

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good Afternoon. Will start by looking back to Saturday. It's always good to win, to win a rivalry game, certainly get a trophy, and a shut-out is an extra bonus. The biggest thing is to go on the road in the conference and play well, and to get a victory is always a good thing. Happy about that.

I thought our team improved, which is the bigger goal, obviously trying to move forward.

A couple of things to note. Defensively great effort, and guys like Montgomery jumping in there and next man in, that type of deal, doing a really good job there. Good for Mark to fight through his injury and be out there and compete and did a good job also, and kind of the same situation with the running backs. You don't know who is going to be out there each and every week. It's been kind of musical chairs, but those guys did a good job collectively.

Then I have to mention Drew's performance. Stevens was very consistent and moves into No. 2 all-time field goals. Compliments to him; a great achievement there, too.

We have to move on quickly. Obviously got back late with it being a night game on the road. A quick turnaround there, but we have to move on and have to do it in a timely fashion, because we have a big challenge on our hands here.

Captains this week are the same four guys: Hurkett, Entringer, Gronowski and Logan Jones.

Injury-wise, not a lot of change. I don't think our running back situation has changed a great deal. I think both backs right now are iffy. We'll see. I'm not optimistic.

Then Jaden Harrell is making progress, but I don't think he'll make it. We'll see, but we are not counting on him to be ready in a full capacity.

Moving on to Penn State. I've grown up in that part of the country, Western Pennsylvania, and probably started

paying attention to college football somewhere in the late '60s, I would guess. For me I think about linebackers that they had there. Denny Onkotz played there back in the late '60s. Jack Ham was I think 1970. They had you a running back Charlie Pittman, 1969. Then a couple of years later they had Lydell Mitchell and Franco Harris, two first-rounders.

My point is going back however many years, 50-plus years, some really good players and really good teams. Quite frankly, from my vantage point not a lot has changed in 50-some years of Penn State football. They have really good players. They're very well-coached, and they've had a lot of really good teams.

I reference that period because back then they weren't in a conference. They were in the Big East or they were an Eastern power. Quite frankly, that part of the country didn't get much attention back then, much respect nationally.

I remember them going down and playing in the Cotton Bowl, beating Texas. Won the Orange Bowl, I believe, against Kansas. Kansas had 12 guys on the field for, like, three plays. They finally figured it out. Down in the goal line series, got a penalty and Penn State won.

Point being, they were really good back then, and things haven't changed a heck of a lot. So a really talented football team that we're going to be playing against. They have a good coaching staff, and certainly they have a good football team. That's kind of the way it's been the last 50-plus years.

I think it's the same way right now. Obviously they have good players at every position. Just look at them. They've recruited extremely well, and you see it on the film. Older guys, younger guys, doesn't matter. They have a lot of talent there.

They had a change on Sunday. Obviously, that was big news, and that is what it is, but they have three coordinators that are wildly respected in collegiate football. Those guys are all there. I'm sure Coach Smith is going to do a great job tying it together. They still have the same players, so it's going to be a big, big challenge for us.

We have our hands full and trying to get ready of the game this week.



Kid Captain this week is Micah Norby, who is a first grader, a 7-year-old first grader, from Greenfield, Iowa. Just tell you a little bit about his history. When he was 5 years old, he was diagnosed with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, something that affects the muscles and breakdown in the muscles basically.

Long story short, the care team at the Stead Children's Family Hospital found a treatment. It's a new treatment. They started that at age 5, and it's made a big difference.

So he's the first child, as I understand it, to get that treatment in the State of Iowa. Kind of cutting-edge stuff. Two years later now he's an active, young guy involved in swimming and fishing. An active first grader, and the family gives the hospital credit for giving the family hope. Always a good story, and certainly it will be great to have Micah and his family with us.

The last thing, Micah Hyde will be the ANF Hall of Fame recipient this week, and Micah is kind of one of our stories, if you will. He was under-recruited a little bit, high school quarterback, really good athlete, unbelievable ball skills and unbelievable anticipation. Had an outstanding career for us as a defensive back obviously and also an outstanding returner and then went on and had a great NFL career, too.

A couple of years ago, the Buffalo Bills had two really good safeties and Micah was one of those guys.

