

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



Jay Higgins will be going over there real quickly, just to see him be selected as an All-American for the second year in a row, a unanimous All-American, certainly very, very special.

The thing about him when he came out, wasn't a five-star guy. He was thinking about going to one of the MAC schools. Came here, contributed on special teams early in his career. He paid attention to what was going on, learned from some outstanding players.

The year before he started, you have Jack Campbell and Seth Benson. In the heart of our defense, doing a great job of leading as well as playing. Jay was paying attention certainly. I don't want to say it's not a surprise that he has played that well. He's played extraordinarily well for two seasons.

The leadership part, the way he goes about his business, not a surprise because we saw that from him from a younger standpoint. Certainly the last two years he's been the leader of our defense and our team. Certainly worthy of being an All-American.

Kaleb Johnson, too. All-American recognition. Certainly deserved. Thing about his career, he came here, really some nice things, intriguing things his first year. He's been a tremendous young guy to work with from the start, had a good skill set. Really did a good job that first year. Second year not as consistent. This year really just blossomed, showed great maturity.

I think the key there is he just kept working. He and I have one thing in common: the start of this year we both started out in the penalty box first game. He certainly did a little bit better after than maybe I did.

A phenomenal year he's had. Each and every game he's performed extremely well. It's a real credit to him. The maturity, taking the experience that he gained, putting that to use. That makes all the difference in the world. That's what good players do.

Certainly had one of the top, top plays in that Nebraska game which put us over the top. That was the kind of game it was where it was a game of big plays. I don't know if anyone had a bigger one than he had. I think that's one of the best plays in Iowa football history, quite frankly.

KIRK FERENTZ: Good morning, everybody. Merry Christmas.

It's been kind of an interesting month on a couple levels. This is the last day of final exams. A little bit different than it used to be. It's hard to find anybody that has five finals. I don't think we've had anybody on our team with five. The guys have had exams the last couple weeks. Been training, working through doing that, a little bit of practice.

Probably the strangest thing for all of us as coaches, we've been basically grounded to the barracks here. We've been here all month long. That's kind of a strange deal.

I think there's positives. It gives us a chance to reconnect with our team a little bit better coming out of the season, having a chance just to talk about things other than the football or game plans, that type of deal.

We are looking forward to the next couple days ahead of us, having a chance to celebrate Christmas, go through the bowl experience, too. It's all kind of getting ready to transition into a phase where we don't have as much to think about, much going on.

Just take a minute and talk about our program. Go back 26 years when we got here in '99. Tag that term 'developmental program', started using that years ago. Really what it gets down to is us recruiting players that we think are going to fit our program. Taking lessons from past experience, not having height bars or being too fixed on size, all that kind of stuff, that some teams can do. Looking for other things in players. I think that's really kind of been our mode, trying to get guys that are going to fit us, be team-oriented, be comfortable working hard every day.

I think the best part for us as coaches is having a chance to work with really good people and people that are thinking about improvement and growth, also realize it takes patience sometimes to see that growth take place.

That being said, just want to highlight a couple guys that have been talked about here the last couple weeks. One is



Somebody commented that night it was like Cooper DeJean's play except it counted. And to be recognized, really cool to see.

The thing about our specialist, you think about Kaden Wetjen, Returner of the Year. Noted on some All-American teams. High-energy guy since he came here, too. This year it all came together for him. Did an unbelievable job out there. Drew Stevens, I could say the same thing. Watching these guys grow and develop and keep working at it, it all starts with their attitude and effort.

The other guy I'd like to cite is Nick Jackson. Living in this portal era now, transfers, he's to me the epitome of what you're looking for in a transfer portal. Guy looking for an opportunity, the right fit. I think the criteria he was looking to make a decision was a mature approach and a perfect fit from our standpoint, more importantly from his standpoint.

I don't know if Jay was a five-star recruit when he came out, but he's been a five-star teammate and really valuable football player for us. A bonus for us to get a sixth year with him. I think he set a record for career games now. Power Five, Power Four. And he's one of the all-time tacklers.

