

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Saturday, October 25, 2025

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Kirk Ferentz

Postgame Press Conference



Iowa - 41, Minnesota - 3

KIRK FERENTZ: It was a complete team performance. All three phases really did a great job, especially in that first half playing off each other and doing a great job.

Our players did a great job focusing all week and then certainly carried it out to the game this afternoon. Good to get that strong start. They started out really strong on offense first three drives. I think at one point we were like 19-3, so I've been told, in terms of plays. Nothing wrong with that, certainly. Just the way everything fed off of each other was really pleasing.

I want to congratulate Kaden, too. I understand he's tied with Tim Dwight for return touchdowns, which is saying a lot. That's a great accomplishment. The last week we had Drew Stevens move ahead of Nate Kaeding, and now to tie Tim Dwight, those are two outstanding historical performers in our program. So really a good deal.

There's still things we have plenty to work on right now and things that need to be looked at a little bit closer. Overall looking back the last three weeks certainly with game competition, and I'd include the bye week, I think our team has really grown. They've improved. Their work ethic and attitude has just been outstanding, and it's good to see them get rewarded with their performances out on the field, not only today, but the last three weeks. Just really pleased with the guys, really proud of them.

We'll take this bye week here, hopefully use it smartly. We have a big stretch coming up. November football is so important in college. We'll have something to point to. We'll take tomorrow and enjoy it a little bit and get back to work on Monday.

Q. All three phases scored a touchdown and four touchdowns in about 20 minutes of football. You mentioned complementary football being so key. For it to reach its peak in this game, how does it help in terms of bringing momentum into the bye and carrying it over for two weeks rather than just a couple days?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really big. Somebody just told me the last time that's happened was the Holiday Bowl when we scored a touchdown in all three phases. Same outcome, it was pretty good.

It is important. The improvement thing, that's kind of been our mantra or our theme with our players the last month. Let's focus on getting better. I think they have done that. They've had to do that because, especially the last two weeks, these are tough games. Happy to see that, and the bigger picture is just hoping they understand, if they keep their focus where they need to, we'll keep improving.

We're not a pro football team with a lot of veterans. We're still a team that's capable of a lot of growth. We left some stuff out there tonight, and those will be things we can take off the film Monday morning.

Q. Wanted to ask about the opening drive. I know it hasn't been a ton of success on opening drives so far this year, but really methodical. Worked all the way down there and scored. What worked on that drive?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, it's good that we did that because we're stubborn. We'll keep doing it. We're going to keep swinging away. Yeah, I thought our balance was really good. Tim did a good job calling. Mark was doing a nice job running things. Everything seemed to be pieced together, and we were pretty diverse with what we were doing.

All that being said, I think probably one big thing Mark will say, he's not so much missed throws, but some throws that maybe he could have taken that he didn't take. That's just part of the whole process. There's still a lot of areas we can get better, and we'll go back to work on that.

It was a great way to start the game certainly. You want to get points, and it's a lot better to get a touchdown obviously.

Q. Through the first three weeks, big story line was you guys were not creating turnovers. I know you measure it differently, three and outs, et cetera. I guess over this three week stretch your defensive backs, defensive line has taken a step forward in turning it over. What's changed? Is it them taking

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advantage of opportunities? Is it maybe a little more blitzing? What's your perspective on it?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of everything combined. I always joke about it, we don't have a specific turnover drill. We've been pretty good at them historically. I think it's what you just touched on. It's a combination of everything and mix of calls, pressure, no pressure.

Just got off the radio talking about the coverage sacks, and that's been a big component historically for us. We typically have four guys that will work hard. If they'll do that and we can do a good job in coverage, hopefully they get home or at least get the guy off his spot where he's got to make a bad throw.

There's a lot of intricacies there. Obviously, if you're going to pressure, somebody's got to land it and they have to get there.

Probably as much as anything, you think about our defense, whether it's guys like Entringer, Lutmer, Sharar that really haven't been longtime starters, so I think you're seeing the growth in them. That's kind of what we're banking on or hoping for, as the season goes on, we just keep getting better, a little smarter, and a little more precise with our timing.

Q. Through eight games, can you describe how you've seen the offense grow and what you feel like is still left out there the remainder of the season?

KIRK FERENTZ: The easy answer is we're still leaving yards out there in the passing game. I've asterisked that one a little bit with probably one of the biggest breaks we've had here is the fact that Mark was able to come back and play because none of us knew how it was looking after that ballgame that day. The fact Monday he actually got cleared. Then it was a matter of a race against time a little bit.

Didn't do any work during the bye week, but he's been on the field the last three weeks practicing and doing better each and every week. Get him back there full-time now, which I assume we'll be able to, and just keep working on getting better and pulling things together.

Today was not a great day run-wise. Second half, just not a stat game today, but I feel pretty confident we'll be able to run the ball pretty successfully. Now it's just a matter of pulling it all together so we can play complementary football all the time, not just a couple drives, that type of deal.

