

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Tim Lester

Press Conference



TIM LESTER: Really the only thing I really have to say to lead off is the spring has been productive. Our guys have been chipping away, getting better. Year two is a totally different animal than year one, in a good way, as far as teaching and them understanding what's expected of them and really just taking the next step.

Every position has different steps they need to take, and they've been working hard, and we're chipping away. I do see a lot of growth in different areas, areas that we need to focus on. We've been successful with what we've had to work with, but we have a long way to go.

We're cautiously excited about where we're at, and we have a long way to go, and ready to get to work tomorrow morning. We get another chance. Looking forward to that.

Q. Having signed Bryce George. I know he was a tight end out of high school. Did you offer him, recruit him at Western Michigan?

TIM LESTER: I did. From Detroit, tight end. Got hurt his senior year. Great athlete. It's ironic that when his name came across the desk, I knew who he was, and I knew the family a little bit. Had a ton of success at Ferris.

His offensive coordinator was one of my coaches in college. Called him immediately. He had nothing but great things to say about him and his family. Excited to get him into that competition up front.

Q. I know he played right tackle at Ferris. Is the vision to move him over to left? What are your thoughts?

TIM LESTER: I don't know. There's a lot of competition up there. Obviously I feel really good at right tackle with what we got going, and we've been trying to move with Lauck and Dotzler. When he shows up, it's going to be a third amigo in that battle. They're all getting better.

It's funny from day-to-day, offensive linemen normally take a little bit longer. Watching the way Dotz is coming off the ball right now is different than last spring. It's been exciting

to watch. Lauck, same way. He's an extremely talented athlete. He has great feet.

It's been fun to watch those guys. We've been rotating them everywhere, and we'll probably do the same with Bryce, until he really feels that he fits in somewhere. The left is obviously the biggest position we're working on, but there's a lot of different moving parts.

Bryce does an unbelievable job of moving people around. Guards playing tackle. Tackle playing guards. Not worrying really about winning a drill in practice, but trying to continue to expand their growth as understanding the offense.

I'm sure once we get into camp, we're going to start narrowing it down and getting people in the best place to help us.

Q. We got the chance to speak with Mark a couple of weeks ago. It seems like he oozes natural leadership and perspective. I know he's not obviously fully cleared, but coming in to earn the respect of the offensive players, his teammates, and just sort of picking up the system and then looking at the quarterback room as a whole, it's kind of crazy to think that is a completely revamped room just from the last spring, I guess.

TIM LESTER: Very different.

Q. Talk about the depth of it and how you are moving in the directions there?

TIM LESTER: Mark has done a great job. He came into a building where Sully was very well-respected and one of the leaders on you are on team. He did a great job -- I mean, those guys became friends, just the way they approached the business every single day of being a pro and wanting to work in the weight room.

You can earn a lot of respect as a quarterback in the weight room. It's something Sully did, and Mark really. So he's done a great job. He hasn't been able to do much. I think he's throwing a Nerf ball right now. Something like that. I would like to see him throw a real one eventually, but he's doing a lot. We have him back there taking mental reps. Extremely intelligent.

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I'm impressed with how he has acclimated himself to our team. No expectations other than to come in and compete.

That was probably the most important question that I ask guys out the portal is, What are your expectations? My plan is for you to come in and compete. Some of them love that word, and some of them don't. If they don't, then you probably won't fit in very well here because everyone is going to have to earn their spot.

He's ready to do that. I'm excited to see him get out there and when he can. Just talking football with him, you can tell he's played a lot of football, and he's seen a lot of coverages. He's seen a lot of blitzes, and he knows how to react well. So that will be fun to see it come to light when he's able to get out there.

Q. We talked to a bunch of receivers last week, and they seemed to be pretty optimistic about how the passing game has elevated a little bit, even with different quarterbacks now. I guess what have you seen? We talked to you I think last midseason maybe. You're, like, the passing game takes the longest in the Shanahan system.

TIM LESTER: It's taking a long time.

Q. Where is it at now?

TIM LESTER: It's growing. I think the biggest difference is, one, we're healthy. When I got here, I was impressed with the wideout room. They were just young.

But when you know what you are doing. I mean, you run. We are running right now, which is fun to watch. To watch Seth and Wetjen run, they're not thinking about what to do. They're thinking about how to run the route.