That's a fun part about what we do, that's why I'm sharing this. You see guys getting recognized and getting rewards. The stories behind makes it fun, interesting. From our standpoint, you always wonder who that next story is going to be as we watch guys working in practice, that type of thing. That's really what makes it enjoyable.

Preparation-wise, we have a couple new players joining us actually tonight I think it is. They'll be on the field as I understand it tomorrow. Two new quarterbacks joining us. Hank Brown coming from Auburn University. He's going to transfer. Played his high school football in Nashville, coincidentally.

Jimmy Sullivan is going to be joining us also, a high school midyear graduate. He'll start classes here in January. He's able to practice with us here for whatever it is, five days before the game. Great to have those guys both join us. Obviously they're not going to be playing, but get them indoctrinated.

As we go into the game, Brendan Sullivan is healthy. We expect him to be our starter. Jackson will be the backup to him. That will be our 1-2 depth chart there.

I won't say a lot about Missouri. I will talk about that when we got down to the bowl game. Just on the surface, a 9-3 team. Really a good football team in the SEC. Had some outstanding games this year.

They have some veteran players where it really counts. Quarterback is an outstanding player. I think the other thing that jumped out at me, they haven't lost a bowl game since Coach Drinkwitz has been there. They know how to handle the month. It's a strange journey, if you will. Having the experience to find a formula to make it work is certainly a big part of it. It will be a tough game for us, no question about that. We're looking forward to that, trying to get ready right now.

Regarding the bowl, it's obviously a significant accomplishment for our football team. Mid-season we were teetering a little bit. The guys came back, really rallied, won four out of the last five games. Proud of their effort there.

Over a five-year span, our guys have done a really great job in the Big Ten. If you add up the wins, we've done a good representative job there. A credit to our upperclassmen, seniors, juniors that have been a big part of that.

Looking forward to the bowl experience. The folks down there do a great job, TransPerfect Music City Bowl people are outstanding. It's hard to screw up Nashville. It's a great venue. I think our players really enjoyed it last time. We'll look forward to getting back there next week. We leave on Wednesday.

With that I'll turn it to questions.

Q. Your old boss is joining college football, Bill Belichick. What are your thoughts about him becoming a college coach? Did he reach out to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, not really. I think he's got firsthand exposure, certainly. His son is coaching at the University of Washington. Was on the field a couple months ago. I know he spent time up there with Steve. I think he's gotten firsthand exposure live and in person. He also knows the college game from going around scouting, talking to college coaches frequently regarding prospects, that type of thing.

To me what it says is he loves coaching. I think that's pretty evident. The other logical thing, if you watch his press conference, he talked a little bit about his dad. His dad was a career college coach at Naval Academy, most of his career. Coincidentally a couple years at UNC, which is interesting. I don't know if that was fate or not. I got to know his dad. His dad was an amazing person. You can see where Bill's love of football came from because his dad was all about football all the time.

I remember catching him in one of the last conventions I was at, probably 20 years ago. I was having a refreshment with a friend of mine. Saw him come in, go to the elevator. It was probably about 11:00. At this time he's probably 85 years old. Ran over to say hello to him, figuring it would be a quick 'how do you do'. We stood there for an hour. He's quizzing me about special teams, going right down the list. That love and passion for football probably stems right from that.

Football is football, pro, college or high school. If you're coaching, then you love coaching. I think it's not a surprise at all. I think it's probably a genius move at UNC.

Q. Hank Brown, what was it that led you to pursue him in the portal? What do you feel he can bring to the team?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like anything you do in the portal. If you go to the portal, you're trying to improve your depth, trying to improve the level of competition at any given position. Obviously, we're a little thin at that spot right now body-wise. Need some guys that we think have a chance to really develop and grow.

I know Tim has been really thorough with his evaluations on everybody, including high school film. That was a big part of the evaluation, going back and watching all the prospects that we look at in high school, following it to whatever college tape may be there.

I think the things that Tim is looking for, he found that with Hank. The other key component is what is it going to be like when we meet the prospect, his family, how we feel they're going to fit in the program. Vice versa, it has to be a mutual deal. Felt really good about it. We're excited about it.

