

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



Moving into game week, our captains for this game will be Ethan Hurkett, Koen Entringer, Logan Jones and Mark Gronowski.

KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Just take a minute to focus, talk a little bit about camp a little bit and then we'll shift our focus to game week, which is why we're all here.

As I said last Thursday, overall just pleased with camp. Our guys had a good attitude. Their effort was good, and pretty consistent for the most time.

We saw a lot of improvement from a lot of guys, and the good news is guys are getting ready to play a football game. They're excited about that.

You look back over this whole thing, our guys, we've had a lot of improvement. Went back and pulled something out from January just after we went through our roster and how I ranked the team back then individually, and had a lot of guys make significant progress, I think, over that time, certainly, and August is a part of that.

We were fortunate we came into camp pretty healthy, and fortunate to leave pretty healthy, which for the most part, most of the guys were getting really consistent work, and that's how guys improve. It's a simple formula but not always as smooth as you want.

We released the depth chart yesterday, and that's a fluid situation, especially this time of year. We really don't know at certain positions what our depth is. I think that could go as much as a couple weeks here before we really kind of settle into who's who and what's what.

Some of the names are in permanent ink, a lot of them are in pencil. I remember when I went to the NFL, I was always curious why everybody was always using pencil, and I learned pretty quickly, that way you can erase and say, hey, I never said that, erase whatever you wrote down.

I will say, I think, there is going to be some shifting as we go along. We've got guys rotating in practice. But it's a starting point. We'll see how things play out over the next couple weeks.

Everybody is eager to transition, just like I'm sure UAlbany, as well. Camp goes, it's a prescribed period of time, then it's time to get involved in game week. Look forward to that, and I think all our guys are happy to be at home and have a chance to swarm out into Kinnick. It's always a special thing.

That being said, it's the first game, especially for our entire football team, a lot of our players, high percentage of guys haven't really been out there playing offensively and defensively when it counts, and those kinds of things, so that never changes. Haven't been out there in front of 70,000 people. We'll be curious to see how they all react.

Every first game has its challenges, and this is no different playing UAlbany. A lot of unknowns in terms of what they're going to do schematically. They have had a coaching change, Coach Gattuso left, went back to his alma mater, and Coach Ambrose has been elevated to the head coaching spot. I'm sure still very involved with their offense. He was the offensive coordinator last year.

Schematically, I think, all three phases we expect them to be fairly similar, but you just never know what they've done in the out of season, that type of thing, and that's true each and every game when you open a season.

Then obviously new players, too. They have guys that have graduated, moved on, new players coming in and then transfers that you really haven't seen on film.

There's a lot of guesswork on our side. Same thing for them, I'm sure. Bottom line is you want to be as alert, sound as you possibly can, and the team has got to be ready to adjust as the game goes on because I'm sure there will be some things that we're going to have to react to and see if we can do a good job there.

It gets really down to solid execution, solid focus, and like all first games, just like bowl games at the end of the season, penalties, miscues, ball security, special teams, you don't want those things to be things that are going to put a hole in your boat, that type of deal.



The Kid Captain program continues, and what a great concept that is. Just happy that we'll have 12 more Kid Captains during the course of this year. Just all of them have unbelievable stories.

This week we've got Nolan Stevenson, who's a nine year old from Oskaloosa, was in a UTV accident when he was six years old, hospitalized, they brought him up to Iowa City and went through a 15-hour surgery if you can imagine that and then a week later unfortunately lost his leg. He was six years old when he had the accident. He's doing great.

Also went through about 84 days of treatment and surgery over there, skin grafting, procedures, et cetera. Great young guy. Got a great spirit. Likes golfing, likes swimming, active on the family farm. So it'll be great to have him with us on Saturday. Look forward to that.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. What are the difficulties of actually trying to scout UAlbany? I know they have a couple coaches and coordinators returning but I think 50 different players from last year, interim head coach tag. Where do you start?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think schematically, at least we think, you would imagine they'd stay pretty consistent. Coach Ambrose has done a really good job as an offensive coordinator, was at Delaware at one point in his career and has done a really good job there, so I don't see them drifting too far.