The bigger picture is he is a tremendous human being. Raising a great family right now. Was back here this past summer. Did a golf outing and worked that in conjunction with the Tippie School of Business. One of the professors that he had had a big impact on him, so they worked together to team that up, and benefits from the golf outing are going to the family hospital, also. Kind of a cool little triangle that way.

One of the good stories. I know it's not the main story in football. Everybody cares about wins and losses, but it will be great to have Micah back. I think he's a tremendous selection for that award.

That being said, it will be great to be in Kinnick Saturday. Great to have it a night game. I'm sure it will be lively in there, and we got just an outstanding challenge on our hands. We'll look forward to that.

Q. If you peeled off your headset Saturday, you might have heard "Fire Fickell" chants. You see what happened at Penn State this past weekend. I'm curious your thoughts on how difficult it is to just in

college football have the longevity that you guys have had here.

KIRK FERENTZ: When I take my headsets off I don't listen to anything or anybody. I've learned how to not listen to the noise, because there's plenty of it, good or bad.

I was throwing my tie before coming out here and thinking about that a little bit. To me probably the one that stands out to me is when Coach Helton got fired at USC. It's been two or three years ago. Kind of broke the ice. I was teasing the NFL guys that were here today just that, you know, that world has crept down into our world.

It's a sign of the times. It's the world we're living in right now. It's unfortunate in a lot of ways I think, but it's just the world we're living in. It's not going to change. Well, it's going to change. It's going to keep getting more aggressive.

We live in reactionary times, me personally. I understand that. I'm not being accusatory or judgmental at all, but we live in reactionary times. I learned a lot when I was in pro football six years-wise about football and about other things, and I guess maybe that helps you down the road a little bit.

The other thing I would point out real quick, I haven't heard anything about graduation rates in the last four days. Again, it illustrates where we're at right now, and it's unfortunate. Or having a great college experience. Throw that stuff out there, too.

Q. I know a few years ago Nebraska had a coaching change before they came here, and I don't know if they showed things that maybe you weren't expecting, but I guess how does that change your preparation for Penn State, or does it change it at all?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the key thing are, again, as I mentioned, the coordinators. Typically head coaches, everything runs through the head coach, needless to say, and decisions on game day run through the head coach, too, typically, but philosophically I can't imagine they're going to change much, and I don't know why they would. They don't need to.

But, yeah, what the reaction is going to be, nobody can predict it. It seems like recently in our conference they made a change, and that team has done very well. My guess is these guys are going to come in ready to play, and they have a good football team. We need to get ready for it. I think we're seeing it on tape.

Q. You probably addressed it in the past. I know

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some programs, they have a clock management guy, you know, a coach on the staff that takes care of that, is in the ear of the head coach in those situations. Do you take care of that yourself? Have you switched how you've done that over the years? What has been your philosophy? Who do you rely on in those two-minute situations and a half in the game?

KIRK FERENTZ: We do have a guy that has the charts, whether it be go for two, clock management, how much time is left, when can we kill it, kill the clock without the opponent getting the ball back, all that kind of stuff. Northwestern's guy broke through and took knee the other day. Smart play. All those kinds of things. We blew that against Minnesota in '15 when LeShun took that one to the house on a power play, short-yardage play. We should have gone down there.

Anyway, yeah, we have somebody that has a chart, a firm chart, but then we also have somebody assigned to just thinking the situation out a little bit, and then we all confer as the situations are coming or taking place. You have to. It's almost overwhelming. It can give you a real headache you start thinking about some of the scenarios that can come up. It's amazing.

Q. I'm curious how you've seen Mark take on the leadership role, and then what impact does a quarterback who is maybe not fully 100%, but healthy enough to play, for his teammates to see that, what kind of impact does that have on the team?

KIRK FERENTZ: His leadership role, as I've said before, it got challenged because he came in off of surgery. So he was here, and he was doing everything we were doing, but he wasn't doing it, wasn't doing the hard work, the heavy lifting.

I think he's, whether it's smart enough or maybe more wisdom than smart, but he had a good feel of how to handle the situation. Didn't try to force himself. He's a quarterback. That's a leadership position, and he's naturally wired that way.

I thought he just let it happen really organically. He played it right. Then when he was able to start doing some of the hard stuff, the summer program, he was right in there with the guys and really excelled in that regard. You can just see it over the course of the summer. Everybody's respect for him just really grew. Then once we started practicing football in August, it just continued to compound.

