

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Good to see everybody. Hope everybody had a goodbye weekend.

Just looking backwards for a second, obviously the long trip back from the West Coast, got back here probably like everybody else, around 7 am on Saturday. Gave our guys the weekend off to rest, and then Monday came in and trained and had a chance to look at the film. So we went back through that to see what we could learn, and then the rest of the week was really geared towards recovery time and getting a couple workouts in and practice and then got back at it on Sunday. That's really kind of where it's at.

We're 13 weeks into the season calendar now, which again, is a little bit unusual having two bye weeks. It's a long season, obviously, but the nuts and bolts of it is we are on to an 11-day season right now. That's what we've encouraged our players to focus on.

I would like to take a minute and congratulate Kaleb Johnson, who was named a semifinalist for the Doak Walker Award, and over the last 10 days had a lot of guys being named and the offensive line being named to the Joe Moore semifinalist list. Just happy for those guys. It's not the finish line, but it's a recognition of a job well done. Congratulations to those guys.

Captains for this game will be Jay Higgins, Quinn Schulte, Luke Lachey and Logan Jones.

Injury-wise, Brendan Sullivan and Reece Vander Zee will not be playing.

Then getting guys back, Lachey and Ostrenga have both been cleared and they've been able to practice, and will be back. I think Marco Lainez will be back. After that we've got a few guys who are clearly cloudy right now. We're going to see how the week plays out and go from there.

One of thing of note, Jeff Bowie has decided he's going to leave the football team. Made that decision last week. He's going to pull back right now and finish up academically. He'll graduate here this spring, and then

he's interested in going to another school and taking advantage of his last year.

Transitioning into Maryland, first thing, talented football team in all three phases. Well-coached, Mike Locksley has done a great job there. He's been there for quite some time. Sixth year as a head coach, 10 years overall in the program. He's from that part of the country and certainly knows that area well and has done a nice job building that program. Been to three straight bowls. They have their staff in place, consistent leadership at the coordinator positions. Certainly have an identity offensively, defensively and special teams-wise.

We're 10 games into it now, so you have a chance to look at people and get to know them a little bit. First thing that jumps out is they're just extremely talented on offense. The quarterback and two receivers are at the top of the Big Ten. Then their third receiver is a really good football player, too, No. 5. They have a trio of receivers that's as good as anybody out there. The quarterback has been really effective. Obviously, he's starting this year. In the past he's come off the bench and played really well, too, when their starter couldn't go. I remember seeing him I think it was against Michigan a year ago or two years ago and doing a nice job. He is a good football player.

Defensively, good size, athleticism, especially up front, and big guys that play extremely hard. So they're formidable. It's interesting in the kicking game they have a veteran placekicker who's a good football player. Punter is a newcomer, transferred in from a different university and is leading the Big Ten right now in punting, so they have two good specialists there, and then the same thing, they have good size, good athleticism and do a good job on special teams.

Probably as much as anything, if I could summarize it, a week ago Saturday, watching them compete against Oregon, it was really impressive. I think the score was misleading. I think Oregon got a fumble recovery for I think a 60-yard touchdown that kind of took it out of scale a little bit, but impressed watching them on TV how they competed against arguably the best team in the country and in a very tough environment out there. That tells you a lot about their football team.

The Kid Captain this week, we have Raelynn



Miller-Ramirez, a 10-year-old from Davenport. I've been told she was having a back-to-school deal where they give you a vision test when she was six and they discovered a tumor in her brain, a fast-moving cancerous tumor, and she traveled to Oregon to get that taken care of, and unfortunately it led to blindness. She's been over at the Stead Family Children's Hospital receiving treatment, and like so often, I think the unsung heroes there, the child life specialists there do just a wonderful job, and the family can't say enough about the job that they've done. They've been really helpful with her recovery and her story.

She is four years cancer free. Happy to say that right now. I've been told very active in the Girl Scouts, loves the violin. Just another really good story, and we'll be proud to represent her and her family this weekend as the game comes up.

I'll close it out with a couple of things. It's November, a lot of distractions, especially for our players. That's my concern right now is just them dealing with all the stuff that might be going on, whether it's whatever speculation on this and that. It's always been the case, but there's probably more now than there's ever been, the climate that we live in right now and social media, all that stuff.

Really our encouragement has been pretty simple. It's an 11-day season right now, and the only thing that matters right now are these next five days, including today. It's as simple as that. It's kind of like a lot of things in life. It's a big challenge, I think, in this game is just how well can we get ready for our challenge at noon on Saturday.