So there was a lot of thinking going on last year. There's not a lot of thinking going on. It's just trying to press the issue, especially when you are trying to stretch the field vertically.

The ability to run a route and not look back at five yards and don't look back for 20. Seth has done a good job of that. Dayton is doing a good job of that.

It's been fun because we're a faster team right now in the passing game because they're running faster. The plays haven't changed. They just have run them enough times finally.

So I think that's helped us. They're getting themselves more open. Obviously the quarterbacks, the more open the receivers are, it's been really helpful to them to have

the tight ends know what they're doing, the wideouts know what they're doing. And they're starting to learn coverage, which is a big part of this offense. I don't know how much it was before.

When we started teaching them coverage and why we motion and what information we pick up from the motions, they looked at me kind of funny when I first got here. Now they're starting to answer questions. I asked Dayton a question the other day in a meeting. He led off his answer with, Well, I know it's man coverage because of the motion. I stopped and clapped. That was a great start to this answer. You know the coverage now, so how are you going to run the route? They're starting to see things. I think they're more comfortable with the system.

I'm excited with where they're at. We have a long way to go, but they are just more confident, and we're able to make nuances, adjustments really quick. They can go out there on the next route, it's fixed. We're still a little short on routes sometimes because we get excited, and we get a lot of third down red zone situations where there's a lot of little nuances that we have to get better at.

But I've been very happy away their progression as we expected it to happen, and it's obviously shown with some more success.

Q. With Mark obviously once he's out on the field, what can a quarterback of his skill set really unlock in terms of what you want to do schematically? Any regrets back to your Western Michigan days of not offering him?

TIM LESTER: We recruited him. I have to remember the year and how it went down. A lot of times when it comes to recruiting, especially at a Max school, you offer ten dudes and hope to get one. So whoever commits first, gets it. Just because you're happy to get one, you know? It's a different type of recruiting.

Here we offer one or two. There I was way more offers. So probably should have offered him, no doubt, with the success he's had.

I think the biggest thing, when you have a quarterback that can consistently provide positive football plays, it's a big word. Positive football plays. Especially when you are calling it aggressively where he can bail you out of, Hey, this is a bad look. Just check it down, get us a yard. Throw it away for all I care. Just don't take a sack. Don't throw a pick.

It's been fun. We've had him in the back.

He's been taking more mental reps than anyone else. We see it on the film. I know exactly where he would have gone. The receivers know it. They all watch what Mark would have done on that play because he's pointing to where he would have gone, and 90% of the time it's the same as the guy that's holding the ball.

Now, back there there's no pass rush, so he's really comfortable back there standing there hopping up and down. It's been good for him just to get reps because there's a muscle memory to everything you do. He's doing all the fake handoffs to nobody, him and his imaginary team back there.

He's having a blast doing it, and when he actually gets out there and he has to bring all the motions and do all the movements, we're just trying to shorten the curve really so when he gets out there, we can start seeing a more comfortable version of a guy who has played -- I don't even know how many games he's played. A lot. I know how many he's thrown for, which that has to be a lot of games.

He's very comfortable, and my job is to get him more comfortable so we can get him ready to compete in the fall.

Q. You decided not to go on the road this year recruiting. What was your reasoning? What was Kirk's reasoning for that? Then how did that impact you this spring and what you were able to do to the offense and take it another step forward?

TIM LESTER: It was huge, to be honest with you. Everything in the offseason is optional, but me being in my office when you had Jimmy graduate high school early and came in, Hank was new. Obviously, Mark was new. I was in my office every morning. We really didn't have anything to talk about in the morning other than what quasi-questions do you have? We would just talk football.

For those three guys that literally just came here, even Jimmy. He is swimming a little bit, as he should be, but they're way further ahead because of the amount of hours we were able to spend. They were all in different lifting groups, so one was 8:00 to 9:30 or whenever he left, and Hank would roll in, and he would be there for a couple of hours. Then Mark would roll in, and he would be there. It would be 1:00 before I knew it. The next day we would do it again and again, and all the way through Friday. It happened for almost two months.