Again, he's not going to play in this game. We're going to add to the competition here in the spring and see how it goes. Both he and Jimmy Sullivan will be a part of that.

Q. Iowa is the only football program in America with a consensus All-American(s) each of the last six years. What is it that those guys on the wall have in common? What does it say about your program to have this many guys reach that top level?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's fair in saying we don't get a lot of five-star guys, unless their dad has played here. Probably about the best chance we've got. Maybe a brother played here. We've had that, too. Otherwise it's just not where we recruit typically.

As I said at the front end, it's about getting guys that have

the right attitude and hopefully have a skill set that can be developed. Height bar. Bob Sanders was never going to be able to get on the roller coaster back in Kennywood Park back in Pittsburgh. He could play strong safety pretty good for us. He played it pretty well in the NFL, too. All at 5'8". If we were going by the bar -- other people didn't go by the bar -- he would have gone to Penn State. That's one thing I learned in the '80s: good players come in all sizes and shapes.

The commonality of the guys that are on that wall are guys that really had a lot of pride and they didn't mind working. Sometimes they had to be patient like Jay. Jay has watched other good players play. That's really the secret at any level, for somebody being good, is put that work in. You have to have requisite ability, you can't do it just by chance. I think it's attitude and just ability to work hard, persevere, all the things that football teaches you. Those things all come out and come out in good form for those guys.

Q. No Reece Vander Zee on the depth chart. Is he available?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know when we wrote that depth chart, it was probably last month. He's fine. Practicing well. In fact, coming off the field last night, asked him how he felt. He feels great. He'll be in the rotation.

Q. Hank Brown via the portal, are you comfortable where you're at in terms of additions?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, so far. It's a process, as you know. A lot of people are out traveling around. I guess it all comes to an end Sunday, I think. Seems like it's been a long journey.

I think we're in a good position. We'll do our due diligence. If it works, it works with players we're involved with. If not, so be it. We have a couple more visitors coming here I guess before Sunday. As far as I know, we're done Sunday. That could change.

I think we're comfortable right now.

Q. Anything you would change about the way the portal works?

KIRK FERENTZ: How long do we have (smiling)?

No, I mean, I'm an optimist. I think we're moving in the right direction, being college football. I think the proposed model right now, is solid. Question is can we enforce it, really make it a reality. I'll believe that when I see it.



I mean, I've been saying this for a while, especially after being in the NFL. One thing is the NFL, it has perfect clarity in terms of what you can and can't do. Also have a Collective Bargaining Agreement, so that makes it easier.

Everybody is under contract in the NFL, coaches and players, and they're binding contracts. If the coffee is not good on Tuesday, I can't just leave and go to the next team because my feelings got hurt about the coffee.

You sign a deal, then you live that deal out, or you sit. The harsh reality in the NFL is they can pay you to sit. They don't do it with players too often, but coaches they'll do. We're not a big expense item.

Anyway, what we need is some structure and clarity. I think everybody should be willing to sign on. You could argue the same thing about coaches. But sign on and live by the binding agreement.

Yeah, right now there's way too much. People have been changing their minds fast, move on. It's disruptive to everybody, quite frankly. Not fair to everybody.

Having structure would be nice. Then enforcement in the NFL is very consistent all across the board. Everybody plays by the same rules. That's the Utopia. We're never going to get that in college football.

Salary cap, which I think we're kind of getting there, if we could enforce it. That will be a great start. Then again, if you're going to say you're going to do this, you got to do it. Not a life sentence, but prescribed, whatever you agree to write on a contract, do it, live it out.

Q. You've called the 105 roster cap number regrettable.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I still do. That's a euphemism.

Q. What was the process of going through the process of getting the roster to 105?

KIRK FERENTZ: Awful. It's been the hardest part of this month. It could have been so easily avoided if we stair-stepped it. I'm sure it was a financial decision. Nobody asked me for my opinion or filled me in on the details. I'm sure it was a financial decision, like everything we do.

