

# University of Iowa Football

## Media Conference

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## LeVar Woods

### Press Conference



LEVAR WOODS: Thanks for being here. It is a beautiful day outside right now, and you guys could be out on a run or a bike ride or something like that, but you're here, so appreciate you being here.

Just to kind of give you a brief overview of where we're at this spring. Just finished our 13th practice.

During the spring, it's a great teaching time, great opportunity for young guys to learn and improve and to try to get a little foothold for themselves moving into fall camp. This spring has been nothing short of that, so it's been good from that standpoint.

We install a punt, field goal, field goal block. Those are the phases that get installed, and the rest of the other phases we kind of install piece by piece, drill by drill, nothing schematic goes in in those during that time. That's kind of where we're at. It's been fun. You see young guys taking a step forward, trying to teach them the skills, the techniques they need to be able to compete and help our football team here come fall and in the season.

You see a lot of progress, a lot of good work from guys. It's also a good time to help galvanize the team, build the team, kind of push the team and the units forward. So it's kind of where we're at right now.

In regards to the specialists. Starting off with Drew Stevens, most experienced guy. Senior right now. Definitely, definitely has grown and matured. You guys have heard me say that about him before. He keeps doing it, and it's fun to watch. He's in a good place right now. He's kicking the ball really well. He's working on his leadership, which isn't necessarily natural to him because he is a pretty quiet, focused guy, but it's been fun watching him grow in that role. He's doing a really good job with it. Kicking the ball incredibly well. As good as I've seen here. That's fun to watch.

Behind him right now a young guy, Caden Buhr from Bettendorf. He's doing a really good job. The kid should be in science class right now in high school, but he's

choosing to be here, so he's getting a little bit of a jump. He's doing really well. Bright future. Been a good addition to the room. It's fun watching he and Drew.

He reminds me of Drew as a freshman when Drew was kind of very talented, but kind of just crazy, head all over the place. Now you see Drew the other way where he's more mature, level-headed, and then you have Kaden. So it's fun I think for Drew. You guys can ask him this if he sees it this way, but to see, man, that was him when he was a freshman.

From a talent and ability standpoint, it's all out there for Caden. He's been a good edition.

Talking about the punter, Rhys is having a good spring. Sort of got thrust into everything last year. I know I've been on record saying this before. You've seen him improve each and every game last year, each and every opportunity as he learned the game and understood the game. He's sort of at a point right now where he's at that point, but now we're trying to adjust and trying to tweak and how much better can we be? How much more consistent can we be punting the football?

He's improved dramatically as a holder. He's done a really good job in that role, and excited for him and the sky is the limit for him as well. I think we saw some of that last year as well.

With him working at punter is also Ty Nissen. He's a senior. Been steady for us. Been kind of quiet. He served as the holder last year. Did a really good job with that role. Continues to do well with that. He's also improved his punting. A lot of that I think has to do with the strength and conditioning program. He's faster. He's stronger. His leg is stronger.

Any much you that play golf, that swing speed is much faster, and I think it surprises him at times with some of the balls he hits and connects with. That's also been interesting to watch here this spring.

Then as far as long snapper goes, Ike Speltz is the one snapper we have here on our roster. He's a redshirt freshman right now going into his third year. Done a really good job. In the spring he's doing the work of two snappers right now. He's servicing everybody, so he's

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snapping a ton. We're sort of trying to fast track him developmentally-wise that way, and he's done a good job with that role.

All Ike lacks right now is game experience. That's what he just doesn't have, but the only way to get that is to get him in the game. That's what he's working towards right now.

We'll add another piece here going into fall camp. I'm unable to speak about that at this moment, but that's kind of where everything is from a special teams standpoint, specialist standpoint.