The thing about last week, he's not going to get a Purple Heart, but there has to be medical clearance, first and foremost. Then the rest of it is we've got to make a

judgment as coaches, is he capable of playing effectively, and then is he going to be able to do his job, or is he going to be out there worried about his condition?

That was the last step is just at the end of the week asking him, Are you confident? Don't give me a hero's answer. I appreciate during the game, he said, 'I can't finish this thing,' two games ago. The candidness there is really appreciated, and he went out and played. He wasn't full speed or 100%, I don't think, but he played well.

Things like that, yeah, you're either earning credit or you're not earning credit as a football player I think, and you can't fool each other. That's one thing about. It's like families. Everybody knows what's going on in a family, and football teams are the same way I think, and I think he's just done nothing but impress everybody here.

Q. I wanted to ask about the dynamic of coaching a father and a son, which you did with Jerry and Jayden Montgomery now. I don't know if that's the first one that you've had in your program to be a father and son. I wondered about maybe some memories you have of Jerry, how him and Jayden might be similar, and that dynamic you have with LeVar and Mason, too, having a father and son you coached.

KIRK FERENTZ: The first thing I remember about Jerry is how helpful he was in recruiting. He was a good player, but we were 1-10 our first year, and we brought prospects in.

You get feedback from recruits about this guy, that guy, the hosts, and the guys on our team. The two guys I would point out Eric Steinbach and Jerry Montgomery were two guys that were unbelievable with recruits, hospitality, just making them feel comfortable.

Jerry has that kind of personality and then he chose to go into coaching and just excelled at it. He's done a really nice job. There's a little something to that.

I think if the dads have played, it's 20-some years there's a gap there, but there's still some help there I think, because they better understand what it might be like when they get here.

Jayden probably has three times the GPA that Jerry had. Jayden is like a 4.0 student. That came from Mom. I know that, like usual. The good stuff.

Q. What have you seen from Penn State's new starting quarterback?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not much.

Q. What are your early thoughts about him? On a separate note, what did you think of Reece Vander Zee on Saturday? Are you going to up his snap count? I think he played 27 snaps against Wisconsin. Has he progressed the way you would like to post-injury?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's doing fine. I walked next to him coincidentally this morning and just asked. He says, I feel great. We'll keep ramping up the volume a little bit. We want to be smart about it so we don't go backwards.

Good to get him back. He's going to add to a group. That's a good thing. Especially with a guy who is I think on the upwards swing right now. Good to get him back.

The quarterback, we just have, what is it, 20 some plays or something like that. I don't know, but it's kind of like when Heck went in the other night. He wasn't exactly winging it around. It's kind of the same situation.

We'll learn as we go on, but I just know this, they don't have many guys on their roster that aren't really good. So my guess is he's going to play just fine.

Q. You played Zach a little bit at cornerback. Just curious as to what led to that decision, and do you anticipate that just being a one-time thing against Wisconsin, or is that something that you could work in the rest of the season?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, I think I've said all along, Zach is one guy on our secondary that could probably play all five of the spots, if you include the dime position. He has some versatility.

I think it just gives us a way to rotate guys through. Right now those four guys, plus Deshaun, we think we have five starters against Wisconsin because of the way they do things, their personnel. We envision being in 40 more than the dime package. It just gave us another way to split those reps up a little between he and Deshaun. I think it worked out just fine.

We'll see how it goes, but most teams aren't going to be in those heavier groupings typically. We'll probably be back in dime a lot more, I'm guessing, down the road. Probably all season for the most part at least, yeah.

Q. We spoke to Reece Vander Zee. It's one thing for him to sit and let his foot heal, but mentally for him I'm sure it wasn't easy to just have a freak injury and now he's off the field. How did you see him kind of take that challenge and go from, you know, aw, shucks, and go to leaning on his teammates, and he told us his

faith and basically mentally getting in the head space of, Okay, I'm off the field now, but what can I still do to grow?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's the hardest thing about injuries, quite frankly, I think is the psychology part of it. I'm not minimizing the injury itself and the rehab that goes into it. His was not so much strenuous or painful rehab. It was more about healing because of the nature of his injury, but nonetheless, just the separation.

Anybody that's ever played sports and has been hurt knows this. If you miss one practice, you know, you're standing there with your team, but you feel like you're miles away from them. There's a psychology to it that I think is really challenging.