Same thing defensively; we'd expect similar looks to what we're seeing on film. The biggest part is personnel. It's hard because you have transition, and it's more of that now than ever before in college football, so a lot of new faces, and we'll just have to see as we go along.

You try to piece things together. They have some new receivers, and they've had good receivers, and they have some new guys that look like they can run pretty well, but you're looking at film from here, there or wherever -- we'll learn during the game, the first half of the game I'm sure.

Q. I wanted to ask about Mark and it being his first start, having just started to play live football again this last couple months, whatever it is. How would you define success for him specifically on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's kind of like our whole football team. You hate to start with the negatives, but you don't want to do anything negative. Things are going to be really costly. In any sport but certainly in football, a big part of

winning is not losing, so just taking care of your job, basically, and the difference is a quarterback, he has his hands on the ball every play. It is a little bit different than other sports. It's a critical position. He makes a lot of big decisions and critical decisions during the course of the game.

But I think probably as much as anything from my vantage point it would be not trying to do too much. I think during the course of this camp, we've seen him get more and more comfortable, and then went through a little period there where he's trying to maybe do too much and force some things, that type of deal.

He hasn't played in a while. I know he'll be excited just like a lot of guys that haven't played in Kinnick. He has played in Kinnick but not on our side. So just try to relax and play your best football the way you've been coached, and look forward to seeing him play.

Q. A long snapper wasn't listed on the depth chart. Do you guys have a starter there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, Ike Speltz will be the guy. He and Bryant have been going back and forth, but it's one of the positions where it's not a clearly defined line yet.

Q. You mentioned last Thursday that there was less soft tissue stuff going into camp. What do you attribute that to?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not sure I know, actually. It's a little bit ironic because we have a smaller roster. But overall our conditioning has been pretty good, and I think part of it is just good fortune.

I also do think every individual has some ownership in it. You can't prevent everything, obviously, but there are a lot of things you can do for yourself as an athlete. But it takes discipline, takes awareness, education.

But the simple things that we all know we're supposed to do like sleeping well, hydrating, eating good food, all that type of deal, all that stuff factors into staying healthy, and I think maybe our guys are doing a good job of listening right now.

There's always some luck involved when it comes to injuries and certain things you just can't avoid, but I do think there's probably maybe been a little bit more awareness on the team in terms of taking care of the things they have to do on a daily basis.

Q. I wanted to ask you what your breakdown is when you look at a position like, say, left tackle, the



subjective versus the objective and how you decide ultimately who plays more or who wins that type of a job. You see every practice, you look at every single play, every single snap; how do you break that down? Is it number of blocks made? Is it his technique is better, he's more consistent with it? Is it a combination of that? Which one do you skew towards if it's we need to go in a direction here with one of these guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really all of the above. All the things you talked about factor into it. It's ongoing, too. I mentioned pulling out the sheet I had from January and how different that looks now eight months later, eight plus months I guess. That's part of it. Practice what we're doing.

Jack Dotzler, I'll just cherry pick him, you talk about tackles. Had really, I thought, a good spring and then didn't have a great end of the spring. His last day out there was okay, but he's made vast improvement.

The good news to me after I watched that tape from that last practice, most of it was just some technique stuff that he kind of abandoned, and talking about first experience, spring practice is not -- the place isn't sold out, but I think he had his motor running a little bit too hard and it affected his play.

He's done a really good job in camp, and kids' day is the only time we've been in public, but he played a lot better than he did that last time prior to that. It's a process. You just kind of evaluate day-to-day, and it is fluid.

I mentioned we have a lot of stuff written in pencil right now. I think we listed Trevor No. 1, but I'll give you some inside info. Yesterday one guy was at No. 1, the other guy was at 2, and then we flip-flopped it today. So we'll see what happens on Saturday.

But we're not 100 percent sure on a lot of spots, but it's daily and ongoing. It will be all season, too. The objective is to play well in games. As we move forward, how you do as the games go on really is going to determine who's going to be playing.

Ultimately a player decides who's playing. That's really how it works out.

