

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon, everybody. To start, a couple words about setbacks. Obviously, everybody in Kinnick on Saturday witnessed us experiencing one of those.

I know a lot of people are disappointed, certainly our fans. But I can assure you nobody is more disappointed than the people directly involved, especially our players. They invest an awful lot.

Needless to say, anytime you experience a setback, it's painful. One thing for sure, I'll share it with the team, you don't get second chances and you don't get games back. That's part of the big deal.

Big takeaway is it's one game and we still have 10 opportunities in front of us so that's a big takeaway there.

Unfortunately, setbacks are part of every season. It's not always in the form of a loss, but always you have challenges and that's one of the axioms of going into a season, just understanding there's going to be things that happen that aren't planned, maybe not wanted. And how you deal with those is what is important and that's kind of where our focus is.

That's what we do on Sundays -- learn from what took place and then begin working through it. And the biggest thing is how you choose to respond. It's been that way forever in sports. So that's the big takeaway there.

That was the message postgame. It was the message Sunday. And it's quiet here Sunday and business-like, all that type of thing. But win, lose, draw, there's always learning opportunities. I think it's the most important thing that gets done. So I think that got done.

And then just specifically I really don't feel a lot different than I did after the ball game. The major takeaways, we had good field position -- one off a turnover, one off a really good drive. Ball down inside the 5 and didn't come out with a touchdown in either case. So those were certainly big factors in the ball game, the outcome.

Three of their scoring drives were on four big plays, and I think you've heard me say before defensively it kind of starts with that. You want to make people work, you want to make them earn what they get, and those four plays really altered the course of the game.

So that was the takeaway on Sunday, and then we moved forward yesterday and began working on Troy.

Couple words about them. They were an 11-win team last year. Had a really good football team. And now they're a team in transition, if you will. They have a new coaching staff. Previous staff moved on. And a lot of new players, too.

So it's kind of unique that we've played two straight games now where both staffs were very established. The programs were established. Knew for the most part who the players were and what their tendencies were going to be.

Now we're piecing those things together a little bit and just, A, trying to figure out what to expect, what to match up against; and then secondly, you always have to project a little bit because they're in the middle of installing new systems. So I'm not sure what their players are capable of taking or not taking, so what kind of changes we'll see from the first two games as part of the game that goes on.

But bottom line is this: If we're going to match-up against them, we have to be sound and gotta be flexible not knowing exactly what's going to happen. Every week that's the first challenge is matching up against your opponent. And the bigger challenge is working to improve and working in the efficiency areas that we identify. So really no different than any other week that way.

Captains this week are the same four guys -- Jay Higgins, Quinn Schulte, Luke Lachey and Cade McNamara.

Lastly, I'll tell you a little bit about our Kid Captain. Mya Gilchrist from Center Point will be with us on Saturday. When she was young, just an infant, she was diagnosed with a tumor on her brainstem. 18-month-old at that point and was treated at Stead Family Hospital. And unfortunately the cancer reappeared at age 5 and then again at age 12. Treated again and then was doing really



well.

About a year ago she was tired, kind of sluggish, and they discovered she had a rare form of blood cancer. So she's had a lot of battles and doing really well right now. She's an 18-year-old who is doing very well. And it will be great to have her with us. Obviously, she really epitomizes how to handle setbacks, if anything else. We're excited to have her join us.

Q. I don't know if you thought about this but the game the other day had so many analogies to the 2002 Iowa State game. You ran the ball great, veteran team, big second half lead that melted away. Kind of some weird stuff happened, I guess. I just wonder if you drew that comparison. And also I know it was a long time ago, but what did that particular team do to move on from such a disappointment in that way?

COACH FERENTZ: I can even top you on that one. Coincidentally, Brad Banks was here on Sunday in the office, he was at the game, came through, we got to spend time with him. Talked about the game. The thing about Brad's story and probably that team's story is how he did respond. Everybody knows Brad Banks, player of the year, runner-up to the Heisman. And obviously played really well all season long.