It was huge for us. I had a chance to sit and watch film with the offensive unit if they wanted to watch, and we got to kind of watch them cut up as a whole. It's always great when the O-line hears what I'm telling the quarterback, and the wideouts hear what I'm telling the O-line. I love asking

offensive line, What's the coverage here? Jones is right 99% of the time, which I think impresses everybody in the room.

Just having them all in a room a couple of times a week was big. They couldn't always make it because it's optional, but it really was galvanizing for what we were trying to do last year. We watched every game we lost and the things we didn't do well and talked through what we needed to change to move forward.

So it was definitely a calculated situation. I think if you really are trying to develop quarterbacks, it's really hard to not be around them and do that. It's also hard to recruit them when you're not on the road. It's a give and take, but it was obviously a great decision.

We've had more success in the spring for sure with those guys than we would have if I came back off the road and we had a couple of weeks, and then we went rolling into spring ball because we got to answer all their questions and watch a ton of film. So I think it was a good decision, but it was the first time I've ever done it. There's a lot of teams doing it now. I think it's going to continue to happen more and more after the benefits we've seen from it.

Q. Jimmy, Jackson, and Hank, the three of them have been there since at least the preparations for the bowl game. From starting then until now, how have you seen each of them grow?

TIM LESTER: Night and day, really. Hank obviously already played in the SEC, so he had experience. He needed to learn what we were doing.

Jackson was on the scout team until, what, the last four weeks of the season, three weeks of the season. He needed a lot more reps of running what we're running.

Jimmy should be going to senior prom right now, and he's here with us. He's had really good weeks, and then he'll have a day where he gets lost and can't get himself out of just forgetting to motion a guy, having the running back on the wrong side, not moving him. But he's way ahead of where he would have been. That six days and going to the bowl game and being a part of it and being a part of the team, being here for six months before the rest of his class comes is really giving him a chance to compete because it's going to be obviously competition.

Hank is doing a great job right now. He's been the most efficient out there. Jackson is getting better. He has hot and cold days. We need to have less cold, more hot.

Then Jimmy, you just got to wait. You know what I mean?



You have to wait it out. He's throwing the ball harder. He's more confident. He knows when he's wrong before I have to tell him. It's starting to happen. Not every time.

But, yeah, it's a process with those guys, and the sooner the process starts, the sooner you get to the point where they can be effective. I think it's huge that Jackson played a couple of games and that although it's not good that Mark is not out there, they're getting a ton of reps right now, and that's going to help us moving forward.

Q. You have a new analyst.

TIM LESTER: I do. I have two.

Q. I'm specifically talking about Warren. What is he bringing to the table for you? Are you incorporating some of the things that maybe he was able to do at Wake Forest? Are we going to see slow mesh, any of that stuff?

TIM LESTER: Trying to dabble in everything. That's a whole thing. It's an expensive -- as Warren would say, it's expensive to do that because you have to do it all the time, and it has to be a major part of what you do.

We've just talked about how he came up with it and what it does to a defense and trying to find ways. He's just been a super successful coordinator in Power Five football for a long time. What he did at Wake Forest and the amount of scoring, I've known him since my days at Syracuse. We were doing some things at Syracuse. He gave me a call, wanted to meet, talk football. He's a football junkie, which is great. So am I.

So we met a long time ago. Ten years ago. We stayed in touch ever since. Obviously an unfortunate situation with their coach stepping aside, and he was available. I mean, he was the guy we wanted from day one just because I like the way his brain works. He's in the quarterback room with us. He's recruited and coached a bunch of successful quarterbacks.

When I'm not there and I'm over with the O-linemen or with the tight ends, he's in the room with those guys. It has been really good. We're trying to figure out. We have all his cut-ups. So we've watched some of the stuff they do. It's been a great start to the relationship. It's going to be even more helpful in the fall, because this is not an offense that you can game plan quickly. He's going to be able to get ahead. When we get done with practice on Wednesday, he'll move forward to the next opponent, so he'll be a couple of days ahead of us when we get in on Sunday. I think that's where it's going to make the biggest impact in our offense.

Just having someone that's done it that we can lean on that understands. From his interview it's so evident the O-line play, he understands linebacker play, he understands secondary and coverages. So he's a perfect fit because the more ideas, the merrier, and he has a ton of good ones. It's been a good start.