**Q. With Rhys Dakin, we were talking to him a week or two ago, and he talked about adding a bunch of weight. How do you see that kind of helping him this year, and have you been able to see the difference yet?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think it's physics. If you think about it heavier, more mass, more mass going into the ball. It worked for Drew Stevens when he was young at well. We definitely have seen improvement from Rhys. He's also trying to be a little bit more consistent with that. I think any time you add mass, it needs to be good weight. I know Rai and his staff are doing a good job with that.

**Q. You didn't mention kickoff at all. Is that not something that you guys are doing right now?**

LEVAR WOODS: We do work on returns, punt returns and kick returns. Returners practice every day. We put them in. We just don't install the schematics of it during spring football.

Schematically we don't install the kickoff coverage scheme right now in spring, but we do work on the fundamentals of how to cover kicks and competitive drills and that regard. That went in last Saturday. We continued that yesterday. We'll do it again tomorrow.

**Q. Looking at I guess return, I know Max White entered the portal, but you have Kaden. Are you guys kind of looking at what you got and taking notes going into the fall as to who could be the other kick returner alongside Kaden?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, for sure. I was talking with other special teams analyst Brock Sherman who does a phenomenal job, by the way. He and I were talking earlier. It's, like (knock on wood) but have you ever been in spring practice where you felt better about the returners? I think we have a good pool of returners.

Obviously everyone knows Kaden Wetjen and what he did last year. Super pumped for him and excited for him.

There's some good young guys coming up as well.

You talk about KJ Parker, Terrell Washington. Sam Phillips has done it in games in college. Talking about Zach Lutmer. Go down the list of the running backs. McNeil with Kamari Moulton, talking about kick return. There's definitely a good group. It's been fun working with those guys. We haven't installed the scheme of kick return yet.

**Q. Going back to Drew Stevens, going into last offseason, had maybe a bitter taste in his mouth. A chip on his shoulder. Now he's coming off of success and having a huge moment in the regular season finale. How have you seen him take that tiger inside of him and channel it in a positive direction because he said handling success can be more difficult than handling failure. Then for you as his coach, what was it like to see him have that moment against Nebraska to have that redemption and to make the kick that he did?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, those are great questions you brought up. I think you nailed it with Drew because there is a tiger inside. I saw that when he was a freshman. He was a little bit ornery. There's something about him. A little quirky. There's something about him that was inside of him, and he had great success as a freshman. Made 90% of his kicks. If you look and you pay attention, you look who makes 90% of their kicks? Those guys play on Sundays in pro bowls. It's hard to do what he did as a freshman.

Coming into his second year I think some of the maturity stuff that he maybe wasn't quite ready for that success and how to handle that, and I didn't do a great job as his coach. He and I have had those conversations.

I think what you saw, he got humbled real fast in his second year. I think what you saw coming out of year two into year three was a more consistent guy, a more dedicated guy, a more focused guy. Talent has always been there. Then how do you harness it? How do you get him to see the things that you see the way that you see them? That's every coach's job, right?

I'm sure Phil will tell you the same thing as a DB. Tim will tell you the same things as a QB. You are trying to get the guy to see it the way you see it, see the game the way you see it. I think Drew has done that. All we've seen is this. Right now he's real focused and real deliberate with what he's doing. He's meticulous with his work. He's a grown-up, and it's fun to watch.

**Q. Had a really solid long snapper with Luke. How are**

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**you seeing Ike kind of develop, and do you see that same level of consistency so far from him?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think if Luke heard you say the word "solid," he might try to strangle you because that's a word in our room that we don't like. Solid means average, but you don't know that. There's a long story that goes back to the specialists at Iowa about the word "solid." (laughter)

Luke did a tremendous job while he was here. Unfortunately, we have to send him out the door at some point, but Ike has gotten a chance to watch Luke and watch how he operated, how he performed and his daily routine, what he did.

Ike is a very smart kid, and he followed, and he watched, and he paid attention, and he saw all that stuff. I think Luke gave Ike as much as he possibly could from a preparation standpoint, mental standpoint.

