

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Certainly good for us to have a bye. I imagine everybody feels that way. I think it came at a good time for us. A good time for us to be together. Also to be away from each other too. That's important.

Finishing the first part of the season 3-3 was certainly not a goal. To finish with a 3-point loss stings for a couple days. No question about that. Lingers for a little bit.

It was good to get back on the field, back to work on Tuesday. Everybody was in the building Monday, got a workout in. Had to a chance to watch film. Pushed that to Monday. Couple days on the field, go to work. Focusing on us partially, then partial time was developmental work with the younger guys, and we took a break and got back at it again on Sunday, which is kind of a normal deal for us.

So that's pretty much where we're at at this point. Now we're transitioning to the second half of the season. Obviously, six games before the bye and six games after this year. So that's where our focus is right now during the course of last week just to encourage our guys to think about that as a six-week block and get ready mentally and physically for this.

Transitioning to this game. We face a big challenge this Saturday playing Ohio State. Pretty much any year I talk about Ohio State, you're talking about a team that is very talented. They're very well coached. That's certainly the case this year in both of those areas.

As you might expect, ranked near the top of the national polls for good reason. They have a really good football team. Very explosive offensively. You start with the quarterback, a tremendous player. They have great receivers and a big physical offensive line. Probably as big as we've seen, and they're executing at a high level. Good tight ends and good running backs.

They're explosive, as I said, and they score points in a hurry. That jumps out at you. Tough to knock them off their track. That's the biggest challenge. Defensively, talented at all three levels. They have a good defensive

linemen, outstanding linebackers, and good guys in the secondary.

The other thing I notice about them quickly is they play a lot of guys on defense. There's a lot of players in and out, and doesn't matter who's in there. They're playing at a really high level.

They're multiple with their schemes. It's a new scheme. They have a new defensive coordinator. Looks like he's done an outstanding job in a short amount of time, half the season. They play in sync and have been tough to get points on and move the ball against.

And they play with the lead a lot of the time, which they probably enjoy that. They've done a good job with that as well. Good special teams, good specialists, good return guys, dangerous return guys.

All in all, a tough challenge. Factor on top of it that it's a tough environment to go into, tough Big Ten environment. Always has been. Certainly won't be any different. Part of that, they have a nice streak going. Part of that is the environment. The bigger part is they're a really good football team, good program, and have been historically since I started in the league in '81. That part doesn't come as a surprise.

Big challenge for us. We're looking forward to getting ready for that and seeing where we measure up Saturday.

Our captains, the same four guys; Jack Campbell, Sam LaPorta, Kaevon Merriweather, and Riley Moss.

Our Kid Captain won't be traveling with us, but Gavin Miller from Ogden, a 13-year-old now who had surgery before he was born and a kidney transplant by age 1 and is now very healthy 13-year-old, doing well, and getting total support over at the Family Hospital. So that's great. He has a twin brother named Braden too as well. So we'll think about those guys when we're on the road.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. What were impressions during the bye week of watching film with the offense, and what can you do to improve the unit?



KIRK FERENTZ: The big thing we do in the bye week, typically, is look at our system. And then bigger thing is look at personnel, talk about that, make sure we're all kind of on the same page. We're continuing to develop and evolve, if you will, and the whole thing is about us getting better and executing better.

The last time I talked with you guys was after the ball game in Illinois. And you talk about two 3-point losses. You can pick five, six plays out of any game. If you convert a couple of those, it might be a different story. Might be. You never know how it's going to turn out.

Like every year, that's kind of our focus right now. With our players, how can we do things as intelligently as possible and then execute the plays that are out there to be made, the makable ones.

Q. How do you go about doing that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Practice. There's no pixie dust. And it's the two things I just mentioned. You try to create your schemes to fit what your personnel can do the best. And hopefully, we know more about our guys now than we did six weeks ago. That's a transitional thing too because you have guys with injury situations, et cetera. So it's never the same.