That's where I think our training staff -- training staffs everywhere, but our training staff they're the unsung heroes because they're with the athletes typically more than we are during those periods. It's just a really, really tough thing to go through.

You feel separate. You're not part of it, but then to flip it around to finish up on your question, I always go back to Bryan Bulaga. As a true freshman, we were going to start him Week 2. He got hurt. Hurt his shoulder I guess it was against Northern Illinois, so we didn't start him.

He was out three weeks, comes back, and the first day he was back, first Tuesday he was back, I can tell you where we were back on the old fields. He picked up a blitz pick-up that was pretty impressive in practice, and I'm standing there dumbfounded, like, how could a young guy do what he just did?

My take-away was that when he was out, he was really wired in. He was paying attention and just try to encourage players if you can't go physically, up your mental game. You're not working on your skills, the hard part of it, but you can mentally gain ground if you are smart about it. It's easier for older guys to do that than it is younger guys.

Credit to Reece there, and hopefully every guy is doing that when they are out because it's hard. It's just really tough.

Q. We were talking to Logan Jones earlier. He thought this last game against Wisconsin was the best example of complementary football that he's been a part of since being here. I wanted to know your thoughts on that if you agree, and what more do you want to see in terms of executing complementary football, which I know can be difficult?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's every week. That's the challenge every week, and your opponents are usually the ones that make it a challenge, but yeah, there were a lot of good things that happened Saturday. Cherry-pick a couple of things, like right at the end of the half we had the ball, whatever it was, 20-some yard line.

You're hoping to get a little something going, and if you do, maybe something good is going to happen. You don't want to give the opponents the ball before halftime. All of a sudden we strung a nice drive together and got a field goal out of it. Came out and got a three and out defensively and then took the ball and went 60 for a touchdown, however many play drive.

Just that sequence there of getting 10 points without them. Their three plays and our 10 points combined, pretty good example of what we're trying to do, or in a perfect world you like to see that happen. You're trying to do it all the time, but that doesn't always materialize. That's the challenge. Again, the opponents have a lot to do with that.

Just playing one segment playing off the other is really kind of what you are hoping for each and every week.

Q. A lot of people, including the players, talked about there were a lot of really good things that happened in Wisconsin, but the players also mentioned that there were some nit-picky things that went wrong, as well. I'm curious, when you rewatched that game, what were some of the things that you saw that maybe somebody, like a casual football fan, wouldn't notice off the bat or things that could continue to be improved?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's always something. The yardage doesn't reflect the score the other night, and that's typical sometimes when games -- like you get two turnovers right off the bat. One we had to go six inches to score, so that can be a little bit misleading sometimes. Then the way you play when you get a lead changes things a little bit, too.

Every film there's always things that we could get better at, and that's in all three segments. That's where I made the point earlier, my remarks. Just it was good to get the win obviously, but I think we improved. I think our preparation was really good a week ago, and then I thought we improved on the game field.

The intensity was there. The effort was there the entire game. Just not always the way we needed it to be, or the execution wasn't what you need. I tell you, we could play 15 weeks, and it will be that way. There's always something. You can always find something.

I'll go back and cherry-pick Minnesota in '02. That was our last game of the year, and we played pretty well, but then you sit down and watch the film, and it's like here's 15 things that we got to -- there are always a challenge. If guys are thinking right then, they'll work on those things instead of patting themselves on the back. It's okay to do that for about an hour, but then we need to move on, got to go.

Q. Do you remember where you were when you saw Devonte Ross transfer to Penn State and you knew you were going to have to face him for a second straight year?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, I don't remember where I was, but I remember what I thought.

Q. Your secondary certainly probably has the attention of him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Our goal this year is to get a hand on him. I swear to God, I've never seen that in a game. It's almost impossible to do, but we witnessed it, so it's not impossible. It's unbelievable. Now they got two other guys too, so it's, like, okay, that's interesting.

They went out and attracted three really good receivers, and he's one of them. We didn't have much luck against him.

But that's an illustration the way they've got guys at every position that can beat you one play, so we just need to be at our absolute best.

Q. When you are facing a team that's lost its head coach, lost its starting quarterback, it might be easy for some players' eyes to widen a little bit with the opportunity they're facing. What do you say to them, or how do you get them prepared to keep them level-headed when you are facing a team that's struggling like Penn State?

