at Northwestern, kind of typical repeat comments with them. They're tough. They're well-coached. That really hasn't changed over the years. If you look at it a year ago, they went through a transition in the summertime. I thought Coach Braun did an unbelievable job with their team throughout the year, and we had a really tough ballgame as you remember with them. It was a hard-fought game.

After our game, they won three straight and then won their bowl game in Las Vegas against Utah who's had a lot of success over the years. I think that speaks to their program. Coach Braun made a few adjustments during the out of season, a couple new coaches that he got to pick, so he's probably got things where he wanted, and I think it shows up with their football team.

Big picture-wise, it's interesting, you look back, the last eight contests we're 4-4 with them, and that kind of sums up this series. It's been back and forth, and they're a team where they make you earn everything. They compete hard, and they have good players. That's kind of what we're looking at.

If I was going to highlight one game this year, you look at the Indiana game, and I think all of us know Indiana has a really good football team. They're playing great football. Six minutes left, it's a three-point game. They're going back and forth, Indiana would score, Northwestern would answer.

I think it's kind of representative of their football team. The score ended up getting away a little bit the last five minutes, but for the first 55, that was a really good contest, and that's kind of what we're trying to get ready for here.

A couple words about our Kid Captain. We have Adeline Lovell from Clear Lake will be with us. She's a six-year old, and a couple years ago she was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of leukemia, and it got a little bit



complicated when she had a severe reaction to the chemo, so they had to devise another plan, new strategy across the street, and after two weeks of treatment they got things under control a little bit, and she's done very well. Happy to say that. I guess her dad was inspired and became a marathon runner, ran a marathon up in Chicago, coincidentally, and they're doing fundraising with the dance marathon, et cetera, so really good there. But she'll finish up treatment next month, so that's positive news. Really glad to have her with us, and happy to have her join us.

Closing it up, two messages for the team. We have to move on, and that started yesterday morning. Then secondly, it has to be about improvement, and that's each and every week. You have to try to do a better job, and we certainly had some things off the tape that we've got to work on.

Q. You've said not only throughout the season but throughout your career that practice determines playing time and how you evaluate these guys. What have you been seeing from Cade McNamara in practice that maybe you aren't seeing from Brendan Sullivan yet? Where is the opportunity for growth for Sullivan as you evaluate that position week to week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think they're both doing a good job in practice. Game competition factors in. The guys that are playing, obviously you have concrete examples, and then guys that aren't out there, you're projecting a little bit, and that's part of the deal. There's never 100 percent answer typically at least.

But I think they're both doing a good job, and Cade has to play better, certainly the first half in particular. Really nothing on offense was good enough for us to be -- we dug a hole that was too deep, quite frankly, and everybody had a hand in it, but offense certainly has responsibility.

Cade is going to have to throw the ball a little bit more accurately. I mentioned about the makeables, whether it's him or anybody else, if he's got a chance to give us better production, that's what we need.

We'll keep pushing forward here and see what happens.

Q. I know you mentioned the message to the team being "move on." I guess with lofty goals going into the season, College Football Playoff, Big Ten Championship, is that difficult to keep the team moving forward, and how do you keep it from going sideways and maybe losing a few games as the season continues?

KIRK FERENTZ: It depends on the team. Every week is a

new game. The college playoffs, I know those changed this year, and that opened up a new opportunity beyond what we've had in the past, certainly.

But college football really hasn't changed. I would imagine every team goes in the same way, hoping to win every game. Indiana, I'm guessing, had that goal, and so far they're doing really well with it. Those are the things you find out during the course of the season.

That's twofold, really. How do your opponents measure up, and you know a lot more about that after a game than you do in August, July, June, so you're preparing for the whole year, but bigger picture you're trying to prepare to do your best, and that's a week-by-week assessment. Clearly we weren't in a place Saturday where we need to be if we're going to start by winning just a game and then beyond that.

It's the same thing this week. We're playing a team that we've got a lot of respect for, and they've proven they're certainly capable. Really good win a couple weeks ago at Maryland, and Maryland just had a big win. It's week to week, and you really have to stay focused on that, and the teams that do that the best probably are the teams that are going to be most successful.

Q. From an injury standpoint, following up, Castro and Entringer, you sounded optimistic about them on Saturday. Are they still in a good path for Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: They both practiced today, so I anticipate they're going to be okay. Koen's injury looked like it might be a little bit more serious on Saturday. But fortunately, he'll be fine.