You know more about your football team so you try to be a little bit more intelligent about your planning. And then we got to execute better. That's focus, concentration, repetition. And part of it's us, and part of it's level of competition too. So it's a complex equation, but there's no way I know of, at least, to getting better other than just working at it.

Q. Kirk, obviously, you want to score touchdowns. How important is it Saturday to keep their offense off the field, to stay ahead of the change to keep your offense on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's the challenge. If you listen to our defensive guys, the thing that impresses them when you watch game film and watch cut-ups. We spend a lot of time watching cut-ups. All coaches do. You watch them sequentially.

The thing that jumps out is it's tough to knock them off the tracks. It's tough to get them behind in the count. Good defenses try to do that to offenses, make them have to go the long field or third and longs, those kinds of things.

It's not easy to do with this football team because they're really adept at what they do. They have that explosive capability too with the receivers. They had two first

rounders last year. They feel like the guy on campus were better than or as good as. Gives you an indication of the kind of talent. Like the team we played a couple weeks ago, every play you've got to be on top of your game, or it can be sudden death real fast for you.

Q. From an injury standpoint, what's the latest on Diante Vines and Keagan Johnson?

A. I think Diante has a chance. Keagan, when he's ready, I'll let you know. He's still trying to get back.

Q. Traditionally, your offensive line, you have a stagger. It seems like that's where you're at your best, where you have a couple seniors that maybe start, maybe one of the guys that work their way up to play. Kind of cycling through. That has been the case this year. How is the growth of that unit, and who do they kind of listen to because a lot of times, it's those veteran voices have really helped boost some of the younger players.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think Mason is probably our most veteran guy up front. I think we started three sophomores and two freshmen last time out. Because Nick couldn't go. Nick's a veteran player too, but has been fighting injury issues.

It's not the same as, but I learned a painful lesson in 1983-1984. In '83, we had a really good offensive line and were seven seniors out of ten, which was good for '83. It wasn't so good for '84. It was an exciting year. We had Ronnie Harmon to get us out of some jams.

Still thinking about a play. He ran an 80-yard draw against Illinois. Safety blitz. We grabbed the seven guys that rushed, and he made one guy miss and took it to the house. That's when I learned the value of a good skill player versus line.

You just work through it. That's what you do. We were really young in '84 and were pretty damn good in '85. You push through it and keep trying to get better each week. It's not a perfect situation, that's where we are right now. We'll keep working hard.

Q. This is your first meeting in Columbus since 2013. What do you remember about that game? There was a lot of three tight end usage, but you hung in there. Are there any lessons you can apply from that trip to this one?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's interesting our series from the last 23 years. We got smoked a couple times off the bat, predictably. Smoked in the middle 2000s. Then it was a

Big Ten championship game in '99 or 2000, next to last time we were there. '13, heck of a football game. I remember it felt like they had 12 guys on the field. Braxton Miller and their first-round running back, it was really tough.

Same thing. You have good receivers, a good back in Carlos Hyde and a really good quarterback. So they put the pressure on you like we talked about a couple weeks ago.

It was a really good game. Tough game, competitive game, and we tried to hold the ball. Tried to keep it out of their hands a little bit. Had some success with that. Hit a big play with Duzey down the sideline. That's kind of what it takes. You have to keep the score close and try to find a way maybe to create something.

And see what we can do. It's going to be a big challenge.

Q. When you're in the red zone and in the passing game in the red zone and, specifically, inside the 10, what's kind of your coaching point -- you want to score touchdowns, obviously.

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure.

Q. But is there either a risk averse strategy to go along with it. Like, look, if it's not there, throw it away. Or is it just --

KIRK FERENTZ: Depends on down and distance. One thing you don't want to do is go backwards and knock yourself out of field goal position. That wouldn't be inside the 10, necessarily.

I think we had a couple the last time out there were in that 20-yard line zone. If you take a sack -- now I'm thinking about a game specifically about 20 years ago. It wasn't involving us. But someone took one, a painful sack. The guy held the ball. Knocked them out of field goal position.