Q. Cade being back at the top of the depth chart, has he been cleared, and if so --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I wrote that on Sunday. He practiced Sunday. Everything is cloudy right now. That's kind of our forecast.

It clearly is cloudy right now. Everything is. We'll just take it day by day and see who can go.

Q. With quarterback, sounds like this week and next week are no-go for Brendan. Do you see there being any possibility of him playing in the bowl game? Then also with Marco, how much has he been able to really work in practice?

KIRK FERENTZ: Marco started back. That's the good news. Somebody told me yesterday that Brendan had been pronounced done for the season, which I chuckled because at that point it was a 12-day season. Talk about headlines, I guess you try to grab attention. Not that you guys write the headlines. I understand that.

But yeah, he's out this week. We'll see what next week brings. I'm not optimistic. But I would assume the bowl game. But nothing is broken, so hopefully we get him back.

Q. Obviously you knew this day would come once Brian lined up with Maryland. Curious, number one, whatever you can speak to, how his experience has been there, and also just sort of -- you've coached against a lot of friends, a lot of former coaches but never family. What are your emotions going into this?

KIRK FERENTZ: Exactly. It's the first time for a lot of things. That's life.

I haven't given it a lot of thought quite, frankly. Obviously I knew it was coming. But the bottom line is this, to your point, it's the best I can come up with, it's weird coming back here -- whether it be Barry Alvarez the first year or Bill Snyder year two, Dan McCarney, Bob Stoops, four guys that I worked with, and Bob played for us on top of it. Tremendous respect for all those guys.

It's a weird dynamic, but the bottom line is this: the reality is when you get to game day, that's what's silly about coaches exchanges greetings and all that. I fully know what the other coach wants to do, just like he knows what I want to do, and how we hope the day goes.

It's probably not a great time for a family reunion or just even seeing old friends. Everybody is cordial, but the bottom line is we've all got business to take care of on Saturday. We'll see where it all goes.

But I think his experience has been good, what I know about it, and as a parent I'm glad he's with good people, and Mike is a guy I've got a lot of respect for.

Q. With everything Cade has been through, the two season-ending injuries, then this injury, do you get a sense for how he is mentally at this point? How is he doing? How is he able to process things?

KIRK FERENTZ: You've heard me say multiple times that the worst thing in coaching from my experience is guys dealing with injuries, and usually it's not to this extreme. Usually you're talking about maybe a couple weeks and that's disappointing, or sometimes season-ending, which is disappointing. To have a stack of them, there's nothing you can say. All you can do is to try to support the people involved.

It's really hard. Especially with the collegiate athlete at this level, which I'd never played at. The investment they

make, the amount of time, energy, all the things that they dedicate to having a chance to get out there and compete, and to not have that come, it's nobody's fault, it's just what it is. It's part of the game, unfortunately.

It's hard. All you can do is try to support them and also I think support the message, which goes back to our first program goal is for every guy to graduate, and if you look at all of our propaganda, if you will, our mantras, whatever it may be, there's nothing about playing in the NFL. Just nothing. That's a byproduct of being a really good player, and it means you've got the right genetics and you really did a great job with all the stuff that -- opportunity that came your way, and it's still such a small percentage, and then the odds of staying.

That's not part of our program deal. It's about graduating, being a good person, and hopefully having a great experience during the program. But it's hard to say, well, my experience is a great one; I missed this game, that game, this game. It's just a hard part, but it's a reality of what we do.

Long-winded answer, but we're just trying to support him in every way, just like we are anybody that's dealing with injuries because it's hard and it's really lonely, too. It's a lonely place to be.

Q. I wanted to clear up the QB depth chart because I was surprised to hear Marco was back, so would Marco go into that backup spot or would he be behind Jackson?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, I think we'll start the way we finished is probably the best way I can put it. Jackson finished the game at UCLA. That's kind of where I see it. Then we'll see who can do what. If we were playing tomorrow, that's how it would be.

Everybody else has a chance outside of Brendan. He for sure is not playing this week.

Q. My actual question is with a season like this where you've had so many injuries and injuries have just piled up at so many key positions for you, is there anything as a coaching staff or as a staff as a whole to be learned or gleaned in terms of training practices, anything like that, or when you have a string of all these injuries, is it just purely bad luck, misfortune, and that's all there is to it?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't know that we've had extreme amount, but when they all hit one position -- in '04 it was our running back spot. We got decimated there. There's nothing scientific about it. Each injury is typically

its own story, just like each game and each season is its own story. But when they do hit one position, which at times they do, it magnifies things a little bit. Certainly our quarterback position has been affected, so you just deal with that.