But what an easy path. And what you're referencing there, that third quarter, especially, was really rough. I share that story a lot with our players annually, just that the essence of what Brad did that year is, in my opinion -- I don't think anybody felt worse, talk about investment -- nobody feels worse after a game in that case than him.

But he went back to work. Brad's pretty unflappable. That's one characteristic I think he really embodies.

Two years later we're in the very same situation. Big lead at Penn State and all of a sudden that fourth quarter disappeared and we're in overtime. I would suggest a big part of the reason we won that game was Brad's performance in overtime.

It's one of those stories I cover annually with the team. And that's the right idea. Like, that's what you're looking to do and the rest is history, not that the whole season was smooth but it was hard.

So those are things we talk about in camp. It's part of the curriculum, if you will. And during the season you're going to encounter disappointments. That's one of the more disappointing losses I've ever been involved with on a personal basis.

But life goes on. It's what you do in response that really matters.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the run game where it looks like you're not necessarily running the same type of outside slant; it's more of a tighter slant that's maybe more directed towards the tackle. And it also seems like your guards are able to be tighter in the way they get to the second level. How did that evolution take place? And so far, through two games, it seems to have some really good results?

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, technically, there are a couple of slants we have. One is wider, to your point, and then one is a little tighter, to your point. And then also an inside zone scheme and a couple other things with it.

But bottom line, and what you saw Saturday, the way they play their defense, their interior guys really squeeze the line. That's why our guards were coming off the way they were on the linebackers. Against other teams you may get guys that are playing deeper and coming over the top. That kind of dictates what the guard's path is going to be.

It's a tough defense to run against. I thought we did some good things there and some good awareness by the guys involved in it. But we don't have it figured out. I can promise you, if you were at today's practice you'd see some things that need to get cleaned up.

But a lot of it is dictated by, again, we do have a couple of different calls there -- but it's dictated by how the defense played. And Iowa State was really aggressive inside the tackle box.

Q. You mentioned Brad Banks, in particular. In 2001, there were a few instances, a few series where you brought him in to relieve McCann, just as sort of a change of pace sort of guy. When you look at the QB situation this season, is there ever a situation where you're thinking that maybe Sullivan can be that change of pace, faster QB for somebody like McNamara?

COACH FERENTZ: It's twofold with Brad. Part was he was a different kind of quarterback than Kyle. We talked a lot about Kyle, too. And big takeaway for me was, and Brad shared this with a couple other people, but he learned. He learned from Kyle.

There's a lot of good things that he brought up that day just watching how Kyle performed during the 2001 season, his takeaways from it. I thought they were really pretty astute.

So they're two different guys. But our thinking was Brad was a guy that we thought had a good future here a year

later, and we're going to get him involved in possible weekly. But that was dictated by Brad's performance in practice.

We'll keep an open mind to anything. Obviously if it's going to help us win games now, that's the first priority. And secondly, if a player -- we rotate at other positions -- it's a little tougher at quarterback. It would take the right guy. But Brad certainly was the right guy.

Q. First of all, injury question. Seems like it's just Seth and Jayden at this point that are still out?

COACH FERENTZ: Looks like Jayden will miss this one. Got a couple guys that are limited in practice right now. Hopefully they'll be ready by game time.

Q. Would Seth be limited?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I don't see that happening this week. He's missed too much time. But hopefully moving forward. Hopefully.

Q. With Kaleb Johnson, what's the biggest thing you've seen from him this year compared to last year?

COACH FERENTZ: I think maturity and focus. It's like any player. It's rare for a freshman to play a veteran guy -- rare. But he did a lot of good things the last two years. I think he has a much better feel for what he's doing.

He's a little bit more patient than he was. He's running really strong. Obviously had some really nice runs the other day. I thought his best runs were at the end of the game where he ran strong and broke some tackles. There wasn't a lot there but he was making yards.

So to me, if he can keep integrating that into his style of play, that's really going to help us.

