

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Wednesday, March 26, 2025

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good to see everybody. Good to be back at it. Just start out by congratulating Coach McCollum. Great to have him join us here. He did a great job at the press conference yesterday, and also to Beth and her staff -- I know that's an intensive process anytime they go out and hire someone. I think they did a great, great job. I am excited for them. Wish them all the best as they move forward.

A couple things, then we'll talk a little bit about our team. I think it's been a really quiet off-season, which is good. Quiet is fine by me. It's been productive, as well.

We got back in January, as you know, and it's a really important period for us. The winter program has always been important. Still remains that way. It's an opportunity for guys to develop and grow physically, mentally, and it's time for the team to start coming together.

There's a lot of things that we do measure. I'm pleased with the results, all the things that are measurable. Coach Braithwaite and his staff do a great job there, and overall the effort was good, the work ethic that our guys demonstrated was good, and our team has a positive attitude thus far, so that's encouraging, as well, and then obviously it was good to transition into the practice phase this morning. Had a chance to get on the field finally, and that's always an exciting start.

This is really one of my favorite times of year because it's pure teaching right now. It's all about player development. There's no game planning, no timelines, no rush items, that type of deal. It's about teaching on our part, the coaches' part, and then our players going out and working to see what they can do to grow and develop, and that's simply the goal for everybody in the room, whether it's a sixth-year senior or a handful of guys that joined us back here in back, whether they are veterans. Everybody has a chance to improve.

One thing about football is you can study it, you can meet, you can have walk-throughs, all those kinds of things, but until you put a helmet on and go out and practice, that's

how you learn how to play the game ultimately. All that other stuff is important, but that's what it gets down to.

Our opportunities in football are limited. I assume probably less opportunities than any other sport there is, ironically, but we have 15 opportunities this spring, and then we'll start again in August. This is something we want to take advantage of anytime we get that opportunity.

It's really pretty simple. We install or teach whatever it is that we're going to practice the following day. You go out and you run those things, offensively, defensively, special teams, and then you go back in the meetings and look at them, study them, and the best way for anybody to learn is watching their performance and their teammates' performance, listening to the critiques, and then you go back and do it again. That's really what it is here for the next five weeks. Really deliberate pace, very slow, very methodical, good meeting opportunity, and if our team is doing it right, they'll grow in the meetings as much as they do in practice.

It's good to get started on that thing, and then a couple points going back to our first meeting back in January, whatever it might have been, 17th or 18th, I try to remind our guys that each and every year there's a new team. Every year is a new team, whether we're veteran, not veteran, and usually it's a mix, that type of deal.

It doesn't matter what happened last year. Anything that we have done or haven't done well, you're starting new, so it's kind of important everybody understands that.

Everyone has an opportunity. Every player on our roster has an opportunity to improve, become a better player, hopefully, and also develop our leadership base. There's a lot of things going on during the entire course here of the season starting in January.

Those things are really important points. If you look at our special teams right now just in general, I think we've got a good group of core guys, potentially good group of guys there. We do have veteran specialists, which is nice, with obviously Drew coming back as our field goal kicker. You have Rhys, who's the punter, and Wetjen did a great job as the returner last year, so you have three guys that have good experience. We are excited to see those guys improve, and then a big loss with Luke Elkin graduating, a

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position that doesn't get much attention unless it's a bad performer there, and Luke did a great job his entire career. Trying to fill that void right now.

Offensively one thing we're all excited about it's the second year in Tim Lester's system, so I think the learning will become quicker. Everybody is responding a little bit faster now and a little bit further down the road that way from a mental standpoint, and then ironically for the first time in a while we're a little bit more veteran offensively than we have been and probably more so than defense, so that's a little bit of a change-up, also. Hopefully we can build on that.

Defense, obviously we lost a lot of really good players, a lot of experience on that side of the football. We have some proven guys coming back, but a lot of good competition, hopefully, in that regard. It's true every year, there are no incumbents. Everyone has got to earn their job. But we have a lot of positions right now that are really wide open right now, up for grabs, and it's going to be interesting to see how these next 15 days how things come along a little bit.