It's challenging when you get inside the 10. There's not a lot of room. The defense knows that. They can really cheat, if you will, because there's not as much field to cover and play things a little tighter. So it's tough. There's different ways. You can try to throw it in the end zone, try to hit something underneath and maybe run it in, those types of things. But it's tough. That's why the points are tough down there. Obviously, if you can run the ball, that's a good starting point too.

Q. Seems like you guys are throwing more laterally or short of the goal line as opposed to into the end zone. Is that based on personnel more, or is that strategy-based?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's strategy-based, but I don't know that it's any different than any other year. Each game you try to match up and do what you feel might be effective. If you're throwing it short of the goal line, you're hoping to get a running catch. I'm thinking a game early in the season where we caught one on the 2 and couldn't turn up and score. It might have been a big play in the game. That's been representative of things we've done actually.

I'm thinking about a game, play in our last game where we had a short completion where it would have been inside the 20, potential field goal, touchdown situation and we couldn't complete the pass. So those are the things, going back to the original question, those are the things that we've got to get corrected, or at least hopefully get corrected.

Q. One thing that seemed to crop up is Illinois timing the snap against you guys. Is hard counts, is that something that is hard to develop with a young center and offensive line?

KIRK FERENTZ: We've got a young line right now, and you're on the road. They're a good defensive football team. They did a good job on that. It's tougher on the road, too. The cadence stuff is tougher on the road. It's going to be a challenge. Yeah, you want to do that if you can.

Q. You see Rodgers and Manning, those guys are experts at it. How long does it take to develop where you get confident in a guy going up there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Again, it's more, to your point earlier, it's more than just the quarterback, although it sure helps when you've got a guy like this. It's part of the reason those guys are so famous, too. It's a big part of what they do. Brady being in the same category. You've got a bunch of other guys that are dependent on that too. I'm standing here thinking about a false start this morning that, you know, kind of defeats that purpose.

So today's only Tuesday so we got tomorrow to get that cleaned up. I mean, those are the kind of things you worry about. Five-yard penalties, they are tough to overcome.

Q. How do you prepare for an offense like this one, one of the best in country? How do you keep your guys in the moment?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, you know, just play your defense. The hard part is simulating. We've had that discussion too involving those guys, I think it was Braxton Miller. But where you get somebody to try to duplicate what they do at

quarterback?

We've used, you know, running backs, defensive backs, maybe that were high school quarterbacks in those situations, but we don't have a lot of guys that can duplicate what their receivers do. A lot comes back to awareness and, you know, just trying to play smart technique and keep the ball in front of you. As far as duplicating it out on the practice field, it's hard to do because they've got a lot of really good athletes at every position.

Q. On the defensive line, what's the status of Yahya Black?

A. Hopefully he'll be back, but we'll see. We'll see. Hopefully he'll be back. He's closer than he was. Sure would help. All hands on deck.

Q. Coach, you come up here and pay respect to the opponent, whether it's South Dakota State or Michigan or whoever. I mean, this game against a top 4 ranked team at their building, do you look at yourself as the underdog or is every game the same for you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely, we know we're underdogs. We know that. Our guys aren't stupid. The rankings a month ago really didn't mean a lot. You go back and look. I don't look at those things too often. In fact, I'm not sure I look at them ever. I'm guessing there's a lot of teams that were in there four weeks ago that have disappeared, as much as everybody knew what they thought was going on.

But there are a couple teams that are predictable. This is one of them. We all suspected they'd be good coming into this whole thing. I didn't know what they'd look like on defense because of the change in philosophy and change in system. I had a chance to watch some of Oklahoma State film and they were awfully good there. You figure that was going to work out pretty well and it has.

On top of it, you know the talent level. Most recently, we saw these guys last year in the championship -- not championship game, but the last game of the season in Ann Arbor. You just see them in cross-film, you know what kind of talent they've had. They've always had really good talent, but I think they're at an all-time high right now. They've recruited very well.