Q. When Kaleb's playing the way he is, when the O-line is playing the way they are, like, I guess from the Xs and Os standpoint, what does that do for the passing game? What are opportunities you're seeing that are opening up as a result of that?

COACH FERENTZ: Those are areas we were hoping we'd be able to build off of because we were a little bit more veteran, certainly up front. Outside of Kamari we're pretty veteran at the running back position -- and tight end. And you are hoping you can get something established there.

But if we're going to play the way we want to play we'll have to pass the ball more effectively. That certainly was a factor Saturday, and hopefully it's just something we'll keep

getting better at as we move forward.

We've done some things, done some things that weren't so good. It's a little bit of everything -- accuracy, route running, things like that, and protection at times. So those are the things that we have to piece together. And again after practice today there's still a lot to work on. There will be all season long.

Q. After the game, we talked to Jay Higgins. He was one of the first people to say, you know what, pull the thumb. I could have done a better job on that play that resulted in a touchdown. I just think, talking about the '02 team, leadership was a big thing we heard about today, when you pointed that out, the comparison to the team. How important is that type of leadership in this type of a week where you're trying to just flip the page and enter things around?

COACH FERENTZ: So I'll go back to Brad. Pretty much each and every year, the last, I don't know how many, I'll show his quotes after that game. That specific game, and the way he talked about how he felt, how his teammates were feeling, and it was everybody taking accountability -- whether it was Gallery, Clark, whomever it might be, Fred Russell -- guys felt like they were responsible. It was a team effort, not just one guy.

So that's a takeaway. And you've seen it with Jack Campbell. Now you're seeing it with Jay. I'd tie it into another lesson as I talked about before, with Brad learning from Kyle. I think certainly Jay has learned from Jack.

Encouraged all of our guys, if you want to be a good player, do what the guys on our team that are really good, do what they do. Follow them. Those are the guys you want to watch and try to model yourself after. And I've said this during the summertime, Jay is kind of like the anti-modern college day football player. He didn't run off when Jack was started in front of him. He kept working and learned from Jack. I think it paid off for him last year and it's paying off this year already.

Q. Over the first couple of games we still haven't seen a lot of Leshon Williams. Kaleb and Kamari look like they're getting a lot more carries. Is Leshon still recovering or is he healthy? Are we going to see more from him going forward?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's healthy. That's first thing I want to say. There was a run he made, not this week but a week ago in practice where he got his foot down and, boy, he made a really nice cut. It looked like he's back to where he should be. And hopefully, I think, he is.

Yeah, we're rotating three guys for the most part right now. There's only so many carries. But Leshon, I'll go out on a limb and say he's going to do a good job for us this year. He's practicing well. I think he's healthy now. He's a well-rounded guy. He'll play a lot for us, I'm sure.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Troy, Gerad Parker. He took over at Purdue after -- I think it was after your game that you beat Darrell Hazell there in '16. He's been at Notre Dame. Takes over Troy, which won 11 games last year. Was really good in just about every statistical category and then lost, like, everybody. Where do you draw from to look back? Is it just the first two games? Do you look back at what he called at Notre Dame or what he even did at Purdue? How do you figure out what they may do and do well?

COACH FERENTZ: I'd say it's 100 percent there's a lot of DNA with West Virginia, whether it be him and both coordinators were there for several years in West Virginia. That's one place -- the special teams coordinator came from Akron, I believe. So you're digging up film from previous places just to kind of see what they're thinking.

There's some similarities and all those types of things. We have two game films. It's way better than it would have been two weeks ago. But what you're referencing, it's a sign of the times in college football, too, especially what Coach Parker had to walk into. It's tough. A lot of guys left and went to other places.

And that's one of the challenges, I think modern-day challenges of coaching changes now. You'll see more of it. It's tough.

Q. We were talking to Hayden Large outside. And what a story he has and the resiliency he's had to endure to overcome what he went through. When you talk about the resiliency of your team, when you look at Hayden, what impresses you? What is it for you to watch his journey lead to this moment where he's playing Power Four Football after everything became.