But feel good about the team overall, as I mentioned.

Personnel-wise, you obviously know Coach Ladell Betts had an opportunity with the New York Giants, and it's a really good opportunity. Not a total surprise. When we hired Ladell four or five years ago, he just has done an outstanding job, was impressive in the interview, but more importantly has done a great job here. He's got a great family and has NFL experience, so I know he'll do a great job with the Giants, and wish him all the best.

Certainly appreciative of his contributions here, and then I think we're all excited about the gentleman who's going to replace him. Really good to have Omar Young join the group. He most recently was with the Patriots. Has experience with a lot of NFL teams. Coached in college, as well. Really excited about, I think, the contributions that he'll make in our program. Great young guy.

Then also I think you know Warren Ruggiero who joined our staff a month and a half ago, whatever it may be now. He was a coordinator for quite a while with Dave Clawson down at Wake Forest and Bowling Green prior to that, and Coach Clawson is a guy I've got a lot of respect for. What they did at Wake Forest I think is really impressive. He's a tremendous football coach. They have some challenges there in their lot in life, if you will, but they've done a great job at Wake Forest, and Warren is a big part of that. Great to have him with us.

Roster-wise, we added five transfers at mid-year, and then

we had 10 incoming freshmen join us also. Good to bring those guys.

The 10 freshmen is probably a high number, probably the highest we've had I'm guessing. I haven't gone back and looked it up.

Then the portal, we're not trying to build a roster out of the portal. Pretty sure I'm correct in saying we're the lowest number in the Big Ten. I think Penn State had six, we had five, and I think Northwestern had nine. Everybody else it seems like is in the teens or beyond.

Hopefully it's the right thing to do. It's what we believe in. Fortunately we haven't had a lot of attrition. Happy about that.

Eager to see these guys on the field. It's been fun to watch them the last month and a half, two months here, and been impressed with the group overall. We'll see how that all shakes out.

Then the last point is obviously we know it's a new world in college football. It's an old world but a new world just continually changing, and I don't think that's going to go away.

For the most part, though, all the stuff we're talking about is pretty much external to the program and external to the game, so in that regard, we're going to try to do the best we can given who we think we are and what we want to be, what we want to look like and try to make things fit but be as smart and be as advantageous as possible in that regard.

Then the game itself really doesn't change and the way we approach the game, how we're going to coach it and all those types of things, I don't see that changing a great, great deal. It still gets down to trying to find players that love the game, love the competition, love the challenge of trying to get better, and also have an appreciation for an ultimate team experience, and to me that's what a good football program is. That's what we're going to try to build on a daily basis and see what we can do, and to me if you get the right people that have the right priorities, they figure out pretty quickly that's how it goes, and if you don't, that's how it goes, as well.

I'll throw it out for any questions.

Q. I wanted to ask about Gronowski and his recovery. Where is he at? Is he ahead of schedule? Any other guys that might be missing out on spring ball due to out-of-season surgery?



KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's the biggest one probably right now. Brian Allen had surgery, too, which is going to keep him out. No surgeries are routine, but it's a predictable surgery that a lot of players have had, so Brian will be with us full speed in June when that program starts.

Mark will be throwing lightly here probably in a couple weeks but not with the team. The biggest thing right now is just make sure nobody runs into him or he doesn't fall down. Just being cautious with him.

But the recovery has gone great. Everything is right on schedule. He's probably a little bit ahead, that type of deal. But we'll play it conservatively.

In a perfect world you want everybody out there practicing. In his case he's played a lot of football, and there's a lot of evidence that he knows how to play. He's smarter than the whole coaching staff combined. Dean's List guy and mechanical engineering. That part I think is going to come really quickly for him, and Tim didn't go on the road this year so he spent a lot of time with the quarterbacks individually and collectively, more so individually, during the winter months, and I think he's caught on. For new players it's like learning a new system or a new language. That's the biggest difference. No different than when players jump in the NFL. So they just have to learn the language, all that type of thing. It's all going good. All going well.