I tell our guys, it's your job to get notice, it's your job to earn the position, and everybody has got an opportunity; that's the great thing about this.

Q. Sticking with left tackle, do you know who's going to start? Will you tell us who's going to start on

Saturday? Will it be a rotation? And maybe also, I know you've rotated guys in the past, and how does that benefit you to have that rotation so you can finally determine a guy like a James Daniels and whoever -- you know what I mean? You've rotated guys in the past.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think, as I stand here right now -- 2 p.m. on Tuesday -- we'll start Trevor, but Jack is going to play. I'm sure we'll play him because it is that close. I think they both have earned it. They both have done a good job.

Sometimes it's because you don't have one and you've got to play two, but I think we have two guys that really have made significant ground and gained significant ground. Then we'll just keep playing.

If it ends up that we got six, seven guys that can play starting level football, we'll play them all, no question about it. Usually you don't have that. But if we do, we'll play them, and that will be a good thing.

We've got some guys that are really close, so it's going to be fun to see how it develops here.

Q. Kirk, I wanted to ask you if you've made any decisions on true freshmen playing, that you think are going to get out there on Saturday, and maybe some clarity on the running back position. You have four guys listed in the two deep. How do you manage that situation?

KIRK FERENTZ: So freshman-wise, not a lot of guys, although as we stand here right now, still in August, we'll see. Nathan McNeil is probably the only guy. We'll green-light him this week and see what happens. The good news is again, we've got four games to play with, so that's always a good thing.

But I think we have enough other guys that have risen maybe where it's going to be tougher for sure for a guy to play. There are a couple guys that have a chance. We'll see what happens, see how things pan out.

So yeah, we'll see, but just play that one by ear week by week. We haven't been playing that many freshmen at the end of the day the last couple years.

And the running back position is clearly cloudy, and part of that was we did have some soft tissue injuries with one of our guys, and then another guy had a different injury, so they missed some significant time. So the picture is not real clear right now.

But I think the guys we've got listed plus maybe another



one or two have all done a good job and practiced when they've been in there. Kamari is probably the most game ready based on experience, and T.J. (Washington) is right behind him and Jaz has played, so I think we have a good grip of those guys, see where they are go.

I think Xavier is the other guy we listed. He's really done well starting back last August. He's improved with every phase. Did all season long last year, and he's been really good in the spring, really solid this camp.

Again, first time in a game, you just worry about ball security, all those kinds of things that can be -- see what happens. We'll see how it all plays out.

Q. The tight ends... it's always a given that that room is going to be solid under Abdul and everybody that's in there. You have Addison, Zach and Hayden has played a ton. Even though it looks like maybe there won't be as much 12 or 22 maybe this year, just what that room looks like and what's the role in '25 with the tight ends?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I would anticipate us playing at least two tight ends pretty frequently, and it's a good healthy room right now. Addison has done a really good job all the way through since he got here, played well at a young age. Maybe we didn't expect it to be the level he played at. He's a guy we all have great trust in, great leader, just a really good teammate and pretty good player.

Zach has done a lot of good things, and he continues to grow.

Hayden Large might be one of our most improved players, especially if you think back two years ago coming from Dordt. Last year took a big step, and I think he's taken another really big step. The defensive guys, we cross-evaluate, as well, and they feel the same way, so just a really flexible, multiple, talented guy and great team leader.

Then Vonnahme has really done a great job, too, so I think he's got a chance to really emerge out of the group. Happy with Michael Burt, and then the freshman group looks good, too.

Hopefully we can keep moving guys forward, but we plan on them being an integral part of what we're doing.

Q. Real quick, what is Jeremiah Pittman's health status? Is he okay?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, took a long time getting him back. The last time you guys saw it, he was on the sideline. He's

been back probably about a week and a half right now, and it's been pretty seamless. So the good news is it was a long recovery but he's doing well, and I think we just have to be smart about his volume.

But again, anytime you get a senior back who's experienced and he's got a great attitude and a good player, got him back in the deal, and right now we have to be smart as we move forward.

