

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Offensive Coordinator Tim Lester

Press Conference



TIM LESTER: Thanks for coming out. Obviously, last week was a hard-fought game, physical, and guys competed hard. Several injuries. Mark (Gronowski) was one of them.

Three days after that, encouraging news that all those guys that are banged up are going into a bye week. We're all into a bye week, right? Today was bye week practice number one, and it was exciting for us to get out there with -- I think we ran 56 plays today with our guys, the twos and the devo guys and guys that haven't been in there a ton. It's been a lot of fun for us to get those guys out there. None of the ones got any reps today.

All injured players are working hard to get back. Don't know Mark's status yet. It's cloudy. We don't need to know, though, because it's a bye week. Next week, you'll have the head coach up here. He can tell you more about it as we find out more.

Excited to be into a bye week. We need it. Four weeks of camp, five games straight, some physical games, and we have been improving. Excited to get back and work with some of the twos and threes. As the season goes on, we're going to need those guys. They're going to be in prominent roles. So, it's a good week to take a breath and regroup.

Q. Where is your confidence level with Hank, especially having little experience? He did play this last weekend. I guess what did you think about how he played given that he was thrown in in a tough situation?

TIM LESTER: It's tough. I'm sure he would tell you he wished he played better. Everyone does. His feet were a little giddy. Made a couple of big throws. Missed a couple I'm sure he wants back.

He was going to the right places. We just got to get his feet underneath him. He has such great feet, calm feet.

That's one of the reasons he had a pretty good spring and into fall camp, and -- everyone's feet, Mark's feet looked like that on Week 1 too, and Mark's feet have improved. The last three games, I feel as if I think he's like at 70% completion. He understands it. He's comfortable with it.

Any quarterback that goes in there for the first time -- they need to calm down and relax a little bit. I thought he did that. He made some good plays, but he has to improve.

Him and (Hecklinski) had a great day today. Heck hasn't been here very long, but he's getting for comfortable with what we're doing.

Back to this week, this is a fun week for me to have those guys take a ton of reps and see where they're at, and they both need them because they don't get as many. The other guys have been on the scout field. These guys are getting a ton of reps this week and just to see the improvement we're going to need if he's in the game.

Q. Regardless of who is at quarterback, yards per carry is down quite a bit this year. Obviously, the explosives aren't there. What do you attribute that to thus far, and how do you get that going in the second half of the season?

TIM LESTER: Yeah, we do. I didn't think it would be as explosive. Wanting some of those to come out of the pass game, we've had more explosive pass plays than last year, because every year is going to be different.

The inconsistency, to nobody's fault in the running back situation, has been interesting. They've all been working hard. We have had a different guy start, I think, every single game. We finished last game with only two that were healthy and one of those was Kamari, who was hurt early and didn't come back until game three.

So just getting the consistency with the O-line and running backs, I think that's going to help a ton, and as we become better at throwing the ball, it's going to take more pressure off the run game. I think points are up. All the stats, as I look at them, you really don't stop halfway and look at them, but this would be the one time to peek at them. You peek, and we're a little up in this, we're a little down in this, we're a little up in that. It's hard to judge other than we have to figure out which backs are going to stay healthy

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and have some consistency there.

They're all doing a good job. I felt like we played a really good football team last week, a team that was in the college football playoffs last year, and it was going to be a Jaz, an X, physical, but they were both hurt. So it was a little curve ball there, because it was just going to be a grind.

They're really good up front. I forget what they were ranked, maybe No. 2 in the country on defense. Yards were going to be there, but they were going to be hard to come by. Broken tackles, get the pile pushing forward. I thought Kamari did a really good job a couple of times pushing that pile. Jaz and X, kind of naturally that's their go-to.

We need more consistency in that. I think that will help us get more explosives in the run game.

Then, obviously, the pass side of things is helping the whole offense and the points part of it, which is up a little bit, because we can be more balanced, which is the goal.

Q. Has Reece Vander Zee gotten back out to practice with you guys? Do you expect him back for Wisconsin, and just kind of an overview of the receivers and how they have developed so far this year.

TIM LESTER: Right now -- and I'm proud of this, and we're nowhere near where I would like to eventually be, but we have I think 15 receivers -- running backs, receivers, tight ends that have two or more catches right now. We're spreading the ball fairly well.

Obviously, I would love Reece to be one of those guys. I think is going to start practicing next week. He's been doing more and more. I think they have him running a little bit right now.

He's close. None of the decisions have to be made during a bye week, but we're hopeful that he'll be back soon, and getting a big target like that on the back side -- he plays the X receiver, so he would be a huge advantage to us to have a guy like that.

But Sam is doing a great job in that spot, and he's getting better. I think you see the receivers as a whole, we still got a lot more to work on. I think we're running routes. Our depths are the proper depths. They're making plays.