Q. Regarding Mark, what are your initial impressions of him so far? You've only been around him a couple months now.

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, we got to see him on film, and that speaks for itself. Whether it was how he played but more importantly I think quarterback is all about -- it's a leadership position. There's no avoiding that. He clearly did that. He delivered his team to victory a lot, and that's really impressive.

Under-recruited guy. We had one of those about 45 years ago in 1981. Another under-recruited guy from Chicago did pretty well here. That's one thing about that position; it's a tough position to get right.

I'll deviate for one second. I had some free time last week and just going through some stuff, I tend to collect stuff, there was an article about a pretty prominent school in the South that was like one of the first big bonus baby contracts, if you will, NIL, and I looked at the guy's name and I didn't know who he was, with all due respect. I think he's on his third school now. It didn't work out wherever he had gone, and despite the money they paid and all that other stuff.

My point is that's a position that you never know. You hear Bill Polian talk about it all the time, it's about one out of two they get right, whether the guy is the first or second guy in the draft. There's really no way. But in this case, Mark is a proven player. He's done it on film. Hasn't done it at the Big Ten level necessarily, but good players are good players in my mind.

The thing I'm more impressed with the kind of person he is and his demeanor. I would call him fairly quiet, but he has a humbleness to him and a confidence to him that's very genuine. I think that whole room is really good right now.

Hank has been a great addition. Can't say enough about Brendan Sullivan, going back to June when he showed up last year. His work ethic, just his personality, his leadership traits.

It's a really good group of guys right now. They're competing well with each other.

Q. With Omar Young with his hiring, what stood out to you in particular about his background that you liked, and I realize it's only been about a week and a half or so, but what stood out to you about him so far now that he's here?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I'm not saying I like doing coaching searches because in a perfect world everyone says here, but the world is not perfect, and Ladell is a great example. He had an opportunity he was excited about and I'm fully supportive. I think that's every coach's decision to make a decision on what's best for him, and that one made perfect sense.

The fun part of it is we all worked collectively on it. I say we, the offensive staff primarily in this case, and you start doing research, and we started out pretty much got it down to about a list of four or five that we were serious about and then cut that back by a couple.

But felt really comfortable -- there were probably three guys that we could have hired very easily and it would have worked out very well, but Omar just kind of rose, and the last step of the process was bringing guys to campus and spending time with them in person.

We did Zoom calls, you do a lot of calls and research and try to check sources, all that, but the biggest thing to me is getting quality people that we can envision -- just like players, you can envision them really functioning really well in our system.

Whether it's the outside, like living in Iowa, but also being



part of the program, and then adding to it in Omar, I think with his experience and the places he's been, some of the systems he's been involved in, the transition is going to be easy for him.

Also he'll add to the equation. He has good personal skills. He's walking into a good room. Ladell did a great job of bringing players in that really, I think, have great futures in front of them, and it's an easy group to work with. Those guys like football and they like working. I think it's a good mesh.

Q. You mentioned Warren Ruggiero. What's his role going to look like on the staff, and what has stood out from working with him so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, talked about changing times and all that. We've grown externally -- I never envisioned us having a social media department. Believe me, if you would have told me that 25 years ago or 27 years ago, I'd have said, what are you talking about.

But now we have several people doing that, so we've grown in that regard because that's just reflective of the time. Certainly our recruiting staff has grown. We had one person 27 years ago now. We've got a bunch of guys that help us out in that regard.

But where I'm going on the whole thing football-wise, one thing I've kind of been resistant to, I just prefer smaller instead of larger when it comes to staff. The game hasn't changed. It's still 11 guys, and 11 guys on every phase, special teams.

But one thing I think we decided we could probably create some value, since we practice on Mondays, which is unusual, we go Monday mornings, Sundays are really tough, and they have been since 2015 when we switched it.