But I think with the additions of Jonah and Bryce, that's really been a good -- helped fortify that position. Will has done a good job, too, Will Hubert. I think as a group right now, we're doing okay there.

Q. Just curious for the amount of guys who are either stepping into bigger roles, haven't started, in your estimation, what makes for someone that can make that transition or what are some of the things that those guys do that allows them to be successful in those bigger roles?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, it's just process -- I don't know if it's an overused word, but it's just so true, especially in what we do. Pretty much the whole year is laid out, so how guys handle the whole year. That's in this building but it's also what they're doing outside, academically, socially, all those kinds of things.

Exceptions to every rule, but for the most part, the guys -- a lot of those guys on that wall over there were just guys that came in and worked hard and did it on a daily basis. Obviously we were really concerned with Jack Campbell graduated and got drafted, but here comes Jay Higgins, and we thought he'd play well, but man, he played even better than maybe we anticipated. That's fun to see.

But the reason it happened is just because of the way he worked those first couple years on campus, and when his opportunity came, he jumped in there and did a great job, and he earned every bit of it on his own. That's what I was alluding to earlier about the playing time. Players ultimately either earn the playing time or we just -- something happens and we've just got to put somebody in there before -- I always go back to Allen Reisner going into that one game. I thought I was going to get thrown in jail for child abuse. But you hope that doesn't happen. You hope it's an ascension that's earned.

Q. What are your thoughts on revenue sharing and maybe some disadvantages or advantages that you feel Iowa has there?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm all for revenue sharing. I think it's outstanding. The world has changed, and certainly the



way things look compared to 15 years ago, night and day difference. TV, we can thank them for all that.

I think it's great that money is going back to the athletes. I think that's really so deserved and a great deal.

If we could just keep it to that, I'd be a perfectly happy person. But unfortunately, we kind of struggle with that as a rule. There's some things already going on -- I think the changes that have taken place in structure the past year here, less than past year, were all really positive. I just hope at some point we can contain what's going on with NIL and that type of thing.

I don't want to say I'm not optimistic, but I'm not overly optimistic. Somewhere in between, and just hopeful that for the betterment of our game we can figure this out. The NFL had an advantage because they had a lot less teams when they set the rules up, but from a structure standpoint they've got the best thing going.

I did look it up, I think I mentioned it last week, there were three small-market teams doing really well in baseball, so they were a bye week -- somebody explained that to me. But for competition, I think we all should be able to agree that this is the best thing for our sport. That ain't going to happen, but we'll see.

Q. You've done a lot of these week 1s. Obviously you can learn a lot about your team when they're facing guys with different jerseys. Is there anything specific you're looking to learn about your team this week, things you're looking for, besides obviously getting the win?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first and foremost, yeah, we want to win the game. We don't talk about that a lot, but I talk more about our performance and how we play. But why else would you line up if you're not trying to win, certainly. So that's first and foremost.

But you're curious every first game just how things are going to be, how are we going to react, how are we going to handle whatever comes our way. This team is really interesting in what we've lost a lot of really good players the last couple years, got a lot of new faces. Last year Kaleb Johnson just grabbed that running back role in a short time. I'm not sure that's going to happen this year, but who's going to do what when the door does open, when opportunity is there.

Just really curious to see what kind of growth we can show from a year ago, and then it's going to be ongoing, especially this first part of the season. I think it's really -- this is a big five-week block for us as a team.

Q. A lot has been made about the receiving corps and the improvement they've made in the off-season. Where have you seen the biggest improvement, and going forward, what more would you like to see as they develop into a group that can have a good season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, two-fold. I think we talked about the health thing earlier, and that's a position that tends to get hit with a little bit more soft tissue stuff, and then I would also add the maturity. I think those two things kind of go together sometimes.

We've got a good group of older guys that really work hard and set a good tempo, and they've -- Jon has done a good job, I think, with those guys daily, and they're showing improvement each and every turn.

Hopefully they can get involved and help us become a real balanced offense. That's our goal.