But yeah, part of our annual process and even weekly process but more so annual process, you look at every segment of the program, are we doing something. We're really training the same as we were in '02 but probably not as hard, and we don't practice as long as we did back then. We had more players back then. Basically the program has been pretty similar for 26 years now and the way we go about things.

I bring up '02 only in the sense that that was the one rare year where we had very little problems with injuries. I know we had a cornerback bump there somewhere along the way, but outside of that, it was pretty much the same guys that started each and every week.

When you can get into that groove, that's a good thing. It really helps your chances of being successful. But that's not the reality. Usually you have to deal with things week to week.

The teams that can handle that the best are ones that are going to be successful, and that's something we talk to our guys about every August, like you never know what the bumps are going to be during the course of the year. Injuries always play into that, who can handle it the best.

Q. Your last answer confused me a little bit on the quarterback --

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go back to clearly cloudy. I like that phrase.

Q. You said Jackson would start, but Cade is on the depth chart. Do you know who's starting?

KIRK FERENTZ: If we were playing right now, it would be Jackson. I'll know on Friday.

Q. We talked to Tim Lester last week, and we said would you feel comfortable, and he's like, I don't know about Jackson. How much more comfortable are you maybe now than you were a week ago?

KIRK FERENTZ: A heck of a lot more comfortable. If he knew what we knew about the last time, just because of the lack of -- I'm not saying this in a negative way toward Jackson at all, but he hadn't gotten any reps. Once we started doing game prep, two guys get the reps, and that was obviously the first two guys. Even Marco was



watching. He was holding a clipboard and watching and Jackson was working the scout team.

I thought he did some good things out in that last ballgame, Jackson did, and he has talent. He can throw the football. You guys saw that.

Now it's a matter of thank goodness we got a bye week and got a chance to get him more comfortable and schooled, and if he ends up being our guy, we'll try to put a plan together that features what he can do and keep him out of the danger areas maybe and not have him doing calculus problems out there if he's not ready for that.

But we went through this. If there's good news, we went through the same exercise a year ago and came out of it OK.

You deal with the cards that are dealt you, and play them accordingly. In this case we're not sure what it's going to look like, but we'll know as the week goes on.

Q. To ask a little bit more about Jackson, to quote you, you said you're a hell of a lot more comfortable this time around than you were against UCLA. What makes you more comfortable?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I had never seen him in a game. Let's start there. That's only because he's never been in the game. I was actually teasing him this morning about that because he is, I think, our only -- well, TJ Hall is California, Fresno. That's California, but it's more Midwest. It's not like the California we all think about.

But Jackson, the Rose Bowl, grew up with all that stuff. I was just teasing him about did you ever think you'd be playing in the Rose Bowl this year. He had to admit that was kind of a far-fetched thing certainly, and I had never met him until August when he showed up, or late July, whatever it might have been.

I'm pointing here because his mom and dad, I met them here, too.

We've seen him play now. He was out there, and I thought he did a really admirable job for a guy who has not had a lot of work. I thought he did a good job. He can throw it, seemed composed. Again, he's got a week to go. We'll let it rip. Whoever is in there, we'll let it rip.

Q. I wonder if you could speak about your relationship with Mark Farley as he gets ready to wrap up his career at Northern Iowa this weekend.

KIRK FERENTZ: I should have mentioned that quite

frankly at the top. We're kind of like the same vintage in certain ways. The only difference is he had a really good career as a player and mine was pretty nondescript. Both linebackers, all that stuff. I have a lot of respect for Mark. What a great job he's done. What a great program that's been for quite some time.

He has withstood the test of time. We had a chance to communicate, I guess it was a week ago Sunday. Is that when everything kind of hit? Just happy for him, and it's rare in this -- you guys follow the news closer than I do. It's hard in this profession to leave on your own terms.

I have nothing but respect. He's been down here a lot. Comes to our camps, things like that, just like a lot of the FCS coaches do, and he's had a great career there. It's a great program, great tradition, and he certainly has added to it. Congratulations to him.

Q. I wanted to get some clarity with Cade. You said he practiced Sunday. Did he have a setback or is he still in that process of coming back?

KIRK FERENTZ: Still processing back. He has been cleared to play, and whether or not he can play effectively or not, we'll see. We'll just see how the week goes. But we're prepared for anything, quite frankly.