I would argue whatever the dollar amount was, keep it the same and spread it out on 120, 118, spread it among 118 instead of 105 and not have bloodletting. That's the regrettable part in my mind.

There's a couple ways to do it. I don't know how other people are doing it. I've heard other people are approaching it differently. We felt very strongly as a staff we owed it to any player that might be in jeopardy to let them know the week following our last game what the status was, give them an opportunity to go out and prepare for whatever they want to prepare for.

We've had guys leave the program at that point. They've left the program. We have other guys that are going to go to other places but staying with the program throughout the bowl. Everybody is getting bowl gifts, all that stuff. Everybody had the opportunity to stay with us and go to the bowl site and finish out this with us as a team member. They had the option of doing whatever they wanted to do. We've had other guys leave and already find other homes.

We just felt like it was the right thing to do to give them a chance if they want to prepare for the future, do it. If they want to stay here, that's great, too.

It was hard.

Then the whole next chapter is going to be really interesting, too, because practice with 105 guys in college football. This is not the NFL. Nobody even brought up what happens if a guy has a season-ending injury. We can't go out and bring somebody in to replace that guy. It makes practice a challenge, makes developing a team a challenge.

Those or questions or discussions for post January. I'm not looking forward to that. I think it impacts a program like ours more so than other people that recruit five-star athletes every year because they're a little bit more readymade.

That's the way it goes. We'll figure out a way to make it an advantage.

Q. A point of clarity. So those two quarterbacks you mentioned, I didn't realize they could start soon.

KIRK FERENTZ: It's new for us, yeah. At least we'll get eyes on these guys, get them out there. Tim will have them totally confused by Monday. They can travel with us to the bowl game but they can't play.

Q. You had a quarterback in here recently. How would you say Iowa is positioned NIL-wise? Somewhat of a gray area. But how do you feel where you're positioned in terms of what you can offer?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a really good question.

I think we're fine. There are some extreme situations that are really interesting. Literally mind-blowing sometimes.

Let me qualify every statement I'm going to make here. Nothing is substantiated. Going back to the point about the NFL, things are in black and white on paper. It's usually after like free agency goes on, you find out later on what the contracts are.

There's been so much embellishment and exaggeration on numbers. I can tell you that from the past. Currently I don't know if it's accurate. Some of the numbers you hear are just outrageous.

Long story short, the new system doesn't kick in until sometime in the new year calendar. There's kind of like funny money or free money floating around right now. It's a good time to be a guy in the portal.

Then the markets are really unrealistic. I'll give you an example. I remember seeing two tackles, I can look it up. One guy got drafted by a really good team. I told Ozzie, if we can get this guy in the fourth round, jump on him. Third round maybe. He got drafted in the late first round and started as a rookie.

Another guy from the University of Buffalo, same thing. If we can get this guy in the fourth round, fifth round, let's grab him. He was going in the third round.

My point is that at that position, there's draft inflation for tackles in the NFL. At least there was in the mid '90s. There's a lot of that going on right now too, people are trying to fill needs.

If they have money in their pockets, which a couple schools do, I'm thinking of one in particular that had a really good benefactor, is that what they call these guys, like 'Great Expectations'. He dropped a big check on them and they're spending. They're spending. I'm not sure I see the value in what they're spending.

There are a lot of examples like that. This is a really interesting period. We'll see what happens here. Next year will be more interesting. We'll be able to gauge things a little bit better. I think it's interesting.

I think we're doing fine. We're not crazy. We're not going out there and going crazy. Unless you guys want to kick in? Happy to help you guys invest (smiling).

Q. James Franklin recently said, paraphrasing, he had a quarterback that didn't intend to go into the transfer portal, but it was in the middle of the Playoff, December 9th.

KIRK FERENTZ: That's an awful situation. I read about that certainly.

I couldn't agree more. Wasn't intentional by any stretch of the imagination, but the way the calendar falls. We have so many unintended bad consequences here. The poor kid had no choice, basically had no choice. It's the worst thing in the world. A college athlete, you work hard, you get a chance to play in the Playoffs, you know what I mean? It's really hard.