I would like to see more run after catch. It's something we haven't seen yet, but it's something we're building to. It's always the last thing that comes, right?

So I'm proud of that room. That room has done a good job in creating some separation, making some plays. Obviously, Dayton the made the big play at the Rutgers game.

We also have to put them in situations to make those plays. We've had opportunities to take some shots down the field that we've checked down on, and I know Mark talked to you guys about I have to be more aggressive.

I'm trying to call it aggressive, but you have to make the decision and take that shot. He's starting to get more comfortable with that, and that's been fun to watch his growth as a passer. He's always a good manager. He's a great runner, but to his feet and what they did the last couple of weeks, you know, just to continue to develop him as a passer, it's been fun, because he's a great kid.

He works hard. He wants to learn. So it's been fun to see what he's been able to do and just continue to put them in spots to be playmakers, because if the ball is not thrown to you, you really can't be a playmaker.

Q. I'm curious, because Mark's legs have been such a dynamic part of his game this year, how much changes with what you're able to do with when Hank comes in, and when he comes in, you got a little experience with it last year, how much are you balancing what I want to do with the offense right now and what he's comfortable with and the plays I know he likes to go to?

TIM LESTER: Yeah, it's a good question, because it's different when you have a week to prepare and when it happens in the middle of a game. When you have a week to prepare -- I have each player, each quarterback, one, two, and three, fill out a form of their favorite plays.

I make my call sheet look like the starting quarterback, but I always keep them in a file. I hope I don't ever have to open up that file, but I had to last week. I had to open it up and take Hank's out just to see what his favorites were on the sheet.

So you try to call a game to make the kid comfortable. Hank is way more athletic than you think. I think he's a different style of runner. He's more on the edge guy than up the middle. Sully was more of an edge guy than up the middle guy.

Mark is unique in that he does a good job keeping his shoulders square and working the A gaps, which Tebow could do. Not a lot of guys can work the A gaps. Quarterbacks, at least.

So, and then in the game you really are just thinking, where is he at mentally, and how can I make him comfortable? He ran some short passing game, some screens just to try to get him calmed down.

I used to not calm down until I got hit when I played. I needed to get hit by somebody and then get up, relax, and start playing when I was a quarterback.

During a game, you really don't change much of what you're doing. You just are trying to keep him comfortable. Then we got into two-minute situation. At that point you got to go. There's only one way to go. I thought did he a good job. Missed a couple of things, but I'm sure he's going to learn from it.

He also got us a couple of first downs, got us across the 50. We just got to finish that drive. We had a couple of chances. Sailed the last one a little high. The one before that he got a little bit confused. I wanted him to take a shot, and he didn't, but that's learning, right? It's the first time in there, and he's hungry, and it's been good to see him out there today throwing it again.

Q. I wanted to follow up with the running backs a little bit and just the fact that you guys haven't really had the opportunity to stick with one starting running back every game this year. How does that adjust when you kind of get the word, like, okay, we're not going to get Kamari this week, we're not getting him this week, okay, and this week we're also not going to have X and Patterson. How does that change your approach?

TIM LESTER: It's difficult, right, because they each have their fast ball, right? Like this is what he does best, because you always try to put guys in the position that they do best. We try it with receivers. I need a field post. I know who I want on that route, and I can move that position there, you know.

It's made it very intriguing personnel-wise, because we've added words to the end to make sure I'm getting the right people in for that play. Some guys are better on the edge. Some guys are better in the A gaps.

The good thing about our running back room is I feel like they all can do everything, but you still want to keep them in their fast ball.

Like I just said about last week, we really didn't have a grinder, A-gap runner, that that's his bread and butter. We were playing a team that we kind of needed that. Mark was probably our best big back last week, and we didn't run him. We didn't want to run him much in there, but he

did. He scored on one.

It does, it makes it difficult. Coach Young, our new running back coach, has done a great job at just shuffling them around trying to keep them comfortable. One of them is a true freshman. Nate the Great, he is rolling. He is super talented. He's just young. Trying to keep him comfortable and not put him in too many situations that get him out of his comfort zone. It's difficult.

The great part is you have a great group, right, that most teams if they got to their fourth and fifth, would be in huge trouble, and our guys are still able to execute.

That's the silver line, but it is difficult, and it just takes a little bit more planning on the front end. Then a guy gets hurt in the middle of the game, and all that planning goes out the window quick. Those guys really have done a good job.

Kamari coming back from his first injury, he's really starting to get comfortable. I felt like at the end of the Rutgers game he started feeling like he was back. Not afraid of the shoulder anymore, running hard, and did a good job in the game against a really good front. So we were really happy to have that guy of all of them back.

Q. I was curious, the play called, the third and five. Hank was in the game. It was a play right before Drew missed the 42-yarder. Can you just walk through -- I think it was a screen pass. Just kind of the thought process behind that.