KIRK FERENTZ: This one is really easy. All you have to do is look at the tape, any segment. Just look at the tape. They're probably not smart enough to play here if they don't see it. You've got to respect these guys have really good players.

As I mentioned, they've got three coordinators that are really respected in the business by everybody. Two are very well-known. I think their special teams coordinator, he's actually out of that Erie mafia, if you will, the Hinkel, Bob Sanders era. I'm pretty sure he went to Prep, Cathedral Prep, too, and he's an outstanding special teams coach and has been for a long time, before he went to

Penn State. He's really a guy who has rightfully garnered a very lofty reputation as a special teams coach.

They got good players, good coaches, and there's going to be nothing easy about this game. I know that.

Q. I know you were asked about Jayden Montgomery a bit ago. I wanted to ask about your thoughts on his first start at Mike linebacker and how he played?

KIRK FERENTZ: The good news is we just played. We went out and played as a unit and really played. I thought he did a really good job, and not minimizing his role, because he's in a communication position, a leadership position. I thought he handled it really well.

Wasn't shocking just because of the kind of guy he is. He got voted to the leadership group without ever being a starter here, and he has done such a great job on special teams. He's so conscientious and has an unbelievably great attitude. He's really respected.

You're always wondering how a guy is going to play, obviously. It's his first time in that role, and I thought he did a really nice job. I'm sure he'll be ready to go again this week.

Q. Going back to Reece Vander Zee, we haven't seen a whole lot of him since the end of last season. I guess what did he look like during fall camp and kind of the jump that you had seen him make from freshman to sophomore year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, really good, and you could say -- I talked about Zach Lutmer earlier. These are guys you see during practice. You watch them growing and getting along. I could say the same thing about TJ Hall. All of a sudden the NFL guys are asking about him, and rightfully so, whereas a year ago, probably not.

If you are doing it right -- and I said, "you"... the players, if the players are doing it right, if they're working hard and they have requisite ability, which all three of the guys we talked about certainly have enough of that. If they're really working at and studying it and putting the effort in, they're going to improve as players.

That's the fun part about coaching is watching guys like TJ having a great year as an older guy, and Zach is starting to really start to get the hang of it. Karson Sharar is a senior, and I will argue he's played better in the last two games than he has at any point in his career. He's getting used to the speed and the spacing of things, so his abilities are starting to really come through.

Same thing with Reece. It's just I think a matter of him being on the field and getting work. As he does that, it's just going to keep -- he'll keep climbing the ladder, because he still is a really young player.

Q. Kind of a two-part question. A, Andy Kotelnicki, what can you tell us about him? I think his first-ever coaching job was for Don Patterson at Western. How well do you know his offensive attack? Then, also, kind of second part of that, you've coached against a number of interim guys over the years, I'm sure. Does it feel like in those games guys are auditioning for jobs? Do you feel like there might be a chance that they're going to be taking shots, trying to win jobs for this coming year?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a good question. Only because I was thinking my first answer was going to be, no, but I can remember one of our worst losses since I've been here. We went up to Minnesota, whatever year it would have been, and the first thing I said Tuesday in our team meeting -- at that time our team meeting was on Tuesday -- you know, it's the last game. They've got an interim head coach. If they onside kick on the first play, let's not be surprised. They could do anything.

Sure enough, they onside kicked, and we acted like we were all retreating faster like we were allergic to the football, and that was a bad sign of where we were at in that game. That would have been 2010.

In that game because it was a last-game scenario. In this game I don't think so. They're going to come in here and play the way they play, and they're going to play really well, so we have to be ready for that. I think typically the idea is just to pull things together, let's keep moving forward, I would guess, but I don't want to speak for somebody else in that situation.

What was the other question? I really don't know him that much other than I know of his reputation and rightfully. What they did at Kansas and are continuing to do is really amazing, because that program was not healthy when they came down from Buffalo, the entire staff. They've done a wonderful job there, and he was a big part of that.

Then, Coach Grimes, who is at Wisconsin -- was in that system, and they worked together, too. I think he followed Andy in there. There's some similar DNA, but it's not the same, and the players are different. Just got a week to get ready, like every game. We'll see what we can do, and hopefully be ready to go.

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