Q. When Mark retired, he mentioned the changing nature of college football. For a coach who's been in the game as long as you have and as long as Coach Farley had, how has it been adapting to the changes of late?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's interesting. I think I said a couple years ago, as an experienced coach, not an old coach but an experienced coach, what keeps you interested -- every day there's something to pique your curiosity and something maybe you hadn't envisioned to deal with, and the trend in college football -- as I was kind of alluding to there a little bit, as I wrapped it up, the trend in college football is changing dramatically and it's changing fast, and in some ways not a good way. I am semi-optimistic, probably caps on the "semi" part of it. But I think at least we have an opportunity maybe to rein things -- maybe not rein them in but provide some structure, which right now we're badly needing.

But yeah, it's just really interesting. It's a concerning time. The game itself hasn't changed. The people involved have been -- that's what keeps you -- makes you enjoy the whole thing. It's just the stuff on the outside is really changing right now, and I'm not sure in a way -- it's beneficial for a lot of people, and then unfortunately there's some people benefiting that probably don't deserve to be

benefiting. Outside forces. I'm not talking about athletes or programs.

But we've created this environment that's maybe not real healthy right now. Hopefully there's an opportunity to get some structure, and I've said many times before, the NFL does have structure. Say what you want about the NFL; A, they make money, which is what they're in the business for; and B, they have structure. Like they have clear structure. That's something we're lacking right now. Hopefully we'll get there, and that'll make things a little bit better.

But that's part of life. It's always going to change. College sports is just part of that.

Q. You were mentioning having the Doak Walker semifinalist, having a Joe Moore semifinalist. What's your thoughts on the way Tim Lester has reestablished or reinvigorated this run-first identity, and what's the key to avoiding a situation like UCLA where the run game doesn't really get going?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, a couple things. Give Tim credit, and he spoke to that last week. I read his comments. He has a really good system. That's obviously why we hired him, to try to do some research here, and felt good about that. But I think the biggest picture, and Tim made this very clear last Wednesday, and I'd reaffirm this, and I said this back last August, I think a couple things, first of all, I think the offensive line is a better place than it's been the last couple years. Nobody's issues, it's just attrition, injuries. It's been tough. So we're finally able to maybe play at a level where the proficiency is a little bit more like what we hope.

Then you've got a back who's in his third year instead of being a first-year guy who's kind of hit or miss. He's always been a great kid. He's an outstanding young man. But the lack of consistency, inexperience, immaturity, et cetera, and that's the benefit of being older. So our line has benefitted from that, and Kaleb is benefiting from that, and the rest of the room is doing a good job, too, but he's the one carrying the heaviest load.

Then UCLA just did a great job. The bottom line on that game is you name the phase and they did a better job than we did coaching or playing, so end of discussion on that one. Credit to them.

Q. It seemed like there were parts of that UCLA game that were similar defensively to the Michigan State game, particularly tackling. When you look back and evaluate it, what do you feel like caused that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, football 101. At one point in my life, I was a defensive-minded person. Football 101, if you can't tackle, you're not going to be any good on defense, and that's pure and simple. I know some NFL teams get away with that. That is a rule, if you can cover well enough you don't have to tackle. But just in general terms, if you don't tackle well, forget about it.

Then rule No. 2 is if they run the ball, if you let your opponent run the ball at will, it's going to be a tough day, chances are. So we were really guilty of both those things.

Until you straighten those things out or go into the game with the right mindset, then it's going to be hard to expect to play the kind of defense you want to be. It's a little bit like our team right now; I can give you evidence over the last month where we've looked like a really good football team, and I can show you evidence where we're not so.

It's about consistency in approach. It's about consistency in performance and consistency in coaching. If you write down the list, we all have ownership. That's with these last two games. Right now the only one that matters is Saturday. But that's what it's about. You run that race each and every week.

That's the other thing I would emphasize, and that's part of the challenge about this day and age and especially in November, sometimes people forget this is a week to week deal, just like the NFL, and I think in that way we've become more like the NFL, where in general, like if you're not right on the money, then you've got a chance to come up disappointed.

That's always been the case. I can go back to '81. I was talking to somebody this morning, one of our players, who told me his mom was born in '86, so we were talking about all that kind of stuff, and I was like, hmm, okay. So it was interesting.

But I go back to '81, my first real college experience, and that's been the case. Especially however many years here, 36 or whatever it is, one thing I know about here, we're always the underdogs, that's who we are. There might be an exception or two along the way but not many. If we don't have that right attitude and that right mindset going into a game, it could be dangerous. That leads to bad tackling or whatever. You have to be at your best. That's what the game tries to teach you, and if you don't learn it, you get humbled.

I'll wrap it up. I also want to pay tribute to the high school student journalists observing here today. Congratulations to you guys. Appreciate you being here. Future journalists right there. Thank you.