So basically the whole idea is he's going to be doing some advance work, and it's great he's been here now probably five, six, seven weeks, so he's really learning what we're doing, what we do, and then obviously he has a lot of good ideas, too, which is really nice. He has a wealth and depth of experience.

But I think the way I envision it is when we finish up yesterday's game on Sundays, Warren will already have a jump start on whoever it is we're going into whatever preparation and just have some ideas and some presentation stuff for Tim to help make his process a little quicker, and same thing for the whole offensive staff.

We felt like it was a way to maybe improve our preparation

process. He's been great. He's a football guy all the way.

Q. What is your goal for the quarterbacks that are practicing now? You obviously have a much more fully stocked quarterbacks room. Do you feel in your mind that's your one and now you're seeing who's two? What are you trying to do this spring with those other guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the way I'd phrase it, we feel like we know the most, ironically, about Mark, even though he's not practicing. That doesn't make sense. But it's a contradiction in terms, I guess. But he's played the most and he has that production. That's a starting point.

Then the guys in the room we're excited about, but none of them have played 20 games or 30 games.

This is a good opportunity for them. Obviously Brendan is a heck of a lot more comfortable now with what we're doing than he was a year ago. He got here in June. To me it's amazing what he did pick up in a short amount of time.

The same thing with Hank. You have Jimmy there and then Jackson is back, too. We're just going to let those guys practice and play and all that kind of stuff, and then whenever Mark is able to join us back, and really we're not going to be evaluating or competing until August, then we'll go through that and just see what happens.

But overall the whole room is - pardon the pun - it's a lot healthier, and I think we have a better situation than we've had.

Ironically, Spencer has been back in the building. He had another procedure done, but anyway, he's been around here for a while. Whenever he got tackled and that shoulder blew up a couple Novembers ago, it's been a rough go since then. That's just the way it goes sometimes. You do the best with what's in front of you, but I'm optimistic we've got a little potential now as we move forward right now and looking forward to seeing where it all goes.

Q. It seems like whenever fall camp rolls around or spring training rolls around, you kind of light up when you talk about the team and just the pure football aspect of it, other than social media, other than the game weeks, the preparation. What is it about spring practice that you enjoy the most? Is it the purity? Is it kind of focusing on yourselves? I'm curious what your insight is.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the two most favorite times of the year for me, outside of being with my wife Mary -- we went

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out an a date last week, too. That was a pretty big deal. Went out and had dinner. It was a really nice night.

But outside of that, what I enjoy is being with our players. That's the fun of coaching. Spring allows you that, especially with the non-game planning part, which is a challenge in itself, and that's fun, as well. Just to be with the players and watch them practice, develop, see what they can do to get better, all those kinds of things, and the challenge is how well can we teach as a staff and as coaches. So that's a fun time, and then I love August, too, the same way.

August, pretty much you're blocked from the outside world.

This is a little bit of a mix because we're still recruiting, and I've got nothing against recruiting, but it just kind of take some time away from the team. These are pure football periods, so that's the fun part about it. No jobs are perfect, but those two periods are really enjoyable because it's pure football. Again, you're not trying to game plan. You're not fighting a time clock necessarily.

Q. I wanted to ask about Ben Kueter. Last year he took the year off from football to focus more on wrestling. After wrestling season ended he said, at least online, that he wanted to go back to focusing on football. Is he back working out with the team or anything or has he rejoined you guys? I saw he wasn't on the spring roster.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he is not. They finished up obviously just a couple days ago here. It feels like two weeks ago. But we haven't had conversation. I think he and Seth have talked a little bit. First of all, he probably needs some time off. I've got a real appreciation for that sport and what it entails and just -- it's a grueling nature of it. Big Tens, nationals, all those kinds of things. So first things first, let him get away a little bit, and then take time to think this whole thing out.

We knew when we recruited him, he may have to make a decision or maybe he can do both. We'll see how that goes. I don't pretend to be an expert, but it just seems like there were three really dominant heavyweights this year. I say dominant, there were three guys that were just -- those guys were, like, eight-year veterans versus rookie free agents coming in. They were at a different tier. As far as I know, all three are gone. I think they were all sixth year. One guy was like 10th year. So those guys are out, and just let him figure out what he wants to do.