Q. It did seem like after Beau Stephens left, the run

game slowed down quite a bit. Curious what his status is. That looked pretty bad. Do you feel like Gronowski came through pretty good health-wise this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: He seems fine. No signs of anything there. If it were life or death, Beau could have played. It's a tissue issue, not anything more severe than that, but it didn't make sense at that point. Things were under control. I've talked a little bit about, the last two years now, this year and last year, we haven't been able to play guys before they're ready.

Leighton, we've been watching him every day before practice, he's done a lot of good things. I'm not saying it's the same as Pieper or Lauck or Dotzler, but kind of similar in that he's earned the right to be in there. If anything, it helps us with our depth. We'll be fine there, and I anticipate Beau being fine. I don't know how much he'll do this week, but that timed up really well for him.

I think Mark, he just gets better every day. Should be good there.

Q. Coach Ferentz, I noticed late in the game when you had some other guys come in, they played very well, specifically a young man Cam Buffington came in, and he had an interception late in the game. You must have been very gratified how some of those guys came in late in the third quarter and fourth quarter. I thought they played really well. Would you like to comment on that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm smiling because I've always said before it is noteworthy. I've always teased Phil, I'm perplexed by our two defense. Nobody gets scored on faster.

When we put them in, the ball goes right down the field. I'm thinking back to Minnesota in 2020 actually. It was like, boom, right down the field.

Yeah, we've done a little better this year for whatever reason. Yeah, maybe it's the guys in there, but Cam's done a great job. We've got a young group of linebackers, he, Weisskopf, and Preston Ries are all young guys that did a nice job last year redshirting. For Cam to get his hands on a ball and get a pick today was a really good deal. He's been doing a really nice job on special teams, too. You're seeing that growth, and it was good for him to get out there in the field and have that production

Q. November sort of defines what a college football team will be. Over the years, your teams seem to peak going into November. What is the key to that

happening?

KIRK FERENTZ: I told Pat (on radio), I was just -- not joking with him, but observing. 2009, that was kind of the contradiction of the way we try to get built. Our turnover-takeaway margin wasn't so good back in '09. It was okay, but it was not like stellar. Then that year we were 9-0 and lost two when Ricky got hurt. But we fought through that and played great in the bowl.

To me, if you're doing it right and if the team's really doing it right and thinking right, then they are improving as the season goes on. Injuries can complicate that. There are other factors that can mix in there. Just in general terms, you like to think everybody's improving. You're not just winning games, you're getting better and developing as a team.

We try to prioritize that and emphasize that in our approach, and we've been really fortunate, we've had guys that have been very receptive to that.

The other part to me, November is kind of mental toughness month, if you will. There's a lot of stuff going on. Weather, you name it. There's a lot of -- you can come up with a million excuses why you can't do well, but really no one cares. It's about pushing the thing forward. Our guys have done a really good job responding to that.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the way Mark vibes when he's out there. It seems like his toughness and confidence is contagious, and also the selflessness of he's not complaining he's not throwing for 11 touchdowns, he's rushing for 11, and your team kind of seems to respond to that. In what ways has he helped your offense grow because of the way he plays and how he endears himself to his teammates?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm smiling because Tim and I were talking about it in there. We maybe had to convince him it's okay to throw a couple of touchdowns instead of just running. It's working okay for him, so no complaints there.

To me, that's the essence of what a quarterback does. You watch enough football and you've been around, you know, it doesn't matter size, shape, we've had all kinds of varieties in our 20-plus years. You look at pro football -- I mean, Tom Brady is the classic example, non-athletic, quote, unquote, all that stuff, best quarterback. But the common denominator, great quarterbacks move their teams and the teams believe in them. Not just the offense, but the entire team believes in them.

Mark's competitiveness, toughness, all the things that make a great football player, he embodies those and

doesn't try to broadcast it, just who he is. So players pay attention to each other, that's for sure. It's easy to gravitate, if you're a player, toward a guy like that, and coaches feel the same way. You call those guys feel good players. They make you feel good. There's not enough of them around. It's always a good thing.

Q. Kaden Wetjen obviously had a big day today not only with the punt return, but also in the offense with the run game and the pass game. What kind of element does he bring to your team through multiple phases?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just talked about development and improvement. That's a race every player's running if they're running it well. It's the same thing for Wetjen. A couple years ago when he got here, he was fast as hell, but you didn't know where he was going or what he was going to do. He's done such a great job. Now we can use him on offense, which is a good thing for us certainly.

I can't say enough about his returnability. Speed is part of it, but it's not the whole part. I'm not going to say it's down the row, but it -- his judgment, his courage, his want to, like he wants to score every time he's got it.

That's my conclusion after however many years I've coached. It seems like the guys who block well or tackle well are guys who want to block or want to tackle. As silly as it sounds, some guys want it more than others. Robert Gallery is on our sideline. I happened to look up when it showed a couple of his highlights today of him blocking, are you kidding me? Some guys have that.

I never see Kaden have a bad day. I swear to God. This guy has a smile on his face every time I see him, and he's ready to go. He wants to go compete. I am glad he's on our team.

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