TIM LESTER: Oh, it was there. It was a touchdown if we executed it. We went back and forth.

You know, his last throw down the field was picked. That went through my head. We were already in field goal range, so I was trying to think what kind of safe call can I have for the quarterback since we're already in field goal range? We went with kind of a three-step screen combination, we which we had ran all game and hit it. I think we hit it three times. We never hit the stick. We hit the hitch twice and threw the screen once to Kamari.

I forget whose suggestion it was when we were talking about it, but it was the best aggressive, give us a chance to get the first down and end the game as opposed to dropping him back and trying to read coverage and split two safeties or something simple that still gives us a legit shot.

We got lucky. They covered the three-step. They stunted the back side end, which actually gave us a clean lane for the throw. We had two linemen out on the will, and there's

really nobody left over there. He just kind of fell away, and the ball got away from him, and he missed the throw.

You know, but that was -- because we had a lot of discussion. I don't know what happened. There was a stoppage of the clock before that, so we had a chance to talk about whether we were going to put him in a position to have to go make a third-and-ten-yard throw.

Running it, we hadn't been super explosive, so what's the happy medium of if they give us a quick throw to Wetj out there, we'll take it. If not, we'll give a chance to a play that was hit three times. Man, with the stunt it actually made the throw a little bit easier. We didn't complete it, so we had to kick.

That was the discussion that went through before making that call.

Q. DJ Vonnahme had seven catches this last weekend. Just about the most by a tight end since you've been here. Has he emerged as maybe, with the absence of Ostrenga, as maybe the favorite tight end in that room or a guy who has built a good connection with Mark?

TIM LESTER: Yeah, just watching him get better on a daily basis has been a lot of fun. High school quarterback, you know, and came in here, never had played. Kind of like Reece Vander Zee. They're just learning a new position.

So the level of growth that a guy like that have can have, and you have seen it. He had to put the weight on first. He had to learn how to block, and let me tell you, quarterbacks don't naturally do that, but he is learning how to do it. Then, obviously, we got the screen pass in his hands against Rutgers, and he got in space a little bit.

You know, what happened in camp, Ort got banged up at some point during camp, which really forced DJ to get a ton of reps and really speed up his growth. You got to see that he was ready.

He had one drop. He came out, and that thing was humming. Mark threw it right on time, and he turned. He's never too high. He's never too low. He's a tough kid. He's young. He's going to have a really bright future. We trust him, you know.

So when we're making play calls to get a guy, Ort can really run after the catch, but DJ just has a great ability with the ball in his hands.

Coach Hodge gets to choose when I call the play which

guy he wants to put there, and on that middle screen against Rutgers he chose DJ and gave us all a chance to see what he can do. We have to continue to find ways to get him in space because he's really good.

Q. Before my follow-up, is it fair to say Gronowski has a shot to play against Wisconsin?

TIM LESTER: I hope so. It's cloudy, but he's rehabbing. They're all rehabbing.

Q. It looked bad at first. Okay, regarding the quarterbacks, what are you trying to get out of this week with those two guys, because you might have to play one next week or both?

TIM LESTER: Or both, right? It's a huge week. I can tell you this about Hank. Hank at the end of spring ball was really humming. You know, started a little bit slow this camp, and then really started pushing Mark at one point once his feet got back to comfortable again.

Heck is a great little player now. He's tough. He's got a little swagger to him. He reminds me of when I played, like a little gun slinger. He's aggressive, you know.

But he just wasn't here very long, and now he's been here. So it's fun to have two guys that have a ton of talent, that don't have a ton of experience, but they have a ton of talent. They just need to be around it and hear it.

So today was a lot of fun for both of them to be out there, because as the third stringer, you get no reps. It's just the way it is. So to see Heck out there today -- Hank got a ton of reps too, obviously -- but it was fun because I think he is a very talented kid.

It's going to be a huge week for us just to let those guys get the reps. Unfortunately, because of the situation we're in, Jimmy and Ryan aren't getting a ton this week. They're getting a ton on the scout team. Every day they're down there. They were with the Mendoza brothers last week, both of them. So they're playing a ton.

For us it's so much fun to see some of these guys. There were some huge plays made out there today. Some that were on the scout team. Some that have been kind of rotators on offense and pretty much the backup O-line and getting to run the things full speed.

Heck and Hank have done a great job of learning from watching Mark, but there's only one way to know if you really have learned it. You have to get out there and do it. That's what this week is for.

Like I said, we ran a lot of plays today. I think we're going to run a lot more really for those two guys just to get them comfortable no matter what happens.

It's fun to have numbers and guys, so it was a good day today. That's the fun part about, one, a developmental program, but especially during bye week is a huge weekend for a lot of guys to move up because they're all going to -- we're going to need them as we go through the stretch.

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