Now it's time for Ike to put that on the field and be himself, but still do the things that he's learned. We've seen that from Ike. He's had really good practices. He's had some ups and downs as well, but I think it's all in there with him. We just have to get the consistency ironed out. I mentioned this before. The only way to get experience is to get experience. So at some point that's going to have to happen, so...

**Q. One thing Kaden talked about last week was the potential for guys to kick away from him. Are there things that you guys can do to adjust to put him in position to be able to return or counter the fact that teams might try to avoid kicking to him?**

LEVAR WOODS: For sure. I think it starts with who is the guy back there with you? If you have another threat back there with you, that helps, right? You get guys, like I mentioned, with Terrell, with Moulton, with McNeil, some other guys out there back there with you. That forces the kicker to have to kick it to one of you guys. So that's one thought.

The other thought -- we've had this with Ihmir Smith-Marsette as well. We had to sort of prep him and get him ready to field balls wider than he would normally be used to fielding. So that's another thing that we've been working on or talking about as well.

That stuff is definitely going to be out there. I would anticipate people trying to keep it away from Kaden, but I also -- we play against good competition each week, so they're not going to kick away from him forever.

**Q. You could make a case that no position group is**

**more impacted by 105 than special teams, especially the way you guys have built kind of the walk-ons have become All-Americans, whether it's Kaden Wetjen or Charlie Jones or Drew Stevens, Keith Duncan, whatever. How does that impact you the way you evaluate, the way you recruit, and now you have to keep certain players versus before you would be able to recruit even in your own stomping grounds, recruit small-town players who a lot of times blossomed into important players. How is that impacting you on a special teams level that you're not going to have the extra 25 players to put on your kick units?**

LEVAR WOODS: I'll start first with that in the specialist room itself. Our specialist room is trimmed down pretty tight right now. The thought before typically is you have three guys for each position: Three snappers, three kickers, three punters with the thought of, okay, you have a starter and a backup, guys that are always competing. You have a young guy you're trying to develop along to get in that mix. Those days I think are gone.

You're going to have to have two guys that you know that you can count on to go in the game because things happen, and injuries happen. Sick mindsets happen. Whatever happens, the next guy has to be ready to go. That's been a point in this program for years. The next man in mentality.

I think you're going to see that more and more often not only in that room, in the specialist room, but also across the board. You're starting to see it in regards to special teams. It's going to be hard to keep guys on your roster just for special teams or guys that, hey, maybe they can't cut it.

We've had some guys that are coming to mind right now that maybe they weren't great as a position player, receiver, or DB, but they were phenomenal special teams players. Those guys are going to go a little further and farther between, but I think everyone just needs to be ready. Everyone is probably coaching everyone the same way, so we're trying to get everyone ready to play because you never know when you are going to get called on.

**Q. Iowa is so known for the punt return coverage, kickoff return coverage, a lot of under the radar guys that galvanize the unit, whether it be over the years that gunner position. Who are maybe one or two of those guys that maybe don't get I don't want to say appreciated from the outside, but really are instrumental in galvanizing that group to make it so consistent?**

LEVAR WOODS: You are talking about current or guys



that we --

**Q. Current.**

LEVAR WOODS: I would say right now if you are talking about the gunner position, right off the bat you have Koen Entringer. You have Zach Lutmer, guys that have done it in games. TJ Hall that has done it in games. Jaylen Watson, guys that have done it in games. Deshaun Lee. They've done it. We've seen it. I think a couple of other guys that may garner some attention or surprise this year, Alex Mota. He's done a really good job. Brevin Doll. His potential for that as far as gunners go. We've also seen Alex Eichmann. Got a chance to see him a little bit on kickoff coverage last year. Maybe doesn't show up on the stat sheet all the time, but he is incredibly disruptive.