COACH FERENTZ: Hayden is a great story. I'm still trying to figure out how he ended up in my office a couple Decembers ago, he and his dad. I figured there had to be an Iowa tie because his name is Hayden. You must have family or whatever. They don't. They're from over in Michigan, the west side of Michigan.

But there was a connection a little bit through some other sources and he showed up here. He's been a great guy since he showed up here. I'm not saying he's Zack VanValkenburg or Stilianos, but he comes from a smaller program, just came in here and worked.

Has an unbelievable attitude, is a really good learner. He's very versatile in his play. I think he's taken a real big jump and that would be my comparison to Zach because it's tough. He came in here and there's a lot of guys. But he's worked hard physically and mentally. He's a versatile guy can play the tight end spot for us back in the backfield a little bit, too. He's a really good addition to our team and a valuable team member.

Q. The 75-yard pass play that was referenced earlier, Koen Entringer came in after that, played the rest of the game at strong safety. And you've said a lot about how he's been practicing. Sort of walk us through where his situation is with strong safety right now and what Xavier Nwankpa's status is?

COACH FERENTZ: Xavier is a good player, and so is Koen. They're both good young players, I guess one is a little younger than the other. The main difference is Koen has missed a lot of time coming off the knee surgery. He recovered in record speed. It's amazing how fast everything went. Every step got there a little quicker than the, quote/unquote, book would predict.

All that being said, he's playing catch-up right now. But we feel we have a really good group of guys back there. And Lutmer would be the next guy. I think we've got five guys that are capable back there. We'll let them keep working and competing and see where it all goes. But I feel good about the group.

Plays like that happen unfortunately. And that's when it happens you've just got to learn from it and try to avert that in the future.

Q. Question about those goal-line situations or inside the 5. With your running backs, do you have it preplanned, like Kamari is going to be in there or Leshon? How do you operate that? Is it by feel or by plan?

COACH FERENTZ: By both, really. You go into it with a plan and also the feel of the game dictates how you do things as well.

So that's kind of how it goes. And I think the bigger issue -- especially on that one play we had penetration on the right side -- that was a hurtful play only because it was negative yardage. So you've got the ball down there and all of a sudden it's back on the 4- or 5-yard line.

Offensive football in general, losing yards is a bad thing. Especially down there, it just changes the whole complexion of things. But we still had opportunities and it

was run and pass where we weren't good enough to cash in. We have to improve in that area if we expect to win games.

Q. I guess you could probably predict on the outside people are not happy about quarterback. But obviously you expressed some confidence after the game in Cade. How have you seen him respond and you still feel confident with him as your starter?

COACH FERENTZ: I do. We've been on the field twice. Yes, so far so good.

I'll stay on the same page I've been on. I think he just needs to play. He needs to learn from those experiences. The faster you learn, the better, obviously. He's missed a lot of time. I think he needs that. It is a new offense for him.

Probably, whatever it'd be, his third one in three years, something like that. There's some learning going on there. He can play better and I think he will play better. It's just a matter of working at it.

There's nothing magic we can do. Maybe eliminate some things, lean this way, lean that way, that type of thing. But otherwise just counting on him to play a little better. And we need to help him more in all positions.

Q. Just going off of that, how do you balance that obviously now, at one-on-one, the margin for error is a lot smaller going forward, like, balance that with the fact, like you were saying, you are trying to be patient with Cade. How do you balance those two sides?

COACH FERENTZ: I'll be clear on this. We're trying to win every Saturday. So whatever Saturday it is, that's the No. 1 goal. It's the No. 1 goal.

There's a bigger picture, too, you're looking at and trying to factor in things like missed time, all those kinds of things, whether it was Koen or Cade or whatever.

We have a couple of other guys that missed time. Leshon, mentioned him, where he's at. That slows a guy's progress down. Certainly does and it's a factor.