Q. You were mentioning the issues with tackling. We usually aren't talking about that with this defense. What do you attribute that to, and do you see this as a fixable problem for the next five games and for this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I used the term "uncharacteristic" on Saturday, and time will tell on that one, right? If we get it straightened out and improved and do things that we've been doing well, if we can get back on that plane, then yeah, it is uncharacteristic. Could be the start of a trend. Hopefully not.

It's like turnovers; in the past I talked about turnovers a little bit. We don't have a specific turnover drill. It would be great if you could hit one. But you do things that are based on the fundamentals. You practice fundamentals certainly, and tackling is the same way. We probably tackle less -- I'm talking about over the years, of live tackling than

anybody in college football I would say. I don't know what everybody else does, but we've done very little of it in the last 20 plus years, yet we practice it in drills and those types of things, and we've been pretty successful.

But every game is a new opportunity, and we just weren't there. I don't know what happened, but it was a collective -- wasn't just one position or one guy. It was kind of a collective deal the other night.

Q. It sounded like Cade is your starter for Saturday, correct?

KIRK FERENTZ: As of right now, yeah.

Q. You said they're both practicing well. Is there something specifically about -- and the game results do matter to you at that position, but obviously Brendan hasn't gotten anything beyond the goal-line stuff. What specifically about that, Brendan, is maybe holding you back from giving him that opportunity to have even just an extended look in a game?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think probably the biggest thing is it's easier to talk about putting somebody in a game than just doing it, especially at that position. We've seen enough good things out of Cade to feel like he gives us our best chance out there. It's like any position, although obviously there's more eyes on this position.

I think he's done enough good things where we have confidence that he'll play well Saturday, but we'll also keep an open mind. You have to. We have to do better than we did the first 30 minutes the other night. We can't wait until the second half to start going here.

We'll keep an open mind, but I have confidence in both of them, quite frankly, and when Brendan gets an expanded role or if he gets an expanded role, I think he'll do well.

Q. Maybe this is kind of an odd question, but is it a skill for a player to be brutally honest when they evaluate themselves on tape, and is that culture thing or is that maybe a maturity factor? I'm curious from your perspective what that process is like.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's a life thing. I think all of us walk around thinking we don't have much to learn. You're probably going to leave a lot out there that maybe you could have enjoyed or things you could have learned from.

But the one nice thing about football, nice or not so nice, but the films are really, they are reality. You've heard it, it's so cliché, but it's so true. When you watch, the most powerful teaching aid that all of us have in the meeting

rooms is film because after practice when you watch practice film you know what happened, you see what happened.

It's interesting, we were having a conversation, one of the coaches and I the other day, two days ago, just about having the tablets. Having those on the sideline, sense of reality is a little different during game time now because it used to be on Saturday the player says one thing and then Sunday it's like, whoa, let's take a look here.

That's one nice thing about it, but I think that's one difference about football or one unique thing about football, you can't really debate what you see on the tape. It's not like instant replay the last eight minutes; it's usually, okay, there it is, here's what we've got to do to correct it. So the real trick is doing the work.

But to improve, you've got to be humble enough to say, I've got some work to do.

One thing about football, and it's kind of like life, but football especially, you get humbled, and if you're not up to par, chances are you'll get humbled immediately. Sometimes you get away with it, but not too often.

Q. With the offensive line you've talked a lot about couldn't microwave the experience. Are we seeing some of that with the cornerback position opposite Jermari that those kind of just kind of -- they're struggling right now. What do you see from those guys and trying to microwave some of that experience right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you can't give players the experience, or hand it to them, I should say. Sometimes you have to go out and go through the highs and lows, and that's part of it. We have gone through it at the line. We're not out of the woods there yet. But going back to the previous point, the game is always humbling because there's always somebody out there that's going to challenge you. You run into people that do it better than you, too, so it's trying to gain ground on that.

I think probably outside of Jermari, Jermari has played a lot for us, but we have some guys that are still learning on the job, and you just keep competing, you watch the tape and then you try to improve and then carry that out to the game film on Saturday. A lot of it is technique, a little smarter positioning or seeing the situation a little bit differently maybe than you had on the field.

Q. You guys had an interception, didn't get any points out of it. That's kind of been a trend for this team this year. Offense is below average in scoring off of

turnovers than the rest of the Big Ten. Is there a challenge to scoring in that kind of quick-change situation, and what does the offense need to do to get more off of the defense's turnovers?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't think there's any necessarily psychology to it at all. You'd certainly like to convert any good break, whether it's turnovers, good kick return, punt return, those types of things. You want to take advantage of good momentum, certainly.

But anytime you've got the ball, unless you're just trying to burn clock or what have you, finish a half out, you're trying to move it and score, and preferably touchdowns. There's no psychology to it. We've just got to try to do a little better job on it.