I've got to think he's got a great opportunity in front of him there, too. Not that he doesn't here, but it's a real challenge trying to balance two sports. That's a challenge.

So we'll wait and see what happens here.

Q. Jay Higgins is somebody that had all the production in the world here, but as far as the draft industrial complex maybe not a first, second, third-round pick. I was just curious when you were at the NFL level evaluating talent, what is the line between physical attributes, how high a guy can jump, how fast he can run, and then evaluating what he actually does on the football field and how you figure out where a guy should be going in the draft in that sense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they're still trying to figure it out. Again, I cited Bill Polian, who -- I love Tuesday mornings because he's on the radio. In fact, I might even drive to Des Moines just to keep listening to him, even though he should be coming over here. He is so good.

But he gave a stat whenever it was, a couple months ago, that changed over a 10-year period. They went from, whatever it was, being right .53 times or whatever that is, 53.0 percent, it jumped up, to 54.0 percent. The point being in the first round, there's no guarantees, and those guys spend a lot of money, invest a lot of money, invest a lot of time in the draft process, and they have a lot more information and access to stuff than we do when we recruit.

Yet they still can't get it right every time. It's impossible. The amount of accuracy, his point was if you can hit .550 then you're going to be a Hall-of-Fame GM.

It's unpredictable, but the one thing whether it's -- I'll couple Nick Jackson in there, too. We just had our pro day. You've got the measurables and all that stuff, and that is important, it's a gauge. But my experience is a lot of times people will use those numbers either to justify their argument for a player or against him, either way, depends on how they want to argue it.

Still your resume is what you do on film. In my opinion that's the most important thing a player does is play football, and then the second thing in my mind is what they add to the team and what their attitude is, their determination, all that kind of stuff. I saw a couple guys on month, I actually coached two guys that were both free agents when they came to us, one in Baltimore, one in Cleveland that both played in Super Bowls and both had double digit year careers, a lineman -- one guy I had in college, Mike Flynn, and he showed up in Baltimore wearing the same shoes he wore in Maine which were the same ones he wore at Cathedral High School in Springfield, Massachusetts, 1989 or whatever the hell year it was. Some things you just can't measure with guys.



I cite those two guys because they're not size and speed guys like Jack Campbell, yet they're both football players, and they add so much to a team. It's going to be really hard for somebody to cut those guys. I'm not saying they won't get cut next year, but it's going to be really hard when the time comes.

When you've got a team in the NFL, you've got 53 spots and they can't all be All-Pros. You just can't afford that. Nobody can. Cincinnati is going through that right now. Somebody has got to be 40 down to 53. If you can play special teams and add other things to a team and be versatile and be smart, there's a lot to be said for that.

LeVar Woods is a pretty good example of that. He walked out of here, he wasn't sure he was fast enough. I thought he might be a last-cut guy. He played seven years.

A lot of examples of guys that just got the right attitude and the right stuff internally. They can carve out a nice career in the NFL. Jay and Nick just played phenomenal for us. We've got a lot of guys like that. Historically it's been kind of fun to watch those guys.

Q. I have a two-part question, which is we wrapped up the first 12-team playoff, and I think if we saw a common element it was that line of scrimmage football advanced teams and the final four were totally line of scrimmage teams, very physical in the way they ran and stopped the run, they were top 10 in defense. If nothing else, did that reinforce the tenets of this program are exactly the way it needs to be to be successful, and on the other side, you lose a couple of offensive linemen; how do you feel like your offensive line will perform this spring and beyond?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's a big area of interest. We're watching everything, obviously, but losing a couple guys that really played their best, both of them were out there on -- you think about Connor and Mason easily played their best football last year, and that was one thing I said in August, I felt a little bit more confident about our offense last year because historically if you've got a good offensive line, if your quarterback plays good, you've got a chance.