Q. I know going into last year you revealed that cutting things in half is a big deal to you. When you came here, Iowa was 132. You almost cut it in half to 72nd in scoring offense. I was just curious, you got into the top 40 at nearly every stop you've been. Is that something you're still kind of thinking about, maybe this could be the goal this year, and is that potentially attainable?

TIM LESTER: We haven't set those yet, but yeah, that's exactly how you do it, right? It has to be attainable and realistic. When you coach long enough, you take over great teams, you take over teams that have struggled in different areas, and you are just trying to turn the ship and get it headed the right direction.

Last year looking at us, we weren't very efficient passing team two years ago. We were an efficient running team. When you have something that's efficient, you try to find a way to make it explosive, and you have to find a way to make the passing game efficient.

We were way more efficient this year in the passing game. We weren't nearly good enough. We definitely weren't explosive, but we were efficient. On third down, our third down percentage went up. We were good on third and medium. We were definitely explosive thanks to No. 2 and the five guys and the tight ends up front, so we were explosive in the run game.

Now the question is what's the next step? What's that going to do for you? The goal is always to cut where you were at and cut it in half. I don't know what those numbers are. If we were really high in something, I don't know if I'll keep it, we got to cut it from 10 to 5 or something like that. If you are in the top 20 or 30 in something, you're doing a pretty good job, but when you are on the lower half of the Mason Dixon line, you have to get everything in there. You have to be able to do a little bit of everything.

I haven't put those together. I have it on my whiteboard in there that we need to come up with exact goals that we're going to present to the players. I don't know if it will be in half, but it's going to keep trending that way, and hopefully give them a realistic goal so we can go have something to attack.

Q. Kamari had some explosive plays as well when he got his shot last year. I don't know if I'm drawing this parallel just because I watched way too many games when you were in Kalamazoo of Kaleb Eleby and those guys, but they're the same height and same weight, both running backs. Is LeVante Bellamy a good comp? Does he have the potential to maybe -- you would love those stats, I know.

TIM LESTER: Well, Bellamy could fly now. I mean, Kamari does a lot more horizontally. Bellamy was a straight-line guy, and he was way too fast to be in the MAC. It was great. He was on our team. I think he was player of the year in the league. He was a stud.

The thing that he has that's like LeVante is that they can do multiple things in the pass game, they're good. The whole running back room right now, it's a fun room to coach. Omar has taken over an extremely healthy room. Abdul did an unbelievable job with recruiting in that room.

We have moved TJ Washington back. The whole plan was to put TJ at wide receiver so he could learn the pass game, so we now have a running back that knows the pass game, and he's a great running back, and he's really good out of the back field, which is not something we had last year. When you are trying to expand your pass game, that's always a good thing to have. So he can really catch the ball.

Really that whole group in there, I think it's going to be a running back by committee, but having that experience, watching the way TJ and Kamari ran the ball in the bowl game, they were comfortable. They were putting their foot in the ground. Day one we handed Kamari the first -- I think the first run of the season. He ran right into the O-line. He was nervous. I'm sure the game was happening fast. It slowed down for him, which is really the point where he takes off.

I'm excited. He's kind of taken a leadership role in that running back room. I'm excited for the year he's going to have because he's comfortable. He's ready to play. He really understands and can do so many things from running in between the tackles to running on the edges to catching the ball. We're going to be able to do more things with the running back position, especially with TJ in there than we were able to do in the past.

Q. I know you've had a ton of fluctuation in that quarterback room. Jackson Stratton, now the longest seasoned guy here.

TIM LESTER: Yeah, he's a vet. Got here in June. Did he get here in June last year? Yeah.

Q. I know you've got Jimmy here early. Looking at the fall, you'll have two walk-ons. You'll have two freshmen. Hank who just got here and Mark who just got here.

TIM LESTER: Thanks. Okay.

Q. How confident are you in your quarterback room's depth? Do you think you're going to add another quarterback via the portal?

TIM LESTER: When Sully left, that opens up a spot. It would have to be the right person, the right fit. You would have to have enough knowledge that he with think the guy could help us.

It's not my No. 1 thing because we're in the middle of spring ball, so I'm really just focused on those guys. I do like our depth. Obviously Jackson has played before. The young kid has a long way to go. We're going to see kind of how they develop.

