

Big Ten Conference Football Championship Game: Iowa vs Michigan

Saturday, December 2, 2023

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes Coach Kirk Ferentz Jay Higgins

Postgame Press Conference



Michigan 26, Iowa 0

THE MODERATOR: We will open up with a statement from Coach Ferentz.

KIRK FERENTZ: Somebody pointed out to me, it was 25 years ago when I started in this position, and I feel very fortunate about that. During that time we've had a lot of really good teams, and I've had the privilege to work with a lot of outstanding players. A lot of those guys were here tonight actually, so appreciate that.

But this group that we've worked with this year is about as good as we've had. Certainly amongst the most outstanding group that we've had. A lot of tremendous players, like Jay and a bunch of other guys in that locker room. Gotten great leadership, made great improvements, stuck together.

Tonight certainly wasn't our night. We knew we came in here needing to play pretty much a flawless game. Obviously didn't do that. Didn't do a great job protecting the football, and a couple of other situations.

But disappointing tonight. To me that doesn't overshadow the job that this group has done for the last 10, 11 months now.

Proud to be part of it. Proud to be their coach, and proud of the effort tonight. We'll go back to Iowa City, take a couple of days off and regroup and start figuring out a way to win our next football game.

I'll throw it out for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach or for Jay.

Q. This is for Jay and for Coach Ferentz. The defensive effort tonight, holding Michigan down to 213 yards to play, especially after the first series, I think only about 150. How in tune were you guys when it came to -- with Michigan's offense and being able to stop them repeatedly throughout the game?

JAY HIGGINS: I would definitely say just we understood how big this game was, and obviously Coach Parker, Coach Wallace prepared us. We had a lot of tape on these guys obviously being in Week 13. I just feel like my teammates went out there and they competed. That's all I can ask for. I mean, guys who were making plays when we needed them. You have to show up in big moments. I'm really proud of my defense.

KIRK FERENTZ: Guys have been playing great defense all season long, and tonight was no exception.

Tremendous amount of respect for our opponent's offensive football team, their entire football team. I said that during the week. That was sincere.

Both teams played got defensively tonight. I don't think it's a huge surprise, and credit to our guys. They gave us a chance and kept us in the game really until that turnover in the third quarter.

Q. You mentioned the turnovers, but even without those, obviously, not great numbers there for that offense. What do you attribute that to, and was there something that Michigan --

KIRK FERENTZ: I didn't hear the last part.

Q. You mentioned the turnovers, but what would you attribute -- the numbers overall offensively were not great, even without the turnovers. What do you attribute that to?

KIRK FERENTZ: So probably the two biggest plays, in my opinion, were the punt return and the turnover in the third quarter. Then we turned one over too, which cost us a field goal probably.

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I would attribute Michigan's defensive performance or our offensive performance to their defense. They have a really good defense, and it's statistically proven. I think they give up ten points a game.

That's not our strength right now. We didn't match up well. That's the way it goes. We'll go back to the drawing board.

Q. You mentioned the third quarter sack. It was certainly disputed, the pass by Deacon Hill was ruled a fumble. Can you just speak to what they told you, what you saw, and why it got so heated on your side in terms of disputing that call?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've made it the last two months without getting fined. I'll try again.

I'm really struggling with our replay system. Really struggling with it, as I was after the Minnesota game. However many weeks after that is I'm still struggling on that one. Can't accept it.

Tonight what I was told, the arm was going forward, but the hand wasn't, which I'm not sure if that's possible mechanically. I was an English major, but again, I just think we're really taking a game that's relatively simple -- I'm old enough, okay, I was in the league when they started the replay. The whole concept, as I recall, was taking, obviously -- I don't want to say a blown call, but a wrong call. An official got screened, somehow an obvious mistake took place, and you correct it.

We've taken it to a whole different level, and we've been on the short end of two of them. Coaches get fired. Coaches get fired. If you want to talk about the extreme of it, coaches get fired. So I just think we have a system that needs to be readdressed, rediscussed. There's got to be a better way to do it. I feel bad for the officials on the field because they're the ones that have to explain to us a decision that gets made gets made somewhere else.

It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense to me. So to me the official on the -- who reviews it on the field should have full ability to make the decision or a centralized location because I just can't understand that it wouldn't be better to have one consistent voice.

You know, that's what it is, but that's an out-of-season discussion. But that was a big play in the game, obviously, once that happened.