Q. You touched on it a little bit earlier, but just the challenge of balancing evaluating what you have and also winning the game, winning week 1, is that even more difficult this year than years prior just because of how many guys are up for grabs, how many spots are up for grabs?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, not necessarily. We're going to play the guys we think give us the best chance to win, period. We're always going to do that.

But when things are truly really close, then we think we know, but you don't always know. That's why game experience, I think, is so important.

What we know right now, we being the coach, is we know what we've seen in practice over a prolonged period of time. Camp is roughly four weeks, so you really get a good evaluation there, and I tell our players all the time, it's a long process, and over time you really formulate some opinions.

But all that -- it doesn't go out the window, but really everything is building toward what are we going to do in game competition. That started in January.

Now we've got a chance to be out there on the field, fans, the whole nine yards. It's a different -- it's one more step of the evaluation, if you will, and I'm hoping every guy gets out there and plays really well. That would be great. Hopefully we have some depth and all that stuff. But it's just part of the process as we go forward.



Q. What sprung Sam Phillips to the top of the depth chart in the last couple weeks?

KIRK FERENTZ: Consistency is the first thing I would say. He's a really impressive guy. We met him first, him, his mom and dad, and I don't want to say he's better than we thought. I don't want to make it sound like that. But we thought he would be a good addition to our team. He's out there every day and just works hard, and he's really showing up, and I'm thinking of one play in particular he made in the red zone probably about 10 days ago or eight days ago, something like that, and he went down and basically took a ball off the turf and made a really nice play. You're down there trying to score a touchdown, that's important. It was very natural.

That's the other part about it, too, that we haven't talked about. I don't think we've tackled since January. I would say that our defensive guys don't -- their ears don't work so well. It's been a no-tackling zone since January, and we get guys tackled all the time.

Now we're playing live football, it's going to be a little different, so the evaluations change, and ultimately -- we tackle in drills but not scrimmage. We don't scrimmage.

So it's one more step in the chain here, and I hope we're doing the right thing, but we've kind of done it that way for a long time.

It's a different deal, but that play, the one I'm referencing there, that's what you're looking for. Good players do that kind of stuff.

Q. We've talked a lot about Mark Gronowski in terms of his leadership and him being named a captain by the teammates. How would you describe his leadership style and how he's captivated the offense as a whole, and how have you seen him really progress since we got the opportunity to watch him at kids day?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure, it's a challenge for any newcomer to become a leader in a program. He's been here less than a year, calendar year, and then double the challenge because he came in after surgery, so he was in a brace or whatever they call those things. So he's not participating in some of the stuff in the wintertime, a really intensive strength and conditioning program, so he's not doing that full speed. He's recovering, nothing he can do about it.

But I think his approach was really smart and mature. He didn't try to force anything. He just kind of organically earned everybody's respect, I think, and just the way he operates, I think it became easier once he was able to

actually practice. I'd probably back that up, he was able to be involved in the summer program and be part of the team that way and doing all the stuff that everybody else was doing. So I think that's probably really where he excelled, when the guys got to know him a little bit differently and watched him compete, whatever they might have been doing, strength, conditioning, all that stuff.

Then it's carried over into the football. But he has a good way about him. He's a really humble guy. I don't want to say understated, but he's got a quiet confidence, but there's no arrogance there at all.

I think it's easy to look at the guy and say, okay, this is somebody we want to follow. You've got to play good, too, and that's part of the deal, but he's done that. He's just been a really good teammate. It's just been a gradual process, and I really credit him for not trying to force it because you can see somebody having that inclination, but he didn't do that.

Q. I wanted to ask, I know kick returner wasn't listed on the depth chart. Obviously Kaden is going to be back there --

KIRK FERENTZ: Good chance, yes.

Q. Who do you expect to be next to him?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're not sure yet. The good news is I think we have a couple candidates. Sam is one of them. Sam has done a nice job there, too. We'll see, and we're still looking at the off returner on the kickoff team. That's something that's still up in the air here, and we'll probably make a decision here as the week goes on.

It doesn't sound like much, but that's a really important position. That's a communication position, judgment, all that type of thing.

I know LeVar is still mulling that one over a little bit, but I think we have good candidates. It's just deciding on who best suits that role.

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