You go back and look at -- which I did yesterday. Go back and look at some returns, against our kickoff coverage unit that, man, Eichmann may not have made the tackle, but he was so disruptive in the back field, making the returner go the opposite direction that other people make the tackle.

I think those are sort of the guys you're looking at right now. The other guys that fit in that mix, you mentioned gunners. I'm talking about other coverage players. Nolan DeLong has done a really good job. I think quietly last year we saw it in the bowl game with Landyn Van Kekerix. He knocked the crap out of this dude on the opening kickoff, and he didn't say a word about it. If you ever talk to Landyn, he doesn't say anything.

I thought, man, he must have got penalized, something happened. Man, that was fun to watch, but we see that often here. You just don't always see it in Kinnick.

Karson, he made a ton of tackles for us. He's probably statistically showing up on the stat sheet more with he and Rex and also Montgomery, but this is a great group, man. It's awe fun group to be around. These guys work their butts off every day. They're super competitive. They get in there and compete and just trying to continue to build to see if we can make it better.

**Q. I don't know how much you follow the NFL, but it's becoming more regular that guys just line up from 60 and kick field goals. Brandon Aubrey, for example. Drew Stevens seems like he's got that potential to extend the range, what you can do in a game. I know weather is a factor, but how far do you think he can push his range this year in terms of where you just send him out there on a normal kick, not end of half?**

LEVAR WOODS: Like a normal kick or end of half?

**Q. No, any time in the game.**

LEVAR WOODS: I would say those are different scenarios.

**Q. I know. Any time of the game.**

LEVAR WOODS: I think Drew -- I have seen him do and I know what coach has seen him do. You are talking about 58 and in pretty regular. I've also seen him 68, 65, you know, somewhere in that. That's more of an end of half scenario. But definitely strong-legged. It's never leg strength. It's more the consistency of the line and how the ball is going to travel that's an issue -- or not an issue, but is a factor for him.

Drew definitely has the leg strength and leg ability. Again, you mentioned NFL kickers. That's sort of the norm right now. I think Drew is right in that mix.

**Q. Drew mentioned just how important the book you guys read last offseason was for his development and going from a field kicker to a more technique kicker. What book are you guys reading this offseason? How have the guys responded to it? If you could expand on the "solid" thing a little bit more, where did that come from, I would appreciate it.**

LEVAR WOODS: I would love to. I'm not sure this is PG (laughing), so starting with the book we read last year, it was a book called "Golf, the Sacred Journey." That's a book recommended to us by Nate Kaeding. It's really interesting if you get into it. I like golf. I am awful, but I do like to watch. I get really intrigued when I watch high-level golfers. I feel like I see that a lot kicking. I get a chance to watch high-level kickers. It's fun to watch and how they think and what they see and their approach.

The biggest thing I think for Drew was understanding the checklist that a pilot goes through or a golfer goes through. If you don't hit every step, man, the chances of you hitting a clean shot are not great. I think Drew -- the feel kicker thing that you mentioned, Drew was that way early. He couldn't tell you how he was doing it or why he was doing it. He was more wishing as he hit the ball every time.

Now, it worked until it didn't, and we all kind of saw it unravel a little bit his sophomore year. I think that part of the book he really gravitated to and really helped him out. This offseason the book -- I have a couple in mind, but we haven't confirmed one yet because I'm letting the players have input on that. I know one book that Tory recommended was "Mind Gym," which I have not read before or heard before. That may be an interesting one.



As far as, "solid," (laughing) okay. It happened in a meeting. We were watching practice. We were evaluating the film. We're watching. I had a player ask him how he felt about that ball, that punt he hit. There it is. I gave you the punt piece. He's, like, yeah, it was solid." I was, like, Solid? That's average. We grade everything, right? A, B, C, D, F. I asked guys, How did you feel about that? How did you feel about that ball? Grade that ball so I know what you think an A-plus is and what I know an F is.