Then the other component to that, on the field the whistle blew, and we got penalized a year ago for a guy trying to recover a fumble after a whistle blew. It's really tough to

coach your guys when a whistle blows, their guy recovered it. Our guys didn't. I'm not saying that cost us the game. I'm not sitting up here saying that, but it's a pivotal play. So it's just a little bit challenging.

Q. Coach, you mentioned that Michigan has a terrific defense. What elements of the detention tonight caused you the most problems?

KIRK FERENTZ: If you wanted to compare it to last year, this year's, those interior guys, they've got a big physical group of interior guys, and they're good at every position.

That's been Michigan for a long time. I started in '81. That was my first game being involved against them in person. So they've always had good players. They're very well-coached. They've got a lot of girth inside. It was tough to get anything going in the running game, and they rotate guys through. They have fewer, five, six guys that are pretty good in there.

Not that the other guys aren't, don't get me wrong. They're very veteran, very veteran on defense.

Q. How do you feel like this team stacks up with the elite teams of the Big Ten? You saw one tonight that's going if anything to be in the playoff, potentially win the national championship. How close is maybe potentially how far do you think the Iowa football program is to winning games like this?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, on paper we've been close twice. I think I'm correct in saying that. In '02 there was no playoff, at least Ohio State went. We didn't. I guess it was two teams back then.

I think we would have competed well with them on the field. '15, if we had won that game, which we didn't, then we would have been there. Michigan State wouldn't have been.

I don't think people realize how tough it is to be one of those four teams. TCU was there last year. Didn't go so well this year.

To get there, sustain it, I mean, the facts are there's probably six, eight schools that are in that discussion on a routine basis. That's kind of the nature of college football.

One of my fears about the rules as they are now is that we may go back to more separation, whereas I would suggest in 2002 there maybe wasn't quite as much. Things are shifting a little bit right now, and that's a discussion for a different day too. That was my concern when the NIL began really in earnest a year ago.

Q. Jay, the two scoring drives you gave up are five yards and six yards. How do you walk away from this game feeling, I guess, as a team, as a defense, and what your coach said about you? Proud of the effort you guys gave?

JAY HIGGINS: Yeah, definitely proud of our defense. You know, just it's up to us to put the fire out. We practiced that sudden change. We trained for that all year. So we were definitely expecting to hold those guys to a field goal, and that's really what we were trying to do.

But we fell short on that end, but the Michigan offense, they did really good. I think they're a really good team all around. Obviously the offensive line, really good up front. Then when you have a running back, quarterback that can pull the ball at any moment, pop pass or good tight end, so we just had a lot to guard. I think Michigan did a really good job with their game plan.

Q. Apologies. I don't mean to look too far forward here, but mentioned the games being a little bit out of hand, and you mentioned the weakness of the offense. What needs to happen --

KIRK FERENTZ: Which game is out of hand? Tonight's game?

Q. And in 2021 here. You mentioned the offense, you want it to be stronger. I guess what needs to happen going forward in order for the offense to be where it's at and where you guys can be competitive in games like this?

KIRK FERENTZ: I still think we would have been better off this year if we had the quarterback we thought was going to be our starter playing. He's played in this game before as a winning quarterback.

Our two tight ends are our best offensive players. I think Jay would cosign that. That's a start right there.

We've been dealing with the reality of our situation. Couldn't be prouder of our gee. They've improved, they've scrapped, they've fought. We found a way to win the last four games, and I don't think many people saw that coming.

I look at it from the other lens. I just look at this team, what they've gone through and what they've done, how they persevered when most teams would have buckled, quite frankly, and we've had a lot of other stuff going on too.

You know, I get to work with these guys every day. I see

them internally. I see them at their best, at their worst. That's why I respect them so much because I've seen them at the low point.

Tonight is a low point. These guys laid it out there. This guy, plus a bunch of other guys, laid it out there. Everybody laid it out there. Didn't go our way, but they'll get back on their feet because that's the kind of people they are.

That's not a given. I've done this long enough. I've been around both ways too. We were 4-2 in 2012. Lost six straight. Hey, win them in November, all that stuff. Pep talk. That stuff doesn't always work. It happens because of people, and the people I get to work with every day are first class, top shelf. That's why I said what I said.

Worry about next year next year. We're worried about the next game. We have four weeks to get ready for it, give or take, whatever. We'll find that out tomorrow. That's our focus. I'm not thinking that globally right now.

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