Q. I want to clarify, with Deshaun, there's no injury with him, that was a coach's decision on Saturday for him not to play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Right. The position coaches typically decide on rotations and who's going to go in, and a lot of that is based on the feel of how the game is going. Deshaun is a good young guy. He's in a little bit of a lull, so he's going to work through that.

We're going to need everybody. That's for sure. He's doing well.

Q. About Jermari, the way he's playing, what's the biggest areas of growth you've seen from the past few years since he got here to the way he's playing now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I remember him sitting right here, right about here, with his mom and his grandfather when they came for a visit. He was a guy we covered late, like a lot of our guys that have played well, and she had had a root canal, so the grandfather drove, and she was not in the best of condition, quite frankly.

But anyway, yeah, he was a young guy from Montini Catholic that we kind of liked. Obviously more than kind of liked. It took a while for us to want to get to know him a little bit better, and he's done nothing but work hard and improve since he's gotten here, and he's a tremendous young person on top of it.

Little things you saw with him, he had to commute to get to school. It wasn't easy for him. Tells you a little something about his personalities. I think he had perseverance and it was serious to him. He recognized a good opportunity, so he sacrificed a little bit to make it happen.

But he's worked hard. He's a really thoughtful young guy.

He's got a lot going on that way. That's a good thing. That's part because he's older, too, and sees a little bigger picture than he did four years ago. But he's been a good leader for us, and he's playing well for us out there.

Q. I noticed at fullback we've got Rusty listed as a starter this week. I didn't know if Hayden is getting moved over to more tight end reps with Addison out or what's going on with Hayden.

KIRK FERENTZ: Hayden is coming off that ankle from two weeks ago. He seemed to be fine. He was sore Sunday, a little bit sore yesterday, but he's fine today.

Addison is out, obviously, but the rotation, Hayden is still involved. Ortwerth moves up to basically kind of take Addison's place in terms of what he was doing. Then John Pascuzzi also is involved, and then you've got Rusty and Hayden, that H-back, second tight end, however you want to look at it. Some of that stuff blends together, and we'll probably do things a little differently with Rusty in there or Eli as opposed to maybe one of the tight ends.

Q. With the struggles that the secondary has been having, it looks like a lot of teams have been attacking the outside, that sort of intermediate deep -- basically where the cornerback is handing off to safety a lot. Does that come out to execution? Does that seem like other offenses are learning how to attack this defense schematically, or how do you look at a secondary that's now 83rd in the nation in pass yards allowed per game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I didn't know that stat, either. That's not good news. I kind of look at the thing more collectively.

Yeah, clearly the other night it wasn't a good night...400 plus yards. But again, when you aren't playing fundamentally sound and part of what you're alluding to is physical but also communication sometimes and everybody being on the same page. That's what defense is all about, all 11 guys being tied on a string, if you will, and one thing complements the other. So if you get somebody out of place, you could create some voids, give us some things.

We've fallen victim to that. We've also fallen victim to some really good play. You think about the Ohio State receivers and trying to defend those guys.

The biggest thing we've got to do is just try to take care of what we can do detail-wise, technique-wise, and then try to match up against this opponent, and those are the challenges every week you face.

Q. I wanted to ask about Kaden Wetjen. I know you said he was basically the only bright spot of the game the other night. This is a guy that came in from not only high school but he came from JUCO, was a walk-on, waited his turn behind Cooper DeJean in terms of punt return, and now he's a factor on offense, in kick return, in punt return. I wanted to ask you about what you've seen from him in terms of his mindset, his willingness to wait, and now being impactful on punt return, kick return and offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first of all, since he's been here, he seems like he enjoys football, enjoys the group, being part of the team. He's typically a pretty positive guy. Whether it's in meeting rooms or down working out, strength and conditioning work, I can't say I've really seen him not, like, upbeat very often since he's been here.

To your point, and it's a good point about him having patience because you've got a guy like Cooper who's really exceptional, and I'm sure he would have loved to have been in there the last couple years, too.

But being patient there and then stepping in, kind of the Jay Higgins story and doing a great job, and he certainly did a nice job the other night.

The irony the other night, I thought we would have -- silly me; I thought we'd have an opportunity in the punt return game based on what we had seen. I thought we had a real opportunity there to make some yards, I don't think they punted. So take that off the table, and then flipping it over, they had given us four returns, had four balls returned on this entire season. I didn't think we'd necessarily get an opportunity, and then secondly, didn't really see the ball coming out the way it did. It's a real credit to Wetjen and also the entire unit for blocking the way they did.