And you look at every position, got my attention in the draft again when the receivers were getting drafted, and you hear the experts say, well, you know, they might have better ones back in Columbus. I'm like, huh, I think we play these guys next year. Great. So here we go.

Q. This seems like kind of the ultimate statement of your program. Defensively, you've got one of the best defenses in the country. They've got the best statistical offense in the country. When you look at your guys like Riley or Kaevon, two stars who worked up through the ranks and now they're among the better in the country, then you look at Marvin Harrison's kid, how does that maybe help you just because you know the struggle that your guys had to get to to get to this point, and how can that parlay into when times get rocky, and they're gonna, that they can actually weather through it?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's what you do in sports. Hopefully you do it in life too. That's what sports teach you is things don't always go the way you want them to or the way you draw them up or the way you hope they're going to do. You go out and compete in football, at least you compete weekly and try to do the best you can do and reassess it and go back to work.

I think most of our guys understand. Some of the younger guys don't get the concept quite as well. That's part of the benefit of being a little older and having some experience. But it's really what it is. And then, you know, I know Iowa better than I know anything because I've been here a long time, two different stints.

Things haven't changed. The formula hasn't changed an awful lot. Typically, we'll play a couple teams a year that have recruited better, maybe have more this, more that, more seats in their stadium.

But the lesson is that doesn't always dictate the outcome. It may slant it a little bit, but it doesn't dictate it. That's the great thing about sports. You have an opportunity any time you compete. That's how we look at it. We're realistic about it. But on Saturday, for that hour of competition, it's up to us to do what we can do, knowing that we're facing a really big challenge.

Our guys, the guys you mentioned, they've been around. They understand. Cooper is a young guy, talking about guys in the secondary. Opposite of Riley, really, from that standpoint, but I think he gets it. He understands too. We know it's going to be a tough challenge. Again, it gets back to believing in the system, believe in each other and competing as hard as you can.

Q. Kirk, after the Illinois game, you said you thought the team took a step back offense level. Over the bye week and into this week, what are the one or two things you sort of keyed in to regain that step and continue taking those steps?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's nothing much I can tell the guys, and they knew that. They can feel that. Just like as crazy as it may sound, we lost against Michigan, but I think the guys that I was referring to, I think they felt like they took a step forward and gained a little confidence. But we got knocked back a little bit last time out. Now the challenge is can we get back on our feet and compete better. Again, talented group of guys. They play eight, ten guys. I've lost count how many guys play on the defensive line. They're all good, go hard, pretty athletic and stout.

It's a new challenge, a different kind of challenge than we faced at Illinois. Halfway through, Illinois's proved to be a pretty good defensive football team. So are these guys. So it's a different challenge. Let's see how we handle this challenge. Our eyes forward right now.

Q. How would you evaluate Spencer Petras after six weeks?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's done a good job handling the circumstances. That's really going back to the evaluation question. That's how we do it. We try to be realistic about what the picture looks like and then make a fair assessment. He's done a lot of good things. I think he's improved, gained confidence, as crazy as that may sound. I think he's doing a lot of good things out there. We just need to get better collectively offense level. That's my encouragement.

Q. How confident are you in the QB situation if Spencer couldn't go, if he's injured?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've said it before publicly and feel the same way. Alex has played, stepped in, and did a good job. I'm guessing he'll do a that. He's practicing well. In our opinion, Spencer is practicing better right now. It's kind of where it's at. I think we have two guys that have experience that we feel good about and act like quarterbacks.

I'm not suggesting the other guys don't. They're just younger right now. They're further along in the development.

Q. Coach, what is the locker room like?

KIRK FERENTZ: Today or Saturday or, you know --

Q. (No microphone).

KIRK FERENTZ: I think good. Our guys are respectful of their opponent, first of all, which we try to be each and every week. They're realistic. They know what we're up against. They're anxious to start playing again. The bye

week was good. It was good for everybody to have some air and separation and just kind of get their thoughts back together.