Hank has really taken to it. He's done a really good job. I'm excited to see Mark. It is ironic that none of them other than Jackson have ever played before here wearing the Tiger Hawk on their helmets. It's a challenge. I think the people around them help a lot. That's also having a guy that's thrown for 10,000 guys in your room. That's helpful.

There's some good with it. There's some good with it, but it's a great room. Even Sully, we love Sully, and it's a tight room, and I'm excited for him and his future, but it's a good group that kind of supports each other because they're all kind of learning this thing together from the start, and it's way easier to learn when the people around you know what they're doing. You know, when you turn the corner, and there's three guys open as opposed to everyone ran the wrong route because they blame the quarterback no matter what.

If you take the ball and metric late it down the field, you did a good job. If you don't, you stink. That's the way it works.

With the guys around them playing well, it's really allowed those guys to have a little bit more confidence, and Coach has done a great job of putting us in tough situations. We're getting a lot of work done. We've got a long way to go, but I'm happy where the room is at right now.

If something comes along that we can add somebody else in there to add depth, we would do it in a heart beat.

Q. One of your lists, Billy, you worked at Western Michigan. He was in the NFL for a while. Taught tight



end and O-line, wide zone, a lot of what you did. And Omar has experience in the Shanahan offense too. How have they helped you kind of formulate your scheme going forward or tweaking things or tweaking things on the field to help it really perfect what you want to do?

TIM LESTER: It has been fantastic to have other people that can speak the language, right? We have a burning of coaches that are returning that are doing a phenomenal job, and they're in year two, and they understand it way more and have ideas, but then you bring in two guys that have been doing this for years. They have to learn some of the nuances that we had to change to get it to fit a college field and some of the timing. The speed of the receivers is a little different. We've made some adjustments, but they've picked it up.

Even the interviews when they start teaching our own protection to us, it's been really impressive to have them here. Like Matt at Green Bay, he would never hire a guy unless he could help game plan. You need ideas. We're going to run the same plays a lot of ways, and finding more ways to run the same play and make it look different, the more ideas you can get, the better. When you talk about Warren, same way.

Those two guys have a ton of experience in running this exact system, so they've come in with immediate ideas. Our guys that were here last year that I had to teach everything to -- tried my best to be an O-line coach and then be a tight end coach and coach the coaches first. They're in year two. Billy obviously was a GA for me and then was with the Jets with Mike LaFleur. He knows it forwards and backwards.

He's with the tight ends in that room. He sits in the room. Really he's here to help game plan and understand the system. We've watched a lot of Jets film. We've watched a lot of Bears and Packers and just tried to find ways that can continually evolve our offense so that we can run the same play and Phil thinks it's different plays every single time we run one. That's the goal.

They brought more and more ideas to the table, which is huge. So that part has been a lot of fun for me. It's just the beginning. We haven't really game planned. We're not really game planning. We're trying to find new ways to run the same plays so the guys get good at the techniques, but trying to make it look different to our defense every single time. It's already been big.

When we get to game planning and see different fronts and, Shay, when we saw this front, we would put this run with this can, pull the film up. We watch it. We love it. It's

in. That's the kind of stuff that is invaluable.

Normally when you game plan, you normally have a ton of guys with ideas. Last year it was not so much that way, and that's one of the major things we needed to get changed going forward and having Billy and Warren start early and be a couple of days ahead and having obviously Omar with a ton of experience coaching running backs with the Bears. It should continue to help us.

Our job as game planners is really simple. We have to go out there and execute. My job is to hopefully help them get better leverage so their execution can be done easier. That's the job. They still have to execute. We still have to get to the right depth. We have to throw a strike, but hopefully whether it's disguise, whether it's they think it's a different play, the run play looks like a pass play. All of our run plays should look exactly like a play pass. Sorry.

The more ideas we have that we can help our guys, hopefully make it a little bit easier to execute, that's the main goal of a coach with the shifts in the motions and the leverages. So that's really where we're hoping it comes to fruition this fall by having those here. It's been fun to have them here. The room is different. It's a fun room. The confidence of the guys that were here last year is totally different. We're excited. Again, I'm talking about the coaching staff. It's been a fun group to be around. Spring has been good, and I'm excited to get into the fall and start game plan be with that group.

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