And you compare them to other players that are at the position and go through it. But ultimately it's our responsibility to get the best guys out there to give us a chance to win every Saturday, and that will always be No. 1. Then keeping the bigger picture in mind, too, and that's all about us improving in the areas we just talked about.

If we don't do a better job inside the 5, it's going to be

tough to envision us having a good year, if we can't score some touchdowns in there. And one was off a turnover. You have to take advantage of that. You get the ball on the 12 that possession.

So those little things, those are the things that really can get you or the big plays, defensively.

But there's a lot of things to consider. We're trying to win each and every Saturday. This one's gone. Now we're on to the next one and fully aware. We have 10 opportunities to make. We have to make everyone count.

Q. You mentioned Luke Elkin at Big Ten Media Days and at Media Day here in Iowa City. I'm curious what does him being a veteran player in the special teams room do to help Rhys get comfortable as a first-year player and Drew to regain his confidence here?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I love to talk about Luke on Tuesdays because you don't want to talk about him on game day. That's a bad thing for a snapper. But, yeah, he's been just so good ever since he showed up here.

And LeVar targeted him in high school. He had come to camps. LeVar really felt strongly about him, stronger than most guys. Not only because of his ability but also his character and his steadiness.

He's been great to work with. Each and every day he does well in each and every phase. Good student. Good in the weight room. The whole nine yards. Everything he does is quality.

To have that in the room is very important. You want to have those veterans in that room -- any room you're talking about, the specialist room.

If you look at it, we lost Tory, a really good performer. So you've got a guy like Rhys, who is young and inexperienced.

And Drew had a tough ending to the season last year. To have a stabilizer in there is really valuable. And that's part of building the team, too, is having not only good players but guys that can help just steady things a little bit.

In a week like this, now what do we do? How do we react? Rhys sure as hell doesn't know. With all due respect, why would he? It's just those things are really valuable in a football team.

Q. You said kind of at the beginning that setbacks or responding to setbacks is kind of the message you've had this week. And when you look over the course of

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your career that's probably maybe your greatest strength in what you guys have been able to do after, whether it's the Penn State loss in '16 and coming back and winning, or a couple years ago at Ohio State and coming back and winning eight games, all the way back to '02. What is the common element in your messaging all these years that's been able to enable your team to go forward and not worry and just have some success?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really pretty simple. And unfortunately I got to live it. When you're a 1-10 record owner or a 1-10 record as a head coach, we always get associated with our records; 2-18, that's a rough way to start.

At that point you just believe in what you believe in. You're always looking at what you believe in and trying to get better at it, and what do we need to adjust, what do we need to do. Where does the attention need to be? At some point you've got to believe in something. You just stick to your beliefs and have to do better in what you believe in.

I think all of us in this building feel like we know what we need to do to be successful. It's more about the doing.

So it's being honest about what's in front of us and what did we do, how did we learn from that. I think the single biggest thing, and being in pro football probably helped me learn this better, is you have to move on. Like you just can't waste time looking backwards.

You can on Sunday, that's fine. But when Monday morning comes, boy, you better be looking at the next opportunity or you'll be behind your opponent. It's easier said than done, I can put it that way.

One thing, when we switched our practice schedules, back after the '14 season, the '15 year, it forces us now. We're on the field Monday morning, so we have to move on. It's hard on the coaching staff Sunday to practice Monday, but the good news is we're all moving on because there's no time to be dwelling on things or how we feel. Forget about that right now. Let's get it going here on the next one.

Q. Your first game on the sidelines. Just curious your thoughts on the in-helmet communication, the sideline Tablets and advantages or disadvantages that creates. You guys can make in-game adjustments, but also other teams can adjust to your defense.

COACH FERENTZ: Sounds like there were a problem or two with the Tablets, like a play or two off schedule were missing.

But overall it's a real positive. And the coach-to-player thing is a real positive, too.

It's kind of what we expected based on practice, but I think it's all positive. And I don't have many suggestions in that way. Just trying to figure out how to score a touchdown when we got the ball inside the 5. That's more important right now.

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