Then we had some ups and downs at quarterback with injuries, that type of thing, but Kaleb stepped up and did a great job around the football, but a lot of that was what was going on up front. We were more veteran up front finally.

The guys that are in line to compete for those jobs, right now at least, they didn't just get here. They've been here in the program a couple years. I think their physical maturity is going to enable them to compete and hopefully

keep our standard where we'd like it to be, and hopefully we're going to improve at the other spots.

I'm cautiously optimistic right now. I'll know more here in about 15 days. But hopefully we'll have good healthy competition and be good there.

Same thing on the other side. It's going to be really important that we do the same thing there. We lost a couple good players defensively and some really experienced guys.

But again, I think we're seeing growth with the younger guys. That's fun. We'll never be deep enough. We never have been, never will be. But I think if we can get six, seven, eight guys defensively that can play and the same thing on offense, if we can get seven, eight guys that we feel confident can go in a game and play well, then we'll have a chance to be okay there.

But that's going to be paramount, I think, for anybody to be successful.

Q. Regarding the playoff, did that reinforce or validate, whatever, your style of play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, again, the more things change -- there are exceptions to everything. How you play stylistically, but pretty much it's just a lot easier, going back to what I just said a minute ago, it's a lot easier if you can block people, it's a lot easier to be good on offense no matter what you do, and if your quarterback play is good, that makes things a little bit easier, too.

It's been a challenge for us. I think everybody knows that. It's nobody's fault, it's just we've had some injury situations that have been a little bizarre there at that position. So hopefully we can get that solidified a little bit.

It starts by making, quote-unquote, routine plays or makeable plays, the ones that are there and that are open. If you can execute those, that's how you get good things started.

But we haven't done that well enough to be -- to expect to be where we want to be offensively.

Q. You brought up Spencer. Two and a half years ago, he goes through what he does, has a year to recover, sticks around and coaches while his replacements come in. He had a hell of a season out in Logan and helping these guys here on pro day. If you could speak to his resolve and what he's been through for the last 30 months or so.



KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's just a really exceptional guy. That was apparent when we met him. He came out here, I think they flew through the night and they played in the playoff game out there. It was off schedule because they had the fires in California, whatever year that would have been.

The first time you meet him, he's a little different of a guy. He's kind of an old soul, back then. One quick side story, I asked him who his favorite musicians were the first night I met him. He talked about Cody Jinks, who's a fairly modern country guy, country artist. Then he said Waylon Jennings, and I'm like, how do you even know who Waylon Jennings is? The second thing is you're from the Bay Area; Waylon Jennings, are you kidding me? So that kind of tells you a little bit about Spencer. A different guy.

But he's just a really smart, smart guy. I think he's going to get into coaching at some point. He's wasting a good brain, but he's really sharp. He knows what's going on. He understands the game pretty well.

It's tough. You know, injuries are tough. If it weren't for injuries, it would be a great game. But it's part of the game, unfortunately. But he's rebounded well, and I think he's going to try and give it a shot in the NFL. He threw it really well the other day, so we'll see.

Q. With the linebackers, obviously you lose quite a bit of production there. What's stood out to you about them, and with needing to get down to 105, how much is that in the back of your mind, and how much are you still having conversations about that at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not a lot. It turns out we're in the minority. I didn't take any surveys or do any surveys back in the fall, but we just let our guys know in December if we couldn't guarantee a 105 spot, we told our players that and allowed them to go on visits and still be part of the team and still go to the bowl and all that.

But I just think we were all in agreement staff-wise that the right thing to do was let guys know and be transparent with them. We've had a handful of guys that know right now they don't have a guarantee that chose to stay here this spring instead of go out and find places, but it turns out nobody else is doing that. I actually have a son coaching at the FCS level, and I told him, you have to wait until the end of April and get your net out and catch whoever falls through because apparently that's what's going to go on.