He's, like, Yeah, it was pretty solid. It was solid. It was not solid. It was solid if you want to talk about high school punting and, Hey, I did this at this camp, and that coach liked me and followed me on Twitter and stuff that I think is very average. So it turned into solid became a very bad word. I think I slammed my desk, hand, like I'm not trying to be solid. I'm not trying to be average, but they got the message, and now it's become a running joke in the specialist world, so yeah. I will tell you that player did this after that. There you have it.

That's the PG, dumbed-down version as best as I can. Ask Keith Duncan or Shudak or any of those guys sometimes. Yeah, solid. If you ever say, Oh, that was solid, they'll get bristled up when they say that was solid.

**Q. You just named 10 guys on the coverage team gunners and all that, but between Jayden and Jaxon and Karson, that's like 95 games of primarily special teams experience that now rightfully so get their shot at ones in the linebacking core. Jayden Montgomery is there. Eichmann has been out there. Have you seen anybody start flashing to start rising up and filling 90-plus games of special teams experience because those are very important reps.**

LEVAR WOODS: I do. I think you see a couple of young linebackers. You look at Cam Buffington, who was a freshman last year. Got no playing time. Maybe one kickoff I threw him on. Preston Ries. Again, two guys that are really showing up on defense and show up in my drills and the competition. You get a chance to see that. Same thing with Derek Weisskopf. Those are guys that show up where, also, the early enrollees with Carson Cooney and Blake Goucher. Those are just to name some linebackers. Other guys you see, DJ Vonnahme is a tight end. He does really well. Again, we put these kids in these poxes, these drills, to them it may not seem like much, but you can take that little snapshot and then you show it to them in special teams or show it to them on offense and defense how it relates and how it helps them become a better football player. Then all of a sudden it clicks. I think we're seeing some of that. A lot of times when it's early and they're young, they don't always -- it's hard, right? They get in these awkward positions, and it looks terrible to

them, and they can't figure it out. Then all of a sudden the old are they get, the more they understand the drill, the more they understand how it fits into football, they get better. So that's what we're seeing right now. Those are just a handful of guys I can think of right off the top.

Rashad Godfrey is another guy that keeps standing out to me in those drills.

**Q. First off, I'll keep mine a little bit short. Are we going to see you at Drake Stadium over the next couple of days?**

LEVAR WOODS: Tomorrow for are sure. I heard the weather is going to be great. The weather is supposed to be nice, right? If you get anything above 60, that's a win.

**Q. You have a guy in Luke Elkin who has a chance to maybe compete at the next level. I was just going to ask if you had NFL teams reach out about him because there's obviously very limited spots in the NFL for a long snapper, but do you think that he's got a pretty good chance of being picked up by a team this offseason?**

LEVAR WOODS: I do. I think Luke is as good as he wants to be, and he's going to be a really good pro. He was really good here, and he's a very diligent worker. I would never bet against Luke Elkin, particularly playing at the next level. The difference right now between college and pro is in the pros it may take you a little bit longer to get in because the practice squad rosters have extended. Rosters in general have expanded a little bit there, so sometimes I think they try to stuff guys or hide guys a little bit more. That's the life of a specialist in the NFL.

Unless you are drafted, you have to be willing to ride a year or two or sometimes three. Just ask Casey Kreider. Ten years later he's doing what he's doing. He's doing it very well. Sometimes it takes that at that position in particular because of the roster limits, but I could definitely see Luke playing on Sundays. I've had plenty of people reach out. Plenty of people come here to work him out. Yeah, Luke snaps a really good ball, man. The only thing he has not done yet is protect. The only way -- we don't ask our guy to snap and protect as far as punt goes. That's the one thing he hasn't done, but it goes back to the beginning when I talked about Ike and experience. The only way for Luke to get that experience is to get the experience.

At some point he's going to have to do that, and some coach in the NFL is going to trust him, and some coach in the NFL is going to look like a really smart kid. They're going to get a good kid and good snapper.