Again, I think bigger picture, which we're past the big picture stage right now, but the bigger picture is it's a six-week season. Sunday, it transitioned into this week, and that's all that matters right now.

We've got our hands plenty full just trying to get ready for this team, but we're excited to take the challenge.

Q. Luke, going back home this weekend, Luke Lachey, what do you remember about his recruitment? Interesting young man. Seems like such a nice kid. Basketball player.

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, he is a really nice kid. He seems that way and he is. I knew about his dad's career, obviously, and I guess one thing is I remember we went to his game coming off a bye week. That had to be our bye week his senior year. He caught a fade route in front of us against a DB that was maybe 5'6", and he was pretty tall at that point too. Good coaching. Throw the ball to the tall guy against the shorter guy.

They used him in multiple ways. To us, he just looked like a really good athlete. To Scott's point earlier, a guy I thought had great growth potential, and I think that's what we've seen develop over the last couple years. He's had some issues like just medical stuff that was weird, just that kind of knocked him off the tracks here for a significant amount of time, maybe a couple months total since he's been here.

On the field, you see the steady progress and growth. He's got a great attitude. And probably the biggest thing this year, his blocking. We noticed that when we started fall camp in August. His blocking has really taken a big step forward. You've seen him catch the football. He's kind of fearless out there. If you get it near him, he comes down with it.

Q. Do you feel like he's the type of guy next year could be a prototypical number 1 when Sam's gone?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think both guys are playing at a high level. Me personally. Both Sam and Luke. Really happy about that. I think we've got some young guys coming along too, which is good.

Q. Back to the red zone. Do you feel like some of the routes that are like closer to the goal line are more higher percentage and try to avoid maybe some of the fades in the corner of the endzone? Is that mainly

personnel? If you have more of that, maybe you do that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Fades a lot of time are personnel driven. A lot of times. It helps if you've got a 6'3" guy out there that can go get it. I'm not sure Brody is that guy right now. The good news is we've got him on the field now. It's been six, seven weeks he's been on the field continuous, and you can't get good until you practice. You really can't. We're watching him. We see him growing in confidence. Technique is getting better. I think he'll be a good football player. Tremendous young guy.

Just talked about Luke. He's the same way. I don't know if it's this week, but at some point I imagine he'd be in that discussion.

Q. I didn't see Terry Roberts on the depth chart. I'm assuming he's available?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably not. Probably not, unfortunately.

Q. Is that the injury from Illinois?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. Still, yeah, he's got a lower leg injury.

Q. Building off of that question, with young players backing up Cooper and Riley and talked about the bye week being able to push those guys forward, how do you feel about Jamison, T.J., and the steps they might have taken in the last two weeks?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're improving each and every week. Practice is so important. It's important for everybody. Obviously, younger guys. We're never as deep as we want to be. That's traditional.

Talking about two guys that haven't played a lot, other than special teams stuff. So they're getting their feet wet there. In a perfect world, we'd like to have all three corners available and ready to go. Those guys jump in, they'll do a good job.

Q. What about their quarterback, C.J. Stroud. They seemed to line up -- might as well just say there's a Big Ten MVP every year. You haven't played all of them because of the scheduling weirdness. What does he do well and what's going to be your challenge?

KIRK FERENTZ: Good luck or bad luck. Seems like every time we play them, they've got somebody pretty good taking snaps. It may be the least dynamic and least publicized guy would be the guy that won the national

championship in 2002, right? Nobody was talking about him in August. Then he ran the table. I think he was like an aeronautical engineer or something like that if I remember correctly.

So they've had good quarterbacks, and Stroud looks like he's 28 years old back there. He's a really good football player. Just total control. Really talented and it's going to be another challenge.

Q. As far as trying to match up, you think with their athletes you'd want to definitely go five deep, but they also have two running backs that play pretty much anywhere in the country. Are they more power-based in the way they run?