From a competitive standpoint that would have been smart. I just didn't think it was the right thing to do. These guys come in here, work hard every day. Had a lot of guys that have found new homes, whether it be in the MAC, FCS,

John Pascuzzi went to West Virginia on a scholarship, so I'm thrilled for all those guys.

We're pretty much there. The hard discussions have already taken place.

Not to be critical, but if I would make a recommendation, it would have been nicer if they'd stair stepped it down, given us a year to get to 105, kind of going. But it is what it is, so we've dealt with that.

So I think our roster is pretty much where we need it to be right now. It's pretty much under control.

As far as the linebackers go, we graduated three really good players. Kyler Fisher had an outstanding pro day out there. Maybe as good as anybody. You hate to lose that kind of leadership and production, but I'm anxious to see what's going to go on. Jaden Harrell has been here, he's been working his tail off, and just seems like his demeanor has been growing - maybe it's my imagination - but since January. Eager to see the guys on the field and who's going to emerge, who's going to compete, but I think we've got a really healthy competition, and I think we've got a bunch of guys that are eager to go out and play well, given their opportunity. No different than Jay a couple years ago when the door opened and he played great for us. He won't be a first-rounder, but he was a first-round talent college-wise for us. Played awesome.

Q. John Nestor said he's entering the portal. The defensive back room at this point, how do you evaluate kind of where that's at?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's one less guy in the competition, basically. That's what it is, and it's what it was when he came in to tell me he was going to be leaving.

Right now the two most experienced corners are Deshaun and TJ, but I think we've got a bunch of guys competing right now, and it's kind of similar in the secondary a little bit with Quinn graduating. But I guess it's kind of like a lot of places right now. I'm excited to see what happens. I think we've got a lot of guys -- I'll start with Deshaun and TJ. Both of them have improved in the winter program. They're stronger, more mature, tested out much better than a year ago or two years ago, which is what you're hoping will happen.

Then we've got some young guys behind them that are eager to have an opportunity, too.

It's different, as I kind of alluded to in the opening comments about the defense being -- I think we all knew Higgins was going to be our Mike backer last year, and



that's how it shook out. Right now there's a lot of variables going on, a lot of different moving parts, and it's going to be fun to see how it all shakes out, but concern about depth, you never feel like you have enough good players, guys that can go into a game and be ready to play.

But I also think we have a lot of guys that have the opportunity to maybe grow into that position and we won't have the answers at the end of April, but we'll be further down the road and know more about where these guys are now compared to where they were in December, and I'll go back to one of the points I tried to make initially, especially I think in college football, NFL to a degree but in college football, like the difference between a player in December, the next April, a lot of times can be really big and significant, and I would say the same thing in August. Especially with the younger guys right now, this is their -- some of those guys, it was the first real intensive winter program they've been through because they were wrestling or playing basketball, doing things like that, running winter track.

So their opportunity to grow and develop as football players is really -- there's a bigger window, and that's kind of the fun part about it. That's why I'm always sure I couldn't say to see who makes those jumps, and sometimes it's not first- or second-year guys, but it might be a third- or fourth-year guy. I remember when Mike Daniels -- all of a sudden it was in December, but all of a sudden it was like, whoa, this guy, what happened to him. All of a sudden he was just like turbocharged out there. When a guy hits stride a little bit.

But they've got to be investing, and I think our guys are investing, so kind of curious to see what happens here.

Q. At the very beginning you said there's a lot of positions wide open right now. To you as the head coach, which ones are most fascinating to you? Which ones are most intriguing to you as you go into spring here?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's all kind of interesting because it all kind of meshes together. I don't think there's a lot of drama. I think I know who our center is going to be right now. I've got a pretty good feeling on that one.

But some guys make it easy that way. That was Higgins a year ago, I guess.

There's a lot of interesting things going on. Curious about all of them, quite frankly, because it's all going to impact everybody else. Yeah, I don't know. It's all good. It's one of the fun parts about this thing. So we'll see. We'll see. Maybe deep snapper because I know this, it's hard to get

out of a game if you don't have one. We don't need that problem. Wow. I think we'll get that figured out.

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