We found one positive thing to say about Saturday, so thank you.

Q. Brendan Sullivan is a 69 percent career passer, pretty low mistake guy, so he obviously can throw the ball. You mentioned the 3rd down failures the other day. You had two 3rd and 1s and didn't bring him in the game. I'm curious why you don't use him in those situations, the 3rd and 1s or 3rd and 1½s.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you could make that argument, treat it like what we've done that with the red zone. You could make that argument. You could make it both ways. It's a little bit unsettling maybe bringing a guy in, but I think I saw the Packers walking through the building, Kraft I think did a sneak, and apparently I said that to one of our guys,

and they said, well, I guess he did in college, too. I don't know if he was a high school quarterback. But yeah, that's something you could consider for sure. Maybe it is something we need to look at.

Q. Is that Tim's call?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll talk about it as a staff, but yeah. Usually most of our stuff is a group decision, but Tim ultimately will make the call.

Q. For different circumstances, in years past it feels as if there are question marks around the quarterback position, whether it be who's starting or the play of the quarterback at the time. Do you think there's a common denominator there, or is it a string of maybe just bad coincidences that these conversations are being had?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I'm not sure I understand the question totally, but just about everything in general?

Q. Yeah.

KIRK FERENTZ: Typically when they happen, it means you're not playing well enough to be undefeated or scoring as much as you'd like. I mean, I guess the best way I could say that is a week ago I didn't hear a word on Monday about we didn't play the quarterbacks right. If you win and score points, typically things are well. That's what an offense's job is is to score points. Certainly the quarterback is the most prominent player on an offensive football team.

The other night we didn't do -- basically didn't do much at all, if anything, in the first half. You've got to look at everything, and usually it starts with the quarterback, play calling. But we're assessing those things all the time, and if we had an exact answer that we knew was 100 percent, we'd be going with it.

Let's keep an open mind, keep playing, and see what happens.

Q. At left guard, we saw Elsbury starting and then Kade Pieper get some work in there. What prompted that? Is there an injury there, or is it getting Kade some time, and what have you seen from Kade that's really stood out this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, obviously the injury was Beau being out, and that'll be the case this week, too. We'll probably go the same way. Tyler has done a great job. I've talked about him a lot. Really has good position flexibility.

He'll be our backup center this week, I would imagine, going into the game and start at left guard.

Then Pieper is a guy, young guy, obviously, a little different -- kind of the exact opposite of Tyler, but really impressed us last year and had a really good spring ball and had a good camp, so we think he's got a really good future right now. So our plan the other night was to play both those guys, be and we'll probably do the same thing this week.

I mentioned Tyler being the backup center only because Kade has been working backup center, too, but I don't think we want to have him doing two things this week. So we'll just keep him at guard and let Tyler float around a little bit. His versatility, part of that comes with his experience. He did a great job last year when Logan was out.

Q. Kirk, over the years you've had a lot of young defensive backs, cornerbacks that you've thrown in, maybe have struggled in a game or two but have gone on to have outstanding careers, Riley Moss, Desmond King was thrown in there early. John Nestor was listed as a starter going into the year. Probably didn't have his best performance on Saturday, but he's a guy that you've talked highly about, the team has talked highly about. How do you make sure that he remains focused and locked in and confident in his process as he continues to grow into the role that he wants to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, all he's got to do is talk to basically everybody else in the group that is going through it. Pretty much every position, when you start out as a young player, it's not easy, especially if you're really young, which John is experience-wise. It's going to be a process for him.

You take your lumps, you get back on your feet and just go back to work. You don't have much time to sit around and pout. You've just got to try to learn from what you see on the tape, what you're hearing from the coaches and from other players and go forward.

It's really the path for most guys. We talked about microwaving. You can't microwave an offensive line. It's really true at every position. It's really rare when a guy just comes in and does really well right off the bat. It might happen occasionally, but it's very, very rare. I think that's probably true at every level, at least certainly in college football or the NFL. Usually you've got to take some lumps, too.

Q. You've talked in the past about Riley Moss coming back from the extra season of eligibility and him really taking advantage of that year. Have you seen something similar from Jermari Harris?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. He's playing good football. You hope all the guys that came back are going to not only want to play well but improve, and that's really why you practice and that's why you invest all the time. If you've got experience and some good experience on top of it, which he does, then that can really play to your advantage. I think he's doing a great job of that. Basically all the older guys are doing that, and we just need them to keep leading and bring some other guys with them. But he's doing a great job. I am really glad he's in the program.

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