KIRK FERENTZ: Start with their line. Their line is really big and physical. Two huge tackles. So that sort of starts the problem.

It's not the same discussion as a couple weeks ago, but somewhere in there. If you want to defend the whole field, makes it a little tougher to hold up against the run, and their backs are very capable. So just kind of got to cat and mouse and figure out where you're going to lean left or right and how you're going to do it. Hopefully won't be too obvious with it.

Q. Stroud hasn't ran a lot.

KIRK FERENTZ: Doesn't have to. I don't know if that's good or bad. I don't know.

Q. He can run?

KIRK FERENTZ: He can run.

Q. Logan (Lee) was talking today about his breathing techniques. How much have you seen him kind of really care about that kind of little attention to detail?

KIRK FERENTZ: Every player is different, and we put a lot of stuff in front of our guys and encourage them to give it some consideration and thought. Some guys are certainly more disciplined than others at what they do or choose to do. So that's coaching or whatever and making things available to guys.

But no surprise with Logan. I mean, he's a pretty disciplined, routine type person, individual, and I've joked like he's like a 45-year-old guy. He's the only married guy on the team, and it makes perfect sense. That probably kind of fits in the same package. Not that I do breathing techniques just because I'm married. There's no correlation there.

Q. Coach, in this type of venue, I heard from the players today that you guys have pumped in sound, trying to get a feel for what it's going to be like. How do you prepare young players going to Ohio State, playing in a 100,000 fan stadium?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a good exercise. It's not the same. We haven't been there, to the point earlier, it's been seven, eight years since I've been there. I think I remember the right side where we used to be on the bench, the right side being really noisy. Penn State, for sure, their student section is down there. If you're in that end, it's a little bit of a challenge, kind of like our north end zone, probably.

But, yeah, it's not just there. I mean, in the Big Ten, you've got several places that are a challenge because the crowd gets into it, and they know how to get into it also. So there's really no preparation experience. It's the best way to get through.

Q. Talking to Mason, he seems more mature in his mannerisms than age. Is that by circumstance, or is that just the person he is?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's just the person he is. I talked about Logan. Not the same, but there are similarities. Some guys are that way. Riley's a pretty carefree guy. We've got a multitude of personalities on every team. That's the fun part about it.

Kaevon would be a different story. Just go right through the deal, but some guys are old souls. I would say Logan might be that way. Mason, you know, he's pretty cerebral, pretty -- kind of analytical with everything he does. That can be a good thing sometimes. It can work against you too.

Q. I know you've traveled with injured guys here and there if they're veterans. Is Justin going back to Columbus?

KIRK FERENTZ: You're letting the cat out of the bag. I haven't told him that, but yeah. I had that thought a couple days ago. Keep it quiet. Keep it on low burn right now. I don't know what the (travel) roster is going to look like. We typically have room. For guys that are established starters, we have an open mind on that. Certainly it makes sense if we can fit them in. Fingers crossed, I think we'll be able to. He's doing better, but it's, you know, the mental part of injuries is tough and it hit him hard. Disappointing.

Q. You touched on the 2017 game. In your opinion, is that kind of one of the more complete performances you've had from the program under your tenure. Is it

going to take another complete performance to get by Ohio State?

KIRK FERENTZ: I wish I could tell you what we did that week that was different than anything else we do. The fact of the matter is sometimes things just happen and sometimes, rarely, it goes like that one did. Usually, it's the other way.

Boy, I didn't see that coming. And boy, you just get hit by a train. That's one thing I've learned long before I was a head coach that sometimes that just happens. And when it happens on the good side, man, that's a great feeling. But typically, you go back and look and there's nothing mystical or magical about it. It just happened. And that day, things really clicked. Hopefully, all the plans we draw up are with the idea of having success, but there's other days too where, boy, I didn't see that one coming and nothing worked. And, boy, it's a tough feeling.

So it would be great if they balance out, but they don't.

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