This whole system has taught some athletes really bad lessons, too. I'm not suggesting that is one. That's one where there was no good choice for the athlete. I really feel badly for him. I have empathy for him. Empathy for Penn State, too. That hurts their football team. It's all because of a circumstance.

But the way the system is right now, we're teaching some things you would never teach your kids at home or your kids on your football team. Just run and take the best deal possible sometimes. That's not always the best deal in the long run.

Q. Do you have any suggestions of what to do with the calendar, the portal, semester system, spring football?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've only looked at headlines: We got to move it to spring. I saw: We have to eliminate spring ball. I have thoughts on that one, too.

At some point we need to look at our whole system so we can avoid circumstances like that because that was not fair to anybody involved, the individual or the team. It's really unfortunate. I don't think it was intended that way. That's the way it is. You have the Playoffs thing working independently of the other stuff.

There's a long list of crap that's happened. Life goes on. Just keep pressing, keep pushing. But that's really sad, yeah.

Q. Ethan Hurkett, Logan Jones coming back for another season. I'm assuming you had conversations with other players if they're going to return. What do those two bring back to your football team, maybe change things when you're looking at the portal?

KIRK FERENTZ: The obvious first statement is you can't go out and recruit guys like those guys. Maybe you can, but it's like I talked about with Jay, you have to wait three or four years to get that from them. Same thing with those guys.

Those guys didn't knock it out of the park their first year in terms of everybody knowing who they were. They've both been works in progress. They've been so consistent since they got here. All the nice things I said about Jay I can say about Ethan and Logan and other guys, too.

They embody, just like I talked about Jay, what we are and who we are. Hurkett in some ways, he's not Joe Evans exactly, but there's some parallels, the energy he brings, the tempo he works at, the focus he brings to everything. He's an unbelievable leader just by his example. I can say the same thing about Aaron Graves. Then Logan, same thing. I'm not saying Logan is Linderbaum, but there are a lot of parallels. Wired in, a really good football player. Then everything he does as a human being is so steady. The more guys you have like that around your guys, everybody benefits by having them on the team. Really happy about that.

Q. Brendan Sullivan, how does he look working back into things? What are your expectations?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really good. I'm going back to the end of the season. Friday and Monday, we were off that weekend. That Friday and Monday we worked. Just shorts, not contact. I don't think he did anything or didn't do much. Since that time he's been great. He feels fully confident. The injury is in the history now, it's passed.

Just getting caught up because he missed a couple weeks there. This has been a good period where he's getting some work. Tim even had like a little quarterback school going a couple days where we weren't work, just working those guys mentally, going out in the field walking through some things, letting them throw the ball, stationary, things like that, things you can't do in the spring because of all the stupid rules we have. That goes back to we need to change our approach to January to August. We really need to change that. But that's a discussion for a different day.

Q. Question about Bill again.

KIRK FERENTZ: Rule number one for Bill is don't talk for other people. Keep that in mind (smiling).

Q. If Coach Belichick was sitting next to me and he asked me what advice would you give to me about being a college football coach, what would it be?

KIRK FERENTZ: Turn around and run like hell (smiling). I'm joking. I'm joking.

Nobody is more adept at handling change or crazy

circumstances. I lived through two of them with him during our three years in Cleveland. I thought the first one was really extraordinary when we let Kosar go. We ended up cutting Bernie. Native son. You can imagine what that was like. That was nothing compared to the move two years later.

He's ultra-successful for a lot of reasons. He can take whatever presents itself and he's going to figure out a way to work through it.

He doesn't need much coaching or help from me. I know he's been observant. Again, having the connection with Steve. He spent time out there. He's been there in camp, been there in season. He knows the drill, routine. He knows football better than anybody. He knows people as well.

So he doesn't need my advice. He'll do really well. I know he'll have really good people around him, starting with Mike Lombardi. He'll be ready to roll. Just make sure they're not on our schedule. That would be a task there.

Merry Christmas, everybody. We